

Barrett, Jay Ellen Army

[00:00:12.25] JAY ELLEN BARRETT: I was born in Middlebury Vermont, March 22, 1948. I lived in Walpole, Massachusetts most of my life. I live there now, I grew up there.

[00:00:32.13] My dad was going to Middlebury College which is where I was born. He was a pilot in World War II in the Army Air Corps and flew out of Okinawa over Japan. My mom was a nurse, She went to the Peter Bent Brigham School of Nursing in Boston. She grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts and was an Army nurse in the Philippines in World War II.

[00:01:04.23] She went over with a group from the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital and they went over, it was towards the end of the war, but she was a second lieutenant Army nurse in the Philippines near Manila as far as I know.

[00:01:30.56] Well I grew up as the oldest of four children. My dad passed away when he was 40, so my mom raised the four of us. I was 15 when he passed away and I was the oldest of four. So she raised us. I knew very early that in order to go to college I would have to find a way to finance it. And at the time the Army Nurse Corps--

[00:02:01.33] all services had a program where they would pay for college education for nurses with a requirement for service following that. So I knew very early that I would be joining the Army in order to finance my college education. I went to Duke University and the Army financed my last two years of Duke. And then I had an obligation of three years in the active duty Army.

[00:02:33.16] I graduated in June of 1970 and in September I went to my basic training in Fort Sam Houston Texas. My college roommate also joined the Army with me and we signed up to go on the buddy plan. And when we got our orders, I got orders for Fort Riley Kansas and she got orders for Fort Polk Louisiana. So that was the buddy system the way the Army operated in the late '60s.

[00:03:15.39] I had friends who were killed in Vietnam while I was in college, friends of mine from high school. I remember when I was in an advanced course in high school in international relations, and in part of the course we discussed ongoing international incidents and what was going on in the world.

[00:03:48.18] And I remember very distinctly being in my international relations class and stating, I was going to go to nursing school, and then I was going to join the Army and go to Vietnam and serve as a nurse in Vietnam. And all my friends laughed and said, oh, it'll never be going on by the time you get out of college, and that's a long way off and that'll never happen. But I remember feeling very strongly that this was something that I was going to do and that I would be a part of the Army and that I would go to Vietnam.

[00:04:28.77] But I joined officially in June of 1968, the end of my sophomore year. I was in the Women's Army Corps as a PFC until six months before graduation, which was December of 1969. I was then commissioned as a second lieutenant, so when I graduated from Duke in 1970

in June, I was second lieutenant. By the time I went to my basic training in September of 1970 I was a first lieutenant.

[00:05:15.59] My college roommate and I went to basic training together. She lived in Maryland, And I drove down and met her and the two of us traversed the country together. I will never forget driving through Georgia and seeing great big signs about the Ku Klux Klan is here, and this is the home of George Wallace. And people had said, when you get into Georgia and Alabama, just keep driving, don't stop because they don't like Yankees, and I had a Massachusetts license plate.

[00:05:57.56] So the two of us traveled through the South. We went to spend a few days in New Orleans, went to Houston and spent a day, and then went on to Fort Sam. We got to Fort Sam and friends of mine who had gone before said, report in late and they will be out of BOQs, so they'll have to put you up in a motel.

[00:06:26.03] MARK FRANKLIN: And a BOQ is?

[00:06:27.53] JAY ELLEN BARRETT: A BOQ is bachelor officers quarters. It's the quarters on post that officers would stay in. It was barracks type of quarters. So we reported a little late, a couple of hours later than we were supposed to, and sure enough all the BOQs were gone. So they put us up in an efficiency motel just off post.

[00:06:56.00] And while I was there, there were roughly 500 nurses in basic training, there were 250 M.D. doctors in basic training, 250 helicopter pilots, Dust Off pilots in training and 250 to 300 MSA officers, who were the administrative officers for--

[00:07:25.80] MARK FRANKLIN: MSA is Medical Support or what is it?

[00:07:27.47] JAY ELLEN BARRETT: Medical Support. And they were essentially administrative officers in the hospitals. And most all of us knew that we would end up in Vietnam. So to say it was a lot of parties and a lot of fun, it was.

[00:07:56.16] Well we would have to get up a little early because we were living off post, and we would be in-- on post and lined up at 7:00 AM, and in our uniforms. And my roommate and I went to the local department store and bought wigs so that we wouldn't have to worry about our hair, so that we could just put our hair up under our wigs, put our uniforms on, and get to formation at 7:00 AM.

[00:08:31.47] So, we would have classes all day long. And the way they taught the classes, they wanted everybody to pass. And so, when there was something that they knew was going to be on the final exam, they stamped their feet, so you knew write down what they said, what they were talking about, because that would be on the final exam.

[00:08:57.31] So when we first reported, we got a stack of books this big, wrapped up, tied with rope. And at graduation, I took the same load of books still tied up in the same rope back and

turned it in. But I aced the exam because I listened, and every time the instructor stamped his foot, I wrote it down and that's what I knew to study.

[00:09:31.02] We had goat lab, which they don't have anymore. And I'm sure PETA and lots of other animal rights groups had something to do with that. But what they did was they would take goats, they would shoot them, and we would debride the wounds, we would practice doing cricothyrotomies on the goats.

[00:10:03.09] The debriding wounds was to-- when you had a gunshot wound, you would clean, would use scalpels, you would cut away the dead tissue. Sometimes it needed to be sewn up and stitches, and other times it needed to be left open, so that it could heal from the inside out. And we learned to do that by working with a goat.

[00:10:40.53] The cricothyrotomy was learning how to open up the airway to insert a breathing tube in the cricothyroid area so that breathing could continue. So we learned to do that on goats which was better than learning to do it on humans.

