

## COMPASSION & COMBAT

### A SALUTE TO NURSES



*Diane Carlson Evans, right, volunteered to take her nursing skills to the Vietnam War.*

Photo courtesy Diane Carlson Evans

# 'I never even thought about giving up'

*Vietnam War nurse Diane Carlson Evans comes home to face and win battles of her own, and for all women who served.*

BY JEFF STOFFER

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *This is the second in a two-part series profiling American Legion 100th Anniversary Honorary Committee member Diane Carlson Evans, a Vietnam War combat nurse who led the effort to build a memorial honoring women veterans in Washington, D.C. She is a member of Lewis & Clark Post 2 in Helena, Mont.*

**IN JANUARY 1969, 1ST LT. DIANE CARLSON** is transferred to the 71st Evac Hospital at Pleiku, near the Cambodia border. "Now I am in the thick of combat. Our hospital is surrounded by concertina wire. We have four guard towers. It's very dangerous. We have sappers trying to get in. Patients were coming in so fast we called it a 'push.' A push meant mass casualties."

The 71st Evac nurses could be summoned instantly, any time of day or night, by a push. "Our hooches, where the nurses lived, were right next to the hospital. So in seconds, we could get on our boots, jungle fatigues, flak jacket and helmet when the red-alert siren went on.

"If one chopper was coming in, maybe up to eight patients, or if they really threw bodies on top of bodies, maybe 16. But, you know, one chopper was limited. Two choppers, three choppers – I used to call it a gaggle – you got tuned into the sound of those Hueys coming in, and to this day, if a Huey flew over, I would hear it from a mile away,

maybe two miles away. When a bunch of choppers came in, you knew it was trouble."

(Years later, when sculptor Glenna Goodacre designed a female figure for the Vietnam Women's Memorial looking up as if for a helicopter, "we knew exactly what it meant. For the soldiers, the Dust Off – air ambulance – helicopter meant hope. For us, it meant adrenaline-pumping work to save lives, and every minute counted.")

Every minute was spent on the edge of an emergency. "I don't think I ever really slept in Vietnam. I think I was always on the verge of sleep, waiting for that call and choppers flying."

On one particular night, the nurses' hooches rattle and tremble like the earth is quaking. This is no Huey. It's a Chinook. The nurses scramble to open a spare ward, an extra 45 beds, and begin setting up IVs. Patients start coming in, "but they are not wounded," Carlson notices. "All the wounded are in the emergency room. They're sending these sick guys to my unit. They were

dehydrated. They were dirty. There was vomit. Wounds weren't visible, but their suffering was acute and there wouldn't be any Purple Hearts passed out for their near-death experience. All I could think about was they had been stranded out there without food, without water. Fevers. My lone corpsman and I couldn't make diagnoses. We could just get IVs started."

Deep in hostile territory, they worked by flashlight at night. "The hospital could not be lit because we got hit too often. I could start an IV in the dark, and I did."

The first lieutenant wrote her mother about that night. She had forgotten how many sick and dehydrated soldiers they treated until she rediscovered the letter in 1994. "Twenty-eight." She still has no idea what had caused their condition but remembers hooking up IVs in the dark to soldiers whose veins had collapsed.

Her hoochmate at Pleiku, also from Minnesota, was a nurse named Edie (which means "prosperous in war") and they bonded, under frequent enemy fire. One morning, they arose to find the hooch next to theirs "blown off the map. Nobody was in that hooch that night. It was unbelievable. They were all on R&R. It was like an act of God that it hit that hooch and not ours."

As rockets exploded around Diane and Edie one night, they got under their beds and, despite the situation, got the giggles like the schoolgirls they once were. "We're laughing because Edie, who always tried to keep her hair nice, had curlers in, and she had her helmet on over her head, and she is eating peanut butter and crackers. When Edie is under stress, she eats. 'If I am going to die, I am going to die happy.'

"Our guys were putting sandbags up to the top of our hooch at daybreak, to protect us from any more incoming. We went to work the next day. Was I afraid of dying? I think by that time, I was so numb, I had resigned myself to it – that I might not come home. It was part of being there. You didn't worry about the little things like dying. We had so many casualties to take care of, we were never bored. Our patients came first."

