

*Helen White
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4/6/04*

LIPSTICK AND A SMILE

STORY OF ONE NAM NURSE

HELEN WHITE

**Copyright 2003
Helen White
ISBN No. 0-9747197-0-6**

**Printed in the U.S.A.
by**



Randy & Ellen Bell

**P. O. Box 49 417-395-2275
Rich Hill, MO 64779 (home) 660-832-4899**

ISBN 0-9747197-0-6



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—DEDICATION—

DEDICATED

TO THE WILL TO SURVIVE

AND THRIVE

IN THE SOUP

“This is really weird shit!” I think to myself. As I step off the transport plane, I look to my right. There they are. The filled body bags lying neatly lined up in rows. One bag is leaking a little bit. I don’t know how many there are. But it seems like a whole bunch.

To my left, the soldiers are all standing at rest. They watch us get off the plane and get into formation behind them. I only have memory flashes of this scene. I do remember one officer has a back brace on and I think about his uncomfortable journey.

Live or dead, every soldier there is going home. I’ve just arrived and feel like I’m just something new added to whatever is left in the soup.

I REMEMBER I WAS YOUNG

I'm 21 years of age and I celebrate my first year out of Mercy School of Nursing in Vietnam. Most of my nursing experience is in the NewBorn Nursery. I have a little bit of orthopedic experience with old men at the Wadsworth VA in Leavenworth, Kansas. I also have less than 2 months of ortho experience with combat vets at Fort Campbell, Ky. And here I am to do the best I can do.

NOT ENOUGH

As I open the door, the smells hit me first. The smells are of fresh blood, old blood, rotting human flesh, body fluids, disinfectants, iodine, drainage from various infections and God knows what else. Men are strung up in all kinds of traction, some have bulky splints or dressings and a few have casts of all kinds. Pieces of them are missing. It seems like they are all looking at me, the new nurse.

My immediate thought is that I'm just from Rich Hill, Missouri, and my knowledge and skills are not enough.

SOME SAY

“Why bring this stuff up? Why talk about it? Let us try to forget, bury our painful memories, live in peace, happiness and play with our grandchildren and great grandchildren.”

But horrible traumatic memories are like pus-filled rotten wounds that need to be skillfully opened up and cleaned out. It's only then that healing growth and health can take place.

MEMORIES

The memories I'm referring to are not the ones that bring us comfort and joy. But rather the ones that drag us into a downward spiral of emotions and behaviors. Like a cow chewing her cud, we examine those memories over and over. "If only I had done such and such, or if something else had happened. Why wasn't I more aware or know more?" we continually ask ourselves.

And like video replays of a football play, we look at these from all angles. We probably label them like "Oh, that's Billy Joe." Or as self protection, we forget all names even now. And just when we believe we've stuffed them into the closet of our minds and locked the door, the memories and people jump out to haunt us.

DEADLY BLOSSOM

Ask most anyone involved in trauma and combat, and they report that their experiences are unique. And it is unique to them. But there are repeating patterns. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a song with many verses.

During the Vietnam War, the average age of the soldier is 19 years. The nurse is 23 years old. Of course some individuals are older or younger. Some have more life experiences than others.

Exploding weapons that fragment are used extensively. A cruel fact is that one explosion can not only kill or injure many people, but more people are required to care for the injured. Even a tiny piece of shrapnel that is not located and removed can be deadly.

A QUIET HERO

During Vietnam, more critically injured and ill men survive than in earlier wars. This is due to care given in the field by fellow soldiers and medics, quick evacuation via Dust Off and the quality of care given by the healthcare teams. Most every soldier hopes that if they can just make it to the hospital they will be all right. And a lot of times, in some form or fashion, they are.

But even now, there are belated deaths resulting from injuries or illnesses. Agent Orange exposure is triggering deadly cancers. PTSD still claims many lives. But in spite of all of this, we Vietnam Veterans are survivors and we go on.

VIETNAMESE WOMAN

Not all the patients are U.S. soldiers. Mixed into the population are Vietnamese. Some are children, teenagers, or adults. Some of the Vietnamese have combat injuries like the fellow with only one arm. Others, like the scarred woman with wise eyes, have old burns, problems from polio or other illnesses and previous injuries. It's hoped we can correct some of the damage. We also have injured patients identified as NVA and VC.

