

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH CAPT (ret.) ALICIA FOLEY, NC, USN

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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**Interview with CAPT Alicia Foley, NC, USN. On staff of Naval Support Activity (NSA) Danang, South Vietnam.**

**Where are you from?**

I was born in Queens and grew up in Ozone Park, New York.

**Where did you go to school?**

For grammar school I went to St. Mary Gate of Heaven, and then I attended Our Lady of Wisdom High School, which no longer exists. For nursing school, I went to Mary Immaculate in Jamaica. Then I went to St. John's University and got my bachelors in nursing. Then I joined the Navy.

**When did you join?**

I was a late bloomer. I didn't join until '58. My parents were quite elderly when I was born. My mother had a heart condition so I felt I couldn't leave home; I had to take care of her. And then after she died, I stayed home with my father. That wasn't working out too well so I joined the Navy. And I'm so glad I did. It was one of the best decisions I ever made.

**Why did you join the Navy and not one of the other services?**

I look good in blue.

**That's a good reason.**

[Laughter] It's a honest answer. And I liked the work the Navy did better.

**Did you have an orientation at Newport?**

No. I went to St. Albans. It was near home and it only cost me 5 cents to get there. And when I retired, I retired from Jacksonville so I stayed in Florida. So that didn't cost the government anything.

**So you commuted from Ozone Park to St. Albans.**

No. We had to stay there for 6 weeks. And then I went out to California. I went to Oakland. That was really my first assignment. DUINS [Duty Under Instruction] was at St. Albans. That's when they opened up Newport and the classes after my time went up there.

**What were your duties at Oakland?**

First of all, I worked medicine. Then I went over to ENT school and taught the ENT techs. The gal who had that job before was getting out of the Navy. She didn't like working nights. I got the job and

I really enjoyed that. I worked a lot with corpsmen.

From there I went to Guam and worked any place they needed me. I was the instructor for a while. And from there I went to Japan. At first I thought CDR Monahan was mad at me because she sent me to the CSR [Central Supply Room]. In those days the only people who went to the CSR were the people who couldn't make it any place else. They could wash the instruments and pack them. I felt that was a come down. But she said she had a special reason for sending me there and the reason was that a lot of the stuff was disappearing. And even in those days, there were drugs coming in through the CSR. The kids from the ships used to bring in their supplies to be cleaned up. So that's why she sent me there.

And then she sent me to the urology ward. It was urology and ENT. Of course, I took a terrible ribbing there. I don't know how familiar you are with Foley catheters, but with a name like Foley and working where I was working. . . They gave me a bad time there but I enjoyed it. It was a multi ward with GU and dermatology. The boys would bring VD back from the Philippines and all those other places. So I got to know a lot of people. It was a variety of jobs and the corpsmen were a riot. They were very protective of me.

From there I went to San Diego, my dream place. I was the chief nurse in ICU for a long time. Then I got promoted to lieutenant commander and they thought I should go into supervision. It broke my heart to leave ICU.

From there I went into supervision--medicine and TB. And from there I went to grad school at Columbia. I applied there because I thought they wouldn't take me. I got fooled. I guess I was smarter than I thought.

From there I went to Chelsea and I had an in-service program. They just starting continuing education and in-service so I was in charge of that. I was there from '66 to '68. I loved Chelsea and really loved Boston. If I ever had to live up north again, I think I'd like to live in Boston.

**How did you get orders to Vietnam?**

I went there from Chelsea.

**Did you volunteer?**

Yes. I had that on my dream sheet since I had been in San Diego.

**How did you hear about what was going on over there. Did you have nurse friends who were sending you back information?**

No. There weren't any nurses there at that time. When I was

at Guam, all of a sudden all the corpsmen would disappear, usually the night duty corpsmen. And they would go to a strange place. And we never knew where it was. In retrospect, it was probably Vietnam.

I told CAPT Burke, the Chief Nurse at San Diego that I wanted to go. But I had also put in for school. So she sat me down one day and said, "Miss Foley. Your time to go to school is now. It's not time to go to Vietnam." And then I went to school. She was right.

After that I put in for Vietnam and got Chelsea instead. Then I went to Vietnam from Chelsea. I had been selected for commander. I put on my stripe when I got there.

**What do you remember about the trip over there?**

That was a kick. Dottie Ryder was a Navy nurse and an old buddy of mine. I had a little bit of time before I went to Nam from spook school at Coronado. And we're getting ready to pack me up to take me up to Norton Air Force Base and my suitcase fell apart with all my worldly goods.

So I went back to Sears and bought a suitcase and here I had to pack my suitcase in the parking lot. We went up to Long Beach and stayed with Jody Jeanette overnight.

Bright and early in the morning, Dottie took me over to the airport. I was in my light blues, and we were supposed to leave early in the day. I sat there until about 6 or 7 o'clock at night when we finally took off. I was the only woman on the plane. I met two doctors. One was an orthopedic resident. I don't think this kid had ever seen the real world.

We landed in Okinawa first. We got to Danang and there was nobody to meet us. At that time, I was a lot younger so I had offers of all kinds of rides. I said, "You can't take me unless you take my two buddies."

Finally a truck came and picked us up. Being the gentlemen they were, they let me sit in the cab with the driver and they hopped in the back.

By the time we got to NSA in Danang, we were starving. It was after lunchtime and no one would give us anything to eat. So I went to the administrative officer and commented that I couldn't believe that there wasn't a sandwich or a piece of bread around. He was very nice and he opened up the mess hall and we had sandwiches and coffee. And that night we got hit.

