

July 12, 2014

## **Vail Daily column: Debate continues over role of women in military**

IF YOU GO ...

**Who:** The Women's Foundation of Colorado—Vail Valley Regional Committee.

**What:** Annual Vail Valley Silent Auction and Luncheon: "Opportunities and Challenges for Women in the Military and at Home," featuring Helen Thorpe, author of "Soldier Girls," and the three female soldiers profiled in the book.

**When:** Aug. 8, 10:30 a.m. silent auction, 12 p.m. luncheon

**Where:** Vail Marriott Mountain Resort, Vail.

**Tickets:** [WFCO.org/vailluncheon](http://WFCO.org/vailluncheon) or contact Sarah Braun at 303-285-2976 or [SarahB@wfc.org](mailto:SarahB@wfc.org)

In December of 1970, a United States Air Force transport plane touched down at Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base in Saigon, Vietnam. Thus began the "re-education" of five college girls from Colorado State University. Nothing in our Midwestern upbringings had prepared us for what was about to transpire. On Dec. 1, 1969, we had sat with our male friends all over campus when lottery numbers were drawn for military service. Twelve months later, we found ourselves in the middle of the Vietnam War.

While women's numbers weren't being called at that time, about 1 percent of all women today are choosing to join the military. The topic of "Women in the Military" will be explored at The Women's Foundation of Colorado's Vail Valley Luncheon on Aug. 8.

'Soldier Girls'

This annual event is an educational, inspiring fundraiser that explores contemporary issues that impact women and girls and the men who care about them. The mission of The Women's Foundation is to build resources and lead change so that every woman and girl in Colorado achieves her full potential. Journalist and author Helen Thorpe will be joined by three female veterans profiled in her new book "Soldier Girls: The Battles of Three Women at Home and at War."

---

## Serve Your Country

There are many ways to serve your country in time of war. This was ours — part of a sorority singing group, we were accepted by United Service Organizations Shows as one of the many troupes traveling to the Pacific Rim to entertain the armed forces involved in the war in Vietnam. In the summer of 1970, our first tour had taken us to Japan, Korea, Okinawa, Philippines, Guam and Wake Island, visiting support troops. Our first show was in a burn ward in a military hospital in Japan. Vietnam was different. This was a war zone. Concertina wire lined the beaches and surrounded buildings. Bomb craters filled with chartreuse water dotted the countryside. Bombing raids on Hanoi were conducted during the week we spent on the USS Kitty Hawk in the South China Sea.

Almost all — 99 percent — of the people we encountered were men, most of them young men. They wanted to know about home — the music, clothing, television shows. There were some female support staff and military nurses, one of whom was our valley's own Pat Hammon. Today, more than 200,000 women (Pentagon, 2011) are serving alongside their male military colleagues. Those who serve miss their families, miss their country and have the same needs for friendship and camaraderie as all soldiers in all wars.

## Tastes of Danger

While our “mission” as an USO Shows troupe in 1970 could hardly be defined as combat, we had our tastes of the dangers of war in our five-week holiday tour and the six-week tour the following summer, both in Vietnam.

But this was nothing compared to the perils encountered by the protagonists in “Soldier Girls,” one of whom was the same age as I while in Vietnam when she was deployed to Afghanistan. At home in America, the official story line was that there were no women in combat. But these women weren't so sure about the definition, especially in Iraq. The debate continues in our country over what role women should have in our military — including what constitutes “combat.”

I encourage you to attend the Vail Valley Luncheon on Aug. 8 to continue the dialogue about women's changing and increasing roles in the military and at home.

Pam Smith is a member of the board of trustees of The Women's Foundation of Colorado and a co-founder of The Women's Foundation of Hong Kong. She has devoted the past 47 years to advocacy for women around the world. She has lived in 14 cities in six countries on three continents and has made the Vail Valley her permanent home since 2006.

©2005 - 2014 Swift Communications, Inc.