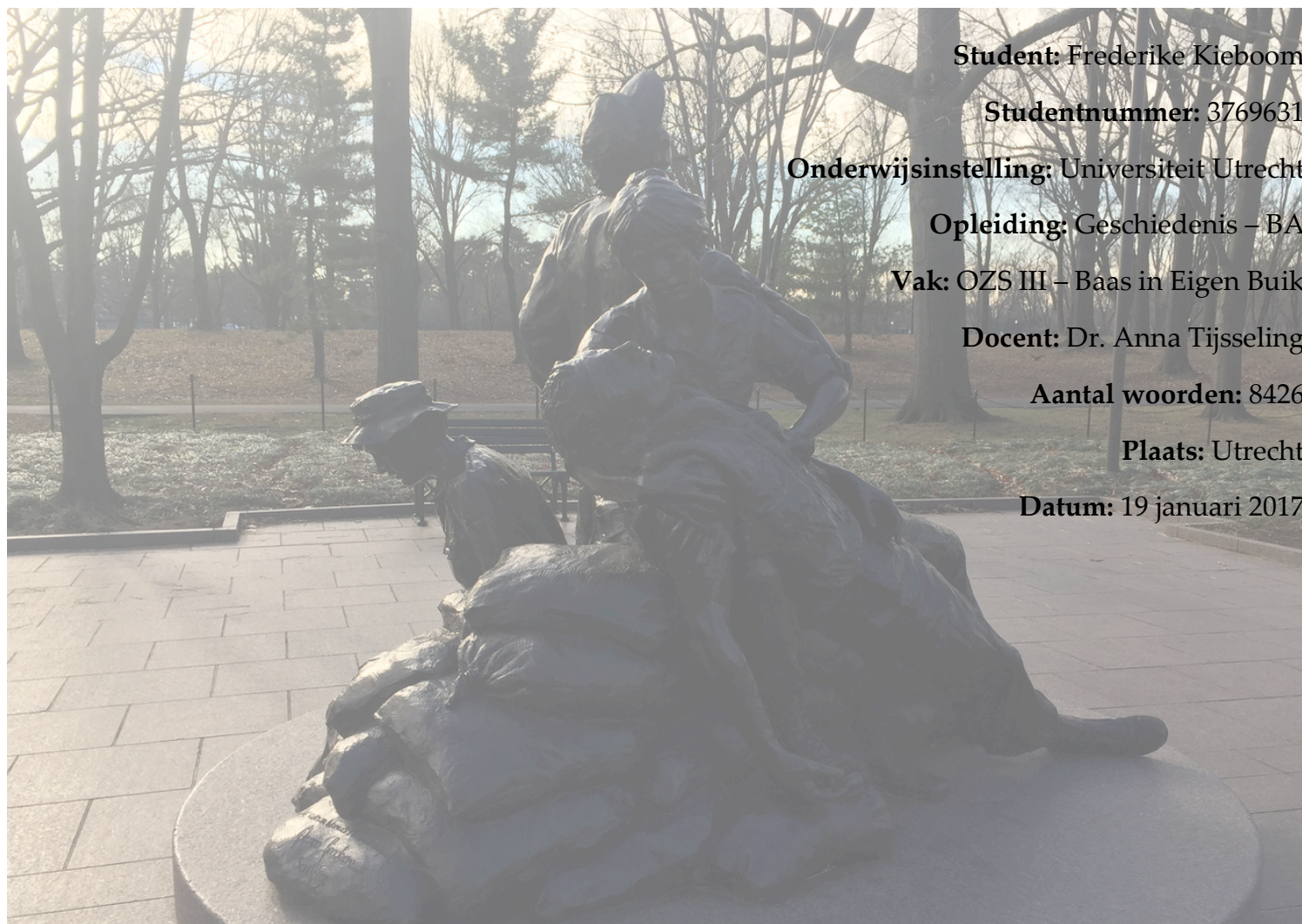


# Remembering the homeland

How female American nurses in the Vietnam War came in contact with  
Second Wave Feminism



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## **Abstract**

Women have always been a part of the United States Armed Forces. Since the Vietnam War they have had a bigger role than ever and had more acknowledgement for their active duty than ever before. This took place in a period where women were fighting for reproductive rights and equality in the workplace. This thesis will explore how these two combined. In what way did the female nurses in Vietnam between 1966 and 1973 come in contact with these issues. To answer these questions research based on twenty six interviews conducted for the Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress was done. Most of the issues female nurses encountered according to these interviews were practical, some larger issues were overturned by Supreme Court Rulings.

“The Army nurse is the symbol of help and relief in his hours of direst need. Through mud and mire, though the mark of campaign and battle, wherever the fight leads, she patiently – gallantly, seeks the wounded and distressed. Her comfort knows no parallel. In the heart of all fighting men, she is enshrined forever.”

*General Douglas MacArthur, December 1944*

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## Introduction

Women have been part of United States wars ever since the Revolutionary War of the eighteenth century. Yet they have always been noncombatant, at least officially. So men fulfilled the traditional female task.

This changed when nurses were sent to Southeast Asia starting in 1966. More than 80% of the women who served in the American army were nurses, and all of them were volunteers. Although the U.S. Defense Department did not keep accurate records of female deployments, the Veterans Administration has calculated that around 11,000 women were stationed in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> The remaining 20% were stationed in fields such as maintenance and administration. Most of the women who were part of the war in Southeast Asia were a part of the Women's Army Corps (WAC). The rest were part of either the Women's Air Force (WAF) or Women's Navy Corps. Within these three branches was a specific Nurse Corps in which most of them were stationed.

In recent years the United States has seen more and more controversy regarding women in the military. This led to the decision in January 2016 by then Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, to open up all military roles to female applicants from January 2016 onwards.

