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January-March 1968  
Interviewed by: Michelle Gibson

I heard about the war when it started, of course, and suppose I volunteered mainly to see for myself what was really happening. In the local newspaper, I saw an article where the AMA, the American Medical Association, was asking for volunteers to go to Vietnam. I wrote them a letter saying I would go, but their response was no, they weren't taking any women at the time. Fairly annoyed, I decided to write back to the editor. "How is it that you have female nurses, female secretaries, and female drivers?" I wrote. "What is the matter with having female physicians?" They promptly replied saying I was accepted.

At the time, I think I was like most parents, supporting the U.S. administration. If the government was putting us in war, we should be supporting them. My four sons however, were all adamantly opposed to the war. They joked when I told them I was leaving and said, "Go ahead Mom, go to Vietnam and learn something!"

We arrived the night before the Tet Offensive, and it soon became clear that this was a very hot time. Instead of being sent to our original assignments (I was supposed to be in charge of a pediatric ward in Central Vietnam), we were immediately put under curfew in the city, as well as martial law. It was impossible to get anywhere.

When the Tet Offensive began, we were sent to a hotel-apartment, to the seventh floor. Fighting started right around us. From our hotel, we saw the bombing and overtaking of the U.S. Embassy, which was just a couple blocks away. Those were scary times. We heard bombs going

off constantly; later, a friend brought me the bottom piece of a rocket that had exploded right outside the hotel.

Afterwards, we were stuck there for a little while in Saigon. At one point, there was an attack in the area, and six captured officers were lined up outside and killed. There was a lot of slaughter going on. You could see the Viet Cong hanging dead bodies up on the lamp posts. It was something we found distressing, to say the least! There was so little we could do. Mostly we just sat there in the hotel, played cards, waited...

A few times, when things quieted down a bit, we were able to visit some of the hospitals in Saigon. It was quickly noticeable that, in some of them, things were desperate. The Vietnamese physicians had been trained mainly by the French, and when the French pulled out in 1954, many physicians also fled. There were few left in the country, which is why the volunteer teams were sent there to help. Other physicians started to come into Saigon, due to the dangers of rockets and bombing elsewhere. One man who came was deeply depressed. He was in a Jeep, I think, or some other type of military vehicle, and when they were attacked on the road, his colleague-friend was killed. That was pretty difficult for all of us, since we couldn't do much to help him. What we did was suggest to The Powers That Be that he get sent back home, which happened...eventually.

The airfield at Saigon was the center of the fighting, and nobody could go in or out for some time. After a time, since so many casualties were at the airfield, we were asked to go there to help. Part of it had been converted to an open hospital. I was assigned as a triage physician, which meant I stood at the entrance as the wounded were brought in, and made tough decisions. If I saw that someone was dying, and there was little chance of helping, they went to one section.

If they needed acute care, they went to the surgical area. If they could wait without too much difficulty, they were sent to another section. It was very hard to do, but somebody had to do it.

We did not get to our original assignments for over a week. By that time, things had calmed down a bit in Saigon, and other parts of the country. Three of us went to Nha Trang, a beautiful resort city, at least in normal times. I was expecting to live in a house prepared by the AMA, but soon found out that I was being placed somewhere else. A colonel, or someone else in charge, said that he did not want another woman in the house, because the last woman who was there talked too much. Later when he left, I was able to join my other friends in the house.

We used a Jeep to get to the hospital, and our assignments. I had patients who were anywhere from 1 month old to 16 years or so, and we would have perhaps 20 patients in the ward. I spent a couple of hours each day in the outpatient clinic, and since I had experience assisting in surgeries, I was asked to assist a surgeon in the operating room.

It was fascinating, medically, because there were many diseases there that we had never seen, or hadn't seen recently: typhoid, cholera, tetanus, bubonic plague, tuberculosis, all of these things were rampant. There were no immunizations at that point in Vietnam. We would see these children come in with various diseases, and by giving them massive doses of medicine, were able to keep them alive.

The whole system in the hospital was very different from ours here in the U.S. Very few records were kept, and there was no time to do a physical and history of each patient. There was nothing like an admission desk, or discharge, so people just walked in the hospital doors. Another thing in that culture was this: as soon as the children began to feel better, the parents would take them home, just take them right out of the hospital! We had only cribs for the

children, and there would always be two or more children in one crib. There were no mattresses, no sheets, no pillows, nothing. There would just be mats, and gallon cans under them for all the parasites and things the babies and children had. The mothers would always be with the children; even up to four or five years old they were nursing the babies. Often the babies were constantly being held; sometimes you could scarcely separate mother and baby long enough to examine them. In our hospitals here, there are regular diets, regular meals, but in the hospital in Vietnam, there was only one so-called "meal". Rice and soup, once a day. The families had to bring in food for all the other meals, to take care of the children. Food was abundant in the markets until the fighting, and then the black market had some canned foods, but most of the people who came to the hospital were extremely poor. There wasn't any real starvation, but there was some malnutrition due to poor diet. There was no toilet paper, no running water, no hand washing...I really missed that sort of sanitation that we have here in the U.S. The place was not clean, not the sort of clean you would expect walking into one of our hospitals. It was difficult, but we did the best we could.

One other place I visited on a weekly basis was an orphanage, with about 240 children of all ages. These were children whose parents had abandoned them, or had parents who were killed. I just did very basic things for them, things like ointments and such. There were not enough medications for them all, since those were specifically for the hospital patients.

We had to be back in our house by 7p.m. each night, due to martial law and the curfew, so there was very little chance, for me anyway, to be out. The men managed to get out, and I always resented that. They kept finding ways, and I started asking, what's the matter? Why can't you let me go out and see X, Y, and Z? The response was, oh, we can't arrange for women,

we can just take the men. Occasionally, I did go out. I think I went swimming three or four times. Another time a few of us rented a boat when it was quiet.

I didn't get any letters for the first three weeks; then the mail began to come in. The administration for all of us tried to notify relatives to say that we were still alive and OK, but we had very little communication for awhile, then sparse letters here and there. It was just great to have letters come, and find out what was happening. My kids wrote; I had letters from each of my sons asking, what did I think now? What was it like? Did I change my ideas?

Actually, toward the end of our time in Vietnam, those of us who were together in the house spent a lot of time philosophizing and talking about what we thought should be done. I'm sure 90% of us by that time felt strongly that the U.S. should get out, and we had no business there.

We were contracted for only 60 days, so I was there during part of January, and most of February and March. I think many of us were relieved to go. Everyone had found it difficult to adapt to a completely different country, but we certainly worked hard while we were there. Would I go back? Would I volunteer again for short term? Yes, for sure.