

Joan Craigwell V2 USAF

[00:00:12.97] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I was born in a place called Demopolis, Alabama. It's near Selma. I don't know if you've heard of the movie Selma, but it's near Selma. And it's a Southern city, very small, a rural area. And that's basically where I grew up.

[00:00:33.46] JOAN CRAIGWELL: My decision to go into the military was met with a lot of resistance from my mother, because I had graduated from college. And at that time, during the '60s, it was-- I don't think that there were many nurses that had a bachelor of science in nursing. And so most of the nurses had a three-year program.

[00:00:55.00] And so my mother-- and my parents actually-- had sacrificed and sent me to a private school in Virginia. And so when I announced to them that I was going into the Air Force, my mother was vehemently against it, and made some statements that I won't say right now. But anyway, she wasn't happy at all about my decision to do it.

[00:01:14.86] However, later on, when she found out that I was an officer and that the lifestyle that she had envisioned as far as a woman being in the military was quite different from what she had read, what she had seen in the movies.

[00:01:29.56] MARC HENDERSON: What do you think she expected?

[00:01:32.14] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Well, she expected me to be among a group of unruly men, men that would abuse me, and that the vocation that I had chosen as a nurse, that it would be diminished in some way simply because she had thought in her mind that I would come back to Alabama and work at Bryan Whitfield Memorial Hospital, and that we'd be one happy family. However, that was not the vision I had.

[00:02:00.28] My vision was to go into the military, retire, travel the world, and be pretty much adventuresome.

[00:02:09.07] During the time I was working on my bachelor's degree in nursing, we had to do some research. And we had-- in one of the nursing journals, I saw one of the advertisements with a flight nurse. And on one part it had them with the white uniform on. And the other had the flight nurse's uniform and a plane in the back. I said, you know, I haven't even been on a plane in my life before, but this is something I would love to do.

[00:02:34.07] So my first assignment was at Mesa Air Force Base, in Sacramento, California. And when the chance came up for me to request going to flight school, I put it in, and I was accepted. It's a difficult school, a lot of physics and stuff.

[00:03:01.67] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Flying is a little bit different than driving around in an automobile. We have to consider the physics, that's-- taking care of patients that have IVs. They have casts on. They have wounds, and they have all those kinds of things. And so understanding the aerodynamics of that and also knowing that, if emergencies arise, that you would have to know how to take care of that.

[00:03:27.80] Some of the flights had flight surgeons. I flew for a while-- and I also flew when I was in Vietnam-- on a C-141. And of course, subsequently, after that, I was in the Reserves and flew on a C-130.

[00:03:41.99] But with the C-141, you have to know the ins and outs of that aircraft. You have to know where the oxygen outlets are. You have to also know how to intervene in case there is an emergency situation.

[00:03:56.99] MARC HENDERSON: How many patients could a C-141 carry?

[00:04:02.01] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Well, now you got me on the spot here, because it would vary.

[00:04:04.15] MARC HENDERSON: Well, it doesn't have to be exact. Just gen--

[00:04:06.25] JOAN CRAIGWELL: It would vary. Some of the flights on there had as many as 27 or 28 litter patients. And of course they would reconfigure the aircraft to accommodate walking passengers. And some people were getting flights back to other destinations. So that was pretty much the load. And you had other flight nurses on there with you. It's just like actually a hospital in the air.

[00:04:37.27] MARC HENDERSON: Could you describe a little bit about the layout for somebody that's never seen a medevac aircraft? Is that what you call them? Hospital aircraft-- what would you call the C-141 when it's fitted out to transport passenger-- or patients?

[00:04:56.50] JOAN CRAIGWELL: An air evacuation--

[00:04:57.91] MARC HENDERSON: Air evacuation.

[00:04:58.48] JOAN CRAIGWELL: --mm-hm, aircraft. And it's cold. It's dark. It's noisy. You don't have a plush rug to walk on. It's metal. And of course, you have your own medications there that you would give to the patients as if-- particularly when you're flying through different time zones. And we call it Z time. And you would have on a watch for Z time and a watch for the local time as well.

[00:05:32.72] So the litters were stacked one on the other.

[00:05:40.72] MARC HENDERSON: How high could they go, four or five high?

[00:05:43.69] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, no. I think the most I've seen is three.

[00:05:51.33] MARC HENDERSON: How old were you when you first went to Vietnam?

[00:05:54.22] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I was 30 years old.

[00:05:55.64] MARC HENDERSON: Thirty.

[00:05:56.22] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Mm-hm.

[00:05:56.85] MARC HENDERSON: And how long had you been in the military before you actually went to Vietnam?

[00:06:05.29] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Six years.

[00:06:06.11] MARC HENDERSON: Six years. What year did you transfer to Vietnam?

[00:06:11.00] JOAN CRAIGWELL: '67.

[00:06:12.29] MARC HENDERSON: And you were assigned to a field hospital there, right?

[00:06:15.86] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Well, the typical-- most people think of a field hospital is something like M*A*S*H, or something like that. But we had the Quonset huts. A Quonset hut is something like someone taking a barrel and cutting it in half and just placing it in the sand. It's pretty much what we had. And of course, I sent you the picture of what the intensive care unit looked like. And that was pretty bad.

[00:06:41.99] So I was assigned, because of my experience-- because most of the nurses I worked with were just newly graduated from nursing school. These were 23-year-olds, and I was 30 years old when I got to Vietnam.

