

BOBBI HOVIS, NAVY NURSE –VN- '63 – '64

Bobbi: Bobbi Hovis. That's B-o-b-b-i. H-o-v-i-s. The Navy nurse. Career Navy nurse. I was in Vietnam 1963 to '64. Had many other exciting duty stations.

PRODUCER : What was the beginning of your career?

Bobbi: I went for my indoctrination at Jacksonville Naval Air Station. The hospital on the air station. I was there 7 months for indoctrination and learning how to be a Navy nurse.

PRODUCER : What year was that?

Bobbi: 1946 to '47.

PRODUCER : Where did you get your education? How did you make the decision to go into the Navy as a nurse and all those years now?

Bobbi: I came from northern Pennsylvania. A little town called Edinboro. A college town. A lake resort town. A perfect town to grow up in. I lived next door to the campus, so I was interested in education very early. Both my mother and grandmother graduated from that college. At age 5 I actually decided and wanted to be a nurse. I was so focused on that, all I focused on. In school I took all of the science and math courses that I could. It just seemed natural for me to lean toward those course. I was good enough at them that I graduated quite easily. I had already decided what hospital school of nursing I wanted to attend, and that was The Western Pennsylvania Hospital School of Nursing in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I graduated from there. At that time the war had just begun and I was a cadet nurse.

PRODUCER : Now what war are we talking about?

Bobbi: World War II. I was in school during World War II, but I got out in time to put in for Navy flight school to become a Navy flight nurse, which I did. I went after graduation from flight school I went right to the Pacific theater and on through Korea. I was so fascinated with nursing that it's all I could focus on. Someone once told me that since I was an only child I was so able to focus on my studies or whatever I was doing at the time because I didn't have the distraction of the siblings.

I thought well that's a pretty good point. I think that is the truth. I always came home from school, immediately got my school work done, and then went out to play. My parents didn't have to get after me all the time to get your homework done, you know?

PRODUCER : Sure.

Bobbi: It was easy for me. I did. After I graduated from flight school I was the first nurse in my class to volunteer for Korea, and although we were stationed in Hawaii, at Hickam Field, we were hardly ever there because we flew around the clock missions 24/7. It seems it was around the clock operation. That first year 1950, the Korean war began in the June of 1950, but that winter in Japan and Korea was one of the worst on record. Our personnel only still has summer uniforms in Japan as the occupation forces, and they were not dressed for the winter that we had there at that time.

We had so many frostbites. We had more fingers, and toes, and limbs lost due to frostbite almost as in gunshots and war casualty type things. When we flew patients with frostbite and loss of limb, we had to keep the cabin very, very cool, of the air craft. Flight crew would get so cold that we would take turns and go up on the flight deck with the pilots and sit up there where it was warm and get warmed up and come back to the cabins where the patients were. Then we terminated back in Hawaii and from there they went on to the States.

PRODUCER : How long where you actually in country in Korea?

Bobbi: I flew 8 months. Eight months. Actually we picked them up. They had been transported from Korea to Japan and most of them we picked up in Japan. That was a 5,000 bed hospital in Yakutsk, Japan. Then we island hopped. We had some of the air crafts that were so worn out that were used on the Berlin Airlift that took the Cole into Berlin and they operated around the clock as well. They estimated they had a landing every minute with Cole for East Berlin and the communist held part of Europe.

PRODUCER : That was '49 right? The Berlin Airlift?

Bobbi: No, it was-

PRODUCER : Was it '48/'49?

Bobbi: It was-

PRODUCER : I'm trying to recall [inaudible 06:32].

Bobbi: The Korean war started ... Yes it would have been there that time, because the Korean war started in '50, and then everything shifted to the Pacific. We rotated between squadrons and hospitals so that we maintained our efficiency in both. It's a lot different caring for patients at altitude in an old junker airplane, then it is a nice hospital ward. We had to maintain our proficiency in both. Once you got those gold wings of a Navy flight nurse ... Ah, that was nice.

