Women in the United States military during the Vietnam War held diverse and important roles supporting the war mission. Many servicewomen stationed in the combat zone served with distinction.

Women line officers, staff officers, and enlisted personnel performed a range of military occupational specialties in the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. All of the women who served in Vietnam volunteered for military service. Many volunteered to serve in Vietnam because they wanted to earn the respect of their male counterparts, and were often under fire from rockets and mortars. Women served in headquarters, staff assignments, operations groups, and information offices. They performed in a variety of clerical, intelligence, medical-specialist, and personnel positions. With their sister servicewomen in the continental United States, they demonstrated extraordinary professionalism and belief in the importance of service during wartime.

In March 1962, Major Anne Marie Doering, a Women’s Army Corps (WAC) officer and later the WAC Director and staff in charge of personnel, was sent to the South Vietnamese Women’s Armed Forces Corps in Saigon. She was the first WAC officer to be assigned to the South Vietnamese W AFC Director and staff in charge of personnel, the WAC Detachment, Vietnam, led by Captain Peggy E. Ready and First Sergeant Marion C. Crawford was established at USARV headquarters, Saigon. The unit had an average strength of 90 enlisted women; mostly clerk typists and stenographers. It was dedicated with the command to Long Binh Post in 1967. Approximately 700 WAC personnel served in Vietnam during the war.

From 1965 on, WAC officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted women served in a variety of capacities at Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) headquarters, support commands, and United States Army Vietnam (USARV) headquarters. Their roles included administration, finance, intelligence, logistics, plans and training, and legal and civil affairs occupations. In September 1966, the WAC Detachment, Vietnam, led by Captain Peggie E. Ready and First Sergeant Marion C. Crawford was established at USARV headquarters, Saigon. The unit had an average strength of 90 enlisted women; mostly clerk typists and stenographers. It was dedicated with the command to Long Binh Post in 1967. Approximately 700 WAC personnel served in Vietnam during the war.

Air Force women throughout CONUS and the Far East were essential to air operations in the Vietnam War. Women served in Strategic Air Command supplying bomber units. They served in military airlift Command preparing personnel, supplies, ammunition, and equipment for aerial to Vietnam. Others served in the Air Force Communications Service that provided global communication links critical during every phase of the war. An estimated 144 line officers and 95 enlisted women of the U.S. Air Force served in Vietnam.
Women line officers, staff officers, and enlisted personnel performed a range of military occupational specialties in the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. All of the women who served in Vietnam volunteered for military service.

Lieutenant Elizabeth G. Wylie was the first female line officer in the Navy selected to serve in Vietnam. In June 1967, she arrived in Saigon and was assigned to the Command Information Center, Naval Forces Command. She was responsible for reports, including briefings to visiting elected officials, dignitaries, and journalists. Seven additional Navy women line officers were assigned to Vietnam between 1968 and 1973. Five officers were assigned to the Naval Forces Command staff in Saigon and two served at the Naval Support Activity in Cam Ranh Bay.

Another important step for women in the U.S. Navy occurred during the Vietnam War era outside the theater of operations. In September 1971, the U.S. Navy awarded the first Purple Heart to a female line officer to serve in South Vietnam. The Navy woman line officer to serve in Vietnam was Lieutenant Junior Grade June M. Pleus, and she was assigned as a supply officer. Her service qualified her to be Officers of the Deck. The enlisted women performed their duties exceptionally in deck, administration, operations, and supply departments.

Commander Elizabeth Barrett was the highest ranking female naval line officer to serve in Vietnam. Arriving in Saigon in January 1971, she became the Navy’s first woman officer to hold a command in a combat zone. She commanded the Naval Advisory Group from November 1972 to March 1973, supervising several hundred personnel.

There are numerous instances of military servicewomen volunteering during their off-duty time to help the local South Vietnamese civilian population. An excellent example is Woman Marine Staff Sergeant Ermelinda Salazar. In 1970 she was nominated for the 1970 Unsung Heroine Award by the Vietnamese Women’s Association. In the same year she was awarded the Vietnamese Service Medal by the Republic of Vietnam for her philanthropic work. Staff Sergeant Salazar was also awarded the Joint Service Commendation Medal for performance of her duties while serving with the Military History Branch.