With this research I want to explore how female American nurses stationed in the Vietnam theatre between 1966 and 1973 came in contact with the central issues of Second Wave Feminism. To achieve this I will specify what these central issues are as well as give a description of the general situation for women in the army. The first chapter will be this descriptive aspect of the research highlighting nurse-history as well as the discussion surrounding the noncombatant aspect of female army life. Both the second and the third chapter will cover the two central issues of Second Wave Feminism. The second chapter will discuss whether these nurses experienced workplace inequality, as well as the similarities between what was considered the

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War era* (Cambridge 2011) 7.

ideal American nurse and the ideal American mother. The third chapter will focus on the female American nurses' experiences regarding issues such as sexuality, femininity and reproductive rights. Concluding the research I hope to be able to answer the given question fully as well as give some recommendations for further research within this topic.

### **Method: Veterans History Project**

To answer these questions I need to comprehend what the specific struggles were for these female nurses. Therefore I have done research, consisting of interviews, which were recorded within the Veterans History Project (VHP), part of the Folklife Center within the Library of Congress. When searching through their online database the limitations I have used are 'Vietnam War, 1961-1975', 'female', 'audio', 'video', as a search keyword I have entered 'nurse'. This search resulted in a total of 165 interviews, of which 48 were digitalized and gave a more specific location of service. By adding this last specification I made sure all of the interviewee's were located in Vietnam and not in the more general Southeast Asia region. With active and repetitive listening to these interviews I note not only the mentioning of workplace inequality or reproductive rights but also look at other subjects discussed. For example I found that in many cases the conductors of the interviews repeatedly asked about the husband of the veterans and his accomplishments after and during the war. The VHP's mission is to "collect, preserve and make accessible the personal accounts of American wartime veterans so that future generations may hear directly from veterans and better understand the realities of war".<sup>2</sup> To do this they ask of citizens to sit down with a veteran and conduct an interview about his or her military service. The Field Kit provides the interviewer with an outline of questions and request for them to be in grade ten or higher, amongst other things. The easiness to volunteer as an interviewer and to submit the interview to the project causes a

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<sup>2</sup> Library of Congress American Folklife Center, *Field Kit: Conducting and Preserving Interviews* (Washington 2000) 1.

difficulty. The relations to the interviewee are different for every interview and the outline is not always followed, therefore not every interview discusses the same subjects. I have found extremes; from a young boy only asking what was on his paper and not exploring the answers to discussions between the veteran and the interviewer when either one did not agree with a statement or conclusion. When listening and viewing the interviews you were not always certain that specific topics would be covered. Listening to a large amount of interviews and being aware of these differences when making assumptions or conclusions was the only way to work with this. A third point of criticism for this method is that I have only looked at the digitalized collection due to practical considerations as the other interviews are kept in Washington D.C.. In total I have reviewed twenty-six interviews, lasting between 16 and 91 minutes, accumulating a total of 1011 minutes (16,85 hours). Whenever a transcript was available, this was used. They did not show any indication of minutes and time. The interviews used were conducted between 2001 and 2014.

You can find a lot of information regarding nurses in the Second World War or the history of Women in the United States Army, when looking for nurses in Vietnam hardly anything can be found. There is not only a lack of documentation by the government but also scientifically not much interest has been generated towards this specific group of United States Veterans. Because the Vietnam War falls into the timeframe of the Second Feminist Wave, this will provide an interesting outlook for the research. Working towards equality and recognition is an ongoing process of which I would like to be a part of with this research. Gender inequality is gaining importance on political agenda's worldwide and much is still to be achieved. The impact of using specific pronouns, adjectives and other word groups to imply someone's sex has been increased since recent developments in acknowledging the LGBTQ-community. Because of this, some clarifications have to be given. In this research the term *female* will be used whenever we need to discuss physical aspects

of those who are scientifically female or make a very specific distinction between the two mainstream sexes: male and female. Hereby acknowledging that this might seem of a sexist nature but likewise acknowledging that many non-females also identify as a woman. However, when talking about women in the army in a general, mostly descriptive, way it can be assumed that these are of the female sex unless otherwise indicated.

### **A void in existing research**

I will sketch in what way my research will build upon already existing materials as well as emphasize different theories or hypothesis that will help analyze the sources used to answer the question in what way U.S. female nurses in Vietnam, during the Vietnam War, dealt with gender-inequality. The two aspects, war history and gender equality, are of equal importance in order to reach an understanding of women's involvement in the war.

The two aforementioned fields of interest have been researched to great extent; the combination of the two has however not been as extensive. One of the main books on this combination is *Women and War* (1987) by the American political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain. Where she argues that men may link their masculinity to the war effort, something that ought not to be taken away by female inclusion in a war. This might explain why the duties of women overseas were still largely related to the more domestic tasks of caring labor such as healthcare.

The American professors of political science Pamela Johnston Conover and Virginia Sapiro discussed how the differences between men and women are used as explanations for their different opinions on international politics and more specifically war in their article 'Gender, Feminist Consciousness, and War' (1993).<sup>3</sup> Their argument will be further explained in the first chapter of this research, but one interesting point is that experiences someone has in one's life make the difference.

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<sup>3</sup> Pamela J. Conover and Virginia Sapiro, 'Gender, Feminist Consciousness, and War', *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (1993) 4, 1079-1099, there 1080.



This would coincide with multiple statements that many soldiers in the Vietnamese field hospitals felt; that the presence of female nurses made them feel more at home and gave them a feeling of domesticity.

