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Beth Parks, interviewed by Laura Tucker, Part 2

Beth Parks

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**Transcript of an Interview
with Beth Parks
by Laura Tucker
June 11, 1999
Bangor, Maine**

The following interview was conducted for the MAINE VIETNAM VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT. Tapes and transcripts of project interviews have been deposited at the Maine Folklife Center at the University of Maine at Orono, where they are available to the public in accordance with the Center's policies. Some restrictions may apply to the use of these interviews by researchers. The Maine Folklife Center should be consulted concerning fair-use guidelines.

Reference copies of the tapes and transcripts are also available in the library of the University of Maine at Farmington and in Special Collections in Ladd Library at Bates College, Lewiston, Maine.

Monique Leamon of Casco, Maine, transcribed the recordings.

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Listener discretion is advised.

BP:Beth Parks

LT:Laura Tucker

Tape One, Side A:

LT:Interview with Beth Parks, June 11th, 1999. If you could just state your full name for me and your date of birth?

BP:My full name, which is a long one and I don't use it all, is Mary Beth Clayfield Parks, better known as Beth Parks. And my birth date is December 27th, 1941.

LT:And where do you, where were you born?

BP:In Glens Falls, New York.

LT:What was your schooling, high school graduation date?

BP:I graduated from high school in Warrensburg, New York, it was a central school so I went K through 12 there and graduated in 1959.

LT:Now, where did you go after high school?

BP:I had planned to go to college in New York, in Rochester, New York, I had scholarships, but my dad died in 1958 so I got a Civil Service scholarship and went to Washington, D.C. and went to three years of nursing school at D.C. General Hospital, Capitol City School of Nursing.

LT:OK, so that, you said you went into the United States Army in '66?

BP:In '66.

LT:What did you do in between times?

BP:Well, I got married in my senior year in nursing school and we moved out into Laurel, Maryland and commuted to our jobs in Washington, and I worked at two different hospitals in Washington. And my husband went overseas in the end of 1964 and at that time my mother was ill with Hodgkins disease, we didn't know what was wrong with her, I went back up to New York to be with her and then saw her through her treatment. And then when she was better, they were crying for operating nurses which is what I'd been, and so I volunteered, I went in as an obligated volunteer.

LT:Now, how did you get into the Army?

BP:I trusted the recruiter. It was a bad mistake. The, it was the Army that was crying for operating room nurses and so I simply contacted the local recruiter who joyfully took me out to dinner and made all kinds of promises. She got hers though because she got, she wound up in Vietnam at a later date and all of the things that she said came back to haunt her, poor girl. But at any rate, yeah, they promised you the sun, moon and stars if you would go into the Army and I did that. The obligated volunteer period was twenty four months and they sent me to medical field service school at Fort Sam Houston, Texas and then from there I got my assignment to Vietnam.

LT:Just to go back a bit, what kind of promises?

BP:Oh, nothing. They give you rank, they give you decent pay, they tell you they're going to take good care of you and you get assignments of your choice and these kinds of things. But, I'm just, I'm joking, everybody always rides on the recruiters because they make everything sound so good. And actually it was pretty good.

LT:So you were actually in Vietnam early on in the war.

BP:Very early in the war, yeah.

LT:Now were you aware, how conscious were you of what was going on?

BP:None. I really, I really did not, there was a lot of hype at the time around Barry Sadler's song, *The Green Beret*, and that probably recruited more people than anything else. I had read a book about Vietnam, well, I guess it was *The Green Berets*, so I was a little familiar with what happened, at least in the northern part of the country. But the thing that sucked me into it was that they simply needed people to do the job and my husband was already over in beautiful southeast Asia and I thought I would go and just do my bit.

LT:Where exactly was your husband?

BP:Well, I thought he was in North Vietnam, not North Vietnam, excuse me, up by the DMZ, but he actually wound up in Thailand.

LT:Now when did you get your assignment to go to Vietnam?

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BP: Well, I knew I was going to be going I think before I even went into Fort Sam Houston, I think I knew before I even did the oath where I was going to be, or roughly. And they had assigned me to Saigon which I did not want, and so I wrote back to the colonel who was the chief nurse and told her that's not what I wanted.

LT: Why not Saigon?

BP: I didn't, if I wanted to stay in the city, I would have stayed in the United States. I wanted to go out in what would have supposedly been the front lines, but there were no front lines. But she did put me in what was the busiest part of the country at that time for casualties.

LT: Now, how did you feel when you got your papers to, because you kind of knew, but how did you feel *[unintelligible phrase]*?

BP: Well, it's what I wanted. I was very disappointed when I got the first assignment, and I wasn't sure that she would accommodate me and put me into a different setting. In fact, she did not do that until I got in country, so when I went over I still wasn't quite sure where I was going to go. She told me she would put me someplace where the action was, but I did not know the exact place until I got there because I was assigned primarily in the beginning at the Third Field Hospital in Saigon.

LT: Now, can you take me back to the day when you went over to Vietnam?
[unintelligible phrase]?

BP: I don't remember it that well, I was pretty tired. All I remember, and the flight, I can't remember which flight, I've been on so many flights going overseas one way or the other I can't remember which one that was now. I think I flew out of Albany, New York and we went west if I'm not mistaken. I don't remember that well. It just seemed to me that I was on a plane for forever. Yeah, that's what happened, I went out of I think Oakland or San Francisco or one of those areas. But what I do remember about that flight, other than being horrendously exhausted, was that we had one sunrise after the other because we kept chasing the sun, which was kind of neat. I think we had four breakfasts on the plane. I was on the plane for a very long time.

LT: Let's just go back a little, what kind of preparation did they give you to go to Vietnam? Because you were already a trained operating room nurse, but what

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did they give you as far as being a *[unintelligible phrase]*?

BP: Well, at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, you had, you were there for six weeks, some intensive training about the Army, about the setup of the hospitals, what it would be like in Vietnam. We did some forced marches, we camped out, they shot goats in the legs and we had to debride their wounds and we had to do tracheoscopy tubes on the goats as well, kinds of things that we might do on a trauma unit. We learned how to set up a MASH hospital and how to make do with things because we never knew if we were going to be getting supplies, that type of thing.

LT: And MASH things were?

BP: Mobile Army Surgical Hospital.

LT: Now what was your MOS and unit designation?

BP: Operating room nurse, which was, I can't remember what the number, three-oh-three or something like that, and the, the unit?

LT: Yeah, the unit designation.

BP: Unit designation, you mean my assign-, where I was assigned?

LT: Yeah.

BP: Oh, okay, 7th, well we called them Surg at that time, be 7th Surgical Hospital, which was a MASH hospital. And I was on temporary duty with them, and then I was permanent duty to the 12th Evac. And the way that that worked was that the, there were so many casualties in our area that they needed to have a larger hospital, so the 7th Surg pulled out and went down to the Mekong Delta and we used their equipment, what was left and whatever buildings they had put up, and built around that to make an evacuation hospital *[unintelligible phrase]*, so that was my job. There were I think six or seven of us and we did that.

LT: Now what is an evacuation hospital?

BP: It's a larger version of a MASH hospital. A MASH hospital is, is not as mobile as it sounds. They don't move that often but they get, they're like a, the nearest

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thing to a, to the battlefield. They've got these medical, oh gosh, I can't even think of the names of them any more, the stations out in the fields, then they would bring them in into a MASH hospital, and in a MASH hospital you have to be able to patch them up and get them back to work. There was no rehab that took place in a MASH hospital. With the evacuation hospital, it was a little more long term so that we could take the casualties in, we'd debride their wounds, they would stay around until we could do what we called a *[unintelligible word]* primary closure on them, and we might send them to another hospital after that for more rehabbing, but it was longer term. So we would get the same kinds of casualties in, but we had more equipment, more staff, and we could keep the patients a little bit longer before we sent them out.

LT: So where did you first go when you arrived in Vietnam?

BP: To Saigon, or Tan Son Nhut airport, and then spent the night somewhere around in there, Tan Son Nhut or Saigon. A chief nurse at *[unintelligible phrase]* came and met me there and then flew with me to my first assignment.

LT: And where was that?

BP: Cu Chi.

LT: Cu Chi?

BP: Yeah.

LT: So what was your first day like?

BP: I was pretty tired, I remember. It was so hot. And the first day, well it was very confusing in Vietnam, in Tan Son Nhut. I was the only white woman there and I really didn't know where I was supposed to go, what I was supposed to do, there was no kind of an orientation for me, no other women to come around and say here's what's going on. I had to go to the bathroom, and the toilets are simply holes in the floor with a little foot plate on either side and an open room with many Vietnamese women, and I had, I mean I, it was a little strange to say the least. I do remember getting my stockings and shoes all wet trying to hit the hole. And when I came out, it had been raining, a lot of mud, and I tried to step over a chain and tripped and I fell flat on my face and was covered with mud. Actually, that's why I wound up going back into the bathroom, I guess, all I could see were my eyes sticking out of this face full of brown mud. So

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here I was supposed to be making a good impression for the chief nurse and I was covered from head to toe with mud on my good clean uniform. So that wasn't too keen, but, and I remember spending the night in a very small room made out of stucco that smelled very badly and there were lizards crawling up the wall. But I got a fairly good night's sleep, and then she came and picked me up and we flew by helicopter out to Cu Chi which is about 25 miles northwest of Saigon.

