Wrongful Appropriation of the Soul

> *In regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible.*
>
> *Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*

One: Complicity

Every time I read another account of sexual assault in the armed forces—most recently, when I read Senator Martha McSally's recent statement that she'd been raped by a senior officer, hadn't reported the assault, and continues to support leaving the prosecution of sexual assault cases in the hands of military commanders—I think of the last thing that poet Audre Lorde ever said to me.

I said goodbye to Audre one night shortly before her son Jonathan and I reported to Naval Officer Candidate School in 1988. I didn't know then that it would be our final conversation: the breast cancer she'd survived a decade earlier had metastasized in her liver, but homeopathic injections prescribed by a doctor in Switzerland had been keeping the tumors under control for four years. Audre was a warrior, and at that time she seemed invincible.

Still, she never wasted time or words. If she spoke,

what she said mattered. One listened with respect, and remembered.

She put her hands on my shoulders and looked directly into my eyes: “Jerri,” she said, “don’t let the Navy steal your soul.”

In the decades that followed, I often wondered if I’d honored my promise or if the culture of sexual harassment and assault in the armed forces had stolen my soul. Like Senator McSally, who commissioned a few months before me, I was sexually assaulted on active duty. Like her, I did not report the assault. And like her—like almost every military woman of our generation, if we’re being honest—I was complicit in a culture that enabled systemic misogyny and abuse.

Two: Assault

Unlike Senator McSally, I was not raped. My assailant was not senior to me. He was a foreign midshipman and I was a lieutenant, three paygrades senior to him.

The midshipman was a foot taller and at least fifty pounds heavier than me. He drank enough at a shipboard dining-in to imagine that I was interested and he was desirable. He followed me to my stateroom, pulled me inside, slid the pocket door shut, and grabbed me in a nonconsensual liplock. I waltzed him around until I could push the door open, and tossed him out so hard that he bounced off the steel bulkhead on the other side of the passageway.

I didn’t report him. In the summer of 1994, the first women to be permanently assigned to American naval combatants

had just been ordered to their ships. I didn’t want my experience to be used as an argument that women didn’t belong at sea. The midshipman, like many of the men who harass and assault military women, was technically proficient and behaved professionally when he was sober. His entire career lay ahead of him, and he had potential to contribute to the defense of his nation and to our alliance.

Most importantly, I didn’t want to tarnish the success of a joint mission with an important ally, or diminish my own contribution to it. Like all good military personnel, I prioritized mission accomplishment over personal inconvenience.

And by the time I was assaulted, I’d been groomed to accept abuse and to remain silent about it.

Three: Grooming

Military culture grooms women in uniform for abuse like a perpetrator of domestic violence grooms a partner for victimization. Military women are too often isolated from each other, desensitized to sexual aggression, encouraged to accept abuse of power as the norm, rewarded for compliance, and then silenced if they dare to object. Commanders would consider those behaviors unacceptable and inexcusable if they occurred in any other criminal offense against another servicemember.

Military culture mixes rewards—camaraderie, a sense of belonging, the right to see oneself as successful and strong—with elements of abuse. The grooming process isn't linear. The techniques of desensitization vary, but they're familiar to anyone knowledgeable about domestic violence and sexual assault.

Grooming often begins in accession training.

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I met my first military sexual predator at Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. Our first eight weeks of training included a class in maneuvering board, a system of solving relative motion problems graphically and mathematically. The instructor, a chief boatswain's mate, made no secret of his contempt for women. We were of no use in his man's Navy; women's sole purpose was gratification of male sexual desire.

Another officer candidate, a prior enlisted woman who'd served as an operations specialist on an oiler, whispered to me in the passageway outside of the classroom that the best way to handle him was not to draw his attention. *Don't ever get caught alone in a classroom or deserted passageway with him,* she said. She didn't need to say *Don't bother reporting him.* He was still an instructor: one needed to know only that to read between the lines. I'd survived a violent sexual assault two years before I joined

the Navy; I was so uncomfortable around that chief that I choked on the final maneuvering board exam and failed it.

The cadre brought me before a board to discuss whether I should repeat just the exam or the entire first eight weeks of training. I claimed that a relapse of bronchitis kept me up all night before the test, and showed them that I could estimate a target angle—a basic maneuvering board skill— using the photo of a destroyer on the wall. They allowed me to retake the exam. A different instructor proctored it; I passed easily.

