

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH CAPT (ret) LINDA DAEHN, NC, USN

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

27 MAY 2004
WASHINGTON, DC

OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY
WASHINGTON, DC

Telephone interview with CAPT Linda Daehn, NC, USN (Ret.). CAPT Daehn cared for Vietnamese refugees following the Vietnam War.

You're from Minnesota.

Yes. Minneapolis.

When did you join the Nurse Corps?

I was a Nurse Corps candidate so I raised my hand in '71 and the Navy paid the last 2 years of my bachelor's degree. Then I went to OIS [Officer Indoctrination School] in '73 and graduated at the end of September. I then went to Camp Pendleton as my first duty station and I was there until the fall of '76.

How did you hear about the Vietnamese refugees?

I was a staff nurse on a surgical ward and was slated to transfer to a surgical ICU fairly shortly. I got a call from my supervisor. She asked me to set up from scratch a ward for these refugees that we were going to be getting any day. I was the division officer for the ward, in charge of the unit.

We had moved into the new hospital [Camp Pendleton] from the old building at that time and moved our surgical ward to the second floor. There were some empty wards at the time so we set to work on what I recall was a Monday morning. We straightened out this vacant ward. It may well have been the sixth floor because that's where we eventually moved our surgical ward because we didn't have enough space on the second floor.

We were making beds and trying to get some basic supplies in. We had patients within just a few days. We started out with under 10 and I remember a couple of them had to go to surgery for some reason. I also remember securing some jewelry for one of them. I think it was a watch and a diamond ring. So the first few patients that we had probably had some money.

But very quickly, we were filled to the gills. They pulled some staff from the rest of the hospital and TAD'd some nurses in. That's when Karen Ott came. And very rapidly the patients, as I recall, were very poor. And it became primarily an infectious disease ward. There was a lot of tuberculosis. We'd look at chest x-rays and instead of being clear, they were almost white from disease. We had to teach them what a Kleenex was because they were spitting on the floor. I don't think they knew any better. Of course, the sputum had TB in it so we had to teach them about Kleenexes. Many of the patients were pretty gaunt. They weren't well nourished.

There was also a measles outbreak out at the camp which was in the middle of the base, which I never visited. They had clinic-sick call services out there. We hospitalized a few of those patients

also.

What was the treatment back then for TB?

We would give isoniazid pills and injections of streptomycin. They were on the pills daily and the streptomycin also daily. We would have to line these folks up at 6 in the morning and have them inhale medication that would make them cough. Then we would collect sputum samples from them to see if they would begin to have negative sputum samples. Then we could release them from the hospital and, hopefully, they would take their medications. We collected a lot of bodily fluids in the ward.

Did you see a lot of positive improvement in those patients while you were there?

In some of them. The ones who had terrible TB, you were just trying to get them so that they wouldn't spread it to someone else. But when someone has most of their lungs taken over by that disease it's pretty hard to see a lot of improvement.

What time frame are we talking about?

I think it was in the spring and summer of '75. I had gotten there in the fall of '73 and I know that I worked a variety of wards for a good year and a half. I know they wouldn't have moved me into the surgical ICU as a brand new nurse.

I understand that there was a vast age difference between the youngest and oldest patients.

Yes. One of the patients was about 102 years old. Then we had a little 12-day-old baby who had the measles.

One of the patients we got early on was a fellow in his late 20s. He had some kind of kidney disease. He was with us a long time. He spoke English so he became our main interpreter. There were interpreters in the building but to have to call and get them to come up, often it was just easier to ask him to help. He was a big boon for us.

Another patient who sticks in my mind. . . We had a young couple there. I don't remember why he was brought to the ward. He was very depressed. At the time we didn't have some of the precautions in place that we have now in our hospital wards. We had a treatment room there that was unlocked. There was a cart with a variety of supplies which included a bottle of acetone with a skull and crossbones on it. Somehow he got that and tried to commit suicide by drinking it. We then transferred him down to our psych ward and he managed to hang himself using some of the curtains. Here was his wife who spoke no English and was devastated by her husband's suicide.

It was very sad.

