



A FEW GOOD WOMEN

AMERICA'S MILITARY WOMEN FROM WORLD WAR I
TO THE WARS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

EVELYN M. MONAHAN AND
ROSEMARY NEIDEL-GREENLEE

A K N O P F  B O O K

ALSO BY
EVELYN M. MONAHAN AND ROSEMARY NEIDEL-GREENLEE

And If I Perish:
Frontline U.S. Army Nurses in World War II

All This Hell:
U.S. Nurses Imprisoned by the Japanese

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The True Story of U.S. Army Nurses Behind Enemy Lines

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Evelyn M. Monahan
and
Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee



ALFRED A. KNOPF NEW YORK 2010

*To Nancy A. Hardesty, Ph.D.
With deep appreciation for introducing me
to the importance of women's history*

EVELYN MONAHAN

and

To all the U.S. military women who have lived this history

ROSEMARY NEIDEL-GREENLEE

Until lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter.

—*Kenyan Proverb*

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INTRODUCTION

Feelings of patriotism have never been an exclusive attribute of the male heart. Throughout recorded history, women have defied the cultural conventions of gender roles that barred them not only from combat but from the military in general. Despite those cultural conventions, women around the world have always included themselves in the defense of their homelands and even in combat itself. In biblical times, Deborah led soldiers during the occupation of Canaan, and Esther risked her life to plead before an enemy king for mercy for her people.

In the mid-ninth century BC in southern Iraq, two women, Queens Zabibi and Samsi, merged their armies and led them into battle against the Assyrians, who planned to add their lands to the possessions of the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser IV. At the time, the Assyrian army was considered one of the most powerful in the world. Zabibi and Samsi rode at the head of their armies and put up a significant battle.

Hundreds of years later, another queen, Bat Zabbai, accompanied her husband, Odainat, on hunting trips and in the wars he fought. When Odainat died in AD 266, Zabbai became regent for her young son and led her armies to acquire new lands. In 269, she conquered all of Egypt and claimed what land remained for Syria. Eventually, Zabbai's kingdom stretched from "Egypt to the Bosphorus, and from the Mediterranean to India." She then ruled over the Eastern Roman Empire and declared herself to be completely independent from Rome.¹

If we add to these women warriors Queen Boudicea of Britain, who led her troops in battles where thousands of Roman soldiers and civilians were killed; Queen Thyra of Denmark; Joan of Arc; and Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, we have a strong but limited sampling of the patriotism and military prowess that have been no strangers to women despite the fact that their lives and deeds are not well known in twenty-first-century America.

We do not have to look far into history to discover that patriotism and courage in the face of war have never been absent from the female heart. American women have always been a volunteer force in the defense of their nation. During the Revolutionary War, women volunteered and followed colonial troops to the front lines as laundresses, cooks, and nurses. Some accompanied their husbands, and others disguised themselves as men, enlisted, and served as soldiers. Margaret Corbin, whom some historians credit as the source of the Molly Pitcher legends, took over her husband's cannon when he was killed during the Battle of Fort Mifflin in 1776.

She fired on British troops until she was wounded. Two years later, Mary Hayes did the same at the Battle of Monmouth in New Jersey. Margaret Corbin's grave and monument can be found today in the cemetery of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, while Mary Hayes's statue stands near her gravesite in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, home of the U.S. Army's Institute of Military History and the U.S. Army War College.

Not all women who felt an irresistible urge to enlist in their nation's military chose the army as their preferred branch of service. For some women, the sea exerted a greater attraction than cavalry posts or cities, and for them, the navy or marines was the military service of choice. One such woman was Hannah Snell, who in the 1700s left her home to go in search of her missing husband. For safety reasons, Hannah dressed as a man, believing the disguise would afford her more protection as she walked the roads and streets in pursuit of her quest. As time passed and neither her husband nor a job was in sight, Hannah enlisted as a marine in Adm. Edward Boscawen's fleet as they recruited sailors and marines in the town of Portsmouth, England. Within days, she sailed as a marine to the East Indies. Despite the fact that she was wounded several times during combat at Pondicherry, she was able to keep her gender hidden from superiors, crew, and fellow marines. Eventually, Hannah served aboard the frigate *Eltham*, and for many months passed as a man despite the fact that the crew nicknamed her "Molly" because of her smooth and whisker-free skin. When her secret finally did come out, she was mustered out of the service with a pension of one shilling a day. Hannah supplemented that pension by joining a circus and theatrical group, where she exhibited herself in her marine uniform at county fairs throughout England. In 1789, at age seventy, she died, still sad that she had never found the husband who had deserted her years ago.

