

**Interview of Marian Weller on her career in the
U.S. Army Nurse Corps and service during the Vietnam War**

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5 Ruth Stewart: Today we are interviewing Marian Weller, more commonly known as
6 Wendy, um, in San Antonio, Texas, and this is February 17, 2004. The
7 interviewer is Ruth Stewart. This is being done for the Women's
8 Overseas Service League. [0:22] Wendy, start in please by telling us a
9 little bit about your early days, where you were born, where you grew up,
10 that kind of thing.

11
12 Marian Weller: Okay, I was born to my d-, um, – in Fort Ord, California, where my dad
13 was a captain in the army and, um, I was only there 6 weeks because we
14 moved to Hanscom Air Force Base. And after that, um, I lived in, uh, um,
15 Pennsylvania and I lived in Texas and I lived in Mississippi. So with my
16 dad being in the military, we moved, oh, every couple of years. And my
17 father always insisted that we live on the economy (that is outside the
18 base) because he wanted us to see what it was like living in different areas.

19
20 When we lived in Mississippi, we lived in a small area called Gulfport
21 which is near Biloxi which is where Keesler Air Force Base was. Dad
22 was assigned to a very small technical place that was right by the beach.
23 And one of the things I remember most about that is that my brothers and I
24 were suspended from riding the school bus because we kept riding in the
25 back because we thought it was fun to bounce on the seats. And in
26 Mississippi in 1957, you were not allowed to ride on the back of the
27 school bus, so we got suspended. And we really had a big problem with
28 the, the way that the races were separated because we had been raised
29 back east to begin with.

30
31 Um, another thing that happened is that a, a black airman happened to get
32 in the wrong part of the, uh, place where they were having Little League
33 Football. And my brother was playing football and I was one of the
34 cheerleaders. The next thing you know, my dad came and got everybody
35 out of there and people started running out the gate. And it wasn't till later
36 I found out that the KKK had come in and hung the airman from a
37 goalpost. And this again was 1957 in Mississippi. Luckily, there was a
38 lot of military people there that managed to get him down and there was
39 quite a big fight over that. And the base came down really heavy from
40 what my dad said and people were told that they were going to close this
41 little base and they might close the big base if the people in the area didn't
42 start calming down. So those are some of the really big things I remember
43 from Mississippi.
44

1 Ruth Stewart: I would guess you would.
2
3 Marian Weller: Oh yeah. [laughter] And from what I remember about Wichita Falls,
4 Texas, now my dad was at Sheppard Air Force Base before World War II
5 when it was just a big field, and when he came back he started the
6 transportation school there. That's what he was in charge of. And I could
7 distinctly remember that when we went to school in Wichita Falls, there
8 was a, a lot of segregation, of course, going on. And everybody there
9 went to school and most of the girls their only goal in life was to get
10 married and the only thing you really studied to be was like a teacher or a
11 nurse or a secretary. And that was in the early 60s. Then in '62, my dad
12 retired and we went to the Main Line of Philadelphia, which is totally
13 different. Everybody wore suits to school. You wore very nice clothes.
14 The people were very wealthy. You had to buy your clothes from Villager
15 and some of the other major expensive brands. And it was like a totally
16 different environment. What I remember in Wichita Falls, I knew how to
17 do diagram sentences and everything and I was put a grade ahead. When I
18 went back up to, back east to Pennsylvania, they almost were going to put
19 me a grade back but I managed to hold my own, so it was a big culture
20 shock.
21
22 Ruth Stewart: I guess.
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24 Marian Weller: My little brother, when we got back to Pennsylvania he was walking
25 around looking for the white drinking fountain [chuckle] because he'd
26 been in the south for 6 years.
27
28 Ruth Stewart: That long, yeah.
29
30 Marian Weller: Yeah.
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32 Ruth Stewart: Yeah. [4:10] So when did you get started being interested in nursing?
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34 Marian Weller: Well, again, when I got up to the Pennsylvania area, a lot of the girls again
35 seemed like everybody was focused on being married and, and being a
36 society matron in that era, but I had always been interested in nursing.
37 When I was in Wichita Falls, I was a candy striper at the catholic hospital.
38 And they were real liberal in those days. They put me in the pharmacy
39 and the Sister let me count pills and fill prescriptions. Of course, they all
40 had to be double checked. And then when I got up into the Pennsylvania
41 area, I was a candy striper at the Bryn Mawr Hospital and I got to do
42 things like take down sterile trays. And those were the days before
43 everything was disposable and we didn't have bad diseases. And I would
44 actually take the metal syringes and the glass syringes and needles apart

1 and soak'm in stuff. And I got to help a little bit, you know, just kind of
2 circulating.

3
4 So by the time I, I was in high school I had joined Future Nurses of
5 America because I was pretty sure that's what I wanted to do. When I got
6 ready to graduate in 1964, there were only 4 programs in the state of
7 Pennsylvania that had a bachelor's degree, 2 were in the Philadelphia area
8 (that was Villanova and the University of Pennsylvania) and 2 were in the
9 Pittsburgh area (that was the University of Pittsburgh and Duquesne). So I
10 decided I was going to go to the University of Pennsylvania and I was
11 going to live at home and I was going to take the subway in from the Main
12 Line because we lived out near Valley Forge. Well, after Mayor Rizzo got
13 all these police dogs out there to guard everybody, I was more scared of
14 the police dogs than I was the criminals. And then I decided maybe it was
15 better, even though I was 17 when I graduated, I really wanted to cut the
16 cord so I decided to go to the University of Pittsburgh. And I was
17 accepted at all 4 schools and I picked Pitt because it was a way to get
18 away from home. I felt that I needed to do that.

19
20 So I started at the University of Pittsburgh and Pitts-, Pitt had a 5-year
21 program. You had 2 years of prerequisites and then you had 3 years of
22 nursing, but they also had a trimester thing. So I decided, I don't know
23 why I was in such a hurry, but I wanted to get through faster. So my first
24 2 years at Pitt, I took French 1 and French 2 and I took Latin 1 and Latin 2
25 and I took History 1. I took all the stuff I had to take and I got 2 years of
26 prerequisites done in 3 trimesters, and that was a lot of work.

