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978-0-521-76275-5 - Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era

Heather Marie Stur

Excerpt

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Introduction

Lily Lee Adams served as an Army nurse in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970 at the 12th Evacuation Hospital in Cu Chi. She was a twenty-year-old American girl, a New Yorker, the daughter of an Italian mother and a Chinese father. John F. Kennedy's call to young people – “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” – had inspired her to join the military. In many ways, Adams's story was typical of young Americans who volunteered for the armed services in the 1960s, but her Asian heritage resulted in some telling differences. Some of the U.S. servicemen she encountered in Vietnam assumed that Adams was a prostitute when she was not wearing her nurse's uniform. “When I was in civilian clothes and walking around with a guy, the other guys would just assume I was a whore,” Adams said. “The Army used to truck in whores all the time.” She learned to keep her military identification with her at all times. “It really hurt inside that I had just spent twelve hours treating their buddies, and they thought I was just some Vietnamese whore,” Adams said. When GIs solicited her for sex, she would think, “You guys don't even know that if you came into my hospital I'd be taking care of you, giving you everything I have just to keep you alive.” Even the Vietnamese guards at the post exchange (PX) where Adams was stationed assumed she was a prostitute and demanded her ID while waving other military staff through. Adams remembered a nurse from the Philippines who left Vietnam after a few months of service because of similar treatment. “She was not used to the sexual harassment and racial discrimination, and she asked me how I handled it,” Adams said. “I told

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her I got used to it. I grew up with discrimination and learned how to deal with it.”¹

The troops’ responses to Adams were grounded in a set of contradictory assumptions and images – passed down in basic training, popular culture, political speeches, and GI folklore – that assigned ideologically charged meanings to Asian and American women. Focusing on the tension between these images and the lived experiences of men and women in (and after) Vietnam, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* investigates the conflict, not just as a military maneuver, but also as a complex web of personal encounters between Americans and Vietnamese that took place in the hothouse environment of war. Although popular memory of the Vietnam War centers on the “combat moment,” refocusing attention onto women and gender paints a more complex – and, ultimately, more accurate – picture of the war’s far-reaching impact beyond the battlefields. A substantial majority of interactions between American men and various groups of women, whether American or Vietnamese, took place not in combat situations, but on bases in Long Binh and Qui Nhon, in brothels in An Khe and Cam Ranh Bay, and along the boulevards of cities such as Saigon and Da Nang. These encounters, which were grounded in the reality of American power and dominance even when individual GIs attempted to soften that reality through humanitarian outreach, were shaped by a cluster of intertwined images that Americans used to make sense of and justify intervention and use of force in Vietnam: the girl next door, a wholesome reminder of why the United States was committed to fighting communism; the dragon lady, at once treacherous and mysterious, a metaphor for both Vietnamese women and South Vietnam; the “John Wayne” figure protecting civilization against savagery; and the gentle warrior, whose humanitarian efforts were intended to win the favor of the South Vietnamese. A careful examination of these images reveals the ways in which home-front culture influenced American policymaking and propaganda regarding Vietnam, and how the actual lived experiences of the men and women on the ground both enforced and challenged the gender ideology deployed in military and diplomatic rhetoric.

¹ Victor Marina, “Fighting for your country,” *Rice*, April 1988, 37; “‘We saved lives in Vietnam,’ recalls Adams. But racism, Agent Orange, left their scars.” *Asian Week*, February 22, 1985, Lily Adams Collection, University of Denver Penrose Library, Box 1, Folder “Lily Adams.” See also Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), 222.

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Even as they were being challenged on the home front, American Cold War ideas about manhood and womanhood shaped relations between U.S. military bases and surrounding Vietnamese communities; they were invoked to mobilize citizens for the war effort and played a role in humanitarian endeavors by U.S. troops in Vietnam. At times, South Vietnamese women were cast as “damsels in distress,” representatives of a nascent democracy – a Southeast Asian mirror of American Cold War norms – in need of protection from Communist despoilers. At other times, Americans viewed Vietnamese women with suspicion, as new incarnations of the “dragon ladies” of the World War II era or, as Adams’s experience demonstrates, sex objects whose purpose was to satiate the carnal desires of American troops.

