



# **SOLDIERS' STORIES** ☆

☆ MILITARY WOMEN IN CINEMA AND TELEVISION SINCE WORLD WAR II

**Yvonne Tasker** ☆

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MILITARY WOMEN IN  
CINEMA AND TELEVISION  
SINCE WORLD WAR II

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In memory of  
Elspeth Snodgrass,  
1964–2003



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## **A PROVOCATIVE PRESENCE**

### Military Women in Visual Culture

Among the advertisements for cosmetics and cigarettes in an issue of the British fan magazine *Picture Show* in 1953 the (young) female reader is addressed directly in this way: “There’s a place for YOU in the W.R.A.F.” (figure 1).<sup>1</sup> A WRAF member, Joan Pears, smiles while the text informs us, “She wanted to stand on her own feet; to meet different people; to travel abroad.” Having left her civilian training as a hairdresser in favor of her new role as a fighter plotter in an operations room, Pears suggests the exciting possibilities of military service for women, a potential migration from feminized labor (hair and beauty) to a position of agency and responsibility (an “important life”). Historians have demonstrated that the place offered to women after the Second World War was a rather contradictory and in many ways limited one; it was nonetheless a place, one officially sanctioned at that, within the male institutions of the postwar military. While I use the term *postwar* conventionally here to denote the period after the Second World War, it is worth noting that this recruitment ad ran just three months after the end of the Korean War, a reminder of the extent to which Western military forces, U.S. forces in particular, would continue to be involved in wars and conflicts in the postwar era. As an exemplary young recruit, Joan Pears works in precisely the kind of clerical and communications role the expansion of which led to increased utilization of (and indeed dependence on) women in the military. The laws and cus-

**As in the case  
of Joan Pears**  
(who wanted to stand  
on her own feet)



**There's a place  
for YOU in the  
W.R.A.F**

Joan Pears was training to become a hairdresser three years ago when she decided to join the Women's Royal Air Force. She was 17 and had never even been on a train alone. She wanted to stand on her own feet; to meet different people; to travel abroad.

"In the Service," says Joan Pears, "I soon decided to become a fighter plotter in an operations room. There are a lot of advantages in being in the W.R.A.F. Your pay is worth more. For example, you don't have to pay for your own meals or your room; you don't have to wear civvies for working in: they are all ready for best, to wear in the evening at a dance or at the weekend.

"I get 30 days leave each year and three free railway warrants which are jolly handy if your home is in Scotland, as mine is.

"It was a big step in my life when I joined but I've never regretted it for a minute. I've made lots of friends, I've seen the world a bit and I'm doing a really worthwhile job."

And you: what about you? Wouldn't you like to know more about this absorbing, important life? Just send the coupon now — it will bring you all you want to know.

.....

● TO: W.R.A.F. (P.S.W. 180), VICTORY HOUSE, LONDON, W.C.2  
Please send booklet about life in the W.R.A.F.

● NAME (Mrs. or Miss) .....

● ADDRESS .....

● Date of Birth .....

Applicants from British Isles only

..... (If ex-W.A.A.F. or ex-W.R.A.F. you may rejoin for 2 or 4 years) .....

1. Recruitment ad for the WRAF as featured in the British movie magazine *Picture Show* (1953).

toms of patriarchal society and the open misogyny in much of the popular culture of the 1950s worked to put women (back) in “their place,” that is, a position of subordination. The figure of the military woman, however, suggests another sort of place, a different ordering of gender and power.

The particular character and location of this ad suggests another set of questions for the reader. How might we make sense of this address to female *cinemagoers*, for instance, and how might that invocation be qualified by the familiar and powerful discourses of domestic femininity operating in the 1950s, or by the postwar films and novels which celebrated the bravery and wartime sacrifices of women? Social class is also clearly pertinent; Joan Pears is a worker rather than a customer at the salon and is thus positioned within the emergent service sector, a woman for whom the economic benefits of military service are centralized. Implicitly the “absorbing, important life” outlined by the recruitment drive is counterpoised to the limits and (feminine) triviality of her role as hair-

dresser. Moreover the example of this young Scottish woman suggests that military service provides an opportunity to actually experience the sort of mobility (social and geographic) delivered as entertainment by the cinema. In an ad nestled in the back pages of a movie magazine, the military woman is here an iconic sign of economic opportunity, movement, and adventure.