27
28 Then, when I started nursing school, I was very unhappy, um, with, with
29 the way that things were being done. They had a group of instructors
30 there that were very, um, cliquey I guess is the word. They were very
31 controlling. And we would have 65 people come into the nursing school
32 and we would graduate 20. And I guess I was a little hell-bent raiser or
33 something because I just didn't think that was right, so I challenged this
34 and challenged that and I led a group of people to sign a petition [laughter]
35 and 5 of us actually quit nursing school in protest, but w-, we got our
36 wishes. They had an investigation and they got rid of those 4 instructors.
37 And I joined the army at the time because they had the army student nurse
38 program and if you went ahead and joined they paid your last year of
39 school all the tuition, they paid for your room and board. And I didn't
40 know how the army recruiter was going to feel like about this, but I told
41 her that they were really, um, blocking a lot of really good nurses from
42 graduating, so they backed me. The army didn't have a problem with me
43 dropping out. I told them that I was going to reapply which, of course, I
44 did. And I got right back in, so I graduated.

1
2 Uh, in 1966 is when I joined in my junior year and I was a private. I was a
3 PFC and my duty station was the University of Pittsburgh. And then 6
4 months before I graduated I was taken out of what was then like the WAC
5 Reserve as a PFC and I was put into the army nurse corps as a second
6 lieutenant. I graduated in December of 1967, and at that point you could
7 not go right into the army as a graduate nurse. You had to take your state
8 boards first. Well, the next state boards weren't until August of '68, so I
9 waited and I got to work those 8 months at Magee-Womens Hospital.
10 And, of course, in those days they put the new graduates on the night shift
11 so you could sink or swim. And that's how you really learned fast
12 because you had to make a lot of decisions and everybody got sick and
13 died on the night shift, so I think that was very good experience. It was a
14 med-surg unit.

15
16 Then when I passed my boards, um, I told the army and, of course, they
17 wanted me right down at basic training. At that time, it was the Medical
18 Field Service School, MFSS, at Fort Sam Houston. That's where all the
19 army nurses and pharmacists and everybody else went. Um, I was there
20 for 8 weeks and had to go on the maneuver course out at Camp Bullis.
21 And I'm really glad they sent us out there because they had a lot of booby
22 traps and all of us kept saying, oh, we're not going to have to learn how to
23 evade and all this. It turned out it was a good thing later that we did.

24
25 I graduated from the Medical Field Service School in November of '68
26 and my first assignment was Walter Reed Army Hospital, which we very
27 affectionately call Walter Wonderful. And [chuckle] I was there for a
28 whole 4 months on an officers' medical and neurology unit, just long
29 enough to learn how to salute and how to figure out the army paperwork.

30
31 In February of 1969, I went to the 95th Evac Hospital in Vietnam. Um,
32 and this, this hospital was, um, across Da Nang Harbor and it was a couple
33 of miles away from what you've heard, everybody's heard called the
34 famous China Beach R&R Center. And – but we were not able to go to
35 the R&R Center because this hospital was totally segregated and isolated.
36 We were surrounded by barbed wire. You could see the water.

37
38 Ruth Stewart: Wendy, let's go back a minute now. [10:14] Uh, you were talking about
39 the 95th Evac Hospital and that was?

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41 Marian Weller: That was in Vietnam. I was at Walter Reed until February of '69. And
42 then in February of '69, I went to Vietnam and I was assigned to the 95th
43 Evac Hospital, which was across the harbor from Da Nang on a little
44 peninsula. We were several clicks away from what is famously called the

China Beach R&R Center; however, we couldn't go there. We were isolated from the rest of the community. We were completely surrounded by barbed wire and all kinds of, of barriers. And the really aggravating thing is that you could see the beach, but you couldn't go out there 'cause it was mined and they had all kinds of guards out there. I know most people saw the China Beach TV show with the gal's bath-, in her bathing suit and walking into surgery. And believe me, it wasn't that way, I can tell you that. Later, by the way, I met Dana Delany at a big convention and somebody told her I'd been at the 95th and she came over and talked to me for quite a while because she said that talking to the nurses helped her in her role to see what it was really like.

Mm-hm.

At any rate, um, we were a basic evacuation hospital. We were pretty large. And I was there about a month when they made me the head nurse of the surgical specialty unit and that included neurology, eye, ear, nose, throat, maxillofacial, GU, and burns. And this was the yuck unit that nobody wanted to work on because the disfiguring injuries were really a lot to take in addition to having to take care of the patients. And I had never worked surgery before in my life. I learned real fast.

And one of the things I remember most after I had just gotten there was one of the nurses showing me how to change the wounds. Now this was a big Quonset hut and the beds were lined up against the wall and there were little windows over the beds with screens, so whenever you went to change a bandage the first thing you had to do was either move the bed or have the patient move so the head was in the aisle. And the reason is, is when the helicopters landed, all the dust came in so if you didn't move'm before you changed the wound, you got all the dust in the wound. Second thing I learned is you had these big old Asepto syringes and we actually had, get this, Betadine and saline and you actually stuck them in the brain and irrigate it. 'Cause a lot of these brain wounds they – this was like what they called the meatball surgery where you patch and get'm out. So we would do emergency surgery and we didn't have time to put in Teflon plates and bone grafts and all that stuff. So the first thing I remember that I learned about wound care is be really, really careful that you don't touch the top of the head because there's the brain right there pulsating.

The thing I remember is the eye wounds. When you took off an eye patch, it was almost like you were a magician. You've probably seen the magicians with all the scarves strung together that they pull out of hats. Well, pulling out all that clean bandage was just like a magician. You could pull out it seemed like miles of it. And then when you finally got

1 this ton of bandages out, if you got a flashlight and you looked in the back,
2 you could see fluid dripping in back of the orbit. Now, of course, that was
3 cerebrospinal fluid 'cause a lot of these injuries were so bad that they
4 really needed more neurosurgery to put patches in. So the first time I did
5 that dressing it, it was very unreal. In fact, the whole time I was in
6 Vietnam was like unreal.