[00:11:06.52] MARK FRANKLIN: Is this a Fort Sam?

[00:11:07.32] JAY ELLEN BARRETT: This is at Fort Sam.

[00:11:15.07] It helped to make you think about what you were going to be facing. I came from a university setting where we had patients in the Duke Medical Center who were very ill. We did have patients who experienced severe injuries that we were involved in taking care of. I worked-- my very first rotation in nursing school was in a VA hospital.

[00:11:50.14] So my very first patient I ever took care of was a VA patient. I'm working in the VA now and I think my very last patient I will take care of will be a VA patient. So we had experience with some very ill patients, some patients with severe injuries.

[00:12:13.91] But I think that being able to be in a setting where we were looking at a recent injury, I think it did help prepare us for how to look at a recent injury-- a recent gunshot wound, something that just happened-- and thinking about how we would care for it, and what we would do.

[00:12:47.48] I left for Vietnam on July 1st 1971. I had been in Fort Riley, Kansas since November, from November to June, November of 1970 to June of '71. That was my first assignment and I had rotated through the emergency room, a regular ward, and the recovery room. So I had some little bit of experience.

[00:13:29.50] A lot of our patients were returnees from Vietnam, who lived in the Midwest, and the military returned them to the closest location to their home base. I think one of the major issues with Soldiers going to Vietnam and then processing it and returning-- and returning to the States, had to do with the fact that everyone went to Vietnam as an individual.

[00:14:00.98] So when I left from Fort Riley, I went home for a couple of weeks of leave, and then my mother and sister drove me into Logan Airport and I got on a plane. I actually was just missing my fifth high school reunion. And I got on a plane, all by myself, in my uniform in 1971 at Logan Airport to fly to San Francisco.

[00:14:40.30] And I really didn't know what I would find when I got out there. I knew that somewhere in the San Francisco airport would be a desk, which would tell me this is where you go to sign up to get a shuttle to the Air Force base to fly to Vietnam.

[00:15:08.72] I was all by myself. I was 23 years old. Apparently my mother was very strong and I never saw her cry about my going or say anything about my going. I knew that she had gone to war and she had lived through it and I figured if she could live through it, I could live through it. I had read Cherry Ames, Army Nurse and Cherry Ames, Chief Nurse and those books, and I knew that-- I kind of had an idea that war wasn't as glorious as the movies made it out to be.

[00:15:55.42] But I was still all by myself, and 23 years old. And none of my friends, nobody I knew was facing what I was facing.

[00:16:08.34] So I flew to San Francisco airport and when I got there, I knew that somehow I had to find a desk that said, this is the bus to Travis Air Force Base. And I collected my suitcases, because I had a couple of suitcases and a duffel bag full of all my Army gear. And it was late at night because-- I forget what time I was leaving, but I remember it was dark and it was late. And I walked over to where the Travis Air Force bus shuttle was supposed to be, and there was nobody there.

[00:16:52.43] And I remember standing there and thinking now what do I do? And all of a sudden out of the blue, this guy comes walking up to me also in a uniform and he says, you're going to Travis? And I said, yes. And he said, so am I. Why don't you come on, I'll show you where to go.

[00:17:10.34] And he was a helicopter pilot, and so I teamed up with him, he helped me yank my suitcases and all my stuff. We found the bus, we got on the bus to Travis and he was meeting a group of his friends from helicopter school or wherever he had been based and he said, we'll all travel together.

[00:17:38.85] So we got there, and we checked into wherever we had to check in, and met up with some other guys. And there was a whole group of people that they had sequestered in this large room that were all going on the flight together. And I looked around and I was the only girl. And there were probably five or six warrant officers and lieutenant helicopter pilots and I'm thinking, OK, Mom did this. I can do this.

[00:18:24.13] And so, we sat around, we played cards. They were fun guys and were looking out for me because I was the only girl there. And at about three or four o'clock in the morning, we got on the plane and the plane was-- and I can't remember quite the name of the airlines.

[00:18:53.61] But what I noticed was every seat was different. It was like an old plane that they had taken the seats from lots of old planes, the best seats from each plane and they put them on. So some your seat went forward to lie back, and some the chair went back, and some had trays that came out of the arms, and some had trays that came down from the back, and some had trays that they brought along and gave to you.

[00:19:25.65] And on the plane, I was the only girl that was a passenger. And it seemed as we continued on our voyage, the flight attendants got older and older. But there were two female flight attendants and me, and 250 guys,

[00:19:55.23] a lot of whom were 18, 19 years old, talking about their party that they had before they left, and how drunk they all were, and all stories that 18 and 19-year-old boys tell each other. And it was almost as if I wasn't there.

[00:20:20.98] I was sitting there, taking it all in, listening to all of this and yet it was as though they didn't see me. So we flew from California to Anchorage, and I remember being in Alaska and we disembarked and we went in. A bunch of them were-- they opened the bar for the Soldiers, and I was sitting talking to the helicopter pilot guys that I had met, who I can't even picture today.

[00:21:02.86] But I remember looking out and seeing mountains and I'm not sure there were any mountains around Anchorage, but I remember picturing mountains. And then we flew from there to Japan and from Japan to Vietnam. We landed in Tan Son Nhut, down by Saigon.

[00:21:31.89] It was daytime, it was raining, it was cloudy, it was hot, It was very, very humid and I remember it smelled different, and it felt different. And as we were walking from the plane to go into the building, whatever they called the building. There was lightning and thunder and we all hit the ground. And all the people that were there, that were kind of shuttling us along, looked at us and go, oh, newbies, newbies.

