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Trauma and the Vietnam War
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Three women stand together, rigid in their stances and representative of different levels of awareness and action. One woman tends to a male soldier who has fallen in battle. Another looks to the sky for a medical helicopter, or perhaps, a sign from God. And yet another kneels to the ground, and prays. These women, named Charity, Faith and Hope, found themselves the center of attention to 25,000 people on November 11, 1993.¹ Cast in bronze, they represented a full round memorial for women who served in Vietnam. Nurses made up most of these wartime women. Erected a full 10 years after the establishment of the Vietnam Veterans Wall Memorial, the design, construction and erection of this memorial statue spoke not only to the struggle by thousands of volunteers to get a memorial built specifically to recognize women, but to the start of the movement by Americans to recognize women's efforts in the Vietnam War. As Veterans called for recognition for their efforts, the term veteran became associated with male (and for the most part, combat) soldiers. Because women's role in the war occurred when society's attitudes of women conveyed subordinate mates whose role was to nurture and keep house, and because the public, officials and military themselves framed the war as something inherently male—that created men from “pussies”, to understand women veterans (mostly nurses) introduced a cognitive dissonance that the public still struggles with today. Furthermore, by framing the war as a man's activity, concurrent with the warrior image, coupled with the distinct position of a wartime nurse apart from a male soldier or a woman who experiences trauma outside of wartime experience, continues to allow Vietnam War nurses' trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

¹ Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation, <http://www.vietnamwomensmemorial.org>.

to go overlooked both in the public discourse, scholarly and traditional sources and feminist writings.

The Vietnam Women's Memorial came after a concerted effort to raise awareness of women veterans. Estimates show that over 250,000 women served in the armed forces, with an estimated 10,000 in combat zones alongside men, including thousands of nurses. The US government recorded no specific numbers on how many women went to Vietnam.² This lack of information speaks to the lack of concern that the US military had for women. The nurses' value was in healing soldiers to continue to fight—the women themselves were negligible. In a 1981 Congressional report which recorded a speech Senator Inouye of Hawaii gave about women Vietnam veterans—the first speech on record that addressed the actual number of women stationed in Vietnam—he claimed that between “7,000 to 55,000 of the 192,000 women in the services were actually ever stationed in Vietnam. Their actual number is probably much closer to 7,000.”³ As scholars have raised the estimate to 250,000 women serving at the time of the Vietnam War, so should scholars and the public scrutinize the numbers of women actually stationed in Vietnam. A huge gap occurs when making the jump between 7,000 and 55,000. Furthermore, women's roles, historically, have been downplayed in male dominated society. To go with a more conservative estimate of women in war makes sense when confronted with the reality that the military did send women there and they did serve in the army corps, air force and navy. A smaller number shows a little less of an oversight; a little less of an omission in records.

Even U.S. toy manufacturers did not know how to categorize women nurses. Introduced in 1967, GI Nurse came as an addition to the GI Joe toy collection. Produced for one year, the

² Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation, <http://www.vietnamwomensmemorial.org>.

³ Senator Inouye, Congress, U.S. Senate, “Women Vietnam Veterans.” 29 April 1981. Congressional Record: S4169.

toy did not see commercial success in the market.⁴ In essence, GI Nurse confronted the same cognitive dissonance that war nurses themselves produced for Americans: where did they fit in the scheme of things? Toy stores struggled with where to place the dolls. Some kept them near the other GI Joe and “boys” toys. Some placed them near Barbies and “girl” toys. Either way, both the doll itself and its placement conveyed to children that war made boys into men, and being a real woman included taking care of others. The doll’s description again emphasized that war was a man’s activity: “Among the American heroes serving in Vietnam were soldiers whose mission it was not to fight, but instead to comfort and heal.”⁵ Fighting (and killing) was the emphasis for many male Vietnam veterans. Women needed to heal these men so they could continue this mission. Interestingly enough, Hasbro didn’t even give the GI Nurse Action Girl a name. She served as a stand in for any nurse, much like nurses themselves would long be overlooked, their names and stories not as important as those of their male counterparts. The GI Nurse came and went without much fanfare. GI Joe, a rough combat soldier, became an icon for little boys wanting to be the next perfect soldier.

