

Kirsten Holmstedt. *Band of Sisters: American Women at War in Iraq.* Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2007. xxiii + 327 \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8117-0267-6.



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From its opening pages discerning readers will quickly discover that *Band of Sisters* deftly manages to rise above the sentimental, sappy "chick-lit" war stories glutting today's literary market on women's issues. In the book's forward, Major Tammy Duckworth (a former U.S. Army helicopter pilot who lost both of her legs when her aircraft was struck by an Iraqi insurgent's rocket) maintains that the stark realities of 21st century desert warfare renders the problematic "women in combat issue" moot. She further argues that combat chivalry extended towards today's female servicewomen by their male peers and superiors is arcane and counterproductive. Today's military women do not need special privileges, she asserts. Just let women do the job they were trained to do and serve where their country needs them to serve. Thrusting American servicewomen into the acrid heat of desert battle helps them transcend hindering gender stereotypes and ultimately allows these servicewomen to be "tough and professional," Duckworth concludes (p. ix).

Kirsten Holmstedt's narrative layout is vintage literary choreography. The twelve women

featured in *Band of Sisters* are a carefully selected ethnically diverse cross section of female officers and enlisted women. They are active duty, guard, and reserve members of the army, navy, marines, and air force. Although a couple of them belong to the heralded "the first military service woman to...." club, (e.g. U.S. Marine Major Vernice Armour, first African American female Department of Defense combat pilot), each woman's narrative account ultimately stands on its own as a positive testament to women's ability to successfully serve in combat roles.

The author wisely confessed that her civilian journalist background was a potential story telling liability, one that could have justifiably disqualified her from credibly speaking for or about military women who were putting their lives on the line in Iraq. Playing the role of literary observer, she appears to calmly sit back, allowing the dozen to boldly commandeer the book's story-telling center stage. They liberally share their experiences via a steady stream of cryptic military jargon and acronyms, dark yet witty battlefield humor topped off with a sprinkling of profanity.

Using this strategy, Holmstedt's narrative sharing technique lent a refreshing authenticity to her work. Although each woman's story was different, some similarities immediately stood out. For example, each woman spoke of "holding her own." In their eyes, real women warriors would not succumb to biological and emotional weaknesses especially if doing so put them in the untenable position of asking already resentful male colleagues to pick up their widely perceived gender generated slack. "Carrying your own weight and having men realize you are a help and not a hindrance to the mission?" As the guy in the famous credit card commercial melodically intones--"priceless." --The book's most exceptional strength was the multidimensional portrayal of the high and low points these women experienced as they performed their duties. Marine Lance Corporal Carrie Blais confessed struggling with conflicting emotions at having killed an insurgent, yet having pride in being one of the few to get an actual combat "kill." Army Kiowa helicopter pilot Robin Brown survived being shot down by insurgents and was rescued by US forces. Weeks later, struggling with grief and survivor's guilt, she spoke at a female colleague and close friend's funeral, another Army Kiowa pilot who was fatally shot down by Iraqi insurgents.

Every book has weaknesses; thankfully this one has only a noticeable few. Some readers, for example, may grouse about the stories being overly focused on marines and pilots. The one Navy story featuring Petty Officer Third Class Marcia Lillie was a poor fit and appears that it was included as a "don't leave out the navy" afterthought.

Band of Sisters is a book that will help move the debate regarding whether women should be in combat out of the academic conference sessions few attend and scholarly journals that all too few laypersons read. Holmstedt's mastery of the women and war narrative genre will also help take the still raging debate out of the halls of Con-

gress and low-level Executive Branch briefings and bring it to the full attention of who have mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters serving in combat.

Even the staunchest opponent to women's role in combat should conclude (albeit grudgingly) that these twelve stories readily validate that the "women in combat" question has been asked and answered. As a retired Air Force female officer who served in the first Gulf War, I highly recommend this book because the stories here, and hundreds other like them, prove that women's service in the 1990s conflict was not a fluke, but a prophetic precursor of women's worldwide military duties to come. Add it to personal and business libraries. Make it a "must read" for any academic course that empirically examines the compelling rhetoric of women in combat.

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