

DONNA CONNOLLY

Sisters In Arms

One of my students, a male cadet at the Air Force Academy, recently wrote a paper in which he commented that a young Vietnamese soldier in a Tim O'Brien story was "as out-of-place in war as a woman." His unequivocal statement reminded me with a start that, although American women have actually fought in wars since the American Revolution, they are still perceived by many as anomalies during wartime. Women are mothers who send their sons to war, or they are wives or girlfriends who handle domestic matters and await anxiously the return of their men.

But women have been combatants for hundreds of years. Linda Grant DePauw, in her article "Women in Combat: The Revolutionary War Experience," reports that tens of thousands of women were involved in active combat during the American War for Independence (209). Some women even adopted male names and passed themselves off as men, an action repeated during the American Civil War. James I. Robertson, in *Tenting Tonight: The Soldier's Life*, found "adventure seeking women—perhaps as many as several hundred—disguised themselves as males and took up arms" (27). Authorities quickly discovered the true identity of most, but some women managed to sustain the deception for months, even years.

Women continued to be combatants in the twentieth century. Maria Botchkareva—Yashka, as she called herself—was a Russian woman who first served as an infantry soldier from 1915 to mid-1917, eventually commanding a platoon of seventy men. After personally capturing two German soldiers, Yashka received the gold cross of the first degree. In May of 1917, Yashka persuaded the Commander in Chief to establish a woman's organization; shortly

thereafter, she became the Commander of the Russian Women's Death Battalion. During the Vietnam War, many Vietnamese women served in the Viet Cong, and thousands of women served in the U. S. military. Of course the most recent example of women in combat is the war in the Persian Gulf. Approximately 45,000 women served there, with five women killed and two taken as POWs (*USA Today*).

But despite the involvement of women in war over the years, male gender appears to be the principal criterion for membership in this "exclusive club." Jean Bethke Elshtain points out that "We in the West are the heirs of a tradition that assumes an affinity between women and peace, between men and war, a tradition that consists of culturally constructed and transmitted myths and memories" (4). That is, men take on the warrior activities, and women are not expected to serve in the armed forces.

That society sees women as passive participants in war was often evident in media coverage of the war in the Persian Gulf. An example I remember particularly appeared in the March 3, 1991 edition of the *Denver Post*. Photographs from the "Week in Review" column reflect two images of war. One is a male American soldier, in full combat gear, standing guard over an Iraqi soldier; the other photo—interestingly, the larger of the two—captures Nurse (she is not identified by rank) Amy Stuart, soundly asleep, hugging her teddy bear. The caption under the photograph reads, "Start the war without me," suggesting the role of women in war as nurturing and peaceful. Though the juxtaposition of the two photos may not have been deliberate, the selection and positioning reflects, at least, society's unconscious belief that women fill peaceful, not warrior, roles in war.

This myth of women's passivity in wartime seems to prevent the society from even publicly acknowledging—at least until the Persian Gulf war—that women have ever been associated with war in more than a supporting role. Both Shelley Saywell and Kathryn Marshall, when researching women's involvement in war in general, struggled to find narratives written by women about war experience. When Saywell finally discovered women who would talk about war, she documented a wide range of activities: nursing, reporting, fighting, spying, bombing, killing, and dying (viii).

Marshall encountered similar difficulties when she tried to record the activities of women in Vietnam. She learned that until the early 1980's, these veterans were essentially isolated from one another. Not until several years after the war did women start appearing at Veterans' Centers and begin talking about their experiences in Vietnam. About the same time, Debra DeBondt organized the Women Veteran's Information Network (Marshall 4).

Shedding the invisibility and silence imposed on them by a society which refused to acknowledge their participation in Vietnam was an arduous activity for these women Vietnam veterans. In fact, the government added to their invisibility by under-reporting their numbers. The Department of Defense states that between 1962 and 1973 approximately 7500 women served on active military duty in Vietnam (Marshall 4). However, independent surveys indicate that the total numbers of American women, both military and civilian, serving or working in Vietnam during the war years, is somewhere between 33,000 and 55,000 (Marshall 4). Thus, the Department of Defense's narrow definition of the female presence in Vietnam masks women's true contribution during the war, supporting the general belief that war is men's business.

