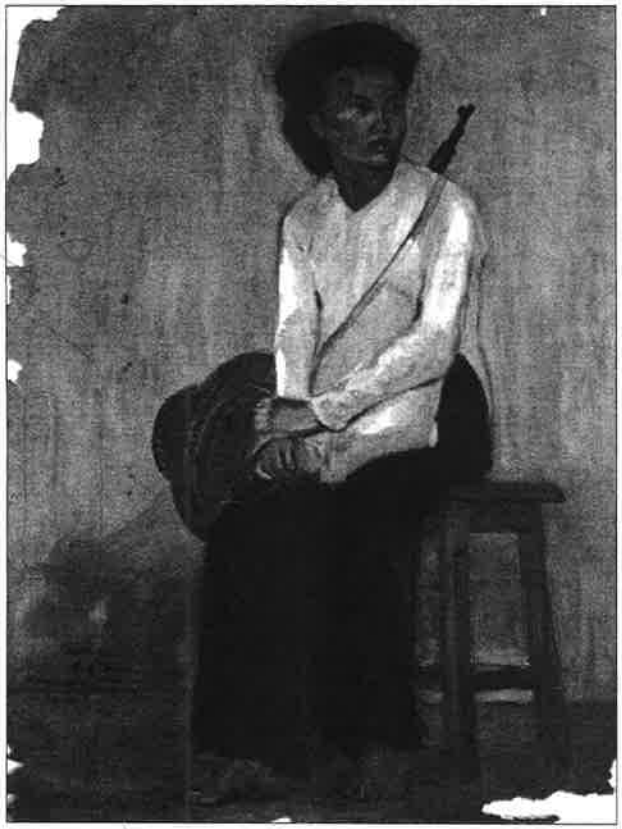

Militiawoman, painting by Nguyen Ngoc Tuan, 1974.

Even the Women Must Fight

Memories of War from North Vietnam

Karen Gottschang Turner
with Phan Thanh Hao

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
New York • Chichester • Weinheim • Brisbane • Singapore • Toronto

CHAPTER SEVEN

Only Women: Maternal Soldiers

> The armed forces may get nervous when nurses start telling their stories because they reveal so much about the nature of war itself.
>
> Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?* 1983.

> When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen. Even if she had to rage across all China, a swordswoman got even with anybody who hurt her family. Perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound.
>
> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood among Ghosts,* 1975.

THE WAR TURNED CONVENTIONAL HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS INSIDE OUT. Women soldiers called on domestic imagery to describe their wartime duties, and longed without any pretense to marry and have children when it was all over. At the same time, women expressed vengeful threats and handled lethal weapons with competence. Vietnamese male soldiers knew full well that the very same women who comforted the wounded and dying were also capable of handling an AK-47. Moreover, women who survived the tests that war imposes on human beings gained a certain unshakable confidence. "Nothing will ever frighten me again," remarked a woman who headed a medical clinic at the front for ten years.

In the jungles, the tunnels, the clinics, when Vietnamese women turned their gaze toward their men, they saw not powerful patriarchal figures but comrades trying to survive with dignity and sometimes losing the struggle. For example, the writer Le Minh Khue, who served as an engineer and journalist on the Trail, remembers that caring for wounded and dying men was part of daily life: "After I held in my arms officers who had once been stern and authoritarian, hearing them cry for their mothers as they died, I no longer feared them."

Vietnamese society did not erase conventional notions of male–female relations during the war, but buried them temporarily. It is not surprising, as

traditional boundaries between men and women's work dissolved at the front, that some men would express ambivalence about women in war, by trivializing them as aesthetic objects in an otherwise bleak landscape, by downplaying their competence, or by reminding them that they would not in the end be judged as warriors but as wives and mothers. In general, the men and women who worked closely together in the lower ranks expressed mutual respect. It was the outsiders, the higher ups from the rear, the reporters and writers living the war vicariously, who didn't understand the bonds that developed among comrades-in-arms. But not always.