[00:07:02.11] MARC HENDERSON: What rank were you when you got there?

[00:07:03.85] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I was a captain.

[00:07:05.29] MARC HENDERSON: So you were senior to most of the ladies that you were assigned with?

[00:07:08.41] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, absolutely. Yes.

[00:07:10.16] MARC HENDERSON: And did you know in advance where you were going to be assigned, or did they get you over there and then assign you as a replacement?

[00:07:19.34] JOAN CRAIGWELL: They changed my assignment. My first assignment was to go to Tan Son Nhut. And thank God that that was changed. Because Tan Son Nhut received a lot of incoming. And it was the hot spot to be in. Cam Ranh was not the safest place, but during the Tet Offensive, no place was safe. Not one single place was safe there.

[00:07:41.92] As a matter of fact, the hospital down below where I was-- see, I was the head nurse of a triage unit, the 26th Casualty Staging Unit. And it's where they would bring in men fresh from the battlefield into this area. And you'd do the triage there. And the place stayed full all the time. We had three-- well, at first it was one, then we added two more.

[00:08:13.66] And during the Tet Offensive, we didn't have beds enough for everybody. It was a concrete floor, damp sheets. You had one door on one end, one door entrance, and the other door, and that was it. And of course, at night, sometimes they would tell us to make sure we had no power showing, and no lights. And so many of us worked with flashlights. And we had to go about our nursing duties that way.

[00:08:46.99] I called that my battlefield. As a matter of fact, when I talk about my nursing in Vietnam, I call it my own personal battlefield. It wasn't the VC. It wasn't the NVA. It was the nurses running around on that concrete, trying to keep patients alive. That was our battlefield.

[00:09:13.13] MARC HENDERSON: Did you ever fly with patients and cargo, in addition to the space-available passengers or the walking passengers?

[00:09:19.35] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Well, I'm sure they did. I'm sure they used whatever space they had available when there-- if there were some patients. I'm sure there was some cargo and some other kinds of things on the aircraft. But mainly my focus was taking care of the patients that were there.

[00:09:36.32] And the medical technicians were just wonderful. They were well-prepared, very supportive, didn't forget anything. If you told them that you needed this for the flight, they knew their job, and you could just depend on them.

[00:09:58.01] JOAN CRAIGWELL: You'd go down to the hangar about 4 o'clock in the morning, and you'd have the manifest of the patients that were going to be on the plane. And you'd have the configuration on the wall of the C-141. And so here you are, with the other nurses, and you're planning exactly where you're going to place those patients. OK?

[00:10:20.69] Now, if a patient has an IV, you're not going to place them on a bottom litter. You're going to place them on a top litter, because the IV can drip a lot better if it's set at heights rather than down on the floor. If you have someone who has what we call an airplane splint, that's an aisle problem. That someone walking up and down the aisle. So you've got to make sure where you situate that patient so that that patient is not in the flow of traffic.

[00:10:52.06] When you start thinking about patients needing oxygen, who are at risk, then you're thinking about placing that patient near an oxygen outlet. So you had to think of every eventuality on the plane, considering the diagnosis of the patient and where the patient is wounded. If you've got a patient with a head wound and you put the patient in the aircraft, you've got to think about swelling. That could be a problem.

[00:11:23.30] So before the patient is placed on the aircraft, they have to be cleared by the physician, the flight surgeon. If they're that critically ill-- and some were really at high risk, and wanting to get them back to the States-- that was our-- like I said, that was our battlefield right there. It was making sure that we got the patients back alive. That was what we were fighting for. That's what all the nurses were fighting for.

[00:11:49.60] And that's why we gave up so much to have that to happen. Because we wanted those guys to get back home in the best shape that they could. Because their fam-- some of them didn't have families, of course, but for the most part, somebody was back there waiting on them. And then when they got back to the States, many times, they had to be redistributed.

[00:12:10.68] But getting back to your original question, as far as the preparation to get a client on a C-141, it takes-- on any aircraft-- for planning for a patient leaving-- it takes a lot of planning. You got to think about the diet, the food, the liquids. You got to think about every conceivable thing that you'd have in a hospital. All these things are going through your mind at the same time--

[00:12:35.94] MARC HENDERSON: And the flight nurse--

[00:12:36.66] JOAN CRAIGWELL: --preparing for a flight.

[00:12:37.59] MARC HENDERSON: --the flight nurse was integral in that planning process. It wasn't done for you in advance. You had to help plan for it?

[00:12:45.99] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Well, the day before the flight, you would go down to the hospital and you would get the names of the patients that were flying. There were some people who-- some patients-- some guys who were, like I said, at high risk. They didn't know if they should be on that flight or not. So it wasn't probably until the last minute that they were cleared to leave, to get on the aircraft.

[00:13:11.10] Because one of the things you don't want to have happen is to put a patient on there, knowing that they're at high risk, and then realizing, by the time you start your journey, that that patient is going to suffer some kind of emergency situation that could have possibly been avoided if you had planned more carefully.

[00:13:36.54] MARC HENDERSON: And how about a day in the life at the triage?