I assumed that the horny chief was an outlier. Some of the men in my class didn't exactly approve of my presence, but none of them behaved unprofessionally. Listening to women in the know and avoiding the occasional bad apple seemed to be reasonable strategies for sexual assault prevention—which I understood to be my individual, personal responsibility. I didn't realize how many bad apples were in the barrel; that a network of street-savvy, collegial women didn't exist everywhere in the Fleet; or that some men worked hard to prevent women from trusting each other and sharing information.

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Several months

later, I attended the Intelligence Officer Basic Course in Dam Neck, Virginia.
The only other woman in my class of twenty had a girly-girl name and an open,
friendly smile. She spent Friday and Saturday nights at the officers' club at Naval
Air Station Oceana, home to hundreds of Navy fighter pilots.

Our male
classmates told me, *She's always talking
about the pilots who take her out to dinner: where they go, what they eat, and
how much they spend on her. She's just
in the Navy to find a husband. And if
you pal around with her, people will think you're fucking every pilot at Oceana
too. You're a professional, though,
aren't you? You're one of the good ones.*

It didn't take
long to figure out that sailors laud promiscuity among men and loathe it among
women. I learned never to use the phrase "double standard" to describe this
phenomenon; every man who heard it changed the subject to complain about gender
differences in scoring on the physical fitness test.

I wanted the
men I worked with to consider me one of the *good
ones,* even if it meant being judgmental about another woman's love life, isolated
from other women, and often lonely. I stayed cool and distant around the other
woman in my class. She showed even less interest in getting acquainted. I
wonder now what our classmates told her about me.

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In December 1989, I reported to my first duty station at the Antisubmarine Warfare Operations Center (ASWOC) at Lajes, a village on the island of Terceira in the Azores archipelago. I was one of two women naval officers in the command; both of us were young, junior in rank, and single. The command's mission, straight out of *The Hunt for Red October,* was to locate and track Soviet submarines transiting the central Atlantic using P-3C Orion aircraft.

In addition to serving as the station intelligence officer for two years, I was to earn qualifications to be responsible for the safety of the aircraft in flight, and to debrief the missions and report submarine contacts back to intelligence and antisubmarine warfare headquarters commands in Norfolk, Virginia, and Washington, DC. Although 10 USC § 6015 still prohibited women from flying combat aircraft in 1989, the P-3C community had accepted women in support roles for several years and was considered to be less aggressive and hostile toward women than the carrier aviation community.

The first person I met at the ASWOC was a Limited Duty Officer ensign, formerly a senior enlisted man. He shook my hand and asked, "Are you going to be like our last female intel officer, and sleep with the commanding officer of every squadron who comes through?"

By then I'd

learned the value of a snappy comeback. I batted my eyelashes at him and simpered. “Why—I don’t know! Do you think that’s a good idea?” Then I turned away and walked past him as if he didn’t exist.

Later he and some of the other watch officers introduced me to that day’s duty air crew. “I’m Lieutenant N-.,” said a grinning pilot. “the plane commander for Crew Six. Are you like our intel officer? She only sleeps with O-4s and up.”

I shook my head and stomped my foot a couple of times like a Navy instructor who wants students to remember something important for an upcoming test.

“Gentlemen,” I said, “I am not out here to get laid. I’m out here to catch Soviet submarines. When’s the next mission?”

First assignments in the Navy are, as the saying goes, “like drinking from a fire hose.” I told myself that I had no energy for sneaking around and no time to be lonely. And since the men I worked with apparently had the right to police my relationships, I decided that dating and sex were out of the question altogether for the next two years. I earned my qualifications as fast as I could, stood my watches, and learned to write intelligence reports and personnel evaluations. I dated one man, an Air Force logistics officer, in the last few

months of that assignment.

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One of the P-3C crews deployed to Bell's first duty station let her fly the plane for 15 minutes—with the mission commander in the copilot seat, and the vertical autopilot on. Said Bell, "I'd have stayed in that seat the whole mission, if they'd let me."

Women could fly on P-3C missions as long as the crew wasn't expected to drop torpedoes on an enemy submarine. My supervisor in Lajes, the operations

officer, wanted me to fly as often as I could. For my first flight, the detachment officer in charge assigned me to ride with a crew that always read the same excerpt from a fifty-cent book of pornography aloud after they completed the preflight checklist. While the plane commander chanted a graphic sex scene, I tried not to think about the implications of being locked in a flying tin can for the next ten hours with a dozen men who'd just gotten themselves all hot and bothered. I refused to look down, and attempted to make eye contact with every member of the crew. Some wouldn't meet my gaze. Others squirmed and looked away.

