



A Piece of My Heart

STUDY GUIDE

WOMEN IN VIETNAM

While the US Military prides itself on knowing the number of enemy weapons captured, little or no exact numbers are available for the women who served in Vietnam. Estimates range from 4,000 to 15,000. Women were represented in all military branches, but over 90% served as nurses. Some served as nurses in evacuation hospitals, MASH units and aboard hospital ships. Others worked in support roles in military intelligence, information offices, headquarters, service clubs, and various other clerical, medical, and personnel positions. Servicewomen in Vietnam experienced many of the same hardships as their male counterparts and served bravely in dangerous situations. Many were awarded citations ranging from unit awards to Purple Hearts. Eight US servicewomen were killed, and their sacrifice is memorialized on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, "The Wall," and in Vietnam Women's Memorial, both in Washington D.C.

Non-military women also served important roles. They provided entertainment and support to the troops through the USO, the American Red Cross, and other humanitarian organizations.

Like many of the men going over to Vietnam to serve their country, young women from all over the nation "volunteered" to serve as nurses in the hospitals and medical facilities in South Vietnam. These women volunteered for a variety of reasons: to serve their country, to help the service men who were wounded, to receive training and an education, to further their military careers, to prove themselves or just to have an adventure. The nurses served in the hospital ships of the Navy, the airlift helicopters and airplanes of the Air Force and the hospitals and field hospitals of the Army. They arrived in Vietnam with various levels of nursing experience, from newcomers to the field with barely six months of Nursing under their belts to experienced veterans of twenty plus years. Usually the more confident and experienced the nurse, the better they were able to cope with the stress and the sheer number of casualties they treated on a daily basis.

The Vietnam War was the first major conflict to use the helicopter to transport wounded quickly to medical facilities; sometimes a man would be in the hospital receiving medical care barely half an hour after he had been wounded. This new medevac system saved the lives of thousands of men who in previous conflicts would have died in the battlefield waiting for medical assistance. Because of this phenomenon, Vietnam nurses were faced with more patients and more severely wounded men than they had seen in previous conflicts. These nurses



were required to make quick decisions on who was treated first and what type of treatment they would receive; a much more autonomous state than nursing in the states where they were expected to follow a doctor's orders and nothing more.

Combat nurses worked twelve hour shifts six days a week and when a mass casualty incident occurred, like a major battle, those twelve hour shifts could easily turn into twenty-four to thirty-six hour shifts. Nurses also volunteered their time in the communities around them, often going to the local orphanages or hospitals to offer the civilians their medical services or to teach classes on basic hygiene, first aid or even English. In addition, nurses had to deal with numerous emotions: stress from the amount of patients they had to serve, anger at seeing young men so horribly wounded and guilt at not being able to save all of the wounded men or make them whole again.

Despite the long hours and sometimes horrifying wounds these women had to face, many nurses found their service rewarding. They were able to serve their country and save and comfort the wounded men in their facilities. During the Vietnam War 98% of the men who were wounded and made it to the hospital survived. Nurses witnessed some truly miraculous events such as men recovering from their wounds or acts of true selflessness that are common during combat situations, and many nurses made close friends with their fellow coworkers some of whom still keep in contact into the present day.

Records on their service, their heroism, their decorations earned, where they served, and what they suffered –and what some still suffer – are nonexistent.

From the text “Women in the Military – An Unfinished Revolution,” by Major General Jeanne Holm, USAF (Ret), from collected anecdotal reports, letters, and books by those who were there we are able to get a picture of the service of women in Vietnam. For example:

- **Over six hundred (600) women in the Air Force were there.**
- **Army, Navy and Air Force Nurses and Medical Specialists numbered over 6,000.**
- **Untold numbers of Red Cross, Special Services, Civil Service and countless other women were there.**
- **Over five hundred (500) WACs were stationed in Vietnam.**
- **Women Marines served in Vietnam.**

Some military women asked to go to Vietnam, and some were sent against their wishes. Some who enlisted were sent to Vietnam even though their recruiter may have promised they would not be sent to Vietnam.

