

Chapter Five

The Women's Stories on Vietnam: Civilian and Military Women in the Vietnam War

"My Dead Are Not Silent"

My dead are not silent
They scream in my dreams.

My dead are young soldiers
spent, wasted, discarded.

They paid the price
for political ploys
for strategic follies
for tactical errors.

The politicians and planners
the orderers and senders
discomfited but unshamed
demand that my dead lie quiet
that my grief be smothered
that my ache be shunned
that my memories be denied.

But my dead will not be stilled
They will not be shelved
numbered
catalogued
straightened
into sanitized rows.
Their blood yet drips through my soul
Their moans still echo through my heart.

My dead demand remembrance
My dead demand honor
My dead demand that lessons be learned.

I hear them still
through my dreams
through my laughter
through my prayers.

How can I make you hear? (Dana Shuster)

“My Dead Are Not Silent” (*Visions of War Dreams of Peace* 168-69) terminates in a poignant question: “How can I make you hear?” Shuster’s question echoes similar sentiments expressed by the civilian and military women who served, and their need to be heard. Her poem shows that the women not only have their experiences and memories but also their ghosts. The women’s compulsion to tell their stories is just as powerful as the men’s, perhaps, even more so; the women just want the opportunity to share their year Incountry, to answer some of the questions they are asked, and to find a way to break their profound silence.

One question many people ask is “Why do women go to war?” One possible answer is that throughout history, women have gone to war to cook and care for the men, or to provide other “services” as presented in the war genre fiction written by men. According to these authors, women have *appeared to* go to war for reasons which, on the surface, seem only selfish and/or mercenary, but not to be considered as warriors. Women have not, in general, really spoken about why they went, or what their experiences were during war because so few have recognized that women are warriors, too. Further, the women’s stories are usually not told because many women vets believe that few people, if any, want to hear their stories believing that their stories are not as interesting, and certainly not as *heroic* as those told by male soldiers. The women took no hills, cleared no bunkers of machine guns, captured no enemy soldiers. Rather these women fought death, disease and dismemberment, supposedly “behind the lines.” After all, most non-vets and many male vets believe that the women were never in danger because they didn’t perform the duties of the combat soldier. On the other hand, if the women’s stories are told they are rarely published, or published only as biographies, for example, Van Devanter’s *Home Before Morning*. Women veterans of the Vietnam War have not, until recently, felt a welcoming climate in which to share their memories and their stories of that war. However, these warrior-women do have their texts and their archives. Their archives are dusty shoe boxes hidden away on a shelf, battered boxes

buried in basements, tops of closet shelves, and buried deep within the memories of women reluctant to speak. These women have been marginalized and their service to their country trivialized for 30 years. Their stories don't just *need* to be told; they *must* be told before they are lost like so many of the stories of the World War I and II women vets. The course, then, that I am proposing would include texts either by or about women, and those with chapters to supplement and elucidate the women's experiences thereby serving to give a forum in which their stories can be heard. The lack of knowledge about women as warriors, and the need to understand how women perceive and pursue war should be addressed in the college classroom.

Therefore, an upper division literature course which addresses the experiences of women as told by them and about them is essential to a fuller understanding of war, especially the Vietnam War (the last "traditional" war), and to re-defining both war and the mythology of war as well as to recognize the variety of women's roles in war. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of such a literature course which incorporates both my philosophy and my methodology for such a course. Specific texts, both written and in film as well as assignments will be included in my discussion. Also, throughout the course, students will present panel discussions on some aspect of the Vietnam War and women. For example, panels could be presented on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Vietnam Era Music, Vietnam at the Movies, Poetry written by Vietnam Women Vets, The Future of Women in the Military, or a panel on Perceptions of Women as Warriors.

My course will be divided into 5 sections. These divisions provide for a thematic look at the experiences of the women who volunteered to serve their country in Southeast Asia. The thematic course divisions are: one, Background: Women at War; two, Vietnam: Women Soldiers; three, War Fiction and Commentary; four, Women Speak Out; and five, The Future of Women in War. Each part of the course allows for an in-depth view of the women's tour of duty and the long term impact of Vietnam on their

lives. The Incountry women's experiences are presented through textual readings and their lives since Vietnam in film, juxtaposed with the fiction for comparative and discussion purposes.

