Maureen Brinkman
Army Nurse
Private E-3
Salt Lake City, Utah
“**Turning Point”**

Interviewer
Give us your full name.

Maureen Brinkman
Maureen Brinkman.

Interviewer
And where are you from, originally?

Maureen Brinkman
The east coast, sort of all up and down the east coast. I was born in Pennsylvania.

Interviewer
What's your birth date, would you mind telling us?

Maureen Brinkman
No. July 9th, 1946. I was one of the first of the baby boomers.

Interviewer
And tell us about your life before you went into the military?

Maureen Brinkman
Well, my dad was in real estate, my mom was a homemaker and that's why we traveled so much, because of his real estate. And I had four younger sisters; I'm the oldest of five girls. I wanted to be a doctor since I can remember and when I got to college, I flunked chemistry and calculus and so I switched to nursing and boy, was it a good thing I did because I like nursing a whole lot better. I wasn't meant to be a doctor, it turned out. Nursing was a good field for me.

Interviewer
And where did you go to college?

Maureen Brinkman
Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. That's where I met my husband.

Interviewer
How did you end up in the military?

Maureen Brinkman
That's easy. After my sophomore year I ran out of all the money I had saved to go the college with and even working down the shores in the summer I couldn't make enough money. So one of the nursing instructors recommended that I speak to the Army recruiter and she wrote me a personal check for $500 so I could register for the second term of my sophomore year and then she told me if I got in the Army then I could pay her back and also have the rest of my education paid for. So I joined the Army Student Nurse Program, which made me an obligated volunteer. I had to give them three years back for the last two years of my college education that they paid for and I was able to pay her back and finish my education.

Interviewer
And what year did you graduate?

Maureen Brinkman
1968.

Interviewer
You joined the Army for these reasons, but obviously you're hearing what's going on in Southeast Asia. What were you aware of and what were your thoughts at that time?

Maureen Brinkman
You know, there was a lot going on at that time, the Beatles came to Pittsburgh while I was there, yeah, there were already beginnings of the protests against Vietnam, but I was so focused on graduating. I still had to work while I was in school, and I was helping my sister who was in Spain at a time on a student year abroad, I was helping her financially.
And so I was pretty focused on my education and I really didn't pay much attention to the Beatles or Southeast Asia or much of anything else. The civil rights movement was a big deal then and a lot of my friends were participating in that, but I just sort of stayed focused on getting my education.
Interviewer
The war in Vietnam was going on?
Maureen Brinkman
I was aware of it but I just didn't think it had much to do with me. Even though I had signed up for that Army scholarship program I was pretty naïve, like I said, and didn't really catch on till later.
Interviewer
When did you go into the Army?
Maureen Brinkman
They wouldn't take you until after you'd passed your boards, and in those days there were no computers so you took your boards paper and pencil, six hours sit somewhere, and find out about three or four months later.
So I took my boards, I went home with my husband after I graduated – we weren't married then but I went to Minnesota with him – took my boards in Minnesota and then after I graduated and was notified in August that I had passed my boards, and Uncle Sam said you can report for basic training in September to Fort Sam Houston, Texas.
Interviewer
So you went to Texas for basic training?
Maureen Brinkman
All of the medical corps do basic training at Fort Sam Houston.
I was a Private E-3 during the two years that I was a student, and they paid me $98 a month, which was the salary for privates in those days and then as soon as I graduated I became a second lieutenant. So all of us down there, all of the nurses down there at that time we were all pretty much second lieutenants.
Interviewer
So you get into Army and do you know you're going to Vietnam then?
Maureen Brinkman
No, of course not.
Interviewer
How did all that unfold?
Maureen Brinkman
It was very interesting; there were a lot of things I had not thought about. So I get to basic training and one of the first big crises faced was weapons training. And they said officers have to be trained in small arms because you have to be able to protect the people who are assigned to you. And I said, "Well I don't think I want to shoot a gun and I'm not sure I could kill anybody." And they said, "Lady, it's a little late to decide that now."
So I was crying in the club one night and Captain Jimmy Walker, who was our senior during our basic training, came over to me and he said, "I know you're too young to believe this now, but life is made up of compromises and this is the first significant compromise you need to make; because if you don't take weapons training they're going to court-martial you because you took all this money from Uncle Sam, and you have to make good on the agreement you made."
And the problem was, it wasn't even a bull's-eye. Maybe I could've convinced myself to shoot at a bull's-eye just to be a good marksman. But it was shaped like a human and it really bugged me. He said, "Tomorrow, when we walk out to the range, you sidestep into that latrine which is the last building on the left before we get to the firing range, and then when we come on back you sidestep back in line and you do that for five days in a row, and nobody knows you didn't shoot at that thing and we're all happy, right?"
So that's what I did. I sat in the latrine while the rest of them fired and that's how I got through basic training. That was the first thing. Then, we finished basic training and another nurse recruiter comes along and says, "We have these military occupational specialties which are very important, and if we can get volunteers to take this extra training we'll give you post-graduate training in a specialty area of nursing." And it was things like nurse anesthetist, OB/GYN, operating room nursing. But I said, "Yeah, but I bet you I have to put in more time, more than my three years I'm already committed to," and they said, "No, no, this time will be taken off of the three years you owe and you won't have to give back any more time." I said, "Well that sounds good to me, I think I'll be an OR nurse," so I went to four months of post-graduate OR training and I got to stay at Fort Sam Houston, Texas which was really a good assignment.