I did that for quite a while, and then I was stationed on ADAC in the Aleutian Islands for a year. I flew missions that were not necessarily Korean related, but some of the patients that came into California Travis Air Force base, then they were spread out all over the country and we had the domestic routes. One of my squadrons we flew from Moffit Field, California to Wheelus Air Force base in Tripoli, Libya. That was the longest air evac route ever, and I think that should still stand.

Those were exciting times flying. To think of what's going on in Tripoli and that area of the world now, and I look back on it and it's interesting to compare the two having personally been there. Because of my Korean air flying, we would fly to Southeast Asia. I fell in-love with Southeast Asia. I decided that somehow I would have to get back there for duty of some kind. When the Vietnam war started I put in for it immediately. I was the first Navy nurse to volunteer for Vietnam, although there were 2 nurses out there in what we call the American dispensary.

That was attached to the American Embassy. There was no full facility care whatsoever. You walk into the dispensary and get an aspirin and some cough medicine, but that was about it. Then the war really begins-

PRODUCER : What year are we talking about?

Bobbi: 1963. As it began to escalate the Department of Defense realized that they were going to have to have a full facility hospital. I had come back from ADAC and was stationed at Quantico, Virginia in the Marine Core base. I knew nurses were being sent out so I asked my detailer ... The detailer's the one in D.C. who details you to wherever the nurses were going. She sent me out there. I was the first Navy nurse to volunteer for Vietnam, although the 2 were out there as I said.

Five of us went out on the same aircraft. We had 7 Navy nurses stationed there. It went on from there, establishing the full facility hospital. When we landed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon, our chief nurse met us and

she said that we were going by the commanding officer's quarters for lunch and we would find out about the hospital. We did, and we found out about the hospital. He told us that they had a choice of one of 4 buildings to renovate for a Navy hospital.

He had already selected the one we used and he took us by there the next day. We nearly all ... We couldn't believe we had to turn that building into a Naval hospital in 4 days. He gave us 96 hours. There were the Navy nurses and the corpsman. Eighty Navy corpsman. This building was such an old dilapidated former French apartment house used by Vietnamese. It was so wrecked that ... Falling apart, and we didn't see how we could do this. We did it. She was commissioned October 1, 1963.

PRODUCER : What were the conditions in the building? Describe-

Bobbi: Some you may not want to hear. We would clean one day; clean an area, and we would go back and we had found that they had used the heads the night before. These were our hired workers that worked at the hospital. They used to be called koolies, but they were not called that later on. They lived on the compound, and they use the heads, and they would leave their mess after we had just cleaned it up. We got so discouraged, so we would clean it again, and again, and again. I don't know to this day how we were able to get that hospital up and running in 4 days. It was sparkling.

Sparkling and I don't know how. Night and day. Around the clock. It's like working in a boiler factory in Saigon. No air conditioning. It was quite an adventure. It was designed to be a full facility hospital, so you strove to achieve in 100 beds. I think we had in the 90s. We were full facility, except for psychiatry, and a long lasting problems like fractured femurs in traction.

We would a combat casualty hospital so we could not keep patients more than 30 days, because if we'd have a big run on patients we just had to keep empty beds all the time, so they were medevaced Tuesdays and Thursdays to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, and then on back to us or on to other facilities due to the severity, probably, of the wounds. Just a short time, in fact when we moved into our quarters, nurses quarters, we could look down. We were on the 7th floor, and we could look down in the streets and there were already barricades up, and soldiers manning those barricades.

Things were building and building even before we got there. Then the big coup d'état came when the Diệm government was overthrown. Diệm and his brother were killed in the personnel carrier, and it was an interesting time. During my time I saw 4 coup d'états at least. We never knew. There's some story about those coups that you couldn't believe were happening. During the first coup when the Diệm government was overthrown, right on the edge of town they had setup a battery of 105mm Howitzers. They were firing those into the city in an attempt to hit Diệm's palace.