Within historical research the main scholar for this specific topic is Kara Dixon Vuic, a professor of gender and the U.S. Military history. She has written the influential book *Officer, Nurse, Woman: the Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (2010) on nurses in Vietnam and how they experience gender inequality, she does make some connections to Second Wave Feminism. Likewise the historian Elizabeth Norman concentrates on the role of women in military history. She wrote the book *Woman at War: the story of fifty military nurses who served in Vietnam* (1990). Other than these two there are virtually no historians specifying on the combination of gender and military history. Besides historians, sociologists and psychologists who are interested in this area of research can be found, mostly because of effects on society or the occurrence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

To me the book *And if I Perish, frontline U.S. Army Nurses in World War II* by E.M. Monahan and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee (2003) was inspirational for this research. It explains how the nurses in the Second World War look back at their experiences and it has some very strong imagery of situations they have been in. This showed me that the wars previous to the Vietnam War were very differently fought. Frontlines used to be very clear. While in the Vietnam War this was not the case and so it did not give the possibility to ensure nurses were far removed from the combat zone, like it was in for example the Second World War. As the Vietnam Veteran Peggy Jane Trollinger Adams tells her interviewer in 2008, at one point she was treating an injured soldier who told her he was shot only about one hundred yards from where they were standing.<sup>4</sup> It is argued that women are less capable of coping with these confrontations of violence than men are. Which would contribute to the

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<sup>4</sup> Veteran History Project, *Peggy Jane Trollinger*, conducted 17-04-2008, 28:09.

argument regarding masculinity, because compassion and empathy are largely associated with female characteristics.

This research would contribute to the aforementioned books and researches by combining personal accounts of the Vietnam War with the two main ideas of Second Wave Feminism namely workplace equality and reproductive rights. While doing that it will also support to the link between concepts such as *motherhood* and *noncombatant* with regards to the U.S. Army.

## **1. The United States Armed Force and Women**

In United States history, women have always been entangled in army life; nurses have been a major part since the Revolutionary war. This eighteenth century war was the first to have a number of nurses recognized by Congress.<sup>5</sup> The extent of the Nurse Corps has reached its all time height during the Second World War, where reportedly 59,000 nurses served. After the Second World War many of them resigned, this led to a nation wide deficit in trained nurses in both civilian and army life. It is important to note that nurses were not per definition female, they were however the majority within their field. Partly due to the extensively gendered schooling and recruiting programs. Inspired by the thoughts of the British nurse Florence Nightingale, nursing was seen as a natural aspect of the female qualities and her domestic duties and it is with this point of view that nursing schools were structured.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter will examine two different aspects; first it will examine the way female involvement in the United States army has evolved since the Revolutionary war, where the involvement of female nurses will be highlighted. Secondly it will seek to explain the discussion surrounding the United States law stating female soldiers can only be active in noncombatant roles. These two aspects will answer the condition the United States Army women were in speaking in more general terms.

### **1.1 Women in the Army: a brief historical overview**

Even though women and war are entwined, we still feel that war is more of man's job. We also should not forget that drafting was limited to men, so women were always volunteers. Women have been working for the war effort but it is their male counterpart who goes off. As the American political philosopher Jean Bethke Elstain rightfully states in her book *Women and War*, women are the ones affected by the war

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Sheehy, 'US Military Nurses in Wartime: Reluctant Heroes, Always There', *Journal of Emergency Nursing* 33 (2007) 6, 555-563, there 555.

<sup>6</sup> Kara Dixon Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman: the Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore 2010) 16.

men define and describe.<sup>7</sup> With this being the case we find many historic cases where women cross-dressed to be able to fight for what they believed in or, as some stories state, just to keep count of their new husbands. Next to the women who wanted to fight, the majority of women did not want to participate in the war. Any woman that worked within the armies' capacity was always a civilian under contract by the army. The women under contract in the Spanish-American war did inspire the Army to set up the Nurse Corps in 1901.<sup>8</sup>

Before the Nurse Corps was set up we can find nurses in every historical battle the United States was part of. The present-day United States Army finds its origins in 1775 when the Continental Army was created by orders of Congress. With this the first official accounts of nurses and their matrons are found.<sup>9</sup> We also know that women filled in for men when they were fighting, traditionally they became responsible for agricultural tasks.

During the Civil War there are some accounts of women working officially for both the Confederate as well as the Union Army, it was also the first war of which its female nurse veterans became qualified for federal pensions. However, this era is very much characterized by the ideas of what a true woman should be. Her four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity were of great importance for the nineteenth century society. This ideal was nevertheless extremely unreachable for the majority of women at the time. Moving towards the end of the nineteenth century we find more advocates for women's rights.

The next war the United States was involved in was the Spanish-American War, infamous for the many typhoid fever infections amongst soldiers. There were many nurses contracted, also the first nurse died overseas and for the first time a

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York 1987), 164.

<sup>8</sup> Women in Military Service For America Memorial Foundation, INC. 'Highlights in the History of Military Women' <http://www.webcitation.org/6HZVJCcKI> 7 December 2016

<sup>9</sup> Sheehy, 'US Military Nurses in Wartime: Reluctant Heroes, Always There', 555.

nurse received a military funeral.<sup>10</sup> As stated earlier, establishing the permanent Nurse Corps was an effort inspired by the nurses' attitude during this war.

The navy established its Navy Nurse Corpse in 1908 and both they and the Army Nurse Corps attracted many young women before the start of the First World War. In this World War many young female nurses served overseas, however none of them were commissioned military officers.<sup>11</sup> The first woman to enlist with the American armed forces was Loretta Walsh in 1917; she served for the U.S. Navy. We could say that her enlistment, in another capacity than a nurse, inspired the naval forces to open up more positions for women. Furthermore she can be seen as a main motivator for equality within the naval forces, as women were lacking all sorts of beneficial pensions or acknowledgements before she started serving

The Second World War has seen the most active nurses until that moment in American history: 59,000.<sup>12</sup> This was unfortunately not encouraged by the general public, joining the army was seen as an unsuitable life choice. Veterans Evelyn Monahan and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee mention in their book about nurses in the Second World War, it was seen as undignified physical work as well as discreditable to be socializing with men.<sup>13</sup> It was regarded as very demeaning to be working with the male physique, especially for these young women. Choosing the path to be a nurse would almost automatically mean a social downfall. However, the Army did start to provide retirement privileges, officers' commissions, dependents' allowances and equal pay as well as free education for those studying to be a nurse between 1943 and 1948.<sup>14</sup> The Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948 ensured that women could stay in the army, even in times of peace. Nurses were always exempted from this regulation and have been part of the army in times of war as well

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, 556.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, 557.

