

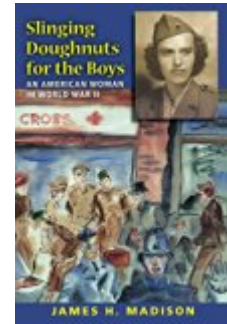
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frances DeBra Brown. *An Army in Skirts: The World War II Letters of Frances DeBra*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2008. Illustrations. ix + 264 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87195-264-6.

James H. Madison. *Slinging Doughnuts for the Boys: An American Woman in World War II*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. Illustrations. xviii + 300 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22107-0.

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## Two Indiana Women in World War II

Although there are many published editions of World War II letters and memoirs, these two volumes offer a view of the war that is rarely presented. In an unscientific survey of war memoirs, I found that naturally most are by or about men. Those that are by or about women tend to concentrate in specific areas: Holocaust survivors, civilian women in the war zone and on the home front, pilots, nurses, and war brides. The two women who are the subjects of these books fall into none of these categories.

Frances DeBra Brown, of Danville, Indiana, was one of the 150,000 women in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) during World War II. She first worked on a flight line in the United States, testing aircraft radios, and later as a draftsperson on classified material at American headquarters in London and Paris. She was one of the small percentage of American women who worked in what were considered "nontraditional" jobs for women. She corresponded with her parents, sister, and close friends, telling them about living and working conditions as well as recreational activities, adjusting her war news according to her audience. Frances returned home to marry her army sweetheart. Over fifty years later, she wrote this book, adding narration between the compilation of letters home and diary entries.

Elizabeth (Liz) Richardson, of Mishawaka, Indiana, joined the American Red Cross (ARC) in 1944 and held a more traditional "woman's" job, serving coffee and doughnuts to weary soldiers—not an easy job by any means. She decided to join ARC instead of a branch of the military open to women because she did not want to be stuck in an office typing and filing, and wanted to be closer to the action. Traveling in club mobiles, making gallons of coffee, frying doughnuts, and serving them to soldiers could be a heavy, dirty job. Even though the hours were long, stress was high, and workload was heavy, Liz seemed to blossom in this environment. Like Frances, the tone of Liz's letters vary according to the recipient; she was much more revealing to her brother (a marine) and her friends than to her parents. Her diary entries are, as to be expected, even more revealing. Liz did not return from the war; she was killed in an airplane crash on July 25, 1945, after V-E Day and shortly before V-J Day.

Few people realize the roles played by American women in wartime, and many only know about those who served as nurses. These Indiana natives who served during World War II demonstrate two of the many positions filled by women during the war. The women themselves, as well as these respective publications, of-

fer many similarities as well as differences. Both women served their country in wartime, one in the military and one in a relief organization. They went to England and on to France, but in different capacities. They wrote newsy letters home about their work and the emotional roller coaster of living and working in Europe during wartime. They each met and were separated from a man for whom they cared deeply. They developed a serious relationship with someone else, probably a fairly common occurrence. One eventually married the man, the other was adamant about not getting attached while in the war zone. One remained in France after the war, buried in an American cemetery; the other returned to the United States to live out a full and happy life. Both women were artistic; some of their illustrations are included in the books. Both volumes are a collection of letters, interspersed with commentary.

The major difference in these two published works is that one is edited and annotated by the woman herself, while the other is edited and annotated by a noted Indiana historian. Each presents advantages and disadvantages to the reader. Brown's book has the advantage of hindsight and personal connection to fill in gaps in the story told by the letters. Only the subject of the story can have that vantage point and this definitely adds to the thoroughness in this volume. She clarifies in detail aspects of her story that might be vague in her earlier writings; the book benefits from her explanations. Her writing style, both in the 1940s and in the present, flows well, is readable, and quickly captures the reader's interest. One hopes that the author did not selectively edit out material that might reflect negatively on her and her situation—always a risk with personally edited memoirs. The book ends with her train ride back to Indiana after

being in the war. I would have liked a concluding chapter explaining what it was like to adjust to coming home, getting married, and starting a new life. How did she feel her war experience affected her life over the next sixty years? The biographical information on the book jacket provides the basics, but it would have been helpful to know more about the long-term effects of her military service.

Richardson's story has the advantage of being told by a historian, someone with academic familiarity with the war and those who served. James H. Madison did extensive research to put Liz's story in context. He not only read her letters and her diary but also interviewed people who knew her or knew of her. Further, he used primary source material from other ARC workers. This greatly enhances the story and allows the author to include a chapter on her friends' and family's reactions to her death and eventual burial at the American Cemetery in Normandy, France. Occasionally, though, I felt that I was reading something twice, once in Madison's introductory commentary and again in the actual text of the letter or diary entry, but this is a minor criticism.

These two volumes are valuable additions to the collection of World War II memoirs and should be read by anyone with an interest in the war. The fact that these are women's experiences should not discourage military historians as they greatly enhance the general knowledge of wartime, giving a vantage point often overlooked in the field. That both women were from Indiana adds to the state's history and its involvement in the war as well. These can also be read for general pleasure as autobiographical and biographical works on American women of the mid-twentieth century.

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