[00:22:25.56] We went to the in country processing and it was July 1st. And because I was an officer, I went to a different area than most of the rest of the people in the group. And I remember being in the area thinking, oh my gosh, this is so dirty, it smells so bad. The sheets-- they assigned me to a bunk, and it smelled like the sheets had not been washed in a long time, there were bugs everywhere, it was very hot, very humid.

[00:23:28.34] So they started in processing us, and they asked about assigning us and I said, I will go, I don't care where you send me. I want to go where I'm needed, but I would prefer not to go to Phu Bai because I had a relationship with somebody who's stationed there and I'd just as soon not go there.

[00:23:52.78] So over the next day I was assigned to Cam Ranh Bay. And so they had me in processed. So July 3rd, I remember lying in bed thinking about, OK, maybe tomorrow will be the day they send me to Cam Ranh Bay and I woke up in the middle of the night to gunfire and noises and thinking, oh my goodness, I'm going to die.

[00:24:29.96] I could hear guns going off and lights and all kinds of things. And I was in this smelly, dirty bed and all of a sudden, somebody says, happy 4th of July. I go, oh OK, all right. So it's not so bad. So then the next day they call me and they say we decided not to send you to Cam Ranh Bay, we're going to send you to Phu Bai. And I said, wait a minute. The only place I didn't want to go was Phu Bai. You've got no place else in Vietnam that needs a nurse? They said, this is what your order says. It's where you're going.

[00:25:10.20] So it was another couple of days that I had to wait for a flight to go up to Phu Bai. Finally at two o'clock in the morning, they wake you up. They say your plane is ready to go. So I pack up my stuff and I go over to the airport and they direct us to an area and again I'm the only girl. And there's a planeload load, it's a C-140 with no-- I mean, it doesn't have seats. It's a cargo plane.

[00:25:52.01] So they load everybody on and the pilot comes back and says, oh, Lieutenant, why don't you come up and sit up front with us? OK. So I go up and sit with him. And so I'm sitting up in the front, plane takes off and then we land pretty soon in Chu Lai. Sorry we have to land here, but there's a monsoon or typhoon or something up in Da Nang, so we can't get up there, so you'll have to stay here until the weather clears.

[00:26:33.41] OK. So we unload and they take all of our baggage off on big pallets that are wrapped in plastic, so we see our stuff is with us and the plane takes off and goes back down to Saigon. And there happened to be a major there from the 1st Cav and I can still see his patch. So I remember he was from the 1st Cav, and he was taking the plane up to Da Nang to go on leave. And he said, oh Lieutenant, come with me. We'll go wait it out at the officers club.

[00:27:17.60] So a couple of other officers and I go with him to the officer's club and we sit there, and it looks like well, who knows whether we'll get up to Da Nang. There's bad weather. And so we have a couple of drinks, he buys us supper at the officer's club, and finally at about 10 o'clock or so at night he said, OK, they've got the plane ready so we're going to go.

[00:27:50.96] So I'm thinking, OK, when I get to Da Nang in the middle of the night, now what's going to happen? Who's going to be there to meet me? Because that's only part way to Phu Bai, but I know I have to stop Da Nang to process in to I Corps or whatever, and then go up to Phu Bai. But I'm supposed to be able to call the hospital to tell them to come get me, but this is past curfew. Nobody's going to be out and about, and I'm going to be at the airport.

[00:28:28.67] And people had told me, oh, when you go in the airport, you see somebody with a towel over their right shoulder it means they're looking for drugs, over the left shoulder means they're selling drugs. Good little tidbit to keep in my mind.

[00:28:46.04] So we get back on another C-140 and take off, and go up to Da Nang, land in Da Nang, and go into the reception area. Everybody has two towels over their shoulders, and OK, everybody's buying and selling drugs. I'm the only girl around here and my hospital can't come get me. And this major from the Cav comes up and says, listen, I'll take you over to the Red Cross center because I know some people over there. They'll put you up, that'll be fine.

[00:29:32.66] OK. So I'm riding around Da Nang in a Jeep, in the middle of the night, in Vietnam, all by myself and I'm 23 years old and I went to Duke University and I grew up in Walpole, Massachusetts, Suburbia, America.

[00:29:55.87] Somehow I just believed that it would be OK. And so he took me over the Red Cross center and there was nobody around, but he found-- I don't know, it was a desk with a bunch of keys. He gave me a key, got me a room, and said, OK, stay here, and in the morning somebody should be around.

[00:30:18.76] OK. So the next morning I remember getting up and thinking, I don't know, I don't know how to communicate with anybody. I'm all by myself and I'm 23 and in the war zone and I know I have to get to Phu Bai. So I did.

[00:30:45.31] As I remember I found somebody eventually who gave me a phone that I could call to the hospital and say, this Lieutenant Barrett and I'm here and I need to get to Phu Bai, and I need to process in. And they said, OK. We can't send somebody over today because there's some kind of an emergency, but we'll let you know. Somebody will be by to get you to process in.

[00:31:15.41] And so I spent that day twiddling my thumbs, wondering what I was supposed to do. I remember distinctly feeling like there is nobody here to take care of me, but I'll make it somehow. So the next day I did, somebody came from the hospital.

[00:31:41.18] They took me to process in to I Corps and they brought me back to the Red Cross center. And I don't know if it was the next day or the day after that somebody came and said, oh, there is a helicopter heading up to Phu Bai. Get your stuff together really fast. We'll throw you on the Jeep and get you over to the helicopter landing and get you up there.

[00:32:12.28] So I went over and I went up there and got the helicopter. And I remember my suitcases were red. They were red Featherlight from Sears. And then I had my duffel bag. And these guys threw my suitcases on the helicopter. Didn't tie them down. And these wide open bays-- and so I got in the helicopter and am thinking my suitcase is going to fall off. And they say, oh, here, put this helmet on and you can hear what's going on.