In order for students to understand how women became *officially* involved in wartime service, I would begin with a film about the life of Florence Nightingale. Going back to Victorian England to include Florence Nightingale may seem to be outside the parameters of the course; however, Nightingale founded modern nursing *and* was the first woman to be officially sent, with her team, into a war zone. Although the film is historical fiction, it shows Nightingale to be more than just motivated by selfish or mercenary impulses. The film reveals her high level of dedication and her desire to serve her country as an officially recognized nurse/member functioning at the behest of the British government. *Florence Nightingale* will provide students with the background necessary to understand women's participation in war leading to their expanded opportunities and roles in the Vietnam War, but not to the extent of the women military in the Persian Gulf war. First, just viewing *Florence Nightingale* provides a stepping stone to a discussion of her pioneering efforts aimed at providing quality care for the soldiers thereby increasing their probability of surviving their wounds. Also, using the *Florence Nightingale* film allows the beginning of a discussion about how women who go to war are stereotyped. The madonna/mother, angel, and whore stereotypes are introduced at this point since they are more romanticized in the Victorian period than in the more graphic form which appears in the Vietnam War material. That is, the stereotypes are presented less graphically and with the sexual overtones somewhat downplayed. Second, introducing the stereotypes early in the course will encourage both critical thinking and careful textual observation in order that the students understand that the stereotypes appear in the fiction, but are *not* present in the same manner in the women vets' actual experiences.

After viewing the Nightingale film, students would be asked to read several

chapters in a general text about Vietnam and its impact on American culture. *The Vietnam War and American Culture* (Rowe and Berg 1991) introduces students to several concepts and ideas. First, students can begin to understand the impact of the Vietnam War on American culture. Because the war entered all facets of our culture, the ideas of a more pro-active involvement by the women vets can be more clearly understood. Second, students will receive an overview of the war itself and America's involvement. The students will be required to read the following chapters from Rowe and Berg: "Visions of Righteousness" (Chomsky), "Revisionist Vietnam History" (Vlastos) and "Military Propaganda: Defense Department Films from World War II and Vietnam" (Springer). These chapters will help students understand the climate of silence that has thwarted many vets from telling about their year Incountry, and which have almost totally silenced the women vets—until recently. After viewing the film and discussing the chapters in Rowe and Berg, each student would be asked to write a response paper discussing their thoughts and ideas about the film and the three chapters.

After the background material, students would be asked to read *Home Before Morning* (Van Devanter 1983) because her story is the best example of the military nurse's experiences both Incountry and post-Vietnam. Van Devanter's text is a microcosm of many of the women's tours of duty in the Vietnam War, and whose experiences help reveal where the stereotypical attitudes of the male authors may have come from, and to contrast those attitudes with her realities. Van Devanter's biography reveals the day-to-day hardships encountered by the nurses, their growth as soldiers, the development of camaraderie among the women, and the difficulties encountered when they returned to "the World" giving the students a better understanding of the reasons for the women vets' silence and their reluctance to talk about or write about their year, in some cases more, in a war zone.

While the class is reading and discussing Van Devanter, I would show the film, *Choosing Sides: I Remember Vietnam* (The History Channel). This film shows several

vets discussing their tours of duty including Lynda Van Devanter. The film gives insight into the myriad of experiences encountered even by those who were assigned to the same general area. *Choosing Sides: I Remember Vietnam* includes Lynda Van Devanter relating her experiences. She discusses her tour and explains the impact of one soldier's death on her personally. I think students will benefit from seeing and hearing the person who wrote the text they are engaged in because hearing the author adds to the authenticity of a text such as *Home Before Morning*. In her interview, she remembers one particular soldier's death (her "primal scene"), and shares the emotional impact created by this one death with the interviewer. The trauma of the war on her thirty years later is still very apparent since her emotions surface quickly. Also during the reading of Van Devanter's text, I will have the students read "Missing in Action: Women Warriors in Vietnam" (Mithers). Mithers focuses on the forgotten veterans—the women. Mithers' discussion not only supports Van Devanter but also further validates Shuster's poem by creating an awareness that more than just the women vets recognize their "ignored" status.

