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Dickey Chappelle, feature
writer for National
Geographic Magazine

ON THEIR OWN: Female Correspondents in Vietnam

By Joyce Hoffmann

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.

For a decade and a half, women begged, cajoled or simply paid their own way to Vietnam. Together they transformed the role of women as war correspondents from an aberration to a norm. But very few of them were acknowledged as the professional equals of their male counterparts — then or now.

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.

Between the Lines

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 stays with troops on the battlefield, arguing that women were an unacceptable distraction, farther down the chain of command the resistance disappeared. There was hardly a young helicopter pilot in Southeast Asia who refused a request from one of the many women accredited to cover the war. Ground troops generally welcomed women, 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 bat-

tle if you had to, endured the heat, the jungle, the trench foot and, most of all, the fear.

Many of the women correspondents — those whom Michael Herr in his book *Dispatches* dismissively refers to as "girl reporters" — were esteemed 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, ennobled the fighting man in a different, but no less remarkable way than columnist Ernie Pyle had done in World War II. Dickey 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 did) that the war was unwinnable.



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Unappreciated Still

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 who 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 view, the "excessively liberal demands" made by leaders of the women's movement "smacked of special-interest crankiness masquerading as the people's will."

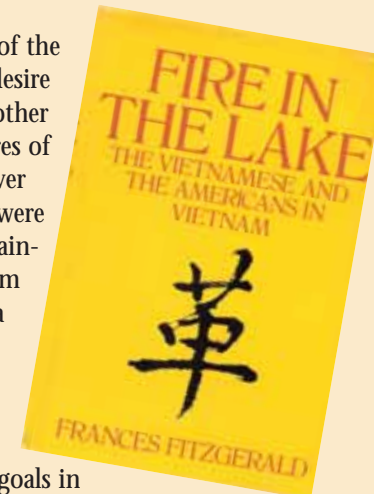
Beyond this collective view of the women's movement and a shared desire to avoid each other, there are few other characteristics common to the scores of women who were accredited to cover the war. Numbered among them were high school graduates with little training in or commitment to journalism and women with a Phi Beta Kappa key and a graduate degree from Harvard. Like so many Americans in the early and mid 1960s, at the outset at least, most of the women correspondents thought America's goals in Southeast Asia were both noble and just.

Politically, they were both Republican and Democrat. Ideologically, their opinions ran from that of *New York Herald Tribune* correspondent Marguerite Higgins on the right, who believed Vietnam was "as much a front line of freedom as Hawaii or San Francisco," to Gloria Emerson's vastly more dovish belief that the war was a huge, unrelenting and avoidable tragedy.

During the two-plus decades after America's withdrawal from Vietnam, years in which women have taken an increasingly prominent role on covering wars, the achievements of female journalists in Vietnam have been considered less noteworthy than those of their male colleagues. Among historians who have written about the war and the media coverage of it, women correspondents are largely ignored or



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receive only perfunctory mention. Even though women who covered the Vietnam war won some of journalism's most prestigious awards — a Pulitzer Prize and several George Polk Awards, the National Book Award and the Overseas Press Award — their role in Vietnam, at best, remains understated.

In the context of journalism history, these 70-odd women who covered the Vietnam War debunked the notion that women had no place on the battlefield. Thanks to their accomplishments in Southeast Asia, the women correspondents who are now routinely assigned to cover conflicts in the Persian Gulf, Yugoslavia, Albania and countries throughout Africa are hardly considered "the girl reporters."

No soldier would ever shout to CNN's Christiane Amanpour, as a Marine once did to Gloria Emerson in Vietnam, "What the hell did they send a woman here for? War is a man's business!" In Vietnam, women proved otherwise.



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