This book begins with a relatively straightforward question: How have military women been represented in the cinema and subsequently in television? In answering this question, I aim to provide a comprehensive study of military women in American and British cinema and television from the Second World War to the present. My goal is both to make the military woman a more visible figure within film and television history, and feminist media studies more broadly, and to suggest ways we might understand the formations of gender and power that she thematizes. How have film, television, and popular narratives framed the ambitions and desires of the military woman? At times normalized, at times deviant, often peripheral, and typically controversial when she takes center stage, the military woman is a contradictory icon of modernity and continuity. To make sense of both her iconicity and her contradictory character, I analyze fictional military women through a series of histories: the institution and contested character of women's services in the U.S. and the U.K.; an evolving discourse of duty and opportunity through which recruiters have sought to enlist women (unlike men, in the period I survey here women have not been subject to the draft); feminism as a prominent public discourse of the late 1960s and 1970s; the emergence of a postfeminist media culture in the late 1980s; and the specificity of those film and television genres in which the military woman finds a place.

Thus my account of military women in film and television proceeds from both real-world concerns and representational histories. That the two are complexly bound together is fundamental to my argument. A concern with the military woman's *image*, a desire to exploit and contain her association with modernity recurs in policy debates, recruitment materials, and other forms of official discourse. In popular imagery and narratives too the military woman represents a particular sort of gender trouble. As Thomas Doherty writes with respect to representations of military women during the Second World War, "A military uniform betokened a sanctioned dominance that undermined gender subservience."<sup>2</sup> The peculiarity of this *authorized subversion* of hierarchies is evi-

dent; in many of the examples I explore we find an accompanying underlying anxiety that the military woman might escape such limits, tipping ordered military life into anarchic misrule. Thus I argue, for instance, that gendered discourses of the military woman as potentially masculinized (a recurrent trope) have informed not only fictional representations, but public, military, and policy debates regarding the “proper” utilization of women in the armed forces. It follows that although film and television are my major focus, an understanding of the cinematic and televisual career of the military woman cannot be separated from an exploration of the wider discursive deployment of this figure.

*Soldiers' Stories* builds on feminist scholarship within the humanities, drawing on sources from women's history and politics to feminist media studies. Scholars working in sociology as well as women's, military, and nursing history have done much to map women's role in the Second World War and other conflicts and have explored in detail their ongoing struggles for equality within various military institutions. The analysis of film and television texts presented here speaks to and supplements such social, cultural, and historical work in which an awareness of the contested image of the military woman has long been central. In her analysis of the formation and early years of the Women's Army Corps (WAC), Leisa D. Meyer identifies a “cultural inability to reconcile the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘soldier’” lying at the heart of opposition to the proposed women's corps.<sup>3</sup> This cultural common sense underpins many of the representations explored in this book, and I return to its terms repeatedly. The significance of the dislocation between these terms has to do, of course, with gender; to the extent that soldiering is understood as a masculine business, the female soldier is a troubling category. Conversely, to the extent that the female soldier demonstrates her capability in soldiering, her masculinity (or at least her manliness) is at issue. Across the period considered here popular narratives work to address the anxiety that attaches to the military woman's troublesome gender, whether she is portrayed as manly, masculine, or failing to effectively perform an appropriate femininity.

Representations of military women produced during the Second World War, as well as those generated in more recent times, reveal a preoccupation with the policing of gendered behavior and appearance. Assumptions about, say, women's inability to work together, men's reluctance to take orders from women, and the likelihood that women will respond

hysterically (and on occasion heroically) to danger are played out in the narratives I examine. Physical appearance remains a constant concern, whether narratives emphasize the conventional femininity, even glamour, of military women, showcase their sexy if thereby problematic bodies, or underline their physical strength, capacity for endurance, and capability.