7
8 The other thing I remember is that we had women and children there. We
9 did not just take G.I.s. Anybody that they brought in from a helicopter,
10 the army and the navy took care of. And when we get these little kids –
11 we had 4 cribs. We only had 4 hospital beds. Everything else was a cot,
12 so we had to learn real quick how to adapt and how to raise everybody's
13 head of the bed 60 degrees and all that kind of stuff. The mama sans
14 would come to take care of their kids and we had them in a tent and they
15 would actually sleep under the crib at night or in the crib with the kid.
16 And we'd put them to work. It was the barter system. Uh, we took care of
17 the kid, they helped us. One thing we did was for medications in the old
18 days we had to shake everything to dissolve it. Everybody that came in
19 we put penicillin and Chloromycetin in the IVs for 12 hours because those
20 heads you only give'm 83 cc an hour 'cause you have to watch the fluid.
21 Then they went to IM injections for several days and then they went to
22 pills.

23
24 And those little kids hated that medicine and the pharmacist and I were
25 always trying to figure out how to make it liquid and what flavoring to put
26 in. And we would tell them words that all we knew was if we said these
27 words they'd eat whatever we told'm and they'd drink it real fast. And I
28 said, yeah, I wonder what this really means. And I found out later
29 [inaudible 14:57] means I'm going to cut your throat and I didn't know
30 that. [chuckle] But I'll tell you, that's how we got the pills down and the
31 other stuff. [laughter]
32

33 The other thing that I personally started, I started a thing with my sorority,
34 Alpha Delta Phi back at University of Pittsburgh, and I had them sending
35 me clothes because all we had was American pajamas that we were trying
36 to cut down for these little kids, so I did that. Another thing that, that I did
37 is I had physical therapy every day and everybody said "How did you do
38 that?" It's real simple. We had to shake all these vials of medication to
39 dissolve'm so what I did is I got all the little kids – and remember with
40 head wounds a lot of times you're going to have right-sided or left-sided
41 weakness depending on which side the injury was. So, um, I put the, the
42 liquid in these bottles and then everybody shook with their bad arm and
43 this is how we did our little PT here in the middle of nowhere. We also
44 took everybody outside. We tried to throw a beach ball around. So it

wasn't much, but, you know, we, we decided we were just going to do the best that we could with what we had.

Um, the other thing is we, we didn't really – in, in those days there was maybe 500 army nurses in Vietnam with 500,000 men. It's not like it is now where a third of the force in Iraq is female. And mostly it was nurses and some finance people and recreation people. There just wasn't a whole lot of women there. And we were coddled and we were guarded and they did not want us off the compound. So we had to get off and the best way we could do that is we made friends with some marines who snuck us out in a deuce-and-a-half.

[16:34] Now this is your recreation area, area?

Well, this is how we got off the base because they wouldn't let us off. [laughter] So we snuck out past the guards. You either went up in a helicopter or you went out in a deuce-and-a-half. And they would fly us up to the top of Monkey Mountain. Because the peninsula that we were on, which is again outside Da Nang, one end had Monkey Mountain which was marines and the other hand had Marble Mountain which was marines, and the rest of it had different bases. So we would sneak out and we would go up there and that's when we got to go to the club and we could dance and basically do whatever we wanted unless there was a red alert and when we came back down the mountain we would have to bribe people or the guys that took us back down that we didn't get caught at the checkpoints. Later, afterwards, I found out the whole mountain was under the control of the Vietnamese General Minh, who was actually getting money from us to leave us alone. I also found out that when the Red Cross wanted to build more buildings on base they had to pay bribe money to Madame [Snow 17:34] whoever she was because she actually owned the land. So there's all these really weird deals going on that we didn't know about until we got back home.

And the only – the, the other big thing is when they blew up the ammo dump in the middle of Da Nang, um, the reverberations from Monkey Mountain and Marble Mountain made the whole thing worse. So somebody took us up to Monkey Mountain and the marines were up there just frantically trying to save all their liquor bottles and their bingo equipment. When I had gone to Hong Kong, as a joke I had made a giant pair of bloomers, light purple with black lace. And it was a big joke because they had panties hanging on a rope over the bar, so I came back with these size 99 bloomers and they put'm right in the middle. Well, my bloomers were missing. They never found out what happened to'm. The last day I was in Vietnam, a bunch of marines and air force guys walked

1 into the mess hall with a big, big poster that said “Where are your
2 bloomers?” and I actually packed the thing and took it home. I had no
3 idea, but I have a picture of it. Um, let’s see, left Vietnam in ’70 and was
4 assigned to Fort Lee, Virginia. I was head nurse of the emergency room.
5 They...

6
7 Ruth Stewart: [18:48] 1970?

8
9 Marian Weller: 1970. They figured if you’d been to Vietnam, you could handle
10 emergencies. And as luck would have it, the doctor that was assigned
11 there was a doctor I had met in Vietnam. And that was kind of nice
12 because we had somebody that we could kind of debrief each other and
13 learn to adjust. Uh, in...

14
15 Ruth Stewart: [19:07] And this was where now?

16
17 Marian Weller: Fort Lee, Virginia, which is where Doris Cobb was born but anyway,
18 [chuckle] she’ll tell you all about it. Um, while I was there a, the very first
19 general of the army nurse corps, General Lillian Dunlap (who was still a
20 colonel at that time) she was recruiting for somebody to go to a, a
21 classified place. And she asked me if I wanted to go and I said yes, I
22 thought I could probably do that. I had a bachelor’s degree and they
23 wanted somebody with experience.

24
25 So I ended up at Fort Detrick, Maryland, at the classified facility which is
26 known as USAMRIID, and I’ll tell you what the means. It stands for
27 United States Army Medical Institute of Infectious Disease. And that’s
28 where at that time in the 70s, 80s, and even today, that’s where they get all
29 the germs from different places and they examine them and play with
30 them and try to make vaccines. I can’t tell you anymore what exactly we
31 worked with, that part is still classified. Um, I can tell you that at the
32 same time they had a very small unit there with 6 beds which was called
33 Ward 200 of Walter Reed and that was for people who got – dependents
34 and staff that got sick up there. And if they really got sick, we had to
35 take ’m to Walter Reed. And we also helped out at the dispensary. So I
36 worked evenings and I controlled everything. I had the keys to all the
37 research labs. I had the keys to the ward. We did emergency room. And I
38 had 2 EMTs working with me and that was a very – it was like you were a
39 doctor because most of the research doctors didn’t have practical
40 experience ‘cause they did research, so me and the corpsman just about
41 did everything. There were only 2 army nurses on their whole base, and I
42 can’t tell you anything more about that [laughter] because as far as I know
43 it’s still classified. Um, I was there for about a year.