We would take these hits. Our quarters weren't hit directly, but buildings all around us were. Our building would be showered with shrapnel, and red tile from the roof, and glass would slam into our building. That is the only time. I was a born adventurer, so I got into these things. Even during the coup I went out on a balcony and I laid down on my stomach. I could look over the edge and I watched ... At that time I didn't know whose tanks they were. Were they the enemy, or were they ours. We were 18 hours that we didn't know that we were under heavy, heavy fire.

Finally the Diệm government was overthrown and the people in the city were so happy. The people who were the Diệm people ... I remember a newspaper office a couple doors down from our hospital. People went in there and pulled out those huge rolls of newspaper print and set them on fire in town. That was right next to our building. It was just a like a riot. It was sort of a happy riot. They would jump on tanks and drive through the city. I remember Madame Nhu did not allow dancing of any sort in Saigon.

I remember the first thing I heard was Chubby Checker and The Twist. There was a bar down below us on the street. They began playing The Twist. The next thing know we were doing a twist too. It was about noon time, and one of my corpsman had been to lunch and he had come back from the direction where his quarters were to the hospital. He said, "Hey. Come out on the street. I want you to see this." I went out on the street and there, maybe a hundred yards or so, there was a barricade blocking the street entirely. Fifty Calver machine guns setup on each curbstone pointing right at us.

Heavy firing began, and chaos in the city. I went up to the 5th floor balcony of the hospital so I could see everything. I saw a dog fight of 2 aircraft. I thought one was shot down, but later I found he wasn't. He had just disappeared behind the trees. I was looking down on the street and I saw a tiny taxi cabs that they had in Vietnam. I saw bullets go through his back window, through his chest, and out the windshield.

Four fellows that were in a doorway, jumped out on the street and pulled that poor man out. I'm sure he was dead. They pulled him out of the car.

I was looking right in the direction at another soldier. I realized he was pointing a rifle at me right up on the balcony. I wasn't sure he was pointing it at me, but sure enough, I saw the muzzle flash of his rifle and the bullet hit 3 inches below my abdomen as I was standing at the rail. I have this bullet to this day. If I can get it out of the case. It direct angle from the street, and it came up and hit the balcony in front of me and hit the ceiling and fell at my feet. I picked it up and I have it to this day, and I had a-

PRODUCER : [inaudible 20:29] in the casing?

Bobbi: I did but I think it fell out.

PRODUCER : [inaudible 20:27]?

Bobbi: There it is.

PRODUCER : [inaudible 20:40].

Bobbi: Gee. Did I ruin everything?

PRODUCER: No, no, no.

PRODUCER : No. No.

Bobbi: Anyway here is the bullet. We had to so many shell casings around the hospital that when firing ceased, we went down to go back to our quarters, and I could just pick up the correct shell casing for this round of ammunition, and that was what hit.

PRODUCER : Tell me what famous round that is. What's the designation of that bullet?

Bobbi: 30 caliber.

PRODUCER : No, but I know you know it's from an AK-47.

Bobbi: Oh, yes.

PRODUCER : Tell me what gun that came from. You tell me. My voice is not in the-

Bobbi: I had a frantic pathologist friend, and I showed it to him, and he said, "Oh, that's an AK-47 round. That's what was fired at you." I saw the muzzle flash. A man threw down the rifle, took off his uniform, and ran away only in his skivvies. I don't know why he felt he should run away because he shot at me, unless he thought maybe he hit a wrong person or something.

PRODUCER : How were you dressed?

Bobbi: In my ward white nurses uniform.

PRODUCER : If you would say, "I was dressed in my ward white dresses." Maybe that's what he was shooting at.

Bobbi: Yeah, the white would have been a good target against a dark background. They were all acting so crazily down on the street with overturning cars, and shooting indiscriminately. Bullets were flying off the buildings. I had a patient who was on the back side of the building. I was on the front side. He was in isolation because he had tuberculosis. He was lying in his bed, and the next thing he knew, he heard something come through the wall about 6 inches above his head. He was in bed of course.