To the extent that popular narratives and imagery insist that women cannot *really* be soldiers, they speak to a hierarchical opposition between combatants (male soldiers) and noncombatants (female soldiers). Such a distinction has proven extremely difficult to pin down. As Meyer's analysis shows, the U.S. Army's contradictory attempts to preserve the distinctiveness of the male soldier as combatant during the Second World War and to treat female soldiers as noncombatants, whatever task each was performing, became increasingly strained. Particular sites of tension were situations in which official policy explicitly distinguished between female civilians (who were not permitted to work in active combat areas) and female soldiers (who were). For the policy to make sense female soldiers must be regarded as either not really soldiers or not really women. Meyer continues, "The differentiation between male soldiers as combatants and 'female soldiers' as noncombatants was also undermined by the general blurring of combat and noncombat areas that began to occur during World War II."<sup>4</sup> With civilians, including women and children, coming under regular, intensive attack during artillery and air raids, the notion that policy might be motivated by a desire to keep military women *as women* out of harm's way seemed increasingly unviable.<sup>5</sup> What, then, was being protected or preserved here? The answer has to do with a pressing desire to shore up cultural formulations of gender which the organization of working, family, and civic life was increasingly calling into question. Such questions remain current, as is evident in attempts to restrict the combat roles of female troops even as their labor remains vital.

In exploring the contradictory characterization of the female soldier as a boundary-crossing figure—not really a woman and not really a soldier—this book addresses a range of issues to do with gender, agency, and female heroism. In this process the heavily mediated image of the military woman forms a productive point of reference. Consider the following chain of events and images. In wartime Britain young women were conscripted into the armed forces, industry, or other service, and other British women were actively involved in Air Raid Precaution duties, fire services, and voluntary assistance of various kinds. In a controversial move, mem-

bers of the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) who worked in anti-aircraft duties on mixed battery units took on a limited but nonetheless significant combat role operating predictors, range finders, searchlights, and at times (albeit unofficially) the guns themselves. Concurrent debates in the U.S. Congress on the advisability and shape of a women's Army corps reflected an awareness of the part that soldiering (quite specifically the right to bear arms in defense of the nation) played in the Constitution. Significantly Meyer suggests that a public fascination with the military work of British women, as represented in popular forums such as *Life* magazine, provided one model of advocacy for developing a military role for American women.<sup>6</sup> The feature from 1941 that accompanies the cover reproduced in figure 2 proclaims, "[British women] have demanded the right to do something, anything, so long as it hurts Hitler. . . . [Their energy] gives American women an idea of what they can do, should the U.S. go to war."<sup>7</sup> The ATS women featured in photo spreads could, it seems, be imagined (both visualized and narrativized) as defending the home, and by extension the nation, in appropriate feminine or maternal terms. That appropriately gendered appearances be kept up was vital for both cultures. Yet the evident propaganda potential of military women—the mobilization of their images—is telling with respect to their subsequent deployment in film and later television fictions.

To further clarify some of the issues at stake in the figuring of the military woman, we can consider a brief yet indicative sequence from the RKO film *Marine Raiders* (1944). In a scene staged at the Marine Corps base in San Diego two experienced soldiers comment, in familiar generic terms, on a batch of youthful male recruits: "Recruits? They still got fuzz on their cheeks!" The two men are posed together in the center of the frame, facing the camera; one comments in concerned tones, "Well, *what* won't they be taking into the Marine Corps next?" As if in wordless answer, a group of female Marines appear from behind the pair, marching toward the camera; they do not so much pass the men as force their way through. These drilling women keep resolutely in formation, and the sound of their marching feet loudly announces their precision and presence, in contrast to the young civilian men we have just seen. And yet the impression is one of disorder as well as order, the women dividing the two men, literally disrupting the frame as they come toward us, brushing past the camera (figure 3). Our two male Marines are taken quite by surprise; one pushes



2. *Life* magazine (August 1941) circulates the image of British military women for American audiences.

his cap back on his head; the other, doffing his cap in a gentlemanly fashion, comments wryly after the women have passed, “We’ve been outmaneuvered.”

