

The Forgotten Veterans

For U.S. military nurses, Vietnam meant serving their country and fulfilling their chosen profession. Coming primarily from conservative, traditional backgrounds, many of the 7,000 nurses who served in Vietnam were fresh out of nursing school when they volunteered for duty.

Nursing in military hospitals in Vietnam was far more emotionally draining than stateside assignments. "In U.S. emergency rooms," commented Vietnam nurse Sharon Balsey, "you hardly ever see blast injuries. I just freaked out. . . . I never got to the point where the mutilations of bodies didn't bother me."

As nurses witnessed firsthand the loss of men even younger than themselves, some grew depressed by the experience. "People don't want to hear about blood and guts," said Cissy Stellabarger, who assisted in surgery round-the-clock during the 1968 Tet offensive. "But that's all I know about, the grief. It was the first time I've been that frightened."

After the war, most nurses successfully re-entered civilian life. The anguish bred among some veteran nurses, however, hampered their readjustment. These nurses felt isolated among family and friends who were as conservative, as patriotic, and as supportive of the war as they once had been. They often felt confused, on the one hand by the increasingly vitriolic antiwar movement and on the other hand by the fact that others at home were doing so little to understand the horrors of Southeast Asia.

For years these nurses bore their anguish quietly. "I started to shut down my feelings [in Vietnam]," explained Lola McGourty. "It all seemed so useless." But gradually a small number of nurses began reporting symptoms similar to those of male veterans diagnosed as suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): flashbacks and nightmares; anxiety and hypertension; inability to maintain a job or emotional relationships; refuge in drugs or alcohol. Even after fifteen

years, nurse Lily Adams rushed out of her house in a frenzy whenever the sound of a helicopter triggered sickening memories of the choppers bringing wounded to the 12th Evacuation Hospital at Cu Chi. Saralee McGoran, who also served at Cu Chi, described her recurring nightmare:

In my dream there was a hospital on one side—and a nightclub on the other. All these beds, just full of bodies, five or six in a bed, and they all had these bleeding eyes. You know how eyes bleed in death? And on the other side, everyone was partying. And that's how it was. Every day there would be broken bodies and pain—and on the other hand the way we coped, not to feel, was to drink beer and have a party.

The Veterans' Administration responded sluggishly to women veterans' requests for psychological counseling, drug and alcohol treatment, as well as medical care for a variety of ailments they claimed were associated with Agent Orange. The VA, already struggling to meet the demands of hundreds of thousands of male Vietnam veterans, was unequipped to deal with the problems of these women.

Women veterans complained that the VA did not adequately publicize the benefits to which they were entitled. The General Accounting Office supported that complaint. In 1982 it charged that the VA had "not effectively informed female veterans of their benefits or assessed their awareness of those benefits."

The VA also tended to ignore women in its efforts to identify the particular needs of Vietnam veterans. A 1981 VA-sponsored study of 1,340 Vietnam veterans did not include a single woman. "Women were forgotten," commented Shad Meshad, a former army psychologist in Vietnam and a pioneer in implementing the VA-supported veterans' outreach program.

It was not until the late 1970s that nurses began organizing to press for improved VA care and recognition of their Vietnam-related maladies. The Women's Project of the Vietnam Veterans of America was initiated in 1978 by Lynda Van Devanter, whose 1983 account of her experiences in Vietnam, *Home Before Morning*, brought attention to her fellow nurses' plight. The Women's Project drew 200 women into a support network and fundraising campaign and assisted women in joining counseling groups and obtaining

VA benefits.

As a result of VVA lobbying, the VA in 1983 finally established an Advisory Committee on Women Veterans. At many of its medical centers it also appointed coordinators for women's medical and psychological services. At the same time, the VA sent a questionnaire to 3,000 women veterans that included a survey of the postwar adjustment difficulties of those who had been in Vietnam. In 1984 the VA undertook a study of the potential PTSD cases among women veterans and an analysis, mandated by Congress, of the effects of their exposure to Agent Orange. Both these studies were to be completed in 1987 or 1988. In 1985, therefore, the extent of the impact of Vietnam on women veterans was still uncertain. But women veterans took satisfaction from having gained public acknowledgement of their wartime service and its after-effects upon their lives.

More than anything else, the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982 extended recognition of the nurses' personal sacrifices. The names of seven women are etched into the memorial's black granite wall: air force Captain Mary Klinker, First Lieutenant Sharon Lane, Captain Eleanor Alexander, First Lieutenant Hedwig Orłowski, Second Lieutenant Carol Drazba, Second Lieutenant Elizabeth Jones, and Second Lieutenant Pamela Donovan.

At the dedication veteran nurses saw men whose bodies had been patched up and sent along their way years ago. Lily Adams recalls how a male vet held out a flag to her and said, "Doesn't it feel good?" "I started to cry," said Adams. "I was so angry with my country for treating us the way it had. We had been totally rejected. I remember touching that flag and, finally, forgiving."

Many emotional encounters during the dedication brought nurses a sense of a mission accomplished. At the reunion of the 25th Division, Saralee McGoran, once a nurse in Cu Chi, found answers to some of the questions raised by her service. Recognizing her 12th Evac hat, one veteran embraced the nurse who for years had been haunted by the memory of broken bodies. "You saved my life," he told her. "I was there in Cu Chi. Thank the rest of the girls. . . . Thanks a lot little lady."



Above. In November 1979 a group of Vietnam veterans attends a counseling session at a California veterans' center. Left. Ann Corsmire, at right, discusses the Vietnam-related problems of her husband, Dick, during a Women's Support Group meeting at a veterans' center in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1981.