LT:Can you take me through a typical day in your job?

BP:In the job? It depended. At the 7th Surg, well let me explain the set up there a little bit. It's very, it was very small, sort of like camping out actually, even though we were at a large base camp, the 25th Infantry Division was where we were, but the hospital unit itself was not very large. As far as the nurses were concerned, we had two hooches that were connected by a set of *[unintelligible word]* boards and, oh, you might be able to get seven or eight people in one hooch. I think there were either fourteen or sixteen nurses with that hospital, that was operating room nurses and other nurses. I think there were six of us who worked in the operating room if I'm not mistaken, six or seven. And then you have others who worked in pre-op and post-op and that type of thing. We had one Quonset for operating room and we could ac-, we could take care of four patients at one time. And basically they would just set up sawhorses and you, when the guys came off of the ambulance or off of the helicopter, they would be on canvas litters and then we'd have usually two people at either end of that litter, and then someone holding the IVS and they would rush them in and just flop them on top of these sawhorses, and that was, that's where we operated. In terms of our day, it depended on how many casualties we had. Sometimes we worked seventy two hours without ever getting off of our feet, and no food and lucky to get somebody to give you something under your mask to drink. And sometimes we went a week or more without anything and we'd just lie around in the sun.

LT:Now were all the other nurses there with you *[unintelligible word]* women?

BP:Hmm.

LT:What was that like seeing, working *[unintelligible phrase]*, seeing all those bodies coming in?

BP:It was, it was different, I'll say that. I don't know how you describe it. It was, it

was a little overwhelming at times when there was so much going on. You get kind of numb to things after a while because you just have to keep plugging. You're the person who's working, somebody's got to go try to get some rest when we're in a situation like that with mass casualties, but I don't know, it's just like pieces of meat coming across the table. The, there was one that really sticks out in my mind, there was a fellow that came in, I didn't know if we were going to be able to save this guy or not. He had one arm that was fairly intact, it had a lot of wounds in it, he had one arm that was, it looked like it had gone through a wringer. You, probably you don't have a clue what a wringer looks like, old washing machine wringers, but his arm had just been twisted around and around and around so it was only held by a tether of twisted flesh, the arm itself was a mess. He had lost an eye, he had lost both legs, everything from his groin down was, oh, probably two and a half feet wide and maybe a foot thick, it looked like a delta of just blackened, torn hamburger flesh. His genitals were gone. And he was really a mess. So I just started hacking away, I think I took his arm off and then I started working on the lower part of his body. You just keep cutting until you get to something that bleeds basically, that's decent flesh, because everything is all destroyed. And the gal who was captain, the operating room charge nurse, came over and looked and she got very pale and, I mean just deathly pale, and she was pretty tough and she'd seen a lot of stuff come through, and I wondered what happened. And, so when she came back in I saw her out of the corner of my eye and I said, what's the matter, Chris? And she said, I had to go out and look at the chart to make sure, she said, that's my cousin. Yikes. So that was, that kind of thing was pretty tough. And he, they did ship him out, he died up in Saigon. Couldn't, I don't know that it was so much his wounds, he just didn't want to live without two legs and an arm and an eye.

LT: Were there any other particular cases that stuck out, or was it all...?

BP: That's the one I think that sticks out more than any other. There was another case at the 12th Evac, it was the same location basically, just in a different building, that a guy had come in and he, he only had one small bullet wound in the belly, or fragment wound in the belly. Because usually we had these guys that just had these massive wounds, you just didn't know where to start working on them. And he had one wound in the belly and he looked fine, and he had been going with this, with one of the nurses who lived in the next hooch. She was a divorcee who had waited a long time and really fell in love with this man who was an enlisted man, and was so happy for the first time in many, many years. He comes in and, I think I was doing triage, and he said to me, tell Mary I said

goodbye. And I said, you're going to be fine, what's the matter, I said, you only have a small hole in your tummy [*unintelligible phrase*]. So I went in and scrubbed and we opened that boy's belly and the blood went right up and hit the roof of the Quonset, and what had happened was that the fragment had perforated his aorta and so we took his intestines out, that took the pressure off, and then he bled to death and nothing anybody could do. It was just amazing.

LT:What was that like, were you working with, you know, doctors? How were the dynamics [*unintelligible phrase*]?

BP:Well the doctors called the shots and would say who's going to work on what. When, with the mass casualties, especially in the MASH hospital, we all just, you just grab a knife and forceps and start hacking away at tissue, you know, you do amputations or whatever, but there's a doctor there. And they would have teams of doctors who would come in. There was a guy who knew how to do eyes, for example, there, whoever was the best at eyes would come in and work on an eye and whoever was the best at chest wounds worked on the chest, so you'd have teams of doctors who would be working on a patient, if there were enough people to do that. And if there weren't, whoever got the patient just started hacking away and we'd trade off. The difference, there were more doctors than there were nurses, and so we found ourselves as nurses just going and going and going, where the doctors would be able to stop after a case and go take a break and somebody else could come in and work. But we just didn't have the staff to do that for the nurses, so you got awful tired.

LT:Did you develop a close bond with the other nurses?

BP:Not really, not really. I, I did get in touch with one of the gals, she married one of the fellows that she met in Vietnam, and they came to see me when I was in Germany and then actually came and visited me here probably about five years ago. But those are the only folks that I kept in contact with. He was a, an aid to General Wyan who was the head of the head of the [*unintelligible phrase*] Infantry Division and she was a nurse, and they've since divorced. But, no, I didn't keep in contact.

LT:Now, did you notice I guess any gender differences where, there weren't many females in Vietnam when you were there in a medical role, but did you notice any kind of gender differences there?

BP:Well, in what way?

LT:I guess I'm wondering what it was like to be a woman in Vietnam [*unintelligible word*]?

BP:Great, I mean it, for those who weren't married, you have two thousand men to a half a dozen women or something like that. There was, you were treated like a queen, [*unintelligible phrase*], the guys were wonderful to the girls and it was just, there would always be a waiting line for people, for fellows who just wanted to talk to you really. But they let you do everything, we drove tanks and flew planes and jumped from airplanes and did all kinds of things just because the guys were trying to impress us and they'd let us do stuff. Oh, there is one other person I kept in contact with, was married to a, I was a sister-in-law with a friend of mine, and so I still know where she is, but we're, we don't socialize or anything like that, she's out west.

LT:Mentioning fun things like getting in tanks and jumping out of planes, what did you get to do?

BP:Oh, I didn't jump out of a plane, but I did fly, this is terrible, I shouldn't tell you this, what they called a FAC plane, it's a spotter plane for the jets that would come in and the, also the bombers, B-52 bombers. And I went up with this pilot and he was letting me fly and we were chasing, before the, before the air strike we were out chasing water buffalo with the airplane. And he stopped, we got out and did something, we went back up again, and I got up in the air and I had to go to the bathroom. I didn't realize we were going to go up then to do the air strike. So here they have all these planes, all these men waiting for this FAC plane to tell them exactly where they were supposed to be bombing, and he had to land to let me go to the bathroom. I was terribly embarrassed. I don't know what that cost the Army but, and the Air Force, but I would say a pretty penny.

LT:Now what did you do in the off time when you were, you know, were you close to any major cities or?

BP:No, you weren't supposed to leave the base anyway. We, I did once in a while get a chance to go up to Saigon. We did go to parties. Our chief nurse's name with the 7th Surg was Molly, and it was Molly, Madame Molly and her girls. Because basically what would happen is we wouldn't have supplies, we'd need blankets, we'd need penicillin, we'd need all kinds of things, and she would send us up to party with these various units in the field and they would put on a

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dinner and a dance for us and then we would come back loaded with supplies. Yeah. But for the most part that's all we had a chance to do. And then I did get up to Vung Tau twice, which was on the beach. That was fantastic. And I took two weeks in Bangkok for my leave and a week or R&R in (*name*), which an island off the coast of Malaysia.

LT:What was it like in Vung Tau, on the beach?

BP:Cool. We had a little cottage, I can't remember if it was something, it must have been something the Army had that they were letting people use who came up there for R&R type of thing, but we were just, I just remember sleeping and going out and swimming and lying in the sand and going back and eating and sleeping, and then going out and lying in the sand, that's all we did. Just kind of a blur. But it was mostly just not doing anything but trying to get some sleep.

LT:Now, you mentioned you went to Bangkok for your R&R, did you have a chance to...?

BP:For a week.

LT:For a week, did you get a chance to see your husband?

BP:No, no.

LT:You didn't see him the whole year?

BP:No, and then we split anyway, so no, I didn't.

LT:How, what was your housing like when you were on the base, you mentioned a couple of hooches [*unintelligible phrase*] living quarters, but...