[00:32:56.89] They were talking about some story about the night before, the party they had been in and I am thinking, these guys are flying me in a helicopter. So from Da Nang to Phu Bai it's probably half an hour flight by helicopter.

[00:33:20.17] And they were showing off, going up and down and around and up and over and trying to scare the new guy, which was me. So we landed, finally. And the chief nurse from the 85th Evac came out to meet me and he goes, you're Lieutenant Barrett? And I said yes. He said, we thought you were a guy and we had your quarters all set up in the male quarters and we have a male sponsor for you. And I said, well, I'm not a male. And I'm here.

[00:33:58.70] OK, well, we'll set you up. And they found me a quarter of a hooch and said, you know, just let us know what color you'd like and we'll just put the word out and tomorrow there'll be paint available. And I said, oh, I think maybe a nice green. OK.

[00:34:20.68] They said, probably somebody will have an air conditioner available in the next week or a couple of weeks and you can buy that and put that in, and maybe you can get a small refrigerator from the PX at some point, but here you go and here's where you'll be.

[00:34:49.84] It was a hooch divided into four rooms and I had one quarter of it. So I had my own entrance, but it was just one room. I had a small closet and then there was a board that was almost like a table or a bench that was along the side and a bed.

[00:35:18.26] And sure enough, within the first week I think I was there, a sergeant who had been fragged was a patient. And he was leaving and he had an air conditioner. And I was telling him how hot it was and everything. He said, oh, I'll sell you my air conditioner. So within a week I had an air conditioner because there were no windows. There was just an area that you could put an air conditioner in.

[00:35:56.27] My first assignment at the 85th was on the medical ward, which took care of mostly patients with malaria, hepatitis, medical conditions. There were some patients that they thought might have leptospirosis or some really strange jungle diseases that I had never heard of before.

[00:36:28.73] And in fact, they would draw blood to test for some of these really strange jungle diseases, send it to Japan because it had to go to Japan to be tested. And by the time the results came back the patient was long gone.

[00:36:52.40] So part of it was that the doctors were curious as to could they recognize these things? But the patients by the time the results of the blood came back the patients were already under care. And hopefully they were getting the right care.

[00:37:15.80] When I arrived, I had told them that I wanted to work in the emergency room and the chief nurse who was a male nurse, Colonel Garlick, felt that I needed a little bit of experience and settling in. And so, most new nurses when they arrived were assigned to the medical or surgical ward at least for a short time until they acclimated.

[00:37:47.53] So it was a good-- it was a good experience. I learned a lot in terms of all kinds of medical issues, tropical diseases that I had never heard of before and never appreciated. But I was only there for a very short time and then I went to the emergency room.

[00:38:13.65] Our shifts were 7:00 PM to 7:00 AM and 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM.

[00:38:18.31] MARK FRANKLIN: So 12 on, 12 off?

[00:38:19.89] JAY ELLEN BARRETT: 12 hours, and we worked six days a week. So there were often times when we would work 12 straight-- 12 hour shift days or nights. Mostly the nights

were 12 straight. In the emergency room, if I was working on the day shift, it was a lot of taking care of sick call, we'd get a lot of patients coming in who had infections, who required some cutting and-- for carbuncles or infections they'd gotten from bug bites or so forth.

[00:39:15.87] On the night shift, we would get a lot of our casualties. And there would be one nurse and generally two corpsmen on the night shift. And if anything serious was coming in, we would put out a call to other nurses or doctors to come in and work with us.

[00:39:40.79] On the night shift, when I first started in the emergency room, I would have two SFCs-- or E-7, sergeant first class-- who had been there for almost a year, who knew everything and had to do everything. And I just pretty much would have to just be there.

[00:40:11.48] These sergeants taught me a lot about what I needed to do, what I needed to look for, how to triage, how to set up for patients, how to manage the patient in the emergency room and move them on. Then they both left at the same time. And they were replaced by two E-4S who were straight out of their 91C classes.

[00:40:54.96] The two that I remember most were Mormons, and they were in the Army as corpsmen because they were opposed to war and they became corpsmen. They were college graduates, they were very smart, they were anxious to do the right thing, they just-- they were scared to death.

[00:41:21.54] And so suddenly after two or three months in the emergency room, I was the-- I was the person that was in charge. 23 years old and I'm in charge in a really major trauma center and had to direct these kids and teach them and help them and manage when we would get a call that we were getting seven or eight casualties coming in.

[00:42:04.63] And I remember one night when we had a call that we had casualties coming in, and when they came in, we knew that we would have one severely injured Soldier who would have stepped on a landmine. And so they would probably have some amputations.

[00:42:30.13] And then the person in front of him and behind him may have some limbs that needed to be amputated, but would have heavy shrapnel. And the ones beyond them would have injuries that were less severe.

[00:42:50.31] And so I remember when these came in and we called for the surgeons and the anesthesiologist and the OR to get ready and the x-ray techs to get ready. So we knew they were coming in, we made all the calls, got everything all set up, and we were on a regular basis all set up for anybody could come in at any time. IVs could be started within minutes and we had everything at our fingertips to move the patient along.

[00:43:23.97] And the patients came in and sure enough, they were the steps of different severities. And the medic that had been with them came in, and he was running from one to another and talking to them. And all of a sudden we turned around and he had passed out on the floor.

[00:43:42.64] He had been injured, but he had been in a state of shock where his adrenaline kept him going and then all of a sudden it caught up with him. And so he had been injured. So suddenly, we have somebody on the floor too that we're taking care of.

[00:44:04.68] And then as we move them through, we would stabilize them as much as we could, and then move them through the x-ray into the operating room was right next to us. And then we would go and we would look through their clothes to find their identification, what unit they were with and so forth.

