

# **The Vietnam Women's Memorial Storytelling Program**

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- A. Self Introduction
- B. Thanks to Marsha, Diane, and Holley Watts
- C. China Beach
- D. Early Army story
- E. Vietnam story
- F. After Vietnam
- G. 50th Medical Detachment Reunion in 2000
- H. In the Shadow of the Blade and A Touch of Home
- I. A Piece of My Heart
- J. NPS Wall Volunteer
- K. Conclusion

Good morning. I am Neal Stanley and I live in Denver Colorado. I am a husband, a brother, a golfer, a petroleum engineer, a business man, a Harley rider, a National Park Service Volunteer at the Wall, and was a combat medic in Vietnam, 1967-68.

I want to thank Dr. Marsha Guenzler-Stevens, a professor at the University of Maryland and the Education Chair and Vice President of the Board of the Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation as the chair of today's Storytelling program. Thank you Marsha for all you do to honor veterans.

I am highly honored that Diane Carlson Evans asked me to participate in this program. I have attended most of the Memorial Day and Veterans Day ceremonies here since 2003 and have seen Diane speak at each one. And I have said "thanks" to her after those events ...along with 1000 other of her admirers. But I think I surprised her when I came up to her last year.....and repeated to her her famous quote from the episode of

the China Beach television program that featured Diane and other real Vietnam nurses. "I never saw my Dad cry all my life....and he came up to me and gave me this big hug...and had these tears...and he said...I have four sons and I send my daughter off to war." I saw that episode of China Beach, as I watched that program almost every week for the four years it was on, 1988-1991. I've always remembered Diane's words. And of course I didn't know then that she had been working many years to create this wonderful memorial to the Women that served in Vietnam. Diane, we can never thank you enough for your leadership and perseverance in making this memorial come to be. Let's give Diane a big thank you applause.

And Holley Watts was one of the first Donut Dollies to go to Nam in 1966. What a nice talk you gave. For those that don't know, Holley wrote a book in 2004, titled **Who Knew?** which has pictures that she took in Vietnam and her thoughts from her Vietnam diary. It is a wonderful collection of both. Thanks Holley.

As we look around at the three memorials, The Vietnam Veterans Memorial commonly called The Wall, The Three Soldier Statue and The Vietnam Women's Memorial, I always think how perfect the three are together. The Wall honors those that gave their life in service to our country, the Three Soldier Statue honors all soldiers that served, and the Vietnam Women's Memorial honors all the women that so bravely served including the eight military women that did give their lives and the four Donut Dollies that did also.

The TV program China Beach was an awakening for me as it was very similar to my life in Vietnam. I was a Dustoff medic in Vietnam. Dustoff was the radio call-sign for helicopter medical evacuation. But let me back up a few years to give you my earlier history. I grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma. My father was an engineer in the oil and gas industry, my mother was a housewife, and I have two sisters. I went to a large high school with 600 students in my class and 96% of us went on to college. I was a Boy Scout and was a fairly good student in high school without really trying too hard. And then, in the fall of 1965, I went to the University of Oklahoma studying engineering. After mid-way through the second semester I realized that I had learned something ....that I should have probably gone to class more often and should have at least opened some of my text books more frequently. So knowing that the military was going to be in my near term future, I borrowed my roommate's ROTC manual and started studying it. I talked to all the recruiters in the summer of 1966 knowing that I would be drafted in September when I was not enrolled in college again. I joined the Army and chose to be trained as a medical corpsman, as that seemed like a good job, a helpful job, and an exciting job. And the recruiter said "hospitals always have the best food and the nurses are there too. Both of which were very true.

So off to Fort Polk, Louisiana I went in early October 1966 for basic training and then to Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas for ten weeks of medic training. After medic training I was sent back to Fort Polk to work as a medic in the Tigerland infantry training center. Somewhere along that time I applied for OCS, Officer Candidate School, and was accepted awaiting a class date. A few weeks later, during our nightly bridge game, one of the guys, our company clerk said, "Hey the 50<sup>th</sup> Med Detachment needs two more medics to join them as they are going to Vietnam soon. Do you guys want to

join?" as he laughed thinking who would volunteer for that. The 50<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment had been at Fort Polk since the end of Korean War and a few months earlier they had received new Huey helicopters and jungle fatigues. Everyone knew that they were headed to Vietnam soon. So this was a "fork in the road" event in my life. I stayed awake all night thinking...should I join or not? If I did I'd be riding in a helicopter, which seemed really cool, and better than walking the hills with an infantry unit. I'd be in Vietnam soon anyway, so why not. I joined the 50<sup>th</sup> the next morning, went home for five days. Two days later I was headed to Vietnam, on a ship, with the 50<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment (Helicopter-Ambulance). That was October 2, 1967.

