

Diane Carlson Evans
Narrator

Kim Heikkila
Interviewer

May 8, 2007

KH: It is Tuesday, May 8, 2007. I am here with Diane Carlson Evans. I am doing an interview with her for the Minnesota Women Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project. I am the interviewer. My name is Kim Heikkila.

Diane, to get us started, I'm going to ask you for some very basic biographical kinds of information, and then we'll get started. Just for the record, could you state and spell your name?

DE: Diane, D-i-a-n-e. My middle name is Althea, A-l-t-h-e-a. My last name is Evans, E-v-a-n-s. I go by my maiden name Carlson, as Diane Carlson Evans. Carlson is C-a-r-l-s-o-n.

KH: Where is it that you currently live?

DE: Helena, Montana.

KH: Tell me your date of birth and where you were born.

DE: November 10, 1946, in Buffalo, Minnesota.

KH: And your race and ethnicity?

DE: White, Caucasian.

KH: And the branch of service that you were in?

DE: Army Nurse Corps.

KH: And what were your total dates of service in the Army Nurse Corps?

DE: I joined as an Army student nurse in May of 1966, so actually I was in the Army at that time but as a student nurse, and went active duty the following year and went off active duty in October of 1972. I had a break in my service of a few months between August 1969 when I returned from Vietnam till the spring of 1970 when I reentered the Army Nurse Corps.

KH: What were your dates of service in Vietnam?

DE: August 1968 to August 1969.

KH: So from 1967 to 1968, you were on active duty before you went to Vietnam?

DE: Yes, I was at Fort Sam Houston [Texas] for basic training, and then Fort Lee, Virginia.

KH: Where were you stationed in Vietnam?

DE: Two places. From August 1968 to January 1969, I was at the 36th Evacuation Hospital in Vung Tau. Then I was transferred to Pleiku, January 1969 till I departed August 1969, at the 71st Evacuation Hospital.

KH: We can talk a little bit about where you were stationed after you get home when we get to that point in the interview. I think that's enough for the basic background information. So we'll just launch ourselves into it.

You were born in Minnesota, in Buffalo. Tell me a little bit about your family.

DE: I grew up in Minnesota on the family farm. My great grandfather, John Carlson, came from Varmland, Sweden, homesteaded the 160 acres three miles south of Buffalo. His son Nils arrived in Minnesota with him. Nils was the father of my father Newell, and my father farmed the farm after his father and grandfather. A brother, Eddie Carlson, farmed it for a while, and then my youngest brother bought the family farm in 1980. So our Minnesota roots are very deep. The farm is still being farmed by my brother Maynard in Buffalo, Minnesota.

My mother, Dorothy Andersen Carlsen, was a registered nurse, so I grew up with a mom who worked as an RN in the Buffalo Memorial Hospital for forty-five years, and a father who was a dairy farmer. So I had, if you would call it, an idyllic life for a kid. Living on a farm in Minnesota, you know, with wide-open spaces, our own horses, lots of animals and dogs and pets, *but* it wasn't idyllic because it was such hard work. There were six kids. I had two older brothers, a younger sister, and two younger brothers. I was in the middle, but I was the oldest of three children beneath me. We all had expectations of our work on the farm and, for some reason, we all did our work. [Chuckles]

It was the work ethic of Swedish homesteaders. I think it was genetic. My mother's family was from North Dakota, and they were pioneers who had actually lived in sod houses when they came from Denmark. My mother always said we came from good stock. So we were a very, very hardworking family and not a lot of fun. My brothers were not allowed in sports. There was no basketball, no football, nothing after school. They came home. They did chores. They went into the field. They milked the cows. There was a work ethic in my family.

Because I wanted to go to college, I knew I would have to probably pay my own way, so I had three jobs when I was in high school, but I liked all my jobs. I was a telephone operator for Northwestern Bell. I earned a dollar and a quarter an hour, which was a lot of money for a sixteen-year-old girl in the early 1960s. I never saw my check. It went right to the bank. I

cleaned house for this wonderful woman downtown who had six children. She lived behind the store; she and her husband had an appliance store. So she worked in the store and I babysat after school and cleaned her house. Then I really wanted to start working at the hospital with my mother, so I got a job working after school at the hospital as a nurse's aide when I was sixteen. I actually started the babysitting and cleaning the house when I was thirteen. I could start the Northwestern operator position when I was sixteen. When I started nurse's training at St. Barnabas [Hospital, Minneapolis, Minnesota], I had \$3,000 in the bank. That was almost enough to put me through the three years. At the time, it was a three-year program, a diploma school program. When I was a junior at St. Barnabas Hospital, I decided that I wanted to go to Vietnam and joined the Army in the Army Student Nurse Program. They paid a stipend, plus paid for my education, so I felt really good that I didn't burden my parents with more bills for them, because there were three more children coming after me. I think, again, that was the sense that we all had for each other. We all kind of watched out for each other. We never expected our parents to really take care of us, because we could see how hard they worked. There was very little money, but we had more money than the rest of the farmers in the community, because my mother worked. So we always had it, I thought, a little bit better than some of the neighboring children because we had a working mother. That was very rare for farm families when I grew up.

KH: Did your mother work because she loved to work or because she needed the money for the family?

DE: My mother loved nursing. She had always worked from the time she graduated from St. Luke's in Fargo, North Dakota, and then moved to Minnesota for her first job. There were two physicians who had graduated from the University of Minnesota as general practitioners. They decided to move to Buffalo, Minnesota and open up a practice, and they wanted to hire a nurse. Mother learned about it, so she came to Minnesota, came to Buffalo, and she worked with those physicians, Dr. Catlin and Dr. Sandeen, for probably forty years. I was born in the original hospital. It was five rooms above the Buffalo Drug Store.

So that was my beginning. I really was influenced by my upbringing. I'm sure the Swedish . . . We weren't very religious, but we were Lutheran. My parents made sure we went to Sunday School and that we were confirmed. But my dad never went to church himself. Mother was not religious, but we had that upbringing with the Lutheran background. I think we were more influenced by their example than anything else. They were very hardworking. They had a sense of community. My dad was always loaning out his machinery and his equipment to the local farmers and then he'd complain because the local farmers wouldn't bring it back. He was generous enough to loan it out and then it wouldn't come back. [Chuckles] All my brothers were hardworking to the point where it was to a fault. My sister and I have talked about growing up on a farm in Minnesota, how it was all work and not much play. Dairy farmers had no time off. We never took a vacation together as a family, except to go visit relatives in North Dakota. Then we'd go visit the relatives for the weekend and we'd come home, and that was our . . . To take an extended vacation, we didn't do that.

KH: You talked a little bit earlier about your brothers, that they couldn't do sports after school because they had to come home and work. Were the expectations about helping on the farm the same for you and your sisters?

DE: They were the same, because we could see how hard our brothers worked. It's interesting because you think about . . . When I was growing up, there was women's work and there was men's work. It didn't matter to us. My sister and I didn't resent the fact that we didn't do men's work, because men's work was cleaning the manure, milking the cows, tossing hay bales, which we did go out and help with, those kinds of things. But we just accepted our fate, if you will. We took care everything in the house. We did all the gardening. We did all the laundry. We made the beds. We did the cooking. We did the baking. We took care of the milk, when the milk came up. We drank our own milk from our cows, so we had to strain it and separate the cream and do all those traditional things that farm families for centuries did. The one thing that was different in our family was we had a working mother, and all our friends didn't. Their mothers were always home and our mother was at work, and we missed her and we missed that, but we understood why she was at work. She worked because, I think, she felt she had to. She had six kids, and she wanted a good life for us. She wanted us to go to college. It helped with the farm. It contributed to buying machinery. We saw our parents working hard, so we had to work hard. If they were working hard, we had to work hard.

KH: Like you said, it was more by example than sitting you down and saying, "Hey, you know, you must work hard."

DE: [Chuckles] No. We look back on it . . . My two older brothers are now gone, both from cancer, one at thirty-eight and one at fifty-eight. They were both veterans and both farmers, both using chemicals, a lot of chemicals, on their farms. We don't know how they got the cancer. It's an issue in our family that they started using chemicals when my dad never did. My dad used manure. My dad lived to be eighty-four and my mother lived to ninety-one. But my brothers started using chemicals as soon as they got out of the military, which was in the 1960s, and didn't use any protection. I don't think they were probably warned or knew the danger. It's speculation that it was farm chemicals. All my brothers loved farming, and they all loved hard work and they were all very mechanical. They were always following my dad around. My dad was very mechanical. So they became inventors and were all very successful, working the land or working in construction. They were all self employed, self-starters, motivated, hardworking, again, to a fault. I would say out of six kids in the Carlson family, there were six workaholics. We were all addicted to work.

Speaking of addictions, we had some farmers nearby who we knew—it's sort of a secret—that there were issues of alcohol. I didn't grow up with that, and I think that was a real blessing for all of us, because there was no use of alcohol by my parents or any of my siblings ever, and there still isn't. And there never was with the Carlsons that came from Sweden.

So, strong work ethic, and now it's the 1960s. My oldest brother quits school so he can join the military. My parents were very upset that he quit school. In those days, you could quit school at sixteen and join the military at seventeen.

KH: How old was he?

