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NANCY GETS HER GUN

In excerpts and photos from her new book, *She's Got a Gun*, Georgia State photography professor Nancy Floyd and her female subjects share their experiences with firepower.

STORY BY FELICIA FEASTER ■ PHOTOS BY NANCY FLOYD

Nancy Floyd's *She's Got a Gun*

Opens Fri., March 7, 6-8 p.m. Through April 12. Floyd will discuss her book at the gallery March 8 at 11 a.m. Solomon Projects, 1037 Monroe Drive, 404-875-7100. www.solomonprojects.com.

A woman with a gun. The image defies our most ingrained notions of femininity. Women are supposed to be nurturing and peaceable. But a woman with a gun suggests other possibilities: independence, fury, the ability to shoot a hole through your neck quicker than the reflex to bake up a plate of snickerdoodles.

In her new book, *She's Got a Gun*, Georgia State University photography professor Nancy Floyd provides potent, often jarring images of housewives, lesbians, soldiers and mothers holding firearms with a kind of confidence and certainty that Freud would undeniably consider symbolic. In this series of excerpts from the Temple University Press book, Floyd recounts the backstory behind her interest in guns and records her encounters with the women who possess them.

ON JUNE 30, 1991, I bought a gun. I did not buy it for self-defense, sport, or hobby. I bought it because I missed my brother. The catalyst was Desert Storm. People I knew were being sent to fight in Iraq, and this stirred up strong memories of Jimmy and the Vietnam War. An excellent marksman who had hopes of becoming a gunsmith, Jimmy left for boot camp when I was nine and died in Vietnam when I was 12 — he was all of 21 years of age. Guns were always a part of his life. I bought my gun because I wanted to understand what he loved about firearms. By doing what he loved most, I thought I might learn more about him.

I bought my revolver out of curiosity, with no intention of becoming a long-term gun owner. I had ideas of what gun people were like, and I wasn't going to become one of them. I thought I would

shoot for a while and then sell my gun. This didn't happen. I grew to enjoy shooting for a number of reasons; being in the company of gun women played a major role. I enjoyed target practice — shooting at paper targets and learning how to improve my skills. My gun range welcomed women, and a few of us formed a club and met weekly to shoot. Nothing formal. We talked about our accomplishments and failures, and we encouraged each other. We even invited a female

police officer to talk to us about her experience as a cop, and some of us took a shooting class together. I found myself hanging out after practice, talking about different types of firearms.

Off the range

we didn't know each other, but on the range we were a small collective with a focus. Our group was not an anomaly; around the country, in various places, women shooters in the 1990s were seeking the company of other women and looking for information and training to meet their needs.

The first year I spent with my revolver I read everything I could find on guns, including *Women & Guns* magazine (1989 to present) and Paxton Quigley's best seller, *Armed & Female* (1989). *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), new movies my gun friends and my feminist friends talked about, provoked debate over definitions of self-defense and the reasons behind Hollywood's increased interest in armed female characters. Because my own documentary projects as a photographer often included research about social or cultural issues, armed women interested me, and in 1993 I began interviewing and photographing some of the women I met at the range.

I was curious — I wanted to know who these women were and what motivated them to pick up a gun. I wanted to know how they handled their difference at a mostly male shooting range, police precinct, or military base. Where did they get their training? What kinds of guns did they shoot? Even the clothing they wore and the types of carrying cases they chose interested me. Why were they entering, in many cases, troubled waters where "no women allowed" signs were posted in most people's minds?

My interviews and photographs evolved over the years, moving far beyond my initial gun range contacts. Since that first visit to the gun range, I've conducted more than fifty interviews and made portraits of women from California, Georgia, New York, Massachusetts, South Dakota, and Wyoming, and I've amassed hundreds of photographs of gun-related activities. While a few of these women are well known in the gun world, most are not. They come from all walks of life, and their stories include those of a woman whose grandmother was killed by an intruder, an 11-year-old girl competing in her first gun competition, and a woman who experienced firefights in Iraq.

