

Another Kind of Veteran, But a Veteran Nonetheless

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Twenty-five years ago, on Aug. 10, 1968, boarded a Boeing 707—an orange plane operated by Braniff for the Military Air Transport Service—at Travis Air Force Base in California. My destination was the same as everyone else's on the plane. We were all bound for Tan Son Nhut Airfield in Saigon, Republic of South Vietnam.

Most of the others were in khaki or olive drab uniforms; mine was blue. Most of us were about the same age, late teens or early twenties. I was twenty-three years old and had graduated from the University of California only two months earlier. Most of them were young men; I was a young woman. But we were all going to the same place. There was one more difference: they were all military. I was a civilian.

We knew as we boarded that plane that we all had a 365-day commitment, and that if everything went well, we'd all be on another plane on Aug 10, 1969, flying east instead of west.

Much would happen to all of us in the next year. Some would come home early because of combat-related injuries. Others would come home in body bags, casualties of the conflict. The rest of us would come home physically pretty much as we left, but we would all be mentally and emotionally changed.

After a 15-hour flight we landed at Tan Son Nhut and were sent to our duty stations. After four days on 'in country' orientation, I was shipped out to my first assignment. I was to be a recreation specialist for Department of Army Special Services at Dong Tam Base, headquarters of the 9th Infantry Division in the heart of the Mekong Delta. There were two other recreation specialists there, eight or nine Red Cross women and the Army nurses assigned to the 3rd Surgical and Evac Hospital.

I worked in a recreation center where we provided a little bit of home to the infantrymen. It was like any community recreation center. There were pool and ping-pong tables,

cards, magazines and newspapers, table games, puzzles, and occasional entertainment by visiting USO celebrities or soldier shows. It was a place to go where the furniture wasn't government-issued gray or olive drab. There was always Kool-Aid and coffee available, free-of-charge.

We were the young women who listened to the soldiers and talked with them. We sympathized when they got bad news from home, and rejoiced when they brought in pictures of their newborns and other family members.

We played cards and ping-pong with them. We learned to shoot pool from them. We ate in their mess tents and halls, went to their chapels and were as homesick as they were. We were just mostly a bunch of kids far away from home.

We had the same immunizations they did, and followed the same malaria pill regime they did. We awaited mail call, packages from home and R&R as much as they did. We had trouble finding nail polish, lipstick, nylons, and hairspray in the PX so we learned to look "natural."

We all put in our year and came home feeling like veterans, just like the men did. We worked 12 hour days six or seven days a week. We ran to bunkers when the rockets were "incoming" the same as the men did, except we had no weapons to defend ourselves if the perimeter of our base was penetrated by a ground attack of Viet Cong. We did our duty and served our time.

We went for different reasons. I went because I thought if young men my age had to go, I ought to do something, too.

If you can remember back to the '60s, Berkeley, Calif., wasn't exactly a hotbed of military sympathizers. I considered myself a pacifist—called myself the Super Dove—but

something inside me was curious to find out what was really going on. I had to see for myself if what I saw on the nightly news was real or not.

So, for a year I did. I moved a couple times, but remained in the Delta for the entire 365 days. I made friends there. One of my Vietnamese friends—now an American citizen—lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her family. Hong was with my mother last summer when she died and I couldn't be there.

It was an educational, interesting, frightening and stress-filled year (although we didn't call it stress then).

I came home on my yellow Braniff Freedom Bird and was greeted with the same indifference as the men were. I have been gratified to see the acceptance the Vietnam veterans are now receiving. I was thrilled when I found out about the Vietnam Women's Memorial statue to be placed near "The Wall" in Washington, D.C. in November of this year, 25 years after I served.

The bottom fell out of my elation today. I was contacted by a reporter of a South Jersey newspaper who wanted to do a Memorial Day feature of women veterans. I began to tell my story. She cut me off. I spent my year in 'Nam, but I wasn't a veteran.

I was only a civilian.

Welcome home!