[00:13:39.87] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, when the patients would come in, it's like any--

[00:13:42.97] MARC HENDERSON: Via helicopter or vehicle or--

[00:13:45.00] JOAN CRAIGWELL: The helicopters would bring them in. You got a lot of guys sometimes out in front of the building, and you had to choose where those patients would go. Some patients would be just sent directly over to the intensive care unit. And those patients sometimes would just die immediately. Then you had patients everywhere. That was the thing that bothered me a lot with working under those kinds of circumstances.

[00:14:18.31] Because normally, when you work at a hospital, you know your patient's name. You know, somehow you've got a little bit of history on them. You know something about them. You didn't get that kind of information. All you know is the guy is severely wounded. And we were short on doctors. And also understanding at the time that I was there is you just don't fly people in when you need them, or get on the phone and say, we need six or seven more nurses

down here. You'd have to work with what you have. And working with what you have sometimes was not all that good either. Because many of the young nurses were not prepared.

[00:14:56.46] I was a little bit more seasoned. I had worked in intensive care units before I got to Vietnam. My education was a little bit different than the younger nurses. And so my planning and critical thinking was a little bit higher, so which meant that I had to-- I didn't have a chance to go to the bathroom. I was there 18, 20 hours a day, not being able to go to the bathroom. Because-- you could go to the bathroom-- you'd pass right by it-- but you'd think, oh, my God, if I go in the bathroom, somebody might die. Or maybe-- or someone's calling me to do this.

[00:15:34.81] And so this sense of over-responsibility I think worked to my detriment. It really did in many, many ways. And that's why nurses really have not been recognized for the things that they have done in the military, and particularly in Vietnam, and flight nurses. And that's why right now I'm working on this film that I want to bring to light, to have-- so that the whole world can see that.

[00:16:03.21] The articles that I have written, people have been fascinated by them. Because they had no idea that women-- of the 11,000 or 12,000 women that were there, there's very little that's been reported about us.

[00:16:17.78] I used to be the director of the largest vet center in this country, the vet center downtown, across from Balboa Park. It's now located over at Liberty Station. But anyway, through my interviews and talking to nurses-- who really need to tell their stories even more, but who have chosen not to do that. But they have given me their story, and I've asked for this story, because I have published those, and it's a typical day that--

[00:16:48.66] MARC HENDERSON: Is there a common theme?

[00:16:49.85] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Yes. Overwork. And I think that-- the thing that I think is common among all of us is not getting to know your patients because you were so task prone. You were so much into doing dressings, IVs, keeping folks alive, blood transfusions, all kinds of-- oh, my gosh, punji stick wounds, charred skin, brain injury, you name it.

[00:17:39.65] MARC HENDERSON: What were your living conditions like there?

[00:17:42.95] JOAN CRAIGWELL: We lived in Quonset huts, and a concrete floor. You could take 68 pounds with you. Two people lived-- I call it-- in a closet. You had a roommate. And you had a common area for your showers and a common area where you would go to eat. And the terrain, or the landscape, was mainly sand at Cam Ranh Bay, mainly sand. It was also littered with a lot of the Vietnamese people sitting around, squatting, with these little cone-shaped straw hats, staring at you.

[00:18:27.98] The monsoon season, the temperature was very hot. I had been stationed in the Philippines before, so Southeast Asia wasn't that new to me. All types of creepy crawly things all the time. Let's see, there were other things. I'm just trying to think about that, what they--

[00:18:55.85] MARC HENDERSON: So how about-- you mentioned having a roommate. Where you lived in your Quonset huts, was it all female officers, or was it all females together? Was it officers only, or officers and enlisted mixed?

[00:19:08.36] JOAN CRAIGWELL: All officers. All the females lived on one end, and then the male officers lived adjacent to us, on the other side. But we all were in one location. All the officers were in one location.

[00:19:21.44] MARC HENDERSON: And it was just medical personnel, or was it--

[00:19:23.72] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Where I was, it was just all medical. Yeah, all medical and support groups. We had civilians there, too. The civilians were constantly building things around there all the time. Constantly. And you could smell diesel smoke. You could just hear this noise, just 24/7.

[00:19:42.56] MARC HENDERSON: Like contracted construction workers?

[00:19:44.78] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Yes.

[00:19:48.83] MARC HENDERSON: And by civilians, were they all Americans, or were they from different nationalities, or mostly Vietnamese? Who were the civilians?

[00:19:56.22] JOAN CRAIGWELL: It was a mixture of people from other areas, too. But mainly it was civilians from the States. And there were Vietnamese people working as well. However, the men who were there fighting were from Australia, Korea, and other areas. And these, we had to take care of those patients, too. And we also had to take care of the Vietnamese people that were wounded.

[00:20:32.67] JOAN CRAIGWELL: It was difficult, because it was a common area, with little privacy. And so we all took showers in a common area. Had a little difficulty with keeping the area clean because no one wanted to take the responsibility to clean up behind other folk. And sometimes when the base was on high alert, we couldn't have any of the Vietnamese people come in to do any of the cleaning, and so that presented a problem. And then the privacy of having another adult person in the room with you, that's another-- it's just tight.

[00:21:14.58] MARC HENDERSON: How did you mitigate that? Did you do anything to work it out? Or how-- can you think of any examples?

[00:21:23.43] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, no. You just go with the flow. You're in a combat zone.

[00:21:29.70] MARC HENDERSON: Well, I was thinking in terms of-- I know sometimes they would hang a curtain between racks for a little more extra privacy.

