Soldiers' Stories
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PART THREE
This final section of the book traces the representation of military women since the 1980s, exploring the ways the intensely mediated and contested figure of the female soldier figures within contemporary film and television fictions. While the period since the Gulf War of 1990–91 has been characterized by a high level of media interest in military women, they appear relatively rarely as the central figures of film or television fictions, and almost never in high-profile feature films. (They may feature as ancillary or supporting characters.) At the time of this writing *G.I. Jane*, released in 1997, was the last Hollywood movie to feature a military woman as the central protagonist (although a remake of *Private Benjamin* is in development). Television movies, driven by issues and contemporary debates, have been more receptive. A number of television movies in the 1990s centered on military women, including *She Stood Alone* (1995), *Serving in Silence* (1995), and *One Kill* (2000). Across film and television there have been significant shifts in both the image of the military woman and the film or television genres in which we are most likely to encounter her. This generic shift is away from comedy and into genres such as the thriller, legal drama, rape-revenge, and war as well as scenarios of crime and investigation.

Although the cultural common sense which insists on the incompatibility of the terms *woman* and *soldier* remains very much in evidence, the military woman emerges in this period as more explicitly martial. This is unsurprising perhaps, considering the relatively high profile which debates concerning women’s place in the military, and particularly their place in combat, have had in the American news media. The large-scale deployments of American women in the Iraq War and the established combat role of women aviators have further shifted that debate, with
military and media seeking to retain ground combat as a distinctly male role. Many of the film and television texts explored in this section are acutely aware of this context and frequently stage debates more or less explicitly in the terms used by politicians, military personnel, and media pundits. My analysis is in turn framed by the widespread circulation of the military woman as an ever more intensely mediated figure within American popular and media culture. The strategies that explain and, I would argue, contain the presence of the military woman within film and television fictions are clearly related to the ways such women are figured in the news media. Chapter 6 offers an overview of this wider media coverage, identifying a series of recurrent tropes which typically associate military women with controversy and suggesting some of the ways film and television narratives have taken up these tropes. The controversies associated with military women—whether they are cast as ordinary or heroic or as victims—typically centers on gender, that is, on expectations of male and female behavior, aptitude, and aspirations.

Two issues in particular function as recurrent sources of controversy and scandal. The first of these is combat, which I address in chapter 7, teasing out the continuing significance of an opposition between combatant and noncombatant status for male and female personnel. The second issue which persists in both media coverage and film and television narratives has to do with sex and power: illicit sexuality, sexual harassment, and sexual violence or rape. The television texts discussed in chapter 6 suggest just how much debates about combat and sex as power are bound up with each other. Chapter 8 explores the figuration of military women as either avengers or investigators through a discussion of the rape-revenge narrative and the military woman as cop. In both instances military women are construed as outsiders and as potential victims of (military) male violence.