DE: He was sixteen and he got a job. And then when he was seventeen, he joined the military and went into the 101st Airborne, but he fell out of an airplane and injured his knee or something. He stayed in the military for his tour of duty, but did not go to Vietnam. My second brother, Ronnie, who was a year older than me, was drafted in 1966. Several of Ronnie's . . . My oldest brother was Chester. He got out of the military, did not go to Vietnam. Then he bought his farm and farmed all those years. My next brother, Ronnie, was drafted and my parents were very, very . . . [sighs] Well, let's say my dad was clearly upset. My mom was more accepting of things in life. We'd already lost several neighbor boys to Vietnam.

KH: By 1966?

DE: Oh, yes. Several of Ronnie's friends from high school were in Vietnam and were either wounded or already had come back to either Buffalo, Rockford or Montrose to be buried. My dad depended on his sons to help him with the farming because they were still helping at that age. So Ronnie was drafted but, thankfully, his orders were not for Vietnam. They were for Korea, so he went to Korea and was up on the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone]. Then he came back and bought a farm and he started farming.

It's now 1966, the same year my brother is drafted, and it's when I came home to tell my parents I wanted to join the Army Nurse Corps because I wanted to go to Vietnam. My dad was sitting at the kitchen table. That's where farm people sit, at the kitchen table. Everything takes place at the kitchen table. [Chuckles] I just remember that moment because my mom, who was a nurse, was very understanding, accepting. Dad just put his head down and looked down, very stoic, put his hands on the table and just shook his head like this, just shaking his head back and forth. He couldn't speak. Then I remember he took his fist and he went like this [pounds the table], down on the table, like that. He couldn't say what he felt, but when your fist goes down on the table, it's a strong message. He got up out of his chair and he walked out the door and went down to the barn. Mother said, "Well, I know you'll be okay. I know you'll be okay." She just said some other very supportive things. I don't remember what they all were, except I do remember, "You'll be okay."

That's the Army student beginning, of course. I signed on the dotted line and I'm now in the Army Student Nurse Corps Program, which means I'm an enlisted woman and it's on paper. Because I don't have to go into any military facility, I finish my training at St. Barnabas. Then when I passed my state boards, I was officially inducted into the Army. That would have been the fall of 1967.

KH: So you graduated high school in what, 1964?

DE: 1964 at the Buffalo High School.

KH: Then went straight to St. Barnabas.

DE: Yes, right.

KH: Why did you want to go to Vietnam?

DE: Vietnam was very much on my mind because my 4-H buddy was there and then he was killed . . . Denny Bodin. Several of Ronnie's friends had been killed. Many had come home wounded. My two older brothers had served. I felt like, both my brothers have to serve; I should, too. When I look back and I think about how our family operated . . . Maybe there was women's work and maybe there was men's work, but it was a division of labor. My sister and I, we worked as hard as they did. Manually, we didn't throw fifty-pound hay bales like they did. [Chuckles] But we worked from morning till night. We talk about, together, now still, that there were days we never got out of the kitchen. The threshing crews would come. There would be hired people that would come to help with haying. We had to have this big meal for them. Mother was at work, so Nola and I had to pick up . . .

When Mom wasn't there, we had to work even harder. There was so much laundry. Everything on a farm is hard. There's so much. The garden, the canning, the freezing, the picking of apples. We had big apple trees, and Mother would buy crates and crates of peaches every summer. We had to can them. Then there were all the cucumbers from the garden and we had to make pickles like the world is going to come to an end if we don't make pickles. [Chuckles] There was this obsession with canning. Then we got the freezer. My sister and I, we started counting. One year we counted that we had frozen 150 bags of sweet corn.

KH: Oh. Wow.

DE: There really is no such thing as women's work and men's work. Lots of farmwomen were out there milking the cows and doing the things that my brothers and my dad were doing. I don't know how many of the men were in the kitchen making pies or pickles. [Chuckles] It was that work ethic and that we just do it together and . . . I felt it was the right thing to do. I was a nurse and I wanted to serve my country, too. I didn't have any fears or any second doubts or any looking back. It was just something I wanted to do and went and signed the papers.

KH: Were there ever conversations in your family about the war itself? Should the U.S. have been there? Was it a good thing that the country was doing? Any kind of political discussion?

DE: That's interesting that you ask that question. Not in 1966, when I joined and my dad just put his head down, shook his head and then his fist on the . . . But in 1967, when I was getting ready to leave for Vietnam, I came home for a two-week leave. I had my horse and I just went riding and I did a couple things I didn't tell my parents I did. I went and I wrote a will—not that I had much to give away. [Chuckles] I must have been thinking I might not come back. I did write a will and I didn't have a nice picture of myself in uniform, so I went to Minneapolis and had Zinsmaster take a head shot of me in my dress blues uniform and then I left it with my sister. My thoughts were, well, if I don't come home, I want them to have a nice picture of me in my dress blues uniform.

KH: So, when you were thinking that, were you scared about it, sad, or were you just kind of a young person thinking, well, if this happens, it was a nice . . . ?

DE: I think even at a young age, I was pretty pragmatic. My mother used to tell me I was . . . Well, she was my mom, but I was pretty mature by the time I was ten, psychologically. Physically, not. I was pretty old for my age in my thinking and I think I was pretty pragmatic about it. Also, the fact that I really loved reading World War I and Civil War history. I was interested in it because I wanted to read about what the nurses were doing. I went to a three-year nursing program, so we didn't study history, but I wanted to know more history about what women had done in the Civil War and World War I. And World War II was close enough to me that there were World War II veterans alive who I was talking to. My aunt served in World War II. She wasn't a nurse, but I loved hearing her stories. There wasn't a lot to read anywhere that I could find about nurses who served during that time. But I was very aware of the tens of thousands of people who died, and I knew that there were a lot of World War I nurses who died. They died of lots of things besides being wounded; they died of disease, a lot of them. I think I was just being very realistic that I'm going off to a war zone and I might not come home. But it didn't give me second doubts or fears or wishing I hadn't signed up. I'd made up my mind.

KH: And you said by now, this is late the 1960s, 1967 . . .

DE: That the attitude of the nation from 1966 to 1967 changed dramatically. It was escalating. The anti-war protests, the demonstrations, were becoming more violent, frequent, more flag burning, more clashes between generations, bombings at colleges. When I left Fort Lee, Virginia, in July 1967, a friend drove me to the airport in Washington, D.C., Washington National, and we passed the Mall. In the Mall, it was a tent city. There were thousands of tents and there were flames over the city. When I was looking, it looked like the city was burning up. There were fires around the city. It was chaotic. The city itself was frightening.

Then I went home and there was discussion. I remember my dad, especially. He was very vocal. He's very anti-war and he was very opposed to the war. He didn't like what was happening to the soldiers. He did not like [President] Lyndon Baines Johnson. He was very vocal about not believing in this war and that they shouldn't be sending any more soldiers over there. My mom didn't say too much about the politics of it, but my dad did. I think that's probably why the year I was in Vietnam—I learned this later; Mom didn't want to tell me—my dad became very depressed. He was supposed to be down milking the cows but, at six o'clock, he'd come up and watch the six o'clock news every night thinking he was going to hear something or see me. It was very disturbing to him, because it was all about the body bags and the body count and the images of the Vietnam War, which were right on television in front of you. He did not serve in World War II, but he was of that generation and they didn't sit and watch it every night on television, and now he's seeing all the carnage. Mom said he was very depressed the year I was in Vietnam, and I felt bad about that, that it had affected him. I was so young, I didn't think about how this would affect my parents.

KH: And he never said anything to you? He never gave you any indication that this was bothering him?

DE: No.

KH: Did he talk to you before you went about his thoughts on the war and say, “Geez, you’re getting into something I don’t support?”

DE: No. Never. He never said anything. It was always you saw it in his emotions. My dad was sort of a man of few words.

I’ve said this when I was interviewed for *China Beach* and I’ve said it when I was interviewed for the documentary *Vietnam Nurses*. It seems like I always need to mention it because it was so profound. The day I left for Vietnam, it was hot. It was in the summer. It looked like it was going to rain. My dad’s a farmer. You have to get the alfalfa in before it rains. It was ready to mow, and so I understood why he couldn’t take me to the airport. He’s a farmer. He has to mow the alfalfa before the rain comes. [Chuckles] He had to mow it and get it into bales before the rain came so they wouldn’t get wet. I understood completely why he couldn’t go to the airport. I went down to find him to say, “Goodbye,” and he was down where the barn and the farm buildings are. Our house was on the top of a hill, so we always said, “We’re going *down* to the barn.” I went down there to hug him and say, “Goodbye,” and that’s when he hugged me and he said, “I have four sons, but I send my daughter off to war,” and he started to cry. [Pauses] That was all he said, but it was profound, and it never left me.

KH: How did you respond?

DE: No response. We just hugged. What could I say?

KH: And you still wanted to go at this point?

DE: Oh, yes. Nothing was going to stop me. I think they already kind of knew that about me, because when I decided that I was going to become a nurse, I wanted to go to St. Olaf College, because they have a four-year program there—and it’s Lutheran. [Chuckles] So I looked into it, talked to the school counselor, and I could see we couldn’t . . . I never told my parents this. I could see that my parents couldn’t afford to send me to St. Olaf. I better not even ask. I won’t even bring it up. The counselor asked me, “Well, what do you want to do with nursing?” He was a guy. [Chuckles] I said, “I want to be a nurse.” He said, “Well, you don’t need to go to St. Olaf then, because if you want to be a nurse, St. Barnabas is a three-year program, and it’s very clinical. If you want to teach nursing, go get your bachelor’s degree.” But I really wanted to go to St. Olaf, but the reason I didn’t was the cost. I learned then what it would cost to go to a diploma school of nursing, a three-year, which would be St. Barnabas or Swedish or St. Mary’s at Mayo [Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota]—I looked at all three places—that I would have to have about \$3,000. So I had three jobs. So I was determined. I think my parents could already see that once I made up my mind to do something, I was going for it, and there was no . . .