[00:21:38.49] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, yeah, we'd have the shower curtains between us, and that. However, when you would get out, you got to dry yourself. And then you got to go down this walkway to your room, down the hall-- not a hall, but in another area there in the compound.

[00:21:54.63] MARC HENDERSON: I was thinking more in your living spaces, like to kind of-- some people would work different shifts so that they would have some privacy in there. Like one person could sleep while the other person was working, and vice versa, or hang a curtain in their living space to get them a little more privacy.

[00:22:11.88] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, no, we didn't have that. No. Mm-mm.

[00:22:16.89] MARC HENDERSON: And the food was OK? Or did you eat many C-rations, or did you--

[00:22:22.92] JOAN CRAIGWELL: No C-rations. No. They had a dining room that you could go. And they also had the food cart that would come on the unit. And so what would happen, many times we would not leave the ward at all-- or leave the Quonset hut, because we were so busy. And so whatever was left on the food cart, many times we ate the scraps off of there. And even if patients didn't eat their trays or what have you, we would eat that food, or what have you.

[00:22:51.16] And I think that's something people don't know about the life of a nurse in a combat area. You go-- and you had asked me the question about your day, when you started out, a typical day. You come in the morning, at 6:30, to get the report on all of your patients, as much as you could. Meantime, patients are coming in. Patients also have-- an emergency may happen at the same time you're getting the report. You may have somebody starts bleeding very badly.

[00:23:27.00] And then, right after that, it was the routines of dressing changes. There was a routine of feeding patients. There was a routine of doing lab work. You had-- for the ambulatory patients, we would get them to put some of the patients in the wheelchair and take them down to the lab. We didn't have lab drawers, people come and just take-- draw blood and that. Sometimes we did and sometimes we didn't. But for the most part, sometimes we'd just take the whole bed down there for them to do the X-rays and to do the blood work in that area.

[00:24:02.88] They had different crews that would go. They would have-- I mean, you could-- they could have as many as three flights leaving out of there per week. I'm sure there probably were even sometimes even more. Because like I said, they evacuated thousands of guys out of there. So that was how it went as far as the schedules would go. And I would be with this crew. Then I'd have to deadhead all the way back on a commercial flight.

[00:24:35.34] MARC HENDERSON: Did that happen often, where you had to fly commercial to get back?

[00:24:38.34] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Well, that's the only way you get back. And when you say, how often, for me, I did this about three or four times during the height of the conflict. So that was about it.

[00:25:01.55] JOAN CRAIGWELL: There was fun. We'd go to the officers' club. And they always had some-- not always, but frequently-- had these bands that would come in from the Philippines. And people would sing, and of course we would dance. And I wasn't one to do the

drinking. In fact, I still don't. And I still had a lot of fun. We really had-- everything wasn't all work, work, work.

[00:25:29.36] And of course we'd go to the beach, and walk up and down the beach. Some people swam at the beach-- at the lake actually. And then I went on R&R to Hong Kong. So that was nice. I had been there before.

[00:25:50.85] MARC HENDERSON: How did you choose to go to Hong Kong, out of all the choices that you had?

[00:25:55.07] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I wanted to do some shopping. Yeah, I needed to get-- I wanted to pick up another camera. I needed to get some-- well, some presents for people. And every time you go to-- if you go to Japan, or if you go any place, people always had a laundry list of things they wanted you to bring back. Because we were limited. Even though we had a base exchange on the base, but still there were limited things for females.

[00:26:20.99] MARC HENDERSON: And how did you get there and back?

[00:26:25.85] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, you'd get a hop, a military aircraft.

[00:26:30.98] MARC HENDERSON: Anything stand out about your trip?

[00:26:36.44] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I can't think of anything that is so unusual for the trip. You pretty much knew what you wanted to purchase. And of course, it's always going to the different restaurants. And I thought it was kind of different. Here we had been wearing these fatigues for I don't know how long, and then we would get an opportunity to dress-- put a nice little dress on, or something like that. And it was nice.

[00:27:10.13] MARC HENDERSON: And is that something that you brought with you or that you had to get there, the dress?

[00:27:13.85] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, I had a few dresses with me, but I always bought something. Yeah.

[00:27:22.33] MARC HENDERSON: And what about popular culture, any books that you remember enjoying, or popular music that you enjoyed, that take you back, that if you could hear it today?

[00:27:36.80] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I must admit, I love '60s music. Books, no, I don't remember reading any books. I think that any time that I had, I was sleeping, that I could rest.

[00:27:51.29] MARC HENDERSON: How about on your flights, did you get much time to sleep during the missions?

[00:27:55.79] JOAN CRAIGWELL: You stayed pretty much alert. Sure, you could doze a little bit. But you pretty much stayed alert, because you had patients there, and you knew when the

next medication was going to be. You were watching the IVs. You were listening for certain kinds of things from certain patients, because you had already gotten the report on them the day before. And then, that morning, usually, if there was a patient that was at high risk, you were constantly watching that patient.

[00:28:26.41] MARC HENDERSON: How much interaction did you have with the allies?

[00:28:31.81] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Not a lot. Because everything was--

[00:28:34.05] MARC HENDERSON: Just as patients?

[00:28:34.81] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Just as patients, yes.

[00:28:38.11] MARC HENDERSON: Did you have on the staff translators for each of those allies?

