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# Fragments from a Work in Progress

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# Fragments from a Work in Progress

by  
Elizabeth Allen

On Saturday more energy came than I could handle and I felt so tired. You know when you carry a load too heavy but too important to put down you get real tired, sometimes so tired that death seems to be more important than letting the load go. I never thought I could talk about death out loud to anyone. But now I can.

Last night I went to see the dancers, Urban Bush Women, and the anger, the anger, the anger. I could get in touch with that. They danced through the most painful scenes I have ever seen. But at the end the joy. They came through with such joy; and they could dance that also. When I came home I could feel the sense of joy for the first time in a very long time. When I came home I took a good look at myself and was I surprised or what? I did not recognize the person in the mirror.

Last night the woman who looked back at me was afraid. The light was out in my soul and my body was weak. I knew the time had come. It was time to make a change; the time to look at what was hidden from myself.

A long time ago in a place far away, a place called Vietnam, I had to come to grips with the monkey. The monkey was not war. As a colored woman born in the forties, the monkey was life. Vietnam just forced me to look at it. Maybe it allowed me the opportunity. Who knows. Looking back at it has been almost impossible. You see, growing up my grandmother would always say when I wanted to explain something, "Baby-darling, will

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talking about something that has already happened change it?" Of course it wouldn't change anything. Any fool knows that. "Well," she would say, "Then it's not worth talking about. You're just wasting time." So on I would go, never getting a chance to understand what had happened or trying to figure out if I could have changed it. War was like that. You see, it didn't matter if I talked about it, nothing would change anyway. It had already happened. It was my belief that talking about it would only take up the time that I need to work on other things.

Along with not being able to talk about the war was an even more threatening thought. During the early days when everything was supposed to happen in a child's life, I wanted so badly to be pretty. Grandma said if I walked up straight, did not open my mouth too wide when I talked and did not talk like a "poor darkie" I would have a better chance of being pretty. Of course I wasn't the right color but that was all right. Then one day I saw an

advertisement to train young women to be models and I went to see about it. Mind you, Grandma said I might be sorry, but go on. The woman at the desk was quick to point out the facts: "Honey, there is no market for colored models, but if you want to come here to learn how to walk that's all right." Oh, did that hurt. Of course, Grandma pointed out the truth to me: "Baby-darling, that's the way it is. This is America. Grandma thinks you are pretty. Let that be enough. Remember, for a colored girl if you get it in your head then you can make it. Don't worry about all that other stuff. It won't matter no way. It's only what you got in your head. Work on that. You be responsible for yourself. It can't be any other way." She was right. It can't be any other way. I really believed that if it was in my head that would be enough. I wonder if anyone ever recognized how alone you can be if the only thing you have is in your head?

Until today, I truly believed that the only reason I went to Vietnam was to be sure the black soldier would know that someone was there for him. I knew there would be very few nurses in Vietnam who would take the interest of the black soldier before the interest of the white one. How could I not know? I went into the military in January 1967 with a master's degree and I was twenty-six years old. I had been around for a long time in hospitals. In all of that time I had seen fewer than twenty black nurses. It certainly was not my belief that all of them would be joining the military. Of the number who wanted to go into the military, few would be accepted. I know that because when my sister tried to join the air force she was informed that they were not taking anyone. Of course, that was in 1958. But things don't change that fast.

Along with the natural reticence black women have for joining the military, this was the sixties. Certainly black people period were not voluntarily joining any branch of the military. Here I was, a black female with a master's degree in nursing, owing the army nothing at all and I sign up to go not just to the army but with a direct appointment to the Republic of Vietnam. I believe now that my desire to go was greater than my desire to do a service. In the dark recesses of my mind I believed that for once in my life I would not be alone, that there I would find people who would accept me as the person I believed myself to be. I knew from all I had heard that there were a lot of black men there who would recognize me as the woman I was and not only for what was in my head. Little did I know of the rules of the military and how entrenched discrimination was.

Sometimes, the need for things to be all right blinds you to the facts. I was even blind to the real race problems. After all, we were at war and prejudices did not exist in war. Everyone was working on this thing called "discrimination." Maybe it was my ignorance that makes it hurt so much even today. When the two women with whom I traveled to and from Fort Sam and flew to "Nam" decided at the time of assignment that they did not want to be assigned with me, I was stunned. How could I have missed something so obvious? Was I really such a bad



person? No, I wasn't a bad person at all. It would work out. "Just don't look back." As Grandma would have said, "Baby-darling, what did you expect?"