44

1 And in September of 1971, I went to Tripler Army Hospital in Hawaii.
2 And that was another experience, another experience in Asia. I got to
3 meet a lot of people, um, who were of different ethnicities like Filipinos
4 and Japanese and Hawaiians and really enjoyed the 2 years I was there. I
5 was also a mentor for several people from the Philippine Army who came
6 to Hawaii. And as a re-, reciprocity kind of thing, they invited 6 of us
7 back to the Philippines. So I got to go to the Philippines and hang out
8 with these other doctors and nurses and I got to see Corregidor and Bataan
9 and some of the other places that I'd always heard about, you know, from
10 World War II era. In 1973, September of '73, I was transferred to Ford
11 Gordon, Georgia.

12
13 Ruth Stewart: [22:06] Um, go back to Hawaii.

14
15 Marian Weller: Mm-hm.

16
17 Ruth Stewart: [22:09] What was your living like there?

18
19 Marian Weller: Oh, in Hawaii I lived in the BOQ and it was 2 rooms with an adjoining
20 bathroom and it had a veranda, which they call a lanai. So I chose to live
21 in the BOQ and for \$30 a month you had a maid come in and clean. And
22 it was government furniture, which is a good thing because their termite
23 situation is so bad in Hawaii you don't ever want to take your furniture
24 over there, you know. And, and you could roll over in bed at night and
25 feel a slat fall out of the bed and hopefully the bed wouldn't fall apart until
26 you got up the next morning. And I basically worked evenings. I slept on
27 the beach all day, um, worked evenings, and then at night we went to
28 Waikiki to the no-cover shows. Mostly the singles hung out together. I
29 did get invited to a 50th wedding anniversary of a Japanese couple and that
30 was a trip. We all had to sit on the floor. And, um, they had 101 dishes, I
31 can't even tell you what is was I ate. [chuckle] That was a lot of fun. So
32 we got to check out a lot of different cultures there. There I worked
33 intensive care. That's when I first started the intensive care thing, uh,
34 MICU and CCU. And I got the [inaudible 23:21] course and I got a
35 certificate so that's when I switched over kind of from emergency room to
36 critical care.

37
38 And let's see, Fort Gordon, Georgia, was 1971. Um, I mean, I'm sorry,
39 seven-, '73 to seventy – I was in Hawaii until – '71 to '73 was Hawaii.
40 Then, uh, '73 to '76 was Georgia. Okay. And, uh, I was immediately put
41 in charge of the SICU and then they moved me to MICU and CCU at Fort
42 Gordon. And I also created and organized a renal dialysis unit, so I was in
43 charge of all of that. And I was also on a lot of boards and councils at the
44 hospital.

1
2 And I had a choice, I could have gone to Europe or I could have gone –
3 and I wanted to take the ICU course because a lot of my lieutenants had
4 taken the course and I just felt like I needed to take the course even though
5 being a senior captain I was going to be promoted and probably end up in
6 management. I didn't want to do that. So I talked my chief nurse into
7 sending me or requesting or backing me to go to the intensive care nurse
8 clinician course in 1976 and that was at Fort Sam Houston again and, um,
9 I took the course. It was a 6-month course going through all the units and
10 I got I think it was 20 credits towards, um, graduation with a master's
11 degree from the University of Texas. And the University of Texas at San
12 Antonio at that time gave us those credits with the understanding we had
13 to go back and take the resident courses and I think it was 36 credits and
14 you graduated with your master's degree, so I had those 20 credits.
15

16 Then, I was assigned to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, and that was '76 to
17 '78. And at first I was head nurse of, um, it was a very, very small post
18 and a very small hospital and I was in charge of adult medicine, pediatrics,
19 and psychiatry. And additionally I suggested we set aside a 4 bedroom
20 and we make it into an ICU because a lot of times we would get critically
21 ill patients and we would have to take them to either, we'd try to take'm to
22 the big VA in Boston because there wasn't a lot of military bases up there.
23 The problem is in Boston in the winter you can't always drive and the
24 helicopters were impossible in those days because the kind of helicopters
25 and the traffic density. So what we'd do is if anybody got bad sick we
26 tried to take care of'm, and if we couldn't take care of'm we, we'd start on
27 Boston and every 20 miles we had a small hospital that if we had too we
28 could divert and drop off the patient. And it was really wild with people
29 with pacing wires in and they'd bump over something and they'd go into
30 an arrhythmia or their heart would stop and all those kind of stuff. So I
31 got to learn a lot about all the Boston hospital area, hospitals 'cause we
32 had to make several stops. It was very nerve-wracking. It was like being
33 back in Vietnam almost.
34

35 Um, and then from there I was going to go back to Texas to do long-term
36 schooling, but I found out that if I was RIFted they had to give me
37 \$15,000. Now I was having a lot of medical problems, uh, ever since I
38 came back from Vietnam and one of'm was I really was having problem
39 gaining weight. And I'd been tested for thyroid problems, but they
40 couldn't find anything conclusive. So I was 20 pounds overweight and I
41 had to lose that weight to get promoted, so I just didn't lost the weight. So
42 I was RIFted and – which means I was separated from the army, but I was
43 put in the reserve. So I took that \$15,000, [chuckle] came right down here
44 to Texas, bought a house, bought stuff to go in the house.

1

2 Ruth Stewart: [27:14] What year?

3

4 Marian Weller:

This was 1978. And I immediately when, you know, rolled over into the reserve and I was actually in the reserves a month and got promoted to major. [chuckle] I was promptly told "And if you lose that 20 pounds you can go right back on active duty." I said "No. I'm going to go to school." So at this point, I got a job at the Audie Murphy VA and somebody said "Why do you want to work in the VA?" I said "Well, I'm working with veterans. I know'm best, and (#2) the paperwork is the exact same as the army so it's not going to stress me out." So I started working at the Audie Murphy VA in 1978 and I worked there until 1983. And during the time that I worked there, I worked in oncology and MICU and surgery, and I was also in the reserve and I also was going to the University of Texas Nursing School. I was doing all 3 things at the same time.

