KH: It is May 23, 2006. I am sitting here with MaryLu Brunner in her home in Edina, Minnesota. We’re doing an interview for the Women Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project for the Minnesota Historical Society. I am Kim Heikkila. I am the interviewer.

MaryLu, can I start us off by asking you to say your full name and spell the parts that we think need spelling?

MB: It’s MaryLu. It’s spelled capital L small u. All my life, there’s been an o in there, even in the military. But it’s MaryLu, middle name is Margaret, maiden name Ostergren, O-s-t-e-r-g-r-e-n, married name Brunner, B, as in boy, r-u-n-n-e-r-.

KH: And you are an Army Nurse Corps veteran?

MB: Correct.

KH: Just to get some basic information down, tell me the dates of your service.

MB: I was in the military on active duty from September 1967 until July 1969. Returning home, I then joined the Reserves, the 5501st General Hospital at Fort Snelling and remained in the Reserves until September 1976. I believe there was at least one break where I took a year off, left, and came back. So those were about five service years in the Reserves.

KH: What were your dates of service in Vietnam?


KH: Where were you stationed in Vietnam?

MB: I was in Pleiku, Vietnam, at the 71st Evacuation Hospital.
KH: Certainly, we’ll come back to all of these things as we go throughout the interview, but I wanted to get that basic information right at the beginning. Why don’t we just start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up?

MB: I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at the Swedish Hospital, to a Swedish father and a German-Irish mother. I was born in the spring of 1945. My sister always jokes a bit that my older brother was born and he started the war and I ended it, meaning World War II, of course. I grew up in South Minneapolis. That sounds like a very large area, but our little neighborhood was almost like living in a small town. You knew your neighbors very well. They were the people that you grew up [with]. People would stay in the neighborhood for absolute years. You went to school with them. You went to church with them. You just got to know everybody. It was like an extension of your immediate family.

My parents married in 1932, and they had two boys in 1937 and 1939, and that was my older brother Carl, and then Wayne. Then I came along, as I mentioned, in the spring; April of 1945. Then my sister, Bette Jane, was born in November of 1947. So there were two of each. My dad said that was a perfect family. My folks didn’t leave the neighborhood till we were all adults. They also, when they moved, just went to a home that was easier to care for, but they stayed in Minneapolis. I went to Catholic grade school, St. Albert the Great. I went to Catholic high school; the Dominicans started Regina, an all girls’ school in Minneapolis. I went there, and from there I went to nurses training. That happened to be in Little Falls [Minnesota], St Gabriel’s School of Nursing. I had also looked into St. Mary’s in Minneapolis and applied to both. I kind of found it intriguing to go away from home, so I went to the boarding school, if you will, in Little Falls. That was a three-year diploma program, which was really popular at the time.

I remember that we did have recruiters come to the nursing school and explain the programs for us, that they would help us financially pay our school bills and then we would give them so many years of service. But at that time I wasn’t quite ready to make any kind of commitment, so I chose not to do that. There were just two of us from our class that actually went into the military. I graduated from nurses training in 1966.

My father had never served in the military because he was partially deaf. So he was 4-F. But his brother-in-laws served, and friends, certainly, and I could tell that he always respected the military. He was the one that I remember saying, “Why don’t you go to the VA [Veterans Administration] Hospital?” [Spoken with a trembling voice] This is where I get kind of soggy-eyed. He said, “They deserve a good nurse.” So I did, and I worked at the VA for a year. I really think that that was part of the reason I joined the military. I remember when you walk in the front door—this would have been the old building, which has now been taken down—it said something to the effect that, “Freedom is witnessed here.” In other words, you walk the halls and this is the pay for our freedom, the veterans and what their sacrifice meant. Really, in a year, I decided that might be something I had an interest in. I had friends who started college, stopped college, and we had always talked of traveling together. It didn’t seem as though those plans, our dreams, were going to be reality. So I thought one way to see the world was to join the military.
At that point, both my brothers were in the Navy Reserve and had been for many years. Of course, back then, if you want to call it selective service or draft, every man had to serve two years, so they did serve their active duty, and they remained in the military, and they both retired with well over twenty years. So I knew about their experiences. I had uncles and neighbors that were in the war, but they never talked about it, so I didn’t have a whole lot of input from any of them.

KH: In World War II, the uncles and neighbors?

MB: In World War II, and two aunts that served in World War II. Both remained stateside. But no one really talked a lot about that. But the military was present, I think, in our life growing up in Minneapolis, so it didn’t seem unnatural to decide to go into the military, and certainly not after serving at the VA, working at the VA for that year. I was touched by a lot of the vets that I worked with and really liked those old guys. I often think, “Now you’re one of those old guys.” [Laughter] They were about this age when I started there as a young nurse in 1966.

I knew Vietnam was going on, but I can’t honestly say it was . . . It wasn’t significant in my decision. I wasn’t thinking about going to Vietnam when I joined the military. When I went to basic training and got to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio [Texas], that was rather interesting, because as those six weeks progressed and we were learning military jargon and how to wear your uniform and salute an officer and saw all these interesting films, learned to march, it became evident before the six weeks was up that a whole lot of people were being sent to Vietnam right out of basic training. I thought . . . hmmm. [Chuckles] So then, of course, you paid a little more attention.

KH: The recruiters had come to school, but you decided not to do it then.

MB: Correct.

KH: You graduate. You work at the VA for a year, and then you decide, “Well, hey, this would be a way to travel”?

MB: Yes! And see the world.

KH: Now, do you go to a recruiting station and say, “Here I am, I’m reporting for duty”?

MB: Yes. Come to think of it, that’s exactly what I did. I must have talked to them over the phone, and I’d probably had a personal interview, and I must have had a physical. I can remember having a physical by the Army somewhere downtown Minneapolis. It [the recruiting station] was right on Lake Street. There was a building around Fourth Avenue and Lake, somewhere in that vicinity. There was an Army nurse recruiter. My mother and my sister and I went. That’s where I took the oath of office, and had a picture of myself taking the oath of office there. After that, it was just basically waiting for orders. That would have been the spring of 1967.
KH: When you were doing this and you go down there and say, “Here I am. Take me,” did they say, “Get ready. You might go to Vietnam”?

MB: No.

KH: Was there any discussion of Vietnam?

MB: No. No. Like I said, I’m aware. It’s beginning to be in your face at that point in time, but not as much as it was in the height, which was 1968, 1969, 1970. That’s when it was at your dinner table every night on the news and in the paper.

KH: If they had said to you when you reported to this recruiting station, “Well, it’s very likely that you’ll be going to Vietnam,” what do you think your response would have been, your reaction?

MB: Hmmm, you know, I do not actually know. I was raised on watching World War II movies, really, truthfully. I probably wouldn’t have given it a great deal of thought. I don’t know that I would have thought that was a bad thing. If they needed me, then that was the place to be. Now, I have a friend who is in the Navy, so really, this is something that may not sound right, but I remember my brother (who was a Navy corpsman) would tell me that the nurses didn’t do anything in the Navy. The corpsmen did all the work. I can remember saying to him, “Well, then, I’m not going to join the Navy. I’m going to join the Army, because I’m going to be doing the work.” I can remember making those comments along the way. Smarty, as I was. That was one of the reasons behind it. But no, I think, like I say, it became evident during basic training. It’s kind of amazing to me now when I look back that I even decided to do anything at all on my own and just go. There was no buddy system. I was on my own. I just got on the plane and took off. When I got to Fort Sam, they didn’t have a place for me on base, and I ended up rooming with two other gals in a motel off base. Then I think they sent a bus or car or something. There were so many. There were well over three hundred and some people, medical service people, being trained. There were huge groups of people that went through there every six weeks, and they ran out of space. I just did it. I guess once you sign up, you don’t have a choice.

KH: They just kept the ball rolling and there you go.

MB: I don’t remember ever thinking it was a bad idea. Yes, you just get on the plane and you do it.

KH: Going back a bit . . .

MB: Sure.

KH: Tell me a bit about what your parents did for work.

MB: My father worked at Flour City Paper Box, and that was on Plymouth Avenue in North Minneapolis. He bused there. He was a box cutter. They used to have Minnetonka Moccasins
and Dayton’s and tons of orders. They did the actual box; cut the box and formed it. He worked there for well over forty years. I think his education would have taken him through part of his junior high. I don’t believe he finished high school. Mother, I believe her schooling stopped at the end of eighth grade. She was at Assumption Grade School in Richfield. It might have been Bloomington then, the Richfield/Bloomington border. She worked in restaurants, I know that, over the years. When she went back to work after my sister and I were born, I was in fifth grade. Bette was in third. She went to become a cashier, and she worked at several grocery stores in the general area.

Like I said, Dad bused; mom walked. She didn’t have a car till 1960. My dad never drove. He drove when he was a youth, but he never drove as an adult, and they didn’t own a car until the 1960s. So we did a lot of walking, actually. The bus and your feet, that’s how you got around. They were always there to encourage us, but as far as nursing, it was just something I always thought I’d want to do. My dad, he would be home, of course, on the weekend. He’d go back to work on Monday. He’d come home every Monday night sick. Later, we put it together that he’d no doubt had a chronic sinus-type problem from the dust at work. So when he was away from it, he was okay, but when he went back to it, then he was ill. When I was a little kid, I used to get his slippers, hot water bottle, blanket and pillow. I kind of took care of him. It just seemed natural then that nursing was part of that.

As far as encouraging us for higher education . . . My oldest brother went to Dunwoody, and he became a tool and die person, and later ended up selling products as a salesman related to blades and different instruments, that sort of thing, working his way up to president of his own district. He did that for many years. My other brother did go to Mankato State. He also spent I don’t know how many years for sure, but he went into the Maryknoll Missions as a brother for a couple of years. When he came from there, he was considering nursing, but ended up becoming a Minneapolis policeman. Then I was the one that went into nurses training. My sister went to St. Catherine’s [College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota] for two years. She was thinking library science. After two years, she went to work for what’s now Ceridian, and was Control Data, and has done secretarial, office-type work, for her career. Actually, she is now working for Maryknoll Missions as secretary and running the place in St. Paul.

KH: So education was something that your family, your parents, valued and encouraged?

MB: You know, it’s not like I can remember being sat down and directed in any way. But I think it was a quiet encouragement and I think they were always behind us. I remember some discussions, but I don’t remember them ever saying, “You can’t do this.” “You should do this.” “Go here.” “Don’t go there.” I think we were somewhat free spirits from that standpoint. They did try, I think, to show us that there is a reason people go on and try to better themselves a little bit. None of us have college degrees either. These other trade schools and the three-year programs, that’s what was out there for us, too, even then. Even in high school, you had a counselor, but in the all-girls school, I can’t honestly say they ever encouraged us to become doctors, lawyers, physicists. I’m sure they didn’t close any doors to us, but I don’t remember being offered a whole lot of other ideas. We just said, “Well, we’re not ready to get married. Don’t want to be a nun.” They would have offered us that. Like I said, nursing was something I
just thought all along would be a profession you could carry with you and do for many years; it
was portable.

KH: Very.

MB: Yes.

KH: You said that you went to Catholic school.

MB: Yes.

KH: How important was your religion or being Catholic to you or your family as you were
growing up?

MB: Very. I think we were a very close family. Mother was one of seven; six brothers and
sisters. They were all in the Minnesota area, suburbs but in the area. My dad had one sister.
Family was important to him because, when he was born in 1905, his father was gone within
three months. His dad died in 1906. His mother died when he was fifteen in 1920. So it was his
sister and himself. His sister was four years older. So at nineteen and fifteen, they were kind of
on their own. You know, there wasn’t any kind of a system. I’m sure, set up back then like there
is now, for aid to children and all that. They just peddled papers, those little flyers they used to
hang on the doors, and whatever odd jobs they could get. I believe my aunt was the one that
started work at Flour City Paper Box and then encouraged my dad to join. I’m not sure how old
he was when he started there.

She would have encouraged him to stay in school. I don’t know whether she ever had much of an
education. I don’t know that. I think she always was his overseer, and then, later in life, when she
aged, he took care of her. My aunt did live with us until I was born—I believe it was when I was
born. She was there, Mom, Dad, and the two boys. Then it was like six years gap between
Wayne and myself. Then the house, you’re talking eight hundred and some square feet probably,
a tiny little three-bedroom home. Then she went to a rooming house in the area, but she was
always an important part of the family, as were my Mom’s brothers and sisters and our cousins.
The holidays were important. You celebrated everything: people’s first communions, baptisms,
Fourth of July picnics. On Memorial Day, you went to the cemeteries. There was a lot of ritual
and I think a lot of family celebrations. We were close-knit.

KH: Did you have, when you were growing up, a sense of being an American and that there was
something important about that part of your life?

MB: It was important to be an American and be proud of it. I think because people did
automatically tend to serve their country back then . . . I realize now that wasn’t a choice they
had, but they did it, and so it just seemed so natural. Patriotism, I think, along with God, it was
important. It was more kind of that you learned by osmosis. I don’t know that anybody actually
said it was important. You just realized it was an important thing. The flag was always
important. As children, we did do the Pledge of Allegiance at school as well as a prayer. My dad
was Lutheran, and, although Christian, stepped away from being active Lutheran. He did not stay in the Lutheran Church, but he also did not join the Catholic Church. He retreated, you might say, and then he let my mother . . . He had to give permission at that time, in those years, to be able to raise us Catholic. He was the one that could never quite understand why you would get anything less than an A+ in religion. [Laughter] He’d push you on your prayers and all this stuff. We had to learn everything by memory. “I just don’t get it. They’re going to Catholic school and they’re not getting A’s in religion.” Oops. We could get A’s in everything else, but that one you had to explain if no A. [Laughter] He was tough, Dad. That was just a given. My sister joined later. She came to Regina with me. My brother Wayne went to high school at De LaSalle, but the oldest one went to South High School, so he did not stay with the Catholic system.