Since I had gone to Vietnam to work with the most injured black soldiers, I wanted to go where I thought they were going to be. I chose Cu Chi, the 12th Evacuation Hospital. Cu Chi was an experience out of time. Of course, no one wanted to go with me. But that was OK. Then Frankie spoke up and said, "Colonel, I want to go with Captain Allen." This was the first time that anyone wanted, chose, to go with me.

The next day, Friday, we caught the chopper to the 12th.

The first person I saw was the door gunner. God, but he was young. Of course, all the other soldiers I saw were young, too. I sat right next to him. I wanted someone to talk to me and I was so scared. As we flew low over the densest forest I could imagine he kept up a steady stream of talk. Ah, but he talked to me. It seemed like the stream of talk went on forever.

Coming into Cu Chi was something. There were a few strange buildings and a lot of trucks and tanks and it was a far place from anything that I had ever seen.

Have you ever been in a situation when you did not know you needed help? On Saturday, two days before the orientation to country and Cu Chi we were hit with mortars. I heard the sound and just stood there because I had no idea what it was. Then the nurses started to run. I remember as though it were yesterday hearing one say, "Hey, there is a new nurse here. Frankie isn't it? Frankie, come on we are under attack."

I stood there mortified, not at the mortars, but that no one remembered I had come on the same day as Frankie. I had no idea what to do and there did not seem to be anyone to tell me. I knew the situation was dangerous. Finally, someone turned around and looked at me. I know I must have looked as frightened as I felt. She said, "Aren't you new, too? Come on, follow me to the bunker."

I remember having seen bunkers in Saigon and they looked so scary, even in the day. What must they be like at night? What would it be like to be in the absolute dark with a bunch of people who did not even know your name? But that's OK. I will know.

Oh my God, but it is dark in here. Where do I sit? What do I do? I hear them telling Frankie what to do but no one says anything to me. Finally one of the women scoots beside me and says, "This happens a lot. You'll get use to it." I wonder. I don't think I will ever get use to being so alone and in such danger. I was not a novice at being alone. That was a lifetime profession. I was in the first group of African Americans to integrate public schools after the 1955 *Brown* decision, one of nine African-American students in a school of 1,500 Caucasian students and the only one in the science and mathematics department. Alone. Yes, I know what that is like. But I don't know what it is like and be in a war zone where "This happens a lot here."

The attack went on a long time it seemed. Maybe it just seemed to be a long time because it was so scary. When we returned to the hooch Frankie was scared and crying. The people seemed to want to help her. I could not cry. Maybe because I believed it wouldn't matter anyway. No one even remembered that I did not know what to do when the mortars hit. Looking back now, I know that is when I began to store the trauma. I could no longer look at it in the way others did. I was in a war zone and I was alone. That fact continued to return to me time and time again. I am a quick learner.

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### *Important knowledge comes fast.*

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It seemed that the mortars and rockets came a lot. Living under the base artillery and not being able to tell when the rounds were coming or going was scary. I never thought I would be able to tell. But important knowledge comes fast. I found out where the 25th Air Cav was and learned about tanks. I found out where the artillery positions were and went out to visit the troops. I ate with them and I talked with them. After all, they were the only black folks I saw who were not wounded.

Before the assignments I had heard a lot of talk about the "Gook Unit." Now, being new in country I had heard that word and I knew that it was not used in love. After all, I had heard the word "nigger" used in just the same way. Along with that, the talk about the head nurse and the assistant head nurse on that unit was certainly less than nice. I was assigned to that unit. Here I had come this far to work with black soldiers and I was assigned to the Vietnamese unit.

I want you to read this right. I had no complaint with the Vietnamese patients, but that was not the reason for my coming here. I had no idea about the language or the people or the diseases. I know that the American public would say they were getting better care than they would have gotten if the unit were not there. Let me ask you: Have you ever seen a critical hospital unit where newborn babies, old men and wounded Viet Cong were in the same place and without the privacy of screens? I wonder if we would have subjected the American white woman to that? I doubt it! It was an eye-opener for me. Now, I had seen this type of arrangement before, sort of. In the colored state-run psychiatric hospitals before the sixties, adults and babies were in the same units. But I don't think I have ever seen this type of conglomeration before. The worse part was the lack of privacy. Imagine what it is like to have a truckload of casualties from a bus bombing come into an open unit where you are trying to take care of an infant dying from the plague? Now imagine that the people in charge cannot even speak the language. The heat, the stench of rotting wounds, the crying of the babies and the fear of the families was at times overwhelming. I tried so hard to make it better.

Absolutely no one could work in that type of chaos



with that magnitude of illness and injury and remain sane. To request assistance was to put yourself up for ridicule. I knew exactly what the patients on the unit felt. I felt the same way.