What I didn't know was that Critical Military Occupational Specialties means as soon as you graduate you can get orders for Vietnam because they didn't have enough OR nurses in Vietnam and that's what happened. As soon as I graduated I got orders for Vietnam.

Interviewer

And you're married at this time?

Maureen Brinkman

Actually, no. We were engaged and that was the next thing. They said, “You have to go see the Judge Advocate General's office and make out a will, 'cause you're going to go to Vietnam and you have to have a will.” And the JAG said, “Your mother is your next of kin,” and I said, "I don't think so." And so I called Paul on the phone and cried for half an hour and said, "I think we need to move up the wedding date," and that's what we did. So we got married on April 26th. And on May 19th I went to Vietnam.

Interviewer

So you had how many days together?

Maureen Brinkman

A month, almost a month. Three weeks. But I wanted him to be my next of kin.

Interviewer

And what year was this?

Maureen Brinkman

1969.

Interviewer

And are you becoming more aware of what's going on in Vietnam?

Maureen Brinkman

Oh, lots more aware. Now I suddenly want to know a lot more about Vietnam, sure.

Interviewer

What are you hearing and what are you thinking?

Maureen Brinkman

I still felt good about having joined the military, and I still was laboring under the impression that my father had given me; he was a World War II vet and I guess I naively just couldn't believe that our government wasn't right, and that they would lie to us about anything.

So I thought the protesters had a right to their opinions, but I pretty much didn't believe it. I really thought they were wrong and maybe that was what I needed to think under the circumstances.

Maureen Brinkman

There were two of the other gals that were in my OR graduating class, we all got orders together. One was going to Thailand and three of us were going to Vietnam, and we all flew out of Letterman together. We all had orders out of Letterman in San Francisco—well it's Travis Air Force Base—and loaded on to one of the those big birds. We were the only women, the rest of them were men.

Interviewer

What was going on in the airplane when you were flying, three women and all these men?

Maureen Brinkman

Nobody really cared much about that, we all hung out together and I think the guys were all so personally concerned about themselves and what was going to happen to them. But it was just a long trip, 18 hours in an airplane. Nobody had any idea. And you are just tired and exhausted and all you want to do is to have the door open and get off of this thing.

Interviewer

So where did your plane land?

Maureen Brinkman

We went to Hawaii and the Philippines before we went to Bien Hoa Air Base.

Interviewer

Do you remember walking out of that plane and seeing the country for the first time?

Maureen Brinkman

I do. The air base was being shelled at the time we landed and I remember when that heat hit us, I couldn't believe it. It was like a wall smashing into me. I just thought, goll, I've never been so warm. That was the first thing. And then as we went off the plane they gave each of us a goody bag from the Red Cross and it had a toothbrush and toothpaste and some good stuff like that, but it also had a bunch of packs of cigarettes and matches in it and I didn't smoke so I gave them all away. I think it's kind of funny that they were actually encouraging cigarette smoking but since I didn't smoke I didn't care.

Interviewer
You said the base was under fire?
Maureen Brinkman
Actually where we landed, that airplane wasn't under fire, but then they put us on a bus and took us to the place where we would get our in-country assignments and the bus went through an area that was being fired upon while we were traveling there.
Interviewer
What were you thinking at that moment?
Maureen Brinkman
I was thinking this is a lot more serious than I ever thought it would be. Yeah, it was pretty scary. And the first night they had us sleep in these old trailers and they didn't have any windows on them and it was raining and rain was coming in and there were little lizards called chinchucks all over the place. One of them plopped down on me and woke me up out of a dead sleep and I was exhausted from that plane trip. So that whole first day I was pretty wiped out.
Interviewer
When did you get your first job assignment?
Maureen Brinkman
So then that next morning we were all together, my friends and I, in a room, and they had a list of the places where they needed OR nurses and one of my friends jumped right up, Anigan, and she volunteered for the place that was closest to the DMZ. I don't know why, but that's what she wanted so that took one of the places away. And then I don't remember what happened with the other two, whether I volunteered or the other gal did, but anyway, I ended up at Qui Nhon which was on the coast, about midway between Saigon and the DMZ. And then I got on a great big C-130 cargo ship and they give you earplugs because it's so noisy, but they did let me sit up front with the pilot and the co-pilot so I was pretty comfortable and flew from Bien Hoa up to Qui Nhon.
Interviewer
And what did you see there when you got off the plane?
Maureen Brinkman
Well, it was a pretty organized place. You could see the red crosses on the tops of the buildings from the air and I could tell that it looked pretty organized and also pretty set. Not like tents or Quonset huts. There were a few Quonset huts though, Officers' Club, and some things like that. But I could tell that it was a pretty secure area, that there was a perimeter that was obvious, and fences around it, and guards in the towers and that kind of thing. So I was just relieved to be there.
Interviewer
So what happened? Tell us about the job? Tell us about your first day?
Maureen Brinkman
Well, my first day was also pretty rough but after that things got a whole lot better. Well the women's officers' quarters were separate and pretty self-contained, it was a quadrangle with an open space in the middle for recreation where you could put a chair and sit out on the grass. It was decorated with different colors of shell casings that they had used to make the perimeter out of. So there were orange and purple and green shell casings that kind of made this little fence. That was pretty interesting. But the room was nice and I was assigned to a roommate and she seemed nice and kind of helped me. She'd been there for quite a while; in fact, she left just about a month after I got there and I got another roommate. But Patty kind of told me how things were going. She was one of the triage nurses, she didn't work in the operating room but she worked out in triage. And so she helped me to get settled. But my first day in the operating room there was a push which meant that most of the operating rooms were busy. And we had five OR's and if things were hectic, all five of them were being used. I got assigned to an orthopedic room and they brought in a traumatic amputation that was almost complete but not quite. And the soldier still had his fatigues on and his boots. And while anesthesia was putting him to sleep, the surgeon yelled at me for a razor. And I'm looking all over and there's a little cupboard so I open the drawer and there was a straight razor in there, and I'd never even seen a straight razor before, but there were blades next to it. So I picked up the razor and the blade but had no idea how to load it. And the surgeon grabbed it out of my hand, loaded the straight razor, sliced off the last little bit that was holding that leg in place and handed me the leg with the boot and everything on it. And I just took that leg and sat down on the floor with it because I didn't know what to do. I'd seen lots of surgery, both as a student and in my extra training that the Army gave me, but I'd never really held a leg like that with its shoe still on it, its boot and everything on it. And Sergeant Short who was the sergeant came in and he said, "Come with me." And so I got up and followed this sergeant out and he gave me a plastic bag and we put the foot in it and he kind of told me what I should do and he said, "Get back in there now and get to work." And then as the door was closing I heard him say to one of the other guys, "They're going to take that one out in a straight jacket." And that was the best thing he could've done because I said, "The heck they will, by golly. If everybody else