❖ ❖ ❖

"BE CAREFUL OR YOU'LL DESTROY YOUR SEX," male soldiers yelled at female volunteers pushing pack bicycles up a steep trail, according to one observer.[1] Other men expressed their worries more circumspectly. An engineer on the Trail in 1969 took account of the effect of poor conditions on women's health:

> Humidity was such that everyone's clothing was damp all year round. Drinkable water had to be taken from deep ravines. At our lunar New Year's festival, there wasn't a single fresh vegetable, no meat or fish. It was a breeding ground for malaria.
>
> Uniforms wore out quickly and our soldiers had to dry their clothes at night over bonfires in order not to go round only in knickers the next day. It was much harder for the women . . . the higher command decided to move the sick and weak to another place where the climate and conditions were less rigorous, but most of the women protested. Only after much persuasion could I talk them into obeying the order.
>
> To a girl who had passed her thirtieth year of age, I said: "We are in wartime. The Party knows your high devotion but also cares about your future. You must return to the rear, get married and have a family of your own."[2]

Other men overlooked the hardships for women and rhapsodized instead about the ways that women enhanced the aesthetic quality of the exotic jungles. A high-ranking officer on an inspection tour of the Trail described a sight that seems incongruous in light of what other men and women themselves reported about actual conditions in the jungles:

"As we reached the peak of the mountain, a very poetic sight appeared beneath us. White clouds drifted past in the middle of the mountain slope. On the branches of trees, the girls in the Young Volunteer forces had hung their colorful garments to dry. These would move when a strong wind blew, making them appear like the blossoms of flowers on the mountain slopes. The girls were singing as they cut trees, quarried rocks, and repaired the road."

He lamented his lack of poetic ability, but nonetheless composed a poem to be included in his memoir, as "a small tribute to the services of those innumerable silent heroes and heroines:"

> Pink brassieres hanging on the trees
> Frail heels trod everywhere in the Truong Son Forest,
> Their songs resonate across the mountains,
> Determined to get the trucks to the blood-filled south.

Ironically, however, the poetic officer is brought down to earth by a veteran volunteer who reminds him that there are real problems, with latrines, for example, that must be attended to at once.[3]

❖ ❖ ❖

ONE WAY TO GET AT THE HEART of some of the ambivalence about women in combat that surfaces in the Vietnamese writings from the war is to examine how women medical practitioners talk about war and how others viewed them. It is the female nurse or doctor who operates within an ambiguous space, between the domestic and military arenas, who is expected to render the kind of unselfish care mothers give naturally, yet perform efficiently amidst a world of carnage and violence believed to be men's unique province. Women in their role as caretakers witness up close the blood, gore, and indignity—and the costs—of war.

On both sides during the American War, nurses and doctors faced the hard fact that the war was fought by the young. Lynda Van Devanter, an American nurse who worked in an evacuation hospital in Pleiku from June 1969 to June 1970, rails against a war machine that allows boys to be mangled beyond repair: "We were just tired and lonely and sick to death of trying to fix the mutilated bodies of young boys."[4] Vietnamese women, too, expressed their deepest sadness for the young boys and girls who died without knowing love or who went home to languish in government recuperation centers because their families couldn't care for them.

Not all female medical personnel remained in safe base hospitals at the rear, where a strict boundary between the nurturer and the fighter could be preserved. Some American nurses traveled with evacuation teams into the field. In base hospitals they worked their medical miracles amidst danger from incoming fire and guerrilla attacks, all too often hampered by inadequate equipment. Vietnamese medical workers made do with far worse conditions, for

A jungle hospital. (*Courtesy of Joiner Archives*)

they moved with the front, transporting their wounded to temporary safe havens, operating only with the equipment they could carry as they ran from the bombs.

A Vietnamese doctor who worked near the battlefields in the South for ten years, from 1965 through 1975, remembers those days. Now, like many prominent patriots, Kim Cuc holds a high position, Director of the International Office and member of the Presidium in the Vietnam Women's Union. When I first met her in 1996, I noticed at once her devotion to her mission to raise living and working standards for all Vietnamese women. At the end of a long interview conducted in English, which she is learning "on the side," I had an inkling of how well her moral courage and sheer determination, evident even in peacetime, must have served her during the war. By her account, family history and a deeply ingrained patriotism contributed to her will to survive and carry out her work. Madame Cuc's matter-of-fact account of giving birth in the jungle and then having to run from a shower of bombs demonstrates yet again that women themselves often perceived no hard and fast distinction between regeneration and death in this war.