One asked quietly afterwards if their reading had bothered me. I smiled and said, "The bodice-rippers I read are hotter than your crew's shitty porn."

I didn't complain. If women wanted respect, we had to act tough and never, ever spoil the guys' fun. The crew's porn ritual, just words, didn't hurt me. Acting tough and depriving bullies of their fun generated a lovely dopamine rush. I refused to think too hard about the effects of accepting bully behavior as the norm.

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On another day, a pilot invited me to the hangar to learn about the squadron duty officers' responsibilities. When I arrived, he and another lieutenant called me into the squadron

duty office and told me to shut the door. On the back of the door, they'd hung a *Penthouse* centerfold of a naked blonde (I am also blonde) sitting in a spread-eagle split. My face was exactly level with her crotch. I could count her short-and-curlies. Suppressed snickers confirmed that the placement had been deliberate.

Looking the poster up and down slowly, I considered the options. If I complained, every man in the command would label me a "bitch" and a "whiner." If I ignored the behavior it might stop—or the aviators might choose to escalate the harassment in hopes of getting a reaction. If I pretended that the prank was no big deal or made a joke of it, I might convince them to think twice about messing with me. I might even win their approval.

I turned to
the smirking lieutenants, shrugged, and pointed my thumb over my shoulder in
the direction of the poster's focal point. "I think she dyes *that*, too."

When I left, I waved cheerily at the centerfold. We had something in common, but for years I didn't want to think about what it might be. Many of the strategies women use to access and retain some of the power men try to exercise over us and over our bodies become maladaptive. Even damaging.

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When Bell commissioned, she had little idea that her career in the Navy would, at times, resemble a gauntlet of sexual advances by superiors, peers, and subordinates. In spite of this, she was able to maintain her faith in the United States, and confidence in her mission.

Over the course of the two-year assignment to Lajes, three of my married colleagues propositioned me. Each time I declined: *Flattered, but not interested.* They accepted the rejections with grace; I had no problems continuing to work with them.

I never told anyone about the propositions. Certainly not the married colleagues' wives, who already suspected me of sleeping with their husbands—or trying to—just because we worked and traveled together.

In a "he said, she said" situation, either the men or their wives might accuse me of having invited the propositions, or accused me of sleeping with a married man—conduct "prejudicial to good order and discipline" and a violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. I told myself that I had too much self-respect to hook up with guys who cheated, and that I deserved better. I allowed myself to feel morally superior to my colleagues, and to pity their wives.

But I never learned to feel comfortable with the old Navy adage about detached service, *What goes on det, stays on det.* Officers are supposed to follow a code of honor and report violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Every time I lied by omission, I felt like I'd ripped off another piece of my integrity and flushed it down the shitter.

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For weeks before the summer antisubmarine warfare conference, held that year in Lajes, the only other single woman officer in the command (the administrative officer) and I endured repeated badgering from the executive officer and my supervisor, the operations officer, about who our "significant others" would be for the Saturday night dining-out event at a

local seafood restaurant. The executive officer wasn't satisfied when we told him we were going stag. Practically licking his lips at the picture of two young women paired with two hot-to-trot pilots, he ordered us both to bring significant others to the dinner.

At the Friday night reception, the admin officer and I cornered the two admirals attending the conference. We explained the situation, and asked them to be our dates for the dining-out. One had to depart for a family emergency, but we picked up the other from the VIP Quarters, stuffed him into the admin officer's little two-cylinder hatchback for the drive out to the town of Praia da Vitoria, and arrived at the restaurant a few minutes late.

We made a grand entrance on the admiral's arm and announced: "XO! OPSO! You ordered us to bring significant others to the dining-out. We're high achievers, so we brought the most *significant* other we could find. Will this one do, gentlemen?"

Everyone laughed but our supervisors, who turned bright red. They left our love lives alone after that.

The master's tools might not have brought down the master's house, but taking a whack with them from the inside and knocking down a little plaster afforded us the illusion of success.