BP:Well, the hooch at the 7th Surg was basically a wooden bottom with a tent top, which leaked like a sieve and so everything was usually very wet. We had, our cots had wooden corners on them so you could hang your clothes off, and mosquito netting on the top, but it was pretty wide open, and we'd drop the flaps when we had the bad rain storms to try to keep some of the stuff from blowing in, but it was, there were, oh gosh, in that building, I think we had like eight people, there'd be four cots on one side and four cots on the other, it was just an open space. Wood floor and a refrigerator, and usually people had an

orange crate or some kind of a little stand to put their stuff on and that was it, that and your duffel bag so it was living kind of light. At the 12th Evac we had a, they built for us a, they weren't Quonsets, they were just wood frame structures with a tin roof and screened in sides, but you could drop a *[unintelligible word]* if it was really stormy *[unintelligible phrase]* in the monsoon season. And then there, I was able to get, trade, at a party, to get some bamboo and matting and we put that up and made ourselves rooms so we each had our own space there and then there was a front room that you could gather in, because the guys weren't supposed to come back into our quarters.

LT:Did they ever?

BP:Of course. But you weren't supposed to, that was an offense of one did that. And then we had a latrine so we had to go out and, you know, we didn't have flush toilets. Although they did get flush toilets at the 12th by the time I left.

LT:Mentioning a refrigerator, did you have electricity?

BP:Yeah, they had a generator at the hospital.

LT:What was the discipline like, did you ever see anybody get caught with a guy in their room, and what did they do about that?

BP:Well, the only thing that happened that I remember is one girl got pregnant, a black girl, and they shipped her out to Japan and that was the end of her career, so, that was something that you weren't supposed to do. But there was a lot of sexual activity that went on. I never, they had things worked out pretty well, they had a bunker out next to the, for example, I mean there were a number of them, they were just sandbag structures, right, that you could hop into them under mortar attack or rocket attack, and they, people used to take turns going into the bunkers. And sometimes they had group things going on in the bunkers because there was no place else for them to go. It was just, the area that we were in was just wide open nothing, just dirt. I think there was one banana plant that grew and a few sprigs of grass but they had Agent Oranged everything, I imagine it's Agent Orange, but all the vegetation was gone and they bulldozed whatever was left. So there, it was just this big flat area with nothing but dirt *[unintelligible phrase]*, there wasn't much privacy. The, at the 12th, two of the nurses who worked in the operating room, one was going with a doctor, anesthesiologist, and the other was going with a male nurse who was an anesthetist and they just took part of the operating room closet, blocked it

off for the anesthesia machines and their mattresses, so they were able, they had a door they could close so they had their privacy.

LT:What was the morale like?

BP:In the beginning I thought very good. As things became more disciplined and people came in from the States who didn't have the background, who hadn't built the place from the ground up and that type of thing, they began to impose their structure and their discipline and then morale started to go down. So those folks who came out about the same time I did had quite low morale by the time they left after a year.

LT:What do you mean by more discipline?

BP:Well, in the beginning, it was a bunch of people trying to help wounded soldiers. We didn't have anything to work with, we had to go beg, borrow and steal whatever we could get, everybody worked together to make it happen, whatever it took, round the clock, to work, everybody pitched in and did their share and really busted buns to help these guys. And whatever you did was fine, I mean people got supplies however they could get them. It was just a very team oriented, to make it work. And the high-, the more civilized you get in the service, the more structured it becomes. Rank becomes important. In the beginning everybody called themselves by their first names and nicknames, or last names or whatever. But toward the end of that year it had to be captain so-and-so, lieutenant so-and-so, whatever. And you had to salute, we never saluted. And when you went around, it was a lot easier to wash blood off of your naked body than it was to clean clothes so the doctors always operated in swim trunks and thongs, and then you could just go hose yourself off. And we wore scrub dresses but we wore either thongs or tennis shoes or something that you could clean. Later on you had to have combat boots on at all times, and your pants had to be bloused and all these other things that seemed a little bit ridiculous. But you couldn't just hop on a plane and go someplace, you couldn't sneak out and do things, it was very rigid and accounted for and not much fun for those of us who fly by the seat of our pants.

LT:Well how come it wasn't very structured in the beginning, was it?

BP:I think it was just the nature of the job in the beginning. It was just kind of loosey-goosey in an organization like that. It was almost like you and a bunch of friends doing things. There was some structure to it, but, and we called our

head, or our chief nurses and our, the commanding officer and all by their first names and type of stuff and this was real, real loose.

LT:Do you know why they started putting more people in making it more structured?

BP:Oh, well, that was the plan anyway, they were going to start off with a MASH hospital to get things established and then they, we were going to move into a an evacuation hospital. My role was to help build that. And then they kept increasing the staff for that. Eventually they turned that hospital over to the Vietnamese as a civilian hospital. But they continued to add staff, they put in sidewalks, they put in flush toilets and a lot of things that made it very civilized. And with that comes all the red tape and rigmarole and.

LT:Now you mentioned, a little while ago that you had to beg, borrow and steal supplies and things like that. How come, you were in the Army, how come they didn't just send you the supplies you needed?

BP:They did, but it would not get to us for whatever reason. And this became rather clear to me on my first trip up to Saigon, and I went up to the market place and they had [*unintelligible word*] in the area where stuff would end. We desperately needed an autoclave to sterilize instruments and it had been ordered and they told us it had been shipped. But it, I found it, with our tag on it, sitting on, in an area which was black market material. So someone had confiscated that and they were selling it on the black market. A lot of the stuff happened like that as well, and you hear about people sending CARE packages and so on, CARE would send bags of grain and many, many different kinds of things and it never got where it was supposed to go, it wound up on the black market and these folks who would get a hold of it would simply sell it to whomever they could sell it. I don't know what use they ever had for an autoclave, but our autoclave was sitting right there and there was no way I could get it back to camp. Heavy, heavy piece of equipment.

LT:Did you ever buy stuff off the black market that you needed for supplies?

BP:No, we were always able to get stuff somehow.

LT:Where did you go to get the stuff?

BP:Usually the soldiers who had their ways of finding out where things were.

LT:Now, when you went in, so you went into Saigon, what are some other things that you saw in the city when you were up there? You saw the black market with your autoclave there, did you see anything other [*unintelligible word*] that sticks out in your mind?

BP:In Saigon? I didn't do a whole lot in Saigon. We stayed at the Caravel Hotel which was very nice, and to be able to eat in a restaurant with crystal and china and be able to sleep in a bed with sheets and be able to take a hot bath were absolutely incredible, and that's basically what I remember, that all I wanted to do was enjoy. So we didn't really go around the city much at all, we just stayed at the Caravel and had a few drinks and eat good and went to sleep.

LT:Now did you ever have any Vietnamese people working...?

BP:Yeah.

LT:...for you?

BP:Yeah, the longer I was there, the more Vietnamese nationals they brought in. When I started at the 7th, the only Vietnamese folks were basically at the PX area, and they had folks there to supervise them. At the 12th they brought in a lot of Vietnamese nationals to work in various capacities. And my biggest, or closest I guess alliance with them, first of all we did have to worry about their doing stuff like putting not so nice things in your toothpaste, had to worry about whether they were going to come up through trap doors and leave bombs in your hooch and those kinds of things, and that happened a lot. Cu Chi was, is situated on laterite clay which is easily tunnel-, tunnelable, and so there were tunnels that were everywhere. We could never figure out when we would get mortared or things would happen within, right on the base camp, what was happening. And the Vietnamese had tunnels all underneath our system and they could just pop up literally anywhere and do rotten things to people. And they did. So you had, you just had to be real careful. For example, if a Vietnamese person offered you a Coca Cola, you had to check to see whether the cap was on or not because what they would do is take the caps off and put formaldehyde in the, in the soda. So you were much safer drinking, going to the PX and getting American beer and Coke, whatever you could get. Usually beer was available, Coke was not always available. But that you had to be careful about. Anyway, I had gone to Bangkok on leave and when we came back in by helicopter there was a mass casualty situation. I just got off the helicopter, I don't, I think I may have taken my duffel bag over and dropped it

at the, in my hooch and then just ran back and took off my green fatigue top and put on a scrub top and went in and scrubbed for hours. I came back out, I guess it was around five, just a little before five o'clock. Now I had had a ring made up in Bangkok because they have a lot of jewels there, rubies and diamonds and sapphires and all this good stuff, and so I had a ring made up, it was silver setting with a diamond in the middle flanked by two sapphires and two rubies, and it was very, very pretty. And I wore it back and when I went to scrub I took it off and put it in the pocket of my fatigue jacket, I thought, and hung it up. So when I came out and got dressed, it wasn't there and I thought, huh, I wonder if I left that, maybe I took it over to the hooch and I ran to the hooch, it was not there. And I said, I'm sure I left that in the pocket of my jacket, so I called CIV which is the security people on the base, main base, and told them that it was gone, actually I said this was probably four thirty, quarter of five, and he said, they're just going off work now, he said, I can guarantee you that one of them took your ring. And I said, well I hate to think that that would happen. He says, believe me, they take things and somebody's got your ring, and we can catch them before they get to the gate. And they went down and by gosh they caught the woman, they actually caught the woman. She saw them coming, I can't remember if they were in a motorized vehicle or a horse drawn, I think maybe a horse drawn wagon or something like that. Anyway, she saw them, he saw her take the ring and put it in her mouth and chew it up. And he brought it back to me all chewed up, and three of the stones which sat in my dresser drawer for twenty years. And, there's the diamond, there's one ruby and one of the sapphires, not the better of the sapphires either. So I had it reset.