can do this, I can do that too." And I made up my mind I was gonna make it. And that was pretty much the end of my troubles. After that it was pretty smooth going.

Interviewer

You said you started to settle into a routine?

Maureen Brinkman

We worked 12-hour shifts, seven days a week. So you were either on seven to seven during the day or seven to seven at night. And you were usually too busy to think about anything. You just kind of did your job every day.

Interviewer

And did you say there were surges?

Maureen Brinkman

We called them pushes. Yeah. That would be when the enemy had made an offensive near us and then we would get a lot of casualties. Otherwise, we actually had surgeons who scheduled cases so we had some scheduled cases during the day; things that needed to be done, wounds that needed to be debrided or cleaned out, old wounds. A lot of foot problems that we would take care of. And a lot of circumcisions, actually, because the guys couldn't keep clean out in the boonies and so usually every Friday we did circumcisions. But those cases always got bumped if we had too many traumatic cases waiting. So whenever there were cases in triage they always got precedent and we did them first. So if we only had two or three rooms going then we could go ahead with the regular schedule to try to keep the five rooms busy wherever we needed to.

Interviewer

What were these things that changed your mind about the war and the government?

Maureen Brinkman

Well, I guess through what I heard and a little bit of what I read, I began to suspect that it wasn't what we were seeing on TV every night or what we were reading in the newspapers. I was made aware of a program through an MACV advisor that I met about a Chieu Hoi Program where they tried to get the Vietnamese in the villages to support the Americans and the South Vietnamese. And we pretty much learned that they'd Chieu Hoi one way and then they'd Chieu Hoi the other way and that the poor villagers were caught in the middle and they had to do whichever side was controlling the land at any time told them to do, and so that was sort of one of the clues that gave me an idea that what we were being told wasn't accurate.

Maureen Brinkman

We did have some visits from bigwigs once in a while that would come through and give purple hearts to the guys that were out on the wards and tell everybody we were doing a great job. And I got skeptical about that too because they were all dressed so nicely, it was a little like seeing MacArthur on TV from World War II. I just thought well you're getting hot showers every day and you get to dress up and you've got six or eight people waiting on you and helping you out. And somehow I just thought I don't think you really know what's going on out here.

Interviewer

Why is that? What's really going on?

Maureen Brinkman

Just that young men, younger than me, were dying in large numbers and it wasn't clear what for. There wasn't any front line, there wasn't any winning or losing, it was just back and forth and back and forth, and it just kept going on and on.

Interviewer

Did you have conversations with our friends, the people you were working with?

Maureen Brinkman

Yeah. Well, it's an interesting thing. You have to remember that it's a different group in the operating room. A lot of our techs, the scrub techs who were highly skilled and they had to be the best of the best, they took all the technicians from the military and pretty much the best ones were assigned to the operating room because of the critical nature of the job. So they were smart. A lot of them had college degrees. But if they were conscientious objectors, then this was a job they could do and still meet their military requirement as opposed to staying Stateside and working in a nursing home or something. So at least two and maybe three of our scrub techs in the operating room were conscientious objectors. And I and the other officers tried to protect them a little because one of the things the military did to them was have them pull extra duty. So besides working all day or all night in the OR, then they might have to go pull fire duty which was their regular assignment as far as the military was concerned. But they knew they couldn't fall asleep while they were up on the tower doing fire watch or they could be court-martialed. But they had already worked 24 or 26 hours straight and we knew they couldn't go up there and stay away that long, so we tried really hard to protect them.