In July 1969, 1st Lt. Carlson's tour in Vietnam ends. She doesn't want to go. "Just when we got good at what we were doing, we left. Same with the guys, the infantrymen, the soldiers. We turned it over to new people. I thought about staying another year, by re-upping, but I knew I needed to go home. I was losing weight. I was exhausted. I needed to rest."

She remembers vividly, as if it was only yesterday, her last patient in Pleiku. The most critically ill were positioned across from the nurses' station so they could keep a constant watch on them. "This patient was on a ventilator with a tracheostomy tube and couldn't speak."

To communicate, they wrote notes to each other. "I told him I was leaving. He became agitated. He didn't want me to leave. I was his nurse. He had become very attached to me. He wrote me a note that said, 'Don't leave me.' I know he was afraid. I think he knew he was going to die, and he didn't want to die alone. So, I left with great regrets, a hole in my heart, thinking not of the patients I helped to save, but only of patients I left behind."

Before leaving Vietnam, she is advised to not wear her Army uniform when she lands in the United States. Protesters can be hostile.

She wears it anyway.



“The unsung heroes are the nurses who took care of the soldiers in the Vietnam War. I was one of these soldiers. I was in the 2nd Battalion, 60th Infantry, 1967 to 1968. We were ambushed in Tan Thanh in the Mekong Delta in April 1967. I was shot three times and seriously wounded. I was sent to Cam Ranh Bay via the 3rd Field Hospital near Saigon, and then on to Japan; from there to Valley Forge and Fort Dix, N.J., hospitals. The true heroes to me were the caring individuals who changed my dressings every day, took my pulse and temperature, changed my chest tubes and gave me medications. They helped me write letters to my parents and girlfriend, whom I married nearly 50 years ago. I can't say enough about those nurses and wish them all God's blessings.”

**John A. Kellner Sr., Alden, N.Y.**

**FIRST STOP, TRAVIS AIR FORCE BASE.** Then on to Madigan Army Hospital at Fort Lewis, Wash., for an examination and discharge paperwork. She is told she has a spot on her lung and is later diagnosed with tuberculosis in both lungs and her spleen, probably the cause of her fatigue, weight loss and frequent coughing.

She travels alone, in uniform, back to Minneapolis where hecklers greet her at the airport. Two GIs are there. One throws a heckler to the ground. “It’s beyond me. That era. How our society could turn their backs on soldiers, not separating the war from the warrior.”

She rests, recovers and takes a job as a surgical nurse in Minneapolis. Three weeks later, she quits. “I was a fish out of water.” She calls Edie, who has been assigned to Madigan Army Hospital. Carlson drives to Madigan and signs on as a civilian nurse there. Within months she simply re-ups and, promoted to captain, is stationed at Brooke Army Medical Center, Fort Sam Houston, Texas, as head nurse in surgical intensive care.

“That saved my life. I needed to be taking care of soldiers again. I couldn’t relate to patients who were just having their gallbladders out and complaining about the pain.”

She falls in love with a surgical intern, Maj. Mike Evans. They marry, and when their first child is on the way, Capt. Carlson Evans retires from the Army, an expectation for pregnant soldiers.

“I wanted to stay in the Army Nurse Corps forever. I loved military nursing.”

Then, vividly, as if it was only yesterday, she returns to Vietnam.

*“I didn’t know what a flashback was.”*

A new mother, she goes to work part-time as a recovery room nurse at a civilian hospital in San Antonio – pretty slow work compared to Pleiku. Then, one night, the operating room nurse calls Carlson Evans in to help with an emergency surgery. “There was a small child on the operating room table. The child was hemorrhaging, and the surgeon was throwing bloody sponges at me, into the basin, for me to count. I smelled the blood. I saw the blood. And I’m right back in Vietnam. I had never heard the term ‘flashback.’ I stood



*Diane Carlson Evans had difficulty adjusting to civilian nursing after the war.* Photo courtesy Diane Carlson Evans

there frozen. I wasn’t functioning. And the surgeon is now swearing at me, and the operating room nurse is acting like she can’t believe that I appear to be in some kind of trance. What kind of nurse would just stand there and do nothing?

