



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BETH PARKS

# A VIETNAM NURSE'S THANKSGIVING

BY BETH PARKS  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

**I**t was a day of Thanksgiving for all of us. Thanks for being alive. Thanks for being in a country that allows us to celebrate. Thanks for being together again.

We were the nurses of the 12th Evacuation Hospital. We were stationed in Cu Chi, Vietnam, a hellhole to all who knew it. The last time we had been together was in October of 1967. But after all these years, we were reunited this past Veterans Day in Washington, D.C. It was the 23rd anniversary of the Vietnam Memorial.

During the Vietnam War, I was an operating room nurse and part of the advance team that set up the 12th Evac. A handful of other nurses and I first served with the 7th Surgical Hospital, more properly listed as the 7th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. We called it Surg, pronounced "surge." You called it M\*A\*S\*H.

The advance team was given the task of setting up the 12th Evac and making it operational prior to the arrival of the trained 12th Unit from the United States. My initial job was to build and staff two oper-



Roses (top) adorn the Vietnam Women's Memorial sculpted by Santa Fe artist Glenna Goodacre. Goodacre (above, from left), former Army nurse Diane Carlson Evans and landscape architect George Dickey attend the 10th anniversary celebration of the Women's Memorial in Washington, D.C.

ating room Quonsets and the central materiel supply Quonset. The latter supplied sterile equipment and supplies to the entire hospital.

The operating rooms were, of course, where we performed surgery on wounded men. We could handle seven surgeries at once at the 12th Evac. That sounds pretty good until you realize that we might take in well over 200 wounded during a single battle. Still, it was better than our capability at the 7th Surg, where we could only operate on three or sometimes four soldiers at one time.

We rarely had the equipment and supplies we needed. Many of the essentials were horse-traded

or diverted to the black market before we ever saw them. For example, we needed two autoclaves to steam-sterilize our instruments at the 12th Evac. We got only one. I later found the other on the black market in Saigon, and it carried a price tag of \$200. If I'd had the money, I would have bought it.

But we assembled the hospital on schedule and it ran just fine. We improvised. We worked 12-hour days, six days a week, and around the clock when we were taking heavy casualties. We were young, inno-

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cent and thankful to be able to help.

We asked for little. We often got nothing.

But we had some things that evade many other people: camaraderie and pride in our work. And we cared. We truly cared.

So there we were in Washington, D.C. Importantly for us, it was the 10th anniversary of the Vietnam Women's Memorial.

The Vietnam Women's Memorial was the brainchild of Diane Carlson Evans, a former Army nurse who initiated the project and now serves as the Memorial Foundation's president. Diane served in Vietnam during 1968-69 and once shared quarters with my former 12th Evac hoochmate, Annie Cunningham. Annie was the gal who convinced Santa Fe sculptor Glenna Goodacre to submit the design that ultimately won the Memorial competition. Annie now serves on the Foundation's board.

It was Annie who convinced me to meet with the other 12th Evacs in DC. Of the ten 12th Evac nurses who attended the ceremonies, nine of us had worked together at Cu Chi. It was like coming home. We were together again, and we gave thanks.

Had it not been for Diane's tenacity, we would have had little reason to gather. Of the 112 monuments previously erected in D.C., none had honored military women. Diane spent nine long years fighting for a memorial that would honor such women for their commitment, dedication and courage. She battled fierce opposition from around the country in order to show "the human face of love and care that did indeed exist even in the midst of great trauma and suffering."

It was partly because of her family's support that Diane was able to accomplish her goal. Her husband, Mike, an Army surgeon in Vietnam, consistently encouraged her not to give up. Their four children also stood by her during the grueling approval process. "Mom, we support your work on the memorial," said one, "but we don't have any clean jeans and there's no peanut butter left for sandwiches."

Diane stepped forth to make things happen. The rest of us, mostly faceless specters in the background, just keep plugging

away the way we always did. Many are still nurses, and many are grandmothers now.

Although some former Army nurses never told their families and friends that they served in Vietnam, others are starting to speak out about their experiences. Even those I knew well tended to keep secrets they never shared. Some were raped or otherwise brutalized. Some couldn't deal with their nightmares of dead and wounded soldiers, and turned to therapy or drink. Some gave birth to children with birth defects, quite likely the result of exposure to Agent Orange.

One nurse came back to the States, only to be sent back to Vietnam for a second tour. "The Army never should have done that to me," she said. But she fell in love with a handsome young lieutenant during that tour and they planned to be married. Shortly before they were scheduled to come home, a sniper's bullet tore through his brain and killed him. I always pictured her in a little country home, surrounded by a bunch of happy kids, but she could never forget him and she still lives alone.

The pivotal experience in Vietnam changed our lives forever: You won't hear us griping or looking for handouts. We still appreciate the things we craved during that year of blood, dust and mud: a hot bath, clean sheets and a drink of cold milk. Oh, yes, and a toilet that flushes everything away.

We give thanks for all the freedoms this country grants us. We think of those things as privileges, though many call them rights.

I took some friends to the airport recently for their return flight to Japan. It was early in the morning, and the place was full of American soldiers who had just arrived after having served nine months in Iraq. No bands or fanfares greeted them, although a man cheerfully gave his cell phone to anyone who wanted to gratefully accept his kind offer.

It was a day of Thanksgiving for all of them. Thanks for being alive. Thanks for being in a country that allowed them to celebrate. Thanks for being home again.

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