Two other texts will round out this section of the course: *A Piece of My Heart* (Walker 1985) and *Hostile Fire* (Bigler 1996). The first of these, *A Piece of My Heart*, (APOMH), relates the stories of more than just military nurses. Donut Dollies, relief organization volunteers, Red Cross, Special Services are each represented through their personal accounts. Students can not only gain an understanding that more than just nurses were in Vietnam but also that these civilian women had many similar experiences with the same need to share their stories. The second text, *Hostile Fire*, details the life and death of 1st Lieutenant Sharon Ann Lane. The story of Lt. Lane is that of a courageous young woman who wanted to serve her country. I am including this text so students will understand that not all women who volunteered for Vietnam came home. At this point in the course, a short response paper on some aspect of Chomsky, Vlastos, Springer, Mithers, Van Devanter, Walker, Bigler, and the film would be assigned. Such

an essay allows students to discover their views, to explore and, perhaps, to solidify their ideas about the texts under discussion. The students would be expected to explore connections between each text and the intertextuality inherent in these works. Students would be encouraged to think seriously and critically about what they had read, seen, and discussed. Rather than simply re-telling the contents of these essays and stories, each student would be asked to respond to the texts and to show me some aspect of the texts that I had not seen previously. Probably, at this point, a mid-term exam would be given so that students could demonstrate their understanding and knowledge of the texts encountered.

The middle section of the course will focus on two works of fiction and commentary which counters that fiction. *The Healer's War* (Scarborough 1988) is written by a woman vet who chose fantasy in order to tell the story she wanted to reveal. Scarborough's main character, Kitty, will allow the students to further explore the stereotypes presented by male-authored fiction, and to assess those stereotypes when juxtaposed with the other texts for this section. In conjunction with the novel, students will be asked to read the chapters by Rowe, Berg and Jeffords. "Eyewitness: Documentary Styles in the American Representations of Vietnam" (Rowe) discusses narratives written by participants in the war, and their need to explain their experiences. Berg's "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology" focuses on stories, television and films about the war as well as their impact on American culture. Jeffords' chapter, "Tattoos, Scars, Diaries, and Writing Masculinity" covers Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*. Although not a text to be specifically addressed by this course, Heinemann's novel creates the opportunity to further discuss the madonna/mother, angel, and whore stereotypes, and to clarify the ambiguities inherent in stereotypes. Relevant excerpts from *Paco's Story* will be provided for the students in the form of handouts.

Two episodes of the *China Beach* series will be shown during this section of the course: "The Best of China Beach" and "Somewhere over the Radio." I have included

the two China Beach episodes for several reasons: one, Scarborough's main character, Kitty, goes to China Beach and encounters the same stereotypical attitudes presented in "The Best of China Beach"; two, because these episodes show the internal conflict of the nurse who wanted to go home and wanted to stay in Vietnam; and three, because the episodes show a United Servicemen's Organization (USO) troupe in a war zone, and the realization of one USO entertainer that war isn't the "fun and games" she expected. Further, these two episodes clearly elucidate the stereotypes in some of the characters' names; for instance, the Donut Dollie's name, who is in Vietnam to search for her brother, is Cherry. Her name carries the sexual connotation of the whore stereotype, the virginity (madonna) of the character both to sex and to war, and her character reveals the innocence and caring desire of the mother.

To contrast the stereotypes presented in *China Beach*, I will show *Vietnam: One Woman's Story* (1994). Kathy Gunson, an emergency room nurse, graphically describes her year in Vietnam from her arrival to her departure. Gunson thoughtfully explains what it was like to return home, and the alienation from society and her family that she felt for so many years. Her story allows students to go beyond the printed word and see that the women vets were real people doing difficult jobs in order to serve their country.

Moving into the next to last section of the course gives students the unique opportunity to hear the women vets themselves as they read their stories and their poetry—some published, but most not published. The class would be reading "Remembering Vietnam" (Clark) and "The Vietnam War and American Music" (James). At this point, I would play "Incountry Folk Songs of Americans in the Vietnam War" (Flying Fish Records 1991), and selections by Simon and Garfunkel, for example, "I Am A Rock" and "The Sound of Silence." The expressions and sentiments in these songs give another aspect to the Vietnam War experience because they show the vets trying to make some sense of the chaos that is war, and the two Simon and Garfunkel songs elaborate the pain and anguish of not talking, of keeping the visions and their attendant

ghosts locked away.

