

Beth Parks
“A Chunk of My Soul”:
American Nurses in Vietnam

What originally began as a personal project, to make a video about her experiences as a nurse in Vietnam from 1966-67, became a much larger project, both in scope and in meaning for Beth Parks, Extension Educator and Professor. Parks’ original goal was to take it to a reunion of those with whom she served. “The only thing that I really wanted to accomplish was to have the people who were stationed with me at that same time look at this video and say ‘Yes, that’s exactly what it was like.’”

Using her own still photographs and film clips taken by two of the men she served with, Parks, with the help of



a WIC grant and technical assistance supplied by Kim Mitchell, created a visual and audio collage that catapults the viewer into a physically and psychologically foreign landscape in which nothing is familiar or reliable. In recreating the experience, Parks wanted to convey the

confusion that she and others experienced.

While those who helped her in the making of the video and those who viewed the video in its early stages suggested that she include narration and interviews, Parks replied, “No. What I want to do is get people’s gut reactions. If somebody’s talking, the audience will not be paying attention to what’s on the screen. I’d be pre-digesting the information for them. I want to put them in the position that I was in of not knowing what I was seeing—just to make them focus.”

That is certainly what the video does to its viewers, as those who attended the Fall 2002 showing of it at a WIC lunch would agree. Parks organized the video around categorical experiences such as arriving, setting up the hospital, bringing in the wounded, resting and relaxing, being under fire, celebrating holidays, and then finally, leaving. This organization of visual images gives a chronological summary of the physical experience of being a nurse in the Vietnam War. The thematic musical drama, that unfolds to complement the photos, evokes the emotional and sensual experience of being stripped of all the normal things that define a person, as the pressures of wartime do. These two facets of the video work in tandem to absorb the viewers’ full attention and to force them to come to terms with war on a personal level. “What I tried

to do was personalize the war, so that you really saw what it was like being there. And I tried to humanize it because we tend not to think about those other people.”

This humanization happens throughout the video, as a significant amount of time is given to imagery of the people and landscape of Vietnam. Parks insists that “there are two sides to the story” and hopes that the video will help others to consider what the experience may have meant to the culture and country of the people of Vietnam. She hopes that her experience will help to break down the insistence on “otherness” that gets played out in wartime.

Although the video is shocking at times, graphic at others, the experience of viewing it is one that will not soon be forgotten. Parks has plans to reformat the video with the help of professional filmmakers and market it as an educational tool. “Everyone who sees the film, sees it a little differently. That’s the reality of war,” adds Parks.