

## [Roth on Bell and Crow, 'It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan'](#)

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The following book review from H-Diplo may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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**Jerri Bell, Tracy Crow, eds.** *It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan*. Potomac Books, 2017. xxi + 330 pp. Illustrations. \$32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61234-831-5.

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In 2016, the US Armed Forces eliminated combat restrictions on women. At one time, this move might have ignited fierce blowback. Certainly, as editors Jerri Bell and Tracy Crow note in *It's My Country Too*, there are still Americans opposed to women serving in all areas of the military. As they point out, in 2015, Oklahoma congressman Steve Russell requested detailed records on the first women to graduate the army's elite Ranger School, because he had been given reason to believe the women had not passed according to the same standards to which men had been held. Yet Russell seems the exception, rather than the rule: while media outlets continue to herald stories of servicewomen moving into new territory and breaking old boundaries, Americans seem less concerned than ever about how and where women serve in the military.

The reality is that women have always defended the United States, a fact laid bare by Bell and Crow's anthology of women's own accounts of serving in and with the military. Instead, Americans have long cherished the notion that women were far away from any sort of danger, since men did the fighting and women did not. *It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan* makes it clear that this notion is nothing more than a myth. What may make the erosion of combat restrictions so meaningful is the fact that allowing women in all areas of the armed forces finally opens leadership paths to servicewomen in new ways, such as the appointment of the first female infantry platoon leader in the Marines.[1]

*It's My Country Too* is a primary source anthology that describes itself as the first to offer women's

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own accounts of their military service from the American Revolution to the present. While women have historically been a very small proportion of the American military, this book is still an important work that required a major undertaking given the challenges of finding women's voices from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular, as well as some periods in the twentieth. The inclusion of so many primary sources in one volume ought to be particularly useful in the classroom and to some degree in research.

It is the range of women's experiences that is most beneficial here, and the insights they provide into their defense work. However, the depth and breadth of women's accounts in any given time period depends heavily on source accessibility. For example, the American Revolution chapter is the shortest, with just two accounts: a transcribed deposition of Sarah Osborn and a speech from Deborah Sampson Gannett, perhaps best known for dressing as a man to serve in the Continental Army. The editors note these are the only two confirmed accounts from women who served in the Revolution, although there are certainly stories of more, such as Molly Pitcher.

Subsequent chapters generally offer a wider range of women's stories, broadly construing women's military service to include not just nurses and women who served in uniform, but also women spies, a lighthouse keeper, and a congresswoman known for her work promoting women's military service. Harriet Tubman, known to most as an Underground Railroad guide, also worked for the Union Army in the Civil War. Bell and Crow include a portion of an interview Tubman gave about her experience in the Combahee River Raid. Tubman supported the Union in a variety of ways deep in the South: while she worked directly with the army, she did not take soldiers' rations and was not paid for her work. "In four years of service, Tubman received only twenty days' rations from the government, as well as small sums of money that she used primarily to pay scouts" (p. 26).

The World War II chapter includes a posthumously published article from Cornelia Fort of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs). Classified as civilians throughout the war, WASP pilots ferried planes for the military. Fort recounts what she saw on the ground at Pearl Harbor on December 7 and describes her happiness at being able to serve her country. "I ... am profoundly grateful that my one talent, my only knowledge, flying, happens to be of use to my country when it is needed. That's all the luck I ever hope to have" (p. 125). A little more than a year into her work as a WASP, Fort died when a male pilot flew too close to her plane. Although not noted by Bell and Crow, as a civilian, Fort was not accorded a military burial: her parents had to shoulder the costs. Only in 2016 did the US government begin to honor WASPs by allowing them to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery.[2]

*It's My Country Too* draws from oral histories, interviews, original pieces written for the anthology, and previously published excerpts. In their preface, Bell and Crow explain their curation process, noting that they "wanted women currently serving and those who will follow them to see themselves and their experiences reflected in these pages." At the same time, observing how many sources and words they had to cut, Bell and Crow note that they kept "only the stories that best amplified the themes we found in reading scholarly histories" (p. xvi). These two goals are not at odds, but the first is a tall order, as this assumes a commonality to all women's defense experiences and seems somewhat ahistorical. For servicewomen, this may be less of a concern than for historians, who want to understand change over time, while veterans may be more interested in placing themselves within a larger community and longer tradition of women's service.

