

Book Review by Eric Chandler: IT'S MY COUNTRY, TOO



This happened in the 1980's. Maybe it was after I joined the military or before, when I was thinking about it. In either case, I was sitting in a cabin in New Gloucester, Maine with my Aunt Helen and my cousin, Kim. Somehow, we got into the topic of women in combat. I made some comment that we needed to decide if that's really what we wanted as a country. My cousin and my aunt both snorted.

I don't remember the exact words, but my Aunt Helen said something like, "Who the hell is 'we'?"

It sticks out in my memory like I got slapped. Even as a self-centered, male teenager, I had to admit they had a point.

I'm still trying to remove myself from the center of the universe and imagine what life is like from someone else's perspective. I read a book during Women's History Month called [*It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan*](#) (Potomac Books, 2017). It's filled with stories that address a question my aunt might have asked, "Why should it be so difficult for a woman to serve her country?"

I served alongside women in uniform from 1985 to 2013. In peacetime and in combat. Officers and enlisted. Pilots and ground personnel. Active Duty and Air National Guard. I went to the Air Force Academy not long after women were first admitted there. When I first joined the Air Force, women weren't allowed to fly fighters. I eventually served in units where women were flying in formations with me. I'm married to a retired Air Force veteran and Air Force Academy graduate. Her older sister, also a grad, retired as a major general in

the Air Force. I should already have a first-hand appreciation for what strides women have made and the challenges they've faced in military service. But Jerri Bell and Tracy Crow, the editors of this book, gave me a new perspective on where my three decades fit into the larger scheme of things.

It was a new perspective that I needed, for a couple of reasons. For one, my wife had a positive experience in military service. She's tough, but quiet. When I push her on the topic, to find some hidden story of struggle or discrimination or mistreatment, she has almost nothing bad to say. Frankly, she seems like an exception. Secondly, I served in the US Air Force. My perspective is limited to my branch of service.

In *It's My Country Too*, there are stories about women in all the branches of military service, even disguised as men so they could fight. There's even a story about a woman who served in the US Lighthouse Service. The breadth and depth of the stories the editors included is remarkable. There are uplifting stories and ones that are ugly. Another thing that makes these stories compelling is that they are first-person accounts. There's a lot of background provided by the editors, but the stories come from the women themselves. This is a great accomplishment, because, as it says in the book regarding Korean War nurses (but the sentiment is true for women's stories in general), "None published memoirs."

The editors mention Louisa May Alcott who wrote *Hospital Sketches* about her time as a civil war nurse. She served under a woman at the Union Hotel Hospital named [Hannah Chandler Ropes](#), my relative. Ropes is buried in the town where my parents live in Maine, the same town where my aunt schooled me about what "we" means. Her writings were published in [Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes](#) (The University of Tennessee Press, 1980) edited by John R. Brumgardt. Bell and Crow inspired me to pull this book down off my shelf for another look. I was disappointed to see that

my copy, that I read years ago, didn't have a single dog-eared page. Say what you will about desecrating physical books, but mangled pages are how I leave breadcrumbs. I read it again.

Ropes served as a volunteer nurse in that hospital in Georgetown. She showed up there on June 25, 1862, the day that the Battle of the Seven Days started. Her nephew Charles Peleg Chandler died fighting at Glendale during that battle on June 30, 1862, the same week she arrived. In a July letter, she says she's worried about both Charles P. and Charles Lyon Chandler, his cousin. I've been researching Charles P. and Charles L. Discovering that their aunt wrote a letter wondering whether her nephews were okay was like getting an electric shock. I have Bell and Crow to thank for helping me learn what I should've known already. In a strange convergence, it was Charles P. who inadvertently motivated Ropes to become a nurse when, two years before, he sent her a book about nursing written by Florence Nightingale. Sadly, Ropes and her two nephews would never see the end of the war.

