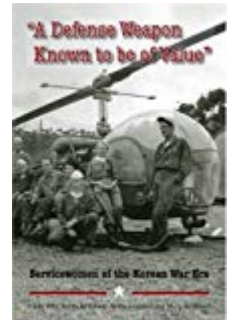


Linda Witt, Judith Bellafaire, Britta Granrud, Mary Jo Binker. *"A Defense Weapon Known to Be of Value"; Servicewomen of the Korean War Era.* Hanover: University Press of New England, 2005. xii + 320 pp. \$60.00, library, ISBN 978-1-58465-471-1.



Reviewed by Tanya L. Roth

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"A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value", the latest publication from the Women in Military Service for America Memorial series, moves beyond the more well-known story of women in World War II to the next chapter in U.S. women's military experiences. Focusing on the often-overlooked post-World War II era, the authors argue that the years 1948 to 1953 were a time of problems and persistence concerning women and their participation in the U.S. military. In the years immediately following World War II, the U.S. government came to believe that womanpower, indispensable in the last war, would be just as necessary in the future. This belief was made evident in 1948 when the Women's Armed Forces Integration Act was passed, finally granting women a permanent place in all branches of the armed forces. But this allowance, as the authors aptly demonstrate, was not without massive limitations. Although an important element of this book is the struggle for women's inclusion in the military at the end of the 1940s, the real focus is the impact of the Women's Armed Forces Integration Act in its first five years of implementation. What the authors ultimately make clear is that "the

armed forces attempted to establish a permanent place for women at an inauspicious time ... Given the American public's social values during the years after World War II, it may be astonishing that the very idea of a military that included women, other than nurses, managed to survive. That servicewomen did manage to carve out a place for their gender within the nation's armed forces says a great deal" (p. 12). And so does this volume, as it chronologically charts women's military involvement and experiences through the difficult early years of integration.

The Women's Armed Forces Integration Act of 1948 allowed women to serve in all branches of the military, with the caveat that they could not comprise more than 2 percent of the total armed forces. Although women had served in temporary military units in World War II and had found ways to participate in other conflicts, the Women's Armed Forces Integration Act finally gave women permanent military standing. Yet despite its importance in changing the way the military could be composed, the Women's Armed Forces Integration Act has been frequently ignored by

historians to date (notable exceptions include Jeanne Holm's incomparable *Women in the Military* (1982) and several official military histories). The authors underscore the importance of understanding the repercussions of this act in the Korean War years, when it was first being implemented on a wide scale. To facilitate such understanding, this book tells the story of how women experienced the military and war in the years immediately following the integration act. Marshaling a plethora of resources, including newspaper articles and interviews with military women from mid-century, the authors thoroughly convey the social tensions that underscored and complicated the military's sexual integration efforts. In a period when women were by and large turning towards marriage and family, convincing women that the military provided a unique, desirable alternative—or complement—was never easy.

Beginning in the World War II era, the book outlines women's roles in American society during that period, while also exploring the new job opportunities World War II provided inside and outside the military. The focus then shifts to women's roles in the military during the demobilization period and examines the postwar efforts to sexually integrate the military. Following the passing of the Women's Armed Forces Integration Act, chapter 3 recounts the military's efforts to recruit and retain women, while chapter 4 examines the roles available to military women in the early integration years. But allowing women into the military was one thing; finding appropriate roles for them was another. Chapter 5 emphasizes how it took a time of crisis—the Korean War and the increased need for man- and womanpower—to begin removing old sex barriers to women's participation and jobs available to them. Even after being legally allowed into the military, there were still many in command who thought women should not be there and resisted efforts to sexually integrate their units until it was absolutely necessary. The needs of the Korean War created many opportunities for American military women

worldwide, as chapter 6 describes. However, forbidden from combat, women were not generally sent to Korea unless they were in the military nursing corps. Given that nearly all American military women in Korea were nurses, then, chapter 7 provides the most thorough account of women's military experiences in the early years of integration by detailing nurses' experiences in Korea. As a concluding note, the authors consider the impact of the period from 1948 to 1953 on women's military participation through the rest of the twentieth century. In this conclusion, some of the problems of the Women's Armed Forces Integration Act come to light, particularly regarding women and their dependents—an issue that women challenged multiple times in the post-Korean War years.

"A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value" makes a remarkable contribution to a historical subject that has not previously been examined thoroughly enough. While there is certainly more work that can and ought to be done regarding both the Women's Armed Forces Integration Act and the Korean War era, this book provides an important foundation for future studies.

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