Oh, I do remember though telling my parents, at some point, “Well, my brothers were in the service, why shouldn’t I?” I do remember saying that. That’s another thing: my brothers did not want me to go into the Army.

KH: They told you that?

DE: They told me. They did not want their sister in the Army.

KH: Why not?

DE: I think they had this image of women in the military maybe . . . They had now been in; they're back. Well, my oldest brother is back. My other brother is still in. I think they felt that maybe women in the military weren't treated very well, and they didn't want their sister in the military exposed to whatever they thought went on in the military.

KH: So it was a protective . . .?

DE: Yes, it was a protective thing.

KH: You said you wanted to go to Vietnam, in part, because you felt if your brothers had to serve, why shouldn't you have to. What were you thinking about the war itself or the politics of the war?

DE: I must have been thinking more than my peers. At St. Barnabas, we weren't allowed to have TVs in our room. We were very cloistered, very protected, had to be in at nine o'clock at night and we had a housemother. But we had a lounge for the student nurses and there was a TV down there. I went down there every night watching the news about Vietnam, and nobody else was. I would be down there seeing what was happening over there, maybe because my brother was drafted and maybe he had to go. I knew about my 4-H buddy and three of Ronnie's classmates have now died in Vietnam. I'm just really curious. I want to know what's happening over there. I want to know why. I had a curiosity about it when others my age didn't . . . women my age. Women didn't have to worry about it, but men did. So I really was paying attention to what was happening in Vietnam. It made me really sad to see the body bags. Sometimes you don't know why you do something. It just feels like you should. I felt I needed to go over there and do my part.

KH: That leads me to the question of how did you conceive of yourself as an American? What did being an American mean to you, at this point?

DE: That's where the influence of my parents came in, especially with my mom because she was very verbal. My sister and I said, "Mother always gave us her free lectures." They were very nurturing, kind, respectful lectures about being a good citizen, so we were taught to be good citizens, which meant doing kind of what she was doing, I think. We used to call her the Florence Nightingale of the county. Every time the phone rang practically, it was somebody who needed her to come, because she was a nurse, and see what they should do with their husband or their child, because they didn't want to go to the doctor, because doctors were expensive. Doing something outside of ourselves. The World War II generation was the generation that we grew up being proud of. So we had that example, that to serve your country is an honorable thing to do, something you should do. My aunt was in World War II, and I really respected her. She used

the G.I. Bill and went on to get her doctorate degree and then taught college. She said if she hadn't been in the military and had that benefit, she probably would never have been able to achieve what she did. I had some other examples as well.

KH: This is also at the height of the Cold War. Are you thinking about Communism as a menace?

DE: No. The whole domino theory was kind of beyond my . . . You know, I'm twenty years old and what's the domino theory? I could understand that one country and then another and then another, and another, and that's sort of the reason that we're in Vietnam. I hadn't heard yet of the Gulf of Tonkin, the lies, the cover up and the politics. But when I was in grade school, like every other kid my age, we were taught where to go in the case of a nuclear bomb. Ours was an underground cellar. I remember my dad just shaking his head at that, too. [Chuckles] We did have an underground cellar; we went there when there were tornadoes. My dad said, "The likelihood of a tornado is a lot greater than a nuclear bomb." In grade school, we were taught to run under our desks, go under our desks. On the farm, Dad showed us the cellar. I wasn't thinking much about the politics of it when I went to Vietnam. I was thinking mostly about how sad it was when I looked at the news and saw people dying over there and when I saw civilians too, you know, the awful pictures of the civilians being killed. Yes.

KH: What was your first military experience like?

DE: Before I answer that, I just had a thought, but I want to get back to that. When I think about my peers, I can't think of one peer, one high school friend or one friend from nurse's training that thought it was a good idea I should go or was supportive.

KH: Really? Were they vocally unsupportive?

DE: No. It was like, "Why would you do that?" "You're doing what?" "You're going into the Army? Why do you want to do that?" "Why do you want to go to Vietnam?" My high school friends who hadn't gone on to college were, of course, married and having children. So their whole lives were taking a different direction than mine. If they were married, their husbands weren't going to Vietnam at that time. My friends from nurse's training . . . There was one other young woman, Liz Henderson, who now lives, I think, in Edina here in Minnesota, she joined the Army Nurse Corps, so there were two of us. But outside of Liz, I don't remember anybody saying, "Oh, thank you for doing that," or support of any kind. I just felt kind of out there all by myself.

KH: Was that upsetting to you?

DE: No. Again, I think I was very pragmatic. I knew where I wanted to go, and I never vacillated. It was, like, I'm doing this because this is my goal. Several thought I was . . . [Chuckles]

This brings back lots of memories. In nurse's training in our senior year, we were allowed to do an internship at any hospital of our choice. I chose the VA [Veteran's Administration] Hospital, and I was the only one. Again, several of my friends said, "Why do you want to go *over there*?" Well, *over there*, at the time, meant . . . The VA Hospital wasn't that great in the 1960s. It was old. I don't think it had . . . I don't know, but there were rumors that the veterans weren't well cared for over there. So I think I wanted to go find out for myself. I went over there and just walked around all by myself, no guided tour or anything. I wanted to check it out and I liked the place. I liked seeing the vets around and they were talking to each other and there were big open wards. St. Barnabas Hospital was fairly new. It was beautiful. There were private rooms. The floors were carpeted. It was decorated. I went over to the VA and the patients all looked alike. They were all men—mostly. They were all sitting around on their beds chatting with each other. It just looked like a place opposite of where I was doing my training. But I felt comfortable there. So I applied for the internship, and I spent three months there. I really loved my work there. I was taking care of World War I veterans, because this was in the 1960s.

KH: Sure.

DE: I was taking care of World War II veterans, Korean veterans, and Vietnam veterans.

KH: Did these guys tell you anything about their war experiences?

DE: Yes, and I really liked listening to them, and they were always trying to embarrass me in a fun way. They were tripping me with their canes, [unclear] Vietnam vets, because they could see I was just this young thing in a white pinafore with a blue and white checked apron. That's what we wore. [Chuckles] So they'd take their canes and try to trip me. They'd have wheel races just for me.

KH: Were they talking about the hard stuff about their time in whatever war they served in?

DE: The Vietnam vets were the quietest. They were definitely the quietest. They would ask me why I was there or who I was or what's this uniform you're wearing, because there weren't any other student nurses there that I know of. So I told them, "Well, I'm a student nurse. I'm going to graduate in the spring, and I'm in the Army, and I'll be going to basic training." Then there was this sort of instant kind of respect. "Oh, you're going in the Army." Then they were very interested, "Why do you want to do that?" That would bring conversations. For the most part, the Vietnam vets were, I think, still in shock. They were very quiet. The World War II vets and the World War I vets were older and they were funny, always teasing. They shared some war stories with me, because I was interested in them and I would ask them, "Was your leg amputated from the war or was that after the war?" Then that would open up, like, how they lost their leg. "Well, I lost my leg. I was on a train that was bombed and the train burned and my legs were burned, and one of them had to be amputated." That brought that out. I really liked working at the VA those three months. It was very fulfilling. It was very rewarding, more so than anything I had done at St. Barnabas, where I was taking care of routine surgeries: gallbladders, appendectomies, every thing you see in a hospital. I think I had an early respect for veterans. I don't know where that came . . . maybe it came from my reading. Civil War, World War I . . . I read what they went

through and I was very much interested and in awe of that. How do people survive that? How do people get through that?

My earliest military experience that's memorable. Is that the question?

KH: Yes.

DE: [Pauses] Hmm. I would have to say that my first really memorable experience was when I landed in Vietnam. There are two and they both happened within the first week in Vietnam. The first one was landing. The airplane that I came in on had one other Army nurse and me, so there were two nurses and about 240 G.I.s. All the G.I.s on this plane were quiet. They're going to a bad place at a bad time. There was no laughter. We're two women in a planeload full of men ages eighteen to twenty-two. You'd think there'd be all this, well, like college students, laughing and partying and having fun. No, it was very quiet. It was very silent. It was like we were all going to our deathbed or something, because it was very morose. As we landed, they wanted the two women to get off the plane first. I remember there was some discussion about . . . We were sitting towards the front. I could hear this discussion about get the two women out first. So they came to us and motioned to us we were out the door. We landed on the tarmac and as we went down the stairs, there were armed guards on either side of us and they had their weapons out and their bandoliers of ammunition were everywhere. It was dark.

KH: Where did you land?

DE: Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base. We are literally whisked . . . keep your head down, go to the bus. The armed guards were right there. We got on the bus, and then that bus was filled, and we left. Then more buses came. The windows on the bus were black, because they'd been painted black, and had chicken wire or something on the windows to prevent shrapnel and so on. That was "Welcome to Vietnam." [Chuckles] I think what was more disconcerting to me than that, than seeing the armed . . . This was for real. This wasn't Camp Bullis at Fort Sam Houston, where we played war games. Seeing kind of the atmosphere in that airplane as we landed, all those guys knowing that . . . Which of these guys aren't going to make it home?

