



**Mary Lou Jones Layne**  
Captain, Nurse Corps, U.S. Army  
3<sup>rd</sup> Surgical Hospital, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division  
Vietnam War

From October 1966 through October 1968, I served in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps. Before enlisting, I had been sort of at loose ends. At the time, I was a night supervisor for the operating room at East Texas Medical Center in Tyler and wanting to do something different. When I joined the Army, I did so with the thought of working in neurosurgery since that was the specialty I enjoyed. Also they guaranteed me an assignment at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research.

I went through basic training at Fort Sam Houston before being assigned to the Neurosurgical Unit at Walter Reed. My female colleagues and I were very well received. Of course, there was a great need for our services, especially operating room nurses. Three months later, I received orders for Vietnam. I was very upset because I thought I was going to be based at Walter Reed. When I asked the chief about it, he said, "We didn't tell you how long you would be here. You were just guaranteed that you would be at Walter Reed." Really, I wouldn't give anything for the time I spent in Vietnam though I would have preferred to remain stateside.

When I stepped off the helicopter in Vietnam at Dong Tam (English translation = Temporary Pile or Heap), dust was flying everywhere because of the rotor blades. I saw where I would be living for the next year, and it finally hit me. I thought, *My goodness, what have I done? What kind of place is this?* It was just a desolate place filled with green Army tents. Within a week or two, however, I was fine.

For the next year, I worked in the operating room of a MUST unit (Medical Unit Self-Contained Transportable – Similar to a MASH, except these were not tents, but inflatables)—the 3<sup>rd</sup> Surgical Hospital, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, in the Mekong Delta well below Saigon. There were twelve nurses there, and we had a great time together. We had a very specialized unit much like the MASH unit on the television show. Of course, our equipment and capabilities were much

more advanced in Vietnam than they had been in Korea.

We worked in inflatable, air-conditioned units. Every time the Viet Cong had the chance, they would hit us. They leveled our unit seven times while I was there. All they had to do was hit us with a pretty good mortar to deflate the unit. Still the inflatable units worked quite well. They could support the inner unit with air-conditioning so that the patients on the operating tables could be in a more stable environment. We also had two airlocks to walk through so that all the dust and dirt usually associated with tents. By the time we had walked through the second airlock, very little dirt actually could get inside the operating room.

Our post was so close to the Mekong River that we could have walked there. We didn't because it would not have been safe. Vietcong soldiers were everywhere at the time. We used to joke that they probably worked for us during the daytime and then attacked us at night. Many Vietnamese locals worked in our dining hall, cleaned the area or even did our laundry. Rolled barbed wire surrounded our large post. If we went outside that fence line, an armed guard had to accompany us. Though we were trained to use a .45 pistol, our medical and surgical personnel did not carry weapons. One night, we were hit by heavy mortar fire. An anesthesiologist said that he wished he could have a gun. I told him, "It wouldn't do me any good. If they got through this door, I'd die from a heart attack."

Under certain circumstances, we could go into the small town of Dong Tam to buy things in the market. Once, an American missionary off the post invited five of us nurses to his home for lunch. Though the table was very clean and the lunch good, chickens and pigs were running around under the table. Of course, it was too hot to have doors.

When the Navy ships came into port on the Mekong River, we would be invited aboard. Normally, we only wore Army fatigues. They told us, "If you'll come to the Captain's dinner and wear a dress and fix your hair, we'll see to it that you have access to a hot shower." We didn't have access to hot showers on the post, so we enjoyed those occasions and were given privacy. Another treat was the gift of fresh eggs and milk, which also were unavailable on the post. The first thing I wanted after I got home to the States was a glass of fresh milk instead of canned or powdered milk.

Though our unit was not in the area of the heaviest fighting, we were mortared almost every night. It became commonplace. Perhaps I was too young and inexperienced to be frightened, but I don't recall being extremely scared except once. During the 1968 Tet Offensive, the enemy overran our post, and I got pretty excited. Most of the time, I felt fairly secure. The whole 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division surrounded us.

Most of the Vietcong were just young kids with very little equipment and very little training. They had been conscripted into the service and probably were only 13 or 14 years old and didn't even have boots, shoes or uniforms. Because those Vietcong soldiers lacked even enough food, they would be emaciated. That was sad more than frightening to me. The North Vietnamese regulars were quite different. They were well dressed, well outfitted and a lot older.

We treated enemy soldiers along with our American soldiers. I can honestly say that we did not differentiate in the operating room. Whenever they put a boy on the table, he was just a patient who needed help.

In Vietnam, there was no front line. The battles were all around us. We saw the worst of the worst because we were a "forward" or first line offense hospital. All the wounded soldiers were brought there. We were equipped for absolute emergencies only. After patients were stabilized, if they needed extensive surgical reconstruction or things of that nature, we sent them on to a hospital in Japan or Hawaii or at least to Saigon. Of course, there were so many wounded

soldiers coming in that we couldn't spend a great deal of time with any one man. Sometimes we had as many as 30 or 40 waiting for surgery, and we only had three operating rooms.