16

Then in, then in 1982 when I got my master's degree, um, I s-, decided since I got it in my, my clinical track was critical care but I also got another dual master's in nursing education 'cause I had always wanted to teach. So after I got my master's I kind of sat on the fence and after about a year I decided I'm going to go to teach, and I did. Um, I was offered positions at Incarnate Word, UT, and Baptist. And at that time, the Baptist offered the most money. Because at that time, the VA paid the most money in town for nursing and I just didn't think that I could take a real big cut in salary [chuckle] especially since at that time I had to take in my brother, his wife, 2 kids, and dog. [chuckle]

27

So I went down to the Baptist. I really got recruited right out of graduate school because the Baptist paid for a lot of their instructors to get their master's degree and that's where I met a lot of'm. So for 4 years I taught there and I taught the critical care and management course for the seniors and I really liked it. And I just got to the point, though, that I missed clinical nursing on my own. It's very difficult being instructor. You got to sit there with your hands in your pocket and get ready to grab at the last minute [laughter] if somebody is going to hurt somebody. I really liked the education part of it and I really liked the management part, especially the part about learning about your space and learning to be assertive. And it was really neat seeing these – a lot of these people were not just kids right out of high school. A lot of these people had been LVNs for years and it was really interesting watching them grow to the point that no longer do they pass the buck to the registered nurse, now they're the registered nurse. And I particularly liked the team leading and the growth and I did a lot of counseling. I did an awful lot of counseling really on being assertive and being in charge and, and that kind of thing.

44

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2 So after 4 years there, I really had gotten involved with veterans in San
3 Antonio. This was about the time they put up the Vietnam Veterans
4 Memorial downtown. And my roommate at the time had been a Red
5 Cross gal that I had known way back in, in Hawaii, and we went down and
6 looked at that memorial and for some reason I went on a crying jag for 3
7 days. I had no idea why I was upset, just felt like crying, and I never cry.
8 And she was really affected too. And there were some veterans' groups
9 hanging around down there that were kind of talking to people and we
10 found out we were eligible to join. It was called the Vietnam Veterans of
11 the Alamo Area or something like that. And my friend was excited
12 because she'd been Red Cross and she had her certificate so we joined.
13 And for some reason I really, really, um, felt the camaraderie and kind of
14 regot, re-, re-experienced some of the stuff that I felt in the military.
15

16 And then one of my friends at that time had just taken over as a nurse
17 clinical specialist at the VA and one of the other gals I knew said "Wendy,
18 why don't you come back? Why don't you come back?" So I decided to
19 go back to the VA and I went into SICU as a staff nurse. But
20 unfortunately I was starting to have a lot of medical problems and I was
21 starting to lose my vision, so I ended up in the hospital and they finally
22 diagnosed all these things that I had. And I went to see Ms. Freeman, who
23 was the chief nurse at the time. And I said "Ms. Freeman, I may have to
24 quit nursing all together, but I don't really want to. Is there a way I can
25 work psychiatry?" And she said "sure," so she went ahead and assigned
26 me to psychiatry. And I stayed in psychiatry from 1987 till I retired in
27 2002.
28

29 The only break I had is when I was asked to take over all the medical
30 clinics for a year because the gal that had, was doing it, um, had a medical
31 emergency and they transferred her to a VA in California and they asked
32 me if I'd take it over. So for a year I was in charge of all the clinics, the
33 neurology and, and oncology and endocrine and female health and
34 everything. And Ms. Freeman kept saying "Gosh, you're real natural at
35 this. You, you really are good at this." I said "Well, I've done all this."
36 [chuckle] So, you know, it was really great. Uh, but then after then when
37 that gal came back I said "No, I'll go back to psych." And that's what I
38 ended up doing for the last, oh gosh, I think I did that for 15 years total.
39

40 And I worked nights at that time and actually found out that at nights it
41 was a really great way to, to teach the doctors and it was a very great
42 teaching relationship with the VA. The doctors were new graduates and
43 they knew that some of the older nurses knew the policies and procedures
44 and I found it to be a teaching thing. I never told'm what to do. I just said

1 “Well, here’s 4 choices and 4 rationales, you know, you pick the thing that
2 you think is the best. There’s your way, there’s the VA way, there’s, you
3 know, the patient way.” I said “You just kind of pick.” And I really kind
4 of enjoyed that because it was a very nice coll-, collegial-type relationship.
5

6 And at the same time, I started doing art classes because when the patients
7 got bored and I got tired of them looking at walls and stuff, uh, and I did it
8 mostly evenings and nights. We got the patients together into doing some
9 art stuff, drawing pictures. We would have themes every week or we
10 would tell them to draw how they feel or draw their emotion. And into
11 that another nurse and I who, who had an art degree we started giving
12 classes for the staff and we started doing a research project about how art
13 therapy was not only good for the patients but it was good for the staff in
14 relieving stress. We presented this in a poster board session at the –
15 you’re probably going to have to turn this off ‘cause I can’t remember the
16 name. [chuckle] So for 2 years in a row we presented this at the, um, uh, at
17 the, at the research symposium and we had a poster board and we
18 explained what we had done.
19

20 And then in 2001 we started collecting data and were, uh, uh, co-,
21 conversing with the National Psychiatric Association publication about
22 possibly publishing this. So that was something that we really liked. We
23 were finding that the people that came to the class felt differently. And
24 they felt that they were really having a really good way of relieving stress
25 because they were telling everybody to come to our class and nobody
26 could figure out why, so that’s what we were trying to identify.
27

28 And, um, during this whole time I was in the reserves, but I was getting
29 sicker and sicker and I ended up with a lot of different illnesses that are
30 directly related to Agent Orange. The VA recognized 3 of them as
31 directly relating to Agent Orange. And when I got really sick in 2002 and
32 became 90% service-connected, I decided to go ahead and retire. And...
33

34Ruth Stewart: [inaudible 35:46].
35

36Marian Weller: In...
37

38Ruth Stewart: [35:47] That was in?
39

40Marian Weller: [chuckle] 2002.
41

42Ruth Stewart: 2002 you totally retired.
43

44Marian Weller: Mm-hm.