“I went home, and I started to shake. I think I shook all night. The next day, I went to human resources, and I resigned.”

### **NO ONE TALKED MUCH ABOUT POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS**

at that time. Carlson Evans knew she had been a competent nurse in Vietnam and at Brooke Army Medical Center. “I had no idea what was happening to me.” She did not talk about it for years.

Soon, with another child on the way, the family moves to Heidelberg, Germany, where Maj. Evans becomes chief of the Army’s 130th Station Hospital. The family grows by two more as the 1970s unfold. “So now I am being a full-time mother, and I am really stuffing my Vietnam experience. The incident in that operating room was so traumatic I didn’t think I could ever go back to nursing. I had gone from being a nurse who felt very skilled and very competent to feeling that I was incompetent and couldn’t do my job.”

In 1982, she attends the dedication ceremony of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. “It was so beautiful and so meaningful – finally the nation was beginning to come to grips with our experience and looking at us as who we really were, not what their stereotypes were about us. And finding the names on the Wall that I know ... I couldn’t keep those memories away anymore. They just came. It seems like I never had a wake, never had a funeral, for all those men and women who died in Vietnam. One by one, faces would come back. Names would come back. I was grieving for each one of them.”

She estimates that 35,000 of the names on the Wall lost their lives during the time she was in-country. Eight were nurses.

In 1984, the Three Soldiers bronze statue is dedicated near the Wall, depicting three Vietnam War troops gazing back at the names of the fallen. Carlson Evans thinks to herself, “it’s a beautiful sculpture, but they forgot someone.”



She tells her husband, “I don’t know how I’m going to do it, but something needs to be done.”

**SHE APPEALS TO OTHER INTERESTED VETERANS** and together they apply for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status to accept donations to build a monument to women who served in the Vietnam War. Articles of incorporation are written and outreach to other Vietnam War veterans, male and female, begins. The organization establishes a presence in Washington, D.C., and begins the long journey through federal commissions, committees, subcommittees, agencies and offices necessary to install anything permanent on the National Mall. She soon learns that to make it happen she will need a mandate from Congress.

“So, now I realize I need to go to the veterans service organizations and see if they wouldn’t support this.” The American Legion would.

A member of American Legion Post 121 in River Falls, Wis., Carlson Evans asks her fellow Legionnaires how she might get the nation’s largest veterans organization behind the idea.

“They said, ‘If you want to get anything done in The American Legion, you’d better contact Judge Dan Foley.’ Well, he was in St. Paul. He was an appellate judge, and I called him. I told him I was a veteran. That was all he needed to hear. He said, ‘Come and have lunch with me.’”

Foley, national commander of The American Legion the year Diane Carlson graduated from high school, explains that she will need a resolution passed at her post, then district and department levels. Then, he says, “You will come to the

national convention. That’s how you get this done.’ I did everything he said.”

In October 1985, The American Legion National Executive Committee unanimously passes Resolution 16 calling on the Department of the Interior, the Fine Arts Commission, the National Capitol Planning Commission and other agencies to dedicate an area near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial “to erect a statue honoring the women who have served during the Vietnam War.”

With national American Legion support, she writes a strategic plan, assembles a board of directors, continues raising funds and launches a publicity campaign. “My skills from Vietnam, and my nursing skills, really played a huge part in my ability to get things done. First of all, you get it done. You don’t give up. That was my mantra. In Vietnam, I never even thought about giving up. Soldiers’ lives were worth fighting for in Vietnam; now, my fellow sister veterans were worth fighting for here at home.”

It takes nearly 10 years and more than 30 hearings. “I am up at 3 in the morning writing testimony trying to convince people. And I realize why so many people are against this. They don’t know who we are. They don’t know what we accomplished because in Vietnam on the 6 o’clock news, we saw the wounded and the body bags and the soldiers, the chopper pilots and the burning villages, but we never ever saw the nurses behind the scenes or the other women who were serving in other roles. They had no clue what our contribution was, how many thousands of lives we touched, how many thousands of lives we saved.”