<sup>12</sup> Evelyn M. Monahan, Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee, *And if I Perish: Frontline U.S. Army Nurses in World War II* (New York 2003), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Monahan and Neidel-Greenlee, *And if I Perish*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon R. Sullivan, 'The Army Nurse Corps: a commemoration of World War II service' (version October 3rd 2003), <http://www.history.army.mil/books/wwii/72-14/72-14.HTM> (7 december 2016).

as peace. This did open up a lot of the other positions in the Army, Navy and Air Force for women. However some regulations were in place, it was not until the 1970's that women who had children under the age of 18 were allowed to serve.

In the Korean War of 1950 only 540 nurses of the army branch served the United States, there were also nurses in the naval and air force branches but exact numbers are not available. After the Korean War the military nursing positions were opened for male nurses. Many former medics joined the Nurse Corps. The social status army nursing developed during the Second World War was giving the army difficulties recruiting as well as holding on to women. During and after the Korean War this posed many difficulties, women were not keen on joining when there were so little benefits involved. It is in this decade that traditional domestic tasks were yet again emphasized by society.

We have seen in this brief overview that women have gained rights within the United States armed forces, from cross-dressing to being able to permanently be employed by the armed forces. Likewise we have seen that ever since the Revolutionary War nurses have played an essential part in the well being of the soldiers, their outstanding work in previous wars has made sure that every male and female pursuing this career will be accepted as an official member of the armed forces. However, we still see workplace inequality with regards to salary and especially benefits. We stand on the brink of a new era where women take more control over some of these issues, it will be interesting to see in what way this has influenced their part within the armed forces.

## **1.2 Noncombatant: Women only!**

Female participation in the United States armed forces has been open for debate ever since its creation in the eighteenth century. Earlier we have seen that much has changed, there are many more opportunities for women who would want to join now. However we still see that not all positions are open for female applicants. The debate regarding this gendered application process is something discussed by many

scholars. All scholars who discuss this issue try to find explanations within gender, maternity or feminism.

The Vietnam War was the first televised war, the media coverage was unlike anything the United States had ever seen. Common men and women at home were confronted with situations they did not know about, nor did they agree with. The level of discomfort grew with each passing week and led to massive demonstrations in 1967. The international discomfort and solidarity with anti-Vietnam campaigns has had a great effect on other social movements, such as the women's Liberation movement, according to leftwing British political activist Lindsey German.<sup>15</sup> She claims women became politicized after civil rights gained more and more importance on the national political agenda. This is in line with the phenomena the Dutch historian Irena Costera Meijer calls orientation after emancipation.<sup>16</sup> Where the main objective is exploring what can be improved even more after the basic emancipation process was accomplished or at least achieved to satisfactory levels.

It is within this social and political climate that the dissatisfaction with the noncombatant rule gained significance. According to German, women felt that they were subordinate and were not able to fully contribute to the political issues at hand.<sup>17</sup> Even though she mostly speaks about the British sentiment, she addresses that American women had a similar response. Because the demonstrations in the United States were so massive and went hand in hand with the women's movements, we can assume that this was also the case in the latest social undertaking.

According to professors of political science Pamela Johnston Conover and Virginia Sapiro most of the reasons for noncombatancy or the lack of female

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<sup>15</sup> German, Lindsay, *How a Century of War changed the lives of Women: Work, Family and Liberation* (London 2013), 99.

<sup>16</sup> Irena Costera Meijer, *Het persoonlijke wordt politiek: Feministische bewustwording in Nederland 1965-1980* (Amsterdam 1996) 33.

<sup>17</sup> German, *How a Century of War changed the lives of Women*, 102.

recruitment can be found in gender explanations.<sup>18</sup> They state that social upbringing and thus childhood experiences play the largest role in developing orientations towards war. This would as such mean that in the nurturing of female children the typical feminine traits would develop more fully than the masculine traits. By doing so they become more pacifistic and this would thus be an explanation as to why women would not even want to be in a direct combat position. However, the Civic Feminists introduced by Sapiro and Conover would argue that it is their feminism and not the social structures that make them anti-war.<sup>19</sup> The armed forces are a schoolbook example of how hierarchy, power and force are used to control a group of people. Arguably, everything a feminist stands against.

This makes it interesting that the United States have had some feminist activists advocating for women in combat positions. The sociologist Laura Miller has researched whether the wishes from these feminists coincide with the actual wishes from army women.<sup>20</sup> In her research she concludes that army women are most likely to support a case where women are able to volunteer for combat positions if they are mentally and physically capable of doing the job. The feminists in her research can be divided into two groups, those who want full inclusion (individualist feminists) versus those who see women joining the army as something negative in general. This gives us the opportunity to compare and contrast the argumentation of the latter group of feminists and the ideas of Sapiro and Conover. When nurture would lead to an aversion towards war we could argue that feminists against war in general would also agree with the nurture-argument, it could be seen as defeminizing. Also a specific upbringing could enhance the physical differences between male and female soldiers. When one of the main arguments is a lack of upper body strength for opening up all positions for female soldiers this is of big importance. We can find examples of this easily when looking at the most elite female individuals in sport;

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<sup>18</sup> Conover and Sapiro, 'Gender, Feminist Consciousness, and War', 1079.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, 1081.

<sup>20</sup> Laura L. Miller, 'Feminism and the Exclusion of Army Women from Combat, *Gender Issues* 16 (1998) 3, 33-64, there 34.



there are many women just as fast or strong as some of the men. These trained individuals show that nothing is impossible when you set your mind to it.

It could be argued, as Quester does, that the inclusion of women in combat roles would make the armed forces a better representation of what the United States is.<sup>21</sup> However there are arguments for and against this inclusive idea, some argue that including women would result in a less effective force in terms of battle-capabilities. Others however use the counterargument that a more structured and organized way would increase its effectiveness. Both these argument focus on certain stereotypical ideas of what a woman is. That suggests there are still steps to be made in order to reach gender equality within the armed forces.