In Saigon, many worked with the Marine Corps Personnel Section on the staff of the Commander, Naval Forces, Vietnam. The section provided administrative support to Marines stationed throughout the combat zone. Other Women Marines, such as Lieutenant Commander Ruth J. O’Hollern and Ruth E. Rainbouu, and Staff Sergeant Ermelinda Salazar, served with the Military History Branch, Secretary, Joint Staff, MACV.

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Another important step for women in the U.S. Navy occurred during the Vietnam War era outside the theater of operations. In September 1971, two women line officers and 32 enlisted women were selected for a yearlong pilot program serving aboard the hospital ship USNS Sanctuary as members of its crew. Lieutenant Junior Grade Ann Kerr served as an administrative assistant, and Ensign Rosemary Nelson was assigned as a supply officer. Their service qualified them to be Officers of the Deck. The enlisted women performed their duties exceptionally in deck, administration, operations, and supply departments. Additional enlisted women were assigned to the ship’s hospital staff.

The first Woman Marine assigned to Vietnam was Master Sergeant Barbara J. Dushinsky, who volunteered for duty in South Vietnam, became the first Woman Marine selected to serve in a combat zone when she reported to the History Activities Command, Vietnam (MACV) in Saigon on March 18, 1967. Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection.

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Many servicewomen were given meritorious service awards, wartime citations, and decorations for their work during the Vietnam War.

At least four servicewomen were awarded the Purple Heart for injuries sustained while serving in Vietnam. Air Force Captain Murieta Grant and Camilla Wager, Army First Lieutenant Sharon Lane, who died from shrapnel wounds, and Army Specialist Fifth Class Sherron Green. In 1978, Army Specialist Fifth Class Karen Olfert received Vietnamese infants and children from a fire near her Tan Son Nhut quarters at the risk of her own life. A recommendation for the Soldier’s Medal was demoted to a Certificate of Achievement; reexamination of the circumstances in 2001 resulted in the belated award of the Soldier’s Medal. Chief Warrant Officer Three Doris "Lucki" Allen, who served three tours in Vietnam from 1967 to 1970, served first as a Specialist Seventh Class senior intelligence analyst, Army Operations Center, Long Binh, South Vietnam. In a report 50,000 Chinese, she informed her superiors about a large number of Chinese troops missing 30 days before the January 1968 Tet Offensive. "Unfortunately," she stated, "they report fell on deaf ears." In her second tour, she held the position of Supervisor, Security Division, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, Security, Combined Document Exploitation Center, Long Binh, South Vietnam. In 1979, Specialist Seventh Class Allen was appointed to Warrant Officer and assigned as the Officer in Charge of the Translation Branch, Vietnam. In 1970, Specialist Seventh Class Doris Allen was inducted into the Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame.

The courage and ability American servicewomen demonstrated before and during the Vietnam War helped convince U.S. leaders to improve women’s standing in the military. Prior to the war, women had limited opportunities for advancement to higher ranks. In November 1967, Congress passed Public Law 90-130, which eliminated rank ceilings for women and lifted the two percent restriction on the number of women line officers and enlisted personnel who could serve. Elizabeth P. Hoisington, Women’s Army Corps (WAC) Director, was promoted to brigadier general on June 11, 1978.* On July 16, 1971, Jeanne M. Holm was promoted to brigadier general, the first Air Force woman to achieve that rank. She became the first woman in the U.S. Armed Forces to attain the rank of major general on June 1, 1973. After the Vietnam War, Fran Mcnair became the first Navy woman line officer to be promoted to the rank of rear admiral (lower half) on June 1, 1978. Nearly two years later, on May 11, 1979, the Marine Corps appointed Margaret A. Brenner to brigadier general.

As a result of personnel shortages, the important contributions of military women during the Vietnam War, and the transition to an all-volunteer force, more career fields and educational and leadership opportunities became available to servicewomen. Within logistic service in previously restricted combat-related areas aboard surface warfare ships and in aircraft as pilots and navigators. Military account and personnel officers regarding women who changed the role for future educational and leadership opportunities. Women obtained the right to join reserve officer training programs and receive appointments to the service academies. They were also allowed to reenlist in the military after becoming pregnant.

References can be found on The United States of America Vietnam War Commemoration website: http://www.vietnamwar50th.com/education/.