He heard it hit the floor and he looked down, and he also picked up a bullet, and it was still hot. Our chief nurse and another nurse and I, there was a head up there on the 5th floor, and we wanted to see out the window, but we weren't all enough. We all 3 climbed up on the toilet. We were looking out that window and the very next thing you knew automatic weapons fire just stitched the wall right below the window where we were looking out at what was going on below. The 2 other ones ran quickly downstairs and took cover. I had to be up there and see it all. I've had other experiences like that as well. Plane crashes and things like that.

I've had several. I look at them as adventure. I guess I can't explain it. I formed a ... Corpsman had very little to do. If they didn't drink there was very little to do. We had a movie and the Viet Cong blew that up, so we didn't have the movie for a while, so I formed a photography club. I enjoyed photography. On Saturday mornings if we were off duty, those who were off duty and those who wanted to join the group, we would really go into some of the weirdest parts of Saigon looking for picture material. We would get these canals that went behind villages.

They were actually the dregs of the Saigon. We found ourselves in some of the darnedest places. It was an adventure. I loved Southeast Asia, so I had to get back and do all that I could to see everything while I was beyond my working time. I had a bicycle. I bicycled all through Saigon. Probably not smart, but I did it. The Viet Cong would blow up ... As you pass by, a storefront would blow up. They blew up bars where American soldiers would drink. We had more guys coming in injured from being in explosions sitting at a bar stool, then maybe for that particular week of being wounded out in the field.

Another favorite trick they had was we had Navy buses that would make their rounds throughout the city, and pick up the men, taking them to their work areas. They'd wait until the last man got on and then this Viet Cong would step out of the crowd and toss a grenade into the bus through the open windows. You can imagine an injury that would happen when a grenade would go off in an enclosed steel vehicle, in this case. We had all sorts of wounds from that sort of thing, and deaths. Then they put heavy screen over the windows, and that stopped. They would still throw it through the door when they stopped at the bus stop.

A lot of times the Vietnamese would not fight. In that case the advisers would have to take over and even defend themselves if they got into a fire fight, which was common. At night we could sit on our balcony of our quarters and look across the Saigon river, and we could see all sorts of fighting going on just that close. You could see the traces at night. They said, "The night belongs to the Viet Cong." As we lived there, at least I did, you're walking down the street. Somehow your senses are heightened, and you're much more aware of what is going on.

The Viet Cong would like a group of Americans standing on the sidewalk, they'd love to throw grenades into our midst. You began to be so sharp. Your senses develop immensely. I really was amazed at how I was aware of what was going on around me. No, not at all. We did accept 2 little boys, 11 and 12. The reason we accepted them, a Viet Cong agent was planning to throw a canister bomb over the wall into our hospital and he had a premature detonation of his bomb right there on the sidewalk in front of the hospital. These 2 little boys were the ones who really took the blunt of that. We had no choice but to take those 2 little kids in.

We had them for several days. They had shrapnel wounds. Their favorite trick was that the Viet Cong to get a coffee can and fill it with nails, and nuts, and bolts, and fill it with explosives, and set that off. It gives various damage to the soft tissue of the human body. They blew up our theater by rolling a coffee can down the aisle and it exploded. Oh my, we had a lot

of casualties. Fifty-seven from that theater explosion. I just missed being in that theater when that happened. I always sat in the same seat because the usher would know ... We're a 24 hour call, so they would know where I and our nurse anesthetist was sitting, and come and get us if they needed us.

We sat in the 6 row from the back. That night we had a new nurse come in for duty, and she wanted us to come down to her quarters for dinner. We did. Otherwise we would have been in the theater that night. We had so many injuries from that. Not only that, they shot the guard at the door. Killed him, and then rolled the coffee can down the aisle and it exploded right at the 6 row seats where we sat. I had a lot of close calls, but they never bothered me.