KH: You were born in 1945 and were growing up all through the peak of the Cold War. Was that part of your consciousness at all? Did you hear discussions about Communism and the Soviet Union and that whole sense of the Cold War?

MB: Yes, because of the Wall going up in Europe. We had like political affairs; I can’t quite remember what they called that class in high school. We were trying to stay on top of all of that. I think there’s a certain busyness people happen to get in their life sometimes, that they put some of that behind them. You’re correct. I would have been very small during the Korean War. I was aware of war and what it was, as I said, because of TV, which of course wasn’t . . . We didn’t even have one until the 1950s, at some point in time there. It was an awareness. All of it was an awareness, and yet we were still at some form of peace, you might say. We knew there was something looming, because in the Catholic Church, the Blessed Virgin appeared in Fatima [Portugal], if you will, to the children and left a message with them. She talked about Mother Russia and being able to crush Russia. You had to say the Rosary and all this business . . .

Yes, I guess there certainly was both religion and patriotism. Being an American was important. As I said, my family came from other countries, came here, which is interesting, because I don’t honestly know what would have been going on in Sweden. I don’t know that I’ve taken enough interest to look at what was going on. My grandfather came here in 1865, which meant he would have probably come at the end of the Civil War. It was before Ellis Island even. Then Grandma came somewhere in there. Again, he married a Swedish girl. It could have been an arranged marriage. I have no idea. They lived in Illinois. After my grandpa’s death, my father and his mother and sister came to Minneapolis. Why, I don’t totally understand that, either. If they had friends, or perhaps she got a job and worked her way here. She did housekeeping after she came here, and my father purchased the house that she used to work in. That was the house we were raised in.

So it was just a good thing. It was freedom and it was peaceful, and yet, you had the fear. I can remember the drills in grade school. We couldn’t understand why my dad didn’t want to build a bomb shelter. I can remember those discussions. But what about the fallout and all this? How are we going to find everybody? I guess you just absorb so much. Sometimes you don’t consciously realize what it is you’re really absorbing.

KH: Especially as kids.
MB: Especially as kids.

KH: This is also the time, while you were growing up, that the Civil Rights Movement was becoming a major thing. Do you remember hearing [about] or being cognizant of that?

MB: A bit of that, because my brother, during some of the riots and things going on in Minneapolis, by then he was a policeman. So those kinds of things were going on, too, in the sense of the riots. Before that, it was what we saw on TV and what we read in the papers.

KH: Did your family talk about race or the Movement or was it just part of—?

MB: I can remember two summers during training, so that would have been the early 1960s, we worked as practical nurses at St. Barnabas [Hospital, Minneapolis]. Back then, they had tons of nursing assistants, and they were usually big strapping males. Many of them were what we now are calling African-Americans, then black. You’ve changed your terminologies along the way here. We had a lot of them, and we would go out, the nurses and aides. You’d go out for the evening or whatever.

One night, one of the [African-American] aides came to pick me up. He honked, you know. I was going, “Oh! Well, he needs to come to the door. I’m not going out if he doesn’t come to the door. He’s supposed to knock on the door and meet my parents.” My dad just whispered in my ear. He said, “You know, he may be uncomfortable in this neighborhood.” My parents were not prejudiced, and they were very warm, loving people. If anybody would come in, it was, “The coffee pot’s on.” No matter what the dinner was, there was extra. She had a way of just materializing a meal. Oh, my God! I can’t do this. I can’t plan for more than two. Mom was just that way. I don’t think either of them had a bone in their body that wasn’t outgoing and gracious and giving. I don’t know how else to describe it.

KH: That’s a very impressive sensitivity that your dad had to this guy.

MB: Yes. He just said, “He might be . . .” I thought, “Oh, an all white neighborhood. Maybe you’re right. He might be uncomfortable.” So he was saying, “Think about that.” There was talk, too, later on in life when we looked back, that even to have my father become a father . . . We knew home was important. We knew staying in place was important, because he’d moved almost every year in his short fifteen years, until he got to Minneapolis. Even then, of course, they moved till he married my mom. So that was important, and owning the home and keeping it up. He’d come home and pluck weeds out of the front yard.

[Tape interruption]

KH: You were talking about your dad being a very conscientious homeowner.

MB: Right, definitely . . . caring for the property. It was one of the nicest looking houses on the block from what I remember.
KH: What part of South Minneapolis was this?

MB: They were near Lake Street, about Thirty-Sixth Avenue and Lake Street. The address was actually Twenty-Sixth Street and Thirty-Fifth Avenue, like seven, eight blocks to church [St. Albert the Great Church]. Mom worked along Lake Street, so it was four blocks to Lake Street. Then Dad was about a block from the bus, which he would take to North Minneapolis. It was South Minneapolis, and it was white at that time.

In fact, I think my first connection with black America would have been when I took the bus to Fourth Avenue and then over to Regina on Forty-Third, because we’d pass Central High School. Our high school was built in, at the time, what you might have referred to as the black neighborhood. We had two African-American, black, gals in our class. That was probably some of the first black people I’d even seen. You’re right, from that standpoint, that we grew up in an area and weren’t exposed to that much. Like I said, neither Mom nor Dad ever gave us the inclination that there was something wrong with anybody else. They were just really open that way. I would say neither were prejudiced.

Like I said, the importance of the house . . . that was important to him, and keeping family because of his lack of a home when young. The discussion that we had as adults, later, was he did a pretty good job considering. He did not have a role model. He technically had no father after the age of three months. Now, in my mom’s case, she grew up on what they refer to as a truck farm in Bloomington. They raised produce mainly, I believe, and then that was trucked off to the marketplace. She would have come from what would have been rural, and working the farm, working very hard, as a youngster. Grandpa had, out of seven, only two boys. [Laughter] So all the girls would have worked mighty hard next to them.

The house that we remember is still over on Portland Avenue and Eighty-Second Street, in Bloomington. We remember it as farm when we were kids in the 1950s and into the 1960s. Then the farms were sold off and there are rows and rows of houses now. The house my mother was born in . . . She was actually born in the hospital, but the house she lived in burned, and then the one that was built later is the one that’s standing now. I think by that time some of the children had already gone. Nobody left at eighteen. They left before that, if they didn’t have higher education often and would live in rooming houses. A couple of her sisters, like I said, they did waitressing, that type of work, worked in the kitchens. After marriage was when Mom worked in the grocery stores. I think they did a lot. They did a whole lot. Their job history, I’m not sure that I could even repeat what the job history was, but they did a lot of stuff.

KH: Also while you were growing up, did you have any sense—how will I put this?—that you had a different life ahead of you than your brothers because you were female? Was there any sense of what it meant to be female in either your family or this country or personally?

MB: Hmmm . . . probably no. I can’t say that . . . I thought of myself as someday probably marrying and being a wife and mother. I can’t say that was a goal, but that was something I think our generation would have looked forward to. Those were the natural stepping stones: religious life or marriage. Otherwise, I can’t say that I felt . . . There were certainly duties around home
that seemed to stress female: the cooking, the cleaning. The man of the house is the one that cuts
the grass and does the painting or whatever, the exterior. But, see, my parents did both. Mom
gardened. Dad usually, by the time we were in grade school, he was home before she was. He
would come home and she might have a casserole or some such or some pork chops sitting there
for us, and we would all kind of work together. My dad, he did it all. He’d start the dinner, and it
was ready when she got home, because she wouldn’t have sat down till probably about 6:30.

So they shared. I saw that. That didn’t happen afterwards when I married or I didn’t think so.
[Laughter] I saw marriage as the two working together. Truly. It wasn’t such a division of labor.
So maybe that role model didn’t make me think I was a woman and had to stay depressed and
couldn’t go anywhere and couldn’t seek higher education if I wanted to do so. Like I said, there
wasn’t a lot of talk about, you know, pursuing many degrees or pursuing money or anything of
that sort. It was you have to do what you like to do and dedicate your life to doing what you like.

KH: Speaking of choosing what you want to do for your life, what year did you graduate from
high school?

MB: In 1963.

KH: This was the [President John F.] Kennedy era.

MB: Correct.

KH: Your three years of high school were Camelot and Kennedy. Do you remember that?

MB: Yes. My classmates have talked about this and we think we were in a ‘history of nursing’
class up at St. Gabriel’s, so we were in nurses training in November, and we were so horrified by
the news. I remember we all got up and went immediately to the chapel. Of course, he was the
first Catholic president and, as you said, that whole patriotism thing again, feeling like you want
to serve . . . Certainly, it was a part of growing up. Whether I would consciously have connected
it, it was definitely part of the picture. Yes.

KH: When you graduate from high school, you said you were going to go to nursing school for
the three-year diploma. What’s the difference between choosing a three-year diploma program
and, say, going to four-year nurses training, beside the obvious degree?

MB: Number one, they probably were more reasonable. Financially, they were attainable. You
would have completed your training and been in the workforce quicker. That, I think, was
probably about the only reason that I . . . No one ever painted one picture or the other. I don’t
remember anybody saying, “You really ought to go to the University of Minnesota.” It was just
there and I picked a three-year diploma. It would have meant I could travel quicker if I got out of
school. I could move around. My dad’s sister traveled a lot, meaning the U.S. and Cuba. I think
she was in Canada. She went by herself, and she just did the Greyhound Bus. They would plan
out a trip for her and she traveled all over. She used to tell us stories and show us pictures of
what she saw and what she did. So that was kind of ingrained in me, to see the world. Yes, I
cannot say anyone might have said, “There’s the U [University of Minnesota]. You could do this.” Why I was focused on a three-year, I couldn’t tell you. They were just all over the place. They were hospital programs. Just about every hospital had a program.

**KH:** So part of your training is that you are actually in the hospital earlier on, say, than you might be in a four-year?

**MB:** We started school in September. Capping was October. We were probably on the wards the first year within six weeks, I think.

**KH:** You had wanted to be a nurse for a long time.

**MB:** Yes.

**KH:** Were you satisfied? When you finally became a nurse, was it what you had been looking for?

**MB:** It was. It was, definitely. I thought it was a good program, and we were well trained; although we were a small hospital. I don’t even know back then if we had 100 beds. It may not have been quite that large. So when I went to the Veterans Hospital in Minneapolis, it was 1,015 beds, so it was, wow! And we had equipment and did things that I never saw in nurses training. The very first ward I worked was open heart and chest. So we had chest tubes all over the place, and we had some trachs [tracheotomies]. I thought, “Oh, my God! What’s all this?” I wouldn’t have seen any of that at St. Gabriel’s. There’s a lot of continuing; you just continue to learn. I thoroughly enjoyed my year. Like I said, I really enjoyed meeting the veterans and feeling like I was doing some good. I really did enjoy it.

**KH:** These veterans would have been World War II, primarily?

**MB:** Most, but we did have World War I and Korean.

**KH:** Did they talk to you at all about war?

**MB:** A few. A few would. Not so much, but you would hear the stories, because of the camaraderie between the patients. Back then, we had wards, huge wards. I shouldn’t say huge. Most of the ones that I had were probably four- to six-bed wards. But there were huge wards in the hospital in other areas. Sometimes you would float to another area. You would hear their stories. The friendship, the camaraderie that they had, that type of thing, it was impressive. It was. Most of these problems that they were having, they were related to old war injuries, and sometimes they were just related to getting up in years. Back then, when you would come to the VA, you often went through just about every body system there was. So if you came for a hernia, you might have dentures and glasses before you leave. You’d make your way through the wards and the services, and it was not uncommon to see them . . . You might have somebody that had something done in the spring and then you’d see them back in the fall. It’s kind of like a few . . .
“You’re back for the winter.” [Chuckles] They’d come and go. It was complete service. It seemed as though to us it was complete service and they took care of every aspect.

KH: Did you get a sense that they took care of the emotional remnants of war?

MB: Well, I was very aware that the top two floors were mental health. So we had drugs and alcohol area and mental illness. I also was very aware that a lot of the veterans that we saw weren’t just there for a hernia. They were complete people. There were problems, lots of problems, multiples. Whereas, at St. Barnabas in the summer during training, you may take care of a person that had a minor surgery, and then they were fine, and then they were gone. But that wasn’t the case at the VA It almost seemed a little bit more like what they call long-term today in the sense that they had multiple things wrong with them.

KH: You were there for a year?

MB: Yes.

KH: You said that this was the old building. Was the old building on the same site as the current—?

MB: It’s all on the same land. Right now, that area is open. I don’t know if they’re building anything on it. It was right on the corner of Minnehaha [Avenue] and Fifty-Fourth [Street]. It was eight floors. It was the largest area. Then we had up-above-ground tunnels that led to outbuildings, they called them. There was kind of a circle of outbuildings. I think there were about, I don’t know, maybe five or six that wound out and around. Those were the ones that were taken down for the new building. Then, eventually, the old one came down, too. There were buildings . . . I think Building 1 and 2. They were all numbered. That’s how they did it. One and 2, I think they [were] some of the last to come down.

KH: Did you leave the VA specifically because you were joining—?

MB: The military.

KH: That was the break?

MB: Right.

KH: You said that your mother and your sister went with you to talk to the recruiter.

MB: Right. I don’t remember anything about that.

KH: Oh, really?

MB: I can’t remember much about it, other than we went and they were there for, like I said, taking the oath of office. I had to have visited that recruiter prior to this, but I just don’t
remember a lot of that. Some of the stories I’ve heard, there were promises, and yet I don’t remember being promised anything. So . . .