The next really poignant moment was when I got my orders that I would go to the 36th Evacuation [Hospital] in Vung Tau. It's pretty amazing when you know that a helicopter has arrived just for you. [Chuckles] This helicopter lands, and I have orders, and I'm told to be at the helipad, so I've got my duffle bag and my orders in my hand, and there's a helicopter with a pilot and the co-pilot and door gunner in it, and that helicopter is just for me. [Chuckles] Where else would that happen but in a war zone? I found it just so odd. They came just for me? [Laughter] There's nobody else getting on this helicopter but me?

So I sat in the back with the door gunner. They never closed the doors, and I looked over to see why they didn't close the doors, but there were no doors. This helicopter did not have doors. I was strapped in. The door gunner never looked up at me, and he never looked up from the ground. He had his eyes on the ground the whole time and he had his hands on the gun. He sat there, both hands on the weapon, looking down at the ground. He never spoke to me. He never

said a word. He didn't look at me, so I sat there till we got to the 36th Evacuation Hospital and I saw the red crosses. We were about to land. I saw the South China Sea and how beautiful that was. I saw the big red crosses on the hospital. I saw a red cross for the helipad for the landing. We come in. We hover. We land. It's stirring up a lot of dust. As I am getting out of the chopper, the door gunner says his first words to me. He said, "Good luck, ma'am, and keep your head down." Those were his only words.

KH: So now you've arrived at your first assignment, the place where you spend the first part of your tour in Vietnam. Like you say, you realize when you get off the plane in Tan Son Nhut that, yes, this is real. There's live ammo around. Are you feeling at all scared at this point?

DE: I'm still not feeling afraid. I'm feeling the seriousness of the situation, because they sent a helicopter just for me with a door gunner. It was my first . . . That's why I have such an enormous respect for how we as nurses were treated in Vietnam. This was how we were treated overall. We all have our stories about, you know, gender issues and harassment. It exists in the civilian world and, yes, we experienced it in the military, but I have to say, overall, the majority of my experience in Vietnam and in the military was a tremendous respect which the men had for us as nurses. I'm a nurse. I speak as a nurse. Again, it was that they were going to make sure I arrived safely . . . the importance of nurses, the importance of the medical personnel. I felt that people were watching out for me. I knew that right from the beginning. Get the women off the plane first. The gunners are right there to escort us off. [Chuckles] It's like, well, us women might be a little more important than the men on this plane. I didn't see any G.I.s getting a private helicopter with a door gunner to take them someplace. [Chuckles] I was already beginning to feel like this is a dangerous place, and they want us to get through this alive and people will be watching out for us. Again, it's different than the war in Iraq today, because they knew we didn't have weapons. The women were not assigned weapons. If you're going to be in a combat zone, men and women both need to be prepared and have weapons, but back then we didn't, and the men knew that. So were they watching out for us? Yes.

I think the first time I really felt afraid was the night I was called over to intensive care because the unit that I was on—my first unit was a surgical unit with sixty beds—was very quiet that night. There were no mass casualties. We didn't have anyone we were really worried about, and we were well staffed that night. So I got called over to intensive care and I was told to stay with this patient who was probably not going to make it through the night, and he didn't. I was just to stay with him. So I went and read his chart and then I pulled up a chair, because I knew I was going to be there all night, so I just sat there and checked his IVs and checked everything else. I couldn't see who he was or what he was. He had field dressings wrapped everywhere. They were around his face, his head, his neck, his torso, his limbs. It's amazing that he survived at all. His arms were all . . . He was wrapped from head to toe. Head to toe were dressings, white. He was white everywhere and a white sheet pulled over him. I lifted up the sheet to see if I could see his IV and to hold his hand. His one hand was not wrapped. I looked down and he was an Afro-American man. He was very black. I would not have known that if . . . It was just so striking, all this white, and then to take his hand and hold it.

I asked him to “Squeeze my hand if you can feel me there,” and he did. So he was still awake enough he could hear me and he could . . . I could feel . . . it wasn’t a firm press of my hand, but it was there, so I knew. I told him I was staying with him and I told him, “I know you can’t talk to me, but I’m going to talk to you.” I remember saying things like, “Well, what shall we talk about? I wonder what you would like me to talk to you about.” I was just trying to make conversation, because I wanted him to just keep listening to my voice. I wanted him to know that he wasn’t alone, that there was somebody with him. I said, “I’m staying with you and I’m going to be here as long as you need me.” I couldn’t say, “I’m going to stay with you till you die.” I said things like, “I’m staying with you. I’m here with you.”

I had not been with somebody who died yet. I hadn’t seen anybody die, so far, of their injuries. I think my biggest fear was watching somebody die who was young. Now, in nurse’s training, I’d seen old people die and car accidents, but I hadn’t seen a soldier die. I was really afraid, because I thought he’s going to die. I’m the only one here and what am I going to do? There’s nothing I can do. I can’t do anything. I can’t even call the doctor to come over and do anything, because we knew he was going to die, so there were no orders to do anything, you know, heroic. It was pain relief. [Sighs] He was heavily medicated with morphine. There are peaks and valleys with morphine. You give the morphine and then they pass out, and then the pain would be horrific. With someone who is dying, it was okay, if you could see their pain was . . . [sighs] . . . their vital signs were indicative of their pain, it would be okay not to wait four hours, but give it at three hours. So pain control was something I really wanted to . . . I didn’t want him to suffer, and he was suffering. [Sighs]

So I just talked and talked and talked. I said, “I’m going to try to guess where you’re from.” Of course, I couldn’t guess where he was from. Then I would say, “If you’re from Chicago, press my hand.” No press. “If you’re from wherever, press my hand.” I never did get him to tell me by asking him where he was from. Then I said, “I’ll tell you all about me, where I grew up.” So I told him about that, I guess. Then, pretty soon, I could tell that he was slipping. I couldn’t tell him things like . . . There were certain things I couldn’t say to him, but if I’d been his mother or a family friend . . . I think I intuitively knew that the best thing I could do for him was just keep talking so he wouldn’t feel alone. I just always thought that the worst thing that could happen to somebody was to die alone in a combat zone. I remember the six o’clock news and seeing those young men in body bags and hoping that there’d been somebody with them when they died. [Sighs]

So that was very traumatic, and I was afraid. I was afraid for him and I was sad for him. Then I was angry, because I thought this isn’t fair. His mother should have been here with him, you know.

KH: So he did die?

DE: Yes. Yes, and I never wrote his name down. So when I went out to the [Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial] Wall in 1982, I couldn’t remember his name. See, this was early in my experience in Vietnam. After that, there were . . . and you couldn’t remember all their names. Sometimes, you didn’t even know their name.

KH: How far into your tour were you [unclear]?

DE: Pretty early. It was pretty early.

See, I had never been exposed to . . . Being from Minnesota and going to St. Barnabas, we had very little racial exposure and to diversity or anything else. This may come as a surprise, but in Buffalo, Minnesota, I don't ever remember caring for a person of color. Even Asians, I don't remember. It was very Scandinavian, very Anglo-Saxon, very white. At St. Barnabas, I don't remember . . . I certainly didn't care for someone who was dying who was a person of color or Afro-American. It was such a meaningful thing for me to . . . It was such a privilege to . . . It was, like, color doesn't . . . What is the thing with color? It doesn't matter. It's like this was this wonderful human being, this wonderful young man. I'm sure he could tell by the way I talked that he knew I wasn't someone of his color. [Chuckles] Yet, I was sharing with him the last moments of his life. So, why me? Why was *I* there with him when maybe somebody else would have been better? I don't know. I did my best. I was the one who was with him, so . . .

KH: You said you went into that situation and you were afraid of that very situation, of seeing someone die and being the only one there.

DE: Yes.

KH: What did you take away from it afterwards?

DE: It was one of the first poems I wrote about Vietnam when I started some counseling at the Vet's Center and I was having a very difficult time sharing my experiences and talking about anything. I just didn't want to talk about it. I'd forgotten it. I'd put it in the past. It's in the past. I've dealt with that. I've moved on. So I was having a hard time verbalizing how I felt. I could tell you what I did or where I was. I was at Pleiku. I was here. I was there. I rode in helicopters. It was all about events and timeframes, but to talk about my feelings? I couldn't do that yet. [Sighs] So my counselor asked me to . . . He said, "Have you ever written poetry?" I said, "Well, yes, in high school." And I like poetry. I like to read poetry. He said, "Write your feelings into a poem." So I wrote about that night, and I wrote about this young black man that I cared for. I remember saying, "Everything was white, white, white. Everything was white. And then I cared for a black man through the night."

I remember . . . [sighs] . . . after Vietnam, I was in downtown Minneapolis. I had gotten a job at North Memorial Hospital and the area around there was a black community. I remember—I suppose it was a flashback; I didn't know what flashbacks were yet and I didn't piece together that maybe what was happening in my mind had anything to do with Vietnam—standing at a street corner and I was staring at three young black men. I was just staring at them. I just stood there like in a frozen state. I know I was staring at them and, all of a sudden, one of them noticed that I was staring at them. I was staring at them because I think psychologically it was like it could have been a young man like that that I was with through the night. He'd practically died in my arms and it was just bringing back memories. They were very young. They were, like, eighteen- or nineteen-year-old young men. They looked at me like this, you know. What are you

doing staring at us? One of them said something kind of unkind to me. I was really hurt by what this person said. I was very hurt. These young black men didn't know why I was staring at them. If they had known, they'd maybe have given me a hug or something.