[00:28:42.61] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, no. As a matter of fact, this was something that was really funny there. One of the Vietnamese patients came up and wanted-- I don't know, I didn't understand Vietnamese-- and so one of the other nurses said, well, I didn't know you understood Vietnamese. And I said, I don't. I said, it's either one of two things that people in here want, is they need some food or they have to do some elimination. So either one or the other. That's all I can do and provide. And so that was kind of comical.

[00:29:17.97] MARC HENDERSON: How about personal relationships? Did you form any tight friendships while you were there?

[00:29:23.55] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Yes. Yes.

[00:29:27.00] MARC HENDERSON: Anything come to mind? Funny--

[00:29:28.83] JOAN CRAIGWELL: One-- I dated a physician that was there, and we formed a very tight relationship. But that relationship was fatal from the start, now looking back at it, because those relationships are usually intense. They're short. And then you go on with your life. I think most of us had the feeling that they would last forever, but not really. Combat zone relationships just don't last a long time.

[00:30:02.04] MARC HENDERSON: What about other nurses and marriage? Were there many nurses that you worked with, or female officers, that were married?

[00:30:11.08] JOAN CRAIGWELL: All of the nurses I worked with were single. See, at that time, back in the '60s, it wasn't-- the occurrence wasn't as frequent as it is now for nurses to be married in the military. But most of the nurses I worked with were all single. But you encountered married men all the time. And that was kind of difficult, really, because I think that when people are in those kind of confined areas like that, and you're in a combat zone, and people very easily think that--

[00:30:58.34] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Actually, there were thousands of combatants that were moved out of Vietnam during the time that I was there. Because what happened is that-- the reason why I got back on flying status in Vietnam was with-- also my other duties-- was because they were short. And so they came around one day and they wanted to know who had a current card. I remember this little salmon-colored card, to show your currency on there. And that's how I was selected to make the flights back from Cam Ranh Bay to Travis Air Force Base.

[00:31:40.24] So it wasn't-- and just to summarize it-- it's not a luxury liner by any stretch, but it is a fantastic aircraft. Because you could-- as you know, you could use it for cargo and you could also use it for patient medical evacuation, and you want to get people out of the country as fast as possible. And that was the thing that made it so neat because, in other wars, they didn't have that type of ability to put wounded combatants on a plane like that and get them back to the States so that they could be cared for immediately.

[00:32:19.79] MARC HENDERSON: How about racism or sexism in your living environment with-- did you encounter any of that?

[00:32:26.06] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I hear this all the time, and I'm questioned about this a lot. It did exist. I'm sure it did. However, during the time I was there, we were so darn busy, until-- I didn't experience that. I did not. And nobody touched me where I didn't want them to touch me. No one-- if they said something racially, I don't know anything about it. Because at the time I was entirely busy for my 12 months that I was there.

[00:32:57.94] MARC HENDERSON: And how about before you went to Vietnam?

[00:33:01.30] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, my gosh, I was born in the cradle of the Confederacy, in Alabama. Oh, sure. I was born in 1937, and so you can understand growing up in that era. Oh, yeah, it was horrible, totally horrible.

[00:33:18.09] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. Sure. And then, in the Air Force, you-- before Vietnam, did you ever encounter any issues?

[00:33:27.99] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Well, I did at Mesa Air Force Base, when I first came in. I didn't realize that they had a Capehart House there that was designated for black nurses, for African-American nurses. I didn't know that until one of my housemates was transferred out, and the room stayed vacant. And there was a white nurse, a Caucasian nurse, that came in. But she was put up in the BOQ. And I wanted to know why is she in the BOQ? We have room here. And come to find out, through the chief nurse, it was her understanding that all the black nurses should be in one house, and that all the white nurses should be in another area. And that was at Mesa Air Force Base, in Sacramento, California. I'll never forget that as long as I live.

[00:34:21.81] And I confronted her, and I also reported her to the general on the base.

[00:34:24.88] MARC HENDERSON: And was anything changed?

[00:34:26.10] JOAN CRAIGWELL: And I didn't know that-- and I did not know you could really get in trouble by doing that sort of thing. But I was very troubled by that.

[00:34:36.31] MARC HENDERSON: Were there any sort of reprisals for you telling the general?

[00:34:41.23] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Well, he confronted her and asked her why. And actually, out of all innocence, she said that she thought that all the black nurses wanted to be with their own kind and all the white nurses wanted to be with their kind, and that's how she saw it.

[00:35:00.29] MARC HENDERSON: And going back to Vietnam, there was nothing that stands out in your mind--

[00:35:06.74] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, no. I mean, you don't have time to be racist when folks are dying. You're trying to keep people alive-- as busy as we were.

[00:35:20.04] MARC HENDERSON: What was a typical crew like, how many nurses, how many orderlies?

[00:35:24.03] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I flew with about three other nurses on the flight. Because the plane was full. And then there were about three or four-- maybe about three med techs. I'll take that back. No, there were two other nurses on, not three other nurses-- two other nurses on the flight. So about three of us on there.

[00:35:46.89] MARC HENDERSON: So back to Vietnam and the unit that you were with for the triage, what was the leadership like?

[00:35:58.29] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I'm not quite clear when you say--

[00:36:00.58] MARC HENDERSON: Leadership. Obviously, there's good leaders and bad leaders. Is there any instances that stand out with a good example of good leadership or bad leadership? Or any one person or-- ?