Women officers and enlisted women were similar in age and tenure as their male counterparts; ranging from youngsters in their early twenties with barely two years in service and career women over forty. Women experienced the same hardships as the men. Many were often in the line of fire from rockets and mortars, particularly during the TET offensive.

Women sloshed through the same mud and blood as men, witnessed the same horrors of war, and suffered the same ignominious treatment and indignities upon their return United States of America.

Women were awarded the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star, Commendation Medals, and Unit Citations. **And, yes, there were casualties.**

They were also young. Many were just 19 or 20. Their ages reflected the average age of their male counterparts which was 23 years of age.



THE VIETNAM WOMEN'S MEMORIAL (Located in Washington, D.C.)

Even though tour guides may say The Vietnam Women's Memorial in DC may advise the memorial is the *Vietnam Nurse's Memorial*, It is a memorial to *all* women who served in Vietnam. Visit their website at www.vietnamwomensmemorial.org

OTHER WOMEN IN VIETNAM WEBSITES

Sites to explore include:

Women in Vietnam, www.womeninvietnam.com

The Sharon Anne Lane Foundation, www.sharonannlanefoundation.org

Red Cross History www.redcross.org/museum/timemach.html

Donut Dollies Photos, www.donutdolly.com/id39.htm

Timelines, letters home, history and more – www.nyvietnamveteransmemorial.org

The Meaning of Vietnam – www.nybooks.com/articles/9160

The Bitter Homecoming – <http://grunt.space.swri.edu/bitter.pdf> or www.vietvet.org/bitter.pdf

Agent Orange Talking Paper – www.gmasw.com/aotalk1.htm

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – http://www.mnwelldir.org/docs/mental_health/ptsd.htm

TIMELINE

An interesting detailed timeline is on-line at: http://threegracetheater.org/post_tonkin_timeline.pdf.

The time line starts in 1964 when China, North Vietnam's neighbor and ally, successfully tests an atomic bomb. Vietcong mortars shell Bien Hoa Air Base near Saigon. 4 Americans are killed, 76 wounded. Five B-57 bombers are destroyed, and 15 are damaged. Two days later, Lyndon Johnson is elected in a landslide over Republican Barry Goldwater of Arizona. During the campaign, Johnson's position on Vietnam sharply contrasted the more militant views held by Goldwater, as LBJ appeared to lean toward de-escalation of US involvement.

It ends in 1973 when in March the last American combat soldiers leave South Vietnam, though military advisors and Marines, who are protecting U.S. installations, remain. The war is officially over the USA. The end of the draft is announced. During the summer session, the Senate Armed Services Committee opens hearings on the US bombing of Cambodia. Allegations are made that the Nixon administration allowed bombing raids to be carried out during what was supposed to be a time when Cambodia's neutrality was officially recognized. As a result of the hearings, Congress orders that all bombing in Cambodia cease effective at midnight, August 14.

LOTS OF COMBAT EXPERIENCES HAVE IMPACT ON VETERANS

The average infantryman in the South Pacific during WWII saw 40 days of combat in four years. The average infantryman in Vietnam saw about 240 days of combat in one year. The significant combat increase is attributed to the role of the helicopter in Vietnam which was capable of transporting soldiers quickly from battle to battle.

58,169 Americans were killed and 304,000 wounded in Vietnam. Although the percentage of those killed is similar to other wars, the number of amputations and crippling wounds were 300% higher than in WWII. 75,000 Vietnam veterans were severely physically disabled.

- - - *The McCaffery Papers; "Speech by Lt. Gen. Barry R. McCaffery, reproduced in the Pentagon, June 4, 1993. McCaffery was Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The speech was given to Vietnam veterans and visitors at "The Wall", Memorial Day, 1993.*

WOMEN, THE UNKNOWN SOLDIERS by M. Carlson (edited for brevity)

The history of women and war has been largely forgotten in favor of recording men's military achievements. Women have always played a part; however, it was more than to simply keep the "home fires burning." Between 1962 and 1973, according to Department of Defense statistics, approximately 7,500 women served on active military duty in Vietnam. The Veteran's Administration puts the numbers even higher, at around 11,000. Independent surveys estimate that the number of women, both civilian and non-civilian, working in Vietnam during the war is between 33,000 and 55,000 (Marshall 4-5).