It was such a struggle each day to go there to work. Never did I know what to expect. The most tragic thing for me was the absolute lack of respect for the patients and their families. It was as though it was their fault that they were caught in the crossfires of war. Did that mean no one cared for them? No, it didn't mean that at all. It meant that the respect and dignity we afforded to Americans was not afforded to them. To give out dated blood was countered with, "Do you want to give them the limited amount of blood that we have for our troops?" or even worse, "If you care so much for them, then you can just keep on with where you are."

Still, nature has a way of changing things. Each day I grew into my assignment. Each day I would go down to the road to wait, out to the guns to talk, and in to myself for support. I learned so much about the Vietnamese culture, about the children and the tropical diseases and cures they use. I went out on Medcaps to work with the villagers. Each day I grew to fit my skin.

Finally, the day came when I was at last sent to the surgical intensive care unit. The magnitude of the pain and suffering there was beyond anything I could ever make up. Nothing could have prepared me for this. The injuries were constant and serious. The heat was so bad and the quonsets absorbed so much of it. At times it was well above 100 degrees and relentless. When it rained, the temperature would drop 20 to 30 degrees in less than an hour. The electricity would constantly go out and then there would not even be a fan. There were times when just the environment was more than you could bear.

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*The heat, the stench of rotting wounds, the crying of the babies and the fear of the families was at times overwhelming.*

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One day I was told that I would be on call. Finding out what I needed to know was of tremendous importance. My requests for information were treated as though they were nothing. I had been in the country for six weeks and no one I knew of had to go on a med evac. Who do you ask about something like this? The only information I could get was to remember a flashlight, get your whole battle gear ready and pray. At 02:00 hours the call came in. Today I can still feel the fear. The voice said, "Move immediately to the helipad. The chopper is on its way in with a chest wound. Remember your steel helmet, your flak jacket and the flashlight. Captain, Godspeed." Today the feelings of that call takes me out.

There I stood in the blackest night you can imagine with the guns going off and alone waiting for the chopper to come. Then I heard it off in the distance. It was almost as if the sound was like nothing I had heard before. What

would I do, but more importantly, could I keep him alive? The chopper was dark as it came in and only its shadow moved. When it was close to the ground the bottom light came on for a short time, then I could see the door gunner. He sat like a sentinel and without motion. He had more rounds of ammunition around his body than I had ever seen, and he had his machine gun ready. I heard him call me as the chopper hovered, "Hurry, m'am, this one may not make it."

The small medical kit was all I was allowed to take along with the flashlight. As soon as I was on board the bird rose still in the dark. Of course, I asked about the lights, so I could see what faced me. Then my greatest nightmare came true. "M'am, we have to fly low and in the dark. Charley is kicking ass tonight. Cover up his head with your shirt and your light under it for a minute then you will have to work in the dark or we all will be killed."

I could hear the labored breathing and his hands were so cold. The pulse was such that it took my lightest touch to feel. As I unfastened my shirt to use to cover his head so that I could turn on the light, I wanted so much to see something different than what I knew I would see. The sight was beyond belief. He was so young. He couldn't have been much past his eighteenth birthday. He had taken a round to the chest. What color he had left was rapidly leaving him. The sound of his breathing filled the chopper. The tenseness within the chopper was that tenseness of death. Then I heard the pilot say, "M'am, we have to shut the light, we are deep in the territory." I could see the fires from the rounds and the mortars and feel the speed of the chopper. But more than that, I could feel the life of this young man seep from his very soul. All he had was me and the drive of that crew. We all knew we had to get him to Saigon alive.

It is hard to recall the coldness of his lips as I breathed for him. But he couldn't breath for himself. I know he knew that I was breathing for him because I felt him squeeze my leg. He needed to let me know that he was alive. You know, maybe the feeling was in my mind and he did nothing. Soon all the fatigue left my legs and arms. Who was I to be tired? I had no right to hurt. For it was this young man, dying in a land far away and for a cause he could not remember, who was hurt. It was my job to save his life, and I did. At one point I could feel the hand of the gunner on my back. He said nothing, there was nothing to say. He knew and so did we all. I must have done the right things because when we landed in Saigon, the soldier was still breathing. I can only remember someone coming out with a litter to take him.

Elizabeth Allen is an associate professor in the School of Nursing of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. She is past chairperson and a current member of the Agent Orange Commission of the state of Michigan. She also serves on the Women's Commission of the New Jersey Agent Orange Commission. She is writing a book about her experiences in Vietnam.