H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tad Bartimus et al. *War Torn: Stories of War from the Women Reporters Who Covered Vietnam.* New York: Random House, 2002. 291 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-50628-4; $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-375-75782-2.

Reviewed by Heather M. Stur (University of Southern Mississippi)
Published on H-Minerva (September, 2006)

Covering the War, Uncovering its Contradictions: Women Journalists and the Vietnam War

Popular culture has made the combat moment the focal point of attempts to understand the Vietnam War and its consequences. Films, novels, and oral history collections depict men in battle and paint images of war as an exclusively masculine realm. But the Vietnam War looks quite different when viewed from the perspective of American women who served there. In an effort to incorporate women more fully into the Vietnam War narrative, journalists Tad Bartimus, Denby Fawcett, Jurate Kazickas, Edith Lederer, Ann Bryan Mariano, Anne Morrissy Merick, Laura Palmer, Kate Webb, and Tracy Wood have shared their experiences in Vietnam during the war, and the memoirs expose the pervasiveness of war. As these women reveal, war reaches beyond battlefields, paying no attention to gender or the difference between military and civilian status.

While the draft forced thousands of American men to deploy to Vietnam, the women journalists featured here chose to go, sometimes despite opposition from male editors who considered women unfit for war zones. The reluctance of male editors to send women to Vietnam illustrates the gendered nature of American ideas about war as a masculine enterprise. Even though the women were not headed for combat, the idea that they would be in a war zone was unsettling to their male bosses. Associated Press reporter Edith Lederer secured an assignment in Saigon despite the foreign desk editor's belief at the time that women were ill-prepared for "the demands of the world's backwaters and battle zones" (p. 157). The foreign editor at United Press International told Tracy Wood that he did not want to send women reporters to cover wars because "if anything happened to you, I'd feel bad" (p. 224). The journalists faced similar attitudes in-country as well. An official military escort accompanied Jurate Kazickas into the field while male correspondents went out unsupervised (p. 122). After meeting Denby Fawcett at an Army base in the Central Highlands, where she was covering a unit from Hawaii for the *Honolulu Advertiser*, General William Westmoreland issued an order prohibiting women journalists from staying overnight in the field. Because transport flights only went in and out at certain times, if journalists could not spend the night out on patrol, they likely would not have been able to do field coverage at all. Westmoreland argued that protecting them could endanger and inconvenience the troops, and that the women likely would not be able to handle the stresses of combat situations. ABC News reporter Anne Morrissy Merick and *Overseas Weekly* correspondent Ann Bryan Mariano eventually lobbied successfully to block Westmoreland's directive, but the incident demonstrates the depths to which ideas about war were gendered in the American cultural psyche, even as the women's movement took shape and gained momentum.

Although unarmed, the journalists who entered the field faced the same dangers as combat troops. A mortar attack injured Jurate Kazickas's face and legs while she covered the siege at Khe San. North Vietnamese troops captured Australian journalist Kate Webb in Cambodia and held her as a prisoner of war for twenty-three days. Her editors in Sydney assumed she had been killed and ran her obituary before learning that she was alive. Women journalists in Vietnam risked their lives to report on the war, and their accounts demonstrate that while cultural attitudes deemed combat an exclusively male sphere, the rules of war did not differentiate according to gender distinctions.

Perhaps most fascinating are the journalists' accounts of life in Saigon, for they portray the ways in which the U.S. presence in Vietnam affected the country outside the context of combat, and they suggest that a form of colonialism accompanied the war. ABC's Anne Morrissy Merick writes of correspondents hiring Vietnamese maids and cooks and enjoying "the fabulous lobsters at the beach resort of Nha Trang" (p. 118). The Golf Club of Saigon employed Vietnamese women as caddies, and at

the Cercle Sportif pool and tennis center, male journalists "enjoyed the lithe figures of the young Vietnamese ladies in their brief bikinis" (p. 118). Dubbed "Pentagon East," the American military complex in Saigon facilitated the development of an economy aimed almost exclusively at military and civilian foreign personnel stationed in Vietnam. Restaurants, tailors, and entertainment establishments employed Vietnamese workers in a service economy designed to meet Westerners' needs and desires. The non-combat accounts of life in Vietnam during the war open another avenue of inquiry for scholars seeking to explore the transformative effects of war on a society. They also raise questions about connections between colonialism and war and recast the appearance of American involvement in Vietnam.

It is clear that the women featured are professional writers, for their engaging prose is lively and descriptive, presenting readers with vivid images of Saigon's "outlaw spirit" and "the surface hectic gaiety and frenetic mix of military and civilian traffic" that characterized the city's downtown (pp. 62, 254). Anecdotes like Kate Webb's account of French former plantation owners "in dark glasses, open-necked white shirts, and gold watches" drinking whiskey in cafes and lamenting the loss of their plantations to North Vietnamese troops illustrate the history that preceded the American war in Vietnam (p. 71). Webb's juxtaposition of "khaki fatigues and silk dinner dresses, death in the mud and haute cuisine" describes the contradictions and confusion embedded in the war. The book spans the period of 1966 through 1975, leaving readers to wonder how the stories of women journalists stationed in Vietnam earlier might broaden the narrative. Although American combat troops did not land in Vietnam until 1965, the United States sent its first advisers there eleven years before, and journalists followed soon after. Also, a larger representation of women journalists from countries other than the United States could provide clues to how nations received and understood the war, and thus help explain reactions to it. But a collection such as this relies on the willingness and ability of subjects to tell their stories, and the women who give of themselves here illuminate aspects of the Vietnam War that combat and policymaking narratives have overshadowed.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Heather M. Stur. Review of et al, Tad Bartimus, *War Torn: Stories of War from the Women Reporters Who Covered Vietnam.* H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12233

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net and MINERVA: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact MinervaCen@aol.com or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.