> I was born into a family of patriots. My father and uncles were active in the French wars. It wasn't Vietnamese heroes like Lady Trieu or the Trung sisters who inspired me so much as the Russian heroines,

Author with Madame Kim Cuc, Hanoi Women's Union, 1996.

like Alexandra Kollontai. And I liked to read about Soviet women pilots and soldiers who fought during World War II because they were modern heroines.

When I finished secondary school, I wanted to be a photographer, but my father told me to become a doctor and so I entered Hanoi Medical College to become a pediatrician—because I loved him. I graduated in 1965, and when Ho Chi Minh's appeal came, I decided to volunteer my services. I went to Quang Nam Da Nang, the most terrible area of the fighting. We traveled for three months on foot, carrying our supplies. For the first five days, I felt I couldn't go on. I was so tired and I couldn't eat anything. But I had to march at the end of the group, because I was a doctor and could help anyone who got sick and fell behind. I was ashamed to go back because my parents were so proud of me. After the seventh day my spirits came back.

After 1968, the war became more fierce because there were more helicopters that could travel anywhere and spot people. We had to disguise the hospital. Living in the jungle for ten years, I ran the hospital almost alone because my nurses had to go out to forage for supplies. Some of them left and never returned and I had no way of knowing what had happened to them. I had to take on any duty that

came up. I was the chief of the hospital and there were fifty women and seven men who worked for me.

She said over and over again how lucky she was to have survived, as she ran from explosions so close that she had to touch herself from time to time to make sure she was intact. The war was so near that she lived with violence day and night; often she could hear American soldiers shouting at each other.

Kim Cuc was twenty-three and married when she went to the front. In 1969 she thought the war would end, and she and her husband decided to have a child, although her husband, a soldier, had to leave for another front.

In the jungle, the delivery was hard. The day after I gave birth, the hospital was bombed and we all had to leave. I put my son on my back and we ran from the helicopters. If my son cried, I knew we would all be killed. I breastfed him to keep him quiet. If he whimpered, my heart would stop. But he was a miraculously happy baby. When I established another hospital, the amputees looked after him, and befriended him. He played with sticks, empty bottles, anything he could find.

Did she have conflicts with the men in her hospital? Did tension between the men and the women on her staff complicate her work?

I didn't have time to worry about that. The men on the staff supported me in my work. I felt sorry for the male patients and they helped me whenever they could. We had to work as a team. We had no choice.

We moved to keep up with the front and whenever the clinic was bombed. In some ways we felt safest in the jungle, because the Americans were afraid of it. But there were wild animals there that harmed people. When I heard about a man who had been mangled by a bear away from our camp, I had to go out alone where I knew the bear lived to carry him back to the clinic so I could operate on him. I was frightened. Snakes were a problem, especially the green leaf snakes that hide themselves so well.

I had an anatomy book that I used for new situations. Sometimes there was no anesthesia and the men screamed. It was terrible to hear them.

On a typical day, I would get up at 3 A.M. to clean cassava. I would have to soften it in a stream for two or three days, and then boil it. Sometimes I ground it into a powder to mix with water as a cake for patients. We didn't have enough food, and if there was rice, the staff saved it for the sick and ate leaves from the forest. At 4:30, I would finish with the food preparations and if I had nurses, ask them to take water from the stream to wash the patients. I would then examine the patients, treat wounds, wash bandages in the stream, and prepare dinner at 6 P.M. Sometimes when I was too tired I would accidentally burn the food. After dinner I washed the patients, washed our clothes, and wrote the medical records. Every now and then we would have a special dinner, and we would eat the husks of termites that had hatched in the rice. Even today, I hate more than anything to see rice wasted.

