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Forgotten Warriors: A History of Women on the Front Line

By Sarah Percy

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Reviewed by Richard Gehrman, University of Southern Queensland

Many women fight in contemporary wars but Sarah Percy argues in *Forgotten Warriors* that this is not a new politically correct innovation. It is a common public perception that all soldiers are involved in fighting and killing, but the vast majority of male soldiers never undertake these roles. Once this divide is understood and misperceptions of all soldiers undertaking direct combat all the time is corrected we get a clearer understanding of the role of female warriors.

Forgotten Warriors: A History of Women on the Front Line covers three distinct spheres.

- Part One assesses women involved in pre-twentieth century combat, with cogent examples demonstrating that military women were not an anomaly but typified the everyday human experience.
- Part Two provides case studies of the role of women in the world wars, explaining how restrictions were imposed upon women and redefined their traditional role as soldiers.
- Part Three narrates the return of contemporary women to the battlefield—while they never fully left the battlefield, their contribution was marginalised.

Percy explores the need to understand the idea of the battlefield and the rear lines. These concepts were not valid in the more fluid battle space before World War I and are less valid now, representing 'twentieth century industrial war, fought between states and usually far away from home' (p.xvii). Percy's explanations of the shift in women's roles in fighting from being openly acknowledged to being hidden is a key part of this book.

Her account is global in focus, with illustrations of female command in case studies of the Celtic Queen Boudicca, Joan of France and Angolan Queen Njinga. Telling illustrations affirm the place of women as soldiers, both past and present. One is the military service of American Civil War soldier Jeannie Rodgers (aka Albert Cashier), including the fact that her female identity remained hidden until her hospitalisation in 1911. A government unable to understand this actually threatened her with loss of pension, a situation resolved after fellow (male) veterans rallied to support her rights.

A strength of each part of the book is that Percy notes commonalities that interconnect, making chapters more

than a historical chronicle. Thus siege warfare is total war for all women and men alike, and despite its historical nature, this combat interaction bears a startling resemblance to the role of World War II British anti-aircraft battery soldiers described in Chapter 8.

Percy's engagement with such wider scholarly-led debates in military history make her work applicable to university scholars as well as school teachers and their students. Percy emphasises that women have always been soldiers but, as women expanded to break other barriers during the nineteenth century, patriarchal restrictions were raised against women having a military role.

A critical point for readers to understand is that women in combat were not exceptional, just like men in combat: some were brave and others cowards. Narratives presenting women in combat as exceptional deny the reality of females as ordinary soldiers being the equals of ordinary male soldiers.

This book has utility in the classroom context, with an introduction chapter outlining key components of Percy's arguments about the role of women in combat in an easily accessible form that is then explained in detail in her thoughtful context chapters.

Forgotten Warriors is a most readable book when read as a whole, but any chapters from part two when read in conjunction with the introduction undoubtedly constitute a valuable classroom aid for History teachers covering either world war. Using the book this way would enrich discussion of the issue of gender in war, and how this has been marginalised in the significant conflicts of the twentieth century.