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Bell’s solo campsite on the summit of Serra da Santa Barbara, Azores, July 1990, looking north across the caldera. Her military experience was not unpleasant, but it was, by necessity, more solitary than that of her many male peers.

In the summer of 1990, a married pilot deployed to Lajes heard that I planned to go camping on Serra de Santa Bárbara, the crest of Terceira’s largest extinct volcano. He invited himself to go with me. He insisted that he would join me even after I told him several times that he wasn’t welcome.

I didn’t complain, but my fellow watch officers overheard him and offered to straighten him out if he was scaring me.

I thanked them, but told them I could handle it. *If the pilot gets anywhere near the top of my volcano,* I said, *I’ll just push him off the side of the mountain and watch him die. With pleasure.* I meant it literally.

I went camping alone and kept watch on the one-lane road up the mountain until sunset. Not even a Navy pilot would risk the hairpin turns with no guard rails, the three-thousand-foot plunge to the sea. The pilot never showed. I slept fitfully.

I told my colleagues that I'd managed the situation and enjoyed the campout.

Not all empowerment stories are true. Mine wasn't. But I told it so many times that I began to believe it. *Fake it 'til you make it.*

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A naval flight officer, a lieutenant commander known for harassing women—especially enlisted women—returned to Lajes for a second deployment.

Both the watch officers and the enlisted sonar technicians assured the women in the command that they wouldn't leave any of us alone with him. The sonar techs wouldn't even go behind the sonar equipment racks if I sat at the debriefing table with the lieutenant commander.

During one mission debrief, he put his hand over mine and leered at me. Every enlisted man in the room stopped working to glare at him.

I didn’t smile. His hand, I moved firmly off my body and out of my personal space. Then, with eye contact and a facial expression, I indicated that he’d better not do it again. He shrugged and grinned: *Can’t blame a guy for trying*. I didn’t report him.

The next day, the operations officer—the supervisor who’d teased me about bringing a “significant other” to the dining-out—called me into his office. The sailors had told him about the handsy lieutenant commander. He asked why I hadn’t reported it. He’d already arranged for the squadron’s commanding officer to put the lieutenant commander on the first flight back to Rota. He insisted that he would never tolerate sexual harassment.

I pretended to see no irony in his statement. I considered myself lucky to work with men who were pranksters and occasionally bullies instead of rapists. I wondered what would happen to the women at the antisubmarine warfare operations center in Rota, and what might already have happened to the women in the deployed squadron. I didn’t wonder too long: they weren’t in my chain of command.

I’d completed the qualification process for “handling it.”

Four: Silence

In 1991, the same year I began congratulating myself for being tough enough to handle

military misogyny, Navy helicopter pilot Paula Coughlin reported sexual assault
and misconduct at the naval aviation community's "Tailhook" professional
conference. I admired her courage in speaking up, and saw her as a role model.

The Navy had
one more lesson to teach.

In her essay "Cassandra Among the Creeps," Rebecca Solnit describes concentric rings of silence, through which women who dare to speak up against powerful men descend. Navy women watched Paula Coughlin descend, and we learned.

Almost immediately, most Navy men—even the Naval Investigative Service personnel charged with investigating the allegations—either dismissed Coughlin's story or attempted to discredit it.

Then they began to discredit Coughlin herself. The Navy grounded her and questioned her mental health. Suddenly, everybody knew somebody who'd known her: in ROTC at Old Dominion, at flight school, in the squadron, on the staff. They said she was brash, foul-mouthed, promiscuous (why else would she have gone to Tailhook in the first place?), and a shitty pilot. Claiming that she hadn't earned the honor of being an admiral's aide, those same men reasoned that the job had been given to her at better pilots' expense because the Navy was pushing to integrate more women into naval aviation. That was the first year I heard the term "political correctness."

Speaking up in Coughlin's defense was a one-way ticket down to the next level of silence: bullying and intimidation. *Are you one of those feminazis like Pat Schroeder? It takes a special kind of man to be a Navy pilot—what happened at Tailhook's just the culture in naval aviation. Do you think this*

investigation will actually change anything? Coughlin's career is toast, whether or not she wins her case. And the witch hunt is ruining the careers of good aviators who cost the taxpayers thousands of dollars to train. Would you *ruin a man's career over something like that? It's not like she was raped or anything.*

I disagreed.

Aw, we thought you were one of the good ones, Lieutenant.