LT:What you had left of it.

BP:Yeah. But you thought, I was amazed, but you really couldn't trust the people. They took a lot of our equipment, they took our clamps, you know, our surgical clamps and sponges and everything because they used them for their own casualties. You couldn't tell who was Vietnamese, I mean who was enemy and who was not.

LT:When you talked about rotten things they did because they had that tunnel system, what kinds of things did you experience when you were there?

BP:I didn't have any problem at all, but some other people did. They put grenades in various areas, they booby trapped so if somebody walked in in the dark and they hit a wire they'd blow off their legs and that type of thing. I never saw

anything in my outfit, but I know it happened. It happened out in back when they were building, where some of the guys were that were five minutes walk or less from my hooch and they had a lot of problems over there. So, we didn't know at the time that there were all these tunnels and they were just discovering those when I got there and during that period of the year that I was there, they found this just enormous tunnel system. They had what they used to call tunnel rats, guys who would go down in these tunnels. But while we were partying, Bob Hope came there on Christmas, and rumor has it that while we were up there enjoying Bob Hope, the VC were having their own show right beneath us in the tunnel system.

LT:Now, *[unintelligible phrase]* found the tunnel system, what did, did you know what they did about that, did they...?

BP:Well they preserved a lot of that and used it for training, because I think they still take people around and show them. At the time they'd only explored just a little bit of the tunnels, they had just literally discovered them not long before I got there and so they had set up a little training thing showing, we all went down into the tunnel to see how it operated and the different levels and where they stored their rice and all these different kinds of things. It was really interesting, but it was an enormous, an extensive tunnel system *[unintelligible phrase]*. Just went for miles.

LT:How about, can you describe it for me, what you remember?

BP:Well, it's something I wouldn't want to go into, I can tell you that. The openings were just big enough for a man to get down in, and they were just dirt, just packed dirt and just, you lower yourself down in and then you crawl through these tunnels. I didn't go very far, and they had ours pretty well set up just so that we could see what they had, they had what they called Punji sticks that were sharpened sticks that were usually dipped in human excrement that would be sticking up so if you crawled you could fall, be punctured by those as you were going along, or they would have a covering over an area of the tunnel that you thought was solid, you could drop down in it at the Punji sticks. They had areas dug out where they would have snakes. You just didn't know what you had. These guys who went in the tunnels, I don't know how in the world they did it, but they'd just go in with a flashlight. And they had multi levels of the, of the tunnels. It's written up very well in some, in books, you can see pictures of how they did that, and diagrams.

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LT:Do you know if they ever tried to get the VC out of the tunnels?

BP:Oh yeah, those guys, the VC could really just move though. Our guys didn't have a map of the tunnel system, they just, you know, they mapped it as they went but, oh my word, when I say extensive, the tunnels were really, really extensive and I, as far as I know they just, they went far away from the camp, too. They would pop up in all kinds of areas.

LT:Now, did religion play a part when you were there?

BP:For whom?

LT:For you?

BP:For me? Not really. There was a priest who, everybody went to, it didn't matter what religion they were but they all had a tendency to congregate about this, around this one priest, his name was Father Peterman, and he was a paratrooper who carried a mongoose in his pocket, and he was a very charismatic fellow, so everybody used to go to his services just because they had a great time. But in terms of religion playing a huge part in my life, no.

LT:What did they have for recreation I guess in your base?

BP:Volleyball was a big thing, particularly because from where we sat watching the guys play volleyball, we could look directly into the mens' showers, so that was the big treat. I don't know if they ever realized why all the girls sat on one side. But volleyball was the, was one of the biggest things that they did. The officers club, which was called the Kutchi-Ku Inn, people would drink. The guys, for the girls the guys had all these various outfits around us like the Division Artillery and the Wolfhounds and all each had their own little club house and they would put on these parties for the girls so we had quite an active social life where we were.

LT:Before you went in, how did, how did you feel about the war? Were you for it or against it?

BP:Had no feeling whatsoever. I was an operating room nurse, I didn't make any judgments on the war, I had no idea what we were doing, the line that was always spread was that it was to defend against Communism. And I had no politics, I was totally apolitical and didn't have a clue. I had been living in

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Washington up until the end of '64 so I'd been in Washington for five and a half years, through the entire Kennedy administration and the first part of, the first year of Johnson but was not, really didn't know what was going on politically, and didn't while I was there. I mean, my job was to take care of wounded soldiers.

End of Tape One, Side A

Tape One, Side B:

LT:Did your views about the war change once you had been seeing all these casualties for a while and working there?

BP:I didn't really understand the war, I still don't. My understanding after I was there for a little while was that we were protecting rich man's, businessmen's interests, that that was really at the root of what this was all about. And I saw some of that, or what I thought was some of that in action. What did bother me to some extent was that congressmen would come over, we always knew when they were coming, everything was always cleaned up to make it look so nice when they came through, and that was not the way that it was. I mean they, they didn't see what really happened, which didn't make sense to me. It would seem to me that you'd want them to see the problems that we were having, but that was not the case. The, the commanding officer, the chief nurse would always try to make sure everything looked just wonderful and that these people were squired around. The other thing that I didn't like and didn't understand was that many of these people who came through had other agendas. They weren't there to see what was going on really, or to help us out. They had their own little agendas that they were working on and so it was more of a masquerade than anything else as far as I could see. And I didn't understand that. There were a lot of people who came through, celebrities who came through, visiting the camps as well. Bob Hope did a show, he brought Phyllis Diller and Anita Bryant and Joey Heatherton who was Miss America, and Miss World I think came through. Vic Damone. You won't even know who these people are, but we sure did. And it was very strange to watch them because there were a hand full who were genuinely interested, Charlton Heston was another one, very interested in the soldiers and in what was happening, and some who were just there, I think it was a feather in their own caps, which surprised me. And an interesting thing, you know who Charlton Heston is?

LT:Yeah.

BP:OK, he was in *The Ten Commandments*, he was Moses and all this kind of stuff, but he was an interesting one for me. I was doing delayed primary closures one day and I looked down the chart to see who my next person was and as it turned out it was the, it was a kid I had known and he had gotten hit in the leg. It wasn't a big wound or anything like that, but lo and behold here he comes. He, after we did the DPC and he's back in his, on a ward, Charlton Heston came around to see the guys. I had gone up to see Cardinal Spellman who was

a very important man in the Catholic church in those days, and he was up at one of the bases giving a, I guess it was a New Years' Day thing, so I went up to see that and this Charlton Heston. So Charlton Heston was going through the ward talking to guys and to each one he'd say, is there anything I can get for you, is there anyone I can call. And John, who I'd known almost all my life, his mother had worked for my grandfather so they used to come up in the summers when I lived in the Adirondacks and spend their summers up there. John says, as Charlton Heston is going out the door, yes there's something you can do for me, please call my mother. So Charlton Heston comes back and John gives him a number and he went back and called John's mother. You'd have to know who John's mother is to appreciate this, but her secretary answered the phone and said, who is this, and he said Charlton Heston. Well, at first she didn't believe him, and he said, yes, Charlton Heston, I have a message from this woman's son. So the secretary calls out, Doris, Doris, God is on the phone. And Charlton Heston did talk to Doris and assured her that everything was fine, and I just thought that was neat, that he took the time to do that because many of the celebrities didn't seem to care at all, they were just there to get their name in the papers and get their faces on TV.

LT: Were there any other celebrities that stick out in your mind, particularly in caring or uncaring?

BP: Anita Bryant was one that I thought was a very genuine person. I think those were the two that stuck out in my mind.

LT: Well you mentioned businessmen's interest in Vietnam, what did you see of that?

BP: I didn't, I really didn't see that much, but there was a lot of stuff going on with plantations and investment stuff that I, I just don't know what it was. I saw some evidence of it, I, but I don't know enough about it to even speak to that.

LT: Now, what did, I'm just wondering when you were talking about how the doctors would wear bathing shorts, what other kind of I guess lack of uniforms, how did that work? Do you know any specific *[unintelligible word]*?

BP: Such as? I'm not sure I follow you.

LT: Well, was there any other thing that was unusual that you *[unintelligible word]*, like, besides that, for uniforms?

BP:No, we, most of just wore scrubs. You wear fatigue pants and, or when we got them, we got hospital pants, too, which washed up a lot better than getting our uniforms messed up when we were able to get more uniforms. See, we used to send our uniforms out to, oh, into town and there'd be people who would just, they had these big wash tubs and stuff that would wash them and beat them against the rocks kind of thing and hang them on a line, and then starch them for us and bring them back. We didn't have much of what you would call a laundry. In terms of the uniform, one sticks out in my mind is that, I told you about Madame Molly and her girls, we had cloth operating room masks and Molly made up with a set of masks a little bra type of thing and, with a G-string, and put red tassels on it and that was our uniform to go out and see what else we could get donated to the hospital in terms of blankets and penicillin and, it was pretty funny. I mean, it was just a joke, we didn't, didn't wear it but I thought it was pretty funny.

LT:How was the pay when you were over there?