So I wrote this poem about . . . So young black men, if I stare at you, don't judge me. I cared for you through the night as you were dying," something like that, you know. It was through that poem I was able to express what a privilege it was, really, to be with someone, anyone, a human being, and to be in their presence when . . . when they were dying. It was pretty profound.

KH: Had any of your training, either at St. Barnabas or at Fort Sam, prepared you for the kind of nursing and caring duties, you saw in Vietnam?

DE: That's interesting that you ask. The biggest influence on me that prepared me for Vietnam....

[Tape interruption]

KH: We were talking about being prepared.

DE: Of course, there are things in nurse's training and working at the VA and some things in basic training that couldn't help but prepare you for some things. Prepare you for watching young men die and suffer? No. Nothing prepares you for that. You just can't be prepared for that. I think the biggest influence that I had in preparation for Vietnam was working with my mother and working in a rural hospital in Buffalo, Minnesota, which was on Highway 55, which was on the railroad tracks. Highway 55 then notoriously had lots of car accidents, high speed. You could drink and drive. Alcohol-related-incidents of teenagers were rampant in car accidents. Children were not in seatbelts. My mother, because she was in charge of the whole hospital on the three-to-eleven shift, went everywhere. She went to the emergency room. She went to deliver babies. She went to the ward. She went to the OR [operating room]. She had to call in the OR if there was going to be surgery necessary. I worked there starting when I was sixteen and all through nurse's training. I would come home on weekends and work with my mom. I saw the train wrecks come in. I saw the car accidents come in. I saw kids come in who died in the emergency room. I saw the stitchings and I saw drownings. We live in Minnesota. Buffalo has several lakes. There were a lot of drownings that came in. So I know I was more prepared than a lot of the nurses when I got to Vietnam because there were a lot of things that I did that I didn't have to learn. I just knew what to do, and I wasn't afraid to just jump in and do it. I didn't have a big learning curve in some things because of the trauma that I'd seen already and then I did work at Hennepin County General [Hospital], too, for rotation.

Also, what I think I learned from my mom that was *huge* was her grace under fire. My mom never lost it, ever! No matter what happened, she was the one in control. The doctors would come in and they'd be throwing things, and they'd be upset, and the doctors would upset everybody. I remember my mother once saying to one of the doctors in the ER, "If you don't stop screaming, I will walk out of this room." The doctor stopped screaming and he stopped throwing things, and the place got calm. So I remember her, that grace under fire. I think it is

something you learn. It just doesn't come. I saw it in her and I learned it from her, and I remember thinking about my mom at times where it's too chaotic. It's too crazy. It's nuts. You just . . . I don't know where it comes from, but there's grace. There were many times that I was privileged to feel that grace. I think I felt it that night I was with that young man, just feeling the grace. It's almost like a religious experience, but I didn't feel religious. It was more spiritual. Nurses and medics and docs, we have to have grace under pressure. If we fall apart, the whole place falls apart. [Sighs] So . . .

KH: Was that wearing on you, to feel like you had to maintain grace under pressure or the whole place would fall apart?

DE: [Pauses] I think it's why I broke down years later. At some point, it becomes toxic.

KH: Did you have any outlet for your own stress or sadness or anger in Vietnam?

DE: Music. For me, it was music. I would go back to my hooch and just listen to all the new music, all the 1960s music. I loved it. I loved the anti-war songs. I loved the things the Beatles sang. I loved Joan Baez. I loved everybody but Jane Fonda. [Chuckles] Of course, you know, that whole politics, that was not good. It was the music. Just going back . . . I kind of isolated myself.

Once in a while, I'd go up to the officer's club with some of my friends, but there was an awful lot of alcohol use in Vietnam. I'm very non-judgmental because it's a war zone. By the grace of God I would have been drunk, too, if my body could handle it. [Chuckles] But I didn't like the feeling of being sick. I could not drink alcohol. I just would be sick. I just couldn't drink, so I didn't drink. I didn't do drugs. I'm thankful for that, because I think that just compounds problems. But it was part of the reality of the war experience. It's something that needs to be talked about. It needs to be shared. It needs to be addressed. You know, it's part of what happens and it's part of the cost of war. It's part of the cost of being in situations where you'll self-medicate.

KH: Now, you said you listened to a lot of the music of the day, and part of what you're describing in addition was happening here as well, in terms of drug use and music, the counter culture, youth culture, the Anti-War Movement. Had your thoughts about the war changed by the time you were in Vietnam or after you were there for a period of time?

DE: It didn't take long after I was in Vietnam and it definitely became . . . My political conscience was born in Vietnam. I had no political conscience before that. I wasn't paying attention to politics. I didn't know much about politics. I didn't know the difference between political parties. But by the time I got up to Pleiku, and after I'd been in the burn unit where we had all the victims of napalm and white phosphorous . . . It was like we were dropping those bombs. We were dropping the napalm. By the time I'd seen the numbers of civilians and mostly women and children because the men were in the military and they took them elsewhere . . . a lot of women and children and the horrific wounds and the suffering and the kids who were orphaned by the thousands, and the crying and the pain and the suffering of the children, that's

when I started asking why. You always ask, “Why? Why?” and I wasn’t getting any answers. By the time I got up to Pleiku, now it’s 1969, and with what I’m hearing from back home and the fact that the war is supposed to be winding down, so why are we getting all this escalation of troops? Then I knew about a lot of the lies. We tried to get our hands on newspapers or we’d read the *Army Times* and then we’d sit around and look at the newspapers together, some of us nurses in my hooch, and it was, like, who made this up? That’s not true. Who made that up? What we saw and what we knew was happening in Vietnam wasn’t what they were reading in the United States.

I think what really clinched it for me was the Cambodian issue, when it was being said by the Administration here at home that we were not in Cambodia. Well, the hospital that I served at in Pleiku was just thirteen kilometers from the Cambodian border, and a lot of our patients were coming from Cambodia. They were injured there. They died there. It wasn’t being recorded properly. “Your son has been killed in Vietnam.” Well, maybe not. Maybe it was Cambodia. But they were covering that up.

So I was beginning to really feel the betrayal. I can’t tell you the terrible feeling you have when you’re serving in a war zone and you feel betrayed. You feel betrayed by your government. And I was definitely now feeling betrayed by the country. We heard the stories now of soldiers who had gone back to the United States and had war protestors throwing things at them. Those soldiers, a lot of them, decided to go back to Vietnam. So now they’re coming back and they’re telling us what’s happening in America and they’re telling us what happened to them. They said, “I’d rather be in Vietnam.” A lot of them returned to Vietnam because they couldn’t stand what was happening at home. By now, I’m just very disillusioned with war and disillusioned with why are we killing the Vietnamese people? What is the mission? We weren’t being given a real clear mission, except this theory about the Communist domino system. The mission seemed to be to count the dead bodies. The winning or the losing of the war was based on how many bodies, how many VC [Viet Cong], how many Vietnamese, how many enemy we killed. That was how we were determining how the war was going—it was, well, we killed this many today. We killed this many the next day. But they never factored in the thousands of Vietnamese that we were also killing, the innocent Vietnamese. Why are these young men dying and suffering and not having that answered . . . ?

KH: Was that sense of questioning and feeling betrayed widespread amongst the people, your colleagues, other doctors and nurses and patients? In other words, how would you describe morale among the troops, medical and combat?

DE: I think morale deteriorated as the war . . . I know morale deteriorated as the war wore on, and by the time I left, the morale was terrible. This is almost the end of July. I think I got home, like, the first of August. The war protests were at their height. Demonstrations were at their height. The country was absolutely chaotic. The National Guard had come out and there were clashes between police and students, and police were being violent to civilians. Some of the protestors were peaceful protestors and you couldn’t even peacefully protest without being, you know, handcuffed or clobbered or some kind of violent act. I, personally, believe in protesting war if you believe the war is wrong, but you have to do it peacefully. I don’t believe in violently

destroying property or people or hurting others. The morale definitely was going down. I think it was noticeable amongst everybody. The other nurses that I served with, we were all tired. We were exhausted. Some of us were sick. Some were going to return for a second tour for all the wrong reasons. What I mean by that is . . . Well, I guess there was no wrong reason, but . . . I knew I had to go home because I was really, really tired. And I didn't realize it, but I was also sick.

So I got on the chopper and came home, and I decided after I'd been home for a while, then I could decide if I wanted to go back to Vietnam, but I didn't. It was also during that time that I was really struggling with that because I felt I should go back to Vietnam. Just when we were getting really good at what we were doing, our tour of duty was over and we went back home. Then the new people came in and then that whole learning curve had to start over again. You felt really bad leaving such caseloads to the new, young nurses coming in. You *really* did. It was like you *knew* what they were in for, and you just didn't want them to have to go through what you just went through. But . . .

KH: What we heard this afternoon at your talk at the University of Minnesota and from Meg Carson also, I think it was, was about how many women Vietnam veterans come home and if they are suffering from PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder], it is often from that witnessing, from being the caregivers to people who are experiencing direct threat of violence or death. They cite less often their own fear for their own safety. Were there times in Vietnam that you feared for your own safety?

DE: There were many times. There were many times. You went through it and you experienced that fear, and then you got over it, and you got over it quickly. I don't know if it was a survival or a protective instinct or what it was. You got so busy you weren't thinking about yourself. You know, as nurses, we were rarely thinking about ourselves. We just wanted to get through the day taking care of our patient and the next patient and the next patient, and get this IV hung and get that blood infusion done. There was always something to do.

