

**Jane Mersky Leder.** *Thanks for the Memories: Love, Sex, and World War II.* Portsmouth: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006. 240 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-275-98879-1.



**Reviewed by** Donna Knaff

**Published on** H-Minerva (June, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Kara Dixon Vuic (Bridgewater College)

The body of literature written on World War II, scholarly and otherwise, continues to grow. This attention is not misplaced; the importance of a conflict in which nearly fifty million people died cannot be underestimated.[1] Yet the war was significant for social and cultural reasons as well: nearly every element of life, for almost everyone concerned, changed during the war, and life around the world after the war was changed irrevocably by it. Jane Mersky Leder's *Thanks for the Memories* makes an admirable attempt to unite much of the information written about WWII by both professional and amateur historians. It makes this attempt by drawing on a variety of sources, including oral histories, government documents, and secondary sources dealing with various aspects of the war years. Besides love and sex, it explores race, homosexual identity, and the years after WWII.

The book's structure, however, is problematic. The eight-page introduction, for instance, establishes no argumentative framework, and only the barest nods to argument come in its first and

last pages. Leder proposes that the book "is the true story of how the World War II generation responded to the passions of war and how their lives and the relationships between the sexes were forever changed" (p. ix). She suggests that her work "exposes the sexual and romantic escapades of the 'greatest generation' and underscores the importance of how those four war years revolutionized relationships between the sexes, between gays and lesbians, and helped set the stage for the second wave of the women's liberation movement" (p. xvi).

The book attempts no standardized or formalized look at military policy or cultural understandings; it instead reveals individual practice as told through a series of unrelated stories. Given that the humanities regard "truth" as unknowable (particularly "truth" untouched by time or faulty memory), the notion that World War II was a critical era for heterosexual relationships, lesbians and gays, and the post-suffrage women's movement is almost without question. Exposing "sexual and romantic escapades" of any generation, how-

ever, does little to "underscore ... the importance" of any era without a full analysis of *how* it does so. Beyond that, without a structuring argument, the book's interesting and revealing stories often have an uncomfortable sense of being drawn together in support of an unclear goal. Perhaps because of this argumentative absence, relationships between chapter titles, subheadings, and content are sometimes difficult to understand and seem to wander far from their purported path. Issues of clarity are not aided by problems with editing: one story recounts that "Harry was up every morning at 3 a.m. in order to take the bus back to the base in time for revelry [sic]" (p. 83).

Further, footnotes are applied inconsistently, with paragraphs of data not footnoted. For instance, under the subheading "Out of the Kitchen and into the Workplace," Leder mentions some statistics about the number of women and men in the service and workforce. Although compelling and persuasive of the enormous change taking place in wartime, none of these statistics is cited. Unfortunately, this is not the only material without citations in the book.

Support for the book's ideas, in fact, is often limited to oral histories of questionable accuracy, as when a source relates that during the war, her husband tried to join the "navy air force [sic]," an inaccurate term for what was officially called Naval Aviation during the war (p. 18).[2] Oral sources often use inaccurate terminology--not everyone is an expert--but an even parenthetical nod to the official term would clarify the organization for less-informed readers. The most egregious and obvious instance of unquestioned and not fact-checked oral history, however, is when Leder perpetuates the "Sgt. Johnnie Phelps" story. For those not familiar with the account, Nell "Johnnie" Phelps claimed that during World War II, General Dwight Eisenhower, for whom she worked "directly," ordered her to "ferret out the lesbians" in her outfit. The story goes that she told him she would do so, but that her name would top

the list. General Eisenhower then, according to the story, told Phelps to "forget the order." Lillian Faderman tells Phelps's story in her otherwise excellent book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (1991). Randy Shilts also tells the story in his highly regarded *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military* (1993), and the story has been retold in histories of Eisenhower and other documents.

Leder cites Mary Ann Humphrey's valuable collection of oral histories, *My Country, My Right to Serve: Experiences of Gay Men and Women in the Military, WWII-Present* (1990), as the source of Phelps's story. According to Humphrey, Phelps claimed that she was first commissioned as a lieutenant, then "got out" and reenlisted (noncommissioned). Humphrey refers to Phelps as an enlisted person and includes a picture of "Private First Class Phelps." Leder, however, inexplicably promotes Phelps to major as she tells the story, and additionally designates Phelps as "the head of [Eisenhower's] base's Women's Army Corps" (WAC) unit. The story and the erroneous promotions are moot, however, because Phelps never served under Eisenhower, was never an officer--was never even promoted past the honorable rank of corporal--and, in fact, only got to Germany a year *after* Eisenhower left. Phelps also claimed that of the nine hundred women in her WAC battalion, about "95%" of them were lesbian.[3] Perhaps predictably, this statement, which is unlikely even in the most broadminded estimation, continues to create furor among female veterans of that era and others.

Leder not only misquotes the story, she bases the experiences of all queer WWII military men and women on it, writing, "There was no such recorded *willingness to look the other way* when a *man* was suspected of being gay" (first emphasis mine) (p. xv). At the end of this paragraph, she footnotes Arthur Dong's film *Coming Out under Fire* (1997), based on Allan Bérubé's book, *Coming*

*Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in WWII* (1990). Bérubé, however, cites the story of a "Regular Army colonel 'of capacity and wide experience,'" appearing in "an Army report, [who] 'became aware, unofficially, of a number of homosexuals in the troops under his command. No difficulties had been reported in connection with these men. By careful assignment and by attention to problems before they became serious, these men were kept on effective duty over a long period of time.'" [4] Bérubé's story, perhaps ironically, appears on the page facing one where he cites Phelps. In fact, Leder contradicts her own assertions about "willingness to look the other way" by writing that "military officials sometimes let known homosexuals serve and even found ways to utilize behavior ordinarily perceived as 'queer'" (p. 55). Minimal research would have turned up Phelps's falsehood, and attention to her own claims might have discouraged Leder from contradicting herself.

In the interests of full disclosure, I have recently written an article on the Phelps story that will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. Even if one were not interested in writing an article, it is fairly easy to check facts with the National Personnel Records Center/National Archives online; Phelps's records are available by request. Further, the discoverers of the falsehood routinely and consistently debunk the story online as it appears.[5] Leder, whose book jacket describes her as "a freelance writer and journalist," is in professions in which fact checking is highly regarded--particularly of a story so important that she includes it in her introduction as crucial to the subject of "Love, Sex, and World War II." While this is the most flagrant example of poor research in the book, it seems indicative of a troubling lack of attention to detail.

The book's issues with scholarship do not diminish its qualities as pleasurable reading nor as loving tribute to her parents and their generation (the "Prologue: To My Parents--Morris and Shirley

Mersky" recounts the story of her parents' early relationship during the war). The book is full of interesting stories and would make an excellent introduction to the war for a younger student, and even, to a lesser extent, to some of the sources that might more rigorously explore the matters at hand. The book does, to its credit, investigate vital aspects of this critical time, and the writer's enthusiasm is laudable. Ultimately, though, its value lies more in entertainment than in academe.

#### Notes

[1]. For number of casualties, see <http://warchronicle.com/numbers/WWII/deaths.htm>.

[2]. Extensive and detailed information on Naval Aviation is available through the National Naval Aviation Museum Web site at <http://collections.navalaviation.museum/Query.php>; and information on the Army Air Corps/Army Air Forces of WWII is available at <http://www.af.mil/history/overview.asp>.

[3]. Mary Ann Humphrey, *My Country, My Right to Serve: Experiences of Gay Men and Women in the Military, WWII-Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 40.

[4]. Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in WWII* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 181.

[5]. Credit for the discovery of the falsehood of Phelps's story goes to Mary Margaret Salm, former WWII WAC sergeant; Colonel Patricia Jernigan, United States Army (retired); and former Captain Lois Beck, United States Army.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-minerva>

**Citation:** Donna Knaff. Review of Leder, Jane Mersky. *Thanks for the Memories: Love, Sex, and World War II*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24670>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.