Despite these high numbers of women in the military, women have had a long road to equality. Women were treated as second class soldiers, both in the military and after coming home...

After the war, women were treated even worse than their male compatriots were, although they were now Veterans. In addition, the all too common sexual harassment that women receive in society was also prevalent in the military...

Nurses made up the most of the bulk of the women serving in Vietnam. Before going to Vietnam, many women were given mock set-ups of battlefield casualties; this was supposed to prepare them for the real war and the real casualties. The women also got field training, which consisted of how to fire an M-16; ironically though, the women were never allowed to fire these weapons...

The women nurses were not trained properly in the medical field for the severe combat injuries that they were to treat. It is interesting to note that the wounded soldiers were not called patients but casualties. The artillery used during the Vietnam War was specifically designed to inflict massive, multiple injuries. As well as the guns there was also napalm, white phosphorous and "antipersonnel" bombs. Napalm and phosphorous burned skin right down to the bone. Add to this the fact that the country's small size, plus the use of helicopters to airlift the wounded (who in earlier times would have died en route) to a hospital, meant that the wounds were more vicious than in previous wars and there were more soldiers to treat.

Orientation for the nurses usually consisted of being thrown into bloody "hell." According to Kohl, "The surgeon threw a pair of scissors at me and said, "Don't just stand there. He's going to lose that arm anyway. Cut it off." and so I did. And I remember the sound of the arm hitting the pail. That was the end of my orientation" (Walker 237)...

... Nurses tell stories of working in surgical wards in Vietnam and, on their return, being shunted to the hemorrhoid ward. They missed, as the men did, the sense of camaraderie that developed during their time overseas and missed, too, a chance to share their experiences with someone who would understand...

... Women who had served in Vietnam exhibited the same symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that men were experiencing, feelings of isolation, intense anger, an inability to get and keep jobs, prolonged bouts of crying and depression...

If the men found it hard to get help for their trauma disorders, the women's needs were not even acknowledged. Most were cut off from traditional channels of help. Women who had been with the military for awhile, quickly learned that the Veteran's Administration had a history of ignoring women. Those who tried to join established veterans' organizations were often denied membership or shunted off into the ladies' auxiliaries. Furthermore, the force behind the organization of Vietnam veterans was all-male, and combat was the central issue. Civilian women,

even those who had worked with military support organizations, were legally ineligible for government compensation or benefits and technically ineligible for counseling at Vietnam Veterans' centers...

...Women's roles have evolved over the years from being essential but supplementary forces in the military during wars, to being active participants. They are now regarded as an integral part of the armed forces and if they have not achieved total parity with the men, it can only be a matter of time.

Works Cited:

Marshall, Kathryn, *IN THE COMBAT ZONE*, Penguin Books, New York, 1987

Walker, Keith, *A PIECE OF MY HEART*, Presidio, Novato, 1985

IN THEIR OWN WORDS - (first person accounts)

Rhona Marie Knox Prescott, Third Field Hospital, 616th Clearing Company, 85th Evac, ANC – “That tent became our surgery. It was beyond primitive; it was beyond the MASH movie and TV show. It was dirty; it was a non-sterile environment. We didn't have enough instruments. We didn't have enough hands. Needless to say we shared things during surgical procedures that were absolutely needed to save lives, but they weren't sterile. We didn't have suction, we didn't have penicillin to irrigate wounds, didn't have enough blood to transfuse, we just didn't have... We did have so many casualties right out of the field. They just brought them all in there. The First Cav. put their people in that staging unit hoping that we could fix them and send them back into the war. So, we were [sigh] way above our heads.”

Address at the Women's Memorial - Jean Youngstrom Diebolt, Air Force Nurse - "We were the most inexperienced group of medical personnel ever to serve in war time. And I was scared--not that I'd be wounded or killed--but that I wouldn't measure up, that I'd panic and freeze when a soldier's life depended on me."