**KH:** What did your family think when you said, “Hey, look, I’m joining the military?”

**MB:** Well, you know, I didn’t get the impression that anybody was upset about that, except that my sister hated to see me leave. [Chuckles] I think they were proud of that, probably, and at the time they weren’t all that worried about me.

**KH:** And your brothers were already in the Navy?

**MB:** Reserves. Because of the age difference, they’d already done their active duty. We were probably in grade school while they were doing their active duty. At this point, if I joined in 1967, my brother was married, the second brother, Wayne. He would have been married in September 1967, just before I left for the military. My older brother, they went to [Las] Vegas [Nevada] and married and had a reception in 1968, which I would have missed. I think it was July 1968. They were involved with wedding plans and starting families about the time I joined the military.

**KH:** Do you remember ever talking to your brothers about their own experiences in the military?

**MB:** No, just that awful comment my brother made about the nurses. [Laughter] One time, I called the oldest brother, Carl, and told him that I was going to volunteer to go to Vietnam. This was after my first duty station. He said, “Oh! You *never* volunteer in the military! Never. Never. Don’t do that.” Well, it just seemed to me that it made sense, because I was aware that Reserve units were being called up. I had two brothers that were recently married, and both had children by this time. I, somewhere along the line, must have been told that they don’t send two from the family. When I heard that, I just thought, “It kind of makes sense. I’m here now. I’ve been trained. Why pull my brothers out of their family situations? So I’ll go.” Thinking, in a sense, that I was protecting them. They were that much older and their particular units they were in, fortunately, were not called up—unlike today.

**KH:** Yes.

**MB:** They would have probably been there three times.

**KH:** Yes, totally different.

**MB:** At the time, that seemed to make sense. My brother, one time he told me later, “I don’t know why . . . You used to call me and you’d ask me for my advice, but you never followed it.” “No, you’re right; I didn’t.” When they said, “Where do you want to go?” I said, “Vietnam.”

**KH:** So you volunteered?
MB: I volunteered. When I was in basic, I had that sense that I might be going anyway. From basic training they said, “Where do you want to go?” I signed up for the surgery or operating room [OR] course. Something told me if I was going to go, I wanted to go as an operating room nurse, so I signed up for that class. In a sense, I knew, too. When you signed up for that class, that was where you would be going, because they needed people there. I felt the extra training would make sense.

KH: That was at Letterman [Army Hospital, San Francisco, California]?

MB: That was at Letterman, and it was supposed to be a six-month course. It was about five, I think. We started in January and I think we were sent home in May, for that month. We had a break before going to our duty assignment.

I met two other nurses in the platoon in San Antonio. We were alphabetized, so there was an Overstreet and an O’Hare and an Ostergren, so the three of us kind of got hooked up together. Katie O’Hare and I both signed up for the class. We were actually in Letterman just after Thanksgiving of 1967, and the class didn’t start until January. We both signed up for the class at basic, and we were assigned Letterman, as was our friend Nancy Overstreet. She went to Vietnam before we did. She went over, I believe, in January of 1968, so we would have some correspondence with her during our class. We kind of knew a little bit. She couldn’t tell you not to come, you know. [Laughter] She was not in surgery at the time that she went into the military. I can’t remember how many years she’d been out of surgery, but they actually put her in surgery, too, so all three of us were surgical nurses in the end. We still are in contact with each other. We weren’t in the same hospitals.

KH: Did you like the military? I mean in your first experience at Fort Sam?

MB: Well, that was a fast course. Actually, the surgery was a fast course. I actually think if there had not been a war going on, I may have stayed in the military.

KH: What did you like about it?

MB: Well, you met interesting people from all over. I think your intelligence was tested in the sense that there were tons of courses and learning experiences. You could hop around the globe if you wanted to spend a career in the military. Once having been in Vietnam, by the time my year was over, I didn’t want anything to do with the military. I needed a break. I needed to leave. I wasn’t so sure that was where I wanted to be. Then, shortly thereafter, I actually was giving some thought to rejoining. That’s about the time I met my husband and we were married just over a year after we met. So probably then, at that point, that wouldn’t have been on the table anymore. I wouldn’t have joined. I had a taste of it staying in the Reserves like I did for a while.

KH: When you’re at Letterman for this course, what kinds of patients are at Letterman?

MB: We had all kinds of patients, and we had returning Vietnam veterans, certainly. I was assigned, for those two months before training started in the OR, to the officers’ ward. That was
both surgical and medical, if I can remember right. They were all a lot of young people coming back with their war injuries, various things: back injuries, legs. I did not see—which later was something I had a lot of trouble with—head cases, head injuries. But my friend, Nancy, who went over in January, she was on a neuro [neurological] ward at Letterman, so she was very aware of all the types of head injuries that occurred. She was caring for them in the rehab [rehabilitation], and that sort of thing. You know, you talked to people, et cetera. You were aware of it. You worked with it. You just did it. I don’t think you’d dwell on it or gave it a whole lot of thought. Those two months just flew by. Then, like I said, we were five months, always in surgery and learning instruments, et cetera. Then we were training the corpsmen.

KH: Who were then going to go over, basically, in the field, the medical personnel in the field?

MB: Right, or in the hospital, like we were. It had to be some time when I was short and didn’t have much time left in country, one of the corpsmen came through that I’d trained. So that was kind of interesting, you know. I enjoyed that aspect. I enjoyed the training part of it. I really did. That one-on-one. I couldn’t see myself as a teacher in front of a class, but one-on-one, I enjoyed that. We probably had six students apiece.

KH: With the patients that you’re seeing in the OR course, do you have a chance to get to know them at all?

MB: [Chuckles] No, not really. We did pre-op visits where we went to talk to the patients prior to their surgery. We would have had dependents, so we would have had females as well as males and, no doubt, children. And we probably scrubbed on all aspects of the human body, as far as what surgeries we did. It was a lot like a large metropolitan hospital; that’s how I think of Letterman.

KH: Did it serve you well? I mean did you feel prepared once you got to Vietnam?

MB: No. [Laughter] Well, probably if I had been in the emergency room or what they call today a trauma hospital, we might have been a little more prepared. Even the films we saw were mostly related to previous wars, obviously. I don’t remember seeing any films on Vietnam. We may have, but they didn’t mean a whole lot. I hope they’re doing a better job. There was no way. I don’t see how they could prepare you for that. I really don’t. We had the technique down. We knew the instruments. We had the technique. We knew how to drape. No, we were not prepared for what we saw there. There was just no way.

KH: Once you volunteer . . . Okay, you’ve done the thing at Letterman and you say, “I’d like to go to Vietnam,” do they just say, “Yes, okay. That’s great. We’ll take you,” and off you go?

MB: I’m trying to think. We probably had to, towards the end of that class, so maybe a month or so before, fill out this form. They probably, no doubt, brought it to us and said, “Where would you like to go after this?” One gal said, “Germany,” and she went. Everybody from our class eventually, I understand, went. We must have had nine in the class. I think they eventually all went. I did run into one of the fellows that was in our class. I was on my way to R&R [Rest and
Recuperation], leaving for a week, or something, and I ran into him. Beyond that, yes, they just
would give that to you. Then when the class ended, you could apply for leave, which I took (the
thirty days) to go home. I think most everybody did. Then [we got] orders somewhere in there.
After you fill that form out, then they send your orders. So we got the orders.

**KH:** How did you feel when you got your orders?

**MB:** I was looking forward to going home. [Chuckles] I was just ready to go home for my
month. I don’t think we even talked about it that much. I’m sure my parents were scared beyond
belief. I would be, if it was my kids now. Then, I was too stupid to know. Yes, I’m sure they had
some sleepless nights. I never gave that a thought.

**KH:** They never said anything to you directly about it?

**MB:** No. No. I went to make a will before leaving; although I didn’t have anything. [Laughter] I
had the clothes on my back and a few bric-a-brac. I just didn’t own a lot. I think I had a sewing
machine, portable sewing machine. I went to see the lawyer and told him where I was going. He
did say that, “Well, you really don’t have anything.” [Laughter] So I don’t think there was a
formal will. I think it ended up, basically . . . Maybe it did. I don’t have a copy of it. It would
have basically said everything was left to my parents. I remember putting a note on a box that
said if I didn’t return . . . Oh, God! My sister said my dad found that and he just about had a . . .
All this little crap in this box and it says, “If I don’t return,” blah, blah, blah. “Oh,” Bette said,
“that was bad news.” The day he came across that box in the closet. I said, “Well, I just wanted
to make sure . . .” I think intelligently you knew you might not return. But you just stuff
everything and you don’t think about it. I came home and had a good time visiting all my friends
and had a number of goodbye parties.

**KH:** Your friends were all supportive of this idea?

**MB:** Now, that’s a slight problem. [Sighs] I don’t have long conversations with my friends about
any of this because, after I had taken my oath and was in this ready stage to go into the military
in 1967, one of my good friend’s brother was a Navy corpsman, and he was killed in Vietnam.
So because of that, we don’t say a whole lot. We just don’t talk about it. What are you going to
say? [Sighs] I don’t think she’s asked a whole lot of questions and, socially, when we’re together
as a group, we don’t say much. I might tell them some little story here and there, but we don’t
talk a lot about it. When I was writing letters home, my oldest brother, the one that said, “Don’t
volunteer,” he wrote me and he said, “Don’t write to Mom and Dad telling them what it’s like,
what it’s really like.” So I stopped telling people what it was like.

**KH:** You had, initially, been really honest about….

[Tape interruption]

**KH:** You were saying that when you wrote home, you didn’t tell your parents about the attacks?
MB: No. He said, “Don’t write all that because you’re scaring Mom and Dad.” I assumed they told him or he read a letter or two, whatever. Then I kept them a little bit, I suppose you could say, lighter. I would talk about, oh, I went to this post or that base or whatever. We had dinner here, had dinner there. Did this. And kind of kept it lighter. Probably the last six months I was writing things like, “I’m sending home a PACEX Catalog, Mom. Pick out some china.” Or, “Pick out a camera or whatever it is you want.” “I’m going on R & R. What do you want from Thailand? What do you want from Hong Kong?” I read my sister’s letters, that’s how they sound. She kept them. No one else kept them, but she kept those letters. They’re just little snippets. There’s not a whole lot about war so much. When you think about it, who does want to read that, though, you know? It’s pretty hard to put into words, and it doesn’t make for conversation at a cocktail party, and it’s tough . . . it’s not easy to write about or read.

Like I said, I wrote tons of letters and I got tons of mail and CARE packages. Those are the kinds of things you just kept thinking about, and the world, and when you’d be back there, and when you would be leaving this insanity. You looked forward, because if you didn’t, it was too depressing. But when you did that, you almost felt a little guilty, too, because it was like you weren’t trying to make this not important. There was a certain way that you had to kind of block it out to survive. I’m sure that helped me, initially, to write . . . Oh, I would just describe the post and stuff like that, but I’d leave some of the painful stuff out.

KH: Before you leave the U.S. for Vietnam, how did the military prepare you for the fact that you were going to a war zone?

MB: They must have given us a list of things to bring, because I remember having a . . . What do you call those big bags?

KH: Duffel.

MB: Duffel bag. We had one of those, and they suggested that we bring one other bag and the duffel bag, so you kind of put all your belongings that you thought you’d need in there. Now, I did bring some civilian clothes. It was going to be hot. [Chuckles] So my mom made all these little A-line kind of like sundresses, I guess you could say. She made a bunch of brightly colored ones, and I suppose I had slacks or shorts or whatever, T-shirts in there and pajamas and toothbrush, pretty basic stuff. I remember leaving. I think you had to fly in Class-A’s. Then at some point in time we had to put those little summer uniforms on. Then when you got there and arrived, that’s when you were issued your fatigues. Then you basically lived in your fatigues and your jungle boots. They had kind of an area of cloth that would breathe, rather than solid leather. You were issued those and then you wore those. If you went to church, if you went out for dinner some night or something like that, then you had another change, and you could dress up.

In the Highlands, I remember, it got very cool at night, so I was writing for sweatshirts and sweaters and stuff like that. So Mom would send me stuff. I remember asking for candles, so I’m thinking we must have had power outages and needed candles. [Chuckles] I didn’t happen to dye my hair. That wasn’t a problem. I’ve heard people say, “Whoa, I couldn’t find any Kotex. I couldn’t find any tampons.” So perhaps I either got all those supplies I needed at our little PX
[Post Exchange] or I was having regular shipments. If we found we were in need of something, we could write the Sears people, order right out of the Sears catalog or, again, order things right out of your little PX. I don’t remember thinking I didn’t have anything to wear. I don’t have anything to do. Those were not major problems; I don’t remember them being problems. I think I conformed real quickly to just wearing the military uniforms. Then, in my case, I just had a short walk to work, and you would put on your surgical gowns, so it wasn’t a problem having what you needed as far as once you were there. I don’t have the list, but I’m sure there was a list of important things to bring. Obviously, your orders; you always carried those with you.

KH: Did they tell you about the war or the people or the country of Vietnam?

MB: [Sighs] They probably told us it was the tropics and what kinds of things we would need. Back in basic [training], we actually did visit an encampment, if you will. They called it Camp Bullis. There was an area that they set up to look like a little Vietnamese village, so that would have been one introduction to what this was supposed to look like, I’ll have to say I wasn’t in awe of the rural, as rural as it was and how cramped the little towns were and the muddy streets and no electricity and no running water and no toilets flushing. I would have to say I had only read about such places in books, so it was quite interesting to actually, physically, be there. It was hot, because we came into the south, Long Binh, so it was hot and sticky and dusty. I think I probably ended up in—if you can say it—a nice place. In the Central Highlands, as I said, it would cool in the evening and actually get a little bit on the cold side.