Lesson learned: no woman would be awarded the Medal of Honor for jumping on the sexual assault grenade.

Coughlin resigned her commission in the Navy. I decided to stay, took another big gulp of the Kool-Aid, and jumped feet-first down to the bottom of the pit. The need for silence, I internalized as a personal survival strategy. I didn't speak up in support of Coughlin again. Women who challenged military bullies and predators risked criticism, ostracism, lower marks on performance evaluations, or trumped-up misconduct charges that could lead to discharge from the service—even dishonorable discharge. Few senior women were around to serve as role models or mentors; those who would discuss sexual harassment advised us to keep our heads down and pick our battles. We couldn't rely on women who agreed with us in private to stand with us in public. Men were even less likely to offer support.

In 2005, my graduate fiction advisor suggested that I write stories from the perspective of women in uniform. "Military women don't *ever* tell those stories," I replied. "That would just make things worse for every woman still serving." That had been my lived experience, and I believed every word when I said it. I didn't start writing about the Navy for almost another decade.

Five: Barriers

Senator McSally needed years to decide to break her silence about her assault. Many of us do. If you'd asked me when I retired in 2008 if I'd been sexually assaulted on active duty, I'd have said no: I'd handled the incident with the handsy midshipman and moved on. Senator McSally may have thought she'd handled her sexual assault, too.

An admission of complicity in the culture that permits and encourages gender and sexual violence in the armed forces, and the realization that there is no contradiction in being both the victim of abuse and an enabler of it, can take much longer. Responsibility for sexual harassment and assault in the military rests squarely and solely on the shoulders of the perpetrators; staying silent to survive, or to remain employed, in no way equals consent to being assaulted. But men and women who served and are still serving bear the responsibility for tolerating and perpetuating an abusive culture that creates conditions in which sexual assault can occur more frequently, in which victims who come forward are routinely silenced, and in which those who courageously insist on being heard are denied justice.

Complicity costs us a fortune in integrity. Worse, when we fail to recognize and acknowledge the ways in which we individually enable toxicity in the culture, we pass some of the cost on to other victims. Military sexual trauma factors significantly in

depression for many veterans, female and male. It's a risk factor for substance abuse and homelessness. It's almost certainly implicated in the suicide rate of women veterans (250 times the national average for women). Complicity allows the culture of gender and sexual violence in the armed forces to appropriate our souls—or to steal them outright.

Audre Lorde wrote in her final book *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays*: "While we fortify ourselves with visions of the future, we must arm ourselves with accurate perceptions of the barriers between us and that future." Visions of an armed force in which gender and sexual violence is prevented to the extent possible, and properly addressed when it occurs, must begin with accurate perception. This begins with an understanding of how the culture of sexual harassment and sexual assault functions in the armed forces. It's a slippery slope that leads from inappropriate stressors in training, to the acceptance of gender-based harassment and sexual abuse as norms. Military leaders must also develop an accurate perception of how toleration of sexual harassment and assault, and silence about it, have for too long been the price of approval, acceptance, camaraderie, and privilege in the armed forces, especially for women.

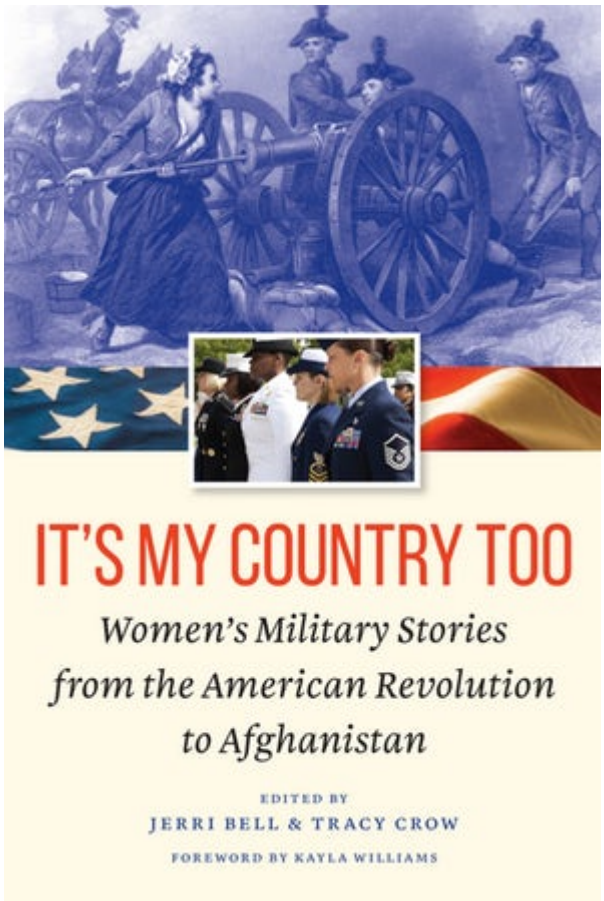
Senator McSally's task force will need to develop accurate perceptions of the systemic barriers to reducing gender and sexual violence in the armed forces. Department of Defense leaders resistant to change and jealous of their authority, and conservative pundits with an antiquated understanding of strength and of sexual violence, will likely attempt to reward the task force for tolerance of the status quo and continued

