



T.J. HOOKER PHOTO—THE POST-STAR  
 This painting by James Davis Nelson depicts nurses, tech assistants and surgeons at work in the 12th Evacuation Hospital operating theater. Beth Parks, who grew up in Athol, is depicted at far left. Nelson, acclaimed for his work as a Vietnam combat artist, served with the 25th Infantry Division at Cu Chi. The painting, owned by the U.S. Army Medical Department Museum at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, is on loan to the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs until autumn 2006.

# Lessons of battle

## Vietnam nurse recalls years overseas

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After flying into the surgical hospital at Cu Chi, 25 miles northwest of Saigon, under heavy enemy fire, Beth Parks was happy enough to feel the ground under her feet. But the bleak landscape was almost devoid of growth, thanks to Agent Orange, and the rainy season had washed away the dirt, leaving thick, wet clay under a haze of hot air. "It sucked the combat boots right off your feet," Parks said. The young nurse was deep "in country" — in the shadow of the notorious Black Virgin Mountain, mere miles from the Cambodian border, on the edge of the infamous Iron Triangle, a Viet Cong stronghold. Parks, who was born in Glens Falls, was stationed with the 7th Surgical Hospital, a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) equipped to operate on three wounded soldiers at a time — four in mass casualty situations. During Parks' first "mass cal," 200 bloodied soldiers were brought in, wounded by land mines and booby traps or peppered with shrapnel and bullets.

"There were enough dead that we stacked the bodies up like cordwood outside in the rain," she said. "It was not pleasant." The hospital ran out of sterile sheets, and surgeons took to wearing nothing but trunks and rubber flip-flops — it was easier to wash their own bodies between patients than to find clean scrubs. The nurses and doctors worked 12-hour days, six days a week, and around the clock when swamped with casualties. They recovered each night in wooden "hooches," or huts, amid the stink of mildew and rancid rice starch. The company rarely had everything it needed. Still, the 12th Evacuation Hospital, which Parks helped set up, treated 37,000 patients between 1966 and 1970. "But in between battles, it was very quiet," she said. "You could relax, sleep, sneak off for a walk — although where you could go was rather limited." The nurses were young, innocent and thankful to be able to help, said Parks. They were girl-next-door types, she said, mostly in their early 20s. They knew nothing of the pol-

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The world is often led by those whose lusts for power predispose them to incite the rest of us. To fight for what's not best for us.

Could they, the ones who call to war, perhaps be rotten to the Corps? And might we ask their plans be cursed, unless they send their own kids first?

— "Call to War" by Beth Parks



COURTESY PHOTO  
 Ambulances from the 12th Evacuation Hospital in Cu Chi, Vietnam, where Athol native Beth Parks served, line up just before the semimobile care unit opened in November 1966.

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itics of war, but they had camaraderie and pride in their work, and they cared.

"We truly cared," she said. There were good times too, like Christmas Day 1966, when Bob Hope put on a show, just two days before Parks' 25th birthday.

"Little did we know that the Viet Cong were below our feet in a tunnel complex, holding their own token celebration," she said. "It wasn't till much later that we discovered that the clay beneath the entire base camp was honeycombed with enemy tunnels."

Cu Chi would later become famous for its underground labyrinth, part of a network that stretched from Saigon to Cambodia.

"The Americans were making so much noise that they never heard the enemy below," said Parks.

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Parks grew up on the old Ellsworth farm on High Street in Athol. She was born three weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, but clearly remembers moments during World War II.

The farm next door lost two sons just weeks apart. Parks remembers the flags draped across the young men's coffins.

Her father gave her a "hokey" book on women in the military, and said he'd be proud if she ever decided to enlist.

Parks flew back into the United States from Japan to Alaska. When she and her friends finally landed in Oakland, the plane's tires blew.

"When we actually got into the airport, we were spat upon," she said. "We had been talking the entire trip about going to the top of the Mark Hotel in San Francisco, and they wouldn't serve us."

No hotels would take them in. They said they were full. Parks stayed in a halfway house.

"We couldn't wait to get out of our uniforms," she said. Although some of the nurses Parks worked with never talk about Vietnam, others have started speaking out.

With every reunion, Parks finds out a new secret, whether from a nurse who can't deal with her memories of the dead and wounded, or from one who was raped and brutalized by soldiers. (There were 12 women and 1,200 men stationed in Cu Chi when Parks arrived.)

"The guys, particularly the enlisted men, were looking to be with the women, and some of the guys were a little perverted," she said.

The nurses coped in different ways. Some have since turned to the bottle, others to therapy. But most of them hang in

there, giving thanks for the freedoms they enjoy, seeing them as privileges, not rights. "I know I still appreciate the things I craved during that year of blood, dust and mud: a hot shower, clean sheets and a drink of cold milk," she said. "Oh yes, and the toilet that flushes everything away."

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But there are lessons, and Parks tries to pass them on. Although she now lives in Bangor, Maine, and is a retired wildlife biology professor from the University of Maine, she makes regular trips spreading what she has learned.

Her story was one of nearly 1,000 interviews recorded by the Military Museum as part of an oral history project. And Parks gave the keynote speech at the Vietnam Memorial Gallery in The Empire State Plaza in Albany a few weeks ago, for the opening of an exhibit called "They Also Served: Nurses in the Military."

Parks learned that you discov-

er who you are in a war zone, and you discover what others are made of, too.

She learned that rank doesn't equate to intelligence or competence.

She learned that war changes your priorities. She learned that people on both sides of a conflict look exactly the same under their skins, when they're opened up in the fetid air of an operating room.

She learned that war is a game of chess — the pawns get sacrificed first.

She learned that ideologies, deities and policies are dangerous when worshipped in the extreme.

And she learned that patriotism and nationalism are two radically different things.

"I wish I could help people understand, so that they wouldn't have to go through that," Parks said. "But you can't convey such things — that's not the human condition."

"People have to go through things before they get it, and, so, we continually repeat history."