In contrast to the dragon lady and the sex object, both of whom represented real and metaphorical threats to U.S. troops, the American “girl next door” – white, middle class, and pure – symbolized the way of life the United States had committed itself to defending against communism and a host of associated fears, including homosexuality, racial strife, the collapse of the nuclear family, and the disintegration of capitalist prosperity.² Faced with these anxieties, American women who ventured to Vietnam were expected to fulfill the conventional women’s roles of caregivers, mothers, and virginal girlfriends, even as their concrete experiences told a different story. The images were pervasive, surfacing in U.S. policymakers’ conversations, informational pamphlets published by the State and Defense departments, Army operations manuals, newspapers and magazines published for servicemen, and hundreds of popular songs, movies, and television shows. Combining the currents running through these images, Adams’s experience highlights the misunderstandings they caused when applied to actual women. As an American woman in nurse’s attire, she had an accepted, if marginal, role in a war zone, but her Chinese ethnicity activated the stereotypes that led some troops, both American and Vietnamese, to conclude that she was more likely a dragon lady than a girl next door.

The confusion surrounding women’s roles in Vietnam played out in complicated ways in the experiences of male GIs as well. Like American and Vietnamese women, U.S. servicemen found themselves in situations that had been shaped by a set of gendered assumptions, articulated with

² Elaine Tyler May explores the links between home front gender ideology and Cold War containment in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

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varying degrees of clarity and awareness, about America's place in the world. In U.S. popular culture, the girl next door's archetypal defender was John Wayne, who, as Richard Slotkin writes, symbolized the "perfection of soldierly masculinity" in the 1960s.³ The John Wayne image, transmitted through generic cowboy and soldier characters in movies and on TV, as well as by Wayne himself, represented U.S. martial prowess along with a broader collection of American virtues, including patriotism, courage, Christian faith, and unremitting dedication to protecting the civilization embodied in the girl next door. Growing up in a militarized culture predicated on defending the American way of life, many of the young men who went to Vietnam, as Andrew Huebner has observed, considered John Wayne the embodiment of their "martial dreams."⁴ Born during World War II and coming of age during the nebulous, nearly fifty-years-long event called the Cold War, they witnessed empires collapse and new nations emerge in the initial phases of the postcolonial struggle, which would define the second half of the twentieth century. The generation of American boys whose fathers had fought against Germany and Japan was encouraged to make sense of these circumstances not by looking ahead, but by looking back, beginning with their childhood games, playing cowboys and Indians and reenacting World War II.⁵ As they approached and entered their teenage years, they listened to President John F. Kennedy's rhetoric about fighting tyranny and spreading democracy throughout the decolonizing world.⁶

When put into action in Vietnam, this dual mission – to battle communist insurgency while winning hearts and minds with modernization projects and humanitarian aid – gave rise to a variation on the John Wayne theme: the "gentle warrior." As depicted in both military and civilian media, the gentle warrior was to be the bearer of U.S. benevolence,

³ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 489–533.

⁴ Andrew J. Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 250.

⁵ Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 69–89.

⁶ For a discussion of the Kennedy administration's modernization theories, see Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

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similar to organizations such as the Peace Corps and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Providing health care to Vietnamese families, building schools, and sponsoring orphanages, gentle warriors – a term used in *The Observer*, the official newspaper for the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) – represented an alternative to communist brutality as they deployed what Joseph Nye calls “soft power.”⁷ The dragon lady, the girl next door, John Wayne, and the gentle warrior reflected gendered, ultimately patriarchal, beliefs about national security and America’s duty to weaker peoples and nations. The images illustrate how popular home-front beliefs about men’s and women’s appropriate roles were deployed in U.S. policies toward Vietnam, reflecting what Americans thought about themselves and about the U.S. position in the world. Like the depictions of women, though, the images of men circulating through military rhetoric and the mass media reflected irreconcilable tensions, not just in the images, but in the U.S. mission itself. Vietnamese men were notably absent from the American wartime imagery, and although some GIs acknowledged the martial fortitude of their enemies in the National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese Army, their allies in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) were rarely depicted in soldier folklore or home-front popular culture.⁸

The policies of Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, were grounded in a pervasive and powerful gender ideology, which was often implied rather than explicit, in which John Wayne and the girl next door represented American power and civilization. These images would shape the experiences of the Americans who served in Vietnam, as well as the policies that sent them there. As Susan Jeffords writes in *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, a book that profoundly influenced my work, the Vietnam War consisted not just of battlefields, but also “fields of gender,” in which “enemies are depicted as feminine, wives and mothers and girl friends are justifications for fighting, and vocabularies are sexually motivated.”⁹ On these fields of gender, the irresolvable tensions in American ideology became clear.

⁷ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Public Affairs, 2004).

⁸ On ARVN, see Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

⁹ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), xi.

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Vietnamese women were at once damsels in need of rescue and dragon ladies who must be slain, the American girl next door represented an ideal of white femininity that was under fire from the women's and civil rights movements, and the gentle warrior attempted to rebuild that which his comrades destroyed in combat, exposing the contradictory nature of soft power and ultimately failing to mask the war's devastating effects. For some individual U.S. servicemen, the time they spent teaching English to Vietnamese students or providing medical care to remote villages helped them feel human and offered a sense of purpose in what otherwise seemed to be a pointless war. In the larger context of U.S. policies, massive bombing, misguided operations, and atrocities negated much of the good that some GIs tried to do.