KH: You leave in June?

MB: Yes.

KH: Then arrive in June of 1968?

MB: Yes.

KH: Tell me about that flight over.

MB: Long, tiring, boring. Nobody talked to each other. I think everybody was petrified. The only other nurse I remember being aboard was Katie, who had gone through the operating room training course with me.

KH: So you did travel together?

MB: We traveled together to the country, to Vietnam. Otherwise, I think it was mainly G.I.s. I’m sure we chatted a bit, but I can hardly remember. It was a twenty-three hour flight, and it was miserable.

KH: Commercial airliner?
MB: We were commercial. I think I was on Continental one way and Braniff on the return. Yes, commercial. They’d feed you. They woke you up every so often to feed you. I just remember it being long and tiring and uncomfortable.

KH: You said that people were petrified? Were you? Do you remember being afraid?

MB: Yes. It’s totally unknown. You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into. This is it. Now you did it. I think Katie and I were both frightened. I just do not remember a lot of small talk at all on that plane. I remember landing without a lot of incident. I can remember being bused. I remember the buses had the grills on the windows, but, knowing me, I wouldn’t have thought much about what that all meant either. I just know it was hot and sticky and dusty. We did stay . . . I’m trying to remember. I remember seeing air-conditioned trailers. I cannot remember if we stayed in one. We were there for a night, I think, part of a day and a night.

They had to process you in. We met with the nurse in charge, you might say, of all of the Vietnam hospitals, American hospitals, Army hospitals. The only thing I really remember out of that meeting was she showed us where the hospitals were on the map, and she told us where she could use, in our case, operating room nurses. [Sighs] I can remember Katie saying, “I’d like to go to the beach, because I grew up in Southern California on the ocean.” I think she went to Chu Lai, and that was on the water. I said something like, “Well, I’ve never seen the mountains, so I’ll take that one up there in the mountains.” And that was the 71st in Pleiku. That was how we were assigned. We were asked where we wanted to go. I know other people had different situations where they were married or engaged or they had good friends, so they may have made requests based on that. We just literally made a request based on the geography.

KH: You didn’t consider sticking together, the two of you?

MB: No. I think we were fine going our separate ways.

KH: So what is your first day like in Pleiku?

MB: Well, before we got there, I would have met a couple who were married on my way there. They were going to Pleiku, as well. We’re still friends today. I met them about the time we were boarding the plane, and I think we went to Qui Nhon, if I remember right. We were there for a night, and then went to Pleiku. A lot of where you were dispersed to depended on the time of day that you were leaving and things like that. I think we had a night in Qui Nhon, too. So once I started talking to them, you kind of felt like you knew somebody. So you weren’t totally alone at that point. We were put on cargo planes with hardly any type of a seat or anything, C-130s, I think. We would fly various places when we were moved around, which obviously wasn’t often, but if you went on R & R and that sort of thing. Sometimes, if you were the only nurse, you would go to the cockpit and sit with the pilots, but we were just kind of hanging out in the back with everything else. I don’t remember much being on that plane. It’s just a few of us. So we were transported to Qui Nhon, and then later the next day into Pleiku.
I can see our post. I can see where some of the buildings were laid out. I remember, obviously, being taken on a tour. And certainly the operating room was part of the tour. You were probably introduced to a zillion people. You were assigned to quarters. We ended up, the couple and myself, in the same billet or quarters they called hootch. They were just sort of bleak, green. We had seven rooms to a hootch and one bath. So we had private rooms with locking doors. For the Army, it was all green. It wasn’t olive drab; it was kind of pukey sea green, just blah. We all had the mosquito nets. We knew about the malaria and that we’d be taking anti-malaria medication. Before going, we got every shot in the world. Before we left, that’s all part of it, preparing us. Like I said, our uniforms. I think we had a small dresser, a bed. I had a little flip-up table and could write my letters there. I moved to a little bit nicer room when one of the other gals went home; I moved down the hall and had a little better writing desk. About all you did is play a little music. I remember taking a radio with me, transistor type, portable type radio. It was just sort of an introduction.

Again, it was a dusty place. If you looked out, you could see the mountains in the distance and it was really pretty to fly in, but once you were there, you were just kind of like at a plateau. It was just a big dust bowl with concertina wire wrapped all the way around. I remember it as like a few city blocks each way. We did have paved roads; I believe they were paved. The 18th Surg [Surgical Hospital] was on the other side, and I think that might have become ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam]. We had radar stations and the Air Force was nearby. Engineering was nearby. There were all these other posts or bases around us, scattered around the hospital. These buildings or hooches reminded me of little cabins in Northern Minnesota, lining the sidewalk. We had sidewalk and we had huge ditches on either side, trenches on each side of the sidewalk, which later I found out was for the water, the monsoons. We were kind of on a hill. Then we went down towards the chapel, crossed over to, again, sidewalks with covered walks. There were covered walkways, which led to the Quonset huts.

Our area was a big cross Quonset hut type thing with surgery and I think X-ray was in there. The recovery room was there. The emergency room was there. Then the other buildings were all the wards. I think we had six or seven wards. I’m not sure how many they housed. I can’t remember that. We had five operating rooms. We took care of all of our instruments. We would set up the packs and clean everything. The packs or cloth, that was all done in Central Service. All these areas were in Quonset huts. Everything was surrounded by sandbags about yea high. The enlisted were then on the other side of the hospital; their quarters were down hill. There was, like I said, a chapel. There was a little PX. There was an officers’ party room, I guess you could say, on our side. There was a theater on the other side and whatever else they had down that way. I remember going to the theater a few times. We actually had a pool, an outdoor pool, which I probably went to twice. We had a volleyball court, which I probably went to twice. [Chuckles]

When I got there, we worked eight-hour days. Then we took call. I’m guessing, in just a month or two, we then went to twelve-hour days. Sometime in the first few months that I was there, I requested to go on nights and worked mostly nights. I think we had to rotate days periodically, but, for the most part, I worked nights from maybe August or so on, or even September on, until I left. One of the reasons I did that was because we tended to be up anyway, so if you worked all day and went to bed, you awoke because the sirens would go off. You would hear this
whumping-type noise as they were lobbing various mortars and whatever into the area. If you were in your hootch, you then would scramble under the bed. The bed was a twin-size bed, but it was like a wooden plank on wooden legs, up off the ground, so you had the thickness of that plus the mattress. You’d get under there. And around your perimeter, as I said, you had sandbags. That was where you went in an alert. I thought, “This doesn’t make sense.” You work all day and then you’re up all night anyway, so it just seemed to make sense to just work nights, and it was okay with . . . plus, you didn’t have anybody in charge of you. [Laughter] You were the one in charge. I had, usually, five or six of my corpsmen and myself. I liked it better.

KH: What rank were you at this time?

MB: I went in country as a second lieutenant. Then, within a year, you were a first lieutenant. So by October we would have gotten our first lieutenant bars. It’s just kind of automatic. You go in as a second and come out as a first.

KH: This is an evacuation hospital?

MB: Right.

KH: Which means what?

MB: Basically, our goal was to try to . . . They came to us as quickly as they could get them to us from the field or field hospital.

KH: So they may have come directly from the field or had already stopped at a field hospital?

MB: Depending on where they were, where the firefights were, where their camps were, what was going on. They’d come by helicopter or ambulance. They’d come through the ER and be triaged. When they came to us, the idea was to stabilize them, to do everything we possibly could to stabilize them. Then in recovery, as soon as they were stable, if they were minor injuries, if they could be returned to duty, I suppose from there were moved to the wards. As they recuperated, they would go back to their area. Many of them, obviously, would not return to duty. So as soon as they were stabilized, they would try to send them out. We did sometimes bring someone back if they had a lot of frag wounds . . . We would have debrided them and cleaned their wounds up. You don’t close them. You just stuff their open wounds with a lot of gauze called fluffs. Just fill them up and wrap them up with gauze strips, and they would come back and forth for that debridement. Once, like I said, if they were stable and there wasn’t anything we were going to do more to them, they would go to Japan or back to the States. That was the idea: to bring them in to stabilize them and send them home as quick as possible.

KH: It’s different from a field hospital in that you have greater capabilities for surgeries?

MB: Right. I never saw a field hospital. Other than in a movie, I didn’t know what . . . I’m sure they did some surgery, what they could, stop a bleeder or whatever. But for the most part, yes, I wouldn’t think they would not have had quite as much . . . we would have had more equipment,
more lifesaving equipment. Lord, I can hardly imagine . . . Ours was probably very archaic, if you compared it to today, the high tech we’ve got out there today.

**KH:** Yes.

**MB:** We would have saved far more lives today. It would be interesting, to a certain extent, to see in Iraq what our military have over there today. Some pictures I’ve seen, they kind of look like tents or Quonset huts. That kind of looks familiar, a little déjà vu there when you look at them. We had pretty basic equipment; some suction, and of course we had anesthesia. We had the same instruments as stateside. Sometimes we didn’t have the nicest. They weren’t the best or weren’t in the greatest shape or we didn’t have enough. You’d run out of things and supplies. Sometimes we would.

**KH:** How many medical staff are there working in this hospital?

**MB:** You know, I’ve never been very good with numbers, but I think we had something like forty, roughly thirty to forty; nurses on what would have been six to seven wards, plus surgery, so somewhere in there. We were a mix of, of course, female and male. We also had nurse anesthetists. Medical service officers and, oh, they must have had a lot of corpsmen because the wards were good sized, a lot of patients. Sometimes there might only be a nurse or two, but they had quite a few corpsmen, I think, working the wards.

As far as getting to the wards, about the closest I did would be to move our wounded out of surgery to a recovery room. If there was an alert some night, we would often go to recovery to help take the mattresses off the empty beds and lay them across the wounded because of shrapnel, the possibility of shrapnel, and injury. So we would protect them that way. If they could get under their bed, we’d help them down under their bed. It just kind of depended. I don’t remember tons of people, but there had to be quite a few, because you had your office personnel and motor pool, and the colonels, the CO’s [commanding officers] and XO’s [executive officers] and the head nurses. Then in surgery, we also would have had a head nurse and a charge nurse, a supervisor and head nurse.

**KH:** You said you also had male nurses?

**MB:** We had male nurses and female nurses—in surgery, at least.

**KH:** I’m assuming mostly female nurses?

**MB:** I only know of two in my year, two female nurse anesthetists. The rest were male nurse anesthetists. We had anesthesiologists, as well. Those were all male that I remember. There were two male nurses when I got there, and I worked with at least two other male nurses in my year in surgery. Female nurses, I can probably remember four that I can think of their names that I worked with. Like I said, I had five or six at night and myself. Then if we got really, really busy, what they called a push, then we would call people back in if we couldn’t . . . but we would tend to be able to handle that as long as we had somebody to scrub, and then I would circulate
between the tables. Obviously, if we didn’t have all five running, we would have that extra corpsman running around. We would call for help if we needed it. There was a head nurse. I think they referred to them as a supervisor, and then a head nurse. I think they used those terms.

KH: Was it a racially diverse group of medical staff, also?

MB: Yes, I’d say we had a mix. Yes, people from all over. In the case mostly of the corpsmen and the young men, they were in the middle of their studies or maybe they had a year or six months to go to become a pharmacist or what have you. The military trained so many of them in the medical profession, but who knows what their profession may have been? They aren’t necessarily in medicine today. I’m sure some went on to be doctors. I had heard one of them did. We had folks that joined the post office and went back to school and who knows what they all are doing today?

KH: How would you describe the relationships among yourself and your colleagues?

MB: We didn’t have any major problems that I recall. I think we all really worked hard as a team. You know, you weren’t supposed to socialize with the EMs [enlisted men]. We did some anyway, if you could keep that private. We just did that. You would have your little parties or we’d celebrate people’s birthdays and things like that.

I can remember one of the doctors who had this great Italian meal planned for us. Up on the officers’ side, there was a building that was like a recreational center, but it was hardly ever used. There was a kitchen. A bunch of us were up there one night, and he had all these fine ingredients he sent for, and we were getting a big pot of spaghetti, whatever, and getting together. Because we were surgery, he asked everybody. I kid you not, I think we were a few minutes from sitting down to eat when one of the big wigs came in to say, “Break it up.” That was difficult, because it was to be a morale booster.

When you were down and you had nothing to do, it was a boring place to be. There were times when you could leave and you could go downtown Pleiku. Whoopee! [Chuckles] Or you could, like I said, go to dinner at some other club or something, and the movies and the pool. You know what I’m saying? There wasn’t a whole lot to do. You’d sit around and talk, obviously. People would sit around and drink and write home and read each other their letters and talk about what they were going to do when they leave and go back to the world. You’d make your own fun. In the hootch even, we’d play board games and things like that, cribbage, maybe with patients. They’d play checkers amongst themselves. Somebody would be sitting with a book. Somebody else would be playing checkers if there was nothing going on. I’m sure those were all things we weren’t supposed to do on duty, but it’s pretty difficult to keep yourself out of mischief, I guess you could say.

I think we kind of leaned on each other, and I think we pulled together to do the best we could. I’m sure there were lots of times when it was kind of tough on people. You could go back to your quarters. You might find one or two nurses there to sit and talk to, but you might find the whole place empty, because they were all on duty. They might work the opposite shift. I didn’t
see quite as much of my hootch mates when I went on nights. A couple of them were in charge of the wards, so then they would tend to work the day shift. Like the couple, we’d go out to dinner a few times and socialize. But once they got into their married hootch and I was on nights and they were on days, we didn’t see [each other] as much. You had what they called Hail and Farewell parties, so you’d have little gatherings to say, “Hello,” and “Goodbye,” to people, just like you did stateside. Those were ways of having something to do. They always had music on at the officers club, so dancing. There’d be dancing in the other clubs, as well. They’d have entertainment. They would have bands. The one I remember most was actually a Filipino band. Then they did lip-synching. So it was good fun from that standpoint. You just learned to dance in combat boots, if you were on post. As women, you were invited to parties, periodically. I always saw to it that I went with my married friends. [Laughter] They’d see to it that I got home. They took care of me.