PRODUCER : If they list when your ticket's up, that's when you go, but until then you're free.

Bobbi: Yes.

PRODUCER : You were there for another year?

Bobbi: No, it was supposed to be a year's tour of duty, but my detailer, nurse who sends you on your next set of orders, she forgot me. She brought back all the other nurses that I went out with, and she forgot me. She was a good friend, and she was a good Pennsylvania girl. I was invited to come up to Pennsylvania and give a talk to where her retirement home was, so I did. I never let her forget that she forgot me in Vietnam when my friends went out, I was supposed to come back with them. To answer your question, I was there a little over 13 months, which normally is a years tour of duty.

PRODUCER : You actually came back in '65 just when the first Marine's were coming in later that year.

Bobbi: No, I still got back in November of '64. Yeah. What I had just missed again was the Viet Cong blew up the Brink's BLQ, and we had hundred and some killed. Also they blew up our embassy, and they had over a hundred injuries. I was at home back in Portsmouth, Virginia. I heard the radio announcer say, "We interrupt this program to bring you this special alert. The American Embassy has been blown up in Saigon." I said, "Ah, I should be there. I should probably be helping with the casualties, because we had so many." I retired in '67. Yes, that was my last duty station after Vietnam. Portsmouth Virginia Naval Hospital.

PRODUCER : How do you look back on that period of your life? That 13 months.

Bobbi: It was something that I would have not wanted to missed. I volunteered for it. Someone asked me, "How did you get interested in Vietnam anyway?" I'm a history buff, and I followed the first French-Indochina war, and the second. When Diệm [inaudible 34:03], in May of '53?

PRODUCER : '54 I think it was.

Bobbi: One of the other. Somehow that's when I really became interested. I followed everything from there on out about the Vietnam war. We entered Vietnam based on the articles in the SEATO Treaty. We were bound by law, international law to defend the protocol countries which were Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. That's how we actually got into Vietnam was through the SEATO Treaty. '54 that was signed.

PRODUCER : That's where they came up with the 17th Parallel between the North and the South.

Bobbi: Yes, that is correct. "There is nothing finer in life then to be shot at and missed." I always saw it one time, "To be shot at without result."

PRODUCER : Right. When I looked it up, that's what my actual quote was.

Bobbi: I've seen them both.

PRODUCER : Only because you were fumbling with the bullet, could you recount that story one more time for me, and of course lift it up at the very end. Tell me about going out on the balcony and the coup was underway. Tell me how you were dressed and what happened.

Bobbi: The coup was underway and fortunately I didn't have a lot of patients that needed my attention in my intensive care unit. We were sort of a slack, and I felt I could go up on the balcony and my corpsmen were still downstairs. I didn't want to miss this. I went up on the balcony, and amongst all of the other things that were going on, I noticed that across the street at about a 45 degree angle on the sidewalk there was a soldier with a rifle. I saw him aim the rifle in my direction. I watched him, and the next thing I realized is, he fired at me. I looked directly at the muzzle flash, and next thing I know this bullet landed at my feet.

It came up at a 45 degree angel. You can see the nose of the bullet is bent 45 degrees, and it hit the overhead, and then it fell at my feet. I picked it up and it was still warm. It missed me by 3 inches. I though, oh,

well if that bullet had hit me, I'm right in my own hospital. I'll be okay. I did think of that. I dived very quickly back into the room that the balcony was attached to. Thought that over for a little bit and then I collected my thoughts and went back out on the balcony.

PRODUCER : You went back out?

Bobbi: Oh, yes.

PRODUCER : After that?

Bobbi: I saw him throw down his rifle and take off his uniform and run.

PRODUCER : He was afraid you were going to come after him.

Bobbi: Maybe.

PRODUCER : How it was bent.

Bobbi: Can you see the bend Terry?

PRODUCER : I do. Hold it right there. Okay. Tell me what kind of round that is again?

Bobbi: 30 caliber.

PRODUCER : From what gun?

