Jeanette Nice
Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer
Give us your name and spell it.

Jeanette Nice
Jeanette, J-e-a-n-e-t-t-e; Nice, N-i-c-e.

Interviewer
You're originally from?

Jeanette Nice
North Dakota.

Interviewer
Did they believe you were nice?

Jeanette Nice
Yes. They always say that.

Interviewer
What was life like for you when you were 18?

Jeanette Nice
When I was 18, I was in college in North Dakota, on the open prairie where the wind blowed. It was cold. I was in nursing school. It was really pretty intense. It was just like college life; probably a little different than other colleges because we were in the wide open prairie with the wind blowing on the outskirts of little Grand Forks, North Dakota. We were just all nurses. There were no males in our nursing class.

Interviewer
What year?

Jeanette Nice
Let's see. '65 and I graduated in '69.

Interviewer
So you graduated from nursing school in '69?

Jeanette Nice
Yeah, from the University of North Dakota.

Interviewer
Were you politically aware of what was going on in the country?

Jeanette Nice
When I was in high school, I had a boyfriend whose father was career military, and when they announced on the TV, I remember about Vietnam. He was gung-ho; he was gonna join the Army, and his father had fought in Korea. He said, "No, this is an awful thing; this is not a good thing." My father had never been in the military for health reasons, so I didn't have a real concept of what World War II was like or what the Korean War was like, other than I had a girlfriend whose father was killed in Korea, and she had never known him. That was the only exposure I had to war, so I really didn't understand it. When I was in college, there was just one TV in a great big room with a hundred girls, we would watch the soaps, so I never watched TV in college. I didn't listen to the radio, and we didn't get newspapers, so I was sort of isolated from the war and what everybody else was watching on TV.

Interviewer
No discussions with your girlfriends about what was going on in the country?

Jeanette Nice
No. Nursing students, we were just all tied up in nursing and then dating. I did start writing to a soldier in Vietnam. We had a box in the dorm. It says, "Write to a soldier, a lonely soldier," so I wrote to a soldier in Vietnam, and when he came back, he came to see me, but we really had nothing in common. That just sort of fizzled.
Then when I was a senior, I was running out of money, and I thought, “I've got semester left, and I have no money, and I've already taken out a loan,” and the Army recruiter showed up and said, "We'll pay for everything. We need nurses." So I joined and then told my parents later.
My father was horrified. He had heard all these stories about WAC's during World War II, and he was absolutely horrified that I joined the Army, but he didn't say much. He was just very quiet about it.
I was dating this guy, and he asked me to marry him, and my parents liked him, so I married him. He was in the Air

Force. He was from Grand Forks Air Force Base. He got orders just before we got married in June, and he got orders four weeks before that for Vietnam. So we got married; he left for Vietnam. I went to basic training, and like I said, when I got to basic training, the personnel officer said, "You've got orders to go Barstow in California in the middle of Death Valley." He said, "My suggestion would be go to Vietnam. You get paid combat pay. I can arrange it. I can switch your orders right now," and he did.
So I went to Vietnam after basic training; had no nursing experience really, other than working as an aide. So I remember getting in-country. Because they really hadn't assigned me, I got put on a troop airplane with all these young guys.

Interviewer
You were 22?

Jeanette Nice
Yeah.

Interviewer
So you went on the troop airplane.

Jeanette Nice
Yeah, in this big transport plane that -- it was a commercial plane, so we had stewardess. But it was, I don't know how many guys. I don't know how many personnel it held, but there were officers; there were enlisted. Of course, the guys that knew they were going in the field were terrified. There was one other woman on the plane, but I never saw her. She was way at the other end. There were a group of officers that were lieutenants and captains, and they decided they were gonna protect me, which was kinda nice, 'cause some of the enlisted men were kinda moving in, and I had no idea what to do, so they came and sat by me.
As we were flying over, there was a typhoon in Okinawa, so we landed in Hawaii. So they had all these troops, so they had to put us in hotels in Hawaii. We spent the afternoon on the beach with all these guys. Like I said, there were about four or five of 'em. They said, "Go buy a swimsuit," so I went and bought a swimsuit, and we went down to the beach, spent the afternoon on the beach. We got back to our hotel room, and they said, "Well, the typhoon has blown over; we're off to Vietnam. So we didn't even spend the night in a hotel. So it was kinda interesting. I'm trying to remember.