GI Joe built up for boys this warrior image that stayed throughout many boys’ life. Interestingly enough, this warrior image is associated with a doll, a generally “female” toy. But the camouflage and available accessory packs with weapons and supplies let boys put away any reservations, and allow them to dress the doll as a warrior.⁶ They then can put themselves in the mindset of play and relate how they would then act in the situations that GI Joe encounters. Play became war. Just as boys grow up beating the bad guy, like in cowboys and Indians, GI Joe

⁴ Don Vaughan, “A Toy Story: Rare G.I. Nurse action figure a valuable find for collectors,” *NurseWeek*, May 6, 2004. <http://www.nurseweek.com/news/features/04-05/toystory.asp>.

⁵ Women in Vietnam, “Military Nurses,”

<http://www.users.interport.net/m/k/mklweb/illyria.com/www.illyria.com/vnwnurse.html>

⁶ James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (New York: Hill & Wang Pub, 1994), 129.

became another aspect or tool to socialize boys into wanting to fight, or at least see military action as good.⁷

Society, on the other hand, socialized women in a different way. Women saw themselves as providing a service to men. Many grew up reading the adventures of Cherry Ames, a WWII-era nurse and main character of a set of mystery novels published from 1943 to 1968. Helen Wells wrote *Army Nurse*, published in 1944, to encourage women to become nurses and join the war effort. Those nurses who went to Vietnam would probably have read this title as well as others of the Cherry Ames series. In this book, the text reads:

“But something worried, almost frightened Cherry. As the war deepened, and there were more and greater battles, more and still more nurses were going to be needed ... if thousands of men were to be healed and returned to battle ... IF WE WERE TO WIN. Cherry wished she could cry out to other girls, and her voice carry beyond this crowded pitiful room, far across the Caribbean and all over the United States, how desperately nurses were needed...”⁸

This emphasis on the usefulness of nurses affected many women, who looked to become nurses and serve their duty to their country. Also important to note is that while the text illustrates males as “men” who fight, females are seen as “girls”, marking again, a discrepancy in maturity and importance, even when the nurses and male soldiers were generally both the same in age—young recruits with a mix of older, more established people in the ranks.

Even as some nurses felt accepted by male soldiers, as we can see through interactions recorded in women’s stories from Vietnam, this sentiment was not a part of public discourse or understanding, and the same male soldiers, nurses and those of the public continued to overlook the amicable relations of women and men in the war when the war ended. As Ssgt Barry Sadler gained popularity in 1966 with his single “Ballad of the Green Berets”, the album had another song titled “Salute to the Nurses” in which Sadler sings that “And all of the men in this war torn

⁷ Ibid, 139.

⁸ Helen Wells, *Cherry Ames: Army Nurse* (New York: Grosset and Dun-lap, Inc., 1944), 193.

land salute the nurses of Vietnam.” This sentiment was echoed by some other men, according to nurses, but the support stopped short of understanding comprehensively the struggle of Vietnam Veteran nurses: “they lived with the guilt of killing; we, the guilt of surviving.”⁹ This dichotomous, and seemingly contradictory war experience doesn’t grab the public used to understanding the war as a “man’s war.” And recognizing of nurses’ duties and abilities didn’t seem to catch hold with the general public in any particular way—none of the songs from Ssgt Barry Sadler gained any popularity on the charts.

As more scholars and the public at large began to look at the war in Vietnam and examine it through a gendered lens, many of the writings deemed the war a masculine space in which we can examine the effects of trauma. But in doing so, they create no space for women veterans who were also exposed to these wartime conditions, and thus creates no space in which scholars, physicians and the public can fully understand and address the issues of these women in relation to trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In *Words of Hurt, Reading the Literatures of Trauma* written by Kali Tal, Tal overlooks female veteran nurses in her assessment of the Vietnam War. She acknowledges the trauma of women in terms of rape and incest, but leaves the majority of women with the perspective of war, out. She even goes as far as to, in multiple paragraphs, equate the word veteran with being male¹⁰, dismissing the thousands of women who served as nurses in the military (and even those women who served as clerks, communications specialists, and more.) This creation of synonym between Vietnam veteran and male Vietnam veteran conveyed a lack of an acknowledgement for the service of women and any consequential trauma that they would endure, even from a feminist perspective.

⁹ Susan O’Neill, *Don’t Mean Nothing: Short Stories of Vietnam* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), xiii.

¹⁰ Kali Tal, “There was No Plot, and I Discovered it by Mistake: Trauma, Community, and the Revisionary Process,” in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 142-143.