It's kind of funny now when I look back on it, but the night that we were hit really hard and the hooch next to us, right next to us, was blown off the face of the map . . . There was a big crater right next to our hooch.

KH: Was this in Pleiku?

DE: Yes, at the 71st Evac. It was really good for me to go to my first reunion, which was two years ago, of the 71st Evac Reunion for the medical personnel. Lots of people brought pictures and scrapbooks and so on. Well, one of the medics came up to me. We hadn't seen each other all these years. He came up to me with this kind of smile on his face and he said, "Hey, Diane." He called me, "Lieutenant." "Hey, Lieutenant. Do you remember the night we got hit?" That was *the* night we got hit. There were other nights, but that was the big one. He said, "I've got a picture of it." I didn't take any pictures. I had completely blocked this out, completely forgotten it. So he brings the picture and there's this big crater hole where the hooch had been, and I am standing over here, and he's standing on the opposite side of the crater taking the picture of the crater, and

I happened to be across the way. I looked at that picture, and I thought, so I was there. I did experience that. I didn't have a nightmare that we were hit. You kind of wonder, years later, did I make it up? It's so . . . it couldn't have happened. It was so surreal or maybe I just had a bad dream, and now I remember my dream instead of the actual event. So seeing a picture of me standing on the opposite end and me being captured in that picture was very affirming that I hadn't made it up, that I really was there.

I should have gotten a copy of it, because a few times during the building of the Vietnam Women's Memorial I was told by certain people, as if they knew, but they were never there, "Well, nurses weren't in unsafe areas. Nurses were in hospitals in safe areas, weren't they?" [Chuckles] "They were safe, weren't they?" There was this preconceived idea that nurses wouldn't be placed in harm's way, that we were in nice, safe, white, sanitized hospitals. [Chuckles] If I could just have had that picture to pull out of my pocket and say . . .

KH: "Well!"

[Laughter]

DE: "This area wasn't safe." It was almost like—I think a lot of nurses will share this view—we needed proof to show what it was like, because no one would believe us. It would have to take pictures. It would have to take video. Who would believe us? People would think, well, we made it up or we were exaggerating.

That night, when it hit, it was so excruciatingly loud that it was a jolt. You just hit the floor automatically. There wasn't time to run to a bunker. I just crawled under my bed. As I was crawling under my bed, the mirror over my dresser exploded. The vibration . . . the mirror fell off the wall and exploded on the floor, so now there's glass everywhere. My hooch mate, Edie, who lived in the next room, she was saying, "Diane, Diane, get over here. Get over here." We had done this before, like, crawl under each other's beds so we'd be together when we were being rocketed, so we wouldn't be alone. So I'm crawling on the floor trying to open the door to get over to Edie's bed, and I crawl under the bed with her. She's already under her bed. It was pretty scary, because it was very loud. We knew something terrible had happened. Now I've got glass that I'm picking out of my arms. I'm bleeding all over with little mirror chips. I crawled under Edie's bed. I had on my helmet. I'm a sight to behold with a helmet on and my pajamas. Edie has rollers in her hair and she can't get her helmet on. She's also eating crackers with peanut butter and jelly. I said, "Edie, are you eating?" She said, "Yes. If I'm going to die, I'm not going to die hungry." Well, some of us can't eat when we're under stress and others need to eat when they're being . . . [Chuckles] Now we laugh at this surreal incident with these two young Army nurses under a bed, one with curlers in her hair eating crackers and me with a helmet on in my pajamas. We just pulled the pillows off our beds and put them down and slept till morning and then got up and got dressed and went to work. When she was calling for me, it was kind of like, well, this could be it, and we don't want to be alone. We'd at least be together. Edie's from Minnesota, so we really bonded. As soon as I got up to Pleiku, my new hooch mate was Edie McCoy, and she was from Minnesota.

KM: Is she now Edy [Edythe] Johnson?

DE: Edie McCoy Meeks.

KH: Okay.

DE: Edie Meeks now. It was interesting in that we both knew, hey, if we're going down, we're going to go together, just like that song, "We'll all go down together." [*Goodnight, Saigon* by Billy Joel]

KH: Then you say the next morning you just got up and went to work.

DE: And forgot about it. I got a broom and swept up the glass off the floor.

KH: At the time, are you experiencing it as, well, we're in a war zone, very pragmatically?

DE: Just very . . . This is just . . . and Edie and I never talked about it. We never talked about it till after the dedication, where we both brought it up. Again, we talked about it as if it was a funny incident, rather than the seriousness of what had happened. [Chuckles] We both could have . . . We had just narrowly missed being killed by this big rocket that was right next to our hooch, literally. The next morning when the G.I.s came out, they had thousands of sandbags. It was hot and they were just sweating. The guys were putting sandbags around our hooch, all the way to the top, so the sandbags would surround the whole hooch. The entire hooch was sandbag, except for the roof, so that if it happened again, you know, we'd be safer.

Edie and I, again, we laughed. I said, "Edie, you were eating. How could you eat during a time like that?" [Chuckles] So we laughed. And she in her curlers. It was just sort of a macabre experience, but we looked at it as almost funny. But we both nearly lost our lives.

There were several incidents. I had some other times where I thought it might be . . . [sighs] . . . well, I might not go home. But it didn't make me want to go home. I don't ever remember thinking . . . Edie and I talked about this. She asked me once, "Did you ever think about just going home?" [Chuckles] I said, "No, I don't think I ever thought about just going home because it was never an option." She said, "I didn't either, but isn't it odd? We're twenty-one, twenty-two years old and wouldn't we just throw up our hands and say, 'We want to go home?'" We didn't. We were there for something, for a higher purpose than ourselves, I guess.

KH: You, in your talk this afternoon, when you were describing that evening, one of the things I was very struck by, besides the event that you are describing, was all the sensory images that you used in describing it. Can you give us some sensory memories of your time in Vietnam: sights, sounds, smells that were particularly memorable to you?

DE: We all became, all of us, I would say—it's just human instinct—extremely observant. Every sense was heightened. Everything was heightened, because we were constantly on guard. We were constantly on alert, so we knew the sounds. We had to know, was it incoming or outgoing,

so we became very sensitive to how the thud landed. Was it a distant thud or was it a close thud? Was it a rocket or was it a mortar, because they were different. The crater was probably a mortar. A rocket . . . Is that right? Am I remembering this right? It really doesn't matter. It's all, you know, horrific. The shrapnel was horrible. When that exploded, if it came into the hospital, into the unit or through the roof, and there was shrapnel flying around everywhere, it would hit so many different people. Then you're going around trying to find out who's hurt, who needs the care first. One of the nurses was hit one night. She thought of herself last and took care of everybody else and then went down and got her stitches.

Anyway, the smells, we knew what pseudomonas smelled like, so if we had a patient, we thought, oh, my god, it's pseudomonas. Then you would, you know, make sure that they were on the antibiotic at . . .

KH: What's pseudomonas?

DE: Pseudomonas is an infection and has kind of a greenish, putrid appearance to it. If you've ever smelled pseudomonas, you'll never forget the smell. It has a specific smell to it. You can smell it. Rotting flesh, necrotic flesh, burns, napalm and white phosphorous, that has a special . . . The Sulfamylon medication you use for burns . . .

Everything had a heightened sense to it and you became just extremely alert and observant in assessing, as nurses are taught. When you go into a patient's room, the first thing you do is observe what's happening in the whole room. You look at all . . . look at the patient, and then you assess. Well, when you walk into a unit in Vietnam, you've got forty-five patients or sixty patients in your unit and maybe two nurses, three nurses, and a couple of corpsmen. You have to make a pretty quick assessment of what's happening all around you. You notice *everything* to the point where . . .

I came on duty one night at Pleiku and I was pouring my medications, and I looked up and, across the unit, I saw a piece of red. Now, everything in my unit is olive green, different shades of green, different shades of gray, gray and olive green, and then blue pajamas. The patients wore blue pajamas. I saw this piece of red. I was so curious about what would be red in my unit. [Chuckles] I stopped pouring my medications. I went right over to the end of the unit and over the malaria netting—we put malaria netting down on the patients at night so they were like in their own little cozy cave with their beds covered with malaria netting—and there was the Canadian flag hanging over the malaria netting. That was the red that I saw. I was curious enough about it that I had to go find out. I opened up the malaria netting and I looked in and I said, "What's that?" He said, "Well, it's the Canadian flag." I said, "I know that. I'm from Minnesota and we know the Canadian flag." [Chuckles] I said, "What are you doing here?" I did not know we had Canadian troops in Vietnam [spoken very softly]. He said, "I'm fighting a war, ma'am." Oh, he was so sweet. I just looked at him and I laughed. I asked him how he was. Then I put the malaria netting down and as I was walking away, he shouted at me, and he said, "What are *you* doing here, ma'am?"

KH: [Chuckles] Very polite.

DE: [Chuckles] Yes.

A lot of times, my memories are in black and white. They're not in color. I don't remember a lot of color, you know. The Agent Orange, the dioxin, had defoliated most of Pleiku. It was very dingy, very red dirt.