Interviewer
When you guys were on your temporary R&R there, what was the mindset of the troops?

Jeanette Nice
The young guys, you could see the PFC's were very nervous. The guy that kinda was guiding me was a Green Beret, so he knew everything. He was Special Forces, and the guys kinda hung around with him, let him do the leading. So he was the one that called the shots and said, "Do this. Do this. This is where you need to go." Then we landed. I think it was Da Nang. It was all sort of a blur to me. I had no idea what I was doing, and I wound up sleeping in a hospital bed because they had no quarters for me, so I slept on the ward behind drapes on a hospital bed until they figured out where they were gonna send me. And they did send me to Qui Nhon, which was maybe ten miles or so from Phu Cat, which is where my husband was stationed at an Air Force base.

Interviewer
So you got to see him regularly?

Jeanette Nice
About once a week.

Interviewer
Well that worked out pretty well.

Jeanette Nice
Yeah, and there was phone service, so I could call him every evening.

Interviewer
What were your impressions when you got to Vietnam?

Jeanette Nice
When we go to the airport, it was filthy, because Vietnamese didn't know what flushing toilets were, so they never flushed the toilets, and especially the women's toilet was just filthy. And it was hot and humid. But the country was dirty. I mean, these people had no money. They lived in little shacks with dirt floors. I remember driving along the countryside, and they didn't use diapers for the kids. They just -- bare bottoms, and I always wondered how they did that 'cause when we had young toddlers on our ward, they had no diapers. They had no bottoms, and every time I picked 'em up, they wet all over me, so I thought, how do these mothers do it? I never figured that out. But it was kinda interesting to me that they were -- it was poverty everywhere. And yet these people were smiling; they were happy; they welcomed the troops. The mama-sans that washed our clothes were always very pleasant and I guess it was their living, so they were glad to have us there.

Interviewer
The war, financially --
Jeanette Nice
Was very good to them, and it was, in a sense. They lost their loved ones, and that was hard for them. But I think one of the guys said that Vietnam has been at war forever. Before us, it was the French.
Interviewer
So they were familiar with war.
Jeanette Nice
And they took advantage everywhere they could, which only makes sense. It's their survival. They were appreciative of the medical care. Like I said, we had a doctor who was ear, nose, and throat, and he would repair cleft palates, so the mothers were so thankful, as I told you before on the phone. If you're Buddhist and you have a cleft lip or a cleft palate, you're incomplete, so you can never marry, and you can't be buried in the Buddhist cemetery. So they were thrilled to have this doctor come in and take their children into the hospital and repair the cleft lip and palate.
Interviewer
So there was a line of Buddhists with their babies, then?
Jeanette Nice
Yeah, well, they would go on medical missions and find these children, and they'd bring 'em back.
Interviewer
Oh, the medical team.
Jeanette Nice
As nurses, we weren't allowed to leave the post. We couldn't go into Qui Nhon.
Interviewer
Why is that?
Jeanette Nice
After Tet. I was there the year after the Tet Offensive, so just on the other side of the barbed-wire fence was the village of Qui Nhon, but we weren't allowed at all to leave the post. I think maybe some of the medical officers that were Lieutenant Colonels or Majors were allowed to.
Interviewer
So women in general were never allowed to leave the post after '68?
Jeanette Nice
The nurses in Qui Nhon on the Army post, the '67 VAC, were not allowed to go into the city of Qui Nhon.
Interviewer
Were you there for one or two years?
Jeanette Nice
Just one year. The tours were one year, unless you wanted to get a bonus, and re-up, and stay another year.
Interviewer
Where were you assigned when you got there?
Jeanette Nice
Yeah, there were two wards. It was an H shape. There were three buildings, and there were an H shape. So you had one ward that was urology, ENT, gynecology, and there was a hallway that connected 'em. Then the other ward was minor wounds like punji stick wounds; a kind of a collection of some of the Vietnamese that were wounded, a few of those. Actually, the one section with urology, EENT, and gynecology was a mixture of everything. But most of the GI's that were there had some kind of venereal disease and couldn't be treated in the field because they had to have IV therapy.
Interviewer
I remember you saying how young and innocent you were and how you were assigned to a ward where guys brought in their magazines. Talk about that.
Jeanette Nice
Well, I was brought up very strict family. I had never seen pornography. There were "Penthouse" and that kind of thing lying all over the place, and I chose not -- I mean that was my thing. I looked at it once, and I thought, "Ew." At night, some of the guys were lonely, and they'd talk about the things they did. There was one story that was really gripping. This young man could've been 19 at the most, and he talked about being out on patrol, and they were trying to find the mama-sans that were supplying the enemy with rice. They found a group of mama-sans with all this rice, so the women offered themselves to the men, hoping that they would spare their lives. He said there were Sergeants, and he said they had sex with the women, and then they shot them point blank. He was this 19-

