In late 1944, Corporal Lois E. Smey, serving with the United States Women’s Army Corps (WAC), wrote to her parents in Cuyahoga County, Ohio:

New Guinea was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. Like an emerald, so green and verdant and beautiful. Tall palms, sandy beaches, and all the ships in port signaling a welcome and signals flashing from the mountains all around. And then you think—here am I safe and sound and surrounded by people who have all lived through this, and so have I!1

For Smey and tens of thousands of other Allied women, their Pacific War service provided experiences they would “never forget.”2 Those experiences were shaped by the South Pacific’s physical and human environment, and just as it did for their male compatriots, the South Seas paradigm exercised a powerful influence on servicewomen. While the South Pacific “had a beckoning aura of adventure and romance,” many Allied women were soon disillusioned.3 Selene H. C. Weise had been briefed by an escort officer who had “glamorized going to war”; she soon concluded, however, that the briefing “was a lot of rubbish.” The South Pacific was far removed from the South Seas.4

Servicewomen’s disillusionment with the South Pacific was in part an inevitable consequence of the hardships associated with modern warfare fought amid an unforgiving environment. Yet there were other factors at play, too. Although Weise was writing long after the war’s end, and
while she eschewed any direct connection between her own wartime experiences and the rise of feminism, her comment that there had been occasions when enlisted women “looked upon” themselves as “badly treated slaves” hinted at the connections between women’s wartime service and the shifting consciousness that underpinned postwar women’s activism.  

Allied women’s participation in the Pacific War casts light on aspects of the conflict that have often been left to one side by military historians and raises fundamental questions pertaining to women’s identity and gender roles in the period preceding the birth of the modern feminist movement. War has typically been defined and understood as a masculine endeavor, and the American military, like its counterparts elsewhere, has long played a role “in preserving the notion of a distinctive sphere of male virtues.” The “meaning of warfare for the sexes,” wrote Marilyn Lake and Joy Damousi, “has traditionally been understood through a series of conceptual oppositions.” By a series of contrasts—“home front/battle front, passivity/activity, weakness/strength, private/public, staying/departing, defended/defenders”—women “were defined as passive flesh, naturally weak, outside history, irrelevant to the making of nations, yet needed, like nurses at the front, to keep the military machine functioning or the home fires burning.”

For the women who are the subjects of this chapter, the contrasts described by Lake and Damousi were tested between 1941 and 1945. As millions of women entered the paid workforce for the first time, forsaking the private sphere for the public domain, stereotypical gender roles were simultaneously challenged and reinforced. As Leisa D. Meyer has noted, World War II was a “turning point in women’s relationship to the military,” which precipitated profound and lasting changes to women’s self-identity and status. Yet those transformations occurred alongside the continuing celebration of “traditional” feminine values and roles.

Although tens of thousands of Allied women served across the Pacific war zone, most servicemen had scant contact with them. The absence of Allied women gave credence to the sexual-vacuum counternarrative and contributed to the invisibility of Islander women. Captain Hyman Samuelson, praising the American nurses he had recently encountered, noted that it had been “awful to go for so long seeing nothing but men.” As Hyman’s correspondence makes clear, however, he had encountered, and admired, numbers of indigenous women over the preceding months. New Zealander H. C. Veitch was blunt: writing from New Caledonia, he noted that servicemen go “for weeks without seeing a woman, except a black one and they do not count.” In early 1944, James Fahey, serving on the USS Montpelier, noted that while on shore at Purvis Bay, in