And the smells . . . The smells, to this day, will come back to me and trigger . . . especially the smell of blood. That is . . . Yes. I had a very unusual incident happen several years ago. We were invited to a wedding out of state. The mother of the bride's sister was a chef. So she was doing the whole wedding meal. They had invited us to come to their home. Well, her sister had purchased the tenderloin. I don't know if it was a hundred pounds. I mean, it was the biggest piece of meat I've ever seen in my life. She had it spread out on the kitchen table, and she was cutting it. She was going to be grilling it that night. We walked in the front door of the house. I didn't even see the meat. I didn't even see it. I walked in the front door of the house. It was a hot summer day. They had no air conditioning in the house. I walked in and I smelled . . . it was Vietnam. It was Vietnam. I was jolted by it a little bit, and of course not reacting in any other way except the smell. We walked into the kitchen, because she wanted to introduce us to her sister, and there was this big slab of meat with blood all over the place, and she was cutting it. Now, I saw the limbs. That was a body. It wasn't a slab of meat. I was viscerally sick. I was so disturbed. I didn't say a thing to anybody. I just went out of the house.

I'd never been to their home before, but there was a forest, a woods, across the sidewalk. I just went into the woods and got lost for a while. I just couldn't go back in there. I didn't really ever, at the time, put it all together, except I was just very disturbed by it. What's interesting is that it was visceral. It was just very . . . it was instant. It was automatic. There was no shutting it down or stopping it. I couldn't just tell myself, "Okay, what's the problem here?" I had to calm down. I had to get balanced, get centered. [Sighs] Then, when I did go back in the house, my husband looked at me like, are you okay? Are you sick? Where have you been? I said, "I'm fine. It was probably just being in the car all day." We'd driven down there, but . . . yes. Things like that, when your senses are so heightened, maybe it just never leaves you. You never forget that stuff. I don't know.

Sounds, of course, you know . . . It's the sounds of choppers that bother me most, not one chopper, but several. I still have an increased heart rate if a bunch of helicopters fly over our house. My heart instantly starts racing. I just have to calm down. I can't get my heart to stop doing that. It's just automatic. I can't tell myself, "Okay . . ." I can't make myself stop the visceral reactions. Psychologically, I know I'm not in Vietnam. Those helicopters over my house don't have patients in them. I don't have to run to the hospital. I know all of that intellectually, psychologically . . . [chuckles] . . . emotionally, but I still react viscerally. It's very interesting, and most nurses tell me that; that they react the same way. Their pulse goes up. Their heart starts beating faster when the helicopters come in. I think, for us, the nurses react the most strongly to that because that's when we know the mass casualties are coming in. We know we have to respond. We have the adrenaline rush. We have to get ready. We have to get prepared, pull on our flak jacket, pull on our helmet, get the boots on, get to the hospital, get things done, and to do that, your....

[Tape interruption]

DE: There was never a situation where you could run away from it. You were always running *to* it. Like the helicopters . . . That was a sound where we had to run to it. We had to go do something. If there were gunshots around us, we had to react. We had to react by running to the patients to make sure that they were under their beds, that they had mattresses thrown on them. We were never running away to protect ourselves.

KH: That's a very interesting point, because, of course, most people in a threatening situation, you have the fight or flight response and you flee away. But of course you had to run to the exact thing that was so scary.

DE: The only time that . . . Like the night that I was under my bed and going to Edie, there was no way for us to run to the hospital and do something for our patients. It was so immediate and so nearby that it was like, okay, at this moment, we're being rocketed. We just have to get under this bed and hope that we can survive. The phones weren't ringing, and the sirens didn't tell us that we needed to get to the hospital. So that was the one time that we actually stayed under our bed for the night, but any other times when the red alert siren went on or there were mass casualties, we weren't running *away* from the situation. We were always running *to* the situation that was urgent and terrifying and frightful. It's interesting, because to this day I don't run away from anything. It's interesting.

KH: Do you think that's a useful thing?

DE: It was then.

KH: Now?

DE: Now, it would be useful. [Chuckles]

KH: [Unclear]? Oh, granted the threat was so very different than what you faced in Vietnam, but certainly [unclear] persevered for that Memorial.

DE: Yes, I know it did. Building the Memorial was . . . I can't put it in words in just a sentence. It's going to take a book. That's why I know I need to write down what it took. Most people wouldn't believe . . . We felt people wouldn't believe what we did in Vietnam. There are also people who need to understand how difficult it was to put that Memorial there, that there were so many obstacles, but they need to know why. Why were people opposing honoring nurses, honoring women? What were the sociological . . .? What was the social climate? What was the climate toward gender? I remember saying to myself many times, "If I could do what I did in Vietnam, I can do this. If I fail, nobody is going to *die*. What's the worst thing that can happen when I have to go in front of this Congressional hearing?" They were very terrifying. They were very scary, because there was so much that hinged on, you know, how the hearing went. Would it be favorable or not? I used to go into them, and I literally would pray for grace. I never prayed for it in Vietnam. [Laughter] I was too busy or too unbelieving in God at that point. But,

somehow, it came from someplace. I would just say, “Oh, I need help to get through this. I just have to pray for grace, to be calm, to just be calm.” There were a lot of powerful people convinced that the Memorial didn’t need to be built and so on and so forth. I used to say that to myself. “I got through Vietnam. I was shot at. I worked long hours. That was much more difficult than what this is, so this is nothing compared to Vietnam, so I can get through this. I can do this. And I didn’t quit in Vietnam and I’m not going to quit . . . Nobody is going to push me back or humiliate me again.”

A lot of it was defense. I was very defensive about the fact that when I came back from Vietnam nobody cared, very few people outside of my family and so on and so forth. They cared, but I felt very little support when I came home. I felt very little gratitude. It didn’t hurt me all that much. I was feeling it, but I was feeling it more for . . . I was still transferring my nursing to . . . I was so angry at how they treated the men, because I had just seen how these men had suffered and died and what they had gone through. And now how could people be scorning them or calling them names like “baby killers” when I’d just seen, you know, their courage? Oftentimes, they were in such pain and they were more worried about the guys around them or their buddies than they were themselves. They were . . . A lot of those young men were just amazingly brave, good, good people. I remember really being angry at how the country could turn on them like they did. So . . .

Then when I was working those years toward getting the approval and raising the funds and doing everything necessary to build a memorial, that’s when I started thinking more about how I, personally, was affected, and how there were times, if it came up that I was a Vietnam vet, I would be humiliated by somebody making a comment. I would be *so* hurt. I’d feel sick to my . . . I’d actually, literally, feel so nauseated to be in the presence of that that I would leave the room. I would literally leave the room. I remember, actually, walking home from a party one night because it had happened. I drove home from a party one night because it happened. The person later apologized for what he said. It was very mean-spirited. Because that happened to me, I thought, twenty years later, I’m not going to let these people do that to me again. I’m not going to let people hurt me, and I started fighting back. The way I could fight back was to do it in a constructive, positive way rather than a destructive way. I could fight back by doing my part to talk about how I felt, how veterans were treated, and how they needed to be treated better—especially the women. So . . . [sighs] I was called, “This woman coming in out of the cornfields.” When I knew that that had been said by a staff member at one of the commissions in Washington, D.C., I thought, hmmm, I’m proud to be a woman coming from the cornfields. [Chuckles]

KH: Nothing wrong with that. [Chuckles]

DE: And that how dare they insult my family who feeds the world, you know, the farmers who feed the world? What do they know about corn farmers—nothing—and what intelligence and hard work it takes to be a farmer? It was just another put down, another insult that they could, you know, throw your way. Instead of saying I was a woman who served my country—“Thank you for your service”—I was this woman coming out of the cornfield.

KH: I remember, for my dissertation, after I interviewed you and was researching some of those debates (which is putting it politely) about the Memorial . . . nasty, nasty.

DE: It was mean-spirited. It was nasty. That's how we were treated when we came home from Vietnam, and I wasn't going to let them treat me like that again. I knew I'd have to take the high road and rise above it.

[Pause]

KH: We could talk for, probably, six more hours.

DE: Yes.

KH: But you have a flight to catch, so what haven't we talked about in terms of your year in Vietnam that you would like to talk about or get on the record?

DE: Well, it was the most defining year of my life, and I practiced a lifetime of nursing in one year. It made it difficult for me, a few years later, to practice nursing. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I didn't recognize it. I didn't piece it together. I didn't want to admit that anything could have been negative about my experience in Vietnam, because I knew that I had done the best that I could. I made mistakes. We all made mistakes. We all felt guilt and we all felt blame. I wished—and I know most of the nurses I've talked to wished it—we could have done more, not really thinking about what we had done as being so much, but that we wished we could have done more.

It did have a profound impact on my life in many positive ways, *many* positive ways. The fact that I could move on and successfully move forward with honoring my sister veterans just makes me *so* happy and proud for them and for us, and that the nation did care . . . I think I set out to prove something. [Chuckles] I wanted somehow . . . Deep down, I truly believed that people would care if they knew what we had done. I think I always look for the good. I always believe in the best. I always give people the best, you know, a second chance or I'd always try to find the best in people. It's kind of hard in some, but . . . Somehow, I had a feeling if people knew what nurses had done in Vietnam, they would be surprised. They would be proud. And I really wanted it for the families of the young men we cared for, because if those families knew we were there and what we had done for their sons, maybe it would give them some sense of relief, some sense of healing for them, too, and the healing aspect for my sister veterans.

But it wasn't until years later that I realized the cost for myself and that I had to address that. So . . . I said, "If I had to do Vietnam over again, I would in a heartbeat."