KH: That is something that I have heard other women that I’ve met talk about and in just some of the books that are out about the nurses in particular who have served, that there was quite an expectation of women sometimes, to be kind of these social partners on their off-duty hours for men who hadn’t seen American women very much.

MB: I went to a couple of gatherings, but that’s another thing I got to forget about, because if you work nights, you’re not free. So it was a little easier that way. You could avoid doing that if you didn’t want to. Like I said, then if I went with my married friends, they . . . There was one crazy Air Force guy that used to call me, periodically. I can’t remember, to this day . . . You know, he just wanted to talk. I think he just wanted to talk. We had a phone….

[Tape interruption]

KH: You were talking about talking to this guy from the Air Force.

MB: Yes. I’m assuming that I must have met him at one time, and then he would just call and we’d talk. He kept saying he wanted to come over. [Chuckles] I’d say, “No. No, thanks.”

KH: Did you have any tense or uncomfortable situations with men who maybe wanted a little bit more out of a relationship than you did?

MB: Hmmm . . . For the most part, I never got in over my head, which is a good thing. I’m sure if I had been more receptive, it’s a possibility. I remember taking one of the male nurses home, walked him. I think we were at the club one night. We would have parties in the hootch, literally in the hallway between these rooms. There wasn’t much space. So we had some potlucks in there and stuff like that. You could come in one door and go out the other. But, anyway, we marched in one door, and he stopped at my door and I said, “No,” and then we just walked out the door, and I walked him down to his quarters. He was married. I love the guy to this day, and I’d love to see him and visit him and know that he’s okay. I knew. He had just had one too many. There wasn’t any interest on my part, and I’m not saying I was a saint, because there were people that I had crushes on. It was common, because you cling very much to . . . Who else is there except the people that you work with? You work with them. You play with them. You’re there with them.
all the time, twenty-four hours a day. So there were a couple corpsmen that I really fancied, didn’t go anywhere with that. One night, one of them was crawling along the sandbags trying to find my window. I had a major, by that time, next door to me, and I heard her—I mean, paper-thin walls—say, “Next window.” Thank God, she didn’t get him in trouble. He could have gotten in deep do-do doing that.

KH: Because he was enlisted?

MB: Yes, and he was in the officers’ area. There were people, maybe you’d write to them after they left for a while, and then it would all just fizzle out. I did the same thing. I came home and I remember getting some correspondence, but I don’t remember anything lasting very long. It’s almost like you closed your door on that chapter of your life or something, and then you kind of moved on. I actually did come home engaged.

KH: Hmmm.

MB: The last few months I was there, I met a Green Beret. We dated, if you want to call that dating. [Chuckles] I did come home engaged, but he had six months left to do, and I think one of the reasons that maybe didn’t go very far was because he wanted me to stay six months, and I said, “I’m out of here. Thanks, anyway. I’m gone.” I left in July. He came to Minnesota and met my family and friends and all in December. Then I went in January, over New Year’s, to meet his family. He, actually, was raised by his grandparents in Casper, Wyoming. We were disengaged by February. I met his wife later on in that year, because I did the Reserves in Colorado Springs, and that was his first duty assignment back. So I met his wife, who was really a nice gal. [Laughter] I kind of wish we had kept in contact, because it would be neat to know what happened to them.

This is strange. The relationships are strange. I admire those folks that could have gone there married or married there and still be married today. That was one thing I remember: his wife saying to me, “The one thing I wish I had experienced is what you and he experienced,” which was Vietnam. She said, “I will always feel that there’s something lacking, because I don’t know what that experience was like.” I just think that there were a lot of liaisons that probably couldn’t have gone too far. It was clingy at the time, but then . . . just kind of unreal. The whole place was a bit on the unreal side. I admire the people I worked with, and if I have nothing more to say . . . They kept me as sane as I feel I might be, you know, today. It’s because they just all pulled together to do what they could.

KH: Did you explicitly talk about the danger you were in or the stresses you were feeling by way of supporting each other or was it kind of in unspoken ways?

MB: I don’t specifically remember saying a whole lot about it, except, of course, I think everybody’s adrenaline was going if there was an alert. It was more some comments in passing. I would say we didn’t sit and talk about it a lot. There might be certain patients that certain corpsmen and nurses would have to know about and follow up on, and they might share that. But I don’t remember a lot of conversations about it. It was almost more like you tried to get away
from it. You couldn’t really get away very far, but it was kind of like you would prefer to kind of get away from it. Although, like I said, you ended up seeing the same people on your off hours as the people you worked with, because that’s the only people that were around.

You would make your own fun, like remembering the birthdays. We would do the birthday cakes in the electric fry pans.

**KH:** [Chuckles]

**MB:** You might do potlucks and share your boxes from home, things like that, have a little treat for whatever reason. The corpsmen, at Christmas, we put our heads together and came up with gag gifts for, as I remember, it was everybody in the OR. But, to this day, I do not remember what that number was. We had a short timer’s calendar, which was like three sheets, so if you added them all up, I guess you’d get an idea of how many were stationed there at a time. Just kind of as a morale booster . . . Somebody brought in a couple branches from some tree that we decorated and made as a Christmas tree, that sort of thing. I remember it was quiet Christmas Eve and we did go to Midnight Mass. We were able to do that. For whatever reason, we didn’t have Midnight Mass at our chapel, but the Air Force base was close, so we went to Midnight Mass and got back.

I sure wish I could see her . . . Our head nurse, we pulled a gag on her, because we weren’t busy. We called her up, dragged her out in the middle of the night. We used to get a sheet, an 8” x 10” sheet, with the name of the patient and what the problem was as they came in from the ER. Then we knew what to set up in surgery. We wrote Colonel Claus and things like this. How did he come? By sleigh with reindeer, things like that. I’ll tell you, she just flew out of bed and then she put [on] her work mode and she never even looked at that. To this day, I wonder what she thought. She went whipping in there ripping open stuff, getting everything set up, and we’re going, “Oh, I think this went too far.” Now, she was in charge of us, but she never bothered to make a big stink. She didn’t get us in trouble. We could have gotten in trouble.

**KH:** So a pretty compatible working relationship.

**MB:** Yes.

**KH:** Do you remember any instances of tension or conflict?

**MB:** I overheard a few. I never had to write anybody up. I overheard a few. They would make our corpsmen work twelve-hour shifts and then sit at the guard gate. So it was not unlikely that someone may doze off and be written up. Like I said, they’d go home with a sheet of paper, a general thank you for your service type of thing. Not that anybody cared about the medals, but that was sort of a slap in the face. I know a few that had that happen to them. If you just got in trouble once or twice, then it was like they had you pegged as a troublemaker. What else were they supposed to do? I suppose that was their job. We were not regular Army. We were not, obviously, dedicated. We were really hard workers, from that standpoint, but we were not dedicated to the military.
KH: Would it be fair to say that your identity was more as a nurse than it was as a military person?

MB: Yes. I think I thought of myself as a nurse, yes, not so much that I was military. I was probably never real military.

KH: Did other patients, for example, or other people treat you that way as well? Did you sense a distinction because you were nurses and not—?

MB: Yes. Actually, we probably were treated as female and nurses. I think most of us were in the same boat. We were people who came in to do this job. I’m sure plenty of them stayed in and went on to have military careers, but most of the people in charge that I personally knew were flexible enough with us not to cause tons of problems.

One of the biggest problems I have found is when people ask you, “Oh, what was it like over there?” It’s like, “You better sit down, because I’m not going to be able to tell you in twenty words or less.” It is a difficult question to answer. I used to jokingly—because *M*A*S*H* came out, that nutty movie—say, “Well, it was a little bit like *M*A*S*H*, but we didn’t have a PA [public address] system like they did when they would tell everybody what was going on in the compound.” Then they’d laugh and then they’d go off, and I’d say, “Thank God.” [Chuckles] My husband had a job with an insurance company for a while where we socialized with the cocktail hours and dinners. He was very proud of the fact that I had served in the military, and he’d tell everybody. I said, “Don’t do that. I don’t want to talk about it.” It’s not something you can just say a few words about, you know. And nobody wants me to describe what it was really like anyway, to be honest.

I just wish every president would read every book ever written so they’d never start another war. It’s asinine. It really is. It’s awful. It bugs me to think that we’re there again. I’m not saying that people aren’t deserving of help. Honestly, they need . . . but oh, my God, I don’t know. I don’t know. I wouldn’t have believed that I could have ever hated anybody as much as I hated the people that made us go to that war.

KH: Really?

MB: Yes.

KH: Politicians, you mean?

MB: And the people of the country. They didn’t do anything, meaning there were so many innocents and we took care of many of them.

KH: Vietnamese people?

MB: Yes. You just wanted to pack up these boys and go home. You couldn’t imagine that you were doing any good, at times. You just thought, “What is the purpose of this?” We all went with
the idea that we were stomping out Communism and freeing up the people. That was why I thought we were there. Then we were there to mend our boys and bring them home. But, wow! The destruction to land and homes and country and people that didn’t even know what was going on. Then you didn’t know who was who anyway. There was the Vietnamese and then there was the Viet Cong and then there was the North Vietnamese and then there were the people that were helping them. You’re just saying, “Wait a minute. This doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

KH: So your view of the war itself changed while you were there?

MB: Yes. Yes, I think so. I never thought it would have come out of my mouth, but when [President Lyndon] Johnson was bombing the North, we had very few casualties. So I think, “Then he should just keep right on bombing.” And you’re not thinking about what the bombs are doing to the land and to the people. You think, “How could that come out of your mouth? Aren’t you supposed to be Christian and loving of all and lay down your life?” I don’t know. It was hard to put into words, but I just thought, “Bomb the heck out of them and end the war so we can go home. Why should we have any more limbless people coming in here, and people with half a head and no eyes and, oh, dear God? Why? For what? This is an icky place and I want to go home.” You could actually find yourself sort of, after a few months, just drifting down into the pit, and then you think, when they say, “War is hell,” they mean it. This is truly kind of hell over here.

KH: Into the pit meaning—?

MB: You’re just slumping down there thinking . . . You’re calling them names and you’re hoping they all disappear. You just get upset with the situation and you don’t see any end to it—and it didn’t end. Like the folks that went into, say, World War II and came home five years later, that’s a heck of a long tour. But they got the job done and went home, so we thought. Then we go in and stay forever. You realize later how long it had been going and the how long it kept going on. You think, “I’ll go to war, and then we’ll come home, and it’ll all be over with.” But that wasn’t the case. It just kept going.

KH: You are talking a little bit about the people of Vietnam. What kind of contact did you have with Vietnamese people?

MB: Mainly, they had jobs on our base, so we might see them working in supply or they would be working in the PX stocking shelves, I suppose, things like that. We had them doing our maid service, if you will, our laundry. Our hootch had a mamasan and a babysan, so a mother-daughter type. I don’t even know if they were related. They would sweep out the place and do our laundry for us. If you didn’t want them to clean your room, you would just lock your room and leave your laundry at the door. You certainly may have some contact with them, but not a lot. Especially working nights, we didn’t go to the mess hall much. Maybe you’d go for breakfast. Maybe you would go to town to get away and eat a meal or just kind of . . . I didn’t get to the point where I could communicate, but you do a lot of pointing. [Chuckles]
I remember touring the hospital. I remember it was bombed out. It would be Pleiku’s hospital. I’m not sure if I remember patients there. I just remember seeing what was left of it. Maybe later they did have civilian patients there as well. We did operate on a lot of children. They might have some congenital problems that we would repair surgically. Of course, sometimes they would be injured and we would repair . . . We had a mom—I wasn’t there the day she gave birth—give birth when I was on R & R, and I came back and got a picture of myself holding her twins. I think she had triplets, if I remember right, but one died. We had birth. We had death. And we had wards of Vietnamese that a lot of our nurses cared for. If they had somebody in surgery, you’d go out the doors and they’d be camping there. The whole family would be there. They might be cooking a little something. They’d be camped by the bedside. From that standpoint, you would have some interaction with them, but not to the point where I felt like I ever got to know anybody. In my heart, I knew it wasn’t them I hated, but it was just the situation.

KH: Did you ever treat any ARVN or even POWs [prisoner of war]?

MB: Yes, we had a POW, one that I remember for sure, because I remember he was burned quite badly. So, basically, under anesthesia, we would have debrided him, wrapped him, and sent him out. I don’t know what happened to him. We did get a call one night, because they had a short-wave radio type thing, that said they were bringing in two NVA [North Vietnamese Army] that were injured, but we never did see them. So we heard stories about what happened to them, but I don’t know what happened to them; they didn’t show up [whispered]. Yes, we would occasionally have prisoners.

KH: Was it hard to treat them?

MB: I don’t think I ever thought of that. They were wounded. We never had an incident, to my knowledge, where we were fighting over a surgical bed that we would take a wounded [prisoner or enemy] in place of a G.I. or something like that. I don’t recall any incident like that that I had to get upset about or get involved with. Like I said, I know we did treat them, certainly, but I don’t remember them being any major problems.

KH: Kind of shifting a little bit here . . . How safe or, perhaps, unsafe did you feel during your time in Vietnam?