The second goal, keeping the accounts that reflected themes the editors found in scholarly histories, is more elusive in the book's execution. The table of contents provides a generally chronological focus, but chapter 6, "Unconventional Operations, Espionage, and the Cold War" sits oddly between World War II and a chapter entitled "Women's Integration and the Korean War." Chapter 6 functions as a catch-all, beginning with women in espionage during World War II and the mid-1940s, then providing an excerpt from General Jeanne Holm's oral history, and one from Anne Visser Ney, who served from 1979 to 2010. General Holm, the second woman ever to attain the rank of general, was on active duty from World War II into the 1970s. Taken together, the contents in this chapter appear out of place in the middle of the book with the framing provided. While all might be called "unconventional," Holm and Ney's stories come at a particularly odd moment before the chapter that explains the creation of the Women's Armed Services Integration Act in 1948, arguably important context to help readers make sense of Holm's and Ney's service. It is not clear, then, from the book's organization, just what those themes might be.

In every chapter, Bell and Crow frame the narratives with historical context and other details to give readers a sense of what women's military service looked like at the time. Most include vignettes of women's services from the time frame, such as a paraphrasing of Louisa May Alcott's service at Georgetown Hospital in 1862, or describing how Prudence Wright created her own militia in 1775. Oddly, the women mentioned at the beginning of their respective chapters never appear again. In some cases, this may be because very little is known about these women; in others, such as that of Alcott, it is likely that these are some of the many sources cut for space. While these vignettes set the stage for what comes in each chapter, and are valuable stories in their own right, it is odd to meet a woman only to have her disappear entirely.

This challenge aside, there are moments when the authors provide useful historical information, such as their overview of the 1948 Women's Armed Services Integration Act and the use of Senator Margaret Chase Smith's correspondence to give insights into the legislative battle for women's military service. In contrast, the chapter "Gender Wars" includes information that would be better integrated if the sources of the information had been provided: for example, the editors note that "A perception that gender integration in the military was a creation of social activists who supported passage of the Equal Right Amendment (ERA) at the expense of readiness amplified resistance to women's integration" (p. 214). This claim is followed by a note on Congress's intention about women and selective service, and how that affected states ratifying the ERA. Very little has been written about this period in women's military integration; the lack of sources to support claims such as this seems a large oversight for a work such as this.

Even if the focus is on women's own accounts, the historical context in each chapter is important. Bell and Crow note that they consulted hundreds of sources; they offer a substantial bibliography as well as a list of sources for further reading. All of the sources listed in the bibliography, however, are memoirs and biographies, with an emphasis on autobiographies. Secondary sources appear only in the "Further Reading" list on the last two pages of the book. Jeanne Holm's *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution* (1993), rightly appears here: while not an academic history, Holm's work draws heavily on her nearly four decades of military service and is a cornerstone in readings on women's military service in the twentieth century. A few other important titles appear here as well, but it is striking that several key academic works are entirely absent, including Kara Vuic's work on women nurses in the Vietnam War, Leisa Meyer's analysis of the Women's Army Corps (WAC) in

World War II, Margot Canaday's investigation into WAC lesbian witch hunts in the 1950s, Beth Bailey's study of the creation of the All-Volunteer Services, and even Linda Kerber's *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies*, which includes an important section on the end of the draft in the 1970s and the effect on women.[3] If Bell and Crow were interested in weaving in themes they found in existing scholarship, it is notable that they apparently did not make use of these seminal works in crafting this book.

In one sense, the absence of such scholars is not surprising for this work. Bell and Crow make it clear that their primary goal is to bring together a variety of women's accounts throughout American history. Readers seeking primary sources or a basic background on women's military service will find what they need here, while researchers and educators looking for something deeper will have to keep going. A notable contribution for its breadth and inclusion of so many primary sources, *It's My Country Too* delivers exactly what is promised in its subtitle: women's military stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan.

#### Notes

[1]. Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "The Marines Didn't Think Women Belonged in the Infantry. She's Proving Them Wrong," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/09/us/politics/marines-women-combat-platoon.html>.

[2]. Erin Blakemore, "Female WWII Pilots Can Now Be Buried at Arlington National Cemetery," *Smithsonian.com*, May 28, 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/female-wwii-pilots-can-now-be-buried-arlington-n...>

[3]. Kara Dixon Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Leisa Meyer, *Creating G. I. Jane* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Beth Bailey, *America's Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009); and Linda Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).