HEAD NURSE

Sarah is the Head Nurse of the Orthopedic Units. I really admire her. She's on her second tour in Vietnam. It isn't just her knowledge and skills that I value, but also her attitude about life.

Her life attitude is the following information:

- 1. Here is the situation**
- 2. This is what we know**
- 3. These are the options**
- 4. Do it**
- 5. If it doesn't work, do something else**

Sarah also says that we shouldn't go around looking worried and horrified. If we need to cry or whatever, excuse ourselves, go somewhere, come back and get the job done. So put on some perfume, lipstick and a smile. The guys need all the care and hope they can get.

OH MY GOD!

Within a month of my arrival in Vietnam, a hometown guy, Don Droz, is killed. Mother and Daddy write me. I am shocked. Jerry Boyles, a year younger than me, was killed last year. I never thought anyone else from this little town would be killed.

Hamburger Hill and that whole mess is going on. We get word that regurges are coming. Then someone says we shouldn't say that word because the guys will then associate themselves with vomit. The fact remains that there are so many casualties that they are being sent to different places.

We aren't to let the Vietnamese know because they'll tell the enemy. I wonder to myself how this is a secret with helicopters and planes coming and going and all of us looking so tired. And there are so many injured men. But, as usual, no one asks me.

THE WIDOW AND HER BABY

The Rich Hill Mining Review newspaper writes about the death of Don Droz, Navy LTJG. I don't know if a photo like this painting appears in the paper or not.

Tracy Droz has created a PBS Documentary honoring her father. It's called BE GOOD, SMILE PRETTY. A scene similar to this painting is in it. This scene always haunts me.

A lot of people identify with this painting. They either have relatives or friends who are killed, leaving behind a young widow and her baby.

CROSSING OVER

Sharon Lane, Army Nurse, is killed on June 8, 1969. Other nurses have died, but Sharon is the first KIA nurse. So it's real. Nurses die also.

SO TIRED

Therapists and other people ask me what I remember of Vietnam. The overall memory is of being so tired. Feeling tired to the bone. Even if I can sleep, I wake up still tired. And knowing I have to go back to the guys. I am part of a team. My team needs me. The guys are depending on me.

STAND BY YOUR MAN

Every morning after the National Anthem, the radio announcer plays Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man." I think it is almost a prayer that the woman back home will stand by her man. A year isn't very long. But Dear John letters are too painfully frequent.

But the song also means other things. While on her honeymoon, one young nurse is beaten up by her new husband. She tells everyone she fell down the stairs. She has to be medivaced to the States. The couple stay married a long time. Until the marriage ends, their children never learn she is a Nam Nurse. The husband alone is the family hero.

Lynn Hampton, in Conserve The Fighting Strength, describes being abducted. Using her wits, she survives but her life is never the same.

Sex can easily be bought. But the issues of dominance, power and rare round-eyed women are in play. "Don't mean nothing" is more than a saying to some.

GIRL FROM THE BAND

Sometimes, as part of a group or with dates, we go to the Big O Club. The Big Club serves real food and sometimes bands with singers play. But as very visible round-eyed women, it doesn't matter what we nurses really look like. The men seem to think we are part of the entertainment. That our function is to talk to the lonely, laugh and dance about.

SELF PORTRAIT SHOCK AND DISMAY

Times are changing. The Chief of Orthopedics is suddenly replaced. I have a new Head Nurse. The mood of the whole place is changing. And changing for the worse. Anger is so thick you can almost cut it with a knife.

On the unit, there are grumbles about the time required to care for the children and other Vietnamese taking away from the soldiers. I overhear a couple of guys discussing how much air put into IV tubing is needed to kill someone. There is more open talk about our continuing casualty rate and the horrible wounds.

Politicians talk about light at the end of the tunnel. All we see are wounded men coming in from places not on the Vietnam map. Armed Forces news is biased.

A grenade with the pin pulled is rolled into the NCO shower. Our new XO supposedly commits suicide. All kinds of drugs are easily accessible and used. A good medic dies from self medication.

THE 1969 PEACE MORATORIUM

We learn that more than 2 million people meet in Washington, D.C. At the 67th Evac Hospital, there's a lot of quiet talk going on. Many of us are concerned how the injured soldiers will take this. My roommate Mary wears a black armband and fasts. In the hospital chapel, stones are laid on the altar. There seem to be a lot of armed MPs about.