Connie Walker-Evans (Nez Perce), Ret. CMDR, USPHS, ANC 1965-1969 - "I feel bad that I cannot remember their names, but I cannot forget the severity of their wounds and their young faces. Nor the hopelessness and sadness I felt as so many of their lives slipped away."

Memorial Day Address at the Wall - Janet Southby; "Why are you here?" It was easy to tell them the truth: If you were my brother, father, husband or son, I would want to know that qualified, compassionate and skilled American nurses were here caring for you to the very best of their ability.”

Scattered Memories - Lt. Col. Janis A. Nark; "I'm no heroine. I joined the Army Nurse Corps to go to Europe; that's what my recruiter promised me. I was 21 years old when I was ordered to Vietnam."

Lynda Van Devanter - "It's the largest trail of blood leading to the table that I have ever seen. I slip on it because my eyes are drawn to the gurney where several people are transferring the soldier to the operating table. I watch in horror as the lower portion of his jaw, teeth exposed, dangles from what is left of his face. "

A Letter Home, 24 July 1969 - "It hurts so much sometimes to see the paper full of demonstrators, especially people burning the flag. Fight fire with fire, we ask here. Display the flag, Mom and Dad, please, every day. And tell your friends to do the same. It means so much to us to know



we're supported, to know not everyone feels we're making a mistake being here."

Penelope Bolt, 8th Field Hospital (letter home) - "The Tet truce they talk about - well, I'll never get the blood out from under my fingernails."

Journey to the Underworld - "Then, for a number of reasons--including my inability to get along with the Director of Nursing--I asked for a transfer. The Director of Nursing met my request with unbridled hostility. 'I'll send you somewhere,' she snarled. 'I'll send you to the worst hell-hole in Viet Nam.' And she sent me to Cu Chi."

Diana Dwan Poole - "One of my rules was that nurses were not allowed to cry. The wounded and dying men in our care need our strength, I told them. We couldn't indulge in the luxury of our own feelings. On the other hand, I was always straight with the soldiers. I would never say, "Oh, you're going to be just fine," if they were on their way out. I didn't lie."

WHAT THE CAST IS LISTENING TO

Our ladies were stationed in Vietnam during approximately 1966 to 1972. They would have listened to the hits of the day on Armed Forces Vietnam Network (AFVN) For more information about AFVN visit the website www.geocities.com/afvn/multimedia.html.

For another reference about music of Vietnam visit **Battle Notes: music of the Vietnam War** by Lee Andresen at www.battlenotes.com/index.html. Mr. Andersen makes a connection between music and war. The music throughout this play is selected from lists provided by combat troops in Vietnam as among their favorite listened to music.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

(Short answer essay)

1. Was a discussion of the Vietnam conflict a part of your education? If so, what was 'taught' and what impressions did you come away with?
2. Has this play or learning more about those who served in Vietnam changed from your prior impressions?
3. How does this play differ from the typical movies about the Vietnam conflict and Vietnam veterans?
4. Why were official military records of the service of women in Vietnam non-existent or so poorly kept?
5. What are your remembrances of the Vietnam era?
6. Can we learn anything from the 'Music of Vietnam'?
7. Pick one of the websites and describe what you learned from the website.
8. With which character in the play did you most identify and why?
9. What is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and why would veterans of Vietnam experience more PTSD than veterans of other wars?
10. What was the impact of the 'conflict at home' regarding US involvement in the Vietnam War on service men and women in Vietnam?
11. How have the roles of women in the military changed from those during the Vietnam Era?
12. Discuss the impact you felt after experiencing this play.

LAST WORDS

“Many veterans and non-veterans have found their peace at “The Wall” or the Women’s Memorial. It may be a different peace for each, but a peace nonetheless. We hope all find a peace.

“Those who see “The Wall” or the “Women’s Memorial” are sure to be affected. We hope you have been affected by this play as well.

“For those who have been affected; your tears are a universal experience even if you don’t know any of the dead or any of those who suffered because of their personal experiences.”

--- Cast and Crew of “A Piece of My Heart”