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<sup>21</sup> George H. Quester, 'Women in Combat', *International Security* 1 (1977) 4, 80-91, there 90.

## 2. Inequality at Work and within Family Life

After seeing how female involvement has developed in the United States Armed Forces this chapter will focus on the issue regarding workplace inequality and the concept of 'motherhood'. The interviews conducted within the Veterans History Project provide the information on the experiences of female nurses in Vietnam concerning either one of these subjects. I shall discuss voids in the conversations as well as specific mentioning of any relating subjects. This chapter will start of with an introductory paragraph on the and will continue to discuss the veterans' experiences thematically.

### 2.1 The issue at hand

Generally speaking, women in the 1960's and 70's were bound to the home. Most of the women in America married young and devoted their life to their husband and children. As such, only 38% of the American women were working in 1960 and their job opportunities were limited to nursing, teaching or secretary work.<sup>22</sup> Not only were the options limited, women were paid less than their male colleagues and getting pregnant was a sure way to be fired. One of the nurses interviewed, Patricia Carroll, talks about her high school counselor who told her to become a teacher or a nurse whereas her aptitude test she should be an aeronautical engineer or meteorologist. She became a nurse.<sup>23</sup> Ann Catherine Cunningham claims you had to have had real determination to do something different than being in one of the three fields.<sup>24</sup>

Challenging this tradition was the American Betty Friedan, who can be seen as the igniter of the Second Wave Feminism because of the publication of her book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 as well as co-founding the National Organization for

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<sup>22</sup> Tavaana, 'The 1960s-70s American Feminist Movement: Breaking Down Barriers for Women' <https://tavaana.org/en/content/1960s-70s-american-feminist-movement-breaking-down-barriers-women> (14 December 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Veterans History Project, *Patricia A. Carroll*, conducted on 24-05-2007.

<sup>24</sup> Veterans History Project, *Ann Catherina Cunningham*, conducted on 20-10-2006.

Women (NOW) in 1966. Inequality in this chapter will be divided into two aspects: the workplace and family life. Friedan focuses on the combination of the two that makes her ideas very relevant for this analysis.

Friedan researched why women in the 1950's and 1960's were unhappy with their lives, even if they were middle-class suburban women with husbands and children. She found that the general public only saw women with a desire to fulfill the domestic duties as wives and mothers.<sup>25</sup> Women were marrying at a younger age and the percentage of women with a college degree dropped tremendously. Over time Friedan noticed that her fellow housewife's had the feeling something was missing in their life, her book explores this and its origin. She concludes that women should not see being housewife as a fulltime occupation, these suburban women should do something more in life to find fulfillment like education or occupation.<sup>26</sup> This is exactly what the American nurses did, many of them still married and opted for family life after serving their country. They reached a sense of fulfillment by acting on the famous words spoken by President Kennedy at his inaugural address "ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country."<sup>27</sup> Which has inspired several of the interviewed nurses.

## **2.2 Married in the Armed Forces**

However, women would not be stationed in direct line with family, which included their spouses, upon till the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was the first war in which married couples could request to be assigned together.<sup>28</sup> This led to limited benefits and multiple complications for the American army.

In 1967 about 25% of the nurse corps was married, this was a much higher number than in any of the previous years. The changes in legislations should have

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<sup>25</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London 1963) 15.

<sup>26</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 342.

<sup>27</sup> Independence Hall Association, 'Ask not what your country can do for you' <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/ask-not.htm> (17 January 2017)

<sup>28</sup> Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 114.

led to a decrease in nurses leaving the army because of marriage but this was not the case. It is difficult to find a reason for this phenomenon, when listening to the many interviews women did not specify why they retired from the army other than physical reasons. Also Kara Dixon Vuic has no explanation for this, she suggests that women found it difficult to combine moving around for different assignments with the career their (civilian) husbands had.<sup>29</sup> This would insinuate that women did still feel that their careers were less important than their spouses even though many limitations have been lifted. Nurses came in to the Armed Forces as first or second lieutenants depending on their experience and education, they were always promoted captain after a year of service. Many of them thus outranked the male soldiers, particularly the enlisted. As officers they were, by army regulation, not supposed to fraternize with the enlisted. When a married couple contained a female nurse and an enlisted husband this would easily pose a problem for their chiefs. Whenever this was not the case and they were both officers and assigned together, many stations in-country had special quarters for married couples or made an effort to create one every once in a while. According to Vuic's research on women in Vietnam this did fuel resentment amongst the married officers who were not stationed together.<sup>30</sup> Only one interviewed nurse stated that she and her husband were stationed together by their request, many more talk about getting married on leave or meeting their future husband whilst in Vietnam. Another complication for the American army were the benefits civilian spouses received. Female civilians received everything, no questions asked. Male civilian spouses could only receive benefits when he relied on her for more than half of his income. The Supreme Court ruling of 1973 turned this around and banned sex discrimination for spousal benefits. These complications show that women were still seen as the caretaker and not the breadwinner of the family. This leads us directly to the concept of 'motherhood'.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, 116.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, 120.

### **2.3 You are a mother first and foremost**

Motherhood is defined by maternalist thinkers as an act of caring, mothering, through which the mothers develop a certain way of thinking and acting. This would include being more empathetic, caring and attentive and less concerned with individuation and autonomy.<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that any gender can be seen as a mother; it is solely based on the ability of giving care. However, the mother is traditionally still female. The 'mother' would develop a sense of peacekeeping that could contribute to them being more pacifist than those who do not identify with the act of mothering. This in turn would again mean that they are concerned with the well-being of someone and thus enhance the idea of being a nurse. Still, being a caring person does not solely make someone antimilitaristic or a pacifist. Early memories and childhood experiences have a far greater influence on someone's stand on social and cultural issues, according to Sapiro and Conover.<sup>32</sup> This concept of socialization combined with motherhood would explain why the traditionally gendered duties of domesticity but also the attribute of femininity keep being projected on females.