Juxtaposed with the realities of day-to-day experiences in Vietnam, the images together point to a fundamental contradiction in the American mission, which has been identified in James Gibson's *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* and Christian Appy's *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*. Even as the United States presented itself as a benevolent entity protecting the American way of life from the insidious spread of communism and rescuing the Vietnamese from communist oppression, U.S. policies and actions damaged the infrastructure, economic system, and family structures that military humanitarian projects attempted to fix. Grounded in gendered and racialized beliefs about American power, the notion that the United States had to destroy Vietnam to save it – an idea based on a statement a U.S. Army major allegedly made to journalist Peter Arnett after a battle in the city of Ben Tre – fundamentally undermined official rhetoric about democracy building.¹⁰

Drawing on oral histories and extensive interviews, as well as foreign policy documents, military publications, civilian newspapers and magazines, and the literature of GIs and veterans, *Beyond Combat* pays special attention to the experiences of women, primarily American but also some Vietnamese, who until recently have remained relatively absent from Vietnam War scholarship. As psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton wrote regarding his work with Vietnam veterans, although war primarily is about “male obligation and male glory,” women – in symbol and in reality – are crucial to it, used to confirm the manhood of soldiers and positioned

¹⁰ James Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 226; Christian Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 207–8.

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either as sources of “chivalric inspiration” or dehumanized justifications for brutality.¹¹ Vietnam was the descendant of a legacy of wars in which women were used to build troop morale and inspire political obligation among U.S. troops, as works by Ann Pfau, Sonya Michel, and Robert Westbrook illustrate.¹² Taking place at a historical moment when gender roles were undergoing challenges and changes on the home front, the Vietnam War differed from previous wars because the tensions and contradictions that had previously been veiled were exposed in a much clearer way.

Just as there was no typical GI in a war in which men were clerks, bakers, dog handlers, and journalists as well as combat soldiers, there was no generic story of the American woman in Vietnam. We can only estimate the numbers of women who served in the military in Vietnam – although the Defense Department did not keep accurate records on women, it has calculated that approximately 7,500 women served in Vietnam; the Veterans Administration has set the number at 11,000. More than 80 percent were nurses, most from the Army Nurse Corps. Among those who were not nurses, about 700 women were members of the Women’s Army Corps (WAC), and much smaller numbers served in the Navy, Air Force, and Marines.¹³ Pinning down the numbers of civilian women who worked in Vietnam is even more difficult; estimates have gone as high as 55,000.¹⁴ Kathryn Marshall, a journalist who compiled an oral history anthology based on interviews with American military and civilian women who

¹¹ Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 245.

¹² Ann Pfau, *Miss Yourlovin: GIs, Gender, and Domesticity during World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), via Gutenberg-e, www.gutenberg-e.org/pfau/; Sonya Michel, “American Women and the Discourse of the Democratic Family in World War II,” in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. by Margaret Randolph Higonnet, et al (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 154–67; Robert Westbrook, “I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl That Married Henry James’: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II,” in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (December 1990), 587–614.

¹³ Another 500 women served in the Air Force during the Vietnam War, but most of them were stationed in the Pacific and other parts of Southeast Asia, not in Vietnam. Fewer than thirty women Marines served in Vietnam. In addition to nurses, nine women Navy officers served tours of duty in Vietnam. See Marshall, 4; Ron Steinman, *Women in Vietnam* (New York: TV Books, 2000), 18–20; Susan H. Godson, *Serving Proudly: A History of Women in the U.S. Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 213; Col. Mary V. Stremlow, *A History of the Women Marines, 1946–1977* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1986), 87.

¹⁴ Marshall, 4; Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 163.

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served in Vietnam, notes that the lack of official records “both serves as a reminder of government mishandling of information during the Vietnam War and points to a more general belief that war is men’s business.”¹⁵ Even though the number of American women who served was minuscule compared with the number of men, ideas about women and gender were, in fact, very present in foreign policy documents, policymakers’ conversations, soldier folklore, and the rhetoric of basic training.