Women Vietnam veterans also faced resistance in being admitted to established Veterans' organizations. They were often denied membership, or they were pointed toward ladies' auxiliaries (Marshall 11). Of course, males organized the Vietnam veterans, with direct participation in combat as the central focus (Marshall 4). And because women were typically caretakers and helpmates in the Vietnam War, they themselves downplayed their own feelings and conceded that the men's experiences came first. They "were used to being minor characters, even in their own lives" (Marshall 12), and consequently were less likely even to try to make their voices heard.

Written accounts of the Vietnam War mirror this relative silence of women who were either in combat or on the periphery of combat. Not surprisingly, even women who have served in a war zone, see war as an exclusively masculine endeavor. In "Why Men Love War," published in the November 1984 issue of *Esquire*,

William Broyles notes that the “enduring emotion of war, when everything else has faded, is comradeship. A comrade in war is a man you can trust with anything, because you can trust him with your life” (58). Broyles’ use of male terms here excludes females’ participation in the Vietnam war, as does an earlier comment about that war in which he polarizes male and female experiences. Discussing why men love war, he says:

I’m not talking about how some men my age feel today, men who didn’t go to war but now have sort of a nostalgic longing for something they missed, some classic male experience, the way some women who didn’t have children worry they missed something basic about being a woman, something they didn’t value when they could have done it.(56)

With this and other such statements, Broyles relegates women to childbirth and assigns men to war. Of course, only women can birth a child, but stating that only men can experience war is simply not true.

For Broyles, war calls for the deepest kind of “brotherly love” (58). Separation from war upon returning home is as if “something had gone out of our lives forever, and our behavior on returning was inexplicable except as the behavior of men who had lost a great—perhaps the great—love of their lives, and no way to tell anyone about it” (56). In *A Rumor of War*, Phil Caputo furthers this idea: “It [war] is, unlike marriage, a bond that cannot be broken by a word, by boredom or divorce, or by anything other than death” (xvii). War, then, intensifies experience to the point of “terrible ecstasy” (Broyles 56)—apparently, an ecstasy only men can experience and appreciate.

To imagine women as killers by necessity reinvents myths about the roles of men and women in society. Jean Bethke Elshtain notes that war seduces everyone because we

continue to locate ourselves *inside* its prototypical emblems and identities. Men fight as avatars of a nation’s sanctioned violence. Women work and weep

and sometimes protest within the frame of discursive practices that turn one out, militant mother and pacifist protestor alike, as the collective "other" to the male warrior.(3)

If women are the collective "other" to the male warrior, they are assumed not to be in war, and they are thus robbed of the authority to express themselves on the subject of war (Hanley 134).

Despite the strong presence of women in war, they have written little about their experiences. Lynda Van Devanter's personal narrative, *Home Before Morning*, which details her year as a nurse in Vietnam and her difficulty reintegrating into society on her return to the United States, was published in 1983. Few published collections of oral histories, such as *A Piece of My Heart* and *In the Combat Zone*, have focused exclusively on women's experiences in Vietnam. Finally, in 1991, a collection of poetry written by women who served in Vietnam was published. In this collection, the woman's voice does sound strongly. Often, it expresses the anger with which, as Adrienne Rich and other feminists have pointed out, so many women in the past were afraid to write. Many of the poems demand that women's involvement in the war not be forgotten. For example, Sara J. McVicker's poem, "Saigon?," asks: "I've read so much about them/ Couldn't they learn something/ About me?"(130).

It's telling to note that Vietnam narratives written by women such as Lynda Van Devanter and Le Ly Hayslip are co-authored with men, raising the question of whether or not these narratives speak with an authentic woman's voice. Devanter and Hayslip's narratives are certainly important literary representations of women in war, but their filtering through a male consciousness may have diluted the veracity and strength of a woman's war experience.