MB: Obviously, except for incoming, for the most part, I felt safe. There were times when they would not let us leave the compound, because they did say there was activity in the area. So that happened occasionally. We were under maybe it was Orange Alert or something where we couldn’t leave. We were, most of the time, too involved and too busy with what was going on, once I started working nights, to be too into the incoming. We were aware of it, obviously, and we took our flak vests and helmets to work. It’s not that I wasn’t afraid. I’m sure I was, but I don’t remember that a whole lot. I do remember we seemed to have alerts frequently, and most of the time at night. We did occasionally have alerts during the day as well, but it was pretty rare. I mean, there wasn’t much between you and whatever was falling.
We did have a rocket come close to the Colonel’s quarters. He had a trailer up the hill from us, I think, and some big old rocket landed next to his trailer. There were a lot of close calls. We figured, at some point, that somebody, who we thought was on our side and was employed by the Army, knew exactly where all these buildings were because those mortars and shells would fall pretty doggone close to either the OR or some surgeon’s hootch. You know what I mean. They were close to the buildings. There was injury but not when I was there. It was just before I came. A corpsman lost a leg. The Sharon Lane incident [First Lieutenant Sharon Lane, the only nurse to lose her life as a result of hostile fire in the Vietnam War], which was where my friend was stationed, that happened after we left country. That would have been June 1969, I think, so about the time we were getting ready to leave. I didn’t even hear about that until after we got back. I think that was June 1969 or July 1969. It’s like you were aware, but I can’t say that I was always thinking about that.

If we did worry at times, that maybe some little fiasco we were doing or got into some trouble, we would just sit there and say, “Well, and what are they going to do to us?” What’s the worst thing they could do? Send you to Vietnam. We’re already here, which means they would extend your stay a little bit or something like that. I think had we been regular Army and been in the military for a while, we probably would have had a different attitude. I actually think that the Army probably got some good workers for at least the year I was there. [Chuckles] Yes, we worked hard.

KH: Tell me about your average workday, either your average workday or a particularly memorable workday.

MB: Hmmm . . . Well, there were some that were just as long and boring as there were the ones that were ultimately busy. You could often come to work and have very little going on. Maybe they were finishing up a case and you’d have a little something, altercation. You might have one or two and nothing until the wee hours of the morning. Then they’d start coming in towards daybreak, that sort of thing. Then there’d be times when you’d barely walk in the door and the place was full, and we had them stacked in the ER coming our way. So we had just as many long days as we had long, boring, very few cases, days like that.

When I first got there, it was easy to, you might say, call the individual by his name, find out where he was from. You’d read the chart, and you’d say, “So and so is from Wisconsin.” “Oh, yes, a Minnesotan.” You’d have all this little kibitzing done, a kind of connection, but then that got pretty tough. As I realized how awful and devastating those wounds were, it was harder for me to know that John was from Wisconsin. I’d rather think that he didn’t have a name and I didn’t know where he was from. As hard as the OR was, doing what we did and living through that, one of the toughest things in the end was not knowing any of my patients. I didn’t know them by name, and I didn’t know what happened to them. So many of them, you knew that they were . . . There was a multiple amputee or they had lots of internal injuries or whatever the situation was, and you just thought, “I’ll never know what happens to them.” That was kind of tough later, because I really didn’t know anybody.

KH: Later, like even after you got back?
**MB:** Yes. Yes. Afterwards as things started to happen, and people were a little more interested in Vietnam, and things with the Memorial were coming up and the Wall, then you kind of wondered, you know. You looked at the peak of that Wall, when we were there in 1968 and 1969, and you look at all the names and you think, “Does that mean everybody that went through there is on that list? Did they all die? Did they come home?” Then you’re starting to see that, no, we’re here and grateful for what you did, and this sort of thing. Until that point, it was easier for me not to know them by name and not to follow them to find out what happened to them.

**KH:** Not to follow them even after you were done with them?

**MB:** Yes. We would take them over to the Recovery Room, and we’d know that they’d be gone within twenty-four hours to maybe three days or something like that. I just kind of cut myself off that way, because I thought it might keep me sane. Yet, like I said, that’s kind of the heartbreak part of it, too, is that you then don’t know what’s become of anybody. [Sighs] There’s only one person that I happened to meet in Washington who asked if we were at the 71st. I think how he asked was, “Are you nurses?” We said, “Yes.” He said, “Did anybody support the 4th Infantry Division?” I said, “Yes, I did. I was at the 71st.” Then he named the date that he came through our OR and it was evening, and I thought, “Well, you know, I don’t know where else I would have been, so I think I was there when you came through.” We’ve kind of communicated. He calls me his nurse, but I mean, as far as personally knowing him, no. When you’ve got five rooms going and there’s a constant turnover, you don’t tend to know them in any kind of a personal nature.

The closest I came to that—and I still don’t have a name—is one doc came running through the doors and we had all the rooms going, and there was a young fellow, his leg was gone way up into his cavity, chest cavity. He was, you could tell . . . His eyes were already glassy, and [the doctor] was yelling to get this room open. We had a little room that, at one time, they said it would be a dirty room. Yes, right. They’re all that way. But it ended up being a storage room and it didn’t have everything in it, and it wasn’t set up for us to get at. I think later they opened that one up. And he died. The doc, you know, he’s wanting to do everything he can, and he’s yelling, “Do this. Do that.” Our hands are like that. There was nothing we could do. You knew he wasn’t going to make it to the table. That was probably the more personal closeness that I had versus someone who knew a name and worked with someone on the ward, got to know people that way. I’ll never forget him, even though I don’t know his name. [Whispered]

**KH:** You said earlier that you didn’t feel prepared for what you faced.

**MB:** No.

**KH:** Tell me why or what was the difference between what you were doing in Vietnam versus Letterman or—?

**MB:** Well, the majority of the things I scrubbed on or circulated in the surgical suite, they were all extremely clean, fairly routine, and you made the incision. In Vietnam, a lot of times, they were already made and you were extending incisions that some foreign object had made. They
were traumatic injuries and everything was filthy. It was full of dirt and grass and who knows what.

**KH:** Everything on your patient?

**MB:** Yes, on the patient. We had just multiple frag wounds where little pieces of metal would get in legs or arms or any body part. They would extend that incision to clean out that piece of metal and rinse. Abdominal parts were torn and displaced. Head injuries. Facial injuries. Jaw injuries. I mean, we had dentists. We had eye doctors, neurosurgeons, orthopedics, chest surgeons. They all would help each other, because a lot of times someone had multiple problems. As I said, they weren’t a simple hernia. Those things didn’t happen too often.

[Tape interruption]

**KH:** We were talking about the kinds of injuries.

**MB:** Some of the worst that I remember, or the ones that I had the hardest time with, were the head injuries. I chose to scrub on those because we all, meaning the corpsmen and myself, hated them in the sense that they were so devastating. Of course, like I said, we didn’t follow . . . so we may have had some great outcomes, but in our hearts, we were afraid that most of them would never be the same. They . . . oh, it just upset them a lot, so then I said, “I’ll scrub on these,” and it made it easier for them to circulate.

**KH:** The corpsmen?

**MB:** Yes. So then the corpsmen would circulate. We had a really neat neurosurgeon. He was very patient. You always just thought, “What the heck are you picking out of there and working away . . .?” They were just sad. Because I was so afraid most of them wouldn’t live, it just seemed . . . It was . . . They were hard to do, I don’t mean physically. Just mentally, emotionally, they were tough. I met one of my corpsmen at our reunion. It was a year and a half ago. It was the first 71st Vietnam reunion. The 71st, I think, dates back to World War II. But this was the first time that they’d gotten together, and they found quite a few people, maybe thirty or forty of us. I remember making some comment about those; that those were so devastating and hard to take. The corpsmen said, “You know, I can remember that you had tears in your eyes whenever we worked on someone with a head injury.” Of course, I don’t remember that. I just remember, at least on the inside, it felt like I was crying because they were just . . . they were awful. I don’t know how to explain it. They were just pretty painful, as were many others, but those were the tough ones. Most things you thought were repairable and, oh, maybe you’ll be okay without this limb or whatever. But when it was above the neck is when you were concerned that life would be so altered for them and maybe would never be the same. Would they make it home to their loved ones? It isn’t that you didn’t have all these feelings, but I think you kind of went about it almost like a little robot. You kind of did your work, you know, and hoped for the best.

**KH:** I have read—I think I’m remembering this correctly; it’s quite an amazing statistic—that there was something like a ninety-eight percent survival rate for people who were injured and
who got to a hospital. Is that in keeping, do you think? And maybe you don’t know, given the fact that you didn’t get to follow them.

MB: The only way for me to know how many injured even came through the 71st, as an example, you’d have to somehow get a hold of those records. We logged everybody in. We’d have a stack of sheets and we’d log everybody in as to when they came in and what they had done, basically. So there’s a log somewhere. I think they could get them out of the field fairly fast. Many, no, but so many of them, if they made it to the hospital, I do believe that the rate of survival was good. What life was like after you got here is perhaps another thing. There was a young man that . . . My sister dated a fellow that worked over at the VA and he befriended this one fellow that was local here, and we did things socially. He had multiple injuries and later he died, they felt, of Agent Orange.

It’s like for everyone you save, you do save, but how is life when you’re back here? Are they alcoholics? Are they killing themselves with drugs? Are people alienating them because of their injuries? Are they accepted back into the fold or aren’t they? Do they have fruitful lives? Did they marry? Do they have kids? It’s kind of like you sort of worry about them. You just kind of worry about everybody. You aren’t sure about the outcome, but then I don’t know that you’d want to know about the outcome either. It would be a tough one. Those young men may have later been compromised, may have not made it out of Vietnam alive, meaning the ones I was speaking of when I talked about the multiple injuries or the head injuries. If they did, how much of the brain was still functioning? Did they know their family? Their family would see them, but did they know their family? Things like that. It’s just complex. We are complex. Lives are complex. Yes. And it had to be tough on the docs [doctors]. I would have to say that I did not interact as much with the doctors. Certainly, we’d talk a little bit and all that, but I mean I didn’t socialize with them. It was mostly, like I said, the nurses in my hootch or the people from the OR, but just occasionally, like the Hail and Farewell type parties.

KH: Why do you think that is?

MB: I don’t know.

KH: That seems to be pretty common.

MB: I think most of them were a little older, because they would have gone, obviously, farther on into medical school, were established with families and that sort of thing at home. You know, other than, like I said, to sit and maybe visit a little bit or have a Coke or a drink or something at the Officers Club if you’re there for a steak fry, something like that.

KH: We have maybe talked about this a little bit when you were talking about relationships, including male-female relationships. Throughout your time in the military, did you get a sense that you were treated differently, either positively or negatively, for being a woman?

MB: Yes, in a way. There again, it would probably be similar on a ward with the staff. With the staff that I was with, yes, I think. Especially the NCO’s. It was kind of like they were protecting
you. They tried to protect you. I really would have to say I felt respected. I should have been an authority figure, I suppose, but I wasn’t. I was more on the same level and playing field. I don’t think the docs ever . . . they didn’t come in there wearing any insignia either, if you know what I mean. So we were kind of all equals, hopefully. That’s how I feel I was treated, more as an equal. I somewhat felt protected by my little group of corpsmen and the NCO’s, non-commissioned officers, that were in charge of them. It was like a little family. Even when we were out and about, if we were walking someplace or whatever, I would have to say, overall, I felt people respected us. They might whistle if they could recognize . . . You’re wearing the same uniform they are, but they might know you’re a woman.

KH: [Chuckles]

MB: They’d stop and give you a ride or, like I said, the pilots would put you up in the cockpit if you were traveling by yourself and things like that. So, fortunately, I would have to say that experience was good and I do not feel that people treated me poorly. Not at all.

KH: What about the military as a whole? Did you notice differences in pay or rank or promotions or benefits or any kind of . . . This is the time when we’re thinking about sexual discrimination in civilian life.

MB: Right. I would have to say that I probably didn’t notice that. It’s like I said, if you did your job, there were regular promotions. I wasn’t there long enough—it was barely two years—so I can’t say I probably had a really good handle on that. In the Reserves, I know there were some that were fighting for a higher rank. There were a lot of ropes to jump, you might say. They had a lot of further testing. I went on for further education in the Reserves as well, and made it as far as a captain before leaving in September 1976. When I was pregnant with my second child, I decided it was too much of a hassle, so I left. In our days, of course, if you became pregnant you went home and you were discharged. It’s not like that today with the women. I think they have it a lot tougher than we did. I think they have it a lot tougher than we did. I think the majority of us were single. Later on, I’m sure they probably did have some problems, but I wasn’t aware of that many. I think it’s just because of the situation I was in. I was either in school or I was in war. In the Reserves, I can’t say there were any problems. It was two weeks active duty once a year, you know, that type of thing.

KH: You just said something that reminded me of something I was going to ask earlier. People have commented on it to me and I think I’ve read it as well, that it seems that there is a great proportion of the women who serve, particularly nurses who join the military, who come from Catholic backgrounds.

MB: Yes! What is with that?

KH: That’s what I’m asking you! [Laughter] Do you have any speculation about that?

MB: I don’t know. I’ll tell you: we make great military, because if you’re raised Catholic, you tend to have been raised with the fear of God. So then you are in fear of your higher ups, right? That’s the same scenario. Do you ask questions? No. They tell you to do something; you do it.
mean, that’s maybe where I got the word robotic a little bit [earlier]. [Laughter] You weren’t raised to ask a whole lot of questions. I was in high school before I realized that, hey, I actually have a mind here that I should be using. It’s just that when you’re little in the grade school, you’re just told to do this and you do it, and you believe this, so you believe it, and you recite this and you do that. The military is a little bit like that. It’s just the next stepping-stone. Then, the VA, that’s federal government, so I was just programmed until I said, “I’m out of here,” and went home. You know, it might be because so many of the programs, the hospital programs, were religious. If not Catholic, they might have been Lutheran. The hospitals had a religious affiliation. It could have been that time. Those three-year programs were full of young, mostly women, men, too, but mostly women, and that was just a sign of the times. It’s a possibility. I remember reading Linda VanDevanter’s book. Did you read it?