year-old boy, very innocent, and he said it was just so shocking.

Interviewer
He participated?

Jeanette Nice
He never said whether he participated. He said, "This is what they did." And he just couldn't deal with it.

Interviewer
That would be hard to deal with.

Jeanette Nice
Yeah. He was just a young man, and he said they were older; there were Staff Sergeants. They were in command. He said he didn't dare say anything. He was like a PFC. So that kinda thing went on.

Interviewer
You heard stories of them out in the field, yet they had to be careful about what they told you for security purposes, right?

Jeanette Nice
Yeah. They couldn't tell us anything about what they did, and they didn't.

Interviewer
Yet he just told you a --

Jeanette Nice
Yeah. This was in the middle of night, like two o'clock in the morning, and he was up walking around. He just had a need to tell somebody what had happened, his experience.

Interviewer
What did you do with that information?

Jeanette Nice
I didn't do anything with it.

Interviewer
You just kept it to yourself?

Jeanette Nice
Yeah. This is war; this is kinda what happens.

Interviewer
Tell us the mood, temperament, and attitude of these guys.

Jeanette Nice
There was one guy who came up and talked to me, 'cause I would sit there and be doing my charting, so they would come up, some of 'em that were more braver. Most of 'em were enlisted, so they were afraid of officers, so most of 'em didn't talk to me. But there were a few that would come up, and one of 'em was a married man. He told me how he wrote to his wife every day and she wrote to him and every day, and then he had his little mama-san downtown. And he said, "That's, it's just the way it is. It's nothing against my wife. It doesn't mean anything."

Interviewer
So you got a big awakening I guess.

Jeanette Nice
Yeah, because that's not what I was taught. I grew up in a very conservative family, and men just didn't do that sort of thing. And you realize: “Well, yes they do, and it doesn't mean that they don't love their wives. These men obviously love their wives and miss them, but this is the way they dealt with life.” And of course, there were a lot of drugs. It was sad to see one of our corpsman who had been out in the field. I guess they spent six months in the field and then six months in a hospital away from the combat. He was a very intelligent man, but you could just see as he did more and more drugs, it just blew his brains. He just didn't even care about anything. He didn't seem to even know who he was. He was just in a fog. This happened to a couple of my corpsman, and I thought, “How sad. Would this have happened if they were in the real world?” -- as they called the United States. It's their way of coping. The ones that had been in the field and seen it all were the ones that resorted to the drugs.

Interviewer
I could understand that.

Jeanette Nice
And it was there, and what do you do when you're out in the field? A lot of our troops, too, had not only venereal diseases; they had kidney stones because they were out in the field, and there was no drinking water. So we saw a lot of young men with kidney stones.