Interviewer

How would you help them?

Maureen Brinkman
Well, we would try to get their assignment changed or have them pull their duty another day or switch with somebody else. Whenever we could we tried to finagle that.

Interviewer
The patients were brought to you and you would work furiously on them?

Maureen Brinkman
We'd actually go get them. They were over in triage and then we got what were called buck slips, and the captain who was in charge of the five operating rooms and the OR supervisor would decide which patients would go in which room, how long it would take to finish in room three, how long this patient would take and whether that surgeon could be tied up for that length on time. Or if we needed, instead of a general surgeon, an orthopod – when would the next orthopedic doctor be free – that kind of thing. And so we'd get this stack of buck slips and then the captain that was the OR supervisor would decide which room would go in and we had a plastic bag on the door of each room and the buck slips were put in the door and then behind it would go the next one. So that's how we knew. So when I'd finish cleaning up a room from the previous patient, I would take out the buck slip, find out the name or the type of injury my next patient had, and then I'd go over to triage and get that patient onto a dolly, if he wasn't already on one, and roll him back over into the operating room. Anesthesia would be changing over their set up and getting ready to put that patient to sleep. And that just went on until all of the buck slips were gone.

Interviewer
How were you changing during this time?

Maureen Brinkman
Well, I'm getting more skilled for one thing, more skilled as a nurse and probably more skilled at decision making because Captain Kaiser, who was the head nurse when I got there, left after I'd been there about eight months. And even though I wasn't the most experienced nurse, I had a lady who became my roommate, Helen, who had much more surgical experience than I did. She had worked for a famous heart surgeon in Phoenix and she taught all of us lots of stuff. But I outranked her because I went to college so I became the head nurse. But Helen was so unselfish with her sharing of knowledge and she didn't care that I was head nurse; she just helped me as much as she could. But then I made her assignments and I became the person who decided who would go in what room and that took all of my skill to do all of that every day and keep on doing it. So I wasn't thinking much, I was mostly just doing.

Interviewer
Are you hearing from your husband?

Maureen Brinkman
Oh, yeah, every day. We would both write to each other pretty much every day and then they had little reel-to-reel tape decks and we would each tape to each other and then plop those in the mail and send those back and forth and then play the tapes back. And then we'd tape over them and send the next one back. And so I got at least one or two tapes a week and I usually got five or six letters a week and I think same for him.

Interviewer
What would you tell him?

Maureen Brinkman
I pretty much told him about how my days had gone since I'd talked to him last or wrote to him last and I shared pretty much everything with him. I think it was maybe one of the things that helped me to adjust better when I got home than most of the other Vietnam veterans because many of them felt they couldn't talk to anybody and couldn't share both the good and bad things that had happened to them. But my husband came over to see me at Christmas, the docs were real nice to allow him to look through the windows in the operating room and see what was going on. He saw my daily routine and knew where I lived and what it looked like, and I don't think I kept anything back from him. I pretty much used him as a sounding board and told him everything.

Interviewer
He was a civilian?

Maureen Brinkman
He was a civilian.

Interviewer
He gets to Vietnam during the war?

Maureen Brinkman
Well, I guess the deal was since it wasn't a declared war, it was an undeclared war, the government couldn't control civilians' ability to apply for a visa – he already had a passport – and the South Vietnamese government gave him a visa and so he just got on a plane and landed in Saigon. Of course he had no one to help him, he had to find his own way up to Qui Nhon but he was resourceful and managed that.