Another woman drawn to military service at sea was Lucy Brewster. In 1812, Lucy disguised herself as a man and, under the assumed name of George Baker, enlisted in the marines. Lucy, alias "George," was assigned to the frigate *Constitution*, where she became an excellent rifleman and fought alongside other crew members off the coast of Brazil when the *Constitution* engaged the frigate *Java* in a long and intense sea battle. While the *Constitution's* forty-four shipboard guns blasted away at the *Java*, "George" perched in the top mast and fired on the enemy with her musket. After several additional sea battles and a successful career as a marine, George Baker retired, reclaimed her identity, and married.

A Few Good Women is the story of how the U.S. women's military corps came into being. It tells of the women who fought for the right to defend their country and its Constitution by serving in America's armed forces as enlisted members and officers with full military rank and benefits, and of the fight and issues still being fought and addressed by the military women of today for the right to serve in combat units as well as in combat support positions. This right has been earned by the blood, sweat, and tears of the

more than one million women who have volunteered to serve this nation. These women have lived a proud history that is too little known by the American people, too little addressed by American historians, too little appreciated by the American government, and still to be rewarded by granting all women the full rights of citizenship granted specifically to men by the U.S. Constitution.

PROLOGUE



Those who live in memory are really never dead.

—Kate Morton, *The Shifting Fog*

Falluja, Iraq: 23 June 2005, 1920 hours (7:20 p.m.). Cpl. Sally J. Saalman finished roll call of the women marines in her charge, climbed onboard the old truck, and seated herself on one of the parallel benches that ran along both sides of the cargo area. Her eyes took in the deserted streets as the three-vehicle convoy began the fifteen-minute trip back to Camp Falluja and the Women's Marine Corps barracks. Corporal Saalman and the other nineteen female Leathernecks in the Women's Search Force had been making this trip twice a day since the inception of the special unit in February 2005. The routine of the Women's Search Force was as predictable as sunrise and sunset. Day in and day out, the members of this platoon awakened at 0500 hours, ate breakfast, loaded onto a cargo truck, and were transported along the identical route to the staging area in "downtown" Falluja.

From this central point, the Women's Search Force was dispersed to various checkpoints throughout the city and began their daily mission of stopping and searching Iraqi women for contraband items or messages they might be carrying to, or on behalf of, an insurgent group.

Now, in the 120-degree evening heat, the women marines were glad to be finished with work for the day and headed home. The improvised armored paneling on both sides of the old cargo truck extended only as high as the women's shoulders and left them with an unobstructed view of either side of the road and backward and forward on the road itself. Looking in the direction from which they had come, it was clear that the second Humvee, whose mission was to protect the convoy from the rear, was nowhere in sight. In compliance with standing orders, the rear guard was keeping a prescribed distance as part of the security plan to protect escorted vehicles. The truck slowed slightly, and the women looked toward the lead Humvee to see if they could determine what was causing the slowdown. The marines in the lead were signaling to the only car in sight to pull to the side of the road and stop. The car's driver obeyed immediately, and the convoy continued on its way. As the Humvee moved forward and cleared the car, the driver pushed down on the accelerator and aimed the car at the cargo truck carrying the women marines.

In a matter of seconds, the car struck its target just behind the cab on the passenger side. The sound of the explosion rolled outward as thick fingers of orange and yellow flames reached upward, then closed around the truck like an angry fist determined to destroy its enemy. The heat was so intense that two male marines in the cab and two women in the cargo area were killed instantly. For those still alive, the horror was just beginning. Despite their own wounds, women marines crawled back to the truck to drag their more severely wounded sisters from the still burning truck. Women's voices were calling for water, while another badly burned female asked over and over again how she looked. The extreme heat that had fused one woman's goggles to her cheeks also exploded the ammunition the women carried. In less than a minute, enemy snipers began firing at the wounded and dead marines scattered in the road.¹

1



No army can withstand the strength of an idea whose time has come.

