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In her well-researched book, Band of Sisters, Jill Sullivan presents the unique and widely unknown history of women’s military bands throughout World War II. Her diligent research traces the history of these ensembles from all branches of the military, including interviews with several women that participated in the ensembles. Sullivan begins her story with an introduction that is both exciting and interesting, painting a vibrant picture of what is to come in future chapters. As the chapters unfold, a very detailed portrait of this time period is depicted along with the process of each military branch allowing women to join up and participate in what many considered one of the greatest experiences of their lives.

Chapters two through five describe the Women’s Army Corps (WAC’s), the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), the SPARs (named for their motto semper paratus, always ready), and the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve. Chapter two describes the 400th,
401st, 402nd, 403rd, and 404th WAC Bands, and spends considerable time describing where each band was started, how they were organized, who led them, and so on. Each chapter gives considerable attention and detail to the ensembles formation, its leadership, and its duties throughout the war, with a smattering of short anecdotes and quotes from former band members about their time in the ensemble.

One notable point of discussion is that of the 404th WAC Band, which happened to be the only band created for black women in the Army. While the army practiced segregation, they also followed the motto that “there would be no discrimination in the types of duties that black women could perform.” This ensemble is discussed in great length, as it differed from some of the other military bands in which the women chosen already had strong musical backgrounds. Many of the women in the 404th had little to no experience playing an instrument, and they learned while in the military. Sullivan does an excellent job of describing the struggles and triumphs of this ensemble during a time period when women and people of color faced serious discrimination and unequal treatment.

While Sullivan’s first four chapters tend to be fact-oriented, a narrative shift occurs in her fifth chapter in which her storytelling approach becomes more lively and intriguing. Chapters two through four include stories from the women who were interviewed; however, in many cases those stories are brief and limited to a few lines. Chapter five reads more like a narrative, incorporating specific quotes and stories throughout the pages to back up the factual details that tell the story of the bands formation, duties, leadership, etc.

The strength of the book is in the details and factual information gathered by Sullivan. Her accounts of the bands are as detail-oriented as one could get when doing research of this nature. The numbers of interviews, both in person and over the phone, as well as the gathering of multiple documents, pictures, and recordings paint a picture of extreme dedication on the part of Jill Sullivan to the work she was completing. Each chapter not only provides multiple direct quotes from those involved within the ensembles, but also numerous dates and locations, lists of music and songs performed, as well as detailed explanations of who

Band of Sisters is labeled as “Music - Women’s Studies,” indicating its appeal to both followers of music history as well as gender issues. This book will make a wonderful reference for those doing research on similar topics, and could be a great resource in any band classroom for students who want to better understand the history of our nation’s marching bands.

Much of the book closely resembles a textbook with lists of facts, rather than the collection of engaging stories that the reader might expect after the introduction. Nonetheless, the information collected depicts a very true and informative history of these women, providing both insights into their daily lives as well as a descriptive portrayal of the many distinct ensembles and military branches. Sullivan’s book does provide an accurate and important account of women’s history in marching bands.

Reference