

Vietnam Women's Memorial Dedicated in Washington, D.C.

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"Were you my nurse?" asked a Vietnam vet I had never seen before.

I was in Washington, D.C. for the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project's Celebration of Patriotism and Courage. I served as an army nurse at the 67th Evacuation Hospital in Qui Nhon, South Vietnam in 1967 and 1968. I was an operating nurse then. Twenty five years later, I was in Washington, D.C. for the dedication of a memorial for women Vietnam veterans. The dedication of the Memorial was part of a project whose objectives are to identify the women who served our country during a difficult time in our history; to educate our nation about the contributions of these women during the Vietnam war; and to place a realistic representation of women veterans at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

"I have no idea if I was your nurse, but welcome home," I replied.

"I don't care if you were my nurse or not. Thank you. Welcome home, sister."

He gave me a hug; we both had tears in our eyes. This exchange with a brother vet seemed to set the tone for the events that followed.

The Vietnam Women's Memorial Project regularly receives letters from veterans attempting to find the nurses who took care of them when they were wounded. An excerpt from one such letter says, "I have no idea who was there when I needed them the most, but to whoever you may be, again I thank you from the bottom of my heart..."

Another excerpt: "Although a combat vet had undoubtedly encountered stress, it seems pale in comparison to your daily exposure to the carnage of war. We who have been wounded in the service of this country are forever in your debt."

The Memorial March was my favorite part of all the events. I knew (because we had arranged it) that three of my friends from the 67th would be there. Running into a lot more of my old colleagues was a wonderful surprise.

At the meeting place for the March, someone had tacked a big banner to a tree: "67th Evacuation Hospital, Qui Nhon". The hospital motto was printed on the banner, too: "Mihi portate vulneratos" ("Bring me your wounded"). Many of the 67th nurses were already there. There was a lot of yelling, screaming, and carrying on as we recognized and greeted each other. And lots of hugs.

Many of us were wearing jungle fatigue shirts. I wore two: one mine, the other a brother vet's. Some of the nurses wore the complete uniform including jungle boots. (I wore tennis shoes; I lost my boots somewhere between Cam Rahn Bay and Philadelphia on my way home from Vietnam.) All of us wore red ribbons in honor of the prisoners of war and the missing in action. I wore my P.O.W. bracelet, too.

The nurses I knew 25 years ago didn't seem much different:

- The vivacious and exuberant Deanna was still outgoing and bubbly.
- Barbara was still quiet, reserved, and sweet.
- Diane was still elegant. When we were in Vietnam, I always wondered how she managed to look so nice when the rest of us were sweating and couldn't do anything with our hair.
- When I saw Patty and Georgia, I thought how grown-up they looked now. In Vietnam, I thought they were so young (they were 21; I was 23). Military nurses in Vietnam were the youngest and most inexperienced group of health care personnel ever to serve in war time. The average nurse was a little over 23 and had less than two years experience.

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- Linda had been head nurse of I.C.U. at the 67th; I had sometimes seen her carrying around a one-legged Vietnamese baby. She was on the television show "Unsolved Mysteries" several years ago when one of her Vietnam casualty patients was looking for her.
- Gail cried a little and said, "War is stupid". Amen. Gail and I had both been at Brooke Army Medical Center before we went to Vietnam; she and I and some other army nurses tried to teach the Vietnam vet amputee patients at Brooke how to dance on their prosthetic legs. I had forgotten all about that until I saw Gail 25 years later.
- I ran into Harvey, a neurosurgeon I worked with a lot in Vietnam. We talked about methyl methacrylate and how much time we spent in other peoples' heads.
- Cindy had been head nurse of the operating room; her dry wit and understated manner were just as remembered.
- Sandra's Texas accent was even more pronounced: she said I sounded more like a Yankee than ever.

I visited with several other people I had worked with, and some nurses who were at the 67th before or after I was there. Everybody seemed glad to be there. A big group of navy nurses wore t-shirts that read, "I was at the REAL China Beach." Patty, from the 67th, wore a boonie hat and a t-shirt that read, "Not all women wore love beads in the sixties." I always wished I had a t-shirt that read, "No, it wasn't like M.A.S.H." or "Tet Offensive 1968: Original Cast."