[00:44:28.39] And I remember looking, and you know you'd pull their wallet out and they'd have pictures of their families and they'd have pictures of their pets and pictures of their girlfriends. And you'd think these people are at home in the United States right now and they don't even know this has happened to their child, their boyfriend, their son, their whatever, and it would hit you.

[00:44:54.21] And I remember looking at them and thinking, these guys are my age and they're going out and they're being faced with life and death and things that we were never brought up to be able to face on a regular basis. And these kids, they're my brother's age and you think about those things and think about the families at home.

[00:45:25.18] My mother used to send me articles from the paper about how many Soldiers had been killed or what was going on in the war. And I'd look I think, oh my gosh, four Soldiers killed this week in Vietnam and seven of them were here.

[00:45:47.60] In the emergency room, we would take care of Marines, who were not in Vietnam when I was there. There were no Marines in Vietnam in 1971. Funny how they would come into the emergency room in the middle of the night for the medical care. They used to come over and go to the officer's club because they figured it was a small officer's club, nobody would really-- we were medical people. What did we care?

[00:46:27.29] But my mother would say, there are no Marines there. Yup, they were there. And in fact, we had a major and a captain who used to come periodically to our officer's club.

[00:46:40.39] And in a quickdraw one night that they were really drunk and everybody was drunk and they were playing quickdraw. And the captain shot the major in the butt. And it was never in his official medical records and he went back out the same gate he came in and nobody ever admitted he was there.

[00:47:13.91] I was astounded that American Soldiers would attack their own people. This was a-- I don't remember whether it's a first sergeant or he was a senior sergeant, and he had been close to going home.

[00:47:37.06] But he had ticked somebody off and they threw a grenade underneath his hooch and he ended up with wounds that necessitated his being sent home. He survived it, and he wasn't that badly hurt, but he was he was really angry.

[00:48:01.60] It was confusing to somebody who was there. I felt I was there partly because I felt that I wanted to carry on what my parents had done as far as being in the military, partly because I was paying back what had been given to me through the government to pay for my last three years of college that made it OK for me to go to college,

[00:48:40.82] partly because I had friends who had died in Vietnam, high school friends and some other people that I had known who had been killed in Vietnam, and I felt if they could go and I had something that was worthwhile to offer that-- being a nurse, I felt I didn't have to condone the war, I didn't have to agree with the war. That I was taking care of Soldiers who were there through-- some of them through no choice of their own.

[00:49:23.61] When I was on the medical floor, I became very good friends with a couple of the corpsmen who worked in the drug-- there was a special drug rehab section, and it was on the medical ward. And because of the requirements of detoxing patients, it was very close to the nurses station. And I remember the nurses station, I remember we used to smoke there, and we would put our cigarettes out on the floor.

[00:50:10.37] I remember patients who had very high fevers. A lot of them had high fevers that couldn't even be registered on a thermometer. And we would tell them to go take a shower. We would send these boys with these incredibly high fevers to go walk themselves up and take a shower, which is totally against everything that I ever learned in nursing school or ever I felt as a medical professional should be appropriate.

[00:50:49.02] And it was considered appropriate because-- first of all it was 110 degrees anyway. So you really didn't know what the patient's temperature was. You knew they had a high fever and if they could walk up to you and say, my fever's 105, or if the corpsman came up and said, these two guys over here, their temperature's 105 or higher,

[00:51:25.56] you would ask the patient, OK, you have two choices. You can lay on the ice bed, which was a bed that had ice water in panels that they would lie on. Or you can go stand under a lukewarm shower until your temperature comes down. Which do you want to do? Well, they'd go, I want to go to the shower. And they did. And they were fine. And I don't remember ever having anybody pass out or become more seriously injured because of that.

[00:52:03.93] It's still to this day bothers me that I asked them to do something that was so against what you should have a patient do, but we gave it to them as a choice. And lying on the ice bed was very uncomfortable and not something people would choose to do.

[00:52:32.47] I grew up in Walpole, Massachusetts, which I think the entire time I was growing up we had one black family in the town and they didn't stay very long. I went to Duke University where in the late '60s there were very few black students. There was a token black student on the basketball team and a token black student on the football team, which today is very different, but at the time I did not know a lot of non-white people.

[00:53:18.23] And in the military, I met a lot of people from backgrounds throughout the States. My corpsmen, I had a group of corpsmen that were from Alabama and Georgia, a couple of them

had told me, they said, we had a choice. We got into trouble, and the judge said, you join the Army or you go to jail. And they said they'd join the Army.

[00:53:48.01] They were good kids. They got into a little bit of trouble, had a choice, chose the Army. Luckily got into being medics as opposed to being grunts or foot soldiers. There were a lot of Mexicans in our unit who were corpsmen, who most of them as I remember the-- big group from Texas and Colorado. And they were kids that I never would have known.

[00:54:27.71] I worked very closely with a couple of kids from Arkansas, and it seemed to me that everybody who lived in and grew up in Arkansas knew Glen Campbell and played guitar and sang with Glen Campbell on their front porch. And one of these kids who was our Radar, the Radar from M*A*S*H, he was from Arkansas.

[00:55:03.56] And we used to sit up all night when I would work 7:00 PM to 7:00 AM in the emergency room and listen to country music. And I had always loved country music, which is very different for Massachusetts people. But it was fun to sit up and talk to him. And I always felt as though one of the real benefits of being in the military was meeting and getting to know people from all across the country.

[00:55:42.06] The third night that I was in Phu Bai sleeping in my hooch, we had an incoming attack that hit so close it sprayed dirt on the metal hooch. And I still can feel the fear that I had that night. Well the whole time I was Phu Bai I had trouble sleeping at night.