Then I got virulent malaria near the end of the war and had to mix quinine with water and inject it into my own body. It was so harsh that I lost my memory and my speech. I couldn't recognize friends or family. I had to do exercises to remember how to talk—it was as if I had frozen up. Then I went to China for special treatment and a rest and I began to get my memory back.

What kept her going? She said she could resist U.S. propaganda to surrender to the other side because of her family heritage, because she dreamed of reunification and curing people in peacetime. And she had lost so many friends that she wanted to be worthy of their sacrifice. What happened when she returned home?

I will never fear anything again after living through this time. In the jungle, I slept in hammocks for ten years and sometimes the bombs would break the strings of the hammock; they were that close. When I got home, all the beds were too hard for me. I worked in Hanoi as a pediatrician and then the Women's Union asked me to join the staff. My son now talks with a Quang Nam Da Nang accent! He is a good young man, not spoiled. He still remembers the years in the jungle, when he would stand by me late at night when I did surgery, encouraging me.

To my final question, she responded: "What did I long for most? To dry my clothes in the sun. It was so hard, in the jungles, wearing wet clothes all the time."

When I told Hao what I had heard from Madame Cuc, she showed me a poem written by one of her closest friends, the late Xuan Quynh. It is called "My Son's Childhood," and some of its lines translate into verse what so many women like Kim Cuc must have felt as they raised their children and fought for their lives.

What do you have for a childhood
That you still smile in the bomb shelter?
There is the morning wind which comes to visit you
There is the full moon which follows you.
The long river, the immense sea, a round pond
The enemy's bomb smoke, the evening star.
At three months you turn your head, at seven you crawl.
You toy with the earth, you play in a bomb shelter.
I long for peace, every day, every month for a year.
For a year, you toddle around the shelter
The sky is blue, but way over there,
The grass is green far away on the ancient tombs
My heart is a pendulum
Pounding in my chest, keeping time for the march.
The small cricket knows how to dig a shelter
The crab doesn't sleep; it, too, fears the bombs.
In the moonlight, even the hare hides
The black clouds hinder the enemy's sight
Flowers and trees join the march
Concealing troops crossing streams, valleys, villages.
My son, trenches crisscross everywhere.
They're as long as the roads you'll someday take.
Our deep shelter is more precious than a house
The gun is close by, the bullets ready
If I must shoot
When you grow up, you'll hold life in your own hands
Whatever I think at present
I note down to remind you of your childhood days.
In the future, when our dreams come true
You will love our history all the more.[5]

This intermingling of maternal sentiment and fighting spirit in women, who could be at once softened by maternal love and toughened by war, was noticed by male observers. In October 1968, a reporter from *Nhan Dan,* the official Party newspaper, wrote about these qualities in a nurse, a member of the volunteer youth corps, whom he chanced upon as he walked down the Trail.

A girl was sitting on a ledge by the stream, her chin and hands resting on her knees. That was Hong, the nurse. She must be watching for fish coming upstream. I asked her what she was doing. She blushed, "Oh, nothing, just girding for a bout of malaria."

I thought she was joking but she looked serious. "It's true, most of the girls have it already, and now it is my turn." "But you're a nurse. I suppose you can scare off the germs." "No, no one is immune to malaria. A doctor died of it the other day—he had just come from Hanoi."

I could see that Hong was really ill: her cheeks were no longer scarlet, but pale, and her lips too. I asked her to take a rest, but she refused, preferring to stay on her feet. She told me, "I don't want to be forced to stay behind, I want to be out on the road tonight. It will be reopened for traffic. I don't want to miss it."

She was a brave girl. One night, as the last convoy had been through, she was on the way to camp with friends and heard three rifle shots, the usual distress signal. Retracing their steps, the girls found a lorry on fire, and the driver and his aide wounded. One man was able to walk and Hong's friend helped him to his feet. The other was wounded in the chest and abdomen and unconscious. Hong dressed his wounds and dragged him to an emergency shelter a short distance away. She didn't want to put him on the ground, which was wet from a recent rain, and so she sat down on a log and cradled the man in her arms.

