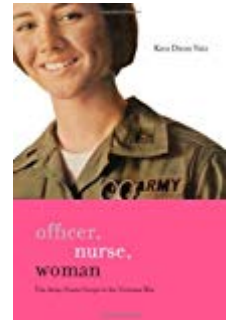


Kara Dixon Vuic. *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. xii + 271 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-9391-9.



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In the final chapter of *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, Kara Dixon Vuic argues that in the years since the Vietnam War, Americans have created a highly gendered memory of Army nurses in Vietnam. According to Vuic, femininity and traditional womanhood became the two primary associations for how Americans remember women's--and particularly nurses'--contributions to the war. "It was these images of nurses--as feminine nurturers who represented domesticity and heterosexual relationships to troops--that came to dominate the postwar representations of Vietnam War army nurses" (p. 186). By the time Vuic reaches this conclusion, however, her research has also demonstrated how misleading that image is.

Although most Americans have come to prefer an image of Vietnam War nurses as a group of compassionate, highly skilled women who embodied the highest ideals of femininity and professionalism, Vuic complicates this image with her study of the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) and its members' experiences in the war. The ANC maintained a presence in Vietnam between 1956 and

1973, peaking at a height of more than nine hundred nurses in mid-1968 (p. 2). Although predominantly composed of women and organized around policies meant to enforce women's primary social roles as wives and mothers, some of the most surprising issues Vuic analyzes in her work focus on male nurses' experiences in the ANC. *Officer, Nurse, Woman* argues that the experiences of ANC nurses highlight how gender roles in the Army and its expectations of masculine and feminine behavior changed and sometimes remained static during the war.

Weaving oral histories with policy, Vuic analyzes how the ANC worked to recruit predominantly women--and primarily white women--into the organization to meet the demands of nursing during a time when a huge nurse shortage existed nationwide. Admitting male nurses to the ANC, for example, did not happen until the 1960s because of broad belief that nursing was a women's job. At the same time, the ANC began changing its policies to allow female ANC members to marry and remain in regular service, although women

who had children were discharged automatically until the early 1970s. Thus, while the ANC modified some gender-specific policies and exclusions in an effort to attract nurses, it also maintained highly conservative ideologies about gender roles that drove many other policies.

Vuic, then, demonstrates how gender was central to ANC members' experiences in the military and in the Vietnam War in particular. She argues that nurses' experiences, while highly individualized, must be understood in the context of these gendered dimensions of their service. Vuic begins by examining how the ANC employed femininity as a strategy to attract prospective nurses. Next, she considers the role of gender in the Army, emphasizing men's roles in the ANC. Subsequent chapters explore the contrast between nursing education and the realities of nursing practice, the role of gender in the nursing war zone, marriage and pregnancy in the ANC, and postwar depictions of Vietnam War nurses. Through these chapters, she successfully highlights how gender expectations and sexuality permeated all aspects of nurses' war experiences.

While femininity and women's experiences occupy most of this work, Vuic's consideration of men in the ANC offers some of the most engaging counterpoints to the broader story of the women nurse officers. Vuic notes that although only approximately 1 percent of the civilian nursing population in the United States were men during the war, within the ANC men made up 13 percent or more of the corps on average. Moreover, at one point, nearly one-third of all Army nurses in Vietnam were male (p. 103). The presence of these men further complicates the dialogue and practice of gender in the Vietnam-era ANC. In particular, on the one hand, male nurses faced assumptions that they were homosexual because of their presence in a predominantly female corps. On the other hand, male nurses were not subject to some of the same restrictions as female nurses. For instance, they could have children and remain in

service, thanks to social assumptions that mothers assumed the primary role of caregiver in the family. Additionally, male nurses completed detailed weapons and defense training, while female nurses did not.

However, Vuic's focus remains on women, particularly in the latter half of the book. In part, male nurses may be largely absent from the war zone sexuality coverage because of assignment policies, which Vuic discusses earlier in the book. It would be interesting to see whether sexuality played as important a role for male nurses in their war zone nursing experiences. For example, if women were valued as morale boosters because of their sex and their role as nurses, it could be assumed that men were not. If female nurses were seen by wounded soldiers as stand-in wives, mothers, or girlfriends, how did wounded soldiers relate to male nurses?

Vuic offers an important new contribution to how we understand women's participation in the U.S. military after World War II. *Officer, Nurse, Woman* also offers a focused snapshot into how the experiences of the Vietnam War created lasting internal changes within the Army and the ANC. More specifically, and perhaps most significantly, Vuic's analysis of changing gender roles in the ANC and how those are reflected in American memory offers not just an insight into the Army itself, but also into how the nation modifies such deeply held values over time.

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