[00:36:13.42] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Yeah, I thought the chief nurse was not very understanding of the workload that we had. Because when we requested more people to come down from other areas, she was a little bit-- I don't know-- I wouldn't use the word resistant, but didn't quite understand that we needed more help. And so we had to constantly call her and tell her, you know, please, we need some more people down here.

[00:36:49.55] And it wasn't actually until I went to the hospital commander and had him to come down and survey the situation after we were hit-- I mean, after the Tet Offensive. And he said, oh, my gosh. He was really astonished at the carnage. So then he went and he got her and had her come down there. And I think she saw. And that's when we pulled nurses from other areas to come down to help.

[00:37:15.98] MARC HENDERSON: So it took a visit from her. Where was she normally assigned?

[00:37:19.97] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, she was up in the-- on the other end of the base. But yet we were in the same hospital area. But she was in another building.

[00:37:30.56] MARC HENDERSON: Was it all Air Force medical personnel there, or were there medical personnel from other services assigned to Cam Ranh Bay?

[00:37:37.88] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Yeah, there were Navy doctors. Because there was a Navy base close by. And so the Navy doctors used to come over to help. But no other nurses were flown in.

[00:37:50.56] MARC HENDERSON: So it was just Air Force?

[00:37:52.31] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Just Air Force.

[00:37:54.26] MARC HENDERSON: And how much interaction did you have with the hospital ships?

[00:37:59.02] JOAN CRAIGWELL: With whom?

[00:37:59.86] MARC HENDERSON: The hospital ships. Did you ever have any--

[00:38:02.31] JOAN CRAIGWELL: No. With the Repose, and with all of those, no. I had no interaction with that.

[00:38:17.04] JOAN CRAIGWELL: My worst day was when I stayed there for 26 hours. That was really bad. That was when we told them that we did not have any more room, and they kept bringing the patients in.

[00:38:30.84] MARC HENDERSON: Did they have anywhere else to take them?

[00:38:32.40] JOAN CRAIGWELL: They had no place else to take them. And so when the beds were filled-- if someone would die or if someone was transferred over to the intensive care unit, then we would take a patient off of a litter that was on the floor and put them in the bed. And then you could never catch up. You could never, ever catch up. Orders were constantly being written. You were constantly just-- by the time you thought you had finished, there was some other incident, there was some other thing you had to do. And it was just a con-- you were just on a roll all the time.

[00:39:17.28] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I really can't recall just having like a best day. And surprisingly, when I got ready to leave, I really, really didn't want to leave. Because I just kind of felt like, wow, you know, I have so much experience and I did so much, and leaving so many people behind who didn't have my experience, I kind of felt like, I wonder what's going to happen to these people?

[00:39:44.59] MARC HENDERSON: What were your impressions of the Vietnamese people before you went to Vietnam? And then did that impression change when you left?

[00:39:52.93] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, I had no political ideology about Vietnam. It wasn't until I came back that I learned quite a bit.

[00:40:01.39] MARC HENDERSON: Can you give an example?

[00:40:05.53] JOAN CRAIGWELL: When I came back, I pretty much learned the history about the unification of Vietnam, what we were really, really fighting for. And they wanted one Vietnam-- didn't want a South Vietnam and a North Vietnam. And that was really the crux of the matter there. And of course, there was a lot of the regimes in Vietnam were tainted. And so Washington DC, with President Johnson and Kennedy and everybody making decisions about that, what they were going to do when-- whether or not they're going to go in and bomb and all that, we weren't privy to all that kind of information.

[00:40:49.52] But President Johnson, Premier Ky, and Westmoreland, the picture I sent you, they did come to my ward where I was. And that's how I got the pictures of them. And President Johnson-- the guys were so ill and so shot up, and I wouldn't-- not to say, use the word shot up, but they were just so mangled that-- usually the guys would salute. They were trying to hold their hand up to salute President Johnson, and they couldn't. So they just put the medals on the pillow. And some of them were just lying there, dazed over, waiting to be air evacked out.

[00:41:31.89] So he did come there to find out how bad the war really was. Because General Giap, after the new year there, we were kind of relaxing our posture, too, and so this kind of caught us off guard. I think we really, really knew-- we did know-- that they were going to hit, but we had no idea the magnitude with which they would strike and that they had that kind of power to do that. And I think that was the biggest surprise of the day.

[00:42:00.98] MARC HENDERSON: When was the visit for President Johnson?

[00:42:04.55] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Right after-- I think he came in February of '68.

[00:42:15.04] MARC HENDERSON: How much news from home were you-- did you have access to?

[00:42:19.27] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, I didn't communicate with anybody at home, not a single soul. And I didn't write anybody at home either.

[00:42:27.74] MARC HENDERSON: What about newspapers--

[00:42:29.28] JOAN CRAIGWELL: No.

[00:42:29.77] MARC HENDERSON: --or television, did you have access to any of that?

[00:42:32.38] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, no. I didn't find out until I came back home-- there was another thing I found out-- is that all of the news about what was going on in Vietnam and all the horror, but there was nothing about nurses and what we were doing.

[00:42:49.43] MARC HENDERSON: How did that make you feel?

[00:42:50.26] JOAN CRAIGWELL: And I was-- I didn't like that. Because we played an integral role in that, in that support system. And even-- we just finished with Burns' series that he did on Vietnam. There's nothing-- there was nothing in that whole series about women.

