

Women in the military

*This Veterans Day is an important time to remember the nearly one million women veterans in America. **Chicken Soup for the Nurse's Soul** offers this story to honour those who serve our profession and our country so gallantly. For their service then, now, and forever, we thank all those who sustain and defend our freedom. Reprinted with the permission of the author, LeAnn Thiemann, co-author **Chicken Soup for the Nurse's Soul**.*

Women in the military

The first military women to arrive in Vietnam were nurses, in 1956. As the American presence in Southeast Asia grew, so too did the number of young women who served. In all, nearly eight thousand military women were there, along with thousands more who served in the civilian sector.

Eighty-three per cent of us were nurses, the rest held positions in special services, supply, air traffic control, cartography, the USO, American Red Cross, and many other jobs in support of our combat troops.

We were all fairly young when we volunteered to serve our country. And many of us were woefully naive in believing our recruiters' promises; mainly that we could be stationed anywhere in the world that we wanted, and that Vietnam was "strictly voluntary."

Still, when our orders arrived sending us to war, most of us believed in our hearts that we were needed, that what we were doing was important, and that it was our duty to go. We did our jobs, facing the perils of enemy fire, horrific heat and humidity, disease, insects, isolation, long work hours, and sleepless nights. Then, we managed to pull ourselves together, dab some perfume behind our ears, and do it all again the next day.

We learned a lot about ourselves. We discovered our strengths, and tried to survive our weaknesses. We were ordinary young women trying to function in the most extraordinary of circumstances; dealing in life and death, and seeking not just to survive, but to understand.

We did the best we could with who we were and what we had. And daily we collected our memories and stored them away someplace safe, out of our conscious minds where we thought, "I'll deal with this later."


And after a year, we came home, back to "The World." In one plane ride, we went from war to peace. In one year, we had gone from childhood to irrevocable adulthood. We knew we had changed, that our lives would never be the same, and that we could never explain any of it to the folks back home. We couldn't, and we didn't. For, as unacceptable as it was for the guys to talk about the war when they came home, no one wanted to acknowledge that young women had been there. Even as the Women's Movement was making its voice heard, the underlying message was clear: "nice girls wouldn't have gone to war."

So we came home quietly, went back to our homes, our families, our jobs, and never spoke about the war to anybody. Many of us quit nursing, and never knew why. Some of us had recurring nightmares, flashbacks, unexplained illnesses, depression, or abused drugs or alcohol. Many women applied themselves with a fury to school, attaining one degree after another, to work, rising to the top leadership positions in their companies, to their church, their social organizations, their families - anything to avoid the memories they had stored away "to think about later." The memories had created a deep impenetrable wound that needed to be healed.

In 1982, the initial healing ground was laid in the form of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial - The Wall. The women, just like men who had served, were drawn to it. The healing power of that sacred place

is evident to all who have been there. We could go to The Wall, and mourn, and cry, and reach out for comfort if we chose, and yet it was so easy to be invisible there. Women simply weren't recognized as veterans.

Then, on Veterans Day 1993, the Vietnam Women's Memorial is dedicated in Washington D.C. Thousands of women vets attend and we are overwhelmed. We lead the parade; the nurses, Red Cross workers, entertainers, women who worked in administration, logistics, and intelligence. The streets are lined with people applauding and crying. A vet sits high up in a tree yelling "Thank You! Thank You!" A man in a flight suit stands for over two hours at attention, saluting as the women pass by. People hand us flowers and hug us. One GI has a picture of his nurse taken "July 1964." He is trying to find her.

We find each other. We know, at last, that we are not alone; that we are not crazy or paranoid, but that we have a lot of work to do in order to heal. We talk to each other and find comfort as well as pain in our words and our tears. Words and tears that, now, finally we share. Now, after so many years, the process has finally begun, and we hold each other close, and say "Welcome Home!" 

Janis Nark, Lt. Col., U.S.A.R. (Ret.)

To learn more about this book or her speaking presentations, see the author's website at www.LeAnnThiemann.com, or call her toll-free at 1-877-THIEMAN.

Memoriam - Marg Smith

In the spring, we lost one of our own, Margaret (Marg) Smith. Marg was a Halifax, Nova Scotia Children's Hospital graduate. Her career, however, was in emergency nursing. She worked as an emergency nurse in Saskatchewan and Alberta. She was president of SENG (Saskatchewan Emergency Nurses Group) and was a member of the NENA Board of Directors. She made valuable contributions to the improvement of emergency nursing. For example, Marg believed that continuing education was important for all emergency nurses and to that end she was instrumental in bringing TNCC to Saskatchewan. She was proud to be an emergency nurse and was a tireless promoter of the specialty of emergency nursing.

In Marg's memory, NENA Board of Directors has established the Margaret Smith Bursary for Pediatric Emergency Nursing. This \$300.00 bursary will be awarded at each spring AGM to a nurse who advances pediatric emergency nursing. Please use the current bursary guidelines and application process to apply.