This short sequence nicely captures the sense in which the military woman was, and indeed remains, a disruptive, even startling presence in popular representations. To introduce another set of themes explored in this book, I’ll highlight three aspects of this sequence. First, it indicates how often the disruption associated with military women is expressed in comic or whimsical terms. Indeed it exemplifies the “battle of the sexes” format that would become perhaps the established frame for representing military women in the postwar period. Given the cultural uncertainty associated with the figure of the military woman in the U.K. and the U.S., it is perhaps not surprising that comedy emerges as an important generic site for her representation. It is not simply that she is



3. In *Marine Raiders* (1944) military women are pictured disrupting the frame and the expectations of male Marines.

a source of amusement by definition, although this is undoubtedly the case in some popular images and narratives. Rather comedy allows the potential staging of female unruliness (whether assuming authority over men or a cruder sexual freedom) in a rule-bound situation. Second, the appearance of this group of military women is framed primarily in terms of their *impact on military men*, an emphasis that will be repeatedly employed in the years that followed. The musicals I explore in chapter 3, for instance, juxtapose the confidence and dexterity of military women with male protagonists whose masculinity is in some way compromised. An implicit (or explicit) suggestion that the two are related—that the military woman has disarmed or unmanned her male counterpart—is a recurrent theme. Third, the Marine's use of the pronoun *what* rather than *who* is indicative of military women's boundary-crossing status; military women are transformed into "things" rather than recognized as citizen-soldiers. Defined in negative terms, as not (white) men, they are human perhaps, but neither comfortably recognizable nor welcome. While the youthful men glimpsed in this sequence (also referred to as *what*) will no doubt be drilled into shape (cinemagoers are familiar with that story, after all), military women represent a rather different sort of problem—one that evidently has to do with gender. That is, drilling female recruits into shape

raises the disconcerting specter of female masculinity, of an eradication of difference, and of men “outmaneuvered” by marching women.

In making sense of the contradictory cultural formulation of the military woman, I theorize two recurrent tropes: the military woman as *auxiliary* and as a *provocative presence*. Both figures work to foreground aspects of the gendered anxiety with which this study is concerned.

The novel visibility of the military woman as citizen-soldier in wartime is premised on a quite specific understanding of her role as temporary and as an auxiliary. Peripheral but visible, striking and at times even glamorous in her uniform, the military woman is an important iconic figure in representations of the Second World War. Her involvement signals the “total war” which the conflict was frequently described as, an allusion both to the unprecedented (in scale at least) bombing of civilian targets and the scale of mobilization. Typically constructed in terms of youth and modernity, she functions as a marker—on occasion quite explicitly—of the role that women might play in public life. In the British context the extent to which women’s new wartime role signaled a change in their status is nicely summed up in the figure of the mobile woman. As Antonia Lant explains, “‘Mobile’ and ‘immobile’ were Ministry of Labour classifications designating women who could either be moved to work anywhere in the country (mobile) or who had to work locally because they had dependents or were married (immobile).”<sup>8</sup> The military woman is thus a figure of social mobility; functioning independently, she is associated with traditionally masculine activities such as traveling, driving, or working with machinery. Alongside her literal mobility she demonstrates an ability to traverse social categories. In films of and about this period the boundary crossing of these military women is not only explained by national emergency, but mediated through comedy or by an emphasis on military women as nurturing nurses, somehow distant from the business of war (again, somehow not *really* soldiers).

In film and television fictions military women serve as auxiliaries in a different sense, typically playing supporting rather than leading roles. Their auxiliary status is more than a metaphor, although it also clearly works on this level. The First World War had seen the establishment of women’s services, conceived as auxiliary forces, not required in peacetime

and without the medical and other benefits associated with male military service. By the end of the Second World War, women's services were no longer defined as fundamentally auxiliary either in the U.K. or the U.S., though they remained more vulnerable than the men to job cuts. Yet contemporary popular culture and media imagery continue to reiterate the lack of fit between *woman* and *soldier*, whether in narratives that emphasize women's vulnerability to sexual violence, in those that underline their isolation within a hostile (male or masculine) institution, or even, or perhaps especially, in media coverage that continues to express surprise at and fetishistic interest in military women. Thus despite the significant extension of peacekeeping and combat roles for women in both the British and the American military, the debates played out since at least the Second World War remain resonant today. The high visibility of contemporary military women has not swept away the intensity of that cultural common sense which tells us that women are not *really* soldiers.