[00:56:22.73] So working nights was fine because then you'd sleep during the day, but you had nothing to do but sleep and work because there was no place to go, there was nothing to do except sleep and work. But I remember that as being one of the scariest nights I ever had.

[00:56:43.40] We had one night when we used to get movies in Vietnam and they were reel to reel movies, and they would show the first reel in the officer's club and then they would take the first reel out, show it to the enlisted people at an outside makeshift screen, and then show the officer's club the second reel and then take that out to the enlisted people.

[00:57:17.33] So this one movie, I must have seen hundreds of movies in Vietnam and I can't tell you the name of one. Well, I can tell you the name of one and that was, Tora! Tora! Tora! And because it was so long, they showed it one time outside, where they usually show the enlisted movies. And they had a big homemade screen painted white, and it was outside so we sat on empty ammunition boxes.

[00:57:53.98] And when they showed the movie-- the night they showed the movie we had an alert. So we all had to have our helmets and flak jackets on. So I'm sitting watching Tora! Tora! Tora! with a helmet and flak jacket. Now we had to sit with our feet up because there were rats running in and around the ammo boxes. Well, we got so used to rats and cockroaches that it meant nothing.

[00:58:20.98] So sitting up with our helmets and flak jackets watching Tora! Tora! Tora! And we could watch the-- they were shooting off into the hills, and they were shooting into the base, and helicopters were taking off and landing.

[00:58:41.91] And the helicopters made the most noise when the Americans were talking because in Tora! Tora! Tora! when the Japanese were talking, they had subtitles and you could read it. But when the Americans were talking, the helicopters were taking off and landing, and you couldn't hear what was going on. But we knew the story anyway.

[00:58:59.79] So I will never forget sitting there, watching this movie with my feet up because of the rats, watching firefights going on, and thinking to myself, if my mother could see me now.

[00:59:25.61] I will never forget the first patient that I was involved with in the emergency room. It was my first week in the emergency room so I don't know whether it was the first day or second or third day.

[00:59:43.82] When they brought in a group of casualties and they brought in a second lieutenant whose legs were both blown off and one arm was just a few bones, and they brought him in and everybody was shouting, do this, do this, do this, do this. And I was standing there, I didn't know what to do, and I wasn't sure what to do, and I didn't know what I was capable of doing or what I should be doing. And it was really the first casualty that came through as I was learning what my role would be.

[01:00:31.88] I remember standing and trying to talk to him and tell him that we were doing everything we could for him. And there was a chaplain on the other side of the patient, and he was talking to him. And I can still remember, we had surgeons all around trying to stop the bleeding. He had 80 units of blood that we gave him.

[01:01:06.50] And in the emergency room, we kept a refrigerator of A negative blood-- O negative blood, I'm sorry. O negative blood because it's a universal donor. And so any Americans, whether they were positive or negative or A or B or O could get this blood. And Vietnamese-- very low incidence of O blood, so we kept it for Americans.

[01:01:40.71] And this particular kid, we were just hanging unit after unit after unit. And I remember over the next few days, members of his unit came in and donated blood. And it just-- there was blood everywhere. And we got him stabilized and moved into the operating room.

[01:02:04.11] And I remember going to his clothes and taking out his wallet. He had graduated from West Point. I still remember his name. And his parents and his family didn't know what had happened to him, and he was dying. Essentially he knew he was dying, he knew he didn't want to live with no legs and one arm.

[01:02:34.45] And the impact of what war does to people, and how it impacts healthy, smart, strong kids really hit me that day.

[01:03:01.03] Probably a good part of it was coming home. When I was in Da Nang after we left Phu Bai and I went down and I was working in Da Nang, we took care of a number of young children who were from a local orphanage and had been seriously injured. And there was one little boy that I will never forget his name, we called him Shah or Sau, whatever the Vietnamese word is that means six

[01:03:36.28] because he was apparently the sixth child of his family. And his mother had been killed in a fire, and he had been shot. And he had a colostomy and he was recovering. He was very tiny. And he was recovering from his wounds and he couldn't tell us where he lived, who his family was, or how we could find his family.

[01:04:02.41] There was no way for us to connect him with his people, and we helped him get better. He went from a scared little child in the corner of his crib to a little boy who was walking around and smiling. And one of the Vietnamese nurses who worked for us adopted him and took him home to be part of her family. So that was a happy day, that was a very happy day.

[01:04:43.91] The hospital leadership I think was very good. Our director of nursing was Colonel Garlick He was an old Army guy and he was probably in his '50s, old by then by our standards. He was a hard nose and he had been in the military for a long time and a lot of people didn't appreciate him and didn't appreciate his trying to keep us on the military straight and narrow.

[01:05:24.01] But I think he was supportive of his nurses, he helped us to get the training we needed, he watched out for us and made sure that before he moved us from one spot to the next that we were prepared, and made sure that we had mentors to help us to learn and to get along.

[01:05:51.94] He had very strict rules, but if you didn't get caught, he didn't pursue things. I believe and I think I remember this, that we had a male nurse who was-- somehow they found out he was gay. Colonel Garlick did not approve and got him sent home. And that disturbed some of us a little, but it was the early '70s and that was part of the environment.

[01:06:39.04] If you were lucky enough to be off on a Sunday, we had Chinook helicopters that would take hospital personnel to the beach. Didn't happen a lot, but when it did, it was fun to go to the beach. And the beaches were beautiful. And I remember we used to say, this is so beautiful there'll be a resort here someday.

[01:07:08.11] When I was in Da Nang, we used to go to China Beach and say, oh, someday there'll be a Ranada or a Sheraton. And this past February I was back in Vietnam and I did go to China Beach and stayed at a five star resort on China Beach. It was beautiful.