BP:Not very much. I can't remember, a couple hundred a month maybe. No, it had to be more than that, but it wasn't very much. And I put, I saved some of that, I had it put into bonds because there was really no place to spend your money with the exception of, the PX did have some good electronic stuff, and then everybody went to Japan or Hongkong or Malaysia to buy stereo equipment. So I got my stereo set in Malaysia, I still have it, it still works. Camera equipment, carousel projectors, those kinds of things. I still have my camera.

LT:You bought a camera and a stereo, what else did you buy? And your ring.

BP:I bought teak stuff in Thailand, elephants and stuff like that, little statuettes, and silk and bronze wear. I have this enormous set of bronze wear that I'll never use in my lifetime because it tarnishes, but it's all elephant, three elephant heads on the bronze wear. It weighs a ton, I could barely lift the box.

LT:Well, was there anything, you mentioned the black market earlier, was there anything that stuck out in your mind, like seeing your autoclave sitting there for sale?

BP:I went to the marketplace, that was my first experience with an Asian marketplace and what knocked my socks off were the number of flies sitting on everything. I thought at first it was pepper when I saw it from a distance and then I realized that everything was just covered with flies, it's on all the fish, and

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anything organic like that could spoil was fly laden. Interesting sights and smells in the marketplace, nothing I had ever seen before. Didn't recognize the fish, didn't recognize the vegetables or the fruits and, but I tried a few of the things and I didn't get sick that time.

LT:Can you describe some of the smells and sights?

BP:No, I can't. In terms of the smells, I, there were spices and things that were used that I don't, I can't remember what they were called. I didn't know them at the time, I found out later what they were, but I don't recall. But it was noisy and crowded. And people, the vendors would sit there with their cone shaped hats on, the straw hats, and black pajamas, white top, white, or black pants and sandals, and they just sat on the ground or squatted and they were just crowded together and you just kind of picked your way through those and if there was something you wanted to buy, you did. Some of the things would be cooking, some of the things would be raw, and you would just go in and buy what you wanted and pick your way out of the crowd. It was very interesting to see. And I did get dysentery once when I was there and I, I'm not sure whether it was uncooked water buffalo that got me or, when we had built the 12th, I had a staff of enlisted men who worked for me and, maybe five of us, they called themselves "Beth's boys," and they were just great guys. And we literally built, we had to steal lumber and stuff because what we were promised never came through so we'd get stuff from other outfits, and we built these Quonsets. My responsibility was to build two operating room Quonsets and a central material supply Quonset, so I had those three Quonsets, and also to do our hooches. So, these guys worked their tails off, they were so good and they just, they put up all the buildings and we got everything ready for these people to come in from the United States. When we got done building I took them to Cu Chi, to the village of Cu Chi and told them I'd treat them to whatever they wanted and mostly what they wanted was prostitutes and beer. Fine. They had a, I can still remember the chicken wire that, the girls would hang off of them, each one has a number, they're beautiful young women, some of them probably no more than twelve or fourteen and just gorgeous young women. Some of them, not all of them. But all of their numbers on and the guys would just go up and say I want number so-and-so. Anyway, I, the guys, I got adopted sort of by this Vietnamese family in the village of Cu Chi, town of Cu Chi, and they asked us if we would come and have some lunch and I said sure. So we went in and they served us and the soup was absolutely delicious. The guys didn't eat it, they [*unintelligible word*], oh yes, this is very good and then they sent it back. Well I ate it, ate the whole thing. And they said would you

like some more, and I said yeah. So, I went out and we had, the road is just a dirt road that one vehicle, two vehicles could get by in a pinch, but there was a ditch at, alongside the road, and they simply went out and scooped up the water and brought it in to make the soup, and it was cold soup, and of course they didn't have very good sanitary facilities, I mean they didn't have any sanitary facilities. People just urinated or defecated at the side of the road, and I had eaten that soup. It wasn't very long and I'll tell you, I got dysentery, I thought I was going to die. I really literally thought I was going to die, it was that bad. So,...

LT:How did they treat you, at your own hospital?

BP:Yeah, they didn't really treat me at all, they gave me paregoric which is, really kind of slows your, the spasms down, and told me not to drink any beer. I think I could have some Cool Aid. I can't remember how they, or was it I could have beer and no Cool Aid, it was one or the other. But when you have to get up and go, by the time you get out to the latrine, which was out in back of our hooch, I couldn't, I couldn't even get back to my bed before I'd have to go again, and you just wind up passing bloody jelly, and these just terrific horrendous cramps. So they gave me paregoric and I just stayed in bed, I can't remember, two or three days or something and they said, they took a culture and said what would happen was they found out what the organisms were, that they, if this didn't clear up they would go back in, and usually there's a cyst that will form in your intestine, they have to go in and lance that cyst to clean out the organisms. So I cleared up on my own. It took a while and I can't remember how much weight I lost, twelve pounds or something like that in a very short period of time. Just, wow, that's bad stuff. Anyway, I got better and went back to work and I was fine. And when I got out of the Army, I was in Germany, I happened to look at my medical records and they had used two entire sheets of paper to write out all of the ova and parasites that I had, and I was never treated for it, so my body just apparently warded it off because I had another specimen taken and it was fine. But it cleared up all by itself, *[unintelligible phrase]*.

LT:Did you ever eat with them again?

BP:No, no, I never ate with them again, no, I didn't. That was the only time I ever really got dysentery, too. But I'll tell you, that's not something that you'd ever want to mess around with. You can die very quickly from that stuff, that's how bad it is.

LT:Now you mentioned that you were kind of adopted by this Vietnamese family. How did you meet them?

BP:I can't remember, I really don't. They were very nice. It was a brother and sister and some older family members. They didn't speak any English per se, I mean, I don't, I don't think they spoke any English. I don't remember how we communicated, but we did. And every time I went into town, prior to my getting ill, I always stopped in and said hi. But I don't remember how I met them. Maybe through MEDCAP. MEDCAP was a thing where the doctors and nurses would go into the jungle and treat civilians and we were kind of expected to do that at least once a month. We gave up a day and went into the jungle, and I think that may have been where I met them. And people would just come and we would give them medicine and soak their sores and drain abscesses and do whatever had to be done.

LT:Did anything ever stick out in your mind about going out to the jungle and doing that?

BP:Yeah, some of the stuff I saw, that you'd only see in a book. I remember one guy had an eye, it was about that big around and it looked like a huge grape. I don't what, what he, what was wrong with it but it was a very strange looking thing. And of course there was a lot of parasites. I think the one I remember most on that, and it wasn't at MEDCAP, but, I knew all the kids had parasites, but we hardly ever did anything in the operating room other than casualties. My first case was an appendectomy so they let me do, I shouldn't say that, should I. But one time we had a couple of kids who came in who had some wounds, some shrapnel wounds, little boy and a little girl about eight years old, I think they were eight and six or something like that. So we had to go in and check their tummies. Well, we opened up their bellies and their intestines were big and moving like peristalsis only really moving, but I had to go in anyway because I had to clean out the bullet, the fragment wound. Their bellies were full of brownworms that were about, oh, I would say ten inches and eleven inches long, white that looked like spaghetti, pointy on both ends, and I had a basin, we just would scoop these worms out and throw them into the basin. I had, I wound up with two big round basins full of worms from those kids.

LT:And were these Vietnamese children?

BP:Vietnamese children.

LT: Yeah, that's very disgusting.

BP: It was, it was different.

LT: Now, did you ever have any other illnesses or, while you were over there?

BP: No. I was allergic to bug spray though. We got, every week it seemed like we got a new infestation of some kind of a bug, most of the stuff that I never recognized. Very strange bugs, jeez, I'll tell you, some of the stuff that we saw, with big pinchers on them and horn beetles and frogs that looked like golf balls, not a bug but a frog. I remember it looked like a golf ball and it walked, it didn't hop, it was very strange. At any rate, we got, we had some kind of infestation of bugs and they were really bothering, they bit, and I kept spraying with good old Army bug spray. And all of a sudden my neck and back to really bother me and it turned out I was allergic to this stuff and I wound up with a huge rash that took probably four or five days to clear up. I think those were the only two health problems I had the whole time I was there. Broke a tooth off and had to have that fixed, but...

LT: How did you do that?

BP: I don't remember. I think it was just a big filling in the back that he finally said I can't fix this.

LT: How did you deal with all those bugs and things? Did they ever get in the operating room, or?

BP: Bugs weren't too bad in the OR. The bugs were terrible in the hooches and in the showers. And, God, I can remember this one time going into the hooch in the 7th Surg, I went out to the shower and there were these bugs that, these big things with, like with pinchers, they were like big black crabs. Jeez, and they were snapping. And I stepped back and then my bare foot, I stepped on a frog and I can just remember jumping up on top of the, of the seat of the, I say seat, it was a two-holer latrine. Which smelled terrible because we took a pill called (*name*) that was to keep us from getting malaria, and I think we took them on Tuesdays and on Wednesdays the latrine smelled, or we took them on Wednesday and Thursday the latrine smelled, I can't remember which it was but it was the day after everybody had taken (*name*) and the odor in there was just incredibly awful. But it was the only way I could get away from the bugs.