PARTY OF ONE

And so it occurs to each of us that we are safer in a small known group. Of course, even then you don't really know someone. It's 1969-1970, and good girls are expected to be good girls. If things happen, well you know good girls aren't in those situations. There is no one to tell. After all, it's probably not the man's fault. She must have done or not done something. Maybe it's better to be a party of one.

FEELINGS OF SECURITY

Two drunk medics get into a fight in the NCO Club. They both get their M-16s and have a shootout. One isn't injured. The other has a shattered femur. It's a Big Deal Thing. No one is upset with their drunkenness just at weapons being fired.

The Powers That Be respond by taking all the weapons and ammo away and locking them up in a room next to the perimeter fence. There is no protected access to that room.

At the Rehab Center, the enemy supposedly walks in off the beach. Satchel charges are blown up. Men are killed and injured. Everyone gets concerned about security.

At the 67th Evac, it's decided that we won't have that. So now screen door latches are put on the inside of the outside doors. Someone has to latch and unlatch them. We don't have any code words though. On the Ortho Units, that means that the nurses and medics spend a lot of time latching and unlatching doors. As far as I know, the weapons are still locked up.

HOW I FELT

Eventually, it seems that all nonessential parts of my being are burned away. Just the essentials remain. I am a nurse and do the best I can. But when it comes to life outside work, I'm really emotionally limited. There seems so little I can give or receive. I participate in life but always with one foot out the door. I'm just kind of a numbed hollow human being.

THREE AM

I'm still not sure what happened and why. After I g out of the Army, I return to the Wadsworth VA in Leavenworth, Kansas. Working permanent nights on the Surgical-Orthopedic Unit, I take care of old vets and the returning Vietnam vets.

Except for my family, I keep to myself pretty much. do start going to school. Eventually, I move to Texas and go to school full time. I am going to get more knowledge and skills in nursing!

When I decide to specialize in Geriatric Psychiatry I am working on the Houston VA Nursing Home Care. This decision to focus on aging and mental health is a wise choice for me.

Over the years, I have episodes of what I think is depression. My insurance companies and I spend a lot of money to discuss my childhood and life. No one wants to talk about that year in Vietnam.

I certainly am not going to talk about drinking myse asleep and all that. People would think I was really crazy.

A NEW DAWN

There is an old saying of "Red sky in morning, sailors take warning." I seem to run real fast, work hard and accomplish a lot. But my life storm is brewing and boiling. And it overtakes me.

I read John Wilson's work on PTSD and even volunteer to co-lead a Houston DAV PTSD group. I think I know what PTSD means. It's a guy thing. It's true that I am like them, but Nam Nurses don't have PTSD.

By 1995, my life starts imploding. Like from the rubble left from one of those old Las Vegas casinos, I've emerged barely alive. Suicide's just a matter of when and what's the most successful. I don't want to be a failure at that also.

THOUSAND YARD STARE

No one seems to know how many women military nurses serve in Vietnam. For that matter, how many military women in total serving in Vietnam is unknown. Different references quote different numbers. I don't know why that is. Maybe it's a reflection of the status of women at that time.

Until 1983 and a necessary court case, the Veterans Administration does not recognize combat women as having PTSD. Even facilities and care available for women are lacking and sometimes even unsafe. Since then there have been many positive changes.

Even though the VA offers specialized care for combat PTSD, there are still forms and such that are designed for male combat veterans. You just have to deal with it. Sensitivity to women combat veterans is increasing.

WHAT I WANTED TO DO

When I first paint this painting, I imagine what I wanted to do back then. Somehow, I want to give courage and comfort to all those wounded men going on their long journeys home.

But with the recent unsuccessful suicide attempt of a Nam Nurse, it suddenly occurs to me that what I also want to do is give comfort and courage to each of us. As Nam Nurses, many of us are still injured. The injuries just may not be as visible.

IT AIN'T OVER 'TIL THE FAT LADY SINGS

It has to be a God Thing. Although I achieve a lot in my life, I don't do this by myself. From the rubble of my previous life, I come back. I'm really amazed at this. Bad times happen but they go away. I have to go to the VA and take my medications. Maybe I'll always have to do that. I never thought I'd say this but "My life is good. I'm glad I didn't check out."

—IN APPRECIATION—

I want to express my appreciation and gratitude to all the VA PTSD Program staff. Especially to Booker at the Waco, Texas, PTSD Program.

Love, Laughter and the Good Times