Bobbi: Oh, AK-47.

PRODUCER : Those were 30 caliber, but the AK-47 I think is the classic gun of the Viet Cong.

Bobbi: They actually had rifles from the French-Indochinese war. Still those old FN rifles. I saw a picture of one recently. That's what brought it to my mind.

PRODUCER : Did you have a family that you were worried about, that they were worried about you?

Bobbi: Oh, yes. I had family. My mother and dad were very anxious. When I left home to go to Vietnam, I asked my mother to keep all my letters. I wrote quite descriptively. I wanted her to keep them so I could re-read them for my own edification after I got home. She did. She saved 16 letters. I was very faithful about writing. I knew they were worried. I

tended to downplay a situation. When the coup was in the news, that was heavily covered. They were very worried about that. Yes, I have a large family in Pennsylvania. Still have. Edinboro.

PRODUCER : You're talking to somebody from Bradford.

Bobbi: Bradford?

PRODUCER : Yep.

Bobbi: That is the worst place to fly in you ever say. The fog-

PRODUCER : I was there when they had the 2 crashed in '69.

Bobbi: I stopped at Whidbey Isle Naval Air Station in Washington. We would get aboard our civilian flight from Sea-Tac Airport in Washington. I'm a football nut. We were there for the Washington-Utah football game. It was October. I knew that I would not see a football game all winter because I'd be out in the Aleutians. I still knew my way around the flight manifest people, and that still from my flight nursing.

I found this lady who makes up the manifest and I asked her ... She had me scheduled to go out on Saturday. I said, "Nothing will be going on NADAC on Saturday. Could you take me off that manifest and put me on the manifest for Monday?" because they didn't fly on Sunday. I said, "I want to see this football game." It was Lee Gross Cop for Utah, and Bob Schloredt "The One-eyed Quarterback" for Washington. This would be a real exciting game. She said, "Oh, sure" she could do that.

That plan left on Saturday morning and there was a volcano nearby ADAC called ... I want to say Mount Moffett, but I don't think that's quite ... I forget the name of the volcano. Anyway, that airplane crashed into that mountain. They sent Marines up the mountain to bring down the bodies. In those days the Navy paid their personnel in cash. They had a million dollar payroll aboard that aircraft. The Marines go up to the level of the crash and they said that million dollars was flying in all directions.

They were scooping up money and sticking them in their tunics to try to save some of ... Anyway, that was another close one. But for that football game.

PRODUCER : I would say, you have really dodged a lot of-

Bobbi: I'm a Virgo.

PRODUCER : Well Bobbi, I'd like to thank you for sharing your stories. Thank you for what you did over there as well. That was [crosstalk 42:36].

Bobbi: Well, you know, I wanted to do it. Those guys were the best patients up until '65. Then they became some of the dregs ... I hate to say dregs of humanity, but there were an awful lot of guys, as I mentioned to you, that would smoke marijuana through their shotgun barrel. They would frack their officers. They'd thrown grenades in the [inaudible 43:06] huts of their officers. They'd been dealers in dope.

They were not good people. Up until '65, those fellows were just the greatest. They were the best patients I've ever had in my career. There were no goldbricks. They would pester me, "Ma'am. Can't you get me back to my unit? Can't you get me well sooner?" Things like that. They had to get back to their men and to the field. That's the kind of fellows they were, and such a joy to take those.

PRODUCER : Thank you for everything you did for those guys.

Bobbi: Some of my friends that came back, University of Virginia, their tires were slashed. Two nurses tires were slashed, broken into record office, the military records scattered all over the floor, and chicken blood thrown on the records. That happened down there. It made you feel so badly that they could act like that towards us.

Up until '65 they were mostly all volunteers. It was an experience that I would not have wanted to miss. I would not have wanted to miss Korea either because of flying. My two loves are flying and nursing. Fortunately, I still fly and I still do some nursing around my retirement home.

PRODUCER : That's great. I thank you for coming in.