Interviewer
How do you treat that?

Jeanette Nice
They gave 'em pain medications; made sure that the kidney stones passed. I don't think they had a good way of really breaking up the -- they didn't have laser to break up the kidney stones, so when they were in a lot of pain, they brought 'em to us, and they stayed there until they were able to pass the kidney stones.

Interviewer
What kind of venereal diseases were there, and how did they treat them?

Jeanette Nice
Penicillin. Some of 'em had IV's, but they had been treated in the field with different drugs, and they developed resistant strains. I think the saddest thing was a lieutenant that had gonorrhea, put his finger in his eye, and went blind in one eye. Thank heavens, it was only one eye, but from the gonorrhea, 'cause it causes blindness, as you probably know. All newborns get treatment to their eyes to prevent blindness from gonorrhea.

Interviewer
So the typical venereal diseases were?

Jeanette Nice
Gonorrhea. The typical venereal disease was gonorrhea. There was no syphilis. They never saw a case of syphilis. Probably, they responded to the penicillin.

Interviewer
Once these soldiers were treated for kidney stones and venereal diseases, they knew they'd go back into service.

Jeanette Nice
Yeah, and they weren't there very long. They were just there a few days; just long enough to get their antibiotics and treated, and then they'd be back on the field. And they knew that.

Interviewer
Were they worried about going back out in the field?

Jeanette Nice
Well, during the day shift, it was so busy they didn't talk to me. It was on the night shift that maybe one or two would be awake and come and talk to me. So there wasn't a lot of interactions, and like I said, because I was an officer and they were just enlisted, we were told not to associate with them, and they were told not associate with us. So there were just a few that were brave enough to come and talk to me. My corpsman would tell me stories about their lives and their wives, because we'd be there all night and the night shifts were quiet. They told me more about what was going on, about the guys that were on drugs, and how they would sneak out and go to their mama-san downtown, even though it was off limits. Qui Nhon was off limits to all personnel.

Interviewer
How big is Qui Nhon?

Jeanette Nice
I have no idea.

Interviewer
You weren't there.

Jeanette Nice
Yeah, I just saw it through the barbed-wire fences.

Interviewer
So you're learning about what is going on around you, about the war.

Jeanette Nice
No, we had no idea and no contact with the war. I didn't in the ward I was on, because the guys didn't talk about it. There was a TV, but they played sitcoms from the United States over, and over, and over again, the same one.

Interviewer
Which is?

Jeanette Nice
Do you remember Diane Carroll? I think she was on there every day of the week. The same ones.

Interviewer
I loved her.

Jeanette Nice
Yeah, and I think they did that because she was black. That was part of the reasons. One ironic thing: they would show movies. You remember Jane Fonda? "Barbarella"? Have you ever heard of "Barbarella"? They played that over, and over, and over again. And it was so ironic that she went to North Vietnam, and here they were playing her movies. The guys loved it. Of course, they had no idea what she was doing on the outside.