Then light from the burning lorry attracted a group of jet fighters, and they lit up the area with flares, dropping a pattern of delayed action fragmentation bombs around the vehicle before firing rockets on it. The wounded driver recovered consciousness just for a minute and then died peacefully in her arms. When the rescue team came, they had difficulty taking Hong's arms off the dead body. Like her legs, they had become stiff from staying in the same position for hours.

Curious, I asked her about herself, and whether or not her mother had cried when she left home. "No. Mother only said, 'You've always been a good-for-nothing. It's time you did a grown-up's job.' "[6]

Medical work in wartime brought a chance for advancement for women like Hong, who had no place at home. A written Party résumé carried by a woman who commanded a medical company and was captured by an American infantry unit on February 19, 1970, preserves an ordinary woman's chronicle. Her history traces her family's economic status and her own political and medical education. A native of Binh Dinh Province, she was from a landless farm family: "Her parents and four siblings had enough to eat when they were all healthy enough to work, but half-starved when they could not and sometimes had to hire out their labor to make ends meet." She started giving food to the Viet Cong in her village in 1964, and joined the army in 1965 after having been imprisoned by the ARVN soldiers as a suspected Viet Cong propagandist. She studied nursing in 1966–1967 and then went to a medical school in the Fifth Interzone in 1968. She became an army doctor

A Vietnamese doctor, Dr. Le Thi Phuong, Laos, 1967. (*Courtesy of Colonel Le Trong Tam*)

and platoon leader with only a first-grade education and two years of medical training.[7]

Other women doctors and nurses with inadequate training performed their duties as healers at the most dangerous sites, because they were charged with the first line of medical treatment for the wounded. A diarist, who was often chided by veteran soldiers when he clouded his admiration for the women he met on the Trail with condescending concern, wrote about a nurse he encountered sometime in 1968, just off of Route 9, at a spot that had just been bombed. The fires still smoldered. He and his group came upon a girl running in front of a van, asking them to let it pass because it carried casualties. The diarist's female assistant pulled out her first-aid kit to help the nurse, and the two women worked on the wounded men, hoping that the surgical team was not too far down the road. The diarist took a close look at the nurse:

> She had a pleasant voice. Her face was haggard and her helmet clearly too big and heavy for her delicate head. When she looked up at me, I saw a whitish patch beneath the helmet and laid a hand on her frail shoulder.
>
> "Are you wounded, too?" I asked. She winced and complained that I was hurting her.
>
> "I have a cut near the left temple. If it had been the carotid, I'd have died."
>
> A male comrade who watched the scene interjected brusquely, "Don't you worry none for her. She's very tough and very brave. Didn't you see how she carried a wounded man a long way, getting covered with blood?"[8]

Dr. Phuong (second from right) with her staff. (*Courtesy of Colonel Le Trong Tam*)

❖ ❖ ❖

AS THE WAR WOUND DOWN, as the mythmaking began, some male writers began to tune out women's tough competence and play up their feminine qualities. For example, in 1975, a journalist in search of the romance of the Trail at a now famous army hospital traveled to the heart of the Three Border Region, the "malaria pocket" of Indochina, a place he calls "Honey Bee Mountain." There he describes for his readers the "quiet, the sunshine dancing through the primeval forests, the murmur of birds, the wind caressing the silky hair of the girl soldier who also exuded a lovely scent." He muses, "Was it the perfume from the girl with the moonshaped face? She told me that she had been a student in the ninth form before joining the army. She came from a coastal village in Thanh Hoa Province and had been on the Truong Son route for three years. Even supposing she had carried a bottle of scent in her knapsack, how could it have lasted until now?"

The journalist is greeted by a rather cynical hospital director, a man, who wants to know if there is a hidden agenda behind his visit. "No, far from that.