Following the two CDs, two videos filmed by a woman vet would be shown. The first, *Veterans' Day at the Writer's Tent* (Washington DC 1997) gives students the opportunity to see and hear both civilian and military women read the stories they wrote about being Incountry. One of the presenters is Dusty whose poetry makes a significant impact on the listener. The other video was filmed in Orlando, Florida at the National Popular Culture Convention (April 1998). Two panels consisting of military, civilian and non-vets read their work, play their songs, and generally, give students another series of views on the multi-faceted Vietnam War. I chose to present these videos so that the printed material gains faces and feelings and becomes human and real.

Public Eye's (April 1998) "Vietnam Nurses" segment further completes the picture of the women's experiences in Vietnam. Five women are interviewed and discuss how they were raped by US soldiers during their year Incountry. The interviewed women stress several important points. One, they went to serve; two, they were in combat often against the soldiers who should have protected them; and three, the reason for speaking out is because of their need to tell their stories, to be a motivator for other women vets who have yet to find their voices, and to find some sort of closure.

The final text for this section of the course is *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace* (Furey and Van Devanter, eds 1991). This text presents the poetry of women vets. Originally compiled to pay for the Vietnam Women's Memorial, the text has become a vital source for understanding the thoughts, ideas, hopes, dreams, anger, frustrations and fears of women who volunteered to go to war. Their emotions flow through the poetry which can catch the reader off-guard, and hit with the power of a Force 5 tornado. Along with this text, students will also read W. D. Ehrhart's poetry (Rowe and Berg). Although not poetry by women vets, Ehrhart's short collection, once again, shows students how multi-sided the Vietnam War has been, still is, and always will be.

Finally, the last section of this course highlights the future of women in war and

in the military. The Vietnam women's experiences represent the end of traditional roles for women during times of war. From Florence Nightingale to Vietnam, women have been nurses, support military personnel, and entertainers. Beginning with the end of the Vietnam War (1975) women began to push for increased involvement in the military. No longer satisfied with peripheral roles such as stenographers and clerks, women began to demand jobs such as helicopter pilots, missile guidance experts, and to be given weapons training. Although the upper echelons of military administration hold tight to their antiquated beliefs, for example, that women have less upper body strength than men, the Persian Gulf war did not require upper body strength as much as intelligence, advanced technological training and the ability to push a button!

To help students recognize the direction that women are striving for, the final part of my course will include two films. The first, *Women in the Military* (20th Century 1994) takes note of several important areas for tomorrow's military. First, the ending of the draft in 1973 helped open the doors for more women and greater involvement in the military. According to the documentary, only 56 jobs, all combat-related, remained closed to women as of 1994. Today, only five years later, that barricade is dropping. Oddly enough, one of the jobs that re-opened to women in the early 90s was that of cook! Second, since active recruitment of women had to occur, the macho-traditions had to undergo change especially where sexual harassment is concerned, for example, the Tailhook Convention (U.S. Navy) which is an excellent example of the "Boy's Club" that Dusty has written about in her poem. Using this documentary on the future of women in the military introduces students to a wide range of controversial subjects concerning women; for instance, sexual harassment, physical differences, combat jobs, etc. The Mike Wallace-narrated documentary presents a broad spectrum of events involving women's push to be more active in their country's military organizations.

Following the discussion of *Women in the Military*, I will show *Courage Under Fire*. Meg Ryan, who stars in the movie, is a Persian Gulf War helicopter pilot who

fighters to save the men in her command after their chopper has been shot down. The movie is a flashback which depicts the Army's investigation of Meg Ryan's character before the Medal of Honor is presented posthumously. The movie highlights the problems and difficulties which were the focus of the 20th Century documentary.

The stereotypes that are part of the male-authored war genre fiction are also part of the movie. The male soldiers either support or decry Ms. Ryan's character based on their feelings about where women should or shouldn't be. The strength of the Ryan character shows students that women can be strong members of a combat team as well as showing them that the fictional representation is beginning to alter from the strong stereotypical view of women in the traditional war genre fiction to one that presents women as competent soldiers doing their assigned jobs.

In order to pull the various themes of the course together, and to provide the students with an opportunity to reflect on those themes and ideas, another essay would be due at the conclusion of *Courage Under Fire*. Throughout the semester, several days would have been set aside to discuss various issues and themes as they appeared in the written texts or in the films and videos. The panel discussions would have also been concluded at this point. The students would be asked to produce a paper, preferably conference length, which would explore some aspect or aspects of women in the military. The paper would need to have, as its focus, one or more of the written texts and/or films presented during the semester, but then to move beyond those texts into connecting what was read, seen and discussed with the students' own ideas, thoughts or experiences. The final paper would be due the day of the final exam.