We had forty guys in the unit...six helicopters, each with a crew of four....2 pilots, one crew chief and one medic. So 24 of us were flight crew and the other 16 were administrative, radio operators, and helicopter mechanics. We were located at Tuy Hoa, right on the beach connected to the 91<sup>st</sup> Evac Hospital. And the 91<sup>st</sup> Evac did have great food and nurses and Donut Dollies. We were an ambulance service. Besides the war going on, there were all the "normal" maladies that 400,000 people would have....heat stroke, heat exhaustion, snake bites, spider bites, upper respiratory infection, malaria, all types of diseases, fights, jeep wrecks, chopper crashes....anything you can think of.

But the calls to pick up the wounded came in on the radio every day. Dustoff Dustoff, this is Sugar Clinch 6 OVER. Sugar Clinch 6, Eagle Dustoff, go ahead OVER. Dustoff we need an urgent pickup. Our coordinates are BQ 899 792. We have 5 WIA and 2 KIA, currently taking heavy fire from the November (north). Three of these guys will be KIA soon if you can't get to them quickly. We are in deep jungle on a hill side, there is no LZ, you will have to hoist them out. The weather is light rain with low ceiling. Our tact push is 49.7 OVER. Roger Sugar Clinch 6 we copy. Dustoff 92 will be airborne in three minutes and will contact you on your push, OUT. And off we would go trying to visualize what we would encounter at the LZ. On the way we would continue to talk to the guys on the ground to try to understand everything that we would be facing once we were ready to make the pickup. If everything went right and there was an LZ to land in, then we might only be on the ground for twenty seconds. If we had to hoist them out, it would take maybe five minutes for each patient. We were sitting ducks on hoist missions and frequently got shot up. After we got them onboard, I would go to work on the patients.....remembering the four lifesaving steps.....check the breathing, stop the bleeding, protect the wound, and treat for shock. When we had five or six or seven patients lying on the floor of the chopper, it was a real challenge to treat them all....bandages, IVs, mouth to mouth, CPR....we did it all. I trained my crew chief to help me in all of that.

We kept one Dustoff chopper at Ban Me Thuot which is in the western highlands near the Cambodian border, to cover that huge area. There was no hospital there, so we would take our patients to the 71<sup>st</sup> Evac in Pleiku or the 8<sup>th</sup> Field in Nha Trang or the 67<sup>th</sup> or 85<sup>th</sup> Evac in Qui Nhon, whichever was the closest to the pick-up LZ.

At our home with the 91<sup>st</sup> Evac Hospital, our operations office was next to the emergency room, ER. And our heliport was 40 yards from the front door of ER. The

personnel in ER would be notified of the number or patients and types of wounds that we were flying back with so they could be ready. If we didn't have another mission to go on, after we got the chopper shut down, and the blood washed out, and my field dressings and IV supplies restocked, I would go into ER and watch my patients being treated by the corpsmen, nurses, and doctors. The ER crews were amazing in how quickly they would work as a team. Covered in blood, yelling vitals and instructions at each other, performing miracles and not stopping until there was no hope.....they would go on and on until all the incoming patients were treated. I was much more fortunate than the ER crew. My job was only to keep them alive until we arrived at the hospital. The doctors, nurses, and corpsmen had to take over and try to piece them back together. I never got to know any of those that I picked up in an LZ.

The 50<sup>th</sup> Med Det was a great unit lead by a great commander, Major Ronald Jones. I learned a tremendous amount about managing a group from him that has helped me greatly in my business career ever since. Hire top people, have high standards in how things are done, and strive for perfection knowing that it probably won't happen but should be close. I am convinced that 36 of our 40 men returned from Vietnam because of the high standards that Major Jones demanded of everyone. Unfortunately, our other four men are still somewhere in Vietnam.

In May, after the Tet Offensive of January and February 1968, we were moved to I Corp, Hue – Phu Bai, Camp Eagle. We became part of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. That was a big time war in I Corp. It was mostly mountainous terrain so lots of hoist missions. We would take most of the patients to the 22<sup>nd</sup> Surgical Hospital in Phu Bai or to the 95<sup>th</sup> Evac in Danang. For head wounds, we would fly out to the hospital ships Sanctuary and Repose. They would be 5 to 30 miles offshore, which was no problem on a sunny day, but in a rain storm at night was a different case. The best benefit was that when we would land to off load the patient, a nurse dressed in her white uniform would come out and give us a paper sack with cokes and ice cream inside. There was always five of each. My crew chief and I never did tell the pilots that we got an extra one. Oh the beauty of small things.