—Victor Hugo

The entrance of American women into the U. S. military was not an easy one. Its conception was analogous to parthenogenesis, and few men in the military, Congress, or the street saw the product of that conception as anything that would affect mankind, America, or the American culture in a positive manner. The population as a whole and particularly those in power saw the very idea as a threat to America and an abomination to the “natural order” that was the foundation of American society. That ingrained belief was supported by every major institution that held power to keep the status quo or to effect change: America’s laws, religious denominations, educational systems, labor markets, military, manufacturing, and marketing all stood in some part on the belief in support of the God-given natural law that prescribed and enforced gender roles that had been handed down from one generation to the next and were the molds in which the lives of Americans were shaped and encouraged to grow. There had always been a fringe element of women who felt they should be allowed equal rights with men, in citizenship and opportunity, but society had always known and willingly supported the fact that these women and their ideas were, to say the least, “unnatural” and made sure they would pay a high price for straying outside the natural boundaries inherent in men and women by their very nature.

True, there were times, as in times of war or national emergency, when men had to set these natural limits aside for the good of society, but those same men called for a return to “normalcy” once the emergency was past.

When the United States entered World War I on 6 April 1917, there were approximately 2,000 women volunteers serving as enlisted members of the U.S. Navy (USN). By 1918, that number had increased to 11,000, and yeomen (F) (for “female”), as they were designated by the U.S. Navy, were serving in U.S. Naval Districts throughout the continental United States. In a society that strongly believed that “a woman’s place is in the home,” women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five headed for recruiting stations to sign up and “Free a Man to Fight.”

Not all Americans, including men serving in the navy, were happy about the service of women in a previously all-male bastion. Accepting women as

enlisted navy personnel was a gigantic change, and in the minds of many, it was a drastic mistake. Newspapers ran articles on the subject, and letters from readers flooded in, expressing a majority of negative responses to the Navy Department action. Many of the American people, and particularly active-duty and retired navy personnel, wanted to know how such a horrible mistake could have been made. The “mistake” originated with Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels.

Like many Americans, Secretary Daniels could see the day when America would enter the fray of World War I as an active combatant. The United States had managed to stay out of the war raging in Europe since Germany had declared war on Russia and France within the first three days of August 1914, and Great Britain had declared war on Germany on 4 August. In 1916, a native-born Washington, D.C., resident and graduate of Washington Business High School, Charlotte L. Barry, called on the navy secretary to inquire about women being allowed to serve in the U.S. Navy. She did not receive an immediate answer but apparently raised a question that would alter the course of the history of women in the U.S. military.¹

By the beginning of 1917, Secretary Daniels began asking his advisers if Department of the Navy regulations under the Naval Act of 1916 specified that U.S. citizens joining the navy had to be males. Those advisers confirmed Daniels’s belief that there was no such regulation. The word “male” did not precede “U.S. citizen” in the regulations, and therefore there was an open avenue for Daniels to enact his idea of enlisting American women as a noncombatant force that would free otherwise landlocked and deskbound sailors and marines to become direct combatants against Germany, if and when America entered World War I.

In March 1917, the navy announced its decision to enlist women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five as yeomen who would “free a man to fight” by taking over clerical duties and other positions that would be designated as the program grew. Hundreds and then thousands of women responded by making their way to recruiting stations to enlist and take the oath of military service.



World War I Yeomen (F) at the munitions factory in Bloomfield, New Jersey.

One of the first women to join the yeomen (F), Gertrude Edna Murray, signed up with the U.S. Naval Coast Reserve on 18 April 1917. “She was working at a company called Globe Wernicke Co. across the street from the Fleet Supply Base in South Brooklyn. Someone from the Navy called up and asked if they had someone who could set up a filing system and they recommended [her].” Soon Chief Yeoman Murray had a unit of forty women yeomen (F) to supervise. The Naval Reserve Force asked Chief Murray to assist with the design of the uniforms for a growing number of enlistees.²

In 1917, Barry, who, a year earlier, had first raised the question of gender with Secretary Daniels, joined the navy with her sister Sophie Bean, both as yeomen third class (F). Throughout the war, Charlotte was a typist at the Washington Navy Gun Factory or Washington Navy Yard. Following her discharge in 1919, Yeoman (F) Second Class Barry stayed on at the Navy Yard in a civilian capacity, doing her old active duty job until after the Korean War, when she retired in 1953.³

It is doubtful that Josephus Daniels foresaw the effect his decision would have from that day forward, not only for American women but for the U.S. Armed Forces and American society in general. Secretary Daniels had crossed the Rubicon, and he had taken the nation’s future with him. The military service of American women in World War I would change the lives of all Americans living then and the lives of the tens of millions who would come after them.

Those changes would affect America’s future in uneven steps and in lasting ways. The pattern that surfaces for women in time of war or emergencies can be seen in the development of the American West. Women pioneers faced all the dangers of travel by wagon train and of establishing homesteads and