“As a nurse at the San Diego naval hospital from September 1968 to May 1970, it was my job to care for neurological patients who had been in Vietnam. With so many patients to care for, it was difficult to remember many of them. One stands out in my memory. He had a non-operable brain tumor and was confined to a wheelchair. At times, he was not aware of his surroundings and believed he was still fighting in Vietnam. Once, I unknowingly approached him too closely and startled him. He took a swing at me, hitting me in the stomach; after comforting him, I eventually persuaded him to take his medication. I continued caring for him until his death a few weeks later. Soon after his death, I received a written note of thanks from his family for the ‘many special nice things you did to add to Ray’s comfort.’ After caring for hundreds of patients, that was the only written note of thanks I ever received, and it was much appreciated, especially as they were parents of the only patient who ever struck me.”

**Sherry (Stibal) Dunbar, Carmen, Idaho**



*The Vietnam Women's Memorial was dedicated Nov. 11, 1993, on the National Mall. Media Bakery*

To get their story out, she and her board and staff recruit a publicist and send press releases to every U.S. state calling on women veterans to step forward and share their stories. “That’s when the tide turned.” Thousands of news clippings, and a wave of donations, pour in. Still, opposition persists. Carlson Evans reads that the next thing you know, there will be a “movement to put a woman on Mount Rushmore” and “maybe they should paint the Statue of Liberty Day-Glo pink, or perhaps a woman should be painted into the image of George Washington crossing the Delaware.”

The lack of logic from opponents astounds her. Then the Commemorative Works Act becomes law in 1986, “making it almost impossible to put a memorial on the Mall.” Carlson Evans studies every line of the new law. “One of the statements said that it had to be of pre-eminent historical significance. So that stayed with me.”

The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts disapproves of the design. “They said the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is closed. There will never be another addition.”

A proposal to install a statue on the Mall to honor the Vietnam War canine corps, at the same time Carlson Evans is fighting for the women’s monument, leads one official to publicly question where to draw the line. Evans remembers the

comparison vividly, as if it was only yesterday. “The canine corps were important and heroic, but did he just put us in the same sentence?”

Soon after that, “60 Minutes” calls. Morley Safer, who had reported in Vietnam and saw what the nurses did, interviews Carlson Evans and three other nurses. Millions see the broadcast. Phone calls, letters and telegrams of support storm in.

It comes down to one final hearing, within the Department of the Interior. It has to be unanimous. Carlson Evans prepares a 10-page speech.

“I had it in front of me, but I didn’t even look at it. I’m just going to say one thing to them: ‘Is it not of pre-eminent and lasting historical significance that women saved thousands of lives? Our wall of names would be much higher and much wider without the contribution of these very brave women.’ I sat down. The place went quiet. They took the vote. It was unanimous.”

On Veterans Day 1993, the statue depicting three uniformed women with a wounded soldier, one nurse looking skyward for a chopper, is dedicated. Thousands, including many who owed their lives to approximately 10,000 women who served in the Vietnam War, attend. The legacy of the women’s experience, cast in bronze, would be permanent.

“We stood on the shoulders of the World War II veteran women and the Korean War women,” says Carlson Evans, now a member of The American Legion’s 100th Anniversary Honorary Committee. “The World War I women – the first nurses who went into the military as nurses – they opened doors for World War II. Each generation opens doors for the next. We Vietnam veteran women certainly proved that we measured up. We were brave. We did our job under enemy fire and hostile conditions, and we didn’t quit. We never gave up on a soldier.”

And no matter what haunts them, sometimes in vivid detail, as if it was only yesterday, combat nurses and all women who have bravely served in uniform, can stand assured that they have fulfilled, above and beyond the call of duty, The American Legion’s definition of citizenship. That may, in fact, be one reason Diane Carlson Evans has kept her high school award all these years.

*Jeff Stoffer is editor of The American Legion Magazine.*

Read an extended article and watch a video interview with Diane Carlson Evans online.

 [www.legion.org/magazine](http://www.legion.org/magazine)