These gendered roles are being institutionalized within the armed forces thus giving them a higher level of legitimacy. The gender *regime* in the armed forces was very traditional, while the gender *order* was changing drastically in the 1960's and 1970's and the armed forces had to keep up.

### **2.4 Inequality: a practical matter**

Women were a minority in Vietnam among the American troops and have remained so in Veteran life. The National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics stated that as of December 2016, 13% of the registered female Veterans served in the Vietnam

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<sup>31</sup> Conover and Sapiro, 'Gender, Feminist Consciousness, and War', 1080.

<sup>32</sup> Conover and Sapiro, 'Gender, Feminist Consciousness, and War', 1097.

War. They also state that only 9% of all registered Veterans is female.<sup>33</sup> After the war many women who contacted the veterans' services were denied, they were not seen as real veterans. This disrespect for the services these women provided was only fully overturned when the Center for Women Veterans was established in 1994 as a part of the Department of Veteran Affairs.<sup>34</sup>

This disrespect for their services is not something that many of the interviewed nurses recognize or mention while in active duty. The main thing they reminisce about is the adoration they receive from their male patients, something that will be discussed in more depth in chapter three. When looking for other signs of inequality within their tour they only mention small practical things. Martha Roed Bell tells her interviewer about her arrival in Vietnam and asking for her size in jungle boots, by her account the men registering rolled his eyes and told her that the smallest size available was 8,5. She asked for a size five.<sup>35</sup> Equipment and clothing was not altered or available for the physique of a woman. A nurse cited in Elstain's *Women at War* talks about the metal helmets which did not fit whenever the women were wearing curlers in their hair, every night when the siren went off she and her fellow nurses had to decide whether to go without helmet or without curlers.<sup>36</sup> On a more serious note, these same women were supposed to roll under their beds in case of an alert. These beds, however, were so close to the ground that any curved female did not fit.<sup>37</sup> Other nurses, such as Elizabeth Allen, described how the latrines were made for petite Vietnamese women, as an American woman you could hardly use it.<sup>38</sup> It was these small practical matters that no one seemed to have thought about. The traditional nurses' outfits were also inappropriate in a warzone, many nurses mention this in the interviews. They were wearing stockings and heels while

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<sup>33</sup> United States Department of Veteran Affairs, 'Profile of Women Veterans: 2015' (Version December 2016) [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Women\\_Veterans\\_Profile\\_12\\_22\\_2016.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Women_Veterans_Profile_12_22_2016.pdf) (17 January 2017)

<sup>34</sup> United States Department of Veteran Affairs, <https://www.va.gov> (17 January 2017)

<sup>35</sup> Veterans History Project, *Martha Roed Bell*, conducted on ??, 15:40.

<sup>36</sup> Elstain, *Women at War*, 66.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, 67.

<sup>38</sup> Veterans History Project, *Elizabeth Allen*, conducted on 18-10-2007, 14:00.

boarding the airplane, and changed into fatigues as soon as they received those in Vietnam. Only in Saigon did the nurses wear their traditional white outfits. Because of this they called their hospital “Walter Reed East” after the United States based military medical center.<sup>39</sup> She mentions that the nurses started wearing fatigues, like in every other location, after the TET offensive of 1968.

Comparing civilian nurses to army nurses, many nurses in the armed forces state they were paid more than their civilian counterparts. Also the tasks were more extensive and they had more responsibility. Many nurses commented on this, as well as the change when they retired from the armed forces and went to work in a civilian facility. Many nurses commented on the different role the doctors had, in Vietnam you decided everything as a nurse and gave the doctor an update once in a while, in civilian life you had to wait for the doctor to decide the treatment. It is not surprising that many nurses have described their time being a nurse in Vietnam as the “ultimate nursing experience”.<sup>40</sup>

## 2.5 Concluding

The army has made some significant changes during the Vietnam era in favor of women wishing to combine marriage with a career. It is easily argued that this could only have happened because of the general opinion and cultural changes that were happening during this era. If the motivations for these changes were primarily the women’s wellbeing or rather the wish for women to keep joining the armed forces remains to be seen: we still see traditional domesticity and traditional gender ideas in all branches of the armed forces.

Other than the practical issues, there is hardly any evidence that women were treated different than men in the Vietnam War. They were paid the same amount as male nurses of the same rank and promotion was fairly given to those who deserved

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<sup>39</sup> Veterans History Project, *Patricia A. Carroll*, conducted on 24-05-2007.

<sup>40</sup> Jeanne LeVasseur, ‘The proving grounds: Combat nursing in Vietnam’, *Nursing Outlook* 51 (2003) 1, 31-36, there 36.

it. Given, the married life of a female nurse was not always easy but many changes and facilities were created or granted over the years.



### 3. Reproductive Rights and Femininity

By actively framing their recruitment posters the armed forces kept looking for a certain type of female nurse. This had to change after men were allowed in the nurse corps in 1955 but still Vietnam recruitment was based on femininity. Many nurses remember choosing to be a Navy Nurse because their outfits were, supposedly, cuter than the outfits of the other branches.<sup>41</sup> This chapter will deal with reproductive rights and sexuality as well as femininity. How did the United States Nurses, in all three branches of the armed forces, experience this and was there any issue in these areas? The armed forces are a male dominated field of career but women became more prominent than ever before in the Vietnam War, as such it is interesting to see what this led to.

#### 3.1 Discharging the pregnant

As seen in the previous chapter women in contract by the United States Armed Forces in our timeframe were supposed to have no children under the age of eighteen, this included sole guardianship of children this age. This emphasized the idea that women were not supposed to be in the armed forces as a career and were primarily caregivers. You could wonder whether single male caregivers, were also discharged for such a reason; this was not the case.<sup>42</sup> Only in 1971 women who are married and became pregnant, had an abortion or gave their child up for adoption were able to remain in the army. This was not a given, women were still supposed to apply for a waiver to guarantee the child was left in good care and the child would not interfere with the women's duties within the army. It took another four more years to ensure that being discharged on pregnancy grounds was in conflict with the American Constitution.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, every woman in Vietnam who became pregnant was discharged and sent to the United States as soon as possible. This

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<sup>41</sup> Veterans History Project, *Patrica Hildebrand*, conducted on 03-12-2006, 02:10.