Television's *China Beach* is an example of how males can recast women's war experiences. William Broyles was one of the producers for the now defunct show, and though the series raised the public's awareness of women's involvement in Vietnam, the women are frequently portrayed in a sexist manner. For example, off-duty, the women in the series always dress in very brief shorts

and very tight tee-shirts or tank tops, and their evening wear often consists of revealing dresses. The women are also portrayed as either the nurturing, mothering types or as sexually loose. In other words, the female characters in *China Beach* fulfill cultural myths based on men's expectations.

Again, male domination of war and its literary mythology may explain the limited representation of women in war itself, as well as in the literature of war. As Deborah Cameron points out in *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, male defense of its own power has decreed that nothing

is more ridiculous than a woman who imitates a male activity and is therefore no longer a woman. . . . Sex differentiation must be rigidly upheld by whatever means are available, for men can be men only if women are unambiguously women. (155-156)

What then is an unambiguous woman? Carolyn Heilbrun posits that to be unambiguously a woman means to put a man at the center of one's life and to allow to occur only what honors his prime position (20-21). If women were to write about their experiences in war—placing themselves at the center of the narrative—they would be displacing men in what is generally considered an exclusive male activity—indeed, a male privilege.

Additionally, in a patriarchal society, women typically have very little power. Heilbrun points out in *Writing a Woman's Life* that power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter (18). Unfortunately, women who have been a very real part of war don't have the same public avenues and opportunities as men to relate their experiences.

In fact, many women apparently don't feel comfortable with public testimony. Heilbrun found that women write differently about themselves in their letters and diaries than in autobiographies and novels. In their private accounts, women were more likely to reflect their ambitions and struggles in the public sphere; in their published autobiographies, they portray themselves as intuitive, nurturing, passive, deemphasizing their

own importance and accomplishments (Heilbrun 23-24). Gaining power and rewriting their positions in society to include male "quest plots" (121)—of which war is certainly primary—takes both courage and talent; so ultimately, we have very little historical or literary record of the accomplishments of women in war—written exclusively by women.

Instead, we have literary texts in which women explore other experiences related to war, for, unquestionably, combatants are not alone in suffering profoundly from its effects. One way a woman can begin to understand how war has affected her is to focus her writing on a man—often a relative—who is a combat veteran. Essentially, the woman validates her "self" in relation to war through a man, for in the conventional world, an acknowledgement of personhood can only be bestowed upon a woman by a man (Heilbrun 84).

Often, the female characters in stories about war merge, either physically (through sexual intercourse) or emotionally and psychically, with the male veteran. This merging implies that the woman who was left at home during the war needs the male veteran to be able to order and understand her own war-related suffering. The analysis of the seven short stories which follow shows how women need to connect somehow to veterans of the Vietnam war. As the female character in Laurie Alberts' story, "Veterans," notes, "It wasn't their wounds, it was their knowledge I craved"(57).

Alberts' story is a classic example of the male who returns from the war, unwilling to disclose his combat experiences, and the woman who is closest to him—in this case, a girlfriend—who wants to gain access to what the man has seen and heard and done in the war. Like Stefan (the veteran), whose aimlessness seems to be a direct result of the war, the woman in this story has also led a life filled with wandering and searching. She seems to believe that a relationship with a war veteran will give her answers to questions about her own life. However, Stefan's only means of communicating and being close to his girlfriend is to teach her how to sail, fish, and dig for clams. In the end, the woman leaves, for she is unable to glean from the veteran what she wants and needs.

Because of her time with Stefan, however, the woman does seem to make decisions about her life with which she is comfortable. She, too, eventually opts to wear a uniform—that of a nurse—and thus feels more anchored in life. When she sees Stefan for the last time, she thinks, “In wanting him, I enlisted too. I accept these limitations because unlike Stefan, I have faith: I know that a series of days, precisely ordered and stretching back, will sweep me into a future of certain changes” (64). She doesn’t learn much about the war, but perhaps she gains something more important: her life takes on new order and coherence.