**What was the date you arrived there?**

It was July '68. I was there until July of '69.

**So that night the enemy hit you.**

Well, there was a lot of stuff coming in. Everybody said, "Just crawl under your bed." We were living in Quonset huts with cement floors. Somebody had decided to seal them with some kind of red paint. When it had dried, it was brown. I got up and it was all over my PJs. I didn't know whether I had bled to death or something else had happened. I was covered with this dried paint. A supply officer eventually got some tile for us and it became a lot easier sliding under the beds.

**Didn't you have bunkers to take shelter in?**

The first crew had bunkers and they were awful and full of snakes. There were pythons as big as your arm. So that first crew found it safer to hide under their racks than to go out to the bunkers and take their chances with the snakes.

The preventive medicine unit out there used to keep two big pythons they named Bonnie and Clyde. They were in two cages just outside their hooch and they used to feed them rabbits and rats. I used to be terrified just walking by.

You know, it's interesting. Everyone thinks about Vietnam and they think about the guys being shot. But nobody ever seems to think of the fellows who were sick with dysentery and all the other parasitic diseases. And they were as sick as the surgical patients and the dermatology patients. These kids came in with rashes and cruddy feet. Nobody seems to pay any attention to them. They never did.

Those kids were so sick. Sometimes they couldn't retain any body fluids. They would be urinating and defecating and wouldn't have time to get to the heads. I was in charge of corpsmen staffing. These poor corpsmen used to clean them up and change their sheets. And there was never a nasty remark. I firmly believe that men are basically very modest. And how embarrassing that must have been for these young men to lose control of their bowels like that. I never thought those corpsmen and nurses who worked up on the medical ward ever got the credit they deserved.

**Do you know any folks from that era who may have worked in that department?**

I think Nadine Swoboda worked up there. She lives in Oceanside. And, I think, Edda Stapleton. I think she lives in Pennsylvania. Those are the names that I recall.

**I think you're right. When people think of that time, they don't think of the diseases--the malaria, the dysentery, and all the other things these poor people got.**

That's right. But we didn't have too much malaria because we

had to take those pills on Sunday. There was a great big bowl of anti-malaria pills right on the buffet as you walked into the mess hall, and you had to take those. We used to check on each other. "Did you take your pills?"

**Who was the CO of NSA at that time?**

Dick Lawrence was the CO when I first got there. And then Don Custis relieved him

**What do you remember about your own duty there at the hospital?**

I was the Assistant Chief Nurse and was responsible for the corpsmen on Nursing Service. We would have a whole hospital full of people and then we'd get a big hit. So the people who had to be moved out to the Philippines or Japan. . . The Air Force nurses were wonderful to us. They would come in and move them out. It was like relocating an entire patient population almost every other day. My job was to find out who was going and where they were going, and what beds were available. And then I'd plan the staffing according to that. Helen would do the nurses and I'd do the corpsmen. It would be nothing to empty out a ward overnight.

**These were people who were going back to the States?**

Hopefully. We could only do so much for them.

**You had some fairly sophisticated specialties there at NSA.**

Oh, yes we did. We had a medical research unit, too.

**I understand you had neurology and just about anything else. They could do just about anything at NSA that they could do anywhere else.**

Absolutely. But we were under fire most of the time. Our job was to patch them up so they could fly. We did procedures to keep them alive so that we could get them out.

**Were the flight nurses who were responsible for them while they were being evacuated Air Force nurses?**

Yes. They were Air Force nurses.

**Do you recall any unusual experiences you may have had at NSA that really stand out in your mind?**

There was always shelling going on around us but we never got hit. No, we did get hit once. One of my jobs at night when the alarm went off . . . I had to make sure that everybody was awake and underneath their racks.

Once we had a distinguished visitor, CAPT [Veronica] Bulshefski. She was then the Director of the Nurse Corps. The only

one who really knew her was Helen [Brooks]. Unfortunately, we thought she would be kind of stiff and fussy, and we were dreading her visit. But she was lovely. Helen and I had one-half of a Quonset hut. It was on the perimeter. The sailors used to say that they put us back there because we were the oldest ones. If the VC took one look at us, they'd turn on their heels and run back into the jungle.

So we fixed up a room back there. If we had a date, we'd invite them over. We had a stove so we could have pizzas and make some drinks. Well, that's where we put CAPT Bulshefski.

VADM [George] Davis [Surgeon General] and other VIPs from BUMED were there. I think the VC must have known they were there because they hit us hard that night. Finally I went in and told CAPT Bulshefski to get under her rack. About the third time I went in to tell her, she said, "Lacey, please tell me when I can come out. I'm staying under here all night. I'm more tired getting in and out of bed than I am staying under here."

**Any other thoughts about your service in Vietnam?**

I made some really wonderful friends. I'm going to San Diego in May to see Helen Brooks. We still keep in touch with the Navy Nurse Corps Association.

**When did you come home from Vietnam?**

In '69 and then went to Bethesda and stayed there about 4 or 5 years. Then I went to Philly. I loved it. I went as the assistant when Maxine Conder made rear admiral and then I made captain and she made admiral. So they decided that they would leave me there as Chief Nurse.

I went from Philly to JAX and I retired from there at the end of '84.

**What did you do after you retired?**

I'm enjoying life doing what I want when I want. I do a lot of volunteer work at my church. One time I was President of the Orlando chapter of the Navy Nurse Corps Association. We have quite a group down here, and I was president of that for two terms. Now I only do what I feel like doing.

**I want to thank you so much for spending time with me this afternoon.**