Interviewer
I'm sure that's the case.
Jeanette Nice
Yeah. And then "Dr. Zhivago," I swear, the whole year I was there, the only two movies they showed. And they would break in the middles, so they'd have to stop it and rewind it 'cause they had been shown so many times that the film was wearing out.
Interviewer
It sounds like you just did a job and you did it well. But there's all this chaos going on all around you.
Jeanette Nice
But I wasn't a part of it. Yeah, you know, 'cause you worked 12-hour shifts. It was dark when you went to work; it was almost dark when we got off, depending on what time of year it was. You quickly ate your lunch and came back. I was even isolated. The other nurse that I worked with -- during the day, we had two nurses, so one was on one side, and the one would be on the other side. So we didn't even talk to each other. And even my roommate, I would just see her briefly as we were coming and going, so there wasn't a lot of contact.
Mainly, I had contact with my corpsman, and there's a master sergeant that ran everything. There were a couple of them, and they had been in the service. They were career, so they ran things. I was just a second lieutenant who didn't know the first thing about the Army. Basic training was like going to Girl Scout camp. So they ran everything. I just gave the meds, did the charting. It was busy because there were 60 patients at night and 30 during the day, some of 'em going to surgery for minor things.
Interviewer
Tell me what your husband did briefly.
Jeanette Nice
He was an Air Traffic Controller at Phu Cat at an Air Force base.
Interviewer
Did he give you any information about what was going on in the war?
Jeanette Nice
He would just say that the fighters flew at night a lot, so he worked nights. There were just stories, like, there was an Army guy that was stationed at the Air Force base, and he got very depressed and killed himself. That was a big story. Then there was a bombing in the air terminal, and one young man who was due to go home was killed, and that was very tragic. Everybody talked about that. He had a young wife and a new baby, and he'd stayed over one day to play in a baseball game, and the next the air terminal was bombed, and he was killed. So things like that, they talked about.
Interviewer
'68, '69, '70, those were pretty volatile years in that war. I'm sure you understand that now.
Jeanette Nice
Yeah, watching the documentaries, but we were very isolated. You'd get the Army newspaper, but they had nothing in there about the war. And people back in the States didn't think of writing to you about what was happening. They thought you knew it. They'd say, "Well, what do you feel about this? What about this?" And you're going, "I have no idea, absolutely no idea who's getting hit." Some of the nurses that worked in the ICU would tell me stories about some of the young men that died. One young man, they had everybody giving blood, and I think they gave him something like 30 units of blood because he was just bleeding out like crazy, and everybody was called to give blood.
Normally, you couldn't give blood 'cause you had all these immunizations, and I guess the malaria pills or whatever -- for some reason, they didn't allow us to give blood. But in this case, because he was dying, they took anybody that had O negative and gave it to him, and he still died. The surgeon talked about wading through blood in the operating room. I remember one patient that we had got maggots, and the surgeon said, "Yes, I remember a fly in the operating room, and it landed on him." And he said, "Well, you know, maggots clean out a wound," so he said it was probably a good thing.
Interviewer
The corpsmen that we've interviewed just rave about the nurses, because not only did you do your jobs well, but you also provided some comfort and emotional support to the guys.
Jeanette Nice
Yeah, and that was interesting, because you had all these young nurses, right out of school, maybe one or two -- some of 'em maybe three years, but they were all very young. Some of 'em, what they would do when you got into the Army, they'd send 'em to a big hospital, where they get a lot of experience, and then the next year, they'd send 'em to Vietnam. Because I had no nursing experience whatsoever, that's why they put me on this particular ward, which is understandable, which is a good thing they did.

So the nurses were young, but all the doctors were specialists who had been drafted. You had your neurosurgeons; your orthopedic surgeons, just your general surgeons, but they were all in their 30s. They were all at least 35, and so you have all these men who were drafted, and you have all these cute, young nurses who are single. So they paired up.

Interviewer
I bet that happened often, huh?

Jeanette Nice
Yeah, and because I was married, I didn't fit into that social group, so I was kinda on the outskirts of that, which was fine with me.

Interviewer
You observed it.

Jeanette Nice
Yeah, because my roommate was dating. She was 24, and she was dating a doctor who was 36, and he had his wife and children back in the United States. It was sad because she was quite innocent.

Interviewer
He went back to the States, and bye-bye.

Jeanette Nice
Yeah. He was very well-to-do. She told me. She was poor. That's why she joined the Army. She didn't have enough money to finish school. And she meets this very well-to-do doctor from New York. And of course, she's just enamored with him and hoping something will happen. And he showed her pictures of his beautiful home, and she said there was a picture of him and his wife in front of this beautiful china cabinet, and she says, "Obviously, he has a great deal of money," compared to where she was coming from. Then he left, and that was the end of it. She said it was heartbreaking for her, and there was a lot of that.

Interviewer
Yeah, a lot of heart-breaking going on in Vietnam.

