H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Grace Porter Miller. *Call of Duty: A Montana Girl in World War II.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999. xix + 153 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2343-0.

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Women veterans of WWII, particularly WACs, have written a number of memoirs of their experiences during the war. Of these, many are self-published with little distribution, or worse, never published at all, as Linda Grant DePauw points out in her preface to this book. Women who have served their country by the thousands have been ignored, largely forgotten, and if noticed at all, generally set around heroic male movie figures as decorative objects or helpless rescuees. The few books that have made it to print have historically been of the we-had-such-girlish-fun-washing-our-hair-in-our-helmets genre. Real issues and descriptions of what life was like for many women in the service, particularly in theaters of war, have just begun to surface.

In part, again as DePauw points out, this is partially due to cultural and societal mores which strongly discouraged women from any public discussion of unpleasantness, particularly of a sexual nature. However, this reviewer would add that another powerful operant factor is denial. Discussions with some WWII women veterans have produced total denial of any veracity in any other woman veteran's account of sexual assault, serious harassment or even traumatic event for anyone but nurses.

The Good Soldier by Selene Weise, previously reviewed for H-Minerva, describes appalling living conditions, diet and treatment of women soldiers in the South Pacific theater, as well as exposure to all the dangers of being present in non-secured areas. Miller now adds to the store of knowledge through her account of service in the European theater. Both women returned to an indifferent nation unnoticed, unheralded, and unthanked for their services; both women also returned with severe health problems that would seriously affect them for the rest of their lives. Yet, the VA only very recently offered services or health care to women veterans.

Miller joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in March, l943. In June of that year the WAAC, which had existed in a more or less quasi-military status, was granted full military status, and its members offered the opportunity to join the Women's Army Corps as soldiers. Miller signed up "for the duration."

In training school Miller ran into her first sexual predator, a woman. In those days, differences in sexual preference were not discussed, and neither she nor her roommate, whom the predator targeted, realized what was going on for some time. They tried to deal with the situation by avoiding "Claudia" as much as possible. Too embarrassed to go to higher authority, Miller's roommate opted out when the WAAC was disbanded. They expected and received sexual predation and harassment from male soldiers, and were prepared to handle it, but the aggressive predation of another woman caught them totally unprepared. Miller makes it clear she met other lesbians over time, but none were predators.

By good fortune, Miller's first posting was San Diego, and her life was filled with fun and excitement. Military women were vastly outnumbered, and men going and returning to the theaters of war were drawn to them in droves. For the most part, chivalry and gentlemanly behavior reigned, although fending off desperate appeals for marriage from men bound for the front could be heartrending and difficult. San Diego was also the site of Miller's first attempted sexual assault. Illegal sexual assault, that is. Every few weeks the WACs were required to strip from the waist down, lie down spread-eagled on their beds and stay that way while the female version of the male "short-arm inspection" was performed; an army doctor and nurse walking the line, doing quickie vaginals. (This practice has been verified by another WWII WAC who served elsewhere.) In the reviewer's opinion, this practice constituted a form of institutionalized rape. Miller opines that it must have been the idea of a junior officer who hated women in his army, considered them

all whores, and was using it a form of sexual harassment.

Throughout the rather brief text several other instances of sexual harassment are recounted, however the author does state that by and large she and her fellow WACs were well-treated by the men with whom they served, and often defended protectively when they were subjected to verbal abuse from other soldiers while out in public.

When the opportunity arose, Miller signed up to go overseas and received orders to England, where she would work as a cryptographer. She crossed the Atlantic in winter seas on the Queen Mary, no longer bearing any resemblance to a luxury liner. She and her fellow WACs were crammed below decks and fed kidney stew–cold kidney stew. >From then on her diet consisted primarily of white margerine, heavy bread, powdered milk and eggs, C-Rations and other heavy, miserable food. Soldiers fought on this diet as well, and fresh fruit and vegetables were virtually unheard of. Of course, war-torn Europe was starving, and thousands of homeless, aimlessly fleeing refugees would have welcomed even that poor diet.

In Europe, Miller experienced the buzz bombs over London, one unforgettable and traumatic look into a ditch filled with murdered bodies shot by rapidly retreating Nazis, getting lost behind enemy lines, endless cold and discomfort. Europe during the war was not kind to enlisted personnel even as they saw the misery of the people all around them, which was so much worse.

Even then, there were lighter moments, and Miller recounts them with fondness and a talent for description that transports the reader back in time. She is a powerful writer, bringing the war alive in a way that shows reality with compassion, yet honesty. This is no chirpy girls-in-uniform fairy tale. This book is all about what it was like to be an army woman right in the thick of the war, bombings and all, living in constant fear, and overwhelming workloads which ultimately left the author ill from stress. She acknowledges she still experiences symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of PTSD, although she does not utilize that term.

In a post-script Miller angrily explains why she decided to write the book after all these years. She is weary of the contributions, efforts and sacrifices of women who served in the military being ignored and forgotten, and she's damn well going to stand up and be counted.

This book is particularly relevant now, as it clearly paints a picture of war-time from the inside. It's been a long, long time since Americans have seen war on their own soil, and perhaps this will make it real. It also makes it painfully clear that Americans need to remember and acknowledge that women have served in our armed forces, and not always in warm, safe offices stateside. It is a short book at 153 pages, but the writing is excellent. Certainly the story it tells is interesting. It should be read.

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