

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt. *A Time Remembered: American Women in the Vietnam War*. Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1999. xi + 250 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89141-669-2.

Reviewed by Pat Jernigan (Colonel, U.S. Army, Retired)  
Published on H-Minerva (April, 2002)



## A Difficult Read

### A Difficult Read

*A Time Remembered*, by Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt, is a collection of essays on women who served in Vietnam. The author, who worked during World War II in an airplane factory and then with the Office of War Information, has written three books for adults and six books for juveniles. This is her second book on military women.[1]

*A Time Remembered* includes the stories of twenty-seven women. The largest group, eleven, were military nurses. The next largest group, six civilian women, served in various American Red Cross positions. Three were Women's Army Corps (WAC) members; others were civilians with the Army Special Services, the United Service Organization, U.S. Agency for International Development, or International Voluntary Services. The women served in a variety of nursing positions, as recreation or entertainment specialists, secretaries, stenographers and clerks. The purpose of the book, noted only on the dust jacket, is summarized by several questions: "Why...did American women go to Vietnam? What was their life like in the war zone? What were their lives like after they came home?" These questions would have made an excellent framework, and are addressed in detail throughout the book.

Many books have been published on the Vietnam War, but only a small percentage of these even mention women, much less explore our role in a realistic manner. As a Vietnam veteran who served in Saigon in 1971, I was anxious to read the book when it first appeared. After the introduction and the first couple of stories, I put

it down. The book has many errors, is not well written, and is depressing. It hasn't improved with time; it's a disappointing book and a difficult read.

Acknowledgments start the book with an impressive list of military women, historians, veterans groups, and government and civilian agencies contacted by the author. Gruhzt-Hoyt discusses a range of resources used to locate women veterans: advertisements in veterans' magazines, postings on veterans' Internet discussion groups, and word of mouth. She asked the woman contacted to write about their Vietnam experiences. A great deal of correspondence and over four years of effort was needed to complete the stories. Ultimately essays of different lengths, described in the endnotes as "voluminous, extremely detailed, lengthy," and, "more than sixty pages," were received (p. 251-5). Gruhzt-Hoyt states in one instance that she sent guidelines, not further defined, to a contributor. The guidelines would have been a valuable addition to the otherwise absent documentation.

The resulting essays are from four to sixteen pages each. Condensing lengthy, rambling stories written in different styles into a coherent narrative is a difficult task. The challenge to maintain the context and individuality of each story, while reducing the length and omitting repetition, is daunting. Frequent shifts from first to third person are confusing. The essays are bland, reading as if the same person wrote them and as if they came from a blender. The author leads her introduction with a strong anti-Vietnam message that colors her editing. She begins: "Almost everyone remembers the Vietnam

War with a shudder of horror. It was America's longest and perhaps most brutal war. More than half a million American servicemen fought and more than 300,000 were wounded, many with multiple amputations. It was a savage war" (p. xi).

Vietnam, bad as it was, certainly brutal and savage, can hardly be described as America's "most brutal" war. A review of easily available on-line information shows, for example, that the Civil War resulted in over half a million casualties, wide spread destruction in the southern states, and generations of bitterness. American battle casualties in World War I during only one year of combat were about 53,000 men killed. Over 291,000 Americans died in World War II. Estimates of World War II casualties world-wide range around 55 million killed.[2]

Approximately 2,600,000 U.S. military personnel served within the borders of South Vietnam; about 500,000 were in country at the height of the war. The number of wounded totaled approximately 304,000, but of these, over 150,000 were lightly injured and required no hospitalization. About 75,000 were severely disabled, with approximately 1,100 suffering multiple loss of limb.[3] While these figures are tragic, they do not reflect the magnitude claimed by Gruhzt-Hoyt.

Gruhzt-Hoyt continues, stating: "Women played a vital role..." This enthusiastic statement does not reflect the reality, correctly identified by the author, that approximately 7,500 to 11,000 women served in Vietnam (p. xi). Women represented 0.04 percent of all military personnel in country. About ninety percent of the military women in Vietnam were nurses; their contribution to medical care was truly vital. This is one of the positive, lasting legacies from the Vietnam conflict. Never before had so many seriously wounded men been saved.

Many of the accounts in *A Time Remembered* begin with recollections of arrival in Vietnam. Anyone who served there vividly remembers the oppressive heat, the odor, and the extreme humidity. It hit like a wall when you stepped off the plane. Even today a whiff of ripening garbage on a hot summer's day instantly transports me back to Saigon. This common experience is repeated over and over. It would have been useful to take common threads, such as this, and discuss them in introductory remarks.

Several of the stories are powerful despite the poor writing and confusing editing. Among the better chapters are ones about nurses Connie Connolly (pp. 12-16) and Carolyn Tanaka (pp. 31-40), WAC Karen Of-

futt (pp. 109-119), Special Services recreation specialist Ann Campbell (pp. 141-150), and Red Cross worker June Smith (pp. 213-217).

Gruhzt-Hoyt struggles with both terminology and experiences, and makes many errors in describing the military experiences. While individually each is small, taken together they detract from the author's credibility. A few examples include: officers' initial training is not "basic training" (p. 3) or "boot camp" (p. 31); officers don't "enlist" (p. 12), nurses were not "inducted" (p. 31); and, there was no "Women's Air Force" in the sense that there was a Women's Army Corps (p. 169).

Some of the nurses note that they were not volunteers; this presumably applies to their assignment to Vietnam, not their presence in the military. All women in the military have been and are volunteers. Once in the military, assignments are governed by the "needs of the service" and may or may not reflect the desires of the individual. Because of the need for nurses in Vietnam, this was a common assignment. For non-nurse women, it was very difficult to get a Vietnam assignment. While there were no written restrictions, the unofficial policy was not to assign women because the women would be more trouble than they were worth, facilities weren't available, it would be too stressful, etc. In some cases, it took subterfuge and scheming to get a Vietnam assignment. Many women volunteered only to be refused the opportunity to serve.[4]

Other details in *A Time Remembered* strain credulity. A Navy nurse reports working on the back of a small boy who had been wounded. Gruhzt-Hoyt reports that the nurse did not recognize the lung at first, thinking it was boy's tongue (p. 64). A former Army nurse who read the book noted that no medically trained person would confuse a lung for a tongue.

The book includes several accounts of weapons training or weapons issued to military women. Few women carried individual weapons, although there were occasional exceptions. It seems unlikely that an arriving nurse would have been issued an M-16 rifle with ammunition (p. 60). WAC training in the late sixties and early seventies was extremely "genteel." WAC leaders during this period were more concerned with maintaining a lady-like image than in providing realistic training. Weapons familiarization had been a part of training, but was eliminated in the early sixties. Weapons training, much more comprehensive than weapons familiarization, was not introduced until 1974, and became mandatory in mid-1975 (p. 127).[5]