

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Heather Marie Stur. *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 278 p. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-76275-5; \$27.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-12741-7.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Norman (NYU, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Beyond Combat began as Heather Marie Stur's dissertation in history at the University of Wisconsin. Her goal is to describe the experiences and stereotypes of American men and women as well as Vietnamese women from 1954 to 1975. This long sorrowful period ended with many people asking whether the sacrifice was worth it. Since that time, not much seems to have changed: wars continue to be fought; military personnel suffer injuries and death; civilian men, women, and children endure daily horrors and deprivation; and sexual stereotypes remain resilient.

In the introduction, Stur writes that the Vietnam War was "a complex web of personal encounters between Americans and Vietnamese that took place in the hot-house environment of war" (p. 2). She focuses on the tensions between the stereotypical images of the dragon lady, the girl next door, and the American man when not in combat, and juxtaposes these stereotypes to their actual experiences. This worthwhile concentration highlights age-old tensions, but the author offers no suggestions for a world (or a war era) without stereotypes. And tension and stress are the way of life in war. Movies, news films, and even comic strips have had their dragon ladies since the 1930s. Studies about American military women from World War I onward emphasize the stresses of being a woman in a man's world where the stereotypes of the battle ax, lesbian, or promiscuous female held sway (see, for example, Jeanne Holms's *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution* [1993] and Mary Sarnecky's *A*

History of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps [1999]). Memoirs by men who served in Vietnam (such as Mark Baker's *Nam* [1981]) discussed brothels, drug use, and other illegal and "unmilitary" aspects of off-duty life on bases.

The book's title is somewhat misleading because the author devotes a significant portion of her work to GIs in Vietnam and at home. Much of chapter 4, "Gender and America's Faces of Domination," is an examination of the impact of John Wayne's image, the gentle warrior and the antiwar GI. At least five of the forty-one interviews that Stur conducted for this book were with American men. The material is fascinating and adds to the body of work on Vietnam, but you would never know from the title.

The author divides the book into five distinct chapters on Vietnamese women, American women, and American men. Stur achieves her intent to explore a different aspect of gender in Vietnam and the impact of the war at home. In the conclusion chapter, she brings gender issues of women rights, gay rights, and career military opportunities up to date. I had hoped, however, to learn more about Vietnamese women, and how they have fared since 1975.

The Vietnam War era remains a fascinating moment in our history. Historians and veterans continue to explore gaps in experiences and policies. The book contains an excellent reference list and a comprehensive list of important archives. I hope that the interviews Stur conducted will be available to future writers and interested listeners.

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