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On Their Own: Female Correspondents in Vietnam

Joyce Hoffmann

Old Dominion University, jhoffman@odu.edu

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Women went to Vietnam as war correspondents in unprecedented numbers in the 1960s and early 1970s. A combination of intellectual curiosity, professional longings to be at the center of a big story and a simple lust for adventure drew women to the jungles of Southeast Asia, just as those same urges had long drawn men to the spectacle of war.

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The military and media worlds female correspondents encountered in Vietnam were a mirror image of those they had left in the States. What they did while they were in Vietnam, says journalist David Halberstam, is only half the story. How, in the male-dominated culture of American newsrooms in the 1960s and 1970s, they managed to get the Vietnam assignment is the other half, he maintains. For women associated with major news organizations, it was a dispiriting ordeal, one that demanded measures of persistence, tact and abundant patience.

ON THEIR OWN: Female Correspondents in Vietnam

By Joyce Hoffmann

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Because Vietnam Was the Most Accessible War in American History for Reporters of Either Gender, Women Had Few Problems Acquiring Accreditation. The Press Had Never Before Had Such Complete Assistance in Covering Any Other Military Conflict. Until 1965, America continued to insist that its role in Vietnam was purely advisory. To have restricted the press or imposed censorship of any kind would have signaled that the Army of South Vietnam was receiving something far more serious than advice.

While the military files are incomplete, available records indicate that upwards of 300 women were accredited to cover the war in the decade between 1965 and 1975. Of those 300, a total of about 70 women are identifiable as correspondents by their published or broadcast reports about the war. Women acquired letters from organizations as traditional as the North American Newspaper Alliance, as diverse as Mademoiselle and True Adventure, or as obscure as the Lithuanian Daily Worker.

The press identification issued by the Military Affairs Command, Vietnam (MACV), entitled the bearer access to the army's ground and air transportation system throughout the entire country. And that is where it became quite easy for women.

Although Supreme Commander General William C. Westmoreland tried — unsuccessfully — to have women barred from overnight trips away from base, women welcomed them, too, precisely because their presence made so many of the commanding officers uncomfortable. Among their own male colleagues, female correspondents were often welcomed but rarely esteemed. No less than the generals, male correspondents in Vietnam perceived war as a man's game. Among these macho media men, the approval of the “grunts” who fought the ground war, and with whom they shared hardships, was a badge of honor. Out on search-and-destroy missions with the troops, you carried your own pack, dug your own trench, fired a .30-caliber automatic at the enemy in the heat of battle if you had to, endured the heat, the jungle, the trench foot and, most of all, the fear. Many of the women correspondents — those whose Michael Herr in his book Dispatches dismissively refers to as “girl reporters” — were assigned among the troops with whom they saw action, and the stories they told enriched the public understanding of the war and its enigmas. Gloria Emerson of the New York Times, for example, enrolled the fighting man in a different, but no less remarkable way than columnist Ernie Pyle had done in World War II. Dickoy Chapelle, a middle-aged freelance photographer, carried her own pack and dug her own trench and died on patrol with her beloved U.S. Marines when a land mine exploded.

Elizabeth Pond and Kate Webb were captured and held prisoner by the Viet Cong, unlike several captured male journalists, they were released unharmed. And, perhaps most notably, Frances FitzGerald explored the complexities of Vietnamese society and concluded (long before many of her male colleagues) that the war was unwinnable.

By this collective view of the women's movement and a shared desire to avoid each other, there are few other characteristics common to the scores of women who were accredited to cover the war. Numbered among them were high school graduates with little training, in or out of college, who signed up in the excitement of covering the war. Most of the women who were accredited to cover the war were women who had been women's movement activists.

Between the Lines

Although the inroads achieved by the women's movement in the 1960s helped to compel editors to assign women to Vietnam and forced the generals to suffer women on the battlefield, many of these women appear to have been at the very least indifferent to, if not downright contemptuous of, feminism. Few would credit feminism with any part of their success. They believed instead that they had made it on their own.

Both Emerson and NBC correspondent Liz Trotta challenged the movement's philosophy. Based on her Vietnam experience, Emerson once wrote that no woman has witnessed how the Army can crush and humble an enlisted man can ever muster any sympathy for the women's movement. “The real victims of men,” she concluded, “are other men.” And in Trotta's book, the “excessively liberal demands” made by leaders of the women's movement “smacked of special-interest crankiness masquerading as the people's will.”

Unappreciated Still

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Beyond this collective view of the women's movement and a shared desire to avoid each other, there are few other characteristics common to the scores of women who were accredited to cover the war. Numbered among them were high school graduates with little training, in or out of college, who signed up in the excitement of covering the war. Most of the women who were accredited to cover the war were women who had been women's movement activists.

Professor of English Joyce Hoffmann is writing a book on the role and experiences of female journalists in Vietnam.