Interviewer
Did this cause any problems having your husband visit?
Maureen Brinkman
Well, I went to my chief nurse as soon as I knew he was coming and my roommate had offered to move out and move in with somebody else who didn't have a roommate so that he could stay with me. But the chief nurse was absolutely adamant that there could be no men in the women's officers' quarters. So she said no, he couldn't stay with me. So I was in the Quonset hut that week, called an officer's club, this little skinny place and I was sitting there kind of crying in my Coke and one of the Air Force guys came up and said, "What's the matter with you, little lady?" And I said, "Oh, my husband's coming in a week and they won't let him stay with me." And he said, "Don't worry about that. We got a VIP room down at the end of the runway and you two can stay down there for a week." So he showed me this VIP room which was nothing more than a room with a bed, one lamp, and one little table in it and it was on the perimeter, the barbed wire was like three feet outside the door of this little room but I didn't care, it was a place where we could stay together and so that's where we stayed for a week.
Interviewer
What year was that?
Maureen Brinkman
That was Christmas of '69, right before New Year.
Interviewer
What was the like seeing your husband and then having to say good-bye?
Maureen Brinkman
Well, in January I had leave. Because of all the time that I had basic training and my OR training I had saved up enough to take leave, not just R&R. Most of the veterans only got to take R&R, but I had enough time saved up to take leave. So he and I flew to Bangkok together and I my friend that got assigned to Bangkok, we stayed with her. She was living in a beautiful home and had a full-time maid and a cook. So we had the lap of luxury for that one week in Thailand together. And then he flew directly back to Minnesota and I flew back in-country. So that good-bye wasn't nearly as bad as a few months later when we went to R&R in Hawaii. And then that was the hardest thing I ever did was get back on that plane in Hawaii and go back to Vietnam because I only had about eight weeks left in-country and something happens to you when you start to get short. Probably it wasn't so bad for me as it was for the boonie rats, the guys that were actually fighting out there, but the shorter you get, the more scared you get. The one with your magic number on it is going to come in, that somehow you aren't going to make it out of here. And so I was really afraid that I wouldn't see him again when I left Hawaii.
Interviewer
Were there nurses that were casualties?
Maureen Brinkman
Oh, yes. Lynda Van Devanter wrote a book. It's called "Home Before Morning" and she had been injured in Vietnam. A few. Not many. My assignment in Qui Nhon, we were only shelled once while I was there. Some VC broke through the perimeter with satchel charges but that was the only time I ever had to spend the night in a bunker or wearing a flak jacket and a helmet, was one time. But I visited my friend Sue up in Chu Lai. And from the time I landed to visit her until the time I left, that operating room was shelled the entire time. I said, "How can you stand this?" You couldn't sleep. The whole time you were operating the shells were going off. She said, "Awe, you get used to it." She slept right through it but she had a lot of practice. I was so glad to leave there and thought how lucky I was to be in Qui Nhon.
Interviewer
Tell everybody what short means. I don't think people use it anymore.
Maureen Brinkman
Okay. So that just means that you're getting closer to your DEROS which is Date Effective Rotation from Overseas. And your DEROS date is your lifeblood because that's when you get out of being in-country. And the shorter you get is the shorter that amount of time. And they had all these jokes like, "I'm so short I can't see over the top of the table anymore," and all these little things that meant just how short are you. And people would say that to you, "How short are you, Captain Brinkman?" That kind of thing.
Interviewer
Were there any recreational things you did? USO shows or anything like that?
Maureen Brinkman
I did. I got to see the New Christy Minstrels; they came and put on a show for us once. I think that was the only USO show that I ever got to see. But interestingly, about six or eight months after I'd been there, things began to slow down. The '68 Tet Offensive was the really bad one and in '69 we had a big push but it wasn't as bad as '68. And then after that, there was kind of a lull and that's what we called them, "lulls." And it was really awful because

you got so bored and people started to get short-tempered and angry with each other because you weren't busy enough. But we had two opportunities, there was a leprosaria not far from Qui Nhon that had been there from the days when the French were still running the country and it was run by an order of French nuns. And then occasionally the Navy would offer MEDCAPs where doctors and nurses who weren't busy could go out on a Navy cruiser and go to a fishing village that hadn't had any medical attention or might need some medical care. And so we volunteered to do those things on our one day a week when we were off just to have something to do to keep us busy.

Interviewer

So you did the MEDCAP?

Maureen Brinkman

Yeah, I did one Navy MEDCAP and I went to the leprosaria one time. Otherwise, because I had become head nurse I wasn't usually off as much as some of the others were.

Interviewer

If you're head nurse you're dealing with other people's problems?

Maureen Brinkman

Well, you're having to write up performance reviews, you have to keep the books, order supplies and equipment, so you have a few more things to do than just work in the operating room.

Interviewer

And how did you feel about seeing all the soldiers?

Maureen Brinkman

Now it's hard for me to admit it, some of the other nurses were much more sensitive to that than I was. And I think it was after that first event that I mentioned to you, that I became real kind of steel hearted because I didn't think I could make it through if I allowed myself too much sensitivity to the guys. So they really were cases to me, not people. Now that doesn't mean I didn't treat them like humans. They taught us in the OR classes I took that just before anesthesia really put them to sleep, the last thing we had to do was tell them that "I will see you when you wake up," so that they went to sleep believing they would wake up. So I never moved from the head of the table when anesthesia was sleeping one of the wounded including the Vietnamese and the Viet Cong wounded. I made sure I was right there, had my hand on their shoulder and that if they were Americans the last thing I said is, "I'll see you when you wake up in the recovery room, soldier," so that they would know they were going to wake up even if the odds didn't look good. But aside from that, I never did some of the things that the others did like write to their families when they passed away or tell them that I had been with their loved one and that they were doing okay and had gone to Japan or Hawaii or wherever they'd been medevaced to. I never did any of that. I pretty much just did my job and I think that was for my own sense of security and sanity.

Interviewer

Do you still have the cassettes of your conversations to your husband?

Maureen Brinkman

You know, I don't know. I have a couple of cassettes, those old reel-to-reel cassettes.

Interviewer

That would be a great addition to your story.

Maureen Brinkman

I can look and see. I know I have the letters, I have a whole box of letters and I always thought when I retired – which I just did recently – that I would go through those letters and try to edit them in some way and make them into something. They're in a box down in the basement and I've never looked at them since.

Interviewer

Tell us about the villages and the classic problems they had. What did you think of the civilians?

