

## Scattered Memories

by Lt. Col. Janis A. Nark

And now the tears come, two and a half decades later. I ache for all we lost in Vietnam - our buddies, our relatives, our innocence.

I'm no heroine. I joined the Army Nurse Corps to go to Europe; that's what my recruiter promised me. I was 21 years old when I was ordered to Vietnam. I stayed 364 days. I cared for the sick, the wounded and the dying. I did the best I could. I am only coming to know that now.

For almost 20 years, I never spoke about that time, that place - I buried my memories, my anger and a large part of "me" deep, so deep, just wanting to forget; wanting to feel peace.

I only spoke to Sue about it because she was there too. Years later in the Army Reserves, once again in fatigues and combat boots out on field exercises, we'd turn to each other, never making the connection of physical circumstances. We'd tell each other funny war stories, and we'd laugh. Then one of us would remember, and share, and then we'd cry. It would be months or maybe a year before we would repeat the scenario.

In 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (The Wall) was placed in our nation's capital. I saw pictures of it and the vets on television or in magazines, and it brought out emotions in me that went way beyond tears. And I, like many vets, knew it wasn't over. We knew we had to go there. We didn't know why, we just knew we had to go. The Wall was calling us home.

It took me five years to answer. Sue and I went together. At first, we stayed far away in the trees. "Tree -Vets," we're called. Then a picnic on the grass behind.

The Wall where we could see the visitors' heads moving along as their walk took them deep into the V of the black granite. Our first frontal maneuver came at night - arm-in-arm, supporting each other, ready for retreat, we walked the length of those names, our tears camouflaged by the night. Even there, even then, we rarely spoke about the war, not even to each other. And we never wore anything or said anything that identified us as Vietnam veterans.

1992 was the 10th anniversary of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Sue couldn't come, and I did two things I'd never done before - I went alone and I went in uniform. I wore my current dress uniform with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and all the insignia, medals and decorations that tell a very specific story to those who know how to read it. I could never have anticipated what happened to me there. I wrote Sue that night:

I carried you with me when I went to The Wall. I had the strength to be there, but I didn't feel the entitlement. I did put on a brave front. No raggedy remnants of faded fatigues or sun-bleached Boonie hats for me. I stood heads above the crowd - proud (at long last) in my Class A's. My chest of ribbons saying loud and clear, "I'm a vet, too. I was your nurse. Honor me. Reach out to me. Please, help me to heal."

And they came. They were there for you Sue. Oh, I wish you could have been there! You would have been so touched; and it was you who deserved what I received. God, but it felt so good to cry the tears that for so long we held, and covered with our laughter, and let the years bury so deep. They came, the 40-something vets looking so much older than their years. Some with the same eyes that we saw back then, the pain still very much with them. They hugged me and held me, and most smiled through tears as they tried to speak. They want you to know they remember that you were there for them, and they're grateful. You saved some of them and cared for them and for their buddies. They love you. You were their nurse. *Continued Page 2*



I saw him hesitate at the edge of the crowd, then urged on by a friend the WWI vet came forward. With crippled and deformed hands, he stood as tall as his 86 years allowed and saluted me. I smiled as my eyes filled with tears and returned his salute. He was mortified that he might cry. I hugged him as his friend took our picture. He spoke volumes in the simple words, "Thank you."

It was a strange *Deja Vu*. Remember when the GIs would always take our pictures? They still do. And all those eyes looking at us - how we learned to look right in them and say, "It's okay, you're gonna be just fine."

It's not so hard to see The Wall now, to be near it, to feel its presence, to feel their absence. We're going to be okay. It's time to heal, my friend ... to know that you did everything you could, and more; that it mattered that you touched those lives.

Next year we'll stand together when the *Women's Memorial* is dedicated, and we can begin to forgive ourselves for our imagined slights and shortcomings and our human frailties. And we can begin the process of healing ourselves and coming to peace with our memories. I love you, my friend.

Veterans Day 1993, the *Vietnam Veterans Women's Memorial* was dedicated in Washington, D.C. Thousands of women vets attended, and we were overwhelmed. We led the parade — the nurses, Red Cross workers, entertainers, women who worked in supply, administration, logistics and intelligence. The streets were lined with people applauding and crying. A vet sat high up on a tree branch yelling, "Thank! Thank you!" A man in a flight suit stood at attention for over two hours, saluting as the women passed by. People handed us flowers and hugged us. One GI had a picture of his nurse taken July, 1964. He was trying to find her.

The women veterans find each other. We know, at last, that we are not alone, that we are not paranoid or crazy, but that we have a lot of work to do in order to heal. We talk to each other and find comfort as well as pain in our words and our tears. Now after so many years, the process has finally begun and we hold each other close and say, "Welcome home."

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