People say your place is isolated, but you have managed to make it warm and hospitable." With the current staff, including a nurse "shy as a bride," he retraces their history as a mobile medical unit team for the Army Medical Department. The staff tells him that their team, DT13, was set up in 1965 and after 1966 traveled with the army to the hottest spots. In the heat of battle, surgical shock troops went in to give first aid and many were killed. Constantly on the move to find safe places for the wounded armymen, the hospital staff of necessity became construction workers, cutting bamboo and timber for operating rooms, digging earth for air-raid shelters and mess halls—a whole village of one hundred and fifty houses each time they moved. He hears about women's service back then: "The nurses carried the wounded soldiers on their backs to the shelters and all those who could handle a rifle concentrated their fire on the choppers. The doctors and nurses gradually got used to this roving life, but it was never a makeshift life. They not only had to handle dexterously the scalpel and the injection needle, but the spade. But that was not all, for the doctor on this Truong Son range must also know what kind of vegetable to grow and how to catch fish. And he must be ready at any time to donate his blood to critically wounded soldiers."

Gendered conceptions of work did not seem to vex the medical team during the war. But now, in 1975, back at Honey Bee Mountain, as the staff concentrates solely on its medical duties, the sexes seemed quite separate according to the observer, who notes that the women soldier's quarters could be easily identified by their cheerful curtains. Of the caring nurses, he writes that one is "easily given to emotion," because she weeps over a wounded patient. But he couldn't help but see that this sentimental young woman also hunted for food and learned to catch fish—with a needle from her sewing kit—to feed her patient. Her ministrations work, and the wounded soldier walks away, leaving the journalist to think about the moving story of the "sister nurse and the young sick soldier." In this nostalgic piece, women are written out of the story except as nurturers with a possible romantic interest in the sick; the men have taken charge in the hospital and the reportage as well.[9]

Another journalist on the Trail in 1975 interviews a group of former female volunteers, now sappers in the regular army. Dressed in their Sunday best, they revisit their old haunts with him. He marvels at the discrepancy between their current appearance and their past exploits. Of one woman who had joined the volunteers while teaching in Thanh Hoa Province, he writes:

> She is now a platoon leader in an engineering unit. I could not imagine how such a frail girl had stood firm during those long days of the dry season of 1971 to 1972, when on the peak of this mountain American aircraft of all types dropped more than ninety-one thousand demolition bombs, magnetic bombs, incendiary and antipersonnel bombs. She took me to a tree which once held the signal light for the drivers. Still there, I could read clearly the words: "Battlefront of Section 3 of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union."
>
> She pointed to where they had lived—a small upper cave during the rainy season and a lower cave in dry times. A mixture of items that showed a youthful urge for fun, and constant threat of danger, were still there. I asked them about the table tennis table in the cave. "Yes we played," she remembered, "but of course we had to have the dynamite and fuses always at the ready to rush to the bombed places at any moment. At the first bomb explosion, we would send a scout to reconnoiter and we communicated by rifle shots."
>
> "When a bomb hit the road, someone would fire two successive shots and then as many after that as there were bomb craters, so we could send the necessary forces to repair them. Two of us would fill a big bomb crater with a single dynamite charge and run to avoid the

Women at a stream along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. (*Courtesy of Joiner Archives*)

Guns and needles, Ho Chi Minh Trail. (*Courtesy of Joiner Archives*)

next attack. We were scared in the first days, but got used to it. So much so that one of us compared the mending of the road to the mending of a shirt."[10]

It is not unusual to find women describing routinely dangerous work in the vocabulary of the housewife. Cynthia Enloe notes that during World War II in the United States women defense workers likened their jobs welding fighter planes to sewing.[11] A poem from a Vietnamese cache of documents captured in 1966 preserves the voice of a worker in the thick of war, one that celebrates soldiers at the frontline killing the enemy resolutely, while she sews clothing for them:

Sewing machines move quickly.
The forest echoes with the bird's songs.
Our resentment will be changed into silk.
The distant sounds of guns harmonize
With the rhythm of the sewing machines.
We are determined to kill the enemy.[12]

This use of domestic images narrows the gap between the abnormal work that falls to women in war and normal domestic tasks allotted to women in peace.