I was trying to throw stuff at it, I threw a broom at it and the broom broke. And finally the bug went to one area, I just, I jumped over the top of it and just ran into the hooch and got in my cot and I said I'm not dealing with that any more, but maybe they just caught me on a bad day or something. So you never knew what you were going to find in the latrine. This one time we had mass casualties at the 7th and, oh, there were arms and legs everywhere, and, jeez, I had to go get something to drink and just go to the bathroom. It had been hours, I think twelve hours since they'd let me out to go to the bathroom, and somebody said, just be careful because I don't know who did it, but somebody put a leg in the latrine. And I thought, who the heck would have done that, because we had a burn pile for limbs, and went out and sure enough, there was a leg in there but it was attached to somebody whole, and what had happened was one of the soldiers had taken off all of his clothes, he pulled the two barrels out from underneath the latrine and was lying there looking up to see the nurses' butts when they came in to sit on the pot. So he got up and ran off.

LT:Now what did you do about the limbs and things and, what was that like?

BP:They, oh we just stacked them up outside. There was a detail of men who took care of those, and I think they tagged them and took them over to a CONEX, I'm not quite sure where they went from there. I think everything was tagged. I know they burned some, I don't know whether they were supposed to or not. Maybe because the CONEX got so full and it couldn't be emptied. CONEX was just a metal container that is shipped to the United States and it's Continental Exchange basically, and they called it CONEX and you can put anything in it. They shipped instruments in it, they put bodies in them, they do all kinds of stuff.

LT:Now why would they ship limbs back?

BP:They would take them to graves registration and then try to match limbs and bodies if they could. And I think they, the idea was that they would try to treat the parts, the body parts with respect and make sure that they got properly treated. Again, I know that in our case there were times that they just couldn't be done and I think they just burned them. I mean, because there was a lot of stuff. We'd have, on some of these mass casualties the bodies were just stacked up like cord wood and it would just take a little while to get them all out of there. Well, it's hot and those bodies really start to smell awful, so they would try to move them out as quickly as they could. There was another one that I remember. I had gone up to the 45th MASH, it was an inflatable

hospital, they literally blew the thing up with pumps and it could easily be moved, unlike ours that had wooden buildings or a combination of wood and tent. But I had gone up to see how they set up their hospital because I was responsible for setting up the operating room and central material section of the 12th. So I went out and I knew the person who was over there anyway and thought this would be kind of neat trip, so I flew out in a helicopter. And there's this big mountain out there called (*name*), or the Black Virgin, it's the only mountain in the area, it just rises right up off of the plain and it's just crawling with VC, you can sit there and watch these guys running all over the mountain. So anyway, I got some information and I went back. It wasn't long after that that the hospital was mortared, badly mortared, and I was in my hooch sleeping, and hot, hot summer afternoon, and the odor woke me up and I thought, what in God's name is that. And I went outside and they had brought some of the bodies down, the commanding officer, one of the doctors, I can't remember who now, and they were just lying there, they'd been out in the sun for a couple of days, and you talk about really smelling. I can still remember the guy, one of the guys had died like this with his hand up and his wedding ring was glinting in the sun, nice looking young man, and I felt so badly wondering, you know, about his family and all. But they...

LT:And this was the other, the 45th, that got mortared?

BP:At the, the 45th that got mortared, at Tay Ninh, just up on the Cambodian border about forty five miles from us I think, can't remember.

LT:Now I want to go back to the prostitutes.

BP:Oh, yeah.

LT:Did you get them prostitutes?

BP:Yeah, sure.

LT:You did? How much were they?

BP:I don't, it wasn't very expensive. Five bucks, I think. So anybody who wanted a prostitute, I treated him to a prostitute. They were very grateful. When they got done they joined us, we were all just out kind of walking around. One of the guys didn't participate, but I think all the rest of them did, and we just kind of went shopping and, it was just a dirt street and not much to buy, very small

town.

LT: Was there ever a drug problem within your hospital? *[unintelligible phrase]* a lot about marijuana and drinking.

BP: When I was there, there was a staff meeting. I, it was one I didn't go to, I didn't like to go to meetings, and they did them at night and I'd rather be sitting around relaxing, listening to music or something, and I missed that meeting. But they had a staff meeting and asked everybody at the hospital to attend that, and they passed around a marijuana cigarette and said, you will encounter this, you should know what it is. But I did not see it and, now John, this guy that I was telling you about, he was wounded, the enlisted men had a lot of pot apparently because he said they smoked a lot. But in the hospital I didn't, I simply didn't see it. If it was there, I didn't see it. Plenty of booze, a lot of alcohol, we had our own officers club, but, there was always booze and there was plenty of beer. I thought I was a pretty good beer drinker until I went to Germany. I took one sip and almost fell on my head because the alcohol content of what we were drinking was not very high. But it was wet and it was safe, and so there was a lot of beer drunk.

LT: Did you ever, were there any specific things you had to do because *[unintelligible phrase]* to be careful about VC or enemies *[unintelligible phrase]*, what are some of the things you had to do to keep your personal safety?

BP: Not, I don't remember doing anything particular, I was just rather careful about going out places alone at night, I was more, actually, worried about American soldiers than I was about the VC. You didn't drink the Coke, I was just real careful around the Vietnamese people because we didn't know who were VC and who weren't, because by day they'd be VC working for the hospital and by night, I mean by day they would be civilians working for the hospital, by night they were out helping VC. We just didn't know who was who, nobody did. They all looked alike in terms of the way that they dressed in their black pajamas and stuff. But I, you're just careful. If you noticed that something was awry in your room, in your hooch, you just looked to see if there was anything that could have been tampered with. But for the most part that wasn't an issue. They did ask us to wear helmets and flak jackets if there was mortar attack, and you'd try to get to a bunker. I didn't even bother after a while, it was too crowded and I was always afraid that the mortar, the bunker would collapse and we'd get squashed, so I just usually lay down under my cot. Didn't make any great effort to go running.

LT:How often were there mortar attacks?

BP:Sometimes pretty darn often, two, three times a week. And then sometimes you'd go for a while without any. But they were pretty scary. Just before I got to the 7th, I mean just before, a mortar had landed right there, right between the two hooches and it didn't go off, so, I have a, I've got pictures of that. They were lucky, they'd all have been killed if that thing would have gone off, everybody would have been killed. We had one in, at the 12th, I was working in the operating room and we had a mortar attack and there was no way we could get to the bunkers. If you were operating and you were under attack, you simply would try to take the patient down to the floor, just get him off the operating table and put him on the floor. And then try, you'd try to cover him with your body if there was an attack. Well in this case, I had just finished operating on somebody and there were three, three of us I think. We just ran outside, there was no place to go. No place to go. And when you're under a mortar attack you can hear them, you'll hear the first (*sound*) come in somewhere around the perimeter, and then the next one (*sound*) hits. And then the third one you know pretty well, your ear would get where you could pretty well judge where they were going to land, and I knew the next one was going to come right down on top of us, and there was no place to go. We were up [*unintelligible word*] Quonset and there were some sand bags that were down about this level and we just kind of lay there and the thing came zooming in, and it didn't go off. But I'll tell you something, I was sweating bullets. We found it, it would have gone off in the POL dump which is where they had the petroleum stuff, and that sucker would have gone up, it would have exploded, you know, with the mortar and all the gasoline, and it didn't go off.

LT:You got lucky.

BP:It didn't go off. Didn't go off. There was one that, another one that didn't go off was a very similar situation when I was at the 7th and I, there was this girl, a captain in our hooch, very nice looking young woman, blonde, California, who was buying all this stuff, carousel projectors and cameras and stereo stuff, I mean she just had a ton of it. And I couldn't figure out how she could buy that much stuff on her salary. Well it turns out she was selling herself to, for I think it was a hundred dollars a throw, and she was out in the POL dump one night with this guy and a mortar landed but did not go off. But I guess it scared the dickens out of her as well. Those were two times that people really lucked out. But mortars can do a lot of damage. We had friends, you know,

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you'd be partying with them one minute and the next they'd be on your operating room table with a blown off shoulder or, and a lot of the guys that the girls were going out with got either badly hurt or killed. That was difficult for them.

LT:Did you have casualties within your staff because of mortar [*unintelligible word*]?

BP:Nobody in the hospital staff that I know of ever got hurt, with the exception of the adjutant who does all the paper work for the organization, and he tripped on the duck board running into the bunker during a mortar attack and scratched himself, and it bled a little bit, and he put himself in for a purple heart and he got it. And I think that was the only casualty that I know of. There was a surgeon who came in, not long before I left, a month or two before I left country, and he, Catholic fellow from Boston, had a wife and kids, and he was riding in a helicopter coming out and they got shot, and when he got out of the plane and looked and the thing, it left a bruise on his shoulder. It hit him in the backpack or whatever he had on, and it didn't puncture the skin but it left him bruised. He went into the officers club and I don't think the guy ever came out again. He was a roaring drunk by the time I left, it scared him so badly.

LT:Now you mentioned, and you probably shouldn't have mentioned it, but they let you do an appendectomy?

BP:Yeah.

LT:And you were a nurse and you, [*unintelligible word*] you did a lot more of the actual surgery than I guess that I picture a nurse would.