At one point as the head matron of the hospital, Ropes was so horrified at the mistreatment of the enlisted men who were patients, she complained to the head surgeon. Getting nowhere, she went in person directly to the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. Once Stanton verified what my relative said was true, he threw both the head steward and the head surgeon into prison. Things improved at the hospital. I was a squadron commander once, so it stings a little to read how she went around the chain of command. But she cared more about the treatment of the patients than how she was perceived. She was also a single mother after being abandoned by her husband in the 1840's. In the 1850's she moved to Kansas as part of the freesoil, anti-slavery movement to help make it a free state, but that's another story. The point is that she was well past being bashful or "proper."

The very last thing that Ropes wrote was a letter to her daughter on Jan 11, 1863 where she let her know that she was

ill along with many of the nurses she supervised. She said "Miss Alcott" was "under orders from me not to leave her room." Both of them had typhoid pneumonia. Hannah Ropes died on January 20, 1863 at the age of 54. My son and I ran by her headstone the last time we were in Maine. Louisa May Alcott pulled through and wrote *Little Women*. Funny how lives circle around and intersect in the past and the present.

Two stories struck me in *It's My Country Too* because they seemed universal to me, regardless of the sex of the author. One was the moving piece by Lori Imsdahl. Maybe it was because it dealt with Afghanistan, where I've looked down on scenes like this from the air and yearned to know what it was like on the ground. Or maybe it was because she talks about luck. Or maybe it was simply because I was transported there by her outstanding writing.

I'm a pilot, so another passage that hit me hard was by Cornelia Fort, who dodged enemy aircraft in her plane as the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor (another incredible story). But this next bit was universal for a pilot, whether you're a man or a woman:

None of us can put into words why we fly. It is something different for each of us. I can't say exactly why I fly but I know why as I've never known anything in my life.

I knew it when I saw my plane silhouetted against the clouds framed by a circular rainbow. I knew it when I flew up into the extinct volcano Haleakala on the island of Maui and saw the gray-green pineapple fields slope down to the cloud-dappled blueness of the Pacific. But I know it otherwise than in beauty. I know it in dignity and self-sufficiency and in the pride of skill. I know it in the satisfaction of usefulness.

When I read this passage by Fort and the story by Imsdahl, I don't feel like a man or a woman. I feel like a human being.

Which reminds me of something Hannah Ropes wrote on December 26, 1862. Her hospital was overflowing with injured soldiers from the Battle of Fredericksburg. The dead and the dying and the amputated limbs. She wrote: "The cause is not of either North or South—it is the cause of, and the special work of the nineteenth century, to take the race up into broader vantage ground and on to broader freedom."

Is she talking about emancipation? She was a vocal abolitionist. Is she talking about the advancement of women? Her writings are clearly feminist. I read all around the quote in that letter and in the book to try to understand what she meant. The editor Brumgardt infers that she means the whole human race. I hope all of those meanings can be true simultaneously.

It's My Country Too brought me to broader vantage ground and helped me face my aunt's question: Who the hell is "we"?

New Poem by Eric Chandler: "The Path Through Security"

my family lived there before it was Maine
before this was a even a country

they still live there so we visit
we fly in and out of the Jetport

we place our shoes in a tray
empty our pockets on the way home out west

the guy asked which one of us was Grace
I pointed to the infant perched on my arm

she was selected for
enhanced security screening



it's possible that happened in the same tunnel of air
the hijackers passed through

the imaginary tube
the human-shaped ribbon through time

the permanent trace of their movement through space
I could see it all at once

we have repeatedly walked in
the steps of those men

the hotel manager where they stayed
had a nervous breakdown

I flew over the Pentagon and Manhattan
one year afterward

other deployments far away
that all blend together

we drove by that hotel again
as we left Maine this summer

we take off our shoes
in a new part of the terminal

and our departure gate is always next
to the old closed security line

little kids run around under a big toy airplane
that hangs over that spot now

a child-sized control tower and terminal building

instead of x-ray machines

we wait to go home
and I always look over

at the playground
in the path of destruction