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ALLHANDS

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My Purple Heart:

One Vietnam Veteran's Story of Survival



[On the Front Cover]

Meet Capt. Ann Darby Reynolds, one of the first four women recipients of the Navy's Purple Heart during the Vietnam conflict.

Photo by MC3(SW) Mikelle Smith



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The Navy School of Music Producing U.S. Ambassadors to the World

It's the only military school in the United States instructing more than 600 military basic and advanced students annually. Located at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Ft. Story, Virginia Beach, Va., the Navy School of Music is a multi-service command providing training for Army, Navy and Marine Corps musicians.

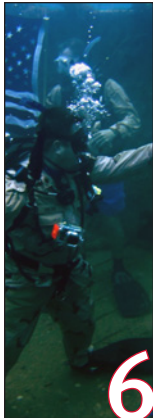
Photo by MC2(AW) Jonathan Hutto Sr.

Life in the 'yard with *Bonhomme Richard*

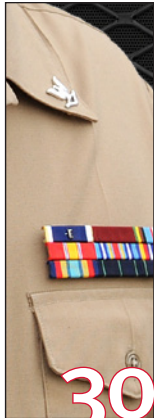
Every five years or so, a ship needs to be pulled out of the water to have critical maintenance and preservation work done to the hull. This year, it's time for USS *Bonhomme Richard* to receive upgrades and equipment, while her Sailors get used to life in the shipyard.

Photo by MCC Joe Kane

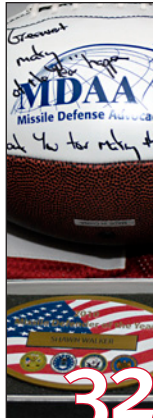
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My Purple Heart One Vietnam Veteran's Story of Survival

On Christmas Eve 1964 in Saigon, Vietnam, Navy Nurse Ann Darby Reynolds stood at the window in her room as the enemy attacked, making the holiday less like Christmas and more like a massacre. Reynolds would go on to devote 26.5 years to the Navy, rarely speaking about the incident or her duty at Naval Station Hospital Saigon, but never forgetting what she called "the most traumatic experience" of her life.

Photo by MC3(SW) Mikelle Smith

[Next Month]

All Hands heads to Key West, Fla. where wounded warrior swim with the dolphins..

Lt. J.G. Ann Darby Reynolds shakes the hand of Capt. Archie Kuntze, commanding officer for Headquarters Support Activity Saigon, Vietnam during the Purple Heart award ceremony.



My Purple Heart:

One Vietnam Veteran's Story of Survival

Story and photos by MC3 Mikelle Smith



"During the 26 years I served in the Navy, what I went through didn't cross my mind as much," expressed Reynolds. "I was occupied; but now, those thoughts seem to cloud my memory."



The Brink Hotel in Saigon, Vietnam, was used as the living facilities for junior officers in the military. Following the bombing, construction workers spent four weeks rebuilding the facility. Upon completion, the building was reopened and used as living quarters.

On Christmas Eve 1964 in Saigon, Vietnam, a Navy nurse stood at the window in her room to watch her maid leave through the gate with an escort. As the nurse focused on the maid and the wrapped present she carried in her arms, the enemy attacked, making the holiday less like Christmas and more like a massacre.

Vietnam veteran, and retired Navy nurse, Ann Darby Reynolds, was the first of four Navy nurses to receive the Purple Heart for heroic actions during the Christmas Eve explosion at the Brink Bachelor Officers Housing (BOQ) quarters.

Reynolds would go on to devote 26.5 years to the Navy, rarely speaking about the incident or her duty at Naval Station Hospital Saigon, but never forgetting what she called “the most traumatic experience” of her life.

“The heat and stench of Vietnam have always stuck with me,” said Reynolds, describing her March 1964 arrival to the capital city of Saigon. “It was as if I had stepped into a furnace filled with rotting eggs and death; even that depiction does not suffice.”

Two months after receiving orders to Vietnam during Christmas 1963, Reynolds made the trip from Travis Air Force Base, Fairfield, Calif., to Saigon in the cargo bay of a tightly packed C-130 Hercules aircraft.

“I remember how hot, dark and squashed the plane ride was,” said Reynolds, who at the time was only a Lieutenant junior grade. “I was squeezed between Army personnel, wearing my service dress blues with heels, while holding a paper cup to catch condensation droplets that fell from the ceiling.”

She spent two days on the cargo plane before entering the skies of Vietnam to land at Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, Saigon. Upon landing, she was quickly escorted to her new command - Naval Station Hospital Saigon - by the hospital’s chief nurse.

Reynolds compared the hospital conditions to that of “an old disheveled prison” with barbed-wire grenade screens and three high-rising lookout towers, which were manned 24 hours every day.

“The hospital was originally a five-story apartment building, with no kitchen areas to cook food for patients, no operating elevators and very small rooms,” Reynolds said of the facilities. “The hospital staff consisted of nine doctors, eight nurses and seven hospital corpsmen. Our working days could last for 36 hours before you handed duty over to one of the other nurses. The days were long and sometimes very strenuous.”

During Reynolds’ tour, Vietnam had only two military hospitals: Naval Station Hospital Saigon in the south, and the Army 8th Field Hospital in Nha Trang, located 200 miles north of Saigon. Countless trips were made from the hospital in Saigon to Nha Trang to obtain more supplies and to help the Army nurses when needed.

Reynolds and her fellow nurses were instructed to travel in pairs or groups because the radical “Viet Cong” (South Vietnam rebels who fought against the Americans and South Vietnamese) had offered \$150 bounties to any Vietnamese willing to harm the nurses.

“The Viet Cong understood that the American military had limited personnel available,” said retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Wilma Vaught, the President of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation. “If they could get rid of the nurses, that obviously meant the troops would not be treated; therefore, resulting in permanent damage to the American forces.”

In a book titled Station Hospital Saigon written by retired Navy Nurse Lt. Cmdr. Bobbi Hovis, the capital city was locally known as “Bombsville.” In the book, Reynolds recalled numerous situations in which she would pass by a building right before the detonator went off.

“The frontline concept didn’t exist in Vietnam,” said Vaught. “It was said on many occasions that women shouldn’t be involved in that type of thing; that women shouldn’t have been there. There was never really a frontline in Vietnam; destruction was everywhere, all the time.”

It was only a matter of time before Reynolds would experience firsthand what it was like to be part of the chaos surrounding her.

Christmas Eve 1964: Attack on the BOQ

Rumors that the Viet Cong were planning a massive attack somewhere in the country circulated around the city of Saigon. Because of those rumors, security to and from American government facilities had been heightened.

“We knew that something was going to happen somewhere in the country,” said Reynolds. “We were told by our chief nurse to be alert. We had no idea where the attack would be or when it would take place.”

Around 5 p.m. on Christmas Eve, Reynolds, and her three BOQ roommates, had just given their cleaning lady a wrapped present.

“I can remember it like it was yesterday,” said Reynolds, as she flipped through an old photo album. “I had my nose pressed tightly against the glass of the French window in my room.



During the chaos following the attack on the Brink Bachelor Officers Quarters, the hospital staff received word that Naval Station Hospital Saigon was the next facility to be attacked.



Ann Darby Reynolds

Served March 1964 - March 1965





After the explosion at the Brink Bachelor Officers Quarters, Reynolds went back to the building to salvage items. While there she used her camera to take photographs of the after effects of the explosion; the balcony of the room next to hers demolished.

I was watching as one of the nurses and the maid walked toward the security gate to leave. It all happened so quickly; I was thrown back by the strongest force I'd ever felt in my life."

Little did she know, as she lay bleeding in glass on the floor of her BOQ room, that individuals in trucks carrying two 20-pound claymore mines had just exploded, and that the next nine hours would forever change her life.

When Reynolds finally came around she remembers thinking, "I must get to the hospital." Grabbing only her nursing shoes, she exited the building to find the other three nurses before heading to Naval Station Hospital Saigon.

"As I made my way out to the courtyard, I remember thinking 'Oh, my God, did this really just happen?'" she said. "Individuals were running out of the building like mad men. Some wearing only towels, others undergarments, but a lot of them were bloody with bad injuries. My automatic reaction was to start treating patients."

By the time Reynolds and the other nurses reached the hospital the entire city of Saigon was on high alert.

"The patients were coming in like an assembly line," Reynolds said of the scene at the hospital following the explosion. "We didn't really have time to do too much interaction with any of them. Everything was in disarray."

While continuing to treat patients, one of the hospital corpsmen noticed a large amount of blood coming from Reynolds' lower leg. After a quick examination, the corpsman informed Reynolds that she needed to get medical treatment because she had sustained substantial injuries.

"I refused to stop working on the patients and told him to wrap [the injury] up as best he could," said Reynolds. "I think I was just running off of adrenaline at that point. Being a nurse, I naturally thought about the patients needs before my own."

The initial blast that broke the glass of the French door windows in the BOQ caused the injury to her calf muscle.

After working well into the early morning hours of Christmas Day, the workload slowed down, allowing the hospital staff - now down to four nurses instead of eight - to exam each other; Reynolds was first.

"As I was on the table receiving several stitches in my calf, one more patient came in and was placed on the table across from me," she said. "When I saw who the patient was, I immediately jumped up to go over to him."

According to Reynolds, the gentleman lying on the table was someone she knew well; he lived next door to her in the BOQ. Several hours after the attack, he was found buried under the rubble.

"When I saw how badly his body was crushed, I didn't know what to say," said Reynolds, holding back the tears welling up in her eyes. "He looked up at me and said 'Darby, please don't let me die,' then passed away. To this day I can't get that image out of my mind."

The Aftermath and the Purple Heart

Reynolds returned to the BOQ on Christmas morning to see what she could salvage. She examined her room, as well as the room where the gentleman she knew resided.

"When I got to my room and saw just how ruined it was, I couldn't believe that I had survived," said Reynolds. "The floor of the room next to mine had completely caved in. I was so close to death and very thankful for life."

Two military personnel were killed in the BOQ blast and 100 Americans, Australians and Vietnamese were injured, according to the second edition of The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict.

Reynolds and three other nurses were informed that they would receive the Purple Heart for courageous actions following the events that took place on Christmas Eve.

"At first I felt like I was only doing my job," said Reynolds referring to her initial reaction to the news. "After I had a moment to sit down and recall everything that took place, I accepted that and was honored to receive it."

Reynolds left Vietnam in March 1965, shortly after she received the Purple Heart, and took with her the memories - good and bad.

Years of Silence

Experts estimate the U.S. involvement on the Vietnam conflict lasted for approximately 10 years, from 1965 to 1975. Even though she was no longer physically in Vietnam during that time, Reynolds still supported the war effort by recruiting Navy nurses, escorting prisoners-of-war back from captivity, continuing on with her career and trying her best to cope with the memories.

"During my 26-and-a-half years in the Navy, not thinking about what I went through in Vietnam was masked by commitment to my job," said Reynolds. "Not until recently, with all of the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, have I really wanted to tell my story."

After retiring in 1988, Reynolds moved back to her home state of New Hampshire.

"Since my retirement, many times I have nightmares when I hear certain things - like a helicopter or the sound of a vehicle backfiring - it takes me back to Christmas Eve 1964," she said. "Since that year there has never been a Christmas that goes by without thinking about what we went through. My Purple Heart is for every person who experienced what I did, and I will forever be thankful." AH

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