BP:Yeah, and part of that in the beginning was just necessity because they just needed more hands and there's nothing to whacking off the tissue. You just do what, you learn how to do one amputation and you've done them all basically, so that's not a big thing. And they all did DPCs, the delayed primary closures.

LT:And what is that?

BP:Delayed primary, well, when you have a wound it's dirty, basically, and if you close that wound initially it'll generally get infected. So what we would do is, you do an, make an incision, you take out all the dead tissue, you irrigate it very well, you put the guys on antibiotics and then you let them sit around for a

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week until they've begun to heal and then you bring them back in and you debride the wound and close it, you put a drain in it, but yeah, we were, we did that. The appendectomy was because the staff hadn't come on yet and we had a young soldier who had to have his appendix out and there just happened to be a surgeon who said, Beth, why don't you do that. I'd seen plenty of them done, so I did it.

LT:And how did it go?

BP:Fine. I mean, there's nothing to doing one once you've done one. And then he was right there, it wasn't that he left me alone.

LT:Towards the end of your stay there, did you have your own opinion on I guess the war, were you still...?

BP:I just didn't understand it. I mean, what I was looking at was working with soldiers. I didn't, I had no politics, I didn't know what the war was about. The *Stars and Stripes* was the newspaper that we got and what would really bother me was that, we would have these mass casualties, and I mean mass casualties, we'd have two hundred soldiers come in with wounds and five of us or whatever to work on them, and, they had more staff later on, but in the beginning it, I think it was just overwhelming with the number of casualties sometimes that came in. And you'd read in the *Stars and Stripes* that there were no casualties in Vietnam. Well it was lies, you know? And they inflated their rice count. But the thing that, I don't know why they covered up all the casualties, well, I guess that was just for morale purposes. They didn't want to know why, or they didn't want people to know how many people were really getting knocked off, and there were a lot of them. But they would inflate the rice counts and I'm sure that that was, and the number of VC killed, so that they looked good. And there was a lot of that went on, there was a lot of untruthfulness I think on both sides. So I don't, I really don't know what the truth was on a lot of this stuff. But to be working the way that we were with so many casualties, and then have the *Stars and Stripes* report that there were no casualties, like what the heck are you people talking about? And the other thing that really bothered me, I, if I had known it was going to be like this I don't think I ever would have gone into the Army. There were, I don't know, a thousand, twelve hundred doctors and nurses at Fort Sam Houston in this big auditorium, and a young second lieutenant got up and was introducing us to the Army and what it was all about and as he was wrapping up this little talk he said, ladies and gentlemen, you're going to want to keep this war going as long

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as you can because it's the only way that you're going to get medals, and it's the only way you're going to get promoted. And I swear to God, if I could have gotten up and walked out I would have done it. And there was a lot of that, that's how people used the war. So it had, a lot of it had nothing to do with the greater politics, but with people trying to make rank and feather their own little nest, and there was a lot of that.

LT:But that wasn't yours.

BP:No.

LT:So you came in in October '66, and you left...?

BP:October '67.

LT:Were you counting the days?

BP:You betcha. I still have a picture of, we used to say you were short, you know, the, as time grew short for you to be in, so, I still have a picture of my helmet sitting on my combat boots and it said, that's Parks, she's short. Oh yeah, I couldn't wait to get out. What was, what we knew was going to happen was Tet offensive and they were building for that, and I wanted to be out of there. I did not want to be around for Tet.

LT:They knew it was happening?

BP:Yeah, we knew. Everybody knew that it was going to be a big thing for Tet that year, we knew months in advance that they were building up for a big offensive.

LT:Now how did you know that?

BP:It was just common knowledge. I don't know who precisely told us, all the guys always talked about the upcoming Tet offensive and how bad it was going to be. So, whether they get that information from the VC or they just know that this is a big holiday for them and they were going to whoop-di-doo or what, I don't know. But I knew it was coming probably in the summer, maybe around August they started talking about the Tet offensive.

LT:That's really interesting because in the books you read they, that surprises me

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actually, because you said that they had reports of it, but they really didn't know.

BP:I don't know that they knew what the extent was going to be, but we knew it was going to be bad. And I was really concerned about my friends at the hospital. And nobody got hurt, but they had a bad time. There was real heavy duty mortaring and rockets and stuff.

LT:And casualties.

BP:Yeah. I don't know that anybody that I knew got hurt.

LT:So, what was it like when you actually got to leave?

BP:Just relief. I met up with a couple of the gals that I had gone through basic training with, we were stationed at Long Binh and we shared a seat coming back on the plane. And I tell you, I've never been so cold in my life, because we came up into Alaska and I don't think there was any heat in that thing, it was a plane that had been gutted out and just fixed up to put troops on, very, very crowded, long trip, all, it seemed like it was all in darkness. And we landed in Alaska for refueling and when we came down into Oakland, San Francisco, somewhere in there, blew out all the tires on the plane coming down. Didn't know, I mean we had this rough landing, it was like we came in on the runway and stopped, and the plane just stopped, period, you know, it was like, holy mackerel, what was that all about. Then all the fire engines and stuff came out. Nobody was hurt, but it certainly was a rude awakening. And then that, speaking of rude awakenings, we really got treated very badly in San Francisco. We wanted to go to the Top of the Mark to have a drink and sleep in nice warm beds with clean sheets and take a shower and they wouldn't let us in. So we found, wound up going someplace and finding a public bathroom and getting out of our uniforms because people just wouldn't have anything to do with us.

LT:It was protesters that wouldn't let...?

BP:Anybody. They weren't actual protesters, it's just that they saw us and they just shunned, you know, just shunned, just turned their back on you. This place isn't open, we won't serve you and those kinds of things.

LT:And this was in San Francisco in an American restaurant?

BP:We finally found a place to sleep, kind of a flea bag motel, something like that, and then all went our separate ways the next day. That was, that was quite the thing. And I knew that the people back in the States were having thoughts about the war, and this one girl that I was stationed with, her sister-in-law's a friend of mine, and her sister-in-law's brother would have gone to Canada to get out of the draft and I knew he was very, very anti war stuff, but that was, a lot of that was building while we were over there. We knew about it, didn't pay that much attention. I didn't pay that much attention.

LT:Did you ever encounter any other experiences because of your status of being over in Vietnam, any negative encounters or anything?

BP:Just in San Francisco. And then I just after that never told anybody I went. I probably didn't tell anybody for I don't know how many years. I'm surprised I even said anything to Bob Whelan because usually I just never, I don't talk about it.

LT:You ever run into any other vets?

BP:Yeah, occasionally.

LT:And is it kind of an unspoken rule that you don't talk about it, or?

BP:Well, I don't know, I just don't talk about it. That's, if you're talking about nurses, no I don't, I haven't met any of the other nurses really. But the, but guys like Bob, he and I sat down and talked. And I've met a couple of people through him that, it's just passing type of thing, you might talk about Vietnam for a few minutes and that's it. But that's certainly, it's nothing I dwell on. It was just a part of my life and it's over.

LT:So what was the first thing you did when you came back home?

BP:Slept. That's all I cared about, I just wanted to sleep. I think I slept for a month, and I'm being literal about that. I think I ate and slept for a month, close to it. Yeah.

LT:Now were you [*unintelligible word*] your husband at this point, or were you...?

BP:No, we'd split, we had split. And I was involved with a doctor in Vietnam, a

surgeon.

LT:When were, coming on back to Vietnam, when did you start dating a surgeon in Vietnam?

BP:Well I dated a couple of surgeons and an artillery man as well, if I remember, but, him in April and he left in August.

LT:Do you still keep in contact, or do you ever...?

BP:We did for about twelve, thirteen years, something like that. He went on to become a general and was a pretty important fellow by the time he retired. And I talked to him four years ago, that's the last time.

LT:Now, where actually were you? Where did you move to after you got back from Vietnam?

BP:I, because of being in Vietnam I was given a guaranteed assignment wherever I wanted, and they had assigned me and him to Valley Forge and I didn't want to go to Valley Forge, I wanted to go to Europe, so I went to Europe. And he went to, actually I think he wound up going to Walter Reed. But I was in Germany and it was, I had to extend for an extra year to complete that tour of duty, it was a two year tour and I was only an obligated volunteer for a full two years and I'd done one year in Vietnam. But I stayed on as a civilian and then traveled when I was there. I got out in December and stayed until the end of August.

LT:In Germany?

BP:Yeah, in 1970.

LT:Were you working in a hospital?

BP:Yeah, Second General, and continued to work as a civilian. But they wouldn't let me work in the operating room, which really bothered me. Well, there was a girl who preceded me who had gotten married and her husband had not completed his tour, and she got out of the service and wanted to stay on as a civilian, and they said, no, you can't work in the operating room. And she put a lot of pressure on them to work, and they said no, you're going to want to be paid overtime, you're not going to want to give us the time, we won't give you

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any comp time, we're not going to pay you and you're not going to like that. And she said, oh, this is what I want, and she had a lot of the doctors put pressure on the commanding officer and they let her work, and gosh, within a month she was complaining. And they said that's it, there will be, nobody else will work in the operating room as a civilian. So I had to work up in the chest ward.

LT: So it's because you were a civilian that they wouldn't let you?

BP: Yeah, because they can't pay you overtime, and so I [*unintelligible word*].