We had another lady who was 80 years old or so. We called her Grandma. Somehow, she got separated from her family in the evacuation and we ended up placing her in a nursing home in Oregon. There were a lot of tragic stories among those individuals.

A lot of families that were split up?

I think so. In some of the movies about that era, you see the pandemonium of people trying to get out of Vietnam. I recall seeing a film, maybe "The Killing Fields," where they were lifting people from the roofs of buildings in helicopters and taking them out to U.S. Navy ships. They had so many helos coming out that they would just push them off the sides of the ships so they could land another helo.

With the exception of that very depressed young man who hanged himself, psychologically, what shape were these people in?

I think they were people who had just endured and were people who had experienced a lot of hardships in their lives and so they figured that they could get through this, too. Family members in the camp visited the patients. And God bless these people. They arrived by the bus load. We never knew how many people we would have to feed for lunch. Because we had to feed everybody who was there. They would use our showers. This was a little luxury for them.

How long did you work in that environment?

I think I was there for no more than 6 months and then they transferred me out to the surgical ICU, which was where I had been headed. I can't tell you how much longer the patients were there. I know we still had patients when I left that ward.

Here was this country that we had tried to save all those years, and it didn't turn out well. And then there were all these refugees who were a byproduct of that whole involvement. I know that some people felt guilty at having let the Vietnamese down. Did you ever have any of those feelings while you were caring for them?

Oh, yes. I think I was so naive at that time. I certainly went to college in the era of protests against the war in Vietnam and I knew what was going on over there but I never felt guilt. But I felt very sad for some of their stories and thinking that they were never, ever going to go home. And that they'd left everything they had and here they were in this strange country. And I certainly was very glad to help them because they were very needy people, but I really pondered a lot about the transition that they would have to make and how that would go for them.

Interestingly enough, I was at the market in Alexandria, VA, a few years ago. In fact, I had gone there with Barb Beeby one Saturday morning and we were looking through some pictures a gentleman had. He was obviously Asian. In the course of purchasing one of his pictures, he gave me his business card. I could then see that he had a Vietnamese name. I then related that I had cared for some of those refugees. He said that he at the time he had been in the refugee camp at Camp Pendleton and that he had been a very renowned artist in Vietnam. But things had changed when he came to the States.

It's been almost 30 years since all that happened. Do you ever think about that time?

Recently, I have been because I've been listening to a book on tape and the author talks about going to Vietnam as a reporter for a newspaper down in Fort Worth and how he had been a supporter of the war. And then when he got over there, he quickly realized that Americans were being killed for unclear objectives in the war. So I think that brought back some of those thoughts.

I also thought about Vietnam during my recent tour at USNH Guam, from summer 1998 to summer 2000. As you know, the U.S. Government continues to search for bodies of MIA servicemen in Vietnam and other countries. The remains are flown to Hawaii for identification.

Guam as a U.S. territory, is the first U.S. soil that the plane carrying the remains lands on for refueling. Several times I participated in a very moving ceremony recognizing the MIAs, which is held at night due to the plane's refueling schedule. The plane pulls up before a formation of active duty and retired service people. The remains are in flag-draped coffins, and after a brief ceremony, the attendees can pay their respects by entering the plane's cargo bay, which holds the coffins. So I thought a lot about those soldiers finally coming home from Vietnam--and their families finally having closure.

But other than that, I can't say I dwell on it a whole lot. I think that when I was retiring and mulling over my career, I thought a little about it then.

After that experience with the refugees at Camp Pendleton, you had many more years in the Navy. That was but a little speed bump.

But what a way to start! Sometimes, it's so odd that you could have been a military nurse for 30 years and never really "go to war." I was over in Okinawa when Desert Shield/Storm was occurring and then I retired by the time this last war occurred. So I guess that was as close as I got to something that was a by-product of war and quite atypical to what we do on a daily basis.

You retired in '03, didn't you? What do you do with your time now?

A lot of it has been sort of taking care of me. That doesn't happen a lot of the time during someone's busy career. I spend time with family and have gone on a couple of trips. And with a brand new house, there's lots to do.

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me.

Well, I hope I was of some help.

You certainly were, and it's always a pleasure to talk with you.