The final exam in a course such as the one that I am proposing not only permits students to demonstrate what they've learned factually but also to respond to several essay questions. These essay questions would be open-ended and result from issues examined during the panel presentations, the discussions following the films, or those connected with individual student research while preparing papers. These questions

would be prepared by class members and copies distributed to each student several class meetings prior to the final. As a group, the class would discuss these questions. Giving students the opportunity to provide thought-provoking questions enhances their critical thinking skills and grants opportunities to develop serious questions with equally serious responses.

I think that such a course as this one is vital for creating a forum in which difficult subjects can be discussed while, at the same time, being firmly grounded in a variety of texts. The civilian and military women's stories of the Vietnam War not only *deserve* to be heard, they *must* be heard. Their experiences vary within the overall umbrella that was America's most devastating and socially-altering war. I think of the Vietnam War and the women's experiences as a multi-storied, multi-windowed house. The rooms are not equal in size or shape, the windows are formed in a myriad of designs and are clear, tinted or frosted, and either have a broad view or a narrowed one-dimensional view of that world of war. The veterans have all experienced the war, but depending on their "view" the experiences don't coincide with anyone else's—exactly. Their experiences don't have the similarity that other wars' stories seem to have; therefore, students will benefit from a multi-sided, multi-faceted approach. That the women vets need to tell about Vietnam and their life-altering experiences is so cogently explained by Dana Shuster's poem, and brought further into realization by a photograph of a young nurse leaving an ancient temple, near Quang Tri, that she had been photographing. The nurse is wearing fatigues, combat boots and carrying both a weapon and a camera; she looks very alone in her world at war. I asked the photographer, another nurse veteran about the picture; she replied,

The nurse was an FNG (fucking new guy) at the 18th Surgical in Quang Tri and I took her along on a MedCap trip and then showed her the sights of Vietnam. . . I haven't a clue what went on in my mind in those days . . . I certainly shouldn't have taken this kid out with me because it certainly put her life at risk. . .it was, afterall, a war! But there was something that I

was trying to prove or teach. . .and perhaps it was a simple lesson. . .that wars take place in the homelands of ‘real people’ who have lives and simple pleasures like everyone else. That there are the little children who lose innocence too soon. . . . To photograph some [sic] much of the countryside and to travel to so many places whenever and however I could was not a deliberate act, but something that subconsciously drove me to find tranquility [sic] in the midst of atrocity. (Banigan ICW 23 March 1999)

Chris Banigan felt the need, even in the midst of war, to teach, to show, to share what she had been through already with an inexperienced nurse. Like Dana Shuster, she wants to tell her stories and share her experiences. To share their experiences and stories would mean terminating their isolation, and would also help end the feelings they have which is so well expressed by Paul Simon’s “I Am A Rock” (one of the two songs played for the class) with the poignant and powerful refrain, “I am a rock; I am an island:”

I’ve built walls
A fortress deep and mighty
That none may penetrate
I have no need for friendship
Friendship causes pain
It’s laughter and it’s loving I disdain.

Don’t talk of love
Well, I’ve heard the word before
It’s sleeping in my memory
I won’t disturb the slumber
Of feelings that have died
If I’d never loved,
I never would have cried.

I have my books
And my poetry to protect me
I am shielded in my armor
Hiding in my room
Safe within my womb
I touch no-one and no-one touches me.

A course like the one that I’ve just outlined would help prepare students to ask the women vets questions, and to receive their answers with an enhanced ability to understand those answers. Then Dana Shuster’s “dead” can be remembered, honored,

and their lessons can be learned so that, perhaps, another Vietnam Wall Memorial will not be necessary, nor will a country need 30 years to heal from the impact of a Vietnam War socially, emotionally, economically, politically, physically, or nationally. The other Simon and Garfunkel song re-echoes the desire to tell and share those stories; for example, this stanza from “The Sound of Silence” (Paul Simon) duplicates what the women vets feel:

‘Fools,’ said I, ‘you do not know
Silence like a cancer grows.’
‘Hear my words that I might teach you,
Take my arms that I might reach you.’
But my words like silent raindrops fell,
And echoed in the wells of silence.

To give the women vets their platform would be the greatest goal of a course on Women in War, and help eliminate the “wells of silence.”

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