In July 1968 when we returned from a tough mission and landed at our heliport, Major Jones came to my chopper and said "Neal, your orders for OCS just came in. You have to report to Ft. Benning in eight days to begin infantry OCS. I told them I doubt if you would want to accept it." So another fork in the road.....finish my tour in Nam and then I still had another year of my enlistment. Or go to OCS for six months and then have two more years of active duty. And of course after OCS I would have been right back in Vietnam as an infantry platoon leader walking the hills. I did think about it for two days, and decided to stay where I was. I've always wondered where that other path would have led.

So I finished my tour in Nam and was sent to White Sands Missile Range New Mexico to work in the hospital for my final year in the army. That was a good place to decompress. And I did meet my wife there who was teaching school in nearby Las Cruces. Marie, raise your hand. After that year I went back to college on the GI bill and

did open those books and never miss a class. But it wasn't easy. The country was in the midst of all the anti-war dialogue. Veterans were looked down on and or ignored like we had done something wrong. I didn't really talk about it much. I did have all the pictures...a few hundred slides that chronicled my year in Nam that I would show to a few people. But mostly I just went to school, finished my engineering degree and went to work in the oil and gas business in west Texas. I was transferred to Houston and then took a different job in Tulsa in 1979 and then to Denver in 1983. A number of my co-workers were veterans too, but we really didn't talk about it. I think we could subconsciously still feel the anti-war sentiment.

But one event kept nagging at my soul -- our Dustoff 90 crew, the four guys that we didn't bring home. What had happened to them? They had disappeared on a night mission on 12 February 1968. They radioed the SF camp where they were headed and said they would be there in 20 minutes and never showed up. So we searched for over two weeks...lots of aircraft searching...never found anything. The crew chief, Wade Groth, was the first guy I had met when I joined the unit and was my great friend. He and I flew together on many missions. I had always been thinking about having a reunion of our unit. Even back when I was in Nam I thought about that since we had such a great team. So on Thanksgiving weekend of 1997, I had a new computer and was on the internet for the first time. I started looking for everyone in the 50<sup>th</sup>. That first weekend I found 11 of the guys. No one had ever talked to anyone else in the 29 years. I kept dialing for people and decided early on that I would organize a reunion. One of the pilots, Ron Porta, had been going to the Dustoff Association annual reunions in San Antonio for 2-3 years, but no one else. I didn't even know that there was a Dustoff Association. So in February 1999 I went to that reunion and Porta was there, the first 50<sup>th</sup> Med guy that I had seen since Nam. We sat in the bar talking, drinking beers, and calling the guys that I had already found. I came to Washington on St. Patrick's Day in 1999 on business and met one of my 50<sup>th</sup> Med buddies who I had found and that lives in nearby Fairfax County. We had dinner at Old Ebbits to plan the reunion and then he took me to the Wall, my first ever visit. We found the names of our four Dustoff 90 buddies on Panel 39E as we cried together. That buddy, Curt Dierdorff and his wife Margaret are here today. Curt, thanks Man.

So in 2000 we had our first reunion in conjunction with the Dustoff Association reunion. Twenty-five guys and spouses attended. It was awesome. For that reunion I prepared a DVD slide show of our year in Nam all set to 60's rock and roll and dedicated it to the Dustoff 90 crew. It was a huge hugs and tears weekend. Since then some of us, 10-20, show up every year. And even two years ago I found three more of our guys. Of course, many had passed on even before I began looking in 1997. I heard lots of sad stories when I would finally find the phone number and make the call and find out that I had waited too long to find them.

The Dustoff 90 chopper was seen from the air in 1970, two years after going down. It was covered by dense jungle and 150 foot tall trees, exactly on the mountain where we had looked for two weeks. It was fairly intact, not all burned and broken up. No sign of the crew was found at that time. And in the mid-1990's a detailed site examination was

completed, again with no sign of any remains. I have been told that they are the only full helicopter crew still MIA in Nam, Panel 39E.

I continued to have business trips to DC a few times each year. Every day that I was in DC I would place a poster for the crew at Panel 39E. And in 2002 I finally found the mother of my buddy Wade Groth in Michigan. I travelled there one Saturday and spent the day with fifteen of Wade's family. I gave his Mom a 50<sup>th</sup> Med Det patch from one of the uniforms that I wore in Vietnam. I also saw all the information that the family had received from the site excavation...hundreds of pictures. That was an awesome day. In 2002 the DVD "In the Shadow of the Blade" premiered. A young husband / wife team from Austin, Texas created it. It shows the significant role the Huey helicopter played in Vietnam. They had many veterans tell their story of Vietnam and the Huey. I met Patrick and Cheryl Fries shortly after they made In the Shadow of the Blade and have become good friends with them. In 2009 they created "A Touch of Home" which tells the story of the Red Cross Girls in Vietnam which were called Donut Dollies. It was narrated by Holley Watts. It premiered at the Arlington Cemetery Women's Theatre. I attended that event which was a wonderful reunion for all the Dollies.

