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Ellen Hampton, *Women of Valor: The Rochambelles on the WWII Front*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. xv + 233 pp. Maps, photographs, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$24.95 U.S. (hb.) ISBN 1-4039-7143-9.

Review by Shannon L. Fogg, University of Missouri-Rolla.

After France's swift defeat in the spring of 1940, many French men and women sought ways to aid their country and to help restore its independence. For one group of women this opportunity came as members of the Rochambeau group of ambulance drivers for General Leclerc's Second Armored Division. Florence Conrad, an American woman with close ties to France, first organized the group in the United States in 1943 to provide aid during the battle for liberation and to free up more men for fighting. Eventually fifty-one women would serve with the Rochambelles (as they were nicknamed) in Europe, the first arriving in France on August 1, 1944 and participating in events such as the liberation of Paris, the Battle of the Bulge, and the German surrender. Ellen Hampton traces the experiences and the fate of these pioneering women--the first assigned to a combat unit on the European front--in *Women of Valor*. Her examination of "ordinary" women who stepped into "a space for action that previously had been closed to women" (p. 6) fills a gap in the military history of World War II and raises additional questions about the gendered nature of war.

Named after the Comte de Rochambeau, a French infantry leader who helped win the American Revolution, the group was officially recognized as part of the Free French forces before leaving the United States. The original fifteen members included expatriates and French women inadvertently trapped in the U.S. after the outbreak of war in September 1939. The group arrived in Morocco after North Africa's liberation in 1943, and Florence Conrad approached General Marie-Pierre Koenig for an assignment for the unit. He suggested either the Fifth Division or Leclerc's Second Armored Division (2e DB) – equipped, supplied, and attached to the U.S. Army. Conrad chose Leclerc. Although reluctant to accept female drivers, General Leclerc agreed to take the women as the necessary condition to receive nineteen brand-new ambulances for the division. He feared women would distract his men and lead to conflict between the soldiers. So Leclerc imposed a condition of his own: the women could join the division if they survived the North African training and maneuvers. Some women could not adjust to the military lifestyle and left the group, while new women joined to support the war effort. By May 1944, as preparations for D-Day were well underway, the women had impressed Leclerc enough for him to agree to take the Rochambelles as far as Paris. He was still unsure of how the women would perform in combat, and he hoped to find male replacement drivers in France. Solid under fire and the unimaginable conditions of war, they were never replaced. The majority of the book chronicles the women's experiences on the frontlines, their relationships with the military and with male soldiers, and their feelings of finally returning home as victors.

One of the greatest strengths of journalist Ellen Hampton's well-written book is the descriptive and engaging personal stories of the Rochambelles. Drawing on letters, unpublished memoirs, photographs, and personal interviews, Hampton has painstakingly reconstructed the personal and professional lives of each of the fifty-one group members. Uncluttered by footnotes, the story unfolds chronologically as the women made their way across France and eventually into Germany. Academic audiences may be disappointed with the lack of scholarly references (the majority of the rare footnotes refer to memoirs), but this choice may appeal to popular audiences and undergraduate students. The reader "hears" the women's own stories through oral histories and memoirs, but Hampton has skillfully woven their

accounts together and placed them within the historical context. Clear, concise explanations of major events and historiographical issues such as collaboration, divisions among the French, the Gaullist myth of Resistance, and the purge demonstrate an awareness and understanding of the current scholarly literature on the war years. One need not be a specialist on Vichy, the military course of the war, or women in combat when picking up this book.

Written for a broad audience, *Women of Valor* is not a traditional historical monograph driven by an argument, theoretical underpinnings, or evidence-based interpretations. Instead Hampton wants to give voice to a group of women who “insisted that they had done nothing the least bit interesting,” and who “did not join the Second Division to change the role of women in the military, or to upset preconceived ideas about women in combat. They did not describe themselves as early feminists or militants for women’s rights” (p. 3). Such self-effacing claims are prevalent in many women’s accounts of their involvement in the war, especially in activities such as the rescue of persecuted individuals and participation in the Resistance. Scholars, however, have demonstrated the importance of gender in their interpretations of women’s wartime actions.[1] Hampton herself notes the ways in which gender was a factor during the war without fully exploring the wider gender implications. For example, ambulance drivers could play the part of a meek, incompetent woman to gain an advantage; wounded soldiers appreciated having a sisterly or motherly figure caring for them; some women were taunted by some enlisted men as whores while other military members did not consider the Rochambelles to be “real” women because they were ambulance drivers. Having revealed these women’s history, Hampton leaves it up to other writers to explore the gender implications of the Rochambeau group’s existence.

The book also touches on important and relevant issues such as male responses to women in the military, Franco-American relations, and the difficulties of adjusting to post-war life. While women had served as ambulance drivers during the First World War and filled many important auxiliary positions during both wars, the Rochambelles were the first women assigned directly to army units. Hampton points out that even today women in the American army are restricted in their assignments in order to “protect” them from combat. Army officials often get around the restrictions by semantics: women, rather than assigned to dangerous units, are “attached in support of” them, although the risks are often the same for men and women (p. 3). By drawing connections between the past and women’s current situation in the military (including the war in Iraq), Hampton demonstrates the continuing need to explore women’s wartime histories. The fact that the 2e DB was attached to the American army also allows the author to dispel the prevalent misconception (especially among American undergraduate students) that the French did nothing to aid in their country’s liberation. Explorations of Leclerc’s relationships with American generals and joint military actions demonstrate the vital role French forces played in the battle for liberation. Finally, Hampton’s epilogue underlines war’s lasting effects on its participants. Some of the Rochambelles continued their work as ambulance drivers under Leclerc in Indochina. Others served in government positions while some women found that marriage and children eased the adjustment to “normal” life after the adventure and responsibility of the war years. For some, life was never quite the same again.

Overall, Ellen Hampton has written a very readable book that weaves together oral histories, memoirs, and secondary sources in a way that should appeal to a broad audience. Academic audiences may criticize the book’s lack of archival research and traditional historical methodology. There is no explanation of her interviewing techniques, no references to gender theory, and no discussion of issues such as memory or forgetting. Still, Hampton succeeds in bringing a little-known aspect of the war to light from the women’s own perspectives. Professors may find the book accessible for advanced students in military history classes or in history of war courses. Although the book fills a gap in women’s history, it is not quite a gender history; however, it will raise questions that could lead to a lively discussion about women, war, sources, and audiences in the classroom.

NOTES

[1] See for example, Nicole Ann Dombrowski, ed. *Women and War in the Twentieth Century: Enlisted with or without Consent* (New York: Rutledge, 2004); Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, Margaret Collins Weitz, eds., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); and Paula Schwartz, "Partisanes and Gender Politics in Vichy France," *French Historical Studies* 16:1 (Spring 1989): 126-151.

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