This was a popular thought for many: women didn't serve in Vietnam, or at least, not substantially. Thus, essentially no "female veterans" existed in the public's mind. As Diane Carlson Evans, founder of the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project (now named the Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation) and Vietnam veteran remarked at the 25th anniversary of the wall, "we were disrespected, ridiculed, analyzed, questioned, investigated, disparaged and accused. We had songs written for us and against us; movies portraying us as inhuman or subhuman. And we were all men." This portrayal of Vietnam Veterans inherently being men continued for many reasons: many believed they would be ridiculed if they admitted their naivety of the war when they volunteered, they were deterred from sharing their stories because of anti-war sentiment, and a lot of times, they wanted to forget they took part in the war. Evans notes the opposition to her campaign as stemming from the idea that only men had suffered the emotional scars of trauma, or that women Vietnam veterans role was too much of a break from public reasoning to rationalize, creating a dissonance: "Some said women had not been in combat, did not suffer, and were too few in number to be honored. Many people were comfortable with the popular stereotype of the all-male American military. For adversaries we were providing a new emblematic definition of women they were eager to impugn."¹¹

As the movement to recognize women as Vietnam veterans began to take root, the public conveyed their feelings of dismay. In a 1985 issue of *The American Journal of Nursing*, Madeline Amgott of New York wrote about her findings and frustrations in trying to produce a segment examining Vietnam War nurses. In this letter, she relays the experiences of women who also struggled with the veteran title: "Rose Sandeck, team leader at the Vietnam Veterans Center in Concord, CA, organizes therapy groups for nurses and lectures across the country. She says

¹¹ Diane Carlson Evans, "Moving a Vision: The Vietnam Women's Memorial." *Policy and Politics in Nursing and Health Care* 3, (1993).

many nurses do not think of them-selves as veterans and therefore do not even apply for veterans' benefits."¹² This emphasizes the devaluation of women in war, and the view that many women had of themselves following the war. Male soldiers saw women's work as beneficial *to them*, but not something that gave them veteran status, while the public didn't want to see women as surviving a war, and thus neglecting the status of veteran, instead referring to them in other ways. Like Keith Walker states, "If we didn't think about them being there, then they were not in danger."¹³

But the truth is many female Vietnam Veterans did experience terrors inflicted from war, and had to cope with the trauma afterwards in a world that didn't understand their situations. In *A Piece of My Heart*, several of the accounts include depression, the inability to form personal relationships, detachment, flashbacks, suicide attempts and other signs of PTSD. They discussed how they felt men just couldn't understand their feelings: "In the rap group I remember thinking that these men just couldn't understand, and I cried a lot".¹⁴ Some nurses conveyed a sense of guilt in having these symptoms, a reaction that can be seen as a result of the dissonance a nurse would feel on being the one unhealthy and in need of help. As one veteran stated in her account of her life and feelings post the Vietnam War: "I think it's a comparison that a lot of woman veterans make—I had it easy compared to the grunts. I shouldn't be having any problems, you know—nursing is nursing."¹⁵ But this realization that their own feelings are valid has had relatively little support from those studying and examining trauma. With little attention paid to these veterans and their struggle to gain recognition as war participants, their problems continue to go on unaddressed. As one vocal advocate for women veteran needs states, "I'm willing to

¹² Madeline Amgott. "Vietnam Nurse Veterans." *The American Journal of Nursing*, 85, no. 4, (1985): 368-369.

¹³ Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of 26 Women Who Served in Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985), 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 110.

talk about it if it is going to help... not only to help women...but also to make other people out there—psychologists, therapists, psychiatrists—understand that war really did a number on all of us, the women as well as the men.”¹⁶

The problem that the Vietnam women veteran presents is a need for recognition and advocacy, but also for addressing the special case. As a wartime participant who experienced trauma, scholarly and feminist writings have yet to create a substantial space in which to understand these veterans’ unique experiences. As some writers discuss trauma generally in two separate spheres, that of men and wartime (public) violence, and women and rape or incest (private) violence.¹⁷ When looking at wartime violence, men are veterans. Soldiers are veterans. But there is no mention of females as veterans. Veterans become males, inherently, because war is inherently seen as male. Even in boot camp, men are changed from “ladies” or “pussies” to men.¹⁸ Socialized upbringings and enforced gender roles also contribute to this lack of understanding women veterans. Women are taught to internalize problems; they are to nurture and heal others, putting others before themselves. Only with these things in mind can we begin to address trauma and PTSD for women Vietnam veteran nurses (and women veterans in general) in a meaningful and effective way.

¹⁶ Ibid, 17.

¹⁷ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 60.

¹⁸ James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (New York: Hill & Wang Pub, 1994), 22.