<sup>42</sup> Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 123.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, 127.

raises the question whether there were any women who became pregnant to escape the war, something that could be developed in further research. Of the twenty-six women whose interviews I have used two talk about their pregnancies while on duty. Cynthia Fitzgerald asked for a day off to see the doctor, who told her she was pregnant. Her pregnancy had to be verified in Saigon and she was made to leave as soon as possible because being pregnant was “a real detriment”.<sup>44</sup> Also Marjorie Peck Voght became pregnant while stationed in Vietnam and she felt like “they just returned us back to the States”.<sup>45</sup>

You could assume that the army wanted to reduce the amount of pregnant nurses because this would lead to an even bigger nurses shortage. The recollections of army nurses concerning birth control are incoherent: some claim they had access to the pill in their own hospital other state they could not get it at all.<sup>46</sup> Former nurse Patricia Carroll remembers a moment in Vietnam when she entered an abandoned Vietnamese orphanage after the TET offensive and found three years worth of French birth control pills.<sup>47</sup> Kara Dixon Vuic captures the timeframe perfectly when she states that “embracing motherhood among married women was one thing, but embracing a sexually active single female population was quite another”.<sup>48</sup> In contrast however, women were able to get an abortion during the Vietnam War while in Vietnam or by travelling to Japan. This contributed to the army’s wish for as many army women to stay in the army. This is an interesting development as *Roe vs. Wade* was only in 1973.

### **3.2 Lady-like behavior**

Stereotypical women in the army are manly, lesbian and unfeminine. Yet the nurses in Vietnam were seen as lady-like and feminine. These characteristics were looked

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<sup>44</sup> Veterans History Project, *Cynthia Fitzgerald*, conducted on 11-11-2014.

<sup>45</sup> Veterans History Project, *Marjorie Peck Voght*, conducted on 13-01-2003.

<sup>46</sup> Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 131.

<sup>47</sup> Veterans History Project, *Patrica A. Carroll*, conducted on 24-05-2007.

<sup>48</sup> Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 131.

for in recruitment posters and are expressed in many memoirs. Many female nurses also remember the way they were treated by the men: going dancing in the Officer's club or being taken away to a beach by helicopter. In the previous chapter fraternizing and ranks were discussed in combination with marriage. This issue is also found within the discussions surrounding sexuality and (in)appropriate behavior. Jane Hodge in *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* reportedly told a colonel while dancing in the Officers club:

“Sir, they spent the last six weeks teaching me that I'm an officer first, a nurse second, and a lady third. The officer has asked you to move your hand, the nurse has told you to move it, and the lady is about to slap the hell out of you”.<sup>49</sup>

According to many nurses cited in that book, it was the higher ranked men you had to be cautious of and not the enlisted. It was the latter group that mostly respected the so-called 'round-eyed' women they encountered and the officers that made the nurses feel unsafe. Many nurses in my research talked about safety measures that were taken where they were stationed. Nancy Berkebile Wells explains why the nurses' quarters were surrounded by constantine wire: “that was to keep, you know, kind of a protection kind of thing for the nurses”.<sup>50</sup> But because women were not supposed to carry a gun, they were still noncombatant and so they had no means to protect anybody. Nurses were caring for a big group of injured troops who had no means to protect themselves and only men in the medical field were able to carry a gun. According to Patricia Carroll this gave the nurses in her unit the feeling they were not protected against the enemy.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 143.

<sup>50</sup> Veterans History Project, *Nancy Berkebile*, conducted on 07-11-2014.

<sup>51</sup> Veterans History Project, *Patricia A. Carroll*, conducted on 24-05-2007.

None of the interviewed nurses, however, mentioned that these measures were taken to protect them from American men. Even though the locations they were stationed at are in some cases the same ones as those cited in Vuic's research. This could indicate that the interviewed women either did not know or they did not want to talk about this on camera or recording. The written word could be less threatening and consequential for the women in question. As you would always be able to deny having said something when it is only written down and not recorded (audio)-visually. Also something to consider is the thought that many women in Vietnam felt like their personal involvements and behavior was appropriate for the time and especially the place, it might have been a way to unwind from the twelve hour work days the nurses usually had. Of the twenty-six interviews I have used, only Ann Catherine Cunningham affirmed sexual harassment taking place. Cunningham claims she did not know about it at the time as it was not something you would talk about but she understood that it did because she encountered men saying to her "Oh, I'm gonna go out in the field tomorrow. I may die, you know, so let's have sex tonight."<sup>52</sup> Especially when you combine this with the excessive drinking in the Officers Clubs or the infamous drug abuse in Vietnam.

In contrast to the lacking sexual harassment complaints there are many nurses who talk about the positive aspect of being a woman in Vietnam. By being treated like a "VIP" which entailed, for Marcita Ann Martin, that she got to ride the cockpit on the way into Vietnam.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, many nurses comment on the joint feeling of being able to lift morale when a patient in their ward first saw them. Connie Christensen remembers a moment like this and contemplates whether it made a difference what she looked like or whether the importance lay in being an American female.<sup>54</sup> This is reflected as well in the story of Patricia Skiles, she remembers being

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<sup>52</sup> Veterans History Project, *Ann Catherine Cunningham*, conducted on 20-10-2008.

<sup>53</sup> Veterans History Project, *Marcita Ann Martin*, conducted on 21-05-2003.

