

COMPASSION & COMBAT

A SALUTE TO NURSES



Diane Carlson Evans keeps in her Montana home a bronze replica from the statue she fought to see installed in Washington, D.C.

William Hopper's Hamamal, Washington, D.C.
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The diametric contrast between combat and compassion is a line willingly navigated by women and men who have served as nurses, caring for those who have borne America's battles. Like corpsmen and all military medical personnel, nurses of all service branches and VA are dealt the worst of human conflict: its results. They may be physical. They may be psychological. They may be both. In this, the first of a series, *The American Legion Magazine* pays tribute to the service, sacrifice and legacy of military and veteran nurses. The number of lives they have saved and souls they have comforted cannot be measured, only honored. This is just a fraction of their ongoing story.

'Whatever it took to save lives'

Combat nurse shares the route she traveled to immortalize Vietnam War women.

BY JEFF STOFFER

GRADUATION DAY, 1964, BUFFALO, MINN. Diane Carlson, daughter of a stoic dairy farmer and a country nurse, cannot believe her name is called from among the 93 graduating seniors. The principal and the local American Legion commander summon her and a classmate, Cliff Eng, to step up and receive the post's annual citizenship award.

She remembers that moment in vivid detail, as if it happened only yesterday.

"My mother is sitting next to me, and she looks at me, and my dad looks at me, and I am shocked. Why me? What have I done to be a good citizen? So, I go up on the stage with my classmate, and receive the certificate. I still have it. They gave me a bronze medallion, and it was very heavy. It said, 'For God and Country,' and it had The American Legion logo. And they gave me a pin - a small pin to wear. I am in total shock."

Eng, who would later serve in the Navy, and Carlson thought they received the award because everyone in the county loved their mothers, both nurses. "I go home, and I say, 'Mom, why did they choose me?' Of course, my dear mother says, 'Because you *have* been a good citizen, Diane. Think of what you did during high school.' I was not familiar with The American Legion except that there was a post downtown, and they had an American Legion sign on it."

FOUR YEARS LATER, during a rocket attack at an evacuation hospital near Pleiku in the central highlands of Vietnam, the same Diane Carlson, an Army nurse and first lieutenant, reaches into a crib

and holds the trembling hand of a young girl severely burned by napalm.

Soldiers have dived under their beds. IVs and other lines have been yanked out. The floor is slippery with blood. Carlson and a medic have thrown mattresses over those who cannot get onto the floor, to protect them from shrapnel.

"Like in the jungle, you do what it takes to survive," she recalls. "We are doing everything we can to protect them the best way that we can. But the little girl in the unit - we were caring for Montagnard and Vietnamese civilians with napalm burns and injuries incurred in the cross-fires of war - she came into our unit screaming in pain, and when we got hit, she started screaming again because it scared her like the night her village was bombed. I couldn't throw a mattress on top of her because she was so badly burned. I went for cover under her crib, and I just held her hand. And she screamed herself to death."

Another moment in vivid detail, as if it happened only yesterday.

"That night, for me, was Vietnam. It was surreal ... like a bad hallucination. I was one lone nurse with one lone medic, and these patients all needed life-saving care. And we were all they got that night. It was our job to do whatever it took to save their lives."

DIANE CARLSON knew exactly what she wanted to be when she grew up. "I wanted to be a nurse, like my mom. I was very proud of her. She was a wonderful nurse and a wonderful mother ... the Florence Nightingale of the county. Every farmer

who did not want to go see a doctor called mother and wanted to know mother's advice. She was loved."

After high school, Diane went without hesitation to a nursing school in Minneapolis. Her oldest brother was in the Army by then, 101st Airborne Division, and another brother was drafted the following year. "Things are happening in Vietnam," she recalls. "I am beginning to notice. We had what was called the nurses student lounge, and we could go there and watch TV. I would go every single night at 6 o'clock, and watch the nightly news. My brother had three classmates who were killed in Vietnam by 1966 – all farm boys. And my 4-H buddy, a close friend of ours, was killed in Vietnam."

She was not frightened by the war. She was drawn to it. "I found an Army nurse recruiter," she says. "I said to her, 'I know I want to go to Vietnam. If I pass my state boards, will I be eligible? What do I do to sign up?'"

"She said, 'Well, there's a nursing shortage right now all over the United States and in the military. We have the Army Student Nurse Program, and if you sign up now, as a junior in nursing, the U.S. government will consider you in the program, and they will pay your tuition and give you a stipend and pay for your books.'"

"To have a stipend and have my tuition and



The daughter of a nurse, Diane Carlson Evans wanted to follow in her mother's footsteps and serve her country in Vietnam, like two brothers and many of her classmates.