Jeanette Nice
Yeah, and of course, they would tell these nurses, "Oh, I'm going to leave my wife for you." And then there were some nurses who met single doctors, and it worked out, or met single officers and married 'em. We actually had a wedding by our commanding officer, which was kinda cute. I hope it worked for them, and it probably did.

Interviewer
All you have to do is be female, and you provided comfort to the guys.

Jeanette Nice
Yeah, like the corpsman. They would come and talk to me. They knew there was no romantic thing, but I was a woman, and at night, they would come and tell me about their wives, their children, how they missed they wives and their family.

Interviewer
Talk about the end of the year, and how different that looked like from the beginning of your year and how you are changing.

Jeanette Nice
When you get off the plane, everybody hates the gooks. Everybody hates the Vietnamese, and the mama-sans are stealing things. And then after you deal with the mama-sans and you have some Vietnamese patients, your heart just goes out to 'em.

We had this little tiny mama-san who got hooked up with a great big, 6-foot tall GI, and she had a baby. And the French nuns -- there was a French hospital near us run by the French nuns, and they tried to do a c-section and kinda messed her up, so she wound up on our gynecology unit with all kinds of tears and fistulas. She was there for probably at least two months. And you see the sweet, little innocent girl, and who knows where her baby was. Probably her relatives were taking care of it. She can't communicate with us; she could talk to the mama-sans that did the cleaning. But there she is on a ward with 30 men, behind a curtain, no privacy, and having a male doctor come in and look at her everyday and do surgery on her, and you just realize what they're living through.

And then the children -- there was a little girl that was there maybe nine months, almost the whole time I was there. She left about a month before I did, because she had all these wounds, and she had a colostomy because she had abdominal wounds. She had crutches because her hip had been blown apart. She had no family, and she couldn't speak English, and we couldn't speak Vietnamese, and they named her. They had a phonetic alphabet. She was Whiskey 56 'cause that's how they named the Vietnamese. She cried when she left. One of the nurses, for Christmas, brought her a little red dress and put a ribbon in her hair. There was a nurse that was older. She was '30s, which was older from us nurses. She just took to this little girl and was always there for her, until six months later, she's gone.

You knew people, and a couple months later, they'd be gone, so you didn't develop strong friendships, 'cause it was such a short stay. People were constantly rotating 'cause they were only there for a year. And if you didn't get there at the same time, you maybe only knew 'em a couple of months; then they were gone, and then somebody else left. It was constantly coming and going.

Interviewer

Were any Vietnamese women being treated for gynecological issues in the gynecology ward?

Jeanette Nice

No, they didn't. If it was a war-related injury, somehow they would sometimes wind up on our wards.

Interviewer

So you become more compassionate and understand toward the Vietnamese?

Jeanette Nice

And what they were going through. And when you see their villages, you just see the poverty.

Interviewer

So at the end of the year, they were no longer gooks to you.

Jeanette Nice

They were no longer just the Vietnamese. I never called them gooks. That was a derogatory term. They were no longer just the Vietnamese; they were people. And I wish we could've done more for them. There was one young man who was in Special Forces, so he was able to go out in the villages. He worked with the Vietnamese, and he became attached to them, and he did things for them, helped them out wherever he could -- getting supplies for them. He was very compassionate, and I learned from him that they're real people and that you should care about 'em and not treat them like the enemy or somebody who's dirty.

Interviewer

When you come home, do you fly back on a commercial airline with your husband, or does he stay?

Jeanette Nice

They let me come home a month early so I could go home with him. Of course, the Army is not efficient as the Air Force, so they couldn't get the paperwork together. So we got to the airport and found out I had no seating on the airplane. But as his spouse through the Air Force, the Air Force got me a seat on a plane.

Interviewer

You come home, and you go back to --?

Jeanette Nice

No. We visited our family, and he wanted to go to Germany, so he said, put in for Germany. We both put in for Germany, and we were stationed in Berlin. The Air Force and the Army were together in Berlin, so we had four years together in Berlin.