I've also said, "If had to do over again the building of the Vietnam Women's Memorial, I would not." Because I had four children at the time. They were under the age of ten. They were four, six, eight, and ten when I founded the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project. I did not have the time to do the Vietnam Women's Memorial. I was raising a family. There was a cost to my family. We held it all together. I have a wonderful husband who was *very* supportive of what I

was doing, and a wonderful mother who stepped in after she retired as a nurse and took care of the kids whenever I had to be gone. I could not have done it without my mother. Every time I had to go to Washington, D.C. or raise money, go to a veteran's convention and all of that, Mother would come and take care of the kids or I could not have done what I did. It was exhausting work. I missed piano recitals. I missed tennis matches. I missed Little League. I missed Parent/Teacher Conferences. But, yet, the kids will tell you today, now that they're in their twenties and thirties, that they had a good childhood and that they realized Mom was out doing something really important. [Chuckles] When they came to the Dedication, they were just blown away. They absolutely loved the Dedication. They saw all these people come up and give me hugs. They just loved that people were hugging me. [Chuckles] And of course they were getting hugged, too, because they were my kids. So I think they saw the result of all that sacrifice on their own part. But I gave up some years with my kids that I'm not sure I'd give up again. I want them back. They've all turned out great and they're doing well. It was a very painful ten years. I wouldn't go through it again, but I'm glad I did it. I don't have a choice to make. [Chuckles] My husband doesn't believe me. He says, "You would do it over again." I'm glad I don't have that choice to make. It's very rewarding to know the Memorial is there and to see what it's done for the women and the men. Men love the Memorial, too. [Sighs]

I guess I had unfinished business after Vietnam. I didn't know what it was at the time. There were times that I was suicidal. I just decided that life wasn't what I wanted it to be anymore. I wasn't afraid of death, because I'd been in Vietnam that year and was very close to it many times. I was with death as patients died, and being exposed to the dangers in Vietnam, I had already prepared myself for my own death, my mortality. It was almost frightening, at a young age, to be that young and not be afraid to die. Sometimes I would think there must be something wrong with me. Counseling and the building of the Memorial has been, for me, very therapeutic. I think I had to finish out my nursing and nursing was still helping others heal, and that's what the Memorial did. What the Memorial has done for the women and the men so that they could move on and have better lives is what's *so* profound—not to mention the legacy that it leaves for young women in the military today. So I'm glad I made it. I'm glad I'm sixty.

KH: [Chuckles]

DE: Now I hope I have a lot more years to enjoy my kids and grandchildren.

KH: Do you have grandchildren?

DE: Four. And they're wonderful. Yes, it's really fun.

KH: Do they know Grandma is a Vietnam vet?

DE: They will. I have to write this book, so . . . Yes, I hope to write the book, if for no other reason than just for my family and grandchildren and history.

KH: What's your best memory from Vietnam?

DE: My best memory from Vietnam . . . I don't have one. I've tried to think of that before, but . . .

KH: It's a hard memory.

DE: The year I was there, I was not . . . Again, it goes back, when I talked about my upbringing on the farm and not a lot of time . . . I didn't date the whole time I was in high school. I was not interested in boys at all. I went to prom twice with my girlfriends. I thought boys were ridiculous.

KH: [Laughter]

DE: And I thought my girlfriends who thought going steady was the best thing . . . I couldn't relate to that. I didn't have what you'd say was a lot of fun. It wasn't that I needed it or regretted. It's not like, oh, I didn't have any fun in high school. I don't think of it that way at all. I was doing what I wanted to do. I made the choices. I liked all my jobs. [Laughter] I just wanted to get out of high school so I could go to college.

So I was not a party girl in Vietnam either, because I wasn't a party girl. While some of my friends were enjoying parties, I used to be a little bit . . . I'd wonder why I was different. I also envied at times—I know it sounds ridiculous—people who could drink. They'd go to the officer's club and I'd go up there and they were laughing and having fun, but they were also drinking to laugh and have fun. I wasn't laughing and I wasn't having fun. I was just sort of . . . I don't know what I was doing. I can't think of a best . . . not that there weren't good times. I think I took the whole year really seriously.

I had a medic who found me after the Dedication, who now lives in Australia, and he was my medic for the whole time I was in Pleiku. He wrote me a letter after the Dedication and he said he was happy to find me. Then, now, he emails me every once in a while. It's been really fascinating because, for the first time, I've had somebody I worked with in Vietnam who tells me what I was like.

KH: Hmmm.

DE: Because you don't see what you're like. You don't see yourself. He's telling me all these things, and it's, like, that's interesting. He said I was always extremely professional. I was very serious. I took my work very seriously. [Laughter] And he said all the corpsmen had crushes on me. I thought that was really sweet. [Laughter]

KH: And you didn't know this at the time?

DE: Oh, of course not.

KH: [Unclear] paying attention?

DE: No. He said, “You were *so* professional. You were *so* serious. We knew that . . .”

KH: [Laughter] It was not even worth a try.

DE: Not even worth a try. [Laughter] He said, “Everybody knew who was in charge.” I thought that was interesting to get feedback from somebody I worked with.

I have wonderful memories of my corpsmen. I guess if I was going to say wonderful memories . . . I have wonderful memories of my corpsmen. They were just amazing, how hard they worked, how great they were. Of course, many of the nurses I worked with as well, but I really loved my corpsmen—and I think they knew it. He told me something about the fact that they all knew that I really cared about them. And I was always backing them up. They’d get called in. I knew they were smoking pot, some of them, and they were getting in trouble, and I would always back them up and take care of them. I *never* reported them for anything. As long as they could do their job and they came on duty . . . I got called into the chief nurse’s office a few times about Corpsman So and So. I just told her, “He is one of the best corpsman in this hospital. He is excellent. He gives excellent patient care. He cares about his patients. I never have any trouble with him.” [Chuckles] I just really stood behind them if they deserved it, and they all did. So . . .

KH: Where does Vietnam fit in your life now?

DE: It’s still a huge part of my life—I’d like it not to be, but I have to make peace with the fact that it is—because I’m still involved with the Vietnam Women’s Memorial Foundation. I’m still communicating with the Board of Directors. We’re still a foundation accomplishing our objectives, which now are education and facilitating research, maintaining our database with the women who served. There’s a lot of research being done. We’re working with a lot of doctoral candidates who are doing dissertations and other graduate work and, interestingly, some from foreign countries, like France, Canada, who had connections to Vietnam, of course, in the past. And I’m still getting mail, of course, from lots of people, and I try to respond to that mail. So because I’m still so connected to the Vietnam Women’s Memorial, that means there’s still a lot of communication that needs to be done. I have responsibilities to meet as well.

Now that I’ve started writing a book about it, it’s very much on my mind. It’s on my mind day and night. It never goes away. I hope in writing the book that I’ll be able to put it in the book, put the book on the shelf, and with that, get on with, you know, playing with my grandchildren. [Chuckles]

I have stepped back a lot. I feel like I should step back more, but there’s something in my nature that doesn’t allow me to do that. I think I still feel a need. There’s still some unfinished business that I need to . . . I still have responsibilities toward the public and my sister veterans. I think my sense of duty and sense of responsibility to working as a veteran’s advocate is such a part of my life that I find it just very difficult to step back from it entirely. I thought I would, but I guess I don’t want to, and that’s why I’m not doing it. I need to feel that connection. I think that’s where the strong bond between me, at the age of sixty, and me, at the age of twenty-one . . . If you look between twenty-one and sixty, the profound impact of Vietnam is very much . . . I don’t know

what could have impacted someone's life more than that war experience—I guess for me, anyway. I felt *so* responsible for my patients. I think I still feel a sense of responsibility to them and to my peers who I worked with. It just can't go away. [Pauses] It doesn't go away.

KH: There are many, many people who are very grateful [unclear].

DE: Yes. [Speaks softly] One of the happiest days of my life—let's set aside childbirth, my children and marriage, all of that—was the day of Dedication and seeing the faces of all the women vets. [Chuckles] Just looking out in the crowd and seeing my sister veterans out there hugging, laughing, crying was like the pinnacle. It was like *the* moment I'd been waiting for all those years, to see them come together and see them recognized. That was a happy moment for me. It was like America came around.

KH: Not without a little prodding, but it did.

DE: It just needed a little help, just needed a little help.

KH: Is there anything else, Diane, that you'd like to get on record before we grab bite to eat and get you off for home?

DE: I really appreciate this interview. I appreciate you, Kim, and what you've done for women veterans with your dissertation. I think it's been very important to the women who served to know that someone cared enough about them to write about them, to do studies about them, to build a memorial for them, what have you. It's just so critical that everybody has a . . . And you're a civilian, Kim. I say, "You're a civilian," which means you were not in the military. It should be people like yourself. It should be civilians and regular Americans who are doing something for the veterans, because that's what brings the country together when there's a sacrifice by military veterans. When those who didn't serve show they care and show their concern and they want to help tell their stories or help them heal, that's the soul of our nation. That shows the soul of our nation and we are soulless if we don't have average American people who didn't serve in the military showing support or interest. I think America has a soul, and that's good to feel.

KH: I'm very, very honored to be any part of this at all. Thank you so much for giving this interview as sort of a prequel to our previous interviews. Your story is an important one both on its own terms and as part of a bigger story [unclear]. Good to have it and the people in Minnesota are lucky to be able to claim you as one of our own, even if you're not living here anymore.

DE: [Chuckles] Thanks, Kim.

KH: Thank you.