[01:07:38.88] I really liked the Vietnamese people that I met. We did take care of North Vietnamese patients in hospitals when I was there, and it was really difficult from a personal ethical-- trying to come to terms with caring for patients who were our enemies, but I think for the most part, the nurses really felt a patient is a patient is a patient, and we took good care of them as we did of our own Soldiers.

[01:08:27.81] I'm not sure whether-- I mean, they were-- the ones that we had in Phu Bai or down in Da Nang were seriously injured, and I'm not sure they could have done anything to hurt us anyway, but we did take good care of them.

[01:08:49.50] I know in Da Nang, in the ward that I worked on, a surgical ward, and there was a section for North Vietnamese patients that had severe brain injuries. And we had disrespectful names for them, but they didn't know. And maybe it helped us to cordon them off as not ours.

[01:09:20.91] We took good care of them, we did everything we needed to do for them and could do for them, but we had to feel like we understood our Soldiers saw them as they were out there to try to kill us or to hurt us, so that it was difficult as a 23-year-old, 24-year-old to think about those things. My friends never did. The people I went to nursing school never had to face those kind of issues. So it's really different.

[01:10:04.71] My mother would send me articles, and none of the articles seemed to jibe with what was really going on in Vietnam in terms of numbers of injured or numbers of killed. We had Chinese that would come and get care in the emergency room in Phu Bai in the middle of the night.

[01:10:29.89] Our hospital was based in what the military will tell you is the worst place to ever put a hospital. It was at that the end of an airfield, airfield is a prime target. It was next to a munitions or gasoline dump-- worst place to put a hospital, good location to try to hit.

[01:10:49.99] We were next to MACV headquarters. They were always trying to hit that. Across the way from us was a super spy area where they had lots of antennas listening to trees all the way out in the jungle. And they had Chinese stationed there to translate from Chinese that they were listening to, and the Chinese would come over in the middle of the night to our ER if they were sick.

[01:11:22.54] So we had Chinese who weren't in Vietnam, we had Marines who weren't in Vietnam, we had ROK soldiers, Republic of Korea soldiers, who weren't in Vietnam at the time and they would come in the middle of the night for medical care, in the middle of the night when they weren't there.

[01:11:50.68] We knew that all of our supplies were being shipped on in containers overseas-- SeaLand. SeaLand was owned by the Johnson family, or primary owners of SeaLand land were the Johnson family. Our buildings were built by a company that was heavily supported by the Johnson family.

[01:12:21.99] We knew that a lot of what was going on was supported financially. People in high places in the American government were making money by our being there. We never felt we could win the war, we never felt like, well, we're getting there, and we're going to take over, and everybody's going to be happy for the rest of our lives.

[01:12:48.54] We felt like we were there for no reason for the United States. It was really difficult from the perspective of seeing young American men coming in maimed and forever

changed because of a war that we would never win and we didn't think anybody in Washington cared whether we won it or not.

[01:13:25.61] I think there were probably 10 or 12 women in the hospital, and that included a Red Cross worker and then the rest of us were nurses. And there were 10,000 men in the Phu Bai area for the 101st Airborne.

[01:13:50.40] So I think first of all, I grew up in a family with a strong mother who had to raise and support her own family because my father died so young. I saw my role model was a strong woman. I went to nursing school at a school that made us feel we were strong change agents and role models and we were smart and we could take care of ourselves and make things happen.

[01:14:30.94] And when I went there I was an officer. So I was a first lieutenant when I went there. I was promoted to captain while at Phu Bai. And so I think I had partially an internal strength but also a shell of-- you know what? I'm a nurse and I'm an officer. And be careful if you say anything to me that I don't like. I'm a nurse and I'm an officer and if you get hurt, you'd better be careful what I remember about you.

[01:15:16.66] But I think as a nurse and an officer, I heard-- they would make comments, they would wolf whistle, there was all of that. But it didn't bother me because I felt like that's not directed at me, not me as a person.

[01:15:40.47] I think it's very different. I work-- today I work in the VA in women's health and I see a lot of the young veterans today coming back from OEF, OIF and OND and things are very, very different. And it's for a lot of reasons. Part of which then-- they weren't officers, they weren't professionals, they weren't nurses, they weren't seen as the angel of mercy. The person that's going to take care of them in the hospital, they're seen totally differently.

[01:16:19.30] And I think there's a lot of issues around how we prepare our women for combat today, and how we help people process having been in combat.

[01:16:38.13] When I came back from Vietnam, I stayed in the military for another three years. And I think that was incredibly important for being able to talk to other veterans about what I experienced, to be able to process everything I went through, to be able to share what had happened and what I went through that today's veterans come back and they immediately the day they get back, they walk out into their civilian life and nobody wants to hear about it, nobody wants to talk about it, and nobody can relate.

[01:17:23.90] If you haven't been there, you can't really understand it. And that's World War II veterans, when they came back, they spent a month on a troopship. They talked to each other, they shared their experiences, they could relate, they knew what each other had been through and they could talk about it, process it before they went back to their regular life. And today we're not allowing our Soldiers to be able to do that. And I think that's a real, real problem for the women, but also for all our veterans.

[01:18:09.05] May of '72. When I landed in San Francisco, we all went up to the bar to get a drink, to welcome ourselves back. So I'm in a captain's military uniform with my Vietnam medals on and the waitress asked me for ID. I've just spent a year in Vietnam, I'm a captain in the Army, I've got Vietnam medals and she asked me for an ID. That ticked me off.

[01:18:47.09] But in 1972 people were not happy about the war. I don't think I ever got spit on, but I didn't go any place where I would be subject to that. I wore my uniform off base as little as possible.

