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Description

Edie Meeks has been a nurse for almost 50 years, including a year of service during the Vietnam War. Meeks talks about her experiences in the military hospitals there, and how her actions changed her perspective on nursing. This story is produced by NBC Learn in partnership with Pearson.

Keywords

Vietnam War, Nursing, Nurse, Edie Meeks, Hospital, Northern Westchester Hospital, Career, Job, Saigon, Pleiku, Third Field Hospital, Operating Room, OR, Huey, Helicopter, Perspective, Intensive Care, Soldiers, Care, Medical Care, Triage, Emergency Room, Patients, Army Nurse Corps, Uniform

Transcript

Edie Meeks, Vietnam Nurse

EDIE MEEKS (Vietnam Nurse):
My name is Edie Meeks and I have been a nurse for almost fifty years. I’ve worked at Northern Westchester Hospital for five years. I always wanted to be a nurse. I never really thought of being
anything else. For many years, if didn't talk about the war. In fact, most people didn't know that I had been a nurse that served there.

I joined in February of 1968. I went to the army recruiter and said, I’d like to join the army and I’d like to go to Vietnam. And the recruiter almost passed out, nobody does that. In July of 1968, I arrived in Saigon. And that's where I worked for the first six months, at the Third Field Hospital. And then I went to Pleiku January '69 to July of '69.

You pretty much lived and breathed, at least we did, the war that we worked on, because we were there all the time. You knew the doctors, the doctors knew you. You know, if you needed to hang blood and they were busy in the O.R. and couldn't write the order, you could do it and they would back you up.

When I was over there I really didn't want to get to know the fellas. Now I can say that, but what I really didn't want to know was their names. I think I couldn't carry the burden of having all of those guys in my head, all the, I had to take care of them and let them go. There was a patient that came in. He had been trapped under a helicopter for three days when he was shot down. They rescued him. They brought him to Third Field Hospital. And before they took him to the O.R., he died. I was so filled with rage that I had to put him aside, because I couldn't handle the rage. Why didn't they get him into the O.R. faster? Why didn't, why didn't, why didn't?

Here was a kid who had fought and fought and fought to stay alive. And I think what happened was he came home to the O.R., and he felt safe, and then he died. It was things like that that you just had to put aside and say, it's piling up too much. You know, there were too many of them.

The Huey helicopter was the helicopter that brought most of our patients to us. To me the Huey just meant total bad news. But you know, for the guys in the field, it meant thank God, we're going home. So that it was like, we had a reverse perspective of what this helicopter was all about.

And for many things, the nurses had a reverse perspective. Because they, the guys might have seen that they won a battle, we never did. We just saw what was injured. We didn't see any victories at all. The only respite that we had was seeing some of these guys get better and go home. And that was it.

In Vietnam, I was an intensive care nurse. And now I’m an operating room nurse. And it's the kind of nursing where you actually can do something that shows, you know, an ending. So that when you're operating on somebody, you hopefully are fixing what's wrong.

KRISTEN SCHMIDT (Nurse, Northern Westchester Hospital):
So were you based at a hospital or were you out in the battlefields?
MEEKS: Actually, we were all at the hospital, but the hospitals were in the battlefields. I mean, we were rocketed almost every night. And we had sandbags, and, you know.

DIANNE GRIMM (Nurse, Northern Westchester Hospital):
Edie, why were you wearing green in this one if you were wearing white at the other hospital?
MEEKS: Every other hospital in Vietnam wore fatigues. And it was because you were out in the dirt. But the Third Field Hospital was supposed to be the showcase hospital of Vietnam. And all of the congressmen, and, you know, the fancy people would come there. And so they wanted us to wear white uniforms, which was really kind of strange. It was kind of bizarre because you could go home and your hos- your uniform would just be just a mess. Because you still had the same patients that everybody else
did.

SCHMIDT: Because you were still getting patients from the battlefield.

MEEKS: Right.

MEEKS: One of the things about the Army Nurse Corps then was unlike today, is that we really weren't soldiers. We were nurses who joined the army to help the guys that who in the army. Whereas today they really are soldiers. The women who were in the Army Nurse Corps.

GRIMM: You look like a soldier here.

SCHMIDT: Yeah.

MEEKS: I think what's helped me the most in nursing since Vietnam is the fact that nothing bothers me. One of the things that we were taught in school was that you can handle anything. Doesn't matter what happens, you can handle it. Everything is put into perspective when you've had a year like that.

My name is Edie Meeks and I was a nurse in Vietnam.