complicity in the
culture of harassment and assault. Members of the task force, and Senator
McSally, must refuse to allow their integrity to become the price for approval,
acceptance, camaraderie, and privilege. I wish Senator McSally and her task
force all success in tackling the challenges of sexual harassment and assault
in the armed forces, and welcome her, with sadness and regret, to the circle of
those who have finally found the courage to break our silence.

Jerri Bell is the Managing Editor for O-Dark-Thirty, the literary journal of the Veterans Writing Project. She retired from the Navy in 2008; her assignments included antisubmarine warfare in the Azores Islands, sea duty on USS Mount Whitney and HMS Sheffield, and attaché duty at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Russia. She also served in collateral assignments as a Navy Family Advocacy Program Officer, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Program Officer, and sexual assault victim advocate. Her fiction has been published in a variety of journals and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize; her nonfiction has been published in newspapers, including the Washington Post and the Charleston Gazette-Mail; in journals; and on blogs. She and former Marine Tracy Crow are the co-authors of It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan.

Book Review by Eric Chandler:

IT’S MY COUNTRY, TOO



This happened in the 1980’s. Maybe it was after I joined the military or before, when I was thinking about it. In either case, I was sitting in a cabin in New Gloucester, Maine with my Aunt Helen and my cousin, Kim. Somehow, we got into the topic of women in combat. I made some comment that we needed to decide if that’s really what we wanted as a country. My cousin and my aunt both snorted.

I don’t remember the exact words, but my Aunt Helen said something like, “Who the hell is ‘we’?”

It sticks out in my memory like I got slapped. Even as a self-centered, male teenager, I had to admit they had a point.

I’m still trying to remove myself from the center of the universe and imagine what life is like from someone else’s perspective. I read a book during Women’s History Month called

It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan (Potomac Books, 2017). It's filled with stories that address a question my aunt might have asked, "Why should it be so difficult for a woman to serve her country?"

I served alongside women in uniform from 1985 to 2013. In peacetime and in combat. Officers and enlisted. Pilots and ground personnel. Active Duty and Air National Guard. I went to the Air Force Academy not long after women were first admitted there. When I first joined the Air Force, women weren't allowed to fly fighters. I eventually served in units where women were flying in formations with me. I'm married to a retired Air Force veteran and Air Force Academy graduate. Her older sister, also a grad, retired as a major general in the Air Force. I should already have a first-hand appreciation for what strides women have made and the challenges they've faced in military service. But Jerri Bell and Tracy Crow, the editors of this book, gave me a new perspective on where my three decades fit into the larger scheme of things.

It was a new perspective that I needed, for a couple of reasons. For one, my wife had a positive experience in military service. She's tough, but quiet. When I push her on the topic, to find some hidden story of struggle or discrimination or mistreatment, she has almost nothing bad to say. Frankly, she seems like an exception. Secondly, I served in the US Air Force. My perspective is limited to my branch of service.

In *It's My Country Too*, there are stories about women in all the branches of military service, even disguised as men so they could fight. There's even a story about a woman who served in the US Lighthouse Service. The breadth and depth of the stories the editors included is remarkable. There are uplifting stories and ones that are ugly. Another thing that makes these stories compelling is that they are first-person accounts. There's a lot of background provided by the editors,

but the stories come from the women themselves. This is a great accomplishment, because, as it says in the book regarding Korean War nurses (but the sentiment is true for women's stories in general), "None published memoirs."