Men's writings suggest that it wasn't always easy for the men to figure out how to deal with women who could be both tough-minded and feminine. A recent short story from Vietnam yields interesting insights about a Truong Son truck driver's attempts to get the right fix on a female trail guide who guides his truck one dark night as he is pushing on to his destination. The driver is irritable because he knows that the girl's laughter is artificial, aimed at downplaying the true conditions of the road ahead. The female trail guide does her job well, however, "floating" ahead of the truck through the dark path in her white blouse, leading the driver down a secret path, away from the bombed-out road. Yet he tries to diminish her critical role in his own success and survival when he tells her: "Your limbs are as slender as raw silk threads. It seems as if you just left your schoolwork at home only a few days ago. You'll have a tough job building roads and cutting through the mountains. I'll bet at night you're still weeping inside your blankets and calling out to mama, right?"

"You get used to it, brother," she replied, laughing.[13]

❖ ❖ ❖

THE WAR PRODUCED WOMEN who got used to the constant danger and tension, discovered they could do men's work, talked back to superiors, and lost their fear of male authority. How would these women reintegrate into civilian life?

Even the Women's Union worried about that question. *Glorious Daughters of the Revolution,* published by the Vietnamese Women's Union right after the war's end, reassures readers that warrior women ultimately can preserve their feminine virtues. The story of Brigade 609, all young women volunteers, for example, features fearless, hardworking, disciplined women, whose exploits earn them the nickname "Lady Trieu Brigade," after the heroine of old. They willingly accept the hardest tasks, become skilled carpenters and metal forgers—they made their own shovels and hoes—and built a 1,600 kilometer road by moving 40,000 cubic meters of earth and rock. This is how their service is described: "The reputation of the Lady Trieu Brigade was due not only to the courage and resolve of its members, but to other qualities: industry, thrift, integrity, uprightness. These qualities are indispensable if one wants to fight the Americans and build socialism at the same time." Reading between the lines, we learn that the brigade had not always been so well oiled; at first the women balked at wearing rubber-tired sandals and straw hats that interfered with their good looks."

The tract ends with a reassurance that in the end, feminine concerns win out. "Classes are regularly held for the brigade members, at which they acquire a general education and learn sewing and embroidery etc. Brigade 609's idea of a good woman is one who works diligently, fights courageously, shows good morals and is likely to become a good wife and mother."[14]

Leaders, Thanh Hoa Women's Union, 1997.

Here we have the Women's Union, founded on revolutionary principles and devoted to women's emancipation, asserting in a postwar publication that women's ultimate value in society rested in their domestic function. But for many women, life didn't work out as it was supposed to. And so, many women veterans would be caught in a bind at war's end: their unselfish, patriotic, wartime work, undertaken just at the time in their lives when they would have married and settled into family life, in many cases rendered them ineligible to compete for mates, incapable of carrying out their duty to the postwar nation as bearers of future generations of patriotic citizens.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Picking Up the Pieces: Going Home

After every war, someone has to tidy up. Things won't pick themselves up, after all.

Wislawa Szymborska, *The End and the Beginning,* 1993.

Wars have their endings inside families.

Cynthia Enloe, *Women After Wars: Puzzles and Warnings,* 1996.

To marry and have a child, how banal! But to become pregnant without the help of a husband, what an achievement.

Ho Xuan Huong, late eighteenth-century Vietnamese woman poet.

BY THE WAR'S END, nearly every family in Vietnam was in mourning. Three and a half million people died during the decade between 1965 and 1975. Over 300,000 children were orphaned and four million people disabled from the consequences of war. Seven hundred thousand wounded soldiers were brought to the rear via the Ho Chi Minh Trail alone. And the American War was not just a struggle with a foreign aggressor, but a civil war that generated irreparable conflicts within families and the nation itself.

Most women stayed in the field as long as their health held up, for as long as ten years in some cases. News from home could not be counted on and some families knew nothing of the fate of their soldier sons and daughters for years. Vietnam's Missing in Action statistics are staggering: as many as 200,000 men and women were still not accounted for in 1996.[1]

Women left home as teenagers, in their most vulnerable, formative years. They grew up quickly, out of touch with the flow of life at the rear. How did they fare when they returned home? And how did they cope with the inevitable tensions of settling back into civilian society?