<sup>54</sup> Veterans History Project, *Connie Christine Christensen*, conducted on 25-06-2009, 22:30.

at the officers' club when a colonel asked her if she wanted to take his incoming radio call from the field:

"Hi guys. How are you?" And just silence, you know. "Who is this?" I said, "This is Lieutenant Markle. I'm a nurse at the 24<sup>th</sup> Evac hospital just calling to see how you are." Well they were just dumbfounded and one guy said: "I haven't heard a female's voice for six months. Bless you, Lieutenant, Bless you." So that was really a touching moment."<sup>55</sup>

This conversation emphasizes the feeling Christensen had, it did not matter what you looked like and a nurse just reminded the men of home. Many women remember men they cared for, but hardly any of them remember the men's names. The relationships between nurses and their patients were often very maternal or sisterly, helping them write letters or just talking about distant memories of home. Continuously being surrounded by men who protected or needed you can also be very restrictive, this is not something any of the women whose interviews I used mentioned but in all stories men accompanied women wherever they went. This shows the level of protection they gave women in Vietnam, men had to risk their lives for social outings.

### **3.3 Concluding**

Women were a vast minority in Vietnam, many nurses remembered they were massively outnumbered on the airplane from the United States to Vietnam and noticed that hardly any feminine products were available in the stores on base. The men surrounding them gave the women a lot of attention, some of the nurses were used to this back home, but many were not. This could have attributed to the large amount of women saying they have been in contact with sexual harassment in

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<sup>55</sup> Veterans History Project, *Jeanne A. Urbin Markle*

researches conducted after the war. In the twenty-six analyzed interviews, only one woman confirmed that sexual harassment took place while she was in Vietnam, this does not mean that the others did not encounter it but makes it harder to discuss. What we can conclude is that the United States Armed Forces made many changes in their policies regarding women during and just after the Vietnam War and were leading the way in abortion politics. The role the nurses had in these changes is impeccable and many might not even be aware of this. Nurses often embraced a certain level of femininity and sexuality to comfort the injured men in their wards. Even though this was not always needed, as the anecdote about the phone call illustrated. Many women ultimately felt that they were cared for, the men were like big brothers or sons.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis gives a basic idea of how Second Wave Feminism has influenced the army experience for women stationed in Vietnam. Nearly all female veterans in the researches used, including my own research, stated that they learned a lot about themselves and gained different understandings of life after being in the Vietnam War. Their contributions to the war effort have been beneficial for many young men and brought war nursing to a higher level. Unconsciously these women were key players in the Second Wave of feminism. The need for nurses was so high in both civilian and army life that the armed forces made many changes to benefit women in general. Equal pay and career opportunities were enforced and by the end of the Vietnam War women gained many more reproductive rights within the armed forces than before. Many legislative changes were achieved because former army women pursued their rights publicly.

For further research there are several interesting aspects that can be developed in more depth. Reproductive rights were discussed in this research and it was made clear that getting pregnant on the job was not something women mostly aspired to do. They were easily and discharged when they did become pregnant, it could be interesting to research whether women became pregnant in Vietnam to escape the war. This would make it a possibility that reproduction becomes a tool in politics and not merely an issue on the agenda to be discussed. Secondly, it was briefly mentioned that there are hardly any women who filed a sexual harassment complaint. There are some researches that claim that over 60% over the women in the Vietnam War did encounter sexual harassment, why did they not file a complaint? Look at this with the research regarding rape supportive cultures and you may find an interesting angle. Thirdly, the female Veterans life has not been easy since the Vietnam War and the effects of this on their lives and society are hardly researched. This void in knowledge should be filled.

Concluding this research I have found that most of the issues the female nurses encountered were practical, things that hopefully have changed since then.

The grander problems such as equal spouse benefits and the right to have children and be on active duty required Supreme Court rulings to be overturned. Due to a lack of confirmation in the interviews, no answer can be given to the questions regarding sexual harassment. Even though the American nurses had different experiences based on the year they served as well as the location of their basis in Vietnam they have all contributed and been active for the feminist causes of the time.



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## List of Interviews

All interviews have been conducted for the Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress.

Peggy Jane Trollinger Adams, conducted on 17-04-2008 (32min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.64909/>

Donna Kay Hanners Alexander, conducted on 13-08-2004 (33min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.52878/>

Elizabeth A. Allen, conducted on 18-10-2007 (91min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.55266/>

Janet A. Bachmeyer, conducted on 12-04-2008 (33min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.57409/>

Anne N. Bauer, conducted on 13-10-2001 (61min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.00261/>

Martha Roed Bell (57min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.84713/>

Mary Fran Meyer Brown, conducted in 2005 (43min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.43263/>

Patricia A. Matkin Byrum, conducted on 31-05-2001 (23min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.23462/>

Margaret Easterly Canfield, conducted on 15-01-2004 (54min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.41193/>

Patricia A. Carroll, conducted on 24-05-2007 (58min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.72595/>

Connie Christine Christensen, conducted on 25-07-2009 (54min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.66745/>

Ann Catherine Cunningham, conducted on 20-10-2006 (88min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.48446/>

Bobby Finch, conducted on 27-05 (16min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.09279/>

Cynthia Frances Given Fitzgerald, conducted on 11-11-2014

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.97572/>

Amy Diane Geissinger (53min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.21245/>

Marjorie E. Peck Voght, conducted on 13-01-2003 (50min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.04505/>

Sharolyn Walcutt, conducted on 02-08-2002 (27min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.02856/>

Nancy Alice Berkebile, conducted on 07-11-2014

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.97581/>

Frances M. Liberty (89min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.02548/>

Jeanne A. Urbin Markle (72min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.03442/>

Marcita Ann Martin, conducted on 21-05-2003 (60min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.05583/>

Lola Mae Rhoades Olsmith, conducted on 15-01-2004 (43min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.41214/>

Bernadette A. Sanner, conducted on 22-04-2002 (56min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.01801/>

Lois Glenn Shirley, conducted on 20-01-2014

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.97555/>

Patricia Ann Skiles, conducted on 30-03-2005 (32min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.33403/>

Patricia A. Hildebrand, conducted on 03-12-2006 (19min)

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.50501/>