[00:43:19.81] JOAN CRAIGWELL: It was October of '68.

[00:43:23.41] MARC HENDERSON: And did your operations tempo slow down before you left, or did you have to train a relief before you left? How was it to prepare to go home?

[00:43:37.73] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I didn't have to train anyone. Everybody pretty much knew when everybody was leaving, because we used to keep this calendar, count off the days down to zero, and all of us did it. And I think everybody knew when my day was, my last day. And so I didn't have to train anybody for my position.

[00:44:05.00] MARC HENDERSON: Can you tell us about getting home, things maybe that you packed up, you wanted to make sure you brought with you, and kind of leaving your Quonset hut, all the way back to the United States, if you could just go through that?

[00:44:19.69] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I packed my things. The guy that I was dating came by. He was in full formal dress uniform. He did that just for me. Wanted me to see him in his whites. He was a Navy physician. And we left, and he went down to the flight line with me. The plane took off. And I arrived at Travis, and then later got transportation to-- actually, I went to Washington, the state of Washington, to finalize all my papers to get out of the military.

[00:44:56.24] And then I went to Palo Alto, near Stanford University. And that's where I stayed until I got married in 1971.

[00:45:08.14] MARC HENDERSON: Did you continue to work in nursing?

[00:45:10.39] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I did. As a matter of fact, I love the areas where I could do a lot, like med-surg, intensive care units, and places like that. I loved it. And then later, believe it or not, I was assigned at the VA Medical Center in Palo Alto, as the head nurse of a psychiatric unit. And that was quite an experience. And even I liked that later, because then I went into teaching psychiatric nursing. So I've changed around. I've done a lot of things.

[00:45:50.99] MARC HENDERSON: Did you have any sort of homecoming with friends or family when you first came back?

[00:45:55.19] JOAN CRAIGWELL: No, I didn't. I didn't have people interested in knowing about what I did. They knew that I had been in Vietnam. And it was kind of like being in Japan-- you were overseas. And I didn't talk too, too much about it until much later.

[00:46:17.48] MARC HENDERSON: Did you have to readjust-- do any readjusting or getting used to being back in the United States, or was there any adjustment period?

[00:46:26.88] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Yes, I did. I did. I had to kind of get back into the church, work that I had done before. I had to connect with friends from the university where I had gone to school. They had an alumni group. And as I look back, I don't think anybody was really interested in what I did in Vietnam, because we didn't talk about it. We just talked about the current things that was going on at campus, having the students come back, on spring break, what we were going to do with them, Christmas time with the family, dinner, those kinds of things. And so I just integrated my life in with their lives.

[00:47:20.32] MARC HENDERSON: And how much contact have you had with fellow veterans from Vietnam? Do you keep in touch with them?

[00:47:25.67] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, yeah. All the time. Get on the phone, call them, talk about old times. Yeah. Then, when I went back to the unveiling of the Vietnam Women's Memorial, that was really exciting, because I saw so many people I had been stationed with before.

[00:47:41.95] MARC HENDERSON: So you were there the day that it was unveiled?

[00:47:43.71] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, yes.

[00:47:44.16] MARC HENDERSON: And those are the pictures that you sent--

[00:47:45.43] JOAN CRAIGWELL: That's in 1993. I was there.

[00:47:53.76] JOAN CRAIGWELL: My career was cut short because of the war in Vietnam. I did not know that war could be so bad and be so brutal, and so amoral, or immoral. And so I had volunteered to go to Vietnam, because women are not drafted to go to a combat zone. And I did that simply because I felt that I would get a European assignment. And that's what I had been offered and had been told, that if I did one year of combat duty, that I would be able to-- I would be considered-- highly considered for a European assignment.

[00:48:35.70] However, I left-- and I was just totally a wreck when I left Vietnam. I was there at the height of the conflict. I was there during the Tet Offensive, '68. And that was a pretty rough time.

[00:48:51.65] MARC HENDERSON: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today?

[00:48:56.01] JOAN CRAIGWELL: It's mixed with-- there are a lot of mixed feelings about the Vietnam War. Some people said it was a conflict. Some people said we should never have been

there. With the vets that I have worked with for 10 years, and going through those battles with them and remembering, and I have a different-- I look at it a little bit differently than perhaps I would have before going there.

[00:49:34.96] MARC HENDERSON: How did the war change you?

[00:49:39.64] JOAN CRAIGWELL: But just to kind of answer the question about--

[00:49:45.13] MARC HENDERSON: How it's remembered today.

[00:49:46.57] JOAN CRAIGWELL: --remembering it. My memory is around all the work that I did there. Now, knowing a little bit of history about it, studying it a lot and also preparing for the film, I view it with mixed emotions as well. Because there's a lot of things that we will never be told. We just don't know. But war is horrible. I think the biggest protesters of the people who are against the war are the folks who were involved in it. They say, never again.

[00:50:29.52] A lot of innocent 19-year-olds who went there to fight a war that they had no idea what it was about, and they are still fighting that war today as older men. And they carry it every single day.

[00:50:50.47] I became a lot more proficient as a nurse. I didn't have to face the bureaucracy in performing my duties as a nurse. My leadership abilities really, really became a lot better, even though, in a chaotic situation, where you have to kind of keep-- forget about your own feelings and think about the individuals that you have to take care of. The camaraderie I thought was fantastic, because we had to depend upon each other. I need you. You need me. There's no selfishness there.