Albertine, the young woman in Louise Erdrich’s story “A Bridge,” is a confused, fifteen-year-old runaway; in many ways, she is very much like the young woman in Alberts’ story. Albertine is not depicted as consciously pursuing an understanding of the Vietnam war experience; however, she is attracted to a young man because he “seemed just what she needed” (132), and “partly because she didn’t know what she was looking for, partly because he was a soldier like her father, and partly because he could have been an Indian” (132).

Albertine does have sexual intercourse with the man, and the story’s ending implies that she has, at least temporarily, healed the veteran. But *Love Medicine*, the collection from which “A Bridge” is taken, suggests that, in some way, Albertine’s brief encounter with the young man is empowering for her as well. A few years later, Albertine seems to be a young woman on the road to success.

One of the most dominant emotions evident in stories written by women about the Vietnam war is empathy, possibly even a need to ease or share the psychic and emotional pain of the veteran. In each of the following three stories, this veteran is a sibling. The women characters are depicted not only as being emotionally in tune with their brothers, but also as the only ones who can even come close to connecting with them. The stories which explore this connecting are Lorrie Moore’s “How to Become a Writer,” Laura Kalpakian’s “Veteran’s Day,” and Pat Ellis Taylor’s “A Call from the Brotherland.”

The consequences of the Vietnam war are very subtly yet strongly portrayed in Lorrie Moore’s “How to Become a Writer.” This story explores how a young girl simultaneously develops as a

woman and a writer. The young woman drifts through life, and though she attempts to write, she seems unable to focus. Moore suggests that the young woman's difficulties directly parallel those of her brother, a Vietnam veteran crippled by the war. The young woman asks, "Why write? Where does writing come from? . . . Where does dust come from? Or: Why is there war? Or: If there's a God, then why is my brother now a cripple?" (122).

Although Lorrie Moore's story ostensibly is about writing, it's also about a young woman wrestling with the effects of war. When she tries to write, others see her plots as "outrageous and incompetent" (121). But her inability to create sensible plots stems from her struggle to make sense of her brother's equally outrageous and debilitating injury in the war.

Laura Kalpakian's and Pat Ellis Taylor's stories have a similar sequence of events: both are about veterans who obviously have had difficulties reintegrating into society once they've returned to the United States. In Kalpakian's "Veterans Day" and Taylor's "A Call to the Brotherland," women almost become one with their brothers—psychically and emotionally. These women are not only suffering from the war themselves but are also struggling with the effects of the war through their brothers, creating a lasting, empathic bond.

In fact, the sister in Kalpakian's story moves beyond empathy; when her brother is captured by the authorities, she actually assumes the role in society he created for himself when he returned from the war. By "becoming" her brother, the sister can experience vicariously her brother's emotional fallout from war. Kalpakian implies that, finally, she too will be able to make some sense of the war, and, consequently, of her life.

In Taylor's "A Call from the Brotherland," the empathy depicted is as strong as in Moore's and Kalpakian's stories, but the sister's empathy doesn't move her to assume her brother's role. Rather, not knowing Okie, her brother, has killed a man, she dreams about him, sensing something amiss. When the woman awakens her husband to tell him about the dream, she receives a phone call from a friend of her brother's, telling her that Okie has shot a man and that no one knows where he has gone. The bond between Okie and his sister is highlighted because she "finds" him in her dream;

indeed, she alone is able to find him, thus illustrating the unique emotional and psychic tie between the two.

The three remaining stories I wish to discuss emphasize women rather than men. In fact, a veteran is almost incidental to the story in Shirley Ann Grau's "The Homecoming." Rather than exploring the relationship or bond between a woman and a veteran, Grau examines a mother-daughter relationship and how both seem to need history to repeat itself. The mother in "The Homecoming" lost her husband in the Korean war, and nearly twenty years later, her daughter Susan receives a telegram notifying her that a young man she knew and went out with once was killed in Vietnam. Susan's mother, reliving her reactions to the news of her husband's death many years before, wants her friends to join with her and Susan in mourning a young man Susan barely knew.

