

One Vietnam nurse, mending and remembering

Lou Eisenbrandt was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease 14 years ago, the result of exposure to Agent Orange. Female Angels of Mercy came in contact with the lethal herbicide when cutting away the uniforms on wounded soldiers. I was privileged to meet Lou and listen to her awe-inspiring presentation during the July gathering of the Atlanta Vietnam Veterans Business Association. And this is her story.



From her own words during the presentation: "I have Parkinson's from exposure to Agent Orange, so I've instructed my body to remain still. If I do a Michael J. Fox, please forgive me but I can't help it. I'm also not using a laser pointer because the laser would be all over the place."

"My experiences are no different than other nurses who served in Nam. Ten thousand women served, 7,000 were nurses. I grew up in the small town of Mascoutah, IL, population 3,000. I was the oldest of five, born with a wanderlust in my heart because I knew something else was out there for me."

"I was in nurses training when I stumbled onto an Army program which allowed a nurse to join up, study for 3 years, then serve for 2 years. I didn't join for a noble cause or thinking I could change the world, I just wanted to see some of the world, like Germany, Japan, or England. My first port-of-call was officer's training at Ft. Sam Houston, TX in June of 1968. Then I received orders for Ft. Dix, NJ. I packed up my brand new Rambler American and headed for The Garden State."

"I spent 9 months at Ft. Dix which was a good thing. Some nurses were sent straight from nursing school to Vietnam. Ft. Dix was interesting to say the least. They even had a stockade section and I had to check daily for improvised weapons. One prisoner escaped, but not on my shift. I usually cared for the soldiers with upper respiratory infections, at one point over 300 soldiers. We also had the fatties and skinnies. If too fat, we put them on diets; if too skinny,



they got milk shakes. Oddly, they put these guys in the same ward. The skinnies stayed skinny because the fatties drank all the milk shakes. Before the year was out I received a manila envelope; 'Congratulations, you're going to Vietnam.' Not the travel I expected."

"I arrived in Vietnam on November 1, 1969. I had a choice of bases so I picked the 91st Evac at Chu Lai because an old

roommate was assigned there. Chu Lai was beautiful, on a hill near a cliff, overlooking the South China Sea. I arrived during Monsoon season, everything wet; my hooch had double beds, a foot locker, and one fan. Thank goodness my room was in front of the bunker. Chu Lai is in the skinny part of Nam, ocean on one side, mountains in the background.”

“I loved flying on the choppers since I was an avid photographer. Great region for photos but I never took photos of casualties. Chopper pilots are, well, different. They loved to party. I spent my first 3 months in a medical ward treating non-combat related problems, like hepatitis and malaria, even jungle rot. By the way, the Officer’s Club was built on the edge of a cliff. We consumed a ‘slight’ amount of alcohol in there.”

“Within 3 months the chief nurse asked if I wanted the challenge of the emergency room. I accepted. After we cared for casualties we washed the blood down a drain in the concrete floor with a hose. Head injuries from rotor blades were the worse cases, horrible wounds. If a soldier was not ambulatory we utilized a gurney and used screens to block off a KIA or DOA. During triage if we determined a soldier wouldn’t make it he was placed behind a screen then a nurse held his hand and talked to him until he died.”

“One time after their village was hit, we had 99 Vietnamese civilians to care for within a 24 hour period. When wounded Vietnamese came in so did the whole family. We also had Vietnamese nurses. They really helped due to culture differences.”



“We waterskied but with parameters, like never going out after 1:00pm because that was when sharks arrived. We used a jeep to pull the boat but I have no idea where the jeep and boat and skis came from. There were local fishermen in LRBs, Little Round Boats, who would wave at us until we threw them a tow rope and pulled them along. They loved it.”

“I was 22 years old, young and adventurous. We’d jump in a jeep and travel heavily mined Highway 1 to visit orphanages or Hue. We took M-16s and helmets, but never encountered any problems. They instructed us to not purchase cokes or beer from roadside stands because the VC would booby-trap cans with live grenades. Pull the tab...and, boom!”

“Saigon was a trip, pardon the pun. It was crazy. Traffic would go on a red light, then keep on going on a green light. Once a bike ran over my toes...I was standing on the sidewalk. Rocket attacks were common at Chi Lai because of all the fuel storage tanks. You know, back then ladies used pink rollers. We couldn’t wear helmets during rocket attacks if we had our hair in rollers; it hurt like heck!”



“The realities of war? You try to forget them but you never do. Every soldier brought into the emergency room had to have his fatigues cut from his body, fatigues frequently coated with Agent Orange. I recall the missing limbs, arms and legs dangling on shredded flesh, and one soldier we rolled over to check for exit wounds....his back stayed on the litter. We put him back down. He made it through surgery and we got him to Japan. Don’t know if he

made it or not. I think of that kid every day.”

“You tried to be detached from the suffering, but I had an attachment to a young Lieutenant who came in with his men. His unit took heavy casualties and he wanted to be with them, to see them through their ordeal. Next time it was him, peppered full of shrapnel. We were told he would lose both legs. That’s one of the few times I had to walk out of the emergency room. It rattled me. We saved his legs but I’ve seen him since returning home. His legs are not of much use; he’s another boy I think about every day.”

“A photo taken of me on my last day in Vietnam shows a young nurse who aged in just one year. You are grateful to be leaving in one piece, but the bond was so strong with the people you worked with that you are also sad about leaving. I was the only female on the flight home. I will never forget my year in Vietnam, it is always with me...always.”

Lou Eisenbrandt returned home then spent six weeks on the road with another nurse, visiting other veteran nurses, doing their best to forget and move on with their lives. Both ladies settled into nursing positions at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital in Denver. Lou met and married a young attorney named Jim. They’ve been together for 44 years, have 2 grown children and 2 precious grandchildren, and as Lou affectionately stated, ‘one big dog.’ Her book, “Vietnam Nurse, Mending and Remembering,” distributed by Deeds Publishing, is selling like hot cakes.

Eight nurses lost their lives in Vietnam. One was 26 year old Lt. Sharon Lane. She was killed by shrapnel from an exploding rocket while caring for Viet Cong prisoners at Chu Lai.

God bless the Angels of Mercy.