The editors mention Louisa May Alcott who wrote *Hospital Sketches* about her time as a civil war nurse. She served under a woman at the Union Hotel Hospital named Hannah Chandler Ropes, my relative. Ropes is buried in the town where my parents live in Maine, the same town where my aunt schooled me about what "we" means. Her writings were published in *Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes* (The University of Tennessee Press, 1980) edited by John R. Brumgardt. Bell and Crow inspired me to pull this book down off my shelf for another look. I was disappointed to see that my copy, that I read years ago, didn't have a single dog-eared page. Say what you will about desecrating physical books, but mangled pages are how I leave breadcrumbs. I read it again.

Ropes served as a volunteer nurse in that hospital in Georgetown. She showed up there on June 25, 1862, the day that the Battle of the Seven Days started. Her nephew Charles Peleg Chandler died fighting at Glendale during that battle on June 30, 1862, the same week she arrived. In a July letter, she says she's worried about both Charles P. and Charles Lyon Chandler, his cousin. I've been researching Charles P. and Charles L. Discovering that their aunt wrote a letter wondering whether her nephews were okay was like getting an electric shock. I have Bell and Crow to thank for helping me learn what I should've known already. In a strange convergence, it was Charles P. who inadvertently motivated Ropes to become a nurse when, two years before, he sent her a book about nursing written by Florence Nightingale. Sadly, Ropes and her two nephews would never see the end of the war.

At one point as the head matron of the hospital, Ropes was so horrified at the mistreatment of the enlisted men who were patients, she complained to the head surgeon. Getting nowhere,

she went in person directly to the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. Once Stanton verified what my relative said was true, he threw both the head steward and the head surgeon into prison. Things improved at the hospital. I was a squadron commander once, so it stings a little to read how she went around the chain of command. But she cared more about the treatment of the patients than how she was perceived. She was also a single mother after being abandoned by her husband in the 1840's. In the 1850's she moved to Kansas as part of the freesoil, anti-slavery movement to help make it a free state, but that's another story. The point is that she was well past being bashful or "proper."

The very last thing that Ropes wrote was a letter to her daughter on Jan 11, 1863 where she let her know that she was ill along with many of the nurses she supervised. She said "Miss Alcott" was "under orders from me not to leave her room." Both of them had typhoid pneumonia. Hannah Ropes died on January 20, 1863 at the age of 54. My son and I ran by her headstone the last time we were in Maine. Louisa May Alcott pulled through and wrote *Little Women*. Funny how lives circle around and intersect in the past and the present.

Two stories struck me in *It's My Country Too* because they seemed universal to me, regardless of the sex of the author. One was the moving piece by Lori Imsdahl. Maybe it was because it dealt with Afghanistan, where I've looked down on scenes like this from the air and yearned to know what it was like on the ground. Or maybe it was because she talks about luck. Or maybe it was simply because I was transported there by her outstanding writing.

I'm a pilot, so another passage that hit me hard was by Cornelia Fort, who dodged enemy aircraft in her plane as the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor (another incredible story). But this next bit was universal for a pilot, whether you're a man or a woman:

None of us can put into words why we fly. It is something different for each of us. I can't say exactly why I fly but I know why as I've never known anything in my life.

I knew it when I saw my plane silhouetted against the clouds framed by a circular rainbow. I knew it when I flew up into the extinct volcano Haleakala on the island of Maui and saw the gray-green pineapple fields slope down to the cloud-dappled blueness of the Pacific. But I know it otherwise than in beauty. I know it in dignity and self-sufficiency and in the pride of skill. I know it in the satisfaction of usefulness.

When I read this passage by Fort and the story by Imsdahl, I don't feel like a man or a woman. I feel like a human being.

Which reminds me of something Hannah Ropes wrote on December 26, 1862. Her hospital was overflowing with injured soldiers from the Battle of Fredericksburg. The dead and the dying and the amputated limbs. She wrote: "The cause is not of either North or South—it is the cause of, and the special work of the nineteenth century, to take the race up into broader vantage ground and on to broader freedom."

Is she talking about emancipation? She was a vocal abolitionist. Is she talking about the advancement of women? Her writings are clearly feminist. I read all around the quote in that letter and in the book to try to understand what she meant. The editor Brumgardt infers that she means the whole human race. I hope all of those meanings can be true simultaneously.

It's My Country Too brought me to broader vantage ground and helped me face my aunt's question: Who the hell is "we"?