1
2 Ruth Stewart: [35:54] And that was from the reserves and from your job?
3
4 Marian Weller: Actually, I was out of, I'm in re-, still in the retired reserve. [chuckle] I
5 was put in the retired reserve in 1988 because of all my physical problems,
6 but I'm still in the reserve. In fact, in I think it was March of this year,
7 March of 2003, last year, I was called by the people in St. Louis who
8 wanted to know if I was still working and if I was still 30% service-
9 connected would I volunteer to go on active duty. But when I explained to
10 them that I was 90% service-connected and been retired for a year, um,
11 they said that I could volunteer, but I didn't really think I would be well
12 enough to, to really go anywhere. Um, and, you know, uh, that's just the
13 way it is. I told'm I would be glad to go out and help at Camp Bullis or if
14 they wanted me to work in the internal medicine clinic I would. But when
15 you go on active duty, you take a risk of being transferred whether you're
16 sick or not and I just didn't think that would be a good idea. And I kind of
17 felt bad about that. I really felt like I could help because all of the doctors
18 are really over in Landstuhl, Germany or Iraq or Afghanistan and so the
19 retirees and the regular people aren't able to go anywhere and they're all
20 having to go out in the economy. But I finally came to the realization that
21 I was one of these people with the nurses, you're going to take care of
22 everybody and finally, I think I finally figured out I needed to stop and
23 take care of myself after all these years.
24
25 Ruth Stewart: Okay, so you spent a good many years here in San Antonio.
26
27 Marian Weller: Mm-hm.
28
29 Ruth Stewart: And some of that military and much of it with Veterans'...
30
31 Marian Weller: Mm-hm.
32
33 Ruth Stewart: ...Hospital.
34
35 Marian Weller: Mm-hm.
36
37 Ruth Stewart: Uh, some of it in schooling.
38
39 Marian Weller: Mm-hm.
40
41 Ruth Stewart: But, uh, you've lived in San Antonio since all this retirement.
42
43 Marian Weller: Mm-hm.
44

1Ruth Stewart:

And you are active with veterans' associations here.

2

3Marian Weller:

Oh yeah. Once I had joined the Alamo Area of Vietnam Veterans, uh, they got – some of the guys were, were – they – we had our main meetings at the VFW, so some of the guys said “Why don't you join the VFW?” And I thought, well, heck, I'll join'm all. So I joined the VFW and the American Legion. And then, of course, when I became service-connected in, I guess it was '85, I went ahead and joined the Disabled American Veterans, the DAV. Um, then my dad – way back in 1975 my dad had gotten me to join a group called MOWW or Military Order of the World Wars because he'd been in it since 1941. So he got me to join, but I never went to meetings, and then when I retired I started going to their meetings. I joined WOSL, oh, several years ago from somebody I met in another group, but I was never able really to come to the meetings because of my work situation, so I started going back to the WOSL meetings. And then a member of another group got me into the ROA, which is the Ret-, Retired Officers Association. And then somebody in there talked me into joining Freedoms Foundation, which I already knew about Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, so I'm an officer in that group.

20

21

Um, and I also have, have gone to Rainbow Girls meetings 'cause I was a Rainbow Girl and I'd gone as an advisor, kind of getting back into that. Uh, there is an Alpha Delta Phi Society here in town, or actually an alumni, but I don't have time to go, [chuckle] so I haven't been going. So I think that...

22

23

24

25

26

27Ruth Stewart:

[39:32] Wendy, would you go on now and let's, let's reprise some of your military life and talk generally about the things that were, uh, that remain in your memory as the most positive things about being in the service, maybe some of the things that weren't so good, the things that might have been extraordinary challenges to you, although you noted certainly several of them I would say are challenges, um, and any, any other amusing incidents.

33

34

35Marian Weller:

Well, um, I, I have to admit, I'm having a little pang of something here. Several years ago a lot of the army nurses were asked to participate in a study that the VA was doing and they asked us the same questions, and not only did they ask us the same questions, but they taped what we were saying. Then, the next day they went back and hooked us up to all these electrodes [chuckle] and monitoring devices and asked them to go over these things again and they were trying to measure our physiological responses in terms of PTSD. And I have to admit, when I came back from that interview I was really having some really unexplained emotional challenges. And I finally went out to one of the doctors I knew at the VA

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1 and I told him "I think I've totally lost my mind. I'm just on an emotional
2 rollercoaster." And they said "Well, have you done any, has anything
3 happened in your life? I said "Well, I went up to this research study. It
4 took 2 days."

5
6 So I ended up over talking to one of the social workers and as a result I, I
7 found that I had a lot of anger and a lot of feelings that I hadn't really
8 explored. And I ended up being – I was told that I really had PTSD,
9 which I had absolutely no idea that I had, but then most medical people
10 don't because it was pointed out that when you're in the warzone
11 everybody depends on you, so you take all of the, the emotions that you
12 have and you kind of lock'm up in another drawer and you leave'm there.
13 And then they were pointing out that years later something can trigger
14 these kinds of emotions to come out. So it was a very interesting time. I
15 learned a lot about myself. I learned how, I learned for one thing that I
16 had this, this big survivor guilt where I was always running around and
17 taking care of everybody else and I'm afraid that probably is very, very
18 true and I never recognized it before. Uh, I'm so busy taking care of
19 everybody else that I really don't take care of myself. Um, I also, um,
20 realized that I've kind of isolated myself from activities by keeping very,
21 very busy, being in a lot of organizations, doing a lot of different things,
22 not really sitting around and thinking about things. And in psych terms we
23 call this "not really processing," so I had to learn how to do that.

24
25 Uh, I went to a group at the vet center which was all male and I was going
26 to be the test case. They were going to see if they'd let a woman in there.
27 And that was very, very interesting. Um, what we found out is we all had
28 similar feelings, not so much about Vietnam, but the way we were treated
29 when we came home, how Vietnam veterans are portrayed in movies and
30 books, um, the, the anger that we had just about war in general. And it,
31 it's, uh, I, I think that it really hit a nerve talking about good times and bad
32 times because I didn't really think about the good times and the bad times.

