

Career military women who served in Vietnam: Happier and in better health than all women

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A study just released by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health reports on the health of American women who were deployed to Vietnam for either military or civilian service. The results show that 48 percent of career military women were very happy compared to 38 percent of women in the general population, and of better than average physical and mental health. The study is the first study to describe the experiences of civilian women deployed to a warzone, compare them to those of military women and match the patterns of general health and happiness for women deployed to Vietnam with a representative sample of their peers. Findings are published online in the journal *Social Science & Medicine—Population Health*.

In addition to positive aspects of service, adverse effects were also noted. Women who served less than 10 years in the [military](#) were more likely to report their Vietnam experience as "highly stressful" (28 percent) compared to career military [women](#) who served more than 20 years (12 percent) and civilian women (13 percent). They cited such stressors as poor living and working conditions, exposure to the consequences of war, physical threat, negative interpersonal experiences (including rape and sexual harassment), and drug and alcohol problems.

About 265,000 women served in the U.S. military during the VietnamEra, with as many as 11,000 deployed to Vietnam but not formally assignedcombat roles. Nonetheless, they were deployed to

combat zones where they experienced warzone stressors and hostile fire.

"Our results suggest that a military career—which by military rules in force during the Vietnam era, precluded a woman from typical wife and mother roles—afforded women a meaningful experience that continued to positively impact their emotional well-being, even decades after the war," said Jeanne Mager Stellman, PhD, professor emerita of Health Policy and Management and senior author.

Career military women who never had children also reported being happier than the average American woman. "Women who volunteered and went to Vietnam in the 1960s may have done so as a way of breaking away from the traditional roles assigned to women in the United States during that time, and they seem to have continued on a different trajectory in post-war years," said Dr. Stellman.

Collaborating with the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project, Dr. Stellman and colleagues at the VA National Center for PTSD, VA Boston Healthcare System and Boston University School of Medicine also compared civilian women, primarily American Red Cross workers, to military women and studied how warzone experiences, exposure to casualties and [sexual harassment](#), affected their current health. They also compared the deployed women to women of comparable age in the General Social Survey, a widely used representative study of Americans.

Both military and civilian women who served in Vietnam, regardless of whether they continued to make the military their career, were less likely to have married or have had children than women from the [general population](#).

Deployment to Vietnam for both military and civilian women had other positive aspects. Many women reported satisfaction from their work with the wounded troops and civilians in Vietnam. Those who served as

nurses, in particular, commented that they were given much more responsibility in their positions while in Vietnam than they would have had in a similar civilian job in the U. S.

An earlier paper by Dr. Stellman and the Boston-VA based group evaluated the psychological well-being of approximately 1,300 female military personnel, Red Cross workers, and others deployed to Vietnam.

"Our new study underscores the benefits of a military career for those women who chose it," noted Dr. Stellman. "Entering military service or volunteering for civilian activities in a warzone offered an opportunity for talented women to establish careers, and rise to high ranks and achieve positions that would be impossible in the civilian world. In addition, career [military women](#) in general, lived in a supportive community that was knowledgeable and sympathetic to their work. What we learned from this study can help to improve the experiences and well-being of current and future generations of female military personnel," noted Dr. Stellman.

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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