

With the Colors

Veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam

Beth Parks is tough as nails.

A year of relentless, battle-front "meatball surgery" in Vietnam is among the galvanizing reasons why.

"It was the defining experience of my entire life," she says, 40 years later. "I found out that I was a lot stronger than I thought I was. I didn't know I was that strong."

Now 65 and retired in the Gouldsboro village of Corea, Parks spent a year as an operating room nurse with a M*A*S*H unit — the 7th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital — and the 12th Evacuation Hospital, a surgery unit she helped to establish in 1966 in the "hell-hole" village of Cu Chi.

It was a yearlong assignment for which she volunteered after working as an OR nurse at a Washington, D.C., hospital.

"I asked to be in a busy area," she said. "I didn't want to sit around in a white uniform in Saigon. They put me in the busiest place in Vietnam. They were taking more casualties than the M*A*S*H unit could handle, so I was assigned to help establish the 12th Evac Hospital.

"We could do three surgeries at once, with the capability of doing a fourth one, under duress, if we used our equipment room. And, when you're taking 200 casualties at a time, that doesn't cut it. We couldn't keep up with instruments or linens. Finally the docs took to operating in bathing trunks and flip-flops and a pair of latex gloves, because it was a lot easier to wash them than the



**U.S. ARMY NURSE
CORPS
Beth Parks**



drapes, because we didn't have any. It was meatball surgery. We could do it, but it was pretty horrendous."

Parks had seen her share of gunshot wounds and other life-threatening injuries as an OR nurse in Washington, D.C., casualties of what she termed the remnants of "the Saturday night gun and knife club." It didn't begin to prepare her for Vietnam and her efforts to provide medical support to the 25th Infantry Division.

"There were a couple of times I worked 72 hours without a break, and that meant on your feet with no food, no water, no going to the bathroom," she said. "It's hard on

your body, and you get so tired you don't even think. For me, it became very automatic; move them in, move them out. For those who really thought about it, I think, even today, they are having a terrible, terrible time with what they saw.

"There are certain cases that you can't get out of your mind and never will. What struck me about it, in retrospect, was that, of all those thousands of people I operated on, I can't remember anyone's name, not even one, which is probably a good thing."

Her unit also provided medical care to wounded Vietnamese civilians and to prisoners of war.

"I even gave blood to a Viet Cong soldier," she said. "He didn't like my blood. He died. He perked up for a minute, and then he was gone."

Among the most important lessons Parks learned in Vietnam, she said, were insights into human nature and her own.

"You find out who people really are, once they've been stripped down of everything," she said. "You've got folks who are completely leveled after you strip away their educations, their bank accounts, their fine clothes and their fancy cars, and now, all of a sudden, you get to see who they are under pressure.

"That was a real surprise to me, more than anything else I saw. It was interesting; the people I thought were so strong weren't, and people like me, who I wouldn't consider strong at all, were. I'm like a horseshoe crab or a cockroach. I'm going to be around, because things don't bother me the way they bothered other people. A lot of them were basketcases. I'm now finding out that a lot of my colleagues, after losing touch for a lot of years, are having tremendous problems. Some just can't deal with it and are totally disabled."

Parks left Vietnam in October of 1967 and was stationed at a military hospital in Germany until she left the Army in December of 1969. By then a captain, she declined a promotion to major that would have sent her back to Vietnam.

Through the GI Bill, she enrolled in college in Florida and later studied wildlife management with the help of a fellowship at the University of Maine-Orono. Eventually she earned a doctorate there in educational administration. Before she retired in July 2004 Parks administered the 4-H program in Penobscot County for the University of Maine Cooperative Extension.

An accomplished photographer and travel writer, Parks recently authored a children's book that is illustrated with her own photographs.

— TOM WALSH



The makeshift operating suites that Beth Parks worked in while in Vietnam were housed within quonset huts erected in the "hell-hole" village of Cu Chi.

The American profiles a veteran of World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars every week. Suggestions of veterans — women and men — who might be included in this profile series may be made to the Newsroom, 667-2576, news@ellsworthamerican.com or (fax) 667-7656.