Maureen Brinkman

Well, we had one civilian who worked in the operating room with us the whole time I was there. We called her mama-san, she said her name was Madam Y – I don't know what her real name was but I have pictures of her, and she was a gem. She was probably the only Vietnamese that I talked to on a regular basis, but I talked to her every day and I loved her and I felt like she loved me. We were really close, but she was that way with a lot of the staff, the guys and the nurses. And I went to her home once in downtown Qui Nhon, she invited us over there. We weren't supposed to eat off the economy and we weren't supposed to go downtown, but I felt that it would be a disservice to her if I didn't accept her offer at least once. So I and two of the others hitched a ride on a deuce and a half into town and went to have dinner with her one night at her house and she fixed us chicken and Vietnamese food. But it was an honor for her, I think, for her status in her community to have us come and visit her. But otherwise I only went out into the countryside once, the same MACV advisor that I mentioned, took me out in a jeep. I have a picture of a bridge that we went across on the way over and on the way back the bridge had been

blown up. But that's when my husband said, "Never mind going out into the countryside anymore. You just stay put where you are." And that was the last time I went out into the countryside. But the fishing villages that we went to on the MEDCAP were surprisingly in good shape and I could tell those people were healthier than the average Vietnamese that I was seeing either in the operating room wounded or Vietnamese civilians like the mama-sans that cleaned our rooms and worked around the compound. I think because they had ready access to fish all the time and didn't have to buy it. I don't know, they just looked happier and healthier than the Vietnamese that were on the main land who were caught up in the war, of course.

Interviewer

What was it like to have to treat them?

Maureen Brinkman

Again, I sort of steeled myself about that. I harbored no ill will toward them, I know that. Some of the other nurses had a much more difficult time with that but they were more, as I said, more personally involved in the patients they were caring for. I had a Viet Cong, in fact, spit on me once when I was standing there right by the head waiting for him to fall asleep. And I said something to him and I think my tone of voice and my expression should've been one of kindness, but he spit at me. And of course we were exposed to a lot of tuberculosis and that's your first thought, "Oh, wow, here we go." But it didn't matter. I didn't move and I didn't do anything until after he was asleep and then I got him ready for surgery same as always. But I had heard a story that when he woke up he did the same thing to one of the nurses in the recovery room and she slapped him across the face and I had heard that story. I don't know if that's true or not. But I just put myself in his place and thought, gee, I've just been wounded by the enemy and now I'm in an enemy hospital where nobody speaks my language and I don't speak their language and they're going to put me to sleep and do something to me. And all I could think is well I'd be scared too. Now I don't think I'd ever spit on anybody, but his arms were strapped down and he probably felt like that was the only thing he could do to express his contempt for us.

Interviewer

You got a medal, what was your medal?

Maureen Brinkman

I got the Army Commendation Medal.

Interviewer

Was it for anything specific?

Maureen Brinkman

I think it was for that Tet Offensive of February of 1970. I worked 40 hours around the clock in three days with very little sleep and ran that operating room. And everybody else got a few hours of sleep, most of them slept on the floor for three or four hours, but the OR supervisor was on R&R and I was the head nurse so I pretty much ran the operating room for that week and I think because of the push and the number of casualties that came through the OR, I think that was why they recommended me for that medal. I didn't know they'd even recommended me for it. I got to my next assignment in New Jersey after I came back stateside and was called into commander's office and he told me I'd gotten a medal and he was going to be presenting it to me.

Interviewer

You said you had two friends that refused their medals. Tell me about that.

Maureen Brinkman

Well both of them were diploma nurses. So they hadn't gone to college either so they were still lieutenants and I had already made captain. And they then only needed to do two years of service to the military. I think maybe they had even been volunteers, I'm not sure, but they would've volunteered for two years. So probably shortly after they got back from Vietnam they would've been discharged. So they probably got back and either part of their discharge or as part of being assigned to another hospital pending their discharge they would've been told that they had gotten medals too. I don't even know if it was the same medal or different medals. I just know that Nancy and Eileen both told me that they refused their medals because they were so against the war in Vietnam by that time.

Interviewer

What did you think of the average soldier?

Maureen Brinkman

Well, I thought there were a lot of brave guys. I thought they were brave to just do what they were being told to do whether they believed in it or not. And a lot of them did believe in it, but a lot of them didn't too. But they all did their job because their brothers were more important to them than any government.

Interviewer

You say brothers, you mean their fellow soldiers?

Maureen Brinkman

Yes, their fellow soldiers. We always had soldiers coming to the door of the operating room asking about one of

their friends that might have been inside. In fact, we had one fellow that was badly, badly wounded after stepping on a Bouncing Betty, one of those things you step on and then it bounces up. And so it pretty much wipes out most of your innards and your legs. We put out a call on the radio that we needed blood because we were pumping blood. We had four blood pumps going simultaneously and we couldn't stop the bleeding on this guy. So we put a notice out on the radio that we needed blood donors, O-positive because we needed universal donors because we knew we didn't have time to type and cross match for him, we just had to get it in. So we needed blood type O and I looked out the operating room door on one of my runs to get more blood and the guys were just lined up down the runway waiting to donate blood for that fellow, and – oh, that stopped me cold. I just thought those guys have come in from all over, wherever they heard that message just to donate blood for somebody who needed it. It was very moving.

Interviewer

You were there were a full year?

Maureen Brinkman

I got a one-day drop. I was there for 364 days but I tell ya, I'd take that drop in a heartbeat. That one day was really important to me. To even get one day off was a big deal.

