

## Book Reviews — Soldier Girls: The Battles of Three Women at Home and at War by Helen Thorpe

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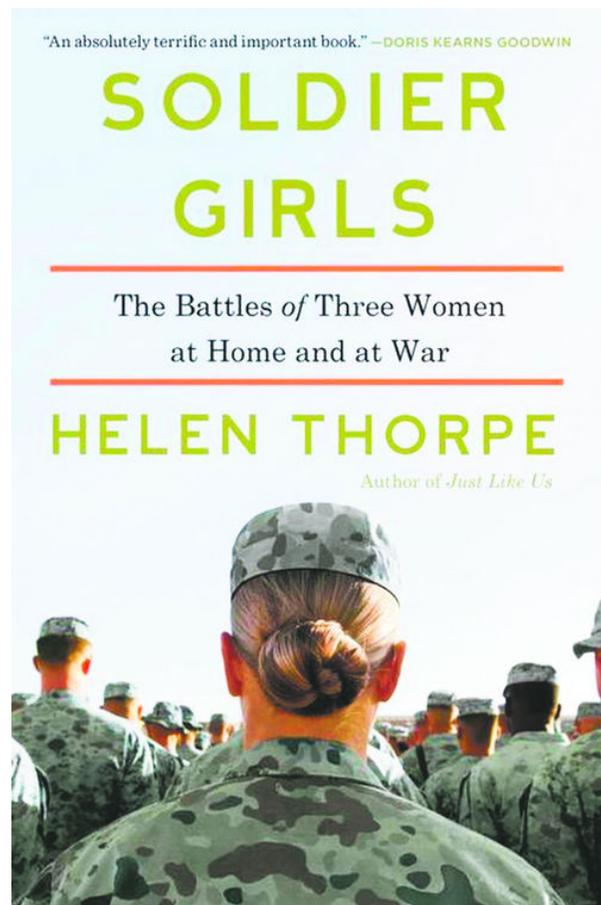
*Soldier Girls: The Battles of Three Women at Home and at War* by Helen Thorpe, Scribner, 384 pages

“Everybody in southern Indiana knew that the [National] Guard did not go to war.” And so, for different reasons, three intelligent, conscientious, and capable women enlisted in the Indiana Army National Guard’s Bravo Company, 113th Support Battalion, and became friends. The enlistment packages were tempting. They included bonuses to join, in-state college tuition, housing allowances, bonuses for staying in school, and payment of outstanding student loans. Serving one weekend a month and two weeks during the summer after initial training was doable. Perhaps there would be duty in the aftermath of a natural disaster. When they swore to defend the Constitution and the country, no foreign foes seemed to threaten the United States. Helen Thorpe profiles them in *Soldier Girls: The Battles of Three Women at Home and at War*. It is a thoughtful, important, and provocative book.

Michelle Fischer was a community-college student who’d achieved a near-perfect score on the Armed Services battery of tests. She enlisted at age eighteen to realize her ambition to earn a University of Indiana degree. She was short, buxom, and blond, presenting an angelic appearance that belied her penchant for pot, punk rock, and boys. She consistently voted for Ralph Nader.

Urged by a friend to join the Guard, the attractive and sociable Desma Brooks rejected the idea. She joined unintentionally, thinking it wasn’t such a big commitment. For the twenty-eight-year-old single mother of three, the money was good. “Extraordinarily bright,” she had passed her GED in the 90th percentile.

Unlike Fischer and Brooks, fifty-two-year-old Debbie Helton, a tall, slim woman, had imagined herself in the military. Her father had served as a drill sergeant, and she loved guns. But back when she was a twenty-three-year-old single mother, she was rejected when she tried to enlist. Eleven years, later she was eligible. The only woman to achieve a perfect score for shooting, she wanted to be a sniper.



Soldier Girls

Sept. 11, 2001, changed everything, and military action against terrorists began. All three women were called to active duty. Fischer's pretty dreams of college life upended, and Brooks was separated from her children. Helton, however, could realize a purpose larger than managing a beauty salon.

While the ostensible battle was against terrorists, the Hoosier women's battles began before leaving the cornfields of Indiana and American shores in general. In 2001, 12.5 percent of the total Army were women — but they were banned from combat. The all-male culture of the military prevailed. In her weapons class at Camp Aberdeen, Fischer outscored an Illinois soldier who vied with her for the highest marks. Yet he was elected class leader. Her intelligence in class didn't earn her her fellow soldiers' respect, and outside the classroom they besieged her. Brooks was sexually assaulted by the recruiter who handled her paperwork after she signed on, but she never reported the incident. Helton coped with the predominant male culture by trying to be one of the boys. Performing the duties of a soldier with a rank higher than hers, she still received the salary for an E-4. These attitudes and behaviors were certainly prevalent among the men these women joined in the troop transport aircraft sent to Afghanistan. And, in an even worse twist, Fischer, Brooks, and Helton would be serving in a Muslim country where the treatment of women was downright medieval.

Afghanistan's monochromatic landscape offered sandstorms, an earthquake, bomb-rubbed street scenes, and lofty peaks on the horizon. The troops contended with uncomfortable living conditions, the rigidity of army life, and boredom while serving as a support battalion. At one point, 20 women were living in a tent designed to accommodate 10 of them. Managing to skirt insubordination at the time, Fischer had repeatedly rebelled by wearing a braided rainbow anklet. To brighten the area at Camp Phoenix, Brooks ordered 50 hot-pink plastic flamingos and a sign reading "Keep Off the Grass."

There were myriad ways of coping, among them "deployment affairs" between soldiers and across ranks, despite regulations. Valium and Ambien were available. Hashish could be obtained. Everyone seemed to have laptops or DVD players. Disney cartoons, *Sex and the City*, and Johnny Depp movies circulated. Fischer and Brooks resorted to alcohol, prescription drugs, and sex. Helton's solace was alcohol.

The battles didn't end when these women returned home. Fischer wished she could meet a fellow female veteran who was in "a successful relationship with a civilian man." Brooks' battles were intensified by her undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. During her second deployment in Iraq, the 8-foot-wide armored security vehicle she drove hit a mine. She sustained a severe concussion. After returning from Iraq, a second deployment, Helton battled depression.

Thorpe's careful writing, reporting, and judicious use of detail, background, and humor help to cast a bright light on the realities of America's wars and their costs, including their ripple effects on combatants and the people around them.