Consider, for instance, an Army recruitment spot that aired on British television in 1998. The spot deploys a handheld camera and eerie music in a style derived in equal parts from horror cinema and photojournalism. We are led through a devastated home in which a raped woman fearfully clutches her small child. The immediate context is the British involvement in Bosnia and the developing situation in Kosovo which led to UN action the following year, specifically media attention to mass rapes during the Bosnia war of 1992–95. The text informs us, "The last thing she wants to see is more soldiers," then adds, "But not all soldiers are men." As the camera closes in on the woman's fearful face, another woman speaks the comforting words, "It's over now. You're all right" (figure 4). The military woman isn't seen at all in this spot, but is implicitly contrasted to both military men (who pose a potential threat) and victimized civilian women. Here the female soldier's seeming difference is exploited, both to boost recruitment and to bolster the desired perception of the British military as a peacekeeping force.

The figure of the auxiliary contains the military woman by emphasizing her supporting and ultimately subservient role. The second term I make reference to in this study, the military woman as *provocative presence*, has a different set of valences. I take the phrase from an account, written under a pseudonym, of a military woman's time as a West Point cadet. She writes that she and her female peers "worked so hard not to be



4. “But not all soldiers are men”: this recruitment ad for the British Army suggests that military women can supplement the violent military masculinity experienced by a rape victim.

provocative in any way.”<sup>9</sup> Her observation demonstrates an awareness of the troubling character of the female presence within institutions which until recently had been all-male and which remained defined and organized in terms of military masculinity. While gender trouble features in numerous films from the 1940s and 1950s centering on military women, disruption takes a different form in the film and television culture of a later period, after gender integration and, arguably, after feminism’s initial influence. Here women’s proximity to men continues to produce humor, but increasingly we also see a marked shift toward a suggestion of danger or the potential for violence. Military women are seen as isolated, even besieged; they are routinely cast as victims of rape, harassment, violence, and hostility from male peers. In the context of high-profile scandals (Tailhook, Aberdeen) and political debate on combat exclusions, film and televisual culture frequently features a barely contained disgust at female bodies. Despite the ostensible liberalism of many texts featuring military women, women’s bodies seem to serve as a recurrent sign of provocation. Rape and sexual assault as well as deception and betrayal function as central narrative terms. Where military women *are* figured as credible soldiers they are almost invariably mannish or masculine, effectively de-emphasizing their (potentially provocative) femaleness.

These images take us a long way from my starting point, the WRAF’s

recruitment strategy of comforting inclusion in the mid-1950s. It is important to underline that the military woman in that image does not inherently figure as disruption and misrule. More complexly, the military woman is both conformist and challenging. In film and television narratives she signals transgression (in stepping outside the bounds of femininity) and conformity (in her desire to belong to a conservative, military community) in equal measure. It is this contradiction that allows *M\*A\*S\*H's* Maj. Margaret Houlihan simultaneously to be ridiculed for an excessive sexuality (her nickname is “Hot Lips”) and to represent the ultimate in military conformity against which the show’s male doctors rebel.

Formulations of the military woman as both auxiliary and a provocative presence help us make sense of her place in popular film and television genres. Those narratives featuring military women may portray them in a male-dominated and highly regulated hierarchy, yet their location is also quite distinctive in generic terms. When Lawrence H. Suid writes that “the typical heroine in a Hollywood military movie is submissive, long-suffering and long-waiting, a woman who satisfies her man’s desires and provides loving care and relaxation from the true excitement of combat,” he does not distinguish between military and civilian women.<sup>10</sup> Military women do love and wait in many of the narratives explored here, but their significance as a sign of modernity and agency, whether welcomed or troubling, also repays our attention. The heroine of the film *Flight Nurse* (1954), for instance, is both loving and waiting in line with Suid’s dictum. Yet she is also the protagonist, and the majority of the film is devoted to scenes of her working; she ultimately chooses her military identity over civilian life and marriage. (That she has to choose is not, of course, without significance, as I discuss in chapter 2.) If accounts such as Suid’s suggest that the specificity of military women is insignificant, they also imply that female characters involve an unwarranted, and even inappropriate, intrusion in generic terms.<sup>11</sup> Thus the purity of the combat film is compromised by the attempt to integrate female characters, whether civilian or military, and by the combat-romance hybrid films considered in chapter 1 of this book or the women’s picture variants explored in chapter 2.<sup>12</sup>