33
34 Challenging things, I was in a helicopter crash. I was on a Huey medevac.
35 One of my corpsman had decided he wanted to be a medevac and I wrote
36 a, a thing, paperwork for him as evaluations and recommendations. And
37 he took me up one day, and we were just simply going from one hospital
38 to the other and the VC got lucky. They shot the rotor off our helicopter
39 and, of course, we crashed and we ended up in trees. And everybody had
40 – I had minor burns on my legs, not a big deal, but some of the people
41 were badly burnt. And the marines and some special forces in that area
42 had to actually repel up and get us out.
43

1 And I remember this fellow is jammed in the open door with the gunner
2 and the gun and I remember this green beret sergeant pull the, pull the gun
3 out, pulled out the gunner, and then turned me around real quick and I
4 heard him saying to the guy behind me "Boy." At the time I'm, I'm only
5 4' 10', I weighed about 80 pounds. I heard him say "Man, they're really
6 drafting runts." At which point he saw my captain's bars, [chuckle] saw
7 the caduceus with the N on it, pulled off my helmet. Of course, everybody
8 had short hair 'cause it was so hot. And he started to say "My god, it's a
9 wo-." And that's when I put my hand over his mouth and whispered "We
10 really don't want anybody to know that there's an American female here
11 now do we?" Because, of course, now I'm a liability and if I get captured
12 I'm a bargaining chip. I mean it was just ridiculous. And I'd, I'll never
13 forget the shock on that man's [laughter] face when he realized it was a
14 girl. Of course, I was not supposed to be in the helicopter. In those days
15 you had to have orders, but we all did it. That's the only way you could
16 get out of the compound and see anything, so.

17
18 Of course, we all had all kinds of problems now because I'm not supposed
19 to be there #1, #2 I'm a girl, blah, blah, blah. So when they got everybody
20 down out of the tree, uh, I got the first [inaudible 45:04], I got the first aid
21 kits. I was trying to put burn packs on people and, you know, somebody
22 had a broken leg, blah, blah, blah. And it took them almost 7 hours to
23 secure the LZ around us before they can get us out. I'm, I had wrenched
24 my knee and my neck getting stuck in the door.

25
26 Well, when we get back to the hospital I knew I was going to be in trouble
27 'cause there was a curfew and if they – my shift was on 12-hour shifts and
28 I wasn't late yet. I had like maybe a half an hour, so. Of course, I had
29 singed fatigues, you know, and I, you know, don't look real good, blah,
30 blah, blah. Just so happened this was during Hamburger Hill and there
31 was a big Mas-Cal going on at our hospital and so what happened was I –
32 they were taking all these litters off helicopters so I ran over and grabbed
33 one of the litters [chuckle] and just started, didn't even think about it,
34 didn't think about like just thought we've got casualties, so I just started
35 helping with the casualties. Went im-, immediately naturally went down
36 to the receiving area and just kind of pitched in because that's what we do
37 anyway. And within minutes I was covered with blood and gore and
38 everything else and my knee hurt really bad and my neck hurt, but I
39 wasn't going to tell anybody. In fact, I didn't even think about it.

40
41 So after the Mas-Cal started to slow down I was limping around and one
42 of the doctors said "What did you do to your leg?" And I said "Well, I'll
43 tell you later because I'm probably going to get in trouble." He said "Tell

me now.” So I told him and he, he ended up – went back to my hooch, put a couple of bandages on my knee and I changed my pants.

And I never really said anything about that ‘cause I was so scared I was going to get an Article 15 and get sent home, and with my father being a colonel and my uncle being an admiral, that was something that I never wanted to happen. I didn’t want to disgrace anybody, so I never said anything about that crash. I didn’t even think about it or anything until the 1980s, 1990s. And when I started talking about that in group one day, um, everybody was just looking me. And I saw the people looking and I said “You know, I’ve never talked about this before.” And in my job at the VA taking care of people in psych that had PTSD, I think I was in a very unique position to do it because having been through it I could say it’s okay to unlock that drawer and take that stuff out. And I had a lot of grown men just totally break down and cry in my arms and I used to tell’m “I’m so glad, I’m so glad you’re crying because now you’re going to get better.” So I think it helped me heal helping them heal, if that makes sense.

It does.

Um, another bad thing I remember is when the VC were going through villages with machetes and they were cutting off appendages of people who had been cared for at the army hospital. And, um, we, we used to try to hide people. When we had Mas-Cal we would take the Vietnamese that we didn’t really want to leave yet and we’d hide’m in our hooches or put’m on the floor or under beds or whatever.

And I remember one guy with a head injury that we had really worked on, we had a trach and we had taught his grandson how to suction the trach ‘cause we knew when he went to the, to the civilian hospital [chuckle] every man for himself kind of a thing. And they probably had 1 suction machine for 50 people, you know. And I remember that he made it home to his village and when the VC went through that village they had cut off his head because he’d been in the military hospital with the, with the U.S. And the reason I found this out is that, believe it or not, his wife and his grandson came to the hospital one day with this big gunny sack and it really smelled and it was very wet and yucky looking.

And I got my interpreter – and that was one thing, the interpreter sp-, spoke French and Vietnamese but no English, and this was where I used all my French from high school and college plus my mother sent my textbook. So they just kept telling me something about dau, which dau dau is head and it also means pain, it can also mean stomach. And I’m

1 going what, what are we talking about here? So I took'm in a supply room
2 and, by god, they opened the sack and took out the man's head and they
3 were explaining to me what happened.
4

5 And I was very upset and I said "Well, are they bringing the head here to
6 show me what happened?" No, in their religion you can't be buried or
7 your, your, your soul will not be, um, at rest unless you're, you're buried
8 whole so they wanted the doctor to sew the head back on. And, of course,
9 with all that's going on, we weren't supposed to go in the village. I went
10 and got the neurosurgeon and we got 2 corpsmen and we said that – we,
11 we, we kept them there with the head and we said when things die down
12 we're going to try to sneak out. And, by god, we snuck out and went over
13 to the village and sewed the head back on the body. And, of course, we
14 were probably all scared to death, but we just felt like it was something we
15 needed to do. And I c-, I can remember all the anger I felt about that, but
16 again this is, this is not anything I've ever told anybody except when I got
17 into this group and I'm sure that I had been thinking about it for years and
18 I had all this suppressed anger.
19