Interviewer

How did you leave Vietnam?

Maureen Brinkman

I was scheduled to go down to the airfield where they put you on a plane to take you to Saigon and then you get orders from Saigon to wherever else you're going. And I missed the plane. I overslept. I don't know how that happened, I think I was just so exhausted. So I woke up about 8:00 and I think the plane left at 7:10 or something like that. So I ran down there and of course I had missed it. But once again, somebody came to my rescue, there was a LOH pilot, which is a Light Observation Helicopter, it was a real tiny little plane, like a glass bubble. It had glass underneath, it glass around it on both sides. And he said, "Well I'll drive you down to Saigon." And I said, "You will?" He said, "Sure, jump in." And so I got ride on an LOH, I never would've got in that kind of helicopter. We drove out along the water and we saw – I can't tell the difference between a dolphin or a porpoise, but just jumping and frolicking in this crystal clear beautiful water, white sandy beaches and I had this wonderful ride down to Saigon in that LOH helicopter. So when I got there I got my orders and then they just had you sleep in this room that had nothing but a bed, it was just a cell and a bed and said somebody would bang on your door about 20 minutes before you were due to leave and let you know, and that's what happened. Somebody banged on my door and I got on that freedom bird and went home.

Interviewer

Where did you land?

Maureen Brinkman

I landed in Seattle, at Seattle Tacoma. They have a military base there from Fort Lewis, Washington, next to the Sea-Tac Airport. And then we got off the plane and they made us take off our uniforms in the ladies' room, or the men's room, I suppose. They said if you're going to be flying home civilian, we want you to go in that restroom and change your clothes. We don't care what you put on, but you can't fly in uniform because by that time the protesters were pretty much unhappy about seeing anybody in uniform at any of the major airports and so they didn't want us going as military, they wanted us to look like civilians.

Interviewer

How did that make you feel?

Maureen Brinkman

It made me feel weird. Kind of dumb. The whole thing was dumb. Not to mention the fact that I threw my fatigues in the trashcan because I wasn't gonna fold up those dirty fatigues and my combat boots and put them in with my nice, clean luggage, so I threw them in the trashcan. But when I went to put them in the trashcan, it was full. Everybody else had done the same thing. That trashcan was just full of fatigues and combat boots. It was weird.

Interviewer

So when did you see your husband?

Maureen Brinkman

When I got off the plane in Minneapolis, St. Paul, he was waiting for me. He had to drive in the middle of the night because I got in early in the morning. I called him from Seattle and said this is what plane I'm on and this is when I'll arrive.

Interviewer

What happened?

Maureen Brinkman

It was wonderful. And then he went with me to my next assignment because I had three years. I still had almost a

year and a half of military service to do so I got assigned to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey and he went with me.

Interviewer

You were 23 years old when you served. Talk about the soldiers and how young they were and how they communicated with you?

Maureen Brinkman

Most of them, when I would see them, because they had been wounded, most of them were pretty scared, didn't know what was going on. And the other thing that really was a problem was the operating room – when I first got there, there was no air conditioning and after I'd been there about six months they actually put air conditioning in the operating room. So the guys would come through the door and they were just freezing. They had not been that cold for months and months and months. And then they're wounded and probably in shock beside. So all we could do was try to keep them warm, talk to them nicely, try to keep them calmed down so that they would have a successful surgery. And most of the interaction between the soldiers and the nurses would occur after they woke up in the recovery room and then in whatever ward they were assigned to. Most of them were severely enough injured that they pretty quickly was in two to three days if they were well enough, would be evaced out to either Japan or Hawaii or the Philippines. So I really had very little interaction with them. Once in a while one of them would just get right to me and then I would go see that one in the recovery room just to see how they were doing and say hello. But I bet I didn't do that more than once a month, probably.

Interviewer

What would get to you about a particular GI?

Maureen Brinkman

I don't know, something that he would say to me. Like one of them said, "I must have died and gone to heaven because you've got to be an angel," and I thought, oh, come on, I'm far from an angel. But that's the kind of hokey things the guys would say. Yeah, it just was a measure of where they'd been and what they'd been missing all that time.

Interviewer

You spoke on the phone about your transition regarding the war. And you said your husband was anti-war before you went in or did you both transition to this place together?

Maureen Brinkman

I don't want to put words in his mouth and so I don't want to say that he was anti-war, but he was more perceptive than I was and certainly felt or appeared to agree with those who felt that the war in Vietnam was not a fair and just war, that we weren't going to be accomplishing anything. So, yeah, I think he was opposed to the war already, right away, when we were engaged, before we were even married. But if I came around to that point of view, I didn't do that for many years afterwards. And I think when the probably happened was when my son was in high school in the '80s and began asking me questions about the Vietnam War which I think he was studying in high school. And that's where I think I finally admitted to myself that it hadn't been a fair and just war and that a lot of guys whose names are on the wall – and women – had lost their lives for not really any good purpose.

Interviewer

Do you remember that day in 1975, the end of April when we pull out of Vietnam?