So many women vets were in the March, most of us nurses. (Ninety percent of the 11,000 American women stationed in Vietnam were nurses.) The sidewalks along Constitution Avenue were crowded with people, many of them brother Vietnam vets. The male Vietnam

veterans have been the greatest supporters of the Memorial Project. Some of them wore buttons that said "Welcome home, ladies". They cheered; they cried; they threw kisses. They said we were angels; they said we were heroes; they said, "We love you." They said, "Welcome home."

I have never been so much photographed or videotaped in my life. I wonder of any of the pictures show my feet touching the ground; I don't think they did.

After the march, my friends from the 67th and I attended the dedication ceremony along with some 25,000 other people. Because we couldn't get near the speakers' platform, we watched the ceremony on the big screen. Diane Carlson Evans, the Vietnam vet nurse who initiated the Memorial Project, was mistress of ceremonies. A couple of the other speakers were Vietnam veteran nurses; one talked about how serving in Vietnam changed us forever. Each time she mentioned being changed, one of my nurse friends would murmur agreement. Nearly everyone at the ceremony – the speakers and the audience – cried at some time during the dedication. Singer Crystal Gayle sang the official dedication song, "Til the White Dove Flies Alone."

The Vietnam Women's Memorial sculpture is nine feet high and depicts three American service women and a wounded G.I. The Wall is 300 feet to the northwest. The sculpture is subject to many interpretations. One woman, the nurse, is holding the soldier in her arms. My experience as a military nurse made me think the G.I. had a gun shot wound to the neck, and the nurse is telling him to spit out the blood in his mouth. He is calling for his mother, and she says, "We'll help you; we'll take care of you; we'll patch you up. She doesn't say, "You'll be okay" because she isn't at all sure he will be.

One of the women in the sculpture is looking up. Some think she is praying. I think she is saying, "Here comes another one: another Dust Off - a helicopter transporting the wounded. For the past 25 years, I have never been able to hear the sound of a helicopter without thinking of the Dust Offs. During the dedication ceremony, we heard a helicopter, and I noticed that my companions had the same reaction as I did. I have always had the greatest respect for the Dust Off crews. They were heroes. They went out in the worst possible conditions (namely hostile fire), picked up the wounded, and brought them to us in minutes. If it hadn't been for them, it wouldn't have mattered what we nurses or anyone else did. The Dust Offs brought us the wounded while there was still time to do something for them.

One woman in the sculpture is kneeling and holding a helmet; maybe she's going to put it on her head because there's yet another Red Alert. Maybe she's going to use it to catch her tears if she's ever able to cry. All the women look tired.

The sculpture is dignified and portrays the compassion and courage it intends.

At the M.N.A. convention in September, the house of delegates passed a resolution recognizing and applauding the Vietnam veteran women, especially the nurses. I took copies of this resolution to Washington, D.C. and placed one at the Memorial sculpture. I gave copies of it to many of my friends who were there, and they were all deeply touched by it. I had given copies to several friends who are brother vets, and they, too, were touched.

I had never been to the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial (the Wall), and I was somewhat apprehensive about seeing it. My apprehension proved to be uncalled for, because what I felt was a sense of welcome and belonging. When

I put my hand on the Wall, it didn't seem like cold hard granite at all. The sun was shining on it; it felt warm and seemed translucent, diaphanous, ethereal. It was my privilege to be there paying my respects to the fallen vets. The number of names was overwhelming, and I wondered how many of those men had been my patients. I know I was the last person some of them saw; I can still see some of their faces.

Some of my friends asked me to trace the names of friends of theirs who died in Vietnam. As I did the tracings, I thought about the families and friends of the fallen and about how they still miss their sons, husbands, brothers, friends...

...and their daughters, the nurses:

- Eleanor Grace Alexander
- Pamela Dorothy Donovan
- Carol Ann Drazba
- Annie Ruth Graham
- Elizabeth Ann Jones
- Mary Therese Klinker
- Sharon Ann Lane
- Hedwig Diane Orlowski

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