SEE NANCY FLOYD PHOTOS, NEXT PAGE



ON THE WEB

For more images from *She's Got a Gun*, and to hear Felicia Feaster interview Nancy Floyd, visit atlanta.creativehoarfing.com.





GAIL, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, 1994

"I'm personally in a helpless position. I can't run away from anybody. This makes me feel just a tad more uneasy, for instance, driving in my van. Since I do display the handicap placard very prominently, and I do park in all the handicap places, someone might think that I'm a much easier mark and could not defend myself. It's a shame that one has to break the law in order to protect themselves, but I'm willing to take that chance. If trouble comes to me, I don't intend to just sit there or lay there screaming 'help me.' I'm going to grab, as fast as I can, for my loaded weapon. And believe me, I have made up my mind that in order to protect my life I will shoot to kill."



MARIA DOLAN, ATLANTA, 2005

"It's hard to say what situations have been defused or just haven't escalated because I have my gun. ... Women need the ability to defend themselves, and queers need the ability to defend themselves, as there is still a lot of queer bashing that goes on. I really like the idea of the Pink Pistols; it's a support group where people don't think you're crazy for having guns. I am a big supporter of the Bill of Rights as well as the Constitution. I'm not going to conceal my sexuality or who I am, and yet there is still a lot of homophobia. My feeling about it is, if the maggots have guns, then I should, too."



GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY CHIEF OF POLICE CONNIE B. SAMPSON, ATLANTA, 1997

"My youngest, he was 7 or 8, and he would always want me to come to his school to eat lunch with him. He never wanted his daddy; his daddy's in sales, his mom was the chief of police. That was a big deal to him — he'd always pick his friends to sit around the table with us when I was there. One day we were having lunch, and I got a page. I left to answer the page, and evidently while I was gone he had informed all of his friends of what was going on. So when I got back a few minutes later he asked, 'Momma, did you have to shoot somebody?' I said, 'No, I did not. I just went to make a phone call.' I think he was bragging to his friends. 'There goes my momma again, she's going to shoot somebody.'"



CLAIR SHERWOOD, ATLANTA, 1997

"My grandmother lived almost a mile back in the woods on a little two-tire dirt road in the West Virginia mountains. She lived so far back in the woods that she never locked her doors. One night she heard a noise behind her washroom. She heard someone fiddling with the door. She got up and got her gun. A man came into the kitchen and apparently wrestled with her and got the gun from her. My grandmother was shot in the head. The man found some gasoline, gassed the house, and set it on fire. By the time the police got there everything was charred and burnt to the ground."

"He was arrested a week later. There were two witnesses who saw him leave the house. No one actually saw him break in, grab the gun, and shoot her. But they saw him leave, and he was tried and convicted. He got life without parole. Well, six years later one of the witnesses died. He appealed. He got off. Today he walks free up in those mountains."



JACKIE RICHARDS, ATLANTA, 2005

"I'm 75 years old and I live in a city that is considered one of the most dangerous in the country. And I felt the need for some protection since I drive and very often I have to go places at night. So I bought a Smith & Wesson Airweight .38 special, five chamber, with a two-inch barrel. I go to a rifle range and I shoot, and after a few misplaced shots, I will hit the bull's-eye fairly regularly. I shoot my gun; I satisfy myself that at my age I can hit the bull's-eye and that everything is all right; and I leave after hugging the cute guys. That's my story."



ASHLEY-ANN CADY, LOWNDES COUNTY, GA., 2006

"Growing up, I was the sneaky one, always wanted to do spy games and stuff like that. As I got older I was more into the FBI, CIA-type route. I got into high school and wanted to go to college and get out and do FBI or CIA, but as time went on I decided military would be my best option — so I could get free schooling and experience and have something better than someone just getting out of college. Came in and wanted to be a cop so I could get a law enforcement background. The SWATs came down and it was just something that I was interested in — I'd never tried it before and never fired a weapon before basic. It was just something to try, a challenge."