20 The other thing that I was very angry about, and I found out that most of
21 the vets were too, is the American press. I hate the American press and
22 there's only very few people that I think try to tell a balanced story, like
23 maybe Barbara Walters or Diane Sawyer. And I, I just have a real
24 problem with the way that my mother would write me and send me
25 articles and I'd say "That's not what's happening over here." It's very,
26 very negative and I'm finding a lot of those feelings coming back now
27 with the war in Iraq because I have a nephew who's on his way over there.
28 And I have friends who have sons and daughters over there that are
29 writing us from Iraq, they're emailing us, and they're telling us that this is
30 what's going on, but if you read the paper, you know, it's totally different.
31 You don't know where the truth is.
32

33 I can remember these press people wanting to interview people after the
34 most horrible thing and sticking a microphone in them and saying, well,
35 exactly like Platoon. I mean Platoon was kind of screwy – or what was it?
36 Full Metal Jacket, but the part of Full Metal Jacket that I thought was very
37 accurate is when they had just tried to take the city away, away. They had
38 gone through and done hand-to-hand fighting. And here's this dumb
39 reporter going "Oh, how do you feel?" You know, I mean what can you
40 say? I'm very angry about the press and I still see them doing the same
41 thing. You can't – I really have absolutely no faith in the press. And I
42 could go on and on. I can feel my blood pressure going up. But that's one
43 of the things that, that, um, I really had a problem with.
44

1 Uh, as far as fun and amusing times. Oh, I don't know. There was
2 various things that was funny. Um, it, it was so hot. We had Quonset huts
3 with metal roofs in Vietnam and it was very, very hot. We had no air
4 conditioning. We had concrete floors, and that was really bad because the
5 blood would get in there and you, you try to pour peroxide on it to foam it
6 up. We finally got some tile from the air force. We bartered for it and we
7 got the tile floor down. We put it in ourselves. But it got really hot in the
8 daytime and the mama sans would come around and scrub the floor with
9 the hose. So sometimes one of the doctors would come over and spray the
10 nurses with shaving cream and we'd get the hose and spray him back.
11 And it was just kind of a crazy thing to do, but boy, it sure cooled
12 everybody off.

13
14 Um, we, we did some cra-, we had a catholic priest. Somebody sent a
15 case of Irish whiskey [laughter] and he wanted to have Irish coffee or
16 something. So I can remember going in the mess hall with this, this giant
17 bowl and these giant blades and trying to make whipped cream out of
18 sugar and condensed milk, [laughter] that was a joke, and egg whites to
19 put in his Irish coffee with this booze. So there was a lot of funny things
20 like that.

21
22 Um, and, of course, in all the different assignments, you know, there were
23 parties to go to and fun things to do, you know. I don't think of, I can't
24 think of anything in, in particular you know that really stands out. 'Cause
25 most of the stateside assignments, you know – although I was in charge of
26 the retirement party for our colonel at Fort Devens. And he was a male so
27 we found these records that were made with chicken clucks so I dressed
28 everybody up as chickens and we sang "You're just a rooster in the old
29 hen house." And then we did the "In the Mood" clucking away and all
30 this kind of thing, and that was really kind of fun.

31
32 We had a group at Fort Devens called the Odd Patients and we had a
33 couple of people with guitars and we performed at different things.
34 Another year we had a MASH party and everybody came in their fatigues
35 and had real mess kits and everything. And I was the big instigator for the
36 USO show and I kind of put that together, so that was kind of fun. So, you
37 know, I think that in any, any place that you go, you're going to have good
38 times and bad times.

39
40 I think being in the military, I got an awful lot of training and experience
41 that I would never get anywhere else. Not only that, but I think in the
42 situations that we were in as a very young person – I mean I was only 22
43 years old when I was a captain and I was in charge of, of a multi-specialty
44 unit. Um, you really, really have to use [throat clearing] – and I hate to

1 say the nursing process because everybody is probably going to groan –
2 something that you learn in school where you have to identify a problem,
3 put the basis for the problem, put a solution, and a rationale for a solution.
4 It's just a scientific method that's organized. But I know at my school, the
5 University of Pittsburgh, they were very, very big on those 4 or 5 columns
6 and we used to groan about it. But let me tell you, when you're in a place
7 where you don't have equipment and you don't have a way to do things, if
8 you use that, it teaches you to think. And we really used that, jerry-rig
9 things. I know people that had gone to schools where everything was in
10 sets. They were just totally at, at a loss.

11
12 So I think that the military taught me how to think. It taught me to think
13 in an organized manner, it taught me to think in emergencies, and it taught
14 me to make decisions. And it also ultimately taught me to take
15 responsibility. So I could never, ever say that that it wasn't a positive
16 experience. I got most of my, part of my bachelor's, most of my master's
17 degree. I had several other courses that I got to take. I got to live in a lot
18 of different places, you know, meet a lot of different people from a lot of
19 different cultures. So overall, I don't, I can't fault it.

20
21 There is a thing about when you're in the military for – I was in 13 active
22 – um, you do move a lot. Now it's very unusual for anybody to have as
23 many, many PCSs (Permanent Change of Stations) as I did in those, those
24 12 years. Um, you don't set down roots, and that is a minus. But then
25 when you retire – most people I know tend to retire, they tend to live
26 somewhere for 10 or 15 years and most p-, people just stay there forever,
27 so you do get that. That, that would be one of the drawbacks I think.

28
29 Um, the only thing I regret is that [throat clearing] when I did retire and
30 then the VA found out I had all these illnesses, um, I do regret that they
31 did not find that I had these illnesses while I was on active duty because I
32 would have rather stayed in. But, you know, they always talk about when
33 there's choices in the road of life, you never know what choice you're
34 going to make. You don't look back. And so if I had made the choice to
35 stay in then I wouldn't have been able to do all the things I've done since I
36 retired and got out of the military, so I think that it's an equal kind of
37 thing. And I think it's a positive experience for anybody and I think that
38 if, if you're going to become a mature individual who can make decisions
39 and take responsibility, you'll find out whether you're going to do that or
40 not. And I think the experiences I had in the military definitely shaped the
41 way I turned out.

42
43 Ruth Stewart: Well, Wendy, this has really been a very, very interesting interview and
44 I've enjoyed hearing about your experiences in your career, nursing and

1 the military, and we really appreciate your taking the time to do this.
2 Thank you very much.
3
4Marian Weller: You're welcome.
5
6
7/mlc