By Joel Kindrick

Women played a vital part on both sides of the Vietnam War. On the American side, women’s roles stuck to the more traditional positions of secretary and nurse. On the Vietnamese side, women were very active in combat roles. American female nurses saved American and Vietnamese lives. Vietnamese female soldiers of the north or the Viet Cong, for the greater good of an independent Vietnam, took lives.

American women at war

Although the American female nurses in Vietnam wore at least lieutenant bars on their collars, men of lower rank still felt obligated to play a protector role. These women were OK with this, and were happy to play their traditional comforting role with their patients.* Nevertheless, men still snapped to attention, when physically able, to give these female officers their due respect, and follow their orders when given.

On the other hand, healthy male soldiers allowing the women just to be military personnel, and transforming them beyond objects of sexual attraction, was a goal not always achieved. Some women found these men’s attention flattering, and others found it demeaning.*

American women who volunteered for Vietnam did so for many reasons. Many did it out of loyalty to their country. They wanted to be like their fathers or be the female counterpart of Audie Murphy or John Wayne. Some just wanted to go for the adventure – to avoid having to settle down and get married. Others thought it was a way to test and challenge themselves professionally. Some were already in the military, and it was a great way to climb that ladder. Parents, somewhat accustomed to sending sons off to war, were much more cautious about sending their daughters. Although their daughters were of age and could make their own decisions whether to serve or not, it was still hard on the parents.*

Lynda Van Devanter saw her Vietnam experience as the worst and the best time of her life. She was stationed at the hospitals in Pleiku and Qui Nhon. She witnessed death and destruction like no woman stateside could – seeing not only soldiers’ limbs being torn to pieces, but children’s as well.* She helped save lives, but more often than not, it seemed that all she could do was give comfort to those dying.
Agnes Reedy was also a nurse, and longed for the time when she could get back home to people who you expected to see die – old people and terminally ill people. Nothing prepared her for strong, handsome young men whose blood bubbled out from their chest, who she tried to save, only to see life fade out of them.* American women who went to Vietnam, same as the men, were forever changed by what they saw and did there.

**Vietnamese women at war**

In Vietnam, the country where the war was actually being fought, women in the north and the south stood up and fought for their independence. Although the ingrained perception of a Vietnamese woman was to stick to her prime responsibility of raising her children and caring for her household, she also took on the responsibility of resistance by producing food so the soldiers could eat, and by fighting in the place of the men when they were either in battle or were already dead.*

![Girl volunteers of the People’s Self Defense Force of Kien Dien, a hamlet of Ben Cat district, 50 kilometers north of Saigon, patrol the hamlet’s perimeter to discourage Viet Cong infiltration.](U.S. Information Agency.]

Not all North Vietnamese women were Communist-party loyalists, but what they all had in common was the desire to get foreign powers removed from their country. They had been through French colonial
rule, Japanese domination, French power again, and then – just when they thought they could live free of foreigners – the Americans came.

Many women could not understand what the Americans had against their country. What they did understand was that their country had been invaded, and they needed to help protect it.* Many women in the south joined the Viet Cong, and women in the north became part of the Viet Minh. President Ho Chi Minh let it be known that women were half the people, and if women were not free, then all the people were not free.* This gave women the confidence and freedom to know that they were accepted in the cause.*

In the south, Nguyen Thi Ut Tich was a woman who embodied those responsibilities. She worked as a guerrilla fighter, she trained new recruits, she provided for soldiers, she raised children, and when her husband died, she continued until she was eventually killed, probably in 1965. Ut Tich’s specialties included plotting and executing ambushes where she was always able to score enemy kills. She also seized an enemy outpost by befriending the commander, getting him and his soldiers drunk, disarming them, and taking them all prisoner. She earned the title of Heroine of the Liberation Army, and was a heroine to many young Viet Cong girls who strove to emulate her.

One group of girls marched on the troops and the police. A banner-carrying sixteen-year-old Truong Thi Bay led them. When the police shot her dead, eighteen-year-old Nguyen Thi Be took her place until she was dead. Another girl then stepped in.* Other women, such as Nguyen Thi Dinh and Ca Le Du, were also great leaders of their cause. The Ben Tre uprisings in the Mekong Delta were attributed to women such as these who fought the American forces.* Media reports that filtered back to the United States underscored American perceptions of female roles when it was reported that women and children were being killed. Many of those women and “children” were female Viet Cong fighters who were legitimate war targets.

In the north, the women volunteered to work on their farms and in industries for the war effort. They were all trained to use weapons. Women formed militias to defend bridges and roads, watch the skies, fire antiaircraft guns, and fight intruding South Vietnamese Rangers near the 17th parallel border. North Vietnamese women carried food and ammunition for other soldiers.
This North Vietnamese postage stamp issued in 1968, shows North Vietnamese women shooting down a U.S. jet.

They also participated in assault teams. Women did skilled jobs such as replacing male physicians and other public-health professionals. Women also labored on such tasks as the construction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.* At age seventeen, Nguyen Thi Kim Lai was the head of a female militia unit in Huong Khue District. Photographs show her aiming a rifle at, and capturing, twenty-two-year-old Captain William Robinson – a man three times her size, who was shot down during the Christmas bombing of Hanoi in 1972. She walked him from the jungle to the Hoa Lo Prison, or what the Americans called the Hanoi Hilton.*

**After the war**

Both Vietnamese women and American women were happy to resume their lives in traditional female roles when the war was over. Vietnamese women went back to their children and husbands, if they were still alive. They worked in their rice paddies, offices, or factories.*

The Vietnam Women’s Memorial in Washington, DC., was designed by Glenna Goodacre, and dedicated in 1993.
Most of the American female nurses returned to civilian life as well, and some stayed on in the military. A shock that many of the nurses found in the workplace when returning from Vietnam was that the authority they had wielded in Vietnam did not fly in the States. One nurse stated that she questioned a doctor’s order and got reprimanded for it.* The gender roles of female submissiveness that had been transformed in Vietnam during the war had not changed back in the United States.

Women of the Vietnam-War era were important on both sides. Female American nurses brought health and healing to injured soldiers. Female Vietnamese soldiers gave their all in combating the threat to their country. Whether they were a life-healer or a life-taker, when the war ended, these women put down their temporary transformations given to them by war, and returned to their ingrained role as wife, mother and comforter.

Works Cited (*)