ARMY RESERVIST SGT. LESLIE RAMONAS, IRAQ, 2004

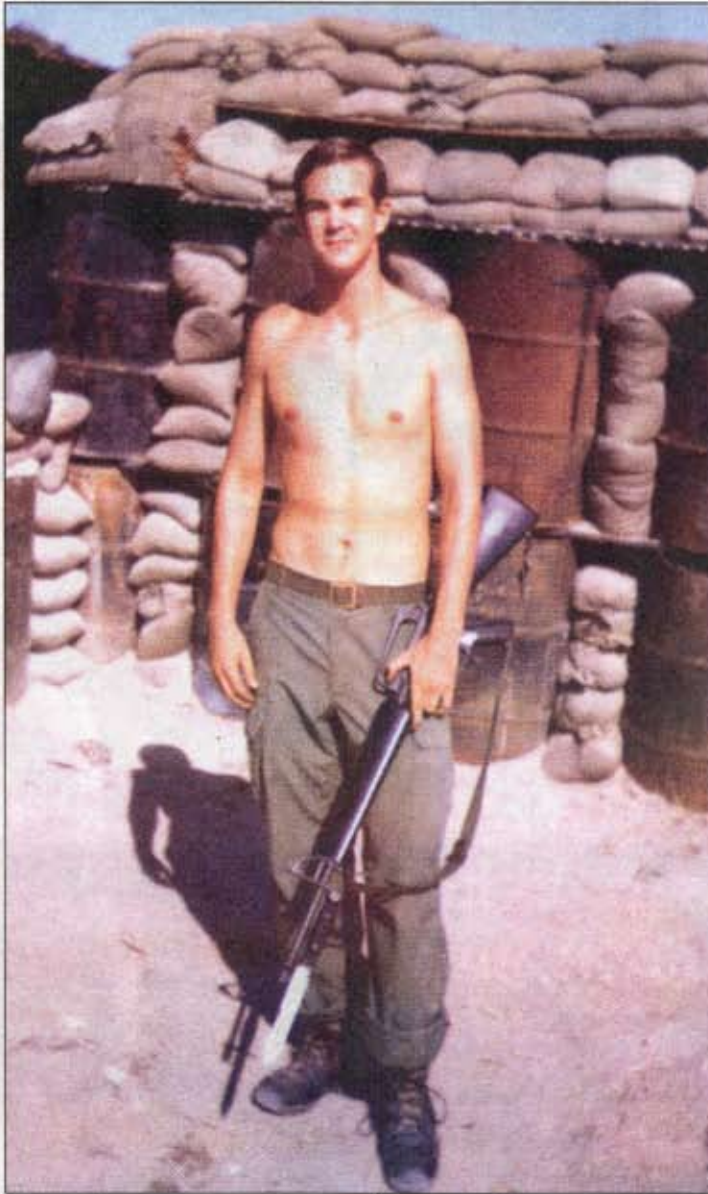
"I had friends get killed, friends get maimed. Practically ruined my own life. A lot of psychological damage. A lot of death. Talk about adrenaline. And now I don't want any of it. I don't want any adrenaline. It's funny, it was a drug that consumed me, almost to my death."



VANESSA NOBLE, 11, LAGUNA NIGUEL, CALIFORNIA, 1996

"Shooting is so fun."

NANCY FLOYD



COURTESY NANCY FLOYD

QUESTION OF LOVE: Jimmy Floyd, Vietnam, 1969

NANCY FLOYD

For the first nine years after Jimmy's death, Dad would drive past the cemetery where Jimmy was buried, on his way to work. Each day, twice a day, he would say as he passed by, 'Come on home, Jimmy boy.' Dad stopped doing this after he changed jobs and his driving route changed. He told me he held on to the slightest hope that the body sent home to us wasn't Jimmy's and he was still alive, somewhere in Vietnam. Dad acknowledged how far-fetched this sounded, but it didn't stop him from thinking it, wishing it. If Jimmy had come home, I wonder, would he have followed his boyhood dream and become a gunsmith? ...

If Jimmy had come home from Vietnam, I don't think his kid sister would have purchased a gun at the end of the first Gulf War. The only reason I bought my gun was because I wanted to understand what he loved about firearms. By doing what he loved most, I thought I might learn more about him. And I have.

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