I don't remember a day when we didn't have surgery. I do remember days that we seemed to work 36 hours straight. On those days, our only break meant being able to eat a sandwich and lay down for a couple of hours on the floor of the waiting area, a large room with no furniture. Most of the time, we worked seven days a week, twelve hours a day. If casualties were high, we didn't get our twelve hours off.

There were so many times when we didn't have blood available, proper equipment or enough personnel. But the patients kept coming. One would come in, be treated, and leave. Then we'd clean the unit and bring in the next one, repeating that pattern over and over again. If we stepped outside, we could see the numerous young soldiers waiting for their turn, many of them with serious injuries.

In triage, you don't take the most serious patients first. You take the most serious patients who can be saved. Then you take the next ones. Last, you take the ones still alive who you originally thought would not survive. If a man is there whose lost half of his body, you won't take him first. You'll work on the guy with a chest wound, who probably can be saved. That was tough because, of course, we wanted to help all of them. But I can honestly say that no matter how tired I got, I didn't even think about returning to my hooch to sleep in those circumstances. We had to get through. It was not like working in a fast food restaurant where you can close down for the night.

We had some excellent doctors and technicians in our unit. The technicians were trained to work with the instruments and that sort of thing. They were perfectly capable of assisting the doctors. Though I scrubbed in many times, I often was just circulating to make sure everything was fine. The people on the post were also our blood source. Though we got a lot of blood from Saigon, most of the time they would say, "Okay, who hasn't given in eight weeks?" Then we would go to the emergency area to donate blood.

Though I was a Christian, I have to admit that during my time in Vietnam, I did not exercise all the faith that I could have to get through it. I was working on adrenaline. I'm ashamed of the time that I didn't spend in prayer rather than worrying about what to do. I didn't put enough faith in what God could do for me. But that is a great testimony for what God does even when we don't. Even though I set God aside, I know He had His hand on me the whole time.

People were dying all around me, and I was never scratched. Mortars landed within a few feet of the area where I was sleeping, but I was unharmed. If a mortar attack happened while we were operating, we couldn't leave to go to a bunker for safety. We had to stay in the operating room and keep working. I have a picture of our operating room door after it was riddled with shrapnel. It looked like someone had fired a machinegun at it. Two of my technicians went down with shrapnel wounds that night, but the doctors, the patient and I were not injured. God took care of me in spite of me.

For my last year or so of service, I was assigned as an assistant surgical supervisor at Fort Hood. That allowed me to transition more easily back into civilian life. In the Army Nurse Corps, you're in the service, but you're really not in the service. I went to work there everyday just like nurses anywhere, wearing a white uniform and living in an apartment off the base.

Though many people did, I didn't feel changed when I came back to the States. After my

discharge from the Army, I went to work for a surgical hospital in Longview, Texas. So my daily life did not change a lot. I was 30 years old and single at the time, so I started dating and met my husband. The thing my military service did for me was to teach me discipline and respect. That has stayed with me. Today, I'm 61 years old. But if I am speaking to someone, I still say, "Yes, sir." A lot of young people with bad attitudes go into the military and come out as really good American citizens.

If you live in America, you should be so proud of where you are. A lot of things happen in our country that are not what we like or desire. But that's not America. That's just some part of someone in America. If a person is not patriotic, they have not looked at what they have been given by God. My husband and I pray, "Thank you, God, for allowing us to be Americans." What if we were in Iraq and couldn't pray in public or had to be subjected to the paganism they call religion? I can't say I was patriotic when I enlisted in the Army. Actually, I was just bored and wanted to do something different. But I wouldn't take a million dollars for the time I spent in the military.

Today, during patriotic services on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Memorial Day or Veterans' Day at Green Acres Baptist Church, I am proud to stand up and say, "Yes. I was there." So many others were there, too. My family was very involved in the military. Several of my uncles were dedicated veterans and proud of their service. During the latter part of World War II, I remember people putting symbols in their windows so that others would know that they had a son or daughter in the service overseas.

When I returned to the States from Vietnam, I was well received. People talk about how the Vietnam veterans were so poorly received when they came home, but I didn't see that. No one had anything derogatory to say to me.

Now I love to watch reruns of the television show "MASH" because the conditions are similar to those I experienced in Vietnam, except that we didn't have all that free time. I wonder what we would have done if we had all that free time to play. Even though I was single at the time, there never was time to date. We did have some good times, but mostly we were busy taking care of wounded soldiers.

The girls who did the most, I think, were the nurses who worked in Post-Op. They were good Christian girls with a great opportunity to witness to young men who may never before have heard about Christ and what He had done for them.

Recently, my husband Raymond was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. I had just lost my brother-in-law to renal cell cancer. It was a terrifying time because my husband's cancer was fairly advanced. But God took us through that year and has healed him. That was what we prayed for, though we didn't deserve it. Yet God gave it to us. To me, that was more frightening than Vietnam. The blessing was better than anything God had done for me in the past. Even having children and grandchildren is not the same as having someone give you back your husband after such a serious illness. Now he's healthy and strong, and hopefully good for another 30 years. We depended on God during that time. Our Sunday school classes, Brother Darryle Dunks, friends, everyone prayed for Raymond. The doctors did their part, but I know where the healing was done.