Interviewer

Did you understand more politically about the war when you were out of country?

Jeanette Nice

Well, I had no contact with any news about Vietnam. You go to Germany; everything's in German. There's the Armed Forces Network, and again, it's repeat sitcoms. They did play "The World at War" over and over again, so I saw the whole series because World War II, it was on the Armed Forces Network. We got the Stars and Stripes, but there's nothing political in the Stars and Stripes. So for five years, I really had no idea what was going on in the United States.

Interviewer

Tell me how you changed in four years from who you were after the war to who you are now, regarding the Vietnam War.

Jeanette Nice

I've watched a lot of documentaries; just read a lot about World War II. Well, in being in Vietnam, you say, “This is pointless.” When you see these guys come in, they aren't fighting for their country or for any great ideological utopia or something like that. They are fighting to save their lives and their buddies, and they told me that: “We're fighting to stay alive. We're fighting for our buddies.” And some of 'em went kinda crazy. I remember a guy getting a Purple Heart, and some movie star who had came in and gave him a Purple Heart. He said, "It really doesn't mean anything. I was saving my buddy's life. It wasn't some great cause. It was just to survive." And then you just see how pointless war is.

Of course, reading about Vietnam, you just -- I read a biography about Johnson and Nixon, and you see how pointless it was. They had this idea that communism was gonna spread, and they were gonna come and take over the United States, and if we stop it in Vietnam, we're gonna save the United States. And of course, we didn't do that, did we? And then I became more compassionate and another reason because the French nuns with their hospital, they survived by having an orchard, and Agent Orange killed everything. That was their means of financial

survival, and we destroyed it.

Interviewer

What do you know or what can you say to the veterans who suffered psychologically?

Jeanette Nice

I didn't really see it. I didn't see it until I came back years later when it's come out in the news. Like I said, I watch a lot of documentaries on Vietnam and what the Vietnamese people went through. So I probably didn't see any of that. I see it now because I volunteer at the soup kitchen, and you see these Vietnam veterans and see what it's done to their lives. So now I see what it did to them. But I had no idea then.

I went from Vietnam to Germany, and the military community is very isolated, especially when you're in a foreign country. All the people you associate with are in the military. They stand up for military ideals; they believed in the war. There was no dissent. You don't say those things when you're in that community. So I didn't see any of that. And then coming back into the civilian life after that, I worked with nurses who had no idea what Vietnam was like. It didn't touch them. It didn't touch a lot of people in the United States, only those who had sons that went there.

Interviewer

Anything else you want to share with us about your experiences in that war? That story of the mama-sans. I would imagine that young man came home struggling with that.

Jeanette Nice

Yeah, it was just a brief thing; a 15-minute conversation. I didn't even know his name, 'cause so many people came through and were gone that you didn't get to know them closely at all.

Interviewer

The freaky thing is that the guys didn't know which mama-san to trust.

Jeanette Nice

Yeah, that's true. So it was a different war for them than me. I was so protected, almost. The nurses that worked in the ER and the OR and the ICU saw it all, and they have stories of what they saw.

Interviewer

It was different for them.

Jeanette Nice

Yeah, they probably suffered Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

Interviewer

The ground pounder's experience was vastly different than the Air Force guys, too.

Jeanette Nice

Yeah, totally, because my Army post was right on the airfield, and it was just wooden shacks with little roofs, and then I would go to Phu Cat, and it was all cement. It was supposed to be a permanent base. That's the way the government set it up, so it was all brick bunkers all over the place. They had a tennis court; they had a swimming pool. It was almost like a country club in comparison to where we lived.

Interviewer

Where you in Germany at the fall of Saigon?

Jeanette Nice

Yeah. Let's see. I came back. We came back --

Interviewer

You don't recall it on TV.

Jeanette Nice

No.

Interviewer

What brought you to Utah?

Jeanette Nice

My husband liked to ski. He was from California, so there's no way he would live in Minnesota or North Dakota.

