Home before morning: The story of an army nurse in Vietnam by Lynda VanDevanter

An Extraordinary Portrait Of War From A Woman's Perspective

This incredible story, which plunges us immediately into the bloodiest aspects of the war, is also a suspenseful autobiography that will keep you chewing your fingernails to see if Van Devanter survives any of it at all. She proves herself a natural storyteller. . . . The most extraordinary part in this book is Van Devanter's plight after the war—her attempt to retrieve the love of her family, only to realize they don't want to see her slides, hear her stories; her assignment to menial duties at Walter Reed Army Hospital. . . . How Van Devanter survives all of this to become, incredibly, a stronger person for it is what makes her book so riveting.—San Francisco Chronicle

An awesome, painfully honest look at war through a woman's eyes. Her letters home and startling images of life in a combat zone—surgeons fighting to save a Vietnamese baby wounded in utero, the ever-present stench of napalm-charred flesh, a beloved priest's gentle humor and appalling death, the casual heroism of her colleagues, a Vietnamese Papa-san trying to talk his dead child back to life, a haunting snapshot dropped by a dying soldier with no face—tell the story of a young American's rude initiation to the best and the worst of humanity.—Washington Post

Moving, powerful . . . a healing book.—Ms. Magazine

This book reads like a diary: unguarded, heartfelt . . . [It] is both moving and valuable, for reminding us so vividly that war is indeed hell . . . and that its most tested heroes are the doctors and nurses who doggedly labor not just to save life, but also to keep their respect for it, even as their surviving patients are sent out, once more, unto the breach.—Harpers Magazine

In Vietnam, reality hit fast: Van Devanter's plane was fired on when it landed in Saigon; and after three days of adjustment, she was assigned to the 71st Evacuation Hospital, a MASH-type facility near the Cambodian border. There, the casualties, . . . the personal danger, the fatigue, the heat, rain, and mud, the harassment of officers enforcing petty regulations, and above all the meaninglessness of American involvement rapidly put an end to Van Devanter's blind patriotism, her innocence, and her youth. . . . Van
Devanter brings us face to face with the toll that undeclared war took on its combatants.-Kirkus Reviews     If you read only one work about Vietnam, make this the one... This is the way it was, as seen through the eyes of an army second lieutenant when she was twenty-two. I believe her completely, because this reviewer remembers Vietnam the same way, when he was a nineteen-year-old Marine PFC.-Deseret Sentinel

My Personal Review:
After reading a number of unnecessarily harsh and, from my point of view, patently untrue reviews that disparage this book and its author, I feel obliged to weigh in. I am a Viet Nam nurse vet; when I first read this book several years ago, I was amazed by its honesty and heartened that a sister-in-arms had been brave enough to tell it like it was. I cannot speak to the precise details in Van Devanter's fine and harrowing account of her life before, during and after Viet Nam, but I can say that her experiences during her service ring entirely true to me. I have heard her reputation slandered before, and I have wondered why the denigration was so vehement and so personal. Do those who defend their greatly-amended version of our reputation as Viet Nam nurses by tearing down this excellent book feel that we must, for some reason, be portrayed as angels to the world at large? Such a picture would be as false as denouncing us as [prostitute]. We were human beings, with all the fine and base characteristics that entailed. We were young women--most of us still in that amorphous hormonal classification of late adolescence. We lived on adrenalin and bad food, experienced heartbreak daily, dealt with entirely too many males, and did a mind-boggling body of work to the best of our abilities in spite of the pain, frustration, sexism and distraction. Home Before Morning is the grandmother of female Viet Nam accounts, an important piece of literature, a first-of-its-kind window on the Viet Nam war. It is well-written and evocative, and its author--who certainly must now have earned the peace she found so elusive in this life--deserves our profound respect for publishing it at a time when she must have realized it would draw criticism from those who find such raw truths threatening. As a writer of fiction that draws on my experiences in Viet Nam, I owe Lynda Van Devanter a great debt. The first among us, she whacked through the jungle of criticism, took the heat, and secured the road for the acceptance of a woman's unique view of what is, by nature, a testosterone-charged world. She deserves a medal, posthumous though it would now be, for grace under fire.

Susan ONeill, Army nurse-vet and author: Dont Mean Nothing: Short Stories of Viet Nam.

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