KH: Yes.

MB: Home Before Morning, I think it is. Oh, my God! I was horrified, because that’s my hospital she’s writing about. Well, she starts out, and I’m reading the first part, this Catholic upbringing, blah, blah, blah, and I’m going, “Oh, geez, I could have been writing this book.” Then she gets to my hospital and of course I’m proud of my hospital, and I know these docs—of course, not the ones after me, but I know them. I’m going, “Who are these people she’s writing about?”

KH: She was there after you, is that right?

MB: Yes. She and I overlapped two weeks, so I would have probably somewhat been orienting her. Part of those two weeks, I think I might have actually been gone a week for my R & R. So we overlapped. I knew who she was. She came in with another nurse, so I know her. We’ve met a few times since. Then when she starts writing about . . . of course, the names are different. I’m going, “I wonder who that is?” [Whispered] [Laughter] I thought, “Oh, this is bad. I shouldn’t read this.” Then it dawned on me, “Wait a minute.” I started reading it again, recently. I thought, “This is not my story, silly. This is her story.” We’re all individuals, and we all experience things differently. We all take it and mull it over. I just don’t even think about it so much anymore.

KH: I have talked to some women who are really not happy with the book.

MB: Yes. Then I read another book [American Daughter Gone to War: the Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam]. The gal’s name is [Winnie] Smith, and there are some similarities, you know. That’s a different story, too. I think she might have come from the same background. Yes, the Army, Navy, whatever, high profile . . . got to those three-year schools. Of course, it was a lot of money for us back then, but it just seems like it’s atrocious what they want out of you now. If we just wouldn’t have any more wars. I kind of wonder how the Reserves will fare in the future, and the National Guard; they are really whopping them. We had so many more military back then than we do now.

I mentioned the patient that I ran into, if you will. I can remember when I wrote to him . . . I think a person can be proud of what they do, but then, on the other hand, you know this is a
team. You didn’t do this alone. So I wrote long pages. I don’t know, it must have been ten pages. It was a really thick letter. I explained all the people he would have met on his way through, and what a team effort it was. I think that’s how most of us look back on it. Fortunately, I had a really good team of people, and those people come and go. I might have worked with somebody a month and then they’re gone, and then somebody comes behind me, and they maybe they were somewhere else, so they do six months and they go. But your lives are intertwined. I feel like they’re family. They may not remember me, but I remember them. They were pretty important in my life. As I said, I think I could have been really crackers if it hadn’t been for that group of people leaning on each other.

KH: Maybe you have in part already answered this question, but what was the best thing about your time in Vietnam for you?

MB: [Sighs] What’s the best thing? Well, I think that pulling together people from all over who don’t know each other, pull together and do as much as you can. I never heard anybody say, “I’m not going to do that. I’m not going to do that. That’s not my job. That’s not in my job description.” Maybe they thought, “Oh, God! Not another one,” but they didn’t complain. At least, I didn’t hear them complaining. They just pulled together and did, I think, the best job that could have been done under the circumstances. I’ve always prayed that the majority of those people all made it home, all made it back here. I think that camaraderie or family-like pulling together . . . You were all kind of in the same boat and you really worked hard.

The worst part about that experience was the results of war. All of our people and how they were devastated, but you’ve devastated the Vietnamese countryside also and all those people and families. No matter what color you are, no matter what your eyes look like, whether tall, short, fat, black, green, people are so all the same. It makes no difference. They all have loving family members. They have little kids to care for. They have a life to try to build, a home to make. Just the mass destruction that we do to countries, it’s just awful.

KH: At what point did you start seeing it in those terms?

MB: Oh, about a few years ago. [Laughter] No, I’d have to say probably after I was gone, after I came back. It’s not like I was . . . I suppose there were certain points of depression and hatred and all that, but at the same time, you kind of catch yourself and say, “Hey, wait a minute.” So probably shortly after I got back.

KH: By the time you left Vietnam the beginning of July 1969, what were you thinking about the war?

MB: The sad part was realizing that it was not over. You just don’t go to war and end it. You think you’re going to go to war and then it will be over, and it’s not. I think the thought that that just kept on going and . . . yes, that was tough. I didn’t personally know of anybody who went back, but I’ve talked to people since that then came back. Some stayed in the military and went back and others came home and got out and then decided to go back. Some people re-upped while they were there. My one friend from California, she stayed an extra six months, and then
she went home after that. My extension was two weeks. I stayed two weeks extra so that—I was under the three months—I didn’t have another duty station.

KH: Oh, okay.

MB: In other words, I did twenty-one months instead of twenty-four months in the military. Where were we? I’ve blocked.

KH: Your thoughts about the war when you came home.

MB: Yes. I’m sure I still classified it as insane and a horror. I really would have to say that I would have gone crazy if I hadn’t kind of stuck it away. I didn’t bring anything to speak of home from the war in the sense of anything material. My mamasan, I left her my shoes, my big, black, ugly shoes. She wanted them. I said, “You can have them.” Anything I didn’t want, I just left piled on the bed for her when I left. I didn’t really take souvenirs to speak of. I had a few little things, but I just wanted to leave.

KH: Was there anything that was hard or sad about leaving?

MB: Yes. I felt like I was leaving family. There were people, obviously, I had worked with for a while that weren’t going home yet. They’d say, “Oh, you can’t go. You’ve got to stay.” [Chuckles] “I love you, but I can’t stay.” That wasn’t just my fiancé. It was these other people. “No. I’m going. I’m going. I’m running for the hills.” In a way, I can look back and that’s kind of sad, too, because you walk away. If you thought about it, you’d make yourself ill, so you don’t think about it. Then you think, “How can you turn and just leave those people?”—meaning my staff that I worked with—and just, “Goodbye, I’m going. I’m out of here.” Some were probably much better at continuing that writing to them or sending CARE packages and stuff. I think I did that for just a short time. I’m sure it wound down to the point where whoever I was writing to wasn’t there anymore. It was a whole new crew.

Unfinished business. It’s kind of like you say, it’s capped and it’s put away and you’re not going to think about it, but it’s unfinished business. I don’t honestly think there is a day that I don’t think about some aspect of Vietnam, whether it’s a patient or a doc or one of the corpsmen. There’s not a day that I don’t think about that. It might be fleeting, but it’s there. It’s always there. It’s always with me. It’s part of me. Everything is a part of you that you experience, but that’s probably one of those things that’s there. Maybe it’s more like a shadow or something kind of hanging over you.

KH: Tell me about when you get home. Where do you land? What’s your first thing—?

MB: I think it was Fort Lewis, Washington. I came in on the West Coast. Again, it was a commercial flight, long. We might have landed at a military installation out there. I remember getting out of my fatigues, throwing them in my suitcase, putting on the little green summer thing again. They processed me out of the service, because I wasn’t going to another duty station. So I must have come home with my DD214 [Military Discharge Note]. I remember
coming in, changing clothes, and somehow getting a ride to a commercial airline. I would probably have had a ticket. I don’t know if I flew standby. I don’t remember that. I was in communication with my family, so they knew which flight I was going to be on. They were at the airport when I got there. The house they had moved to, actually, in 1967, that wasn’t too far from the airport. Then there was this big sign in the yard. Remember when I said my name was MaryLu, L-u? My aunt had this sign printed up, “Welcome Home, Mary Lou,” L-o-u. “Oh, hi, I’m here. I’ve only been gone . . . How long have I been your daughter? The sign is wrong!” [Laughter] It’s so funny when you think about it. There was all of that, and I felt really good being home. It felt great being home. But, that’s it. That’s it. You were over there; now you’re here. I suppose after a few days, I went over to the VA and I went back to the VA

KH: To work?

MB: To work.

KH: Why back to the VA?

MB: Well, because that’s where I had worked before. It made sense to me to go back there. I just worked part of the summer. Then I’d been in communication, obviously, with my sister and a good friend, the one that lost her brother. We decided that we were going to tour Europe, so I got a leave of absence. I go back over there. They put me to work for the summer, and then I take a leave of absence in September. We were gone till just before Thanksgiving. We just kind of bummed around Europe. Remember, I joined the military to see the world, and I only saw California and Vietnam. Anyway, we traveled a Eurail pass. So I sort of unwound, you might say.

KH: Did you tell them? Were you talking about your time in Vietnam at all?

MB: No, no. No, I just fell right back into kind of life, and I didn’t tell people I was there.

KH: Did anybody ask? Those who knew you were there, did they?

MB: No. No, not really. I suppose there were a few other nurses or something that may have asked. But no, for the most part, no, just went back to work. I was just another nurse at the hospital.

KH: Even at the VA?

MB: Yes. Yes.

KH: Not a lot of conversation?

MB: No.

KH: And you were comfortable with that at the time?
MB: Yes, still comfortable with it. This is uncomfortable! [Laughter]

KH: [Unclear]

MB: Then in January, of course, I went back.

KH: To the VA?

MB: Yes.

KH: How long did you work at the VA?

MB: Twenty-eight years.

KH: Wow!

MB: A lot of that was part time. When Don and I . . . oops. No names. When I didn’t get married in 1970, my sister said, “You know, there’s this dating service and for five bucks, you can fill out this questionnaire and send it in. It’s called One Plus One. You’ll kind of get back into the routine.” Anyway, that’s what I did, and met several people. That’s how I met my husband.

KH: Really?

MB: Yes, so we dated about a year. I met him in 1970. We married the fall of 1971. We had a daughter in 1973 and a son in 1977. We stayed in the general area. We raised our family in Bloomington, basically. We lived there over twenty years. I did work, like I said. Sometimes it was full time. About the time Jackie was born, then, after that, I took a few years off, and when I went back it was mostly part time for the last fourteen years, maybe three to four days a week.

KH: You also joined the Reserves during this time period?

MB: Yes. When I came home, I signed up for a year. I’m trying to remember. I thought I did it in 1969, but because of that tour of Europe, I would have missed some time. So maybe it was 1970. Jackie was little, and I was still doing my two weeks. It was when I was pregnant with Mark in 1977 that I left. I think there was at least a year’s break in there somewhere, from 1969 to 1977.

KH: Why go to the Reserves?

MB: Mmmm . . . You know, it was a connection, I think, with where I had been. One thing I found is that you end up as a teacher, you might say. I thought, “Ah, no, I’m not a teacher.” Remember I told you I’m not a teacher. One-on-one is okay, but not this crowd. I would have to say I enjoyed the active duty part of it, the two weeks. You’d go to various hospitals. We went to San Antonio. We went to Fort McCoy [Wisconsin]. We went to Missouri . . . Fort Leonard Wood, I think it is. We would go to different hospitals. I was just in charge of watching over the
corpsmen and they’d have their assignments. It was fine. Colorado Springs was another one. It was kind of enjoyable, and maybe it was just kind of a connection. The uniforms still fit. I might as well wear them. [Laughter] When they didn’t fit anymore, it was time to leave. My husband traveled in his business and with two little ones, I was looking for my parents all the time to babysit.

[Tape interruption]

**MB:** They encouraged me to stay and do my twenty, but I did say, “No.” I was anticipating a second child. I’m amazed at the women today that can be in and have all those little tykes to take care of. I just had a hard time being away like that. So it was just easier, babysitting and everything, just to not do that.

**KH:** The one thing we haven’t talked about that I would like to ask you about is what you thought about the Anti-War Movement.

**MB:** [Sighs] Well... Obviously, I never came home and got in it. I came home, like I say, mid-1969. I know it was going on, but I did not really run into anything as far as people treating me poorly. I didn’t feel like I had to take that uniform off to hide, that sort of thing. Some of that happened to people beyond, like 1970. They had more problems. In a sense, I was anti-war. I didn’t see any sense in the war. We weren’t doing very well over there. So it made sense to not be there anymore, and yet, the way they ended that one is probably just as poor as what may come out of what we’re doing now. How do you stop something like that? There were so many groups of people involved. It wasn’t just North and South [Vietnam]. That’s not the way it was.

Obviously, I did not get active. I know a lot of veterans have joined Activists for Peace and this sort of thing and Anti-War... I guess I feel it’s devastating to the troops, and I know they’ve tried really hard with this war to say, “We are for the troops but not the war.” Obviously, that wasn’t distinguished... That was another good reason not to tell anybody you were over there. One gal said to me, when she heard comments like this, that she said, “Yes, but if we weren’t there, who would have taken care of your father? Who would have taken care of your brother? Who would have seen to it that your uncle came home?” The point is, we were all there for a reason, to do a job. Yes, to split the country, it’s just not good. You’ll never please everybody. It’s a tough one.

**KH:** What do you think about how the war ended?

**MB:** Well, looking back and some of the readings and things I’ve done, it just seems like, oh, okay, time’s up. We’re leaving now.” I know there were peace talks and all that stuff. Obviously, we didn’t prevent the Communists from moving into the South, so the whole country is Communist. If that was our goal, we didn’t meet our goal. We lost many people. We injured many people. We destroyed a country doing it, part of a country—well, we were bombing the North, so the country. In a sense, it’s a black mark. It just didn’t seem right.
Then we left, obviously, as you know, prisoners. If you read the POW-MIA [prisoner of war-missing in action] letters, they still don’t think we should be opening trade to Vietnam anymore. We still shouldn’t be dealing with them, because they haven’t answered all the questions. They haven’t excavated. They have not spoken up and told the truth. That’s a problem, too. Yes. I don’t know . . . it’s probably a heck of a lot better that we’re gone, that we’re not there, and that those people can do their best to rebuild their life. It didn’t seem like it ended. I think so many of the Vietnam vets were so devastated by how they were treated by the military as well as by their peers when they were back here in society that that’s a war that just keeps right on giving. It just keeps on giving, you know. So many have led lives with drugs or booze and they live like hermits or recluses and are homeless.