Although a few women went to Vietnam before the United States committed combat troops, the majority of American women who served in Vietnam in either military or civilian capacities arrived between 1965, the year of the first deployment of ground troops, and 1973, when the last U.S. combat troops departed. Women were exempt from the draft, and not all women who joined the armed services during the era wanted an assignment to Vietnam. When it came down to personnel needs, some who went did so only because they had received orders. In contrast, civilian women by and large chose to go to Vietnam, often because they desired to help the troops. Whether military or civilian, those who picked Vietnam went for a variety of reasons that depended on factors such as race, class, and religion. The Army Nurse Corps offered money for college and career opportunities that some female recruits viewed as a move toward independence. Some women thought service in Vietnam sounded like an adventure, with the chance to travel to an exotic locale while avoiding or delaying marriage and family life. Others felt guilty that conscription forced men to serve, and they wanted to do their part to help. Another group was answering President Kennedy’s call to young Americans to go out into the world as missionaries of democracy. Whatever their motivations or backgrounds, all the American women who served in Vietnam had to deal with the tensions that came to a head with particular clarity for Lily Lee Adams.

Beyond Combat contributes to the growing body of scholarly literature on American women and the Vietnam War inspired by the oral histories compiled by Keith Walker, Ron Steinman, Kathryn Marshall, Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt, and Elizabeth Norman.¹⁶ Kara Dixon Vuic’s *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* examines

¹⁵ Marshall, 4.

¹⁶ Women’s oral history collections include Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of Twenty-Six American Women Who Served in Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985); Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*; Elizabeth Norman, *Women at War: The Story of Fifty Military Nurses Who Served in Vietnam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt, *A Time Remembered: American Women*

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the Army Nurse Corps' efforts to recruit both female and male nurses amid increasing challenges to traditional gender roles. Vuic argues convincingly that even though the Army had to respond to gender changes to meet its wartime personnel needs, it ultimately did not reject the gendered structure in which men were fighters and women were caregivers.¹⁷ Like Vuic's book and the aforementioned oral history collections, my work approaches the subjects of women and gender in the Vietnam War from American perspectives. Although I provide a glimpse of the war's impact on Vietnamese women through those viewpoints, I look forward to the continued work of scholars of Vietnamese history, some of whom, including Sandra Taylor, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, and Karen Gottschang Turner, have begun the process of telling the stories of women from both North and South Vietnam.¹⁸

As Elaine Tyler May outlined in the now-classic *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War*, Americans used gender and sexuality to make sense of the Cold War world, linking private matters such as marriage and family life to U.S. foreign relations. Engaged in an ideological struggle with the Soviet Union for power and influence in the world, U.S. leaders portrayed capitalist democracy as the humane alternative to communism; in his "kitchen debates" with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, then-Vice President Richard Nixon held up suburbia and its affluence as the epitome of American values. The heterosexual gender roles implicit in the image were strictly enforced, with the white, middle-class, suburban, nuclear family as the ultimate symbol of appropriate roles for men and women. Bringing the notion of "separate spheres" into the mid-twentieth century, politicians, sociologists, and medical doctors prescribed policies that once again placed women in charge of the home and childrearing and gave men financial and political responsibilities.¹⁹

in the Vietnam War (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1999); and Ron Steinman, *Women in Vietnam* (New York: TV Books, 2000).

¹⁷ Kara Dixon Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ For studies devoted to various Vietnamese women's experiences in the war, see Sandra C. Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Karen Gottschang Turner, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1999); Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009). See also Le Ly Hayslip's memoir, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Plume, 1990).

¹⁹ May, xxiv-xxv.

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Whatever the theoretical expectations, the experiences of women in the Cold War era reflected the disconnects between the image of the suburban housewife and the realities for most American women, as Wini Breines, Susan Douglas, Alice Echols, Ruth Feldstein, Susan Hartmann, Joanne Meyerowitz, and Ruth Rosen have shown.²⁰ Married and middle-class women increasingly sought paying work outside the home, and groups such as the National Manpower Council and the President's Council on the Status of Women called for the incorporation of women into service for the nation's defense. Tracking the contradictions embedded in the situation, scholars including Robert Corber, K. A. Cuordileone, John D'Emilio, and Jane Sherron De Hart have shown how policymakers capitalized on the culture of fear and uncertainty in the Cold War world to demonize and persecute Americans – especially gays, lesbians, and African Americans – who defied or tried to live outside the boundaries of domesticity. Their work is part of a broader conversation concerning the transitions that were taking place in post-World War II American society, transitions that would ultimately redefine “traditional” gender roles.²¹

As Sara Evans and other women activists have written, those roles persisted even within the era's movements for social change; their experiences of marginalization within civil rights and antiwar organizations

²⁰ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992); Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994); Alice Echols, *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Susan M. Hartmann, *From Margin to Mainstream: American Women and Politics since 1960* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989); Hartmann, “Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946–1958,” in *Not June Cleaver; Ruth Feldstein, Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930–1965* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

²¹ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). See also Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Jane Sherron De Hart, “Containment at Home: Gender, Sexuality, and National Identity in Cold War America,” in *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, ed. Peter J. Kuznick (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2001); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 236–37, 241–42.