LT: So you spent two years in Germany?

BP: I was...

End of Tape One, Side B

Tape Two, Side A:

LT:So you said you spent three years in Germany.

BP:Almost three years. I came back in August. It would have been three years in October, so it was just a little short of three years.

LT:And what did you do while you were there, you said you worked in the chest ward?

BP:Well, when I was doing my two years in Germany as an Army nurse, I was in the operating room, and then as a civilian for eight months I worked in the chest ward.

LT:And where did you go after?

BP:Well, when I came back to the States I wanted to get warm so I went to Florida, and they had a waiting list for their operating room in Clearwater that was as long as your arm, so I just quit. I worked in the medical ward for a few months, started November, December, and then I quit in May and went back to college because I had GI Bill, they still did that in those days.

LT:So, where and what for did you go to college?

BP:Well, I'll tell you, as a nurse you can feel pretty darn stupid because nobody gives you credit for anything, and you're a woman, and I think my ego was feeling that I didn't know anything. I wasn't even sure if I could do anything, if I could even pass if I went back to college. So I was curious, I started and I took a double load and did it in biology and thought I would try to get done in a year for a two year program, I was at a junior college, and then I did so well in school I thought, jeez, this is a snap, so then I went up to Wake Forest in North Carolina, finished up there for that degree and then came to Maine.

LT:How did, what did your decision, how did you get to Maine?

BP:Well, let me back up on this a little bit and say when I left Florida I was looking for a place that was a little more country, some greenery and some hills and mountains which is why I went to North Carolina. And I thought I would go to Duke and got up there and didn't like Duke at all. I had not applied prior to going up to Carolina, I just thought I would take a look and see what the

colleges were like. So, I applied to a couple of other places, was accepted every, actually at three places, so was accepted at all of them and, but Wake Forest was the one that I liked so I did a semester at UNC Greensboro and then went to Wake Forest. Then I, my grades were really good and I was Phi Beta Kappa and all that stuff and I thought, well, I could probably do anything I want. Maybe I'll go to Harvard or Yale or, you know, one of the big schools up here. Well, I couldn't find a program that I liked. I was interested in vertebrate biology and specifically in behavior, marine mammals preferably, and I couldn't, there was nothing at any of the big colleges. I went to UConn and New Hampshire and nobody had anything. So on a whim, I was up here looking at University of New Hampshire, I thought I'll take a swing up into Maine, I hadn't been up to this part of Maine, I'd never seen Orono, I'd never heard of it, but I heard they had a good wildlife program which is what I was interested in. So I came up, fell in love with the campus, found out they had one of the best programs in the country and applied. And at the time I didn't know that there were no women in the program, so that was another story in itself. But I applied, I stayed, came in as a special student for a year and then I got accepted, did a masters with them, took the job here, and then went back and got my doctorate.

LT: So what year and what exactly are your degrees that you have?

BP: Well, I have an AA in Biology from St. Petersburg Junior College in Florida, 1972, and then because I had to, every time you change colleges you wind up having to take a whole lot of courses over again, so I was at Wake Forest and I graduated from there in '74 with a degree in biology. Actually, as it turned out it was their pre med course, and if I had realized that women could have gotten into medicine, I would have done that. I didn't know this. I'm sitting next to a kid, we had to take exit exams, and I said well, what are you going to do with yourself now that you've graduated, and she says, oh, I'm going to medical school. And I knew her grades weren't as good as mine, and she wasn't anywhere near as ambitious as I was, and I thought, I didn't even know that that was a possibility, or I would have done it. Because when I was going through nursing school there were no female doctors. The big colleges, Howard and George Washington in Georgetown, affiliated with D.C. General, had no women doctors. That had, actually there was one, a neurosurgeon, and she brought in a resident, a woman resident, but other than those there were no women in medicine. So anyway, I figured if I was going to be poor, I might as well be poor and happy and I came up here and got a masters in wildlife management, and my doctorate is in educational administration. That was it,

no, can't remember, '90, '91, something like that.

LT:You were the first woman in the program?

BP:In the, there were two of us in the wildlife management program. Debbie Palmer is the other one, she was Maine's first woman warden, that's what she wanted to do when she got out. She came out actually six months before I did. And then there was a girl who came in six months after I did, but we were the first ones in and they did not want us, frankly. Said women couldn't do those jobs.

LT:And what did you tell them?

BP:The three of us acted very differently. Debbie said, I'm better than they are and she went out to prove that she was, and she got just top honors in everything and also top honors in the warden service, she's a legend really now. I thought, hey, if you're going to treat me like this, I'm just not going to work that hard, I'm not, you know, the heck with it. And then the other gal just sat in their office and cried for three years. Because we were treated really badly, I thought, by some of the people.

LT:In what, in what ways?

BP:Well, one that really sticks out in my mind was that I had been asked by one of the professors whom I dearly loved to do a project, a slide tape show, and I knew that one of the professors, other professors, had the slides that I needed. And so I'd make an appointment to go see him to get the slides and he would never be there. I'd drive in, you know, make an appointment, telephone him, make sure he was going to be there, drive in, go up to his office, the office would be locked. And this went on for a month and a half, every time. And then one time he was in, I didn't even announce that I was coming that time, I just came in, he was sitting in his chair and he saw me and he reached up with his foot and he slammed the door in my face. So at this point I went to the other professor and I said, look, I says, I really, I can't get the slides, he won't talk to me, I know he's got the stuff that I need. And he says you come with me, and he marched right down there with me and he said, you give her those slides and you give them to her now. And he did. But that's how we were treated, and they'd just say well they can't do this job, they shouldn't be in wildlife. And now it, I think the majority are women. Interesting.

LT:And when you were in Vietnam working with surgeons, you never encountered

anything like that, it was all...?

BP: Well, in those days it was, there are two ways that you can look at that. The surgeon is always, they're always superior, and they would, I'm sure I've told you this, and superior intellect and superior strength and superior knowledge of the world and knowledge of the war, and plus their skills as surgeons. But they were men, you know? On the other hand, we had more freedom as women because they simply needed extra hands, and they knew we could do the work and so we had a lot of freedom to do stuff. And I, it, we were treated more as equals there than certainly any place else I've ever worked.

LT: I only have two more questions. Do you have any other, to wrap up, particular, I guess they call them war stories [*unintelligible phrase*]? You told me quite a few, actually, but...?

BP: Not really, not really.

LT: Since the whole purpose of these tapes is to make sure that there is more research on the Vietnam era and the people who were in it, is there something you could leave on this tape, something you want I guess future generations to remember about your experience in the war.

BP: War is stupid, it really, really is stupid. And having watched, well I'll give you, you want a war story, this is one that got me. I had been working for two days straight and was exhausted, and at four thirty in the morning I was starting to hallucinate and needed to go just lie down before the next chopper came in, I was on first call. And the way that works is if you're on first call you get everything that comes in, if you're on second call, you only come in on the second, you know, case and the first call person just has to stay there and work until it's over. So I was on first call and I was exhausted, and I picked my way across the section of dirt between the operating room and my hooch, and my, I was just kind of tingling all over because I was so tired, just vibrating, and I got into my hooch and I had just, just sat down on the cot, and I'm thinking I'm just going to fall over backwards and die here, when I heard a chopper come in. And so I had to get up and go back over to the operating room and they had five boys lined up on litters in pre-op and they were all dead, you couldn't see a mark on them, nothing. Beautiful young boys, eighteen, nineteen years old, and I can remember the pre-op nurse saying, and she was furious, there'll be no surgery tonight. She was just so angry that this had happened. Our guys had gotten the wrong coordinates and had lobbed in some

weapons, some shells into a marsh where these guys were, into a rice paddy, and the concussion had killed them. There was not a mark on them, and it was us who did it. And I looked at those five young boys lying there dead without a mark on them and it's just like, what is all this for? The Communism thing, that was a crock, I don't believe that at all. The businessmen's interests, I don't, I don't know. I mean I suspect that that was a very strong part of what was going on but I don't know to what extent, and they hide that stuff pretty well at the governmental levels. But what I did see were people trying to make rank and medals like they told them in that first day with us, and that's what they were doing. It had nothing to do with what's right, what's wrong, what's moral, what's immoral, the greater good or any of that. It's not that glorious, it's not that, that lofty, and philosophically, it boils down to this is my job and this is what I'm going, this is what I do. And it's stupid. And I do think there's a testosterone trip for a lot of the guys, especially for the career soldiers. And it's not worth it. It's not worth it. Thank God, since I came back from Vietnam I have seen an enormous change in attitude amongst young men, and women, in terms of war. And many of them are just say, we won't do, we will not do it. You will always have a contingent of people who want to do it and enjoy it and that's fine. But I don't know if we will, in any, in the foreseeable future ever get ourselves back into a situation like we were in Vietnam where people just, there was no concrete reason for doing, for being there. It's stupid. And if people who are in power want to fight, let them fight I guess, but to drag so many young people in and destroy their lives is for the birds, and God knows we've so many of the young men and women who went through this stuff who just really never came back. I mean they're still with us, but it messes up people's lives.

LT: Thank you very much, I appreciate it a lot.

End of Interview

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

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

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



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

confusion that she and others experienced.

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

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

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

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

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