In this context it is perhaps not surprising that the process of mapping representations of military women has led me to such diverse genres and subgenres as the musical, the melodrama, the legal drama, and boot camp films. Embodying a categorical contradiction, the military woman promotes generic hybridity. Investigating these images reveals the *trans-*

*generic* articulation of the military woman as a figure of agency, modernity, and anxiety.

#### FEMINISM, SOLDIERING, AND CITIZENSHIP

As a provocative presence the military woman has an evident, though far from straightforward, relevance for feminism. Contemporary debates relating to military service foreground women's access to professional opportunities and advancement, opportunities from which, it can be argued, there is no reason beyond custom and practice to exclude women. Popular imagery, however, retains a fascination with the exotic, even erotic associations of the armed military woman; she is a figure of fantasy and anxiety, a subject of comment rather than a naturalized or normalized cultural presence. Cynthia Enloe, whose pathbreaking work on women and militarization provides an important reference point for this study, speculates whether "the very inclination to dwell on women as soldiers is a reflection of our own militarized imagination."<sup>13</sup> Her remarks contextualize the celebratory images of military women frequently deployed in news media. In essence Enloe cautions us to be aware of just how compelling mediated images of military women can be.

During the Second World War the governments of both Britain and the U.S. overcame initial doubts and open expressions of hostility about the need for women's involvement in the war effort on any scale; ultimately they were to channel significant energies toward the goal of recruiting young women into military service, as well as other nontraditional forms of work such as industry and agriculture. In the process the military woman emerged as a sign of modernity, both compelling and troubling. "THIS IS MY WAR TOO!" proclaims a recruiting poster for the U.S. Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in 1943 (figure 5).<sup>14</sup> The patriotic imagery and confident claim of shared ownership speak to the connections drawn between the military woman's service and her status as citizen. As men and women were called on to work for the war, questions about the nature of democracy and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship were also foregrounded. As Richard Crockatt writes, "Democratic citizenship in war is a heightened form of the identification which citizens in democracies are invited to make with their national communities in the normal course of events."<sup>15</sup> Such intense forms of national identification serve, if anything, to underscore the inequalities of class, race, and gender that structured the democracies of Britain (an imperial



5. “This is my war too”: both patriotic endeavor and gender inclusion are central to this recruitment poster from 1943.

power) and the U.S. in the war period. An insistent question emerges in wartime political and cultural discourse as to whether, or when, Britain and the U.S. would fully bestow citizenship on all its subjects.

The Second World War has been popularly regarded as a watershed in both British and American social history; indeed it is a commonplace to assert that this particular war changed women’s place in society irrevocably and in a manner different from other wars.<sup>16</sup> However, as Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson argue, it pays to be cautious in our approach to history. “The war,” they write, “can be seen as both a catalyst for changes already in the making and an incitement to energies directed towards preserving traditional gender differences.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as Penny Summerfield makes clear, much depends on precisely *which* women are referred to in such formulations.<sup>18</sup> As I show in chapter 1, both wartime British cinema and American films about Britain concerned themselves with the inequities of a class system regarded as well past its expiration

date. An expectation that the postwar world would be more equitable was increasingly apparent in British popular culture toward the end of the war. Yet for women, and for racial minorities and colonial subjects of both sexes, democracy and citizenship are complex questions.

