



NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP

Growing up, I wanted to be a doctor, but money was scarce so I went to nursing school. In 1966, during my senior year, an Army Nurse Corps recruiter came to talk to us. It all sounded so exciting; I would have a chance to travel, it paid well and most importantly, I was assured that I wouldn't have to go to Vietnam if I didn't want to - which I didn't. I signed up and after basic training, was assigned to Letterman Hospital at the Presidio of San Francisco. During my two years at Letterman, I received orders for Vietnam three times. The first two times I said no. But the third time, I decided that my two years of experience would probably be a huge asset over there. We landed in Tan Son Nhut Air Base and when the airplane door opened, I nearly fell backwards, overwhelmed by the heat and the stench. Suddenly all my experience seemed trivial. Being 23 years old seemed very young. I was scared, but there was no turning back. After our debriefing, I was assigned to the 67th Evac Hospital in Qui Nhon. When the helicopter landed on the hospital tarmac, they set my things onto the ground. I climbed out, straightening my skirt. The soldiers in the helicopter yelled, "Good luck, Captain," as they took off. I was in my class A uniform, which meant I was also wearing nylons and high heels. Nothing could have been less appropriate for the surroundings. Miles of barbed wire topped by concertina wire encompassed the hospital compound and the large adjoining airfield, along with acres of hot concrete.

I squared my shoulders and marched inside the grim cinder block building in front of me. I was told to get some sleep, because I started tomorrow. I gratefully fell into a bed and in the morning, donned my hospital uniform fatigues and army boots just like the soldiers.

Because I was a Captain, I was made Head Nurse on the Orthopedic Ward, which primarily held soldiers with traumatic amputations. I took my role very seriously and had a reputation for strictness. Although I had been a nurse in the States for two years, it did not adequately prepare me for Viet Nam. I witnessed a tremendous amount of suffering and watched a lot of men die. One of my rules was that nurses were not allowed to cry. The wounded and dying men in our care need our strength, I told them. We couldn't indulge in the luxury of our own feelings. On the other hand, I was always straight with the soldiers. I would never say, "Oh, you're going to be just fine," if they were on their way out. I didn't lie. But I remember one kid that I didn't want to tell.

The badly wounded soldier couldn't have been more than 18 years old. I could see immediately that there was nothing we could do to save him. He never screamed or complained, even though he must have been in a lot of pain. When he asked me, "Am I going to die?"

I said, "Do you feel like you are?"

He said, "Yeah, I do."

"Do you pray?" I asked him.

"I know 'Now I lay me down to sleep.' "

"Good," I said, "that'll work."

When he asked me if I would hold his hand, something in me snapped. This kid deserved more than just having his hand held. "I'll do better than that," I told him.

I knew I would catch flak from the other nurses and corpsmen as well as possible jeers from the patients, but I didn't care. Without a single look around me, I got onto the bed with him. I put my arms around him, stroking his face and his hair as he snuggled close to me. I kissed him on the cheek, and together we recited, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

Then he looked at me and said just one more sentence, "I love you, Momma, I love you," before he died in my arms - quietly and peacefully - as if he really were just going to sleep. After a minute, I slipped off his bed and looked around. I'm sure my face was set in a fierce scowl, daring anyone to give me a hard time. But I needn't have bothered. All the nurses and corpsmen were breaking my rule and crying silently, tears filling their eyes or rolling down their cheeks.

I thought of the dead soldier's mother. She would receive a telegram informing her that her son had died of "war injuries." But that was all it would say. I thought she might always wonder how it had happened. Had he died out in the field? Had he been with anyone? Did he suffer? If I were his mother, I would need to know. So later I sat down and wrote her a letter. I thought she'd want to hear that in her son's final moments he had been thinking of her. But mostly I wanted her to know that her boy hadn't died alone.

UNKNOWN VIETNAM NURSE [BACK TO AIRBORNEPRESS](#)