[01:19:09.18] MARK FRANKLIN: Where were you reassigned?

[01:19:11.56] JAY ELLEN BARRETT: Fort Carson, Colorado.

[01:19:12.80] MARK FRANKLIN: Nice, OK.

[01:19:14.49] JAY ELLEN BARRETT: Very nice, I had a very good time. And there were people I had been in Vietnam with who were also at Fort Carson.

[01:19:21.62] MARK FRANKLIN: How about the reception from your family and friends back home?

[01:19:24.80] JAY ELLEN BARRETT: They were just glad to have me home. I have two younger brothers who both had middle of the road draft numbers, and the draft ended before they got called up. But I remember saying to them, if you get drafted, I'll drive you to Canada, because I did not want them to have to go to Vietnam.

[01:19:56.04] I went as a nurse. But I saw what happened to these kids who went out and would walk through the jungle on patrol, and somebody stepped on a mine and suddenly six lives are changed forever. Well I jump like crazy, I have hyper response or something like that, and I can see people walking up and yet when they say, hello, I'll still jump up a mile.

[01:20:39.11] For a long time after I got back, the sound of a helicopter would shoot adrenaline into my system. And I think that stopped for a while, but lately I've noticed it coming back and I think part of that is because I'm working with veterans, I'm coming to these reunions and I'm reviving a bunch of memories that I hadn't thought about for a long time. So the sound of a Huey helicopter will trigger certain sensations.

[01:21:28.05] I think today people remember it differently than they did 40 years ago. I think people are more apt to appreciate Vietnam veterans today. Back in the '70s you didn't tell anybody you were a veteran, you didn't go to the VA, you didn't share the experiences, you didn't wear a uniform.

[01:22:02.61] The antiwar movement, it was bigger than just anti Vietnam, it was anti the culture, anti a lot of things. The Vietnam War was just one piece of it I think. But I think Vietnam veterans avoided the VA and avoided any association with the government because it was frowned on, it was looked down on, it was not something to be proud of.

[01:22:37.85] I went to the unveiling of the Women's Memorial, and people, strangers came up and said, thank you, thank you for serving. And that had never happened before. So it's nice to see people responding to Soldiers coming back from a war, whether they believe in the war or not.

[01:23:07.01] They're not associating that the people that are in the war are proponents of it necessarily. Where in Vietnam they felt if you went, you were part of the problem. And didn't understand that just because you were in the military and sent there did not mean you necessarily agreed with all of the reasons behind it.

[01:23:44.50] When I went to the Women's Memorial unveiling, I went to the Wall. That memorial is very difficult for me. And when I went to the unveiling of the Women's Memorial, I stood back from it and looked at it as a memorial. There are still names on it that I have not been able to go up and look for.

[01:24:14.76] I have not been back since the unveiling of the memorial, which was-- that was a long time ago. And I have a friend who lives in Maryland and when I go down to visit her I keep thinking, oh, I should have her take me over to the Wall. And there are--

[01:24:32.93] MARK FRANKLIN: Is this the roommate that you--

[01:24:34.58] JAY ELLEN BARRETT: Yeah, yeah.

[01:24:34.88] MARK FRANKLIN: --so you stayed in touch with her over the years?

[01:24:37.19] JAY ELLEN BARRETT: Yeah, we're still very close. I still have a hard time and I know I'll go back to the Wall and I'll find those names, but I'm still not quite ready to do it. And the name of that first patient that I talked about, I know I'll go back and I'll find his name, but it just-- still there just something that I'm just not ready to do it.

[01:25:19.37] I think that it's very important to archive not just official documents and official history but personal experiences of veterans. I think it's important because we're doomed to repeat things if we don't take more time to understand what's happened in the past.

[01:25:55.44] I think that today's youth, they're not spending near enough time on learning history and understanding what's happened in years past, and that maybe this effort will at some point interest enough people to get them involved and in listening and learning and understanding. So that maybe someday we won't have to go to war, we won't have to send our best and brightest and youngest off to a situation that the old men who decide to go don't want to go.

[01:26:45.79] I thought it was very interesting that in Hanoi, they talked about the American War. The people, the guides that we had there, talked about how Ho Chi Minh really revered the American pilots and the Hanoi Hilton is a museum and North Vietnamese children go to the museum and tourists and they talk about how well they took care of our Soldiers and our guide in his mid '30s wasn't even alive.

[01:27:22.19] And so he's been fed these stories that he is passing along to the next generation and the next generation. So the impact of what the government once passed along and told to people was very evident then.

[01:27:45.11] The South Vietnamese, they still talk about the Vietnam War. They were extremely friendly to Americans. The older Vietnamese, South Vietnamese all had little stories to tell about Americans they had met and were very nervous about saying anything out loud about their government or about America or about the war, which showed the impact of the communist regimes.

[01:28:29.45] Although I did not feel as though I were unsafe or the people were watching, it just felt like traveling to another country. I've been to China, and in China you felt like you were really programmed to where you could go, who you could talk to, what you heard was only from people the government chose. And I didn't quite get that feeling in South Vietnam.

[01:28:56.95] MARK FRANKLIN: Now, just a minute ago I asked you if you were familiar with the United States of America Vietnam War Commemoration. This oral history interview project is one component of that, but the larger mission as authorized by Congress is to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War, and our number one objective is to thank and honor our Vietnam War veterans for their service and sacrifice.

[01:29:20.33] So ma'am, thank you for your service.

[01:29:22.55] JAY ELLEN BARRETT: Thank you.

[01:29:22.79] MARK FRANKLIN: And thank you very much for an awesome interview. We really appreciate your time. This was a spectacular.