In August of 2003, I got an email from a Donut Dolly friend, Jan Woods. She told me a Denver high school was going to do a play from the book called "A Piece of My Heart" which tells the stories of 26 women that served in Vietnam. And that the drama teacher was looking for a Vietnam veteran to help. I got the book and saw that most of the women had been nurses in Vietnam, with others being Donut Dollies, USO entertainers, and career military woman. So I emailed the teacher and told her of my Vietnam background, and I would love to help. A few days later I attended the first rehearsal at the Denver School of the Arts. By then I had read the entire book and had also read the script. It was like my life in Vietnam happening before my eyes...hospital emergency room, mass casualties. The eight performances were in late October. And then they won the "best high school production" in the State of Colorado. They performed it again in downtown Denver in front of 2000 high school students and teachers. Shortly after that I went to Washington for Veterans Day. It was the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Vietnam Women's Memorial, which was a huge reunion for women that had served in Vietnam...nurses, Donut Dollies, career military women. And for that reunion an adult theatre group from Omaha Nebraska traveled to DC to perform "A Piece of My Heart" in the Arlington Cemetery Women's Theatre. Of course I attended. As I was sitting waiting for the play to begin, on about the 20<sup>th</sup> row on the aisle, an elderly woman was wheeled up in a wheel chair and placed next to me. I introduced myself and she told me her name was Lucky Allen. I was totally shocked, as Lucky Allen is one of the women in the book and one of the main characters in the play and a high school girl in Denver was playing her life. I told Lucky about my involvement with the play in Denver, and I got her to sign a program that I could take back to Brittney in Denver.

On Veterans Day 2007 I was visiting the Wall and met one of the Volunteers, Suzanne Sigona. After talking during the day she suggested that I become a Wall Volunteer, as I had spent many hours there during the past eight years. So the 2008 Veterans Day was my first time as a volunteer. There are about 60 volunteers from 22 different

states. We all come to the Wall whenever we can. We help visitors find names and answer questions. I owe a big thanks to Suzanne for encouraging me to become a volunteer.

There are always amazing stories that happen at the Wall. There are two stories that I will briefly tell about. In 2007 I had been in DC for four days on business and had a flight out on Sunday afternoon. I visited the Wall that morning and as I had on over 150 different days, I placed a poster to Dustoff 90 and the picture that I had taken of Wade Groth, our first day in Nam, sitting in his helicopter. I clearly remember thinking that morning that there was literally nothing else placed at the Wall, which is really rare, especially on a Sunday. Two weeks later I received an email from a woman named Belinda from Minnesota. She had visited the Wall that Sunday afternoon with her friend from DC. She told me how that her mother had worn an MIA bracelet since 1968 and she wanted to find the name as her Mother had never been to the Wall either. So Belinda and her friend found Panel 39E and were searching for the name, and happened to look down at the poster and picture. The name on her Mother's bracelet was Wade Groth, my buddy. They were totally shocked and amazed. How could this be? The one name they were hoping to find was the only name on the Wall that someone had placed a remembrance.

Just this past March I was in DC for a week, on business, but visited the Wall everyday and placed the posters for my buddies. The following week I received an email from a girl that had visited the Wall with her school group. She wrote about seeing a poster that I had placed at the Wall, Panel 34E, for my Tigerland medic buddy, Jeff Straface. Jeff went to Nam a few months ahead of me. My last letter to Jeff, after I was in Nam, was returned to me by his company commander saying Jeff had been killed in a fierce firefight. After reading my poster, the girl said that the Wall came alive for her ...that the names seemed like people looking at her. And that they were trying to comfort her for her sadness. I wrote the girl back, thanked her for contacting me, and said that I assume that it was her senior class trip to DC. She wrote me back and said "no I'm only in 8<sup>th</sup> grade." She and I have continued to email almost daily since then and I sent her all the different DVDS and pictures that I have, including ***In The Shadow of the Blade and A Touch of Home***. Alie, who lives in Billings, Montana, is an amazing, awesome girl.

These three wonderful Memorials allow everyone to face their emotions about a difficult time in our Nation's history. Together they create an amazing place, a very emotional place, a very healing place, one that is filled with hugs and tears every day. Most all of us that served our country during the Vietnam era, in whatever way that we did, thought we were doing the right thing. We served honorably. We were dedicated to helping each other, and we hoped we would persevere. But no one group did that more bravely than the women that served our nation. Nurses, Donut Dollies, and regular military women were **ALL** volunteers and stood side by side with the men. Thank you, Diane and Holley, and all your sisters, for being there for us.