"The Homecoming" explores the generation gap between the two women, and in so doing, exposes the differences in attitudes each has toward the "proper" way to react to a soldier's death. For Susan, her father and Harold "weren't brave, they just got caught" (63). But because her mother believes that men in war die in a blaze of glory and courage, she also believes they should be appropriately mourned and honored. Ironically, at the end of the story, history does begin to repeat itself, for Susan discovers she doesn't mind obeying the "rules." Ultimately, Grau seems to suggest that during war men and women have distinct roles that must be played out if life is to have coherence.

Maxine Kumin's story, "The Missing Person," is probably the most puzzling and ambiguous of the seven stories I discuss here. "The Missing Person" focuses on how a mother and father grapple with the fact that their son is classified as MIA; the woman, particularly, can't believe that her son is dead. During a trip to a city 370 miles from their home to see their daughter-in-law perform in a play, the woman "loses" her husband in the city. In her quest to have her husband Alan declared missing, she shows the police his picture, recognizing with a start how much her son, Jay, looks like him. When she sees this likeness, she also finally acknowledges that her son is dead. That her husband is now missing seems to be less distressing. The story also strongly suggests that the husband may have run off with the

daughter-in-law, and that assuming his son's life is his way of accepting his son's likely death. Again, empathy, ritual, and role assumption play a part in healing the wounds of war.

The literature from previous wars written by women necessarily occupies an important place in our literary history. But perhaps the long-overdue public acknowledgement of women's participation in war—as in the Persian Gulf—will encourage women to write openly and unapologetically about their wartime experiences. And finally, when women rightfully place themselves at the centers of their narratives, we will have the true stories of women who have lived the “sacred” plot of war. □

Works Cited

- Alberts, Laurie. "Veterans." *Love Stories, Love Poems: An Anthology*. Ed. Joe David Bellamy and Roger Weingarten. San Diego: Fiction International, 1982. 56-64.
- Broyles, William. "Why Men Love War." *Esquire*. November 1984: 55-65.
- Cameron, Deborah. *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. London: Macmillan, 1985.
- Caputo, Philip. *A Rumor of War*. New York: Ballantine, 1978.
- De Pauw, Linda Grant. "Women in Combat: The Revolutionary War Experience." *Armed Forces and Society* 7 (Winter 1981): 209-226. *Denver Post*. "Week in Review." 3 Mar. 1991.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Women and War*. New York: Basic Books, 1987.
- Erdrich, Louise. "A Bridge." *Love Medicine*. New York: Bantam, 1987.
- Grau, Shirley Ann. "Homecoming." *Vietnam Anthology: American War Literature*. Ed. Nancy Anisfield. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State Popular P, 1987. 56-66.
- Hayslip, Le Ly, with Jay Wurts. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from war to Peace*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn. *Writing a Woman's Life*. New York: Norton, 1988.
- Kalpakian, Laura. "Veteran's Day." *Stand One: Winners of the Stand Magazine Short Story Competition*. Ed. Michael Blackburn, Jon Silkin, and Lorna Tracy. London: Gollancz, 1984. 9-30.
- Kumin, Maxine. "The Missing Person." *The Best American Short Stories, 1979*. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates. Boston: Houghton, 1979. 234-242.
- Marshall, Kathryn. *In the Combat Zone*. New York: Penguin, 1987.
- McVicker, Sara J. "Saigon?" *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*. Ed. Lynda Van Devanter and Joan Furey. New York: Warner, 1991. 130.
- Moore, Lorrie. "How to Become a Writer." *Self-Help*. New York: New American Library, 1985. 119-126.
- Robertson, James I. *Tenting Tonight: The Soldier's Life*. Alexandria: Time-Life, 1984.

Saywell, Shelley. *Women in War*. New York: Penguin, 1985.

Taylor, Pat Ellis. "A Call from Brotherland." *The Available Press/Pen Short Story Collection*. Ed. Anne Tyler. New York: Ballantine, 1985. 389-393.

USA Today Tue 21 April 1992 page 4 A.

Van Devanter, Lynda. *Home Before Morning*. New York: Warner, 1983.