Photo courtesy of Diane Carlson Evans

books paid, that was a huge bonus. I said, 'Well, I know I want to go to Vietnam, so how do I sign up?' She showed me the paperwork. The decision, for me, was made."

"Mom and Dad, I have something to tell you."

Diane's mother, who had gone to nursing school with women who later served in World War II, was not surprised. Diane's Aunt Ruth had also enlisted during World War II and used the GI Bill to earn her doctorate.

"I joined the Army. And I am going to volunteer for Vietnam."

Diane's father, who rarely showed emotions, made a fist. He slammed it into the tabletop, got up and walked out.

"I was too young and naïve to understand how traumatic this was for a parent. Then, when I told my brothers, they were furious. They didn't want their sister in the Army. They said the Army is no place for a woman. And I didn't realize, until I joined the Army, what they meant. At the time, there were still a lot of stereotypes about women in the military."

At the Hennepin County Hospital's emergency room during nursing school and while training alongside her mother in Buffalo, she had seen gunshot wounds, stabbings, domestic abuse,

“My favorite nurse is my wife, Victoria Pablo Lowe. She was the daughter of a Philippine Scout who survived the Bataan Death March. She served as an Air Force nurse from 1970 to 1971 before marrying an Army officer and becoming an Air Force mom. Victoria completed her bachelor's degree and served our community as a nurse for many years. When she was laid to rest two years ago at Rock Island National Cemetery, she had more than earned the flag that draped her casket.”

Richard A. Lowe, Davenport, Iowa

“In 1966 I was stationed at Tan Son Nhut with the 120th Aviation Company. During a formation for the awarding of our air medals, five or six nurses went through the line to shake hands with us. Later they flew off in a Huey, which hit a power line. They were all killed, along with the crew. In 1995, I visited the Vietnam memorial in Angel Fire, N.M., and found their photos on the wall. I have never forgotten their sacrifice and dedication to duty.”

Howard McDonald, Laramie, Wyo.

drownings and even some train accidents. "I had seen trauma," she explains. "I was not afraid of it." She also did a three-month internship at the VA hospital in Minneapolis. "That cinched it for me. I knew I wanted to take care of veterans. I was in my element."

"And when I graduate, after I take my state boards, if I pass, I will go to basic training. After that, it will be determined when I go to Vietnam."

2nd LT. CARLSON WAS 21 when she arrived in-country. "The tarmac had big holes in it from mortar and rocket attacks, and we get off," she remembers, vividly, as if only yesterday. "There are two of us, two female nurses on the plane. There must have been over 250 men onboard. And I can't tell you how quiet it was when it landed. There wasn't a sound. I thought about these poor guys. How many were going to come back?"

"The pilot says, 'Nurses off first.' Two armed guards with bandoliers of ammunition meet us as we come down the steps. 'Get into the bus, and keep your head down.'"

Black chicken wire over the bus windows. The odor, the heat, the tropical humidity. Replacement center. Orders. Helicopter. Up and out. "My first assignment is the 36th Evac. People say, 'Great! You're going to the ocean. It's on the South China Sea. It's beautiful there.'"

"I thought, that will be cool."

Really, it wasn't.

"I am now on a 65-bed unit – a surgical unit, all pre-op and post-op – it's a Quonset hut. The temperature is 110 degrees. It's Aug. 3. There is no air conditioning. Every bed is filled. This is 1968."

CARLSON HAD GONE THROUGH basic training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where she

and other new Army nurses learned to march, salute and follow orders. She took classes on chemical weapons and how to treat combat wounds in less-than-ideal conditions. "I don't care how good our training was, or our experience, or how old we were," she says. "Nothing prepares you for a war zone."

At Fort Lee, Va., her nine-month first assignment on active duty, she serves in the Army hospital's orthopedic unit and gets her first taste of Vietnam, treating badly hurt troops sent home from the war. There, she learns clearly about the invisible wounds of combat.

"One time I was on night duty, and a bed pan that I was trying to put under a patient fell onto the floor. My mistake. Do you know how loud a bed pan is falling onto a tile floor? The whole ward was now awake. The guys all hit the floor. Some actually came out of their pulleys, because of the noise ... startled, hyper-vigilance. I won't use the swear words they used for me. Then I realized, these guys are still living back in Vietnam. They are still on guard. A noise hits, and they're all awake, and they're all mad, all agitated."

She learns how to awaken a combat soldier to administer medicine. "You stood back and said his name quietly and inched over, very carefully. You did not want to startle a Vietnam vet patient. These are subtle things I learned while I took care of them. It was good training before I left."