Interviewer

Is there anything else you wanna share with us about your experience?

Jeanette Nice

I just have a few of the kids with the cleft palates. It was sad because they were separated from their families.

Interviewer

Their families didn't come to visit them?

Jeanette Nice

One of the mama-sans would come to visit her little boy that had the cleft palate, but most of 'em, I don't know

exactly how they got there. There was just this wonderful Jewish doctor from New York that would come in and say these are his patients, and he would repair the cleft palates and the cleft lips, and then they would be gone. I don't know how he did it because I think the paperwork -- how he got them in -- because supposedly, they would only treat Vietnamese that were injured by war, war injuries.

Interviewer

Oh, was that the rule?

Jeanette Nice

I didn't know all the rules. I was just a second lieutenant at the time, but that was the general rumor, that you had to have a war injury.

Interviewer

In triage, I understand it was our guys first, the worst-case guys; and then down to the South Vietnamese; and then the North Vietnamese, if it's a slow day.

Jeanette Nice

Yeah. And maybe the nurses that worked in the ER and the ICU saw that, 'cause they talked about when the Vietnamese died, that all the worms would crawl out. They always talk about how when the body is cold, the worms leave the body. And the Vietnamese all had worms because they had very poor sanitation and poor drinking water.

Interviewer

That's crazy.

Jeanette Nice

Yeah, they talked about the chest tube wounds and the worms crawling out in trachs.

Interviewer

Oh, please.

Jeanette Nice

Yeah, and they would say that always upset them. That was a very hard thing to witness. They would kinda joke about it, but it was their way of dealing with that. And of course, the GI's would go to Japan, so they were only there, stabilized, and would go to Japan. I remember one Congressman, his son was injured, so he and his wife came to Vietnam to see his son, and I think his son may have died. But after they left, they sent boxes of buckets and sponges. The head nurse, the supervisor, came around. She said, "I think this woman is trying to tell us something, so I'm bringing you some buckets and some sponges."

Interviewer

You got to clean.

Jeanette Nice

She apparently felt it was rather dirty.

Interviewer

Deep clean. What an interesting, memorable, streamed experience for a young girl.

Jeanette Nice

Yeah, you have no idea what the world is about.

Interviewer

No, but you got broken into a little. Especially with the young men in there.

Jeanette Nice

Yeah. You learn not to be so judgmental of men that have affairs. You look at war totally different. It's not this big cause for the United States: “We're saving the United States from Communism.” You just say, "This is a bunch of nonsense." And you have compassion for the people in the country, which people in the United States didn't have. They didn't have compassion for the Vietnamese.

Interviewer

Wouldn't you say that protestors did though?

Jeanette Nice

I think the protestors were college students who didn't want to go to Vietnam. They weren't concerned about the Vietnamese; they were concerned about being drafted, and I think that was their main goal. You don't see it now with Afghanistan and Iraq. You don't see all those college protestors, do you? Because they don't have to go, so they don't care. It's kinda sad.

Interviewer

Anything else?

Jeanette Nice

I don't know. I think when we came back, nobody talked about Vietnam. Of course, like I said, I went to Germany,

and then came into regular civilian life. So by that time, it had all died down. Nobody talked about it; I never told people I had been in Vietnam. They considered people who went to Vietnam kinda freaks.
I heard one story about a guy who said his brother went to Stanford after Vietnam and the GI Bill, and one of his professors said, "Stand up if you were a Vietnam Veteran." He said, "All right. I don't want any baby killers in this class, so please leave." And this young man had been drafted, fought as a grunt, and I think had been wounded, and this professor told them in front of the whole class, humiliated him, and told him to leave because he was a baby killer. And this is how the United States treated their Vietnamese veterans. Yeah, Vietnam veterans. Heartbreaking, yeah.
I know there was one thing the United States would learn from Vietnam is that you aren't gonna treat our veterans that way now. It's not their fault that they're in Afghanistan or Iraq.

Interviewer

Thank you for interviewing.