Maureen Brinkman

I do. In fact, the photo albums that I brought have a letter from the Holy Family Hospital in downtown Qui Nhon which was a hospital and orphanage run by Australian volunteers that we also visited occasionally and helped out. And after I got back I continued to send them supplies and equipment that I knew they needed from '70 when I got back until they closed the doors in '75. And in that letter he talks about having – there were four of them left – the head fellow that I knew and three others who had remained behind, but everybody else had been evacuated and how they were given two hours to get on the plane and get out. And he just said good-bye and that Holy Family Hospital was no more. So that's what I remember about it was from the Qui Nhon perspective.

Interviewer

And you saw it on television?

Maureen Brinkman

I felt bad for the Vietnamese because I felt like mama-san might be in jeopardy. I was afraid that anybody who had helped or collaborated with the Americans might be in jeopardy once the North Vietnamese took over. So that was my biggest fear but I don't know anything about what happened to her or the rest of them. I just saw them on the roof desperately trying to get on the planes.

Interviewer

When you returned stateside and you continued with your career, did you have thoughts about the people of Vietnam? Did you forget about the war?

Maureen Brinkman
No, I definitely didn't forget about the war and I did continue to follow the news and think about what was happening. Right prior to the fall of Saigon in '75, for example, I was very aware of the baby lift and how much they were doing to try to get those children that were Eurasian children out of Vietnam. The Vietnamese were not very tolerant of children that were mixed blood. And so I was aware of the baby lift and very happy that they were doing what they could to try to get those kids to safety. And I just sort of felt like the South Vietnamese Army types which we took a number of them as refugees, were not the ones I was worried about. The ones I was worried about were the lower-level folks that did all the cleaning and helping and work but nobody was going to be helping them and I just didn't know what would happen to them.

Interviewer
If the war had not been so back and forth, more conventional like World War II, would you have had a different opinion?

Maureen Brinkman
That's a really very good and very tough question to answer. I was still in the Air National Guard in the '90s and my Guard unit from Colorado got called up for Operation Desert Storm, and I have to tell you that I had a whole different feeling about that because I felt that Saddam Hussein had walked into Kuwait and tried to take that country over and the Kuwaitis who are our friends had asked for our help. Now I know this is a bit simplistic, but this is how I rationalized in my mind. So I was actually prouder of the service during the first Gulf War because we went in there, we got Saddam Hussein out and we left. Now my husband always tells me that maybe if we had done it right the first time we wouldn't be back in there the second time. But I don't care. Somehow it felt to me like we weren't doing the Vietnam thing. We were going in, helping our allies, and getting out like we should've. And if we could've done that in Vietnam I guess I would've felt better about things. But it should've been apparent already by the time I got there in '69 because we had had MACV advisors in Vietnam since '63 and it should've been pretty clear that the South Vietnamese were not capable of guarding and protecting and taking care of their own country. And then of course there's all the business about just like in Korea, the artificially drawing a line and saying this is one country and this is another country. And after I read Frances Fitzgerald's book, "Fire in the Lake", I realized you can't do that to a country, especially a country like Vietnam where ancestor worship is show important and where the bones of your loved ones lie is your land. And you can't just say move down here past this border and live here instead. It doesn't work that way culturally for those people. So of course that turned them all against us in the war. But they'd been through it all before with the French. They're an amazingly resilient people; I have nothing but respect for them.

Interviewer
When you hear a helicopter, does it remind you of Vietnam?

Maureen Brinkman
It happened once, right after I got back, Paul and I went to see "MASH," that movie, and when the helicopters – thu, thu, thu, thu – when I heard that on the thing, I did get that adrenaline rush like I needed to go over to the OR because if we were writing letters in our hooch or reading or doing anything and we heard that sound, we would go out the door and look. And if there were green sheets hanging out the helicopter doors we knew they were transfers from someplace else and we didn't have to go to the OR. But if they were the Huey ships that were bringing in the casualties, then we all just went to work. It was just a given. You just put your uniform on and went over to the OR. And so, yeah, that first time I watched "MASH" that happened to me. I got that adrenaline rush. But after that I don't think it ever happened. And other than being up there visiting my friend, the only time I was under direct fire, I don't really think I had post-traumatic stress kinds of things when there would be loud noises or anything like that. I've never had nightmares or any of that kind of stuff. But again, that could also be attributed to the fact that I talked to my husband so much and had somebody to share it with.

Interviewer
So many veterans have this underlying bitterness about the war and how they were treated when they came home. You worked with them. Can you say something to those veterans who want to believe that it had meaning?

Maureen Brinkman
I know lots of them. In fact, lots of the guys I worked with. You have to remember, for one thing, nobody was shooting at me. I was very safe, relatively speaking; even though I might have been fearful at times, nobody was shooting at me. Number two, I didn't know through the harsh conditions they went through. I also had a cushy living situation even though there were minor things, but basically I had it so good. So you can't compare any of that. But I wasn't putting my life on the line. I gave up a year of my life the same way they did, but I think what I'd like to say to them is just like I say now to every soldier I see in uniform: Thank you for serving. What this country failed to do because they couldn't convince the government to stop the war was they somehow failed to give the respect that every soldier deserves regardless. Any soldier that puts on a uniform and serves their country and follows orders – no matter how bad they are or what they are being asked to do – deserves our respect and our gratitude and that's

the feeling that I have for every veteran that I've ever met. And that's all I can say.