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Aileen Kilgore Henderson. *Stateside Soldier: Life in the Women's Army Corps, 1944-1945.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001. 252 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-396-4.

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Letters Home from a Stateside WAC, 1944-1945

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Aileen Kilgore Henderson's *Stateside Soldier* is an edited collection of letters and diary entries written during her two years as a WAC (Women's Army Corps) at the conclusion of the Second World War. It is the first twentieth- century contribution to the book series formerly entitled "Women's Diaries and Letters of the Nineteenth-Century South" edited by Carol Bleser. Though there are probably other books more suited to classroom use than this one, it does succeed in providing historians conducting research in related subjects a glimpse into the day-to-day life of a good soldier and a likeable young Southern woman.

In a sense there are really two authors of this book, each of which is relevant in her own way: Aileen Kilgore Henderson circa 2001, and Aileen Kilgore circa 1944. As the author herself notes in the prologue, "the young woman writing those diary entries and those letters seemed to be someone I had never known" (p. 1). The person who wrote the introductory material, and who presumably chose which excerpts to include, has a lifetime of work behind her as an educator, having served as both a schoolteacher and a museum docent. She is also an accomplished author, having written three award-winning children's books and edited a second collection of letters from her youth.[1] Most of the text (237 of the 241 pages) was written, however, by a 23-year-old woman from rural Alabama for whom "a fascinating world [was] opened" from 1938 to 1943 by all the people she met working at the local "five-and- dime store" (p. 2). It is this young woman that is the most important author of *Stateside Soldier*, and from her stem both the book's strongest and weakest points. Henderson nicely summarized the dangers of all this in the prologue: "It is an act of courage and/or foolhardiness to open one's diary to the gaze of others" (p. 1).

First a brief summary of the events covered by the book is in order. Henderson enlisted in the Women's Army Corps in January 1944 and began basic training at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, the following month. In March she was assigned to Ellington Field, Texas (the book's headers and index anachronistically refer to it as Ellington Air Force Base). Almost immediately Henderson was accepted as an aircraft mechanic, learning on the job in the months that followed. Her initial requests for a transfer to the Photo Lab were denied, but after complaining of stress and weight loss she was transferred to her desired job in August 1944, where she remained for the balance of her enlistment. She received a handful of furloughs, but never traveled farther than back to her home in Alabama until her discharge, which took place at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

Even though Henderson never traveled beyond her native South during this time, the Army and the war brought much of the outside world to her. Given the author's sheltered background, the "outside world" can be understood here to include not only British flight cadets and grizzled veterans returned from overseas, but also Italian Americans, "Yankee" WACs, and people from numerous other backgrounds that were not often encountered in rural Alabama. The greatest value to historians of *Stateside Soldier* will probably come from Henderson's reactions to these outside influences, such as when she is "enrag[ed]" by the hostility shown a friend who was dating a Jewish man (p. 107), or the time when some friends pulled a prank on her by having "a Jap skull from Guadalcanal" rise up and "float" towards her in the dark (p. 109). Confrontations between Southerners and "these loud-mouth Yankees" (p. 32) were also common, especially during basic training, and North-South tension is a consistent early theme. Perhaps the most surprising fact about observations such as these, however, is how infrequent they are. Relations with African Americans in particular is an issue which rarely comes up, and then usually only in passing. The editing process included what Henderson terms "cutting severely," but because no indi-

cation is given as to where material has been omitted, it is impossible for the reader to know whether mentions of such topics were removed during the editing process or simply rare to begin with.

The major exception to this is Henderson's frequent and often telling observations relating to gender issues. A week into basic training Henderson was still able to write "I haven't come in contact with a mean Sgt. or officer yet" (p. 14), but once she and her fellow WACs entered the mainstream Army, expressions of hostility from male soldiers were common. In one incident, as Henderson and her compatriots "beamed with pride" at a group of male cadets marching smartly past the WAC barracks, the column executed an "Eyes left!" and sang in unison "Roll me over, lay me down, and do it again." In her diary Henderson used this event to explain her exclamation, upon leaving Ellington Field for the final time, "Goodbye, proud world! I'm going home. Thou art not my friend and I'm not thine!" (p. 237). On the other hand, Henderson also comments on the respect and courtesy that she and her fellow WACs often encountered, such as the time when a fellow WAC found herself the only woman in a bus full of cadets: "When she said goodnight, all thirty of them saluted her as she walked away" (p. 47). According to Henderson, their "gallant" behavior moved her friend to tears.

Despite the usefulness historians will find in her comments on women in the military and other controversial issues, it should be noted that the vast majority of the book addresses far more mundane matters. There is a great amount of "G.I. wisdom" here: mail is vital, KP (kitchen police) duty is awful, and fire drills always strike at the absolute worst time. A surprising number of detailed descriptions of Henderson's meals are present when only a few would have sufficed, and her adopted cat "Jasper" is mentioned fifty times in the last half of the book.

Her style of writing does help, though. A dry sense of humor and flashes of wit do make frequent appearances, and at times Henderson's writing almost rises to the level of epigram, such as her observation that "mail is a funny business–people weep if they don't get it and they weep if they do" (p. 20). Still, the lack of chapters, or any other means of dividing up the text other than the individual letters and entries themselves, can be demoralizing to the reader. The absence of explanatory notes or any other context relating to outside events is also a problem. Historians reading her letters will realize the significance of the passing of dates like June 6, 1944, and August 6, 1945, but the lay reader is told only of the outside world through whatever Henderson did or did not record at the time. It can also be frustrating to have the text build and build to an important event, such as a long-anticipated furlough home, only to hear nothing of what happened there (because Henderson naturally wrote no letters home while she was already there).

Of course none of these criticisms are the fault of the author circa 1944. She was not writing for academics or for students–she was writing for herself and her family. The lack of context and the level of mundane detail are great enough, however, for this book not to be recommended for use in an undergraduate course, especially given the number of other often excellent memoirs now available that relate to the experiences of American women during the Second World War.[2] Given what an accomplished author Henderson is today, this reviewer is certain that a memoir based on the primary sources included in *Stateside Soldier*, and the memories they might jog in her today, would doubtless be a very interesting read.

Notes:

[1]. Aileen Kilgore Henderson, *Tenderfoot Teacher: Letters from the Big Bend, 1952-1954* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, forthcoming September 2002).

[2]. "Good recent examples include LaVonne Telshaw Camp, *Lingering Fever: A World War II Nurse's Memoir* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1997); Ann B. Carl., *A WASP among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in World War II (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999); and Josette Dermody Wingo,* Mother Was a Gunner's Mate: World War II in the Waves_ (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994)."

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