[00:51:43.54] We were all fighting for-- or not fighting, either-- but we were all working for one common goal here. It's to keep these guys alive. I think that-- in getting back to my own skills-- I became much, much more proficient in what I did.

[00:52:08.03] I think that if I were to speak to this country, I would say that, please, let's have a clear objective about the war and how you're going to handle the war. And then after, have a much clearer objective about the survivors. How are the survivors going to integrate into society, and to feel like they made a contribution to this country, and then can pick up their lives and continue to be a human being, and a contributing citizen? No one will ever be like they were before they left. That's an impossibility. You can't. War changes people in many ways.

[00:53:05.25] JOAN CRAIGWELL: That was really a day to remember. I remember I didn't know what the statue was going to look like. And so, when we gathered there in the park on the Mall-- of course it had red, white, and blue-- it was draped with red, white, and blue, and then there was a rope around it. And so when they got ready to show it, they pulled the rope, and then the covering came off. And it's quite something.

[00:53:35.52] MARC HENDERSON: How many people were in attendance?

[00:53:37.56] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, I would say thousands, but there were hundreds of people there. As a matter of fact, though, I kind of brought with me-- which I'm using in the film, by the way-- a Gold Star mother's letter to us. Do you mind if I read it?

[00:53:57.62] MARC HENDERSON: Sure.

[00:53:58.25] SPEAKER: Allow me to get it.

[00:53:59.84] JOAN CRAIGWELL: It's over there in that-- where that-- underneath the-- by the--
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[00:54:07.61] SPEAKER: In here and--

[00:54:09.39] JOAN CRAIGWELL: The first one is fine. Yes, that one is great.

[00:54:17.18] SPEAKER: There's a wire underneath your arm here, again. There you go. There you go. Perfect.

[00:54:24.36] JOAN CRAIGWELL: It's actually from a Gold Star mother by the name of Miss Eleanor Wimbish. And at the Memorial she wanted it read. And there were so many people, and so we couldn't get it read. And I kept it, and then I sent it back, to be placed there.

[00:54:48.21] She says:

[00:54:50.19] To all the nurses who served in Vietnam, welcome home. I'm a Gold Star Mother, who has thought about you for 24 years. My son died in Vietnam, in a hospital. And I have always hoped and prayed that one of you was there with him. Maybe you were holding his hand, stroking his brow, or just holding him in your arms.

[00:55:19.11] This is a picture I have carried with me and always will. Over the years, I have hugged many of you. And as I did, I wondered, is this the one who was with my Billy when he took his last breath?

[00:55:40.23] To all of you who loved our sons enough to share their living and their dying, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. God's blessings to you, and I hope that you can ease your pain. You will be rewarded in heaven.

[00:56:01.32] Mrs. Eleanor Wimbish, mother of William R. Stocks.

[00:56:05.16] And I did see his name there on the Wall. See, one of the things, too, that's interesting is that we do have the national memorial there for those who died, but we don't have one for those who survived.

[00:56:27.52] MARC HENDERSON: What was your first impression when you saw the Vietnam War Memorial?

[00:56:32.46] JOAN CRAIGWELL: It was very, very moving. And yet I didn't know a single person on that Wall. I am sure I had taken care of many that had passed away. And it was very moving. Because when I came down-- I was kind of on the lower level, and then when I came up the hill and got my first glance, I took a deep breath, and it just-- it was just very moving.

[00:57:05.01] Many people have seen the nurse that's at the top of that statue is African-American. And many people have asked me about that. And I said, I'm just so happy that all of us were represented with the statue.

[00:57:24.50] If no one else thanks the nurses, the final word that I have is that I would like to thank my colleagues and my comrades. I also would like to thank this country for the things that they have-- in spite of all of the other things that have happened-- this country has supported my education. This country has given me opportunities that I never would have had had I not been a veteran. This country has exposed me to things that I perhaps never would have been exposed to. And it has also given me some enlightenment about how lucky I am to be in this country.

[00:58:22.25] And despite all the things that I could say that I don't like, but I think of so many things that I do like. And that I can go as high as I want to or I can stay as low as I want to. But I have chosen the higher ground.

[00:58:39.76] Because when I began to-- when I work with other nurses, and I have been on panels and I have-- my insight and everything has been a little bit different than for folks who have not been in combat, in a war situation. There's some commonalities. There's some common things that happen with you when you are in-- your work in those circumstances. You can't be selfish. That's for one thing. You cannot be selfish. You have to work. Everybody has to work together for one common good.

[00:59:13.12] And that one common good is the survival of that person that's on that floor or in the bed. And whatever it takes to do that, you do it.

[00:59:26.44] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I spoke at the 50th anniversary, down at-- in San Diego, when they had the program down there. And I think it's wonderful to give women and men recognition-- all veterans.

[00:59:46.98] MARC HENDERSON: And you've received a lapel pin from us, right?

[00:59:50.46] JOAN CRAIGWELL: I did. Indeed, I did. Yes.

[00:59:53.52] MARC HENDERSON: Well, I would like to one more time just say, on behalf of a grateful nation, thank you very much for your service.

[00:59:58.59] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Oh, you're welcome.

[00:59:59.43] MARC HENDERSON: And thank you so much for the interview.

[01:00:01.09] JOAN CRAIGWELL: Thank you.