After nine months at Fort Lee, 2nd Lt. Carlson receives orders to deploy. By this time, her oldest brother had been injured and was medically discharged. Her other brother was on the DMZ in South Korea. Diane would be the lone Carlson from Buffalo, Minn., with boots on the ground in Vietnam. "I remember that day. It was what I had dreamed of and been working toward."

She goes home on leave to see her parents once



“ I served with the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment in Cambodia in 1970. I was severely wounded and ended up in the 24th Evac's head injury ward. I had a bandage over my right eye and kept trying to see light through it. I asked a nurse, 'How bad is my eye?' She got the doctor, who told me it was completely gone. I asked the nurse for a hand mirror. She didn't want to get one, but I insisted. I looked at my face and started to cry, saying my girlfriend wouldn't want me anymore. The nurse told me if that if she really loved me, it wouldn't matter. She stayed until I calmed down. I married my girlfriend one year later, and we are still married. Those nurses treated us so kindly. I thank them and remember them to this day.”

Raymond W. Tarr, Kittanning, Pa.

Read the second installment of Diane Carlson Evans' story in the October issue of *The American Legion Magazine*.

more. "My dad had never hugged me or told me he loved me. He was a stoic Scandinavian. Very undemonstrative. In his overalls – I will never forget this – he gave me this big hug, and he started to cry. He said, 'I have four sons, and I send my daughter off to war.'"

Soon, that daughter is flying out of Virginia, watching smoke billow up from the National Mall in Washington, D.C., on her way to Southeast Asia. "I know there are war protesters. I know there are people burning the flag, which I cannot believe – who would burn the American flag? – and the smoke is rising because of a tent city, where protesters had come to oppose the war. This was my last view of my nation's capital – my sendoff to Vietnam."

She was undaunted. The war was calling. "I didn't care what the protesters were saying. I still had this sense of citizenship – that, like my brothers, it was my duty to serve – certainly influenced by that American Legion citizenship award and why I had been chosen for it."

NO ONE HAD SAID anything about snakes. One of 2nd Lt. Carlson's first patients at the 36th Evacuation Hospital had been bitten by one "in that wonderful South China Sea that I was so happy to be by. It was full of sea snakes. I'm taking care of him, and he does survive – *many of them didn't* – and I said to him, 'What does a sea snake look like?' And he said, 'a very bad snake.'

"The next day, I come in, and on the nurses' station, where I am working to get medication together and check the orders for the day, there's this big glass gallon jar with a lid on it. Inside of it is a snake. Of course, I jumped. And my patient is laughing hysterically. They said, 'Lieutenant, you wanted to see one' These guys went out and got one, just for me. Did they shoot it? Did they

have a net? It was dead, thank goodness. We had to laugh. Welcome to Vietnam."

Carlson and each of her fellow nurses, corpsmen and doctors treated thousands of troops and civilians in-country. "We saw the results of war every day, in every patient, for 12 or 14 hours, whatever the length our shift might be. We went from one to the next to the next to the next to the next. Each one had a story."

Injuries were often accompanied by burns. She treated ground grunts and dust-off crash survivors, civilians (including children) and officers. As quickly as possible, patients other than civilians were transferred from the evacuation hospital to the 6th Convalescent Center at Cam Ranh Bay to recover if wounds were not so bad as to send them home.

Infections were a constant concern. "If you were wounded, the wounds were always considered dirty," she says. "Vietnam was a dirty country. The enemy became very crafty. They would lace punji sticks with human feces. A soldier would step on it: instant injury and certain infection. Bone infections were sent home due to the long recovery period. Most injuries required DPCs – delayed primary closures. Any soldier who went through this experienced excruciating pain. Our skilled medics irrigated the wound, packed the dressings, and on the third day, the surgeons could close the wound. Tons of antibiotics. So, now the wound is healing, and the antibiotics are working, and we take out the stitches and he goes back to his unit ... or, he gets the million-dollar wound, and goes home." ❧

Jeff Stoffer is editor of the The American Legion Magazine.

“ I served as an Air Force flight nurse during the Vietnam War, tending to injured soldiers on flights to the United States. Comforting one seriously injured young man, I kissed his forehead, saying, 'Please take care of yourself.' Fifteen years later, while visiting the Vietnam Wall in uniform, I was approached by a young man in a wheelchair. 'You may not remember me, but your comforting words inspired me during rehabilitation, and I've tried for years to find you and thank you,' he said. I later served in the California Army National Guard as founding state nurse, combat support hospital chief nurse and brigade chief nurse. I retired as a colonel and now serve as an officer for American Legion Post 178 in Rio Vista, Calif.”

Sally Ann Brenner, Rio Vista, Calif.