KH: You say that war, this war in particular, is perhaps one that just keeps on giving. Did you have any issues with some of the ways this war keeps on giving in terms of Agent Orange or PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder]? I know a lot of women veterans had a hard time, initially, finding good responsive care at the VA. Of course, you were working there. But did you have any of those—?

MB: [Sighs] For as much as I put my faith, if you will, Catholicism, the way I was raised . . . As much as I’ve probably said, “No, I don’t believe that anymore,” and, “I don’t do this anymore,” that is probably what . . . My strong faith and a belief in another life is probably exactly what helped me get through that . . . You might say, prayer. I was fortunate enough to have met a good man and to have a good marriage and had great kids—not to say anybody is perfect. My life, I’ll have to say, has been pretty smooth. Vietnam, like I said, is with me. I carry it with me, but it has not prevented me from functioning as a human being, a mother, a wife, as a nurse. More physically than anything . . . I’m not working as a nurse now. I think it’s just a little too high tech for me, plus physically, I couldn’t be lifting those people anymore. They’re bigger than I am. [Chuckles] No way. I also think stepping back to the VA, that was okay because I was comfortable there. I was with other veterans, you might say.

KH: Did you treat Vietnam vets?

MB: Not too many . . . certainly ran into some, but not a lot.

KH: So still mostly World War II?

MB: They were starting to come in and drift in. I left the wards in the early 1970s.

KH: Okay.

MB: We had some, but now, I understand, there’s quite a few Vietnam vets coming through. The last fourteen years or so—actually, it’s closer to twenty, I guess—I worked in the Blood Donor Center. We had a lot of veterans come in to donate blood for our vets, and we also drew the vets if they were banking their blood for their own surgeries, so I certainly met Persian Gulf and Vietnam vets and some from other wars as well.
KH: You retired from the VA?

MB: Right. They were changing the Blood Donor Center. It used to be under the Red Cross and it went back under the Red Cross in 1999. I wouldn’t have had that job anymore, and I wasn’t ready . . . Physically, I didn’t feel I wanted to go back to the wards. That was my option. I took an early retirement from there.

KH: Did you encounter any difficulties or challenges as a woman veteran? Now, you’re home from Vietnam. You’re a veteran. You said that you didn’t talk about it much.

MB: No, I didn’t talk about it much. Physically, at least, to date—knock on wood—I’ve not gone to the VA for care. The Women’s Clinic had opened somewhere in that period of time. I don’t know if it was as a vet or as an employee, because I’m not registered there as patient as a veteran, but when I was an employee, apparently, you could go there if you wanted to, or I misinterpreted it. Maybe I’m just not in the computer proper. I did go for a couple of physicals at the hospital at the Women’s Clinic. That, I could see over the years, was a good thing. When we had veterans back in the 1960s and they were women, I think I had a total of two women in that first year. Thank God, we had private rooms on one end. Both of those gals at least had some privacy. But toilets, bathrooms were not too close to your room, so we still would have to hang a sign to see to it that they could get in and have their shower and use the toilet, et cetera.

I’m thinking they’ve done a lot for the women vets. They were a little slow coming. Yes, they were slow. No doubt, you will see more as patients now than you would have forty years ago. That’s still pretty slow when you think about it. [Chuckles] It’s interesting. They have so many rules as to how you can enter the VA. Apparently, as a veteran, I can register, at least register. It could be years before I would get a primary physician, but I can register there and then, let’s say you didn’t qualify financially, they would service you if you had no other place to go. I have a couple friends, as an example, who actually can go to the VA, because they were married to veterans and they’re in that Tricare, so I’m thinking, “What’s wrong with this picture?” I can’t get in but they can. But see, they were married to career soldiers, so that’s a little different, because they handle that differently. That’s kind of ironic, isn’t it? They weren’t in the military. One was, but the other one wasn’t. They are in the system. I am not.

KH: Yes.

MB: That’s all that red tape and the hoops you jump through, and then, of course, cost cutting. You can come and register, but you just may never get in here. It’s kind of bizarre. I am happy in the sense that that new hospital has given the women privacy. Everybody I’ve talked to that’s gone to the Women’s Clinic is very happy with the care. There again, you may find a lot of women that are having trouble getting in there. Like you said, there were gals who needed help and didn’t know how to ask for it, and when they went to that hospital, nobody knew what to do with them. That’s not right. Maybe we were the grounds so that, now if it’s set up, our future women veterans aren’t going to have that same problem that we did. I think quite a percentage of our troops all over world are women now . . . I don’t know, twenty-five percent, but it’s close, maybe more. It’s definitely changing the face of the military.
KH: Yes, it is. So you were not part of this group that some of these other women were who set up the PTSD group kind of off-site?

MB: I was in the group from about 1989 or 1990. I don’t know how many we had . . . fifteen to twenty. I was in that initial group; group therapy is kind of what it was. Of the six or so that then went on for more intense treatment, no, I wasn’t with that group. I’ve gone to a study. They were interested in women veterans who had been in Vietnam. In a sense, it had something to do with PTSD, but they were looking for other things, too . . . in in-country veterans. So I went through that. When I left, the psychologist said she felt I had PTSD. I think everybody who has gone through any kind of trauma has PTSD. She said, “You have good coping skills.” [Chuckles] That’s all the farther that went and that’s fine. Then I have a little better understanding having done some reading and been in our group and had that support group. Yes. Even though my bosom buddies from grade school may not totally understand me, I’ve got some people who do. We may not have been there together, but we know what it was like, because we each served there in different capacities. That’s all good. But some of our stories are harder to tell than others.

KH: Were you involved at all in the Memorial campaign?

MB: Diane Evans, she called sometime about maybe 1986. She had already been to the Wall, I think, at that point, and that’s when she had talked to Roger Brodin. He’s gone now, but he was the maker of the bronze statues. You’ll see a lot of his work and his brother’s work throughout the Cities. She met him there and she said, “Where’s the women?” or, “Where’s the nurse?” or whatever she said to him. Then that first statue got going back then. We were all kind of involved in the fund raising for that, as well as the fund raising for our Minnesota Vietnam Memorial in St. Paul.

KH: Oh, yes.

MB: So I did a number of things over the years for that, and did get to go to the dedication of our statue in 1993.

KH: What was that like?

MB: That was good. That was great. In 1991, a friend and I went out when they had the big exhibit of all the entries. We got to see everybody’s . . . All the artwork and all the ideas came in and they were going to be voting. So we went out then and that’s where I met the patient that remembered coming through in March. At the end of that parade, he was standing there waiting for me.

KH: In 1993?


KH: Wow.
MB: We’d been writing back and forth and we still do communicate back and forth.

I think that it’s like, “Oh! You really were there. You really did spend a year in this war.” It’s a year, you know. If you’re not thinking about it, you don’t realize how traumatic it had been and how bad it was for a lot of people, and then something like that happens and, you know, oh, you feel kind of good about that. When we were in that parade and they were clapping, I thought, “Oh, my God!” I mean, it was . . . I can’t find the words to describe that. That was definitely enough of a welcome and thank you.

KH: You felt satisfied?

MB: Yes, felt really good. Floating down the street instead of walking down the street. I was pleased with the final sculpture, too.

KH: The Glenda Goodacre?

MB: Yes. I have both of them, because I have Roger’s, too. I was equally as happy, but it got to be such a political thing, the nurse versus women, and you’ve got to think about that. I’m sure she didn’t at the beginning and, of course, it took a lot of years because of it. I’m sure there are people that feel like . . . they’re still bent out of shape. I don’t know. The thing is there are still so many nurses out there. I don’t know where they are. I don’t know where my hootch mates are. I know where one is. And my coworkers? I don’t know where any of them are. They didn’t show up for that dedication in 1993. I did not go to the ten-year reunion. I had Scouts and I said, “Let me know if anybody shows.” The closest I’ve come to meeting anybody was our 71st, as I said, reunion in Utah, and that turned out to be one doctor and one corpsman that I was actually there with and we could actually communicate and remember each other.

KH: Wow!

MB: Yes. I’ve never been one that liked being out in the forefront anyway, so that’s okay. I don’t need to be. But I try. If I see somebody . . . You know, you see people—I don’t wear things—that will have their hats on and it’ll say, “Korean Vet,” or “World War II,” or “Vietnam.” I try to make a point to go up, shake their hands and thank them for their service. It was interesting, because I went to change my address just the other day and I was in Bloomington. It was just an apartment number change, but it’s important. So I went over there and stood in line. I was changing the plates on my vehicle and I do have Vietnam plates, so I was doing that as well as the address. The guy said, “Now, you said this is your plate?” I said, “Yes, I did bring my DD214. Do I need that?” “No,” he said, “it just doesn’t say in the computer whether it was you or your husband.” He looked up and said, “Thank you for your service.” That was a good feeling. I thought, “Oh!” Oh, I thought he was just questioning, you know, whether this was the for real thing. That was a good feeling. “Oh! Oh, you’re welcome,” I said. I don’t walk around with a hat on that says where I’ve been.

KH: You were saying earlier, before we were recording, that you’re not one to talk about your story in Vietnam much.
MB: Not much.

KH: Why not?

MB: Oh . . . Because I get . . . It’s because . . . When I do talk, I do try to tell them all the good things, like the Christmas parties and the birthday parties. I keep it light. Yet, although you may want to go on more, I don’t dump that on people, you know. I read a book recently, too, and this was a World War II nurse. Man! If you read her story, I had it easy. I’m just talking about me personally, not what I saw. We saw the same stuff. It was just a different war, a different time, but they lived in tents and the mud and the cold. I’m thinking, “Geez, I had it pretty good in that little wooden box that we were in.” [Chuckles] We had flush toilets and we had running showers, cold water. It wasn’t hot, and sometimes we didn’t have water, and they had nothing. I think to myself, “Geez, I wonder if you would have had enough guts to do that.”

I think, over the years, I’ve always compared myself to friends I’ve talked to who . . . I’ve got friends with a hundred percent PTSD, and I have friends that have a heck of a time getting on with their life and dealing with problems. When they’ve described where they were, it was worse. That’s the way I’ve interpreted it, that they did more. It was harder. Pleiku was pretty good. Then, every now and then, you’ll find somebody that will say, “Pleiku, oh, God, that was a real hellhole, I hear.” So it depends on whose story you’re listening to. Like I said, I’ve thought it’s good to tell people, but I don’t know how to do it, so I haven’t done it. I just kind of shy away from that.

KH: So why do this interview?

MB: Well . . . [sighs] There was a young gal working on, I believe it was, her masters who came to Utah, so she was interviewing us, each personally. She was doing something like I think you had done before. She just needed the material. When she said, “Will you fill this out and send it to some Texas University?” I said, “Sure,” but I never did. Then when the Brigham Young lady came—Kay [Bauer] is always introducing us to people—she said, “Here. Would you be interviewed?” “Sure.” That interview came back; it’s incomplete. She was going to call me to finish it and she never did. I’m sure she got busy, whatever. So I have not followed through with that either. I thought, “Well, this is my state. This is where I come from. If it helps when people are looking back and wanting to know a little bit about what it was like, they’ll have a few people to read about now.”

I know the book, Piece of My Heart: [the Stories of 26 American Women who Served in Vietnam by Keith Walker] has many stories in it. We have a couple of books that have like fifty women’s stories, things like that. I’ve tried to stay up on some of that. But I only know of two [nurses] that have written . . . There could be more by now, but I’ve only known of two nurses that actually wrote their stories. It really is the only way anyone is going to know what it’s like. There’s a book that came out a while back called Just a Nurse: [From Clinic to Hospital Ward, Battleground to Cancer Unit-The Hearts and Minds of Nurses Today, by Janet Kraegel and Mary Kachoyeanos]. It’s stories and they’re all different: an ER nurse, an OR and there’s one from Vietnam and one from here and there. It’s an interesting little list of stories, individual stories. I
gave it to a friend who is a nurse, and she was intrigued by that. That was written quite some time ago. At that time, I didn’t know of anyone else who had told their stories. Then I started reading others. You know, it’s important.

Like I said, I don’t know how you encourage people to go into the military, because it’s frightening. But it’s pretty important. I really, personally—probably because I’ve been there, done that—I don’t see any reason why men and women shouldn’t serve their country. Everybody who steps foot on our soil should eventually . . . give them two years. It could be in the typing pool. It could be the car pool. There are a whole lot of jobs to be done that, if you’re willing, I think it would be a good way to give back. I think a lot of our generation now without the draft, they don’t understand what it means, except for all these young kids now who are probably getting worn to a frazzle.

KH: Yes.

MB: I couldn’t do more than one tour, and I was young. They’re doing two and three tours. We had a choice. We don’t know a lot of people that did more than one tour, so what’s going to happen to our vets when they come back here?

KH: Is there anything else you think is important to get on the record, so to speak?

MB: Basically, I feel I was treated well, and I think, overall, everybody really worked well together. I want to thank anybody who listens to this or reads it who might remember that I was there with them. I can’t think of anything special to say, except, “Peace and God bless our troops.”

KH: Thank you, MaryLu, so much for putting yourself out there and sharing your experiences with me and whoever else may come across this.