Anne Phillips writes that, in Western democracies, “the conventional assumption of a non-gendered, abstract citizenship” operates “to centre the male.”<sup>19</sup> The possibility that the status of (predominantly white) women in British and American society might also change forms an explicit element of wartime political and cultural discourse relating to military women; whether expressed in policy, cartoons, comedy, or other forms of the era’s popular culture, the modernity of the military woman is clearly troubling. In this context Lant points to the changed value of women’s work in wartime Britain such that women “now had to be figured as part of the nation’s political body.”<sup>20</sup> Lant’s project of mapping the shifting construction of women in wartime British cinema takes on the implicit, subtle, and even unconscious ways in which popular culture and official discourse of the period constituted women’s military service (and indeed women’s war work more generally) as necessary, virtuous, patriotic, temporary, but *troubling* nonetheless. Let me be clear here: though women’s military service was evidently culturally troubling, I do not argue in this book that it is inherently transgressive or subversive. Though alive to the military woman’s deployment as a sign of modernity, we should not romanticize or simply celebrate her. It is clear that to a large extent a place appears for military women as and when their labor is required. In our current historical context of open-ended war and ongoing military interventions, that labor has been integral to American assertions of military authority.

From her perspective as a military woman, Billie Mitchell (a pseudonym) writes, “Feminists are right to be bewildered and even ambivalent about military women. On the one hand, military women are fighting the good fight for equality. On the other, they have been co-opted into accepting not only a male standard of success but one that professionalizes violence, has been responsible for the misery and death of women and children across all time and space, and glamorizes violent and demeaning sexual imagery as symbols of both victory and death. Feminists have every right to ask military women, ‘Are you for us or against us?’”<sup>21</sup> More recently Enloe urges us to question any easy equation between military service and citizenship. Across a variety of national and cultural contexts,

she writes, “yoking citizenship to military service has been a deliberate political enterprise.”<sup>22</sup> The status and benefits given to veterans in the U.S. and the withholding of those benefits from female auxiliaries underline the civic valorization of military service. Feminist historians have produced fascinating work on the development, contested character, and issues faced by the women’s services, including the policing of class, race, and sexuality, and by military women within the gender-integrated military that followed the disestablishment of the WAC in 1978. This study asks a different set of questions concerning the ways an analysis of visual culture might complement or contradict that history.

*Soldiers’ Stories* pursues a telling trajectory across genres and historical periods with respect to the representation of military women. The cultural anxieties, romantic narratives, and endorsement of a vital but temporary military service during the Second World War is explored primarily in part 1. Part 2 focuses on musicals and comedies of the Second World War and the postwar period, underlining the framing of the cinematic (and televisual) military woman in terms of a series of comic variations on the “battle of the sexes,” from Esther Williams as a raucous member of the WAVES in *Skirts Ahoy!* (1952) to Sgt. Joan Hogan as Bilko’s love interest and nemesis in *The Phil Silvers Show* (1955–59). This section of the book also analyzes voyeuristic sex comedies, the long-running CBS series *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972–83), and the feminist-informed (albeit somewhat superficially) articulation of the military woman in the film *Private Benjamin* (1980). Part 3 points to the gradual reworking of comic and dramatic narratives in recent decades, a reworking marked by a turn to trauma against the cultural context of postfeminism. Here I engage with texts clearly informed by more recent debates concerning military women’s role in combat and dealing with the impact of a variety of scandals relating to sexual harassment. I show how film and television fictions from the late 1980s onward foreground sexual violence against military women, as well as detail their personal and professional isolation.

Popular narratives of this period see the development of a figure I characterize as an *exemplary military woman*. We encounter this figure in various contexts; her skills and professionalism may mark her as exceptional (and at times as not *really* a woman), but she is rarely portrayed in terms of the comradeship or teamwork that characterizes male military

representations. In mapping this discursive shift toward the pessimism of contemporary narratives, evident even in those texts that in many ways seek to celebrate the military woman, *Soldiers' Stories* engages with widely circulating, popular, and political discourses of postfeminism. In constituting military women as exemplary but lonely and subject to sexual violence, many recent narratives speak to the wider issues facing women working in male-dominated institutions. That the masculinity and misogyny of military culture is in many ways officially sanctioned renders the incorporation of military women into that culture, and the narratives that represent or valorize it, a particularly acute site of contest over gender and power.

