

Interview of Virginia McGregor by Prof. Ernst on July 9, 1997 in
Lexington, Ky.

E: What led you to become a nurse and when did you become involved?

M: I had a desire to be nurse ever since I was little girl. I was the oldest of ten children and when it came time to think about college, I was looking for a way to pay for college. At that time, the Army had this wonderful scholarship program. I didn't know anything about the Army or what I was getting into, but it offered the opportunity of four years of college. I would also have to serve three years after that in the Army Nurse Corp. I took advantage of the opportunity. It was one of the things that just happened. I saw a mention in a book about the scholarship opportunity they had and I was fortunate enough to get into it. It was a really new program that the Army had started and I believe they saw the need they were having for nurses at that time. I was in the third class of this program, which was the Walter Reed Institute of Nursing Program. I graduated in 1970 with a degree from the University of Maryland. I had always had the desire to be a nurse and the Army provided the means.

E: At that point in time, did you have an opinion on the Vietnam conflict?

M: It was still really too early. I was only seventeen when I enlisted and during that time I was in college, we were enlisted

personnel. We had a rank of private first class. Basically, our role was just college student. I had no experience and I had grown up without seeing anyone in my family being involved with the military. My dad did serve during World War II, but other than that I really didn't know what the Army was about. It was still too early in the Vietnam situation to really know what that was about.

E: When did you become aware of the Vietnam War and your place in it?

M: There were a lot of people protesting the war while I was in college. I was in a unique situation during my junior and senior year of living in Washington, D.C. and living at Walter Reed Army Hospital. They had a building that served as our housing for the nursing students. I really felt that I was isolated from what the rest of the college students were really protesting. I would have to say that I really didn't understand it and was pretty naive. I consider myself to be a patriotic person and the idea of serving my country was something that I felt was really good. I felt good about having the opportunity to do that. I thought of it as something positive. I wasn't around people who protested and I didn't hear that it was a bad thing to be in the military. I just felt more protected and isolated.

E: Were you and the other nurses a tight group?

M: We were. They selected over one hundred students for this program from all around the country. The last two years, we were stationed at Walter Reed. We graduated eighty-five and eighty-

two were commissioned officers. We were close through studying, working, and socializing. We also didn't have the opportunity after we graduated, we were commissioned first lieutenants, we went to basic training in Texas. This was about six or eight weeks again of being with a group.

E: What did you think of basic?

M: I had a good time and really enjoyed it. (Laugh by Ernst) It was not the same for the nurses and doctors as for the young men. It just wasn't the same. It was in San Antonio, Texas, and I enjoyed that city. I just enjoyed that experience.

E: Were you extremely popular? Being a group of young educated women with a bunch of men around.

M: Oh sure. We had a lot of social activities at Walter Reed with young officers. Many of those were on their way to Vietnam. You knew that whenever you were assigned somewhere that you could anticipate that you had lots of opportunities to socialize. There were lots of young men and we were certainly a minority.

E: Was there a general feeling among the men who were going over to Vietnam at that time. Was it a topic that they discussed with you or were just going out and having a good time?

M: Well, I think in a lot of cases, they were just looking to have a good time because they knew that what they were getting into was not going to be so good. They were looking for living for the moment. In my experience, I really didn't have that many who talked to me about their fears or concerns about going over there. We did, however, see a lot of the young men who did come

and the condition and how their lives had changed. I didn't make it a point in keeping up with the large number of deaths or injuries that occurred. It just seemed that we were going about our learning how to be nurses and not looking so much at the political. I remember going to one activity with some young Marine lieutenants. We met many nice young men, who were on their way to Vietnam. Within a couple months of this picnic that we had with them, we had a young lieutenant come back from Vietnam and he was an amputee. I can still remember picturing him because he had made some friends with a couple of these young ladies before he went over. When he came back, he made a point of coming and I've thought about that particular young man, how things have dramