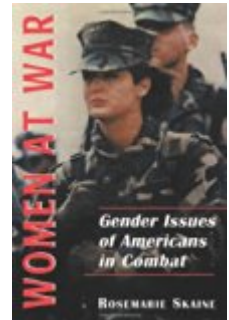


Rosemarie Skaine. *Women at War: Gender Issues of Americans in Combat.* Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, 1999. ix + 299 pp. \$28.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-0570-1.



Reviewed by Pat Jernigan

Published on H-Minerva (March, 2001)

An Updated Examination of Women in the Military and Combat Issues

Women at War sets an ambitious agenda. Skaine's goal is to "...examine not only the history of women in combat, but the contemporary women in combat" (p. 14). Skaine provides an interesting and informative discussion of women in the military that is at times tutorial and at other times analytical in style. She tells how, after almost fifty years, women are now officially allowed into still-limited combat roles. While this relatively slim volume does not contain the detail to match the author's aim, it does provide a great deal of useful information on the very substantial events affecting women in the military through much of the 1990s. *Women at War* is a useful addition to the library of those interested in the recent evolution of women in the military.

The first two chapters provide definitions. War, conflict, war crimes, and the effects of war are among the topics dealt with in brief paragraphs. Next, a short chapter discusses "What is Combat?" before dealing with women's involvement in war, law and policy, and a range of issues

such as readiness, cohesion, sex, equal opportunity, and family. The book concludes with a chapter entitled "Toward Strength and Equality."

Skaine notes the contradictions between the definitions and the way that the military has been organized. While both law and regulations precluded military women's participation in combat, the reality was never that clear, nor were the rules easily enforced. She cites the example of a unit responsible for responding to a Soviet invasion through the Fulda Gap in West Germany in the 1980s. Visiting DACOWITS members asked what would happen if the Soviets invaded. The answer was that the women in the battalion would be there with the men (p. 26). This revelation might well have startled the women too.

A short chapter deals all too briefly with the history of women's involvement in war. Skaine traces the experiences of women in the ancient world, women who served in the American military disguised as men, and women who served in the military as nurses from the Spanish American War on. Another short chapter deals with the increases of women in the 1970s, the "woman-

pause" of the Reagan years, Grenada (Operation Urgent Fury, 1983), Panama (Operation Just Cause, 1989), and the Persian Gulf War (Desert Shield/Desert Storm, 1990-91). The admission of women to the service academies (1976) includes a detailed discussion of the U.S. Military Academy, but only brief attention is given to the integration of women at the other academies. Not found: women deploying to Grenada and Panama saw confusion caused by Direct Combat Probability Coding. Some women were not allowed to deploy with their units, while others were returned to their home base (Jeanne Holm, *Women in the Military*, pp. 404-405).

The laws limiting the assignment of women are mentioned with many of the cases that were brought to challenge these laws. In *United States v. Virginia*, concerning the Virginia Military Institute, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg notes in her opinion: "...our comprehension of 'We the People' expanded." Further, "Estimates of what is appropriate for most women, no longer justify denying opportunity to women...outside the average description..." (p. 94). *Owens v. Brown* challenged the Navy's exclusion of women from assignment to other than hospital and transport ships (pp. 96-98). Policy refinements and shifts are traced as the Army struggled with opening of new positions to women. This chapter is particularly useful as it summarizes many of the important court cases affecting military women.

One of the most interesting features of the book is the series of interviews with a wide range of military women and men. These include: CAPT Rosemary Mariner, USN-Ret, MAJ Lillian Pfluke, USA-Ret, several women from the first West Point class, COL Barbara Lee, USA, Dr. Linda Grant De Pauw, president of The Minerva Center, GEN Gordon R. Sullivan, USA-Ret, and many others representing all of the services, many different ranks, and a rich variety of views. CDR Trish Beckman, USN provides a particularly memorable quote: "Every American citizen is a rugged individualist.

He/she should contribute to our nation's defense based on...individual capabilities, not on arbitrary assumptions of what is 'average' for each....Women will never be given full rights of citizenship until they accept the full responsibilities..." (p. 205).

The chapter on readiness (p. 153 ff) begins with the crucial question: "What are the Real Issues of Readiness?" Readiness, according to MAJ Pfluke, has become the reason for the changing rules: the military needed the flexibility of using personnel more effectively. Dorothy and Carl Schneider state that ability differences exist in both men and women, and some members of each group will perform well while others will not. The positions of Elaine Donnelly and Brian Mitchell in opposition to women in combat are also briefly discussed (pp. 154-5).

The importance of combat positions is stressed throughout the book: the most significant jobs go to officers with extensive combat arms experience. Women are denied the opportunity to compete for these jobs, because they have limited access to combat arms positions. Ground combat remains closed to women. A major objection to women in combat has been that they supposedly lack strength for the work required. This objection may be overstated. An Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine report (January 26, 1996) shows that intensive training of motivated women can increase their physical abilities. The women in the study were able to perform traditional male military duties (p. 176). Major Pfluke, questioned about reaching full potential in the Army, responded: "Ground combat is what is important to the Army. It picks its senior leaders from ground combat branches." (p. 11) Skaine concludes "Meaningful change is occurring... [while] women cannot serve in combat, they can be trained....women...will be ready should they be called..." (p. 224) Much has been done, but more remains.

While the book appears to be well researched and thorough, a few lapses were noted. A series of confusing references identifies the first military women who were selected for general officer. Anna Hayes (Chief, Army Nurse Corps) and Elizabeth Hoisington (Director, Women's Army Corps) are correctly identified as the first women generals (1970) (p. 58). Later, Dorothy Pocklington is incorrectly identified as the "Army's first female brigadier general." (p. 201) Pocklington, an Army Nurse, was the first woman reservist to be promoted to general. Another slip refers to a pre-World War II policy that required junior enlisted men seek permission before they were allowed to marry. The note (p. 213) indicates that "a Specialist (SPC)" needed such permission. Since specialists ranks were only introduced in the mid-1950s, this reference is incorrect. One bibliographic omission is a puzzle: Bettie J. Morden's book, *Women in the Army 1945-1978*, is not listed. Was this an editing error or did the author overlook this important reference?

The minor distractions do not diminish the usefulness of the book. Overall *Women at War* is a fast paced, highly readable primer on the expansion of women's roles in the military. The book is a useful addition to MG Jeanne Holm's *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution*, last updated in 1990.

Women at War is among the growing list of books on women in the military. A query to www.Amazon.com on military women and war results in the display of several hundred titles. A few of the books that might be of interest in reading about contemporary military women and women in combat include: *In the Men's House*, Carol Barkalow; *Breaking Out: VMI and the Coming of Women*, Laura Fairchild Brodie; *Hornet's Nest*, Missy Cummings; *Gender Camouflage: Women and the U.S. Military*, Francine D'Amico and Laurie Weinstein (editors); *This Women's Army: The Dynamics of Sex and Violence in the Military*, Marie E. DeYoung; *Crossed Currents:*

Navy Women in a Century of Change, Jean Ebbert and Marie-Beth Hall (Third Edition); *In Glory's Shadow: The Citadel, Sannon Faulkner, and a Changing America*, Catherine S. Manegold; and, *The Valiant Women of the Vietnam War* by Karen Zeinert. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but illustrates that this topic is receiving more attention.

Copyright c 2001 by H-Net and MINERVA: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military. All rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given. For other permission contact MinervaCen@aol.com.

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

Citation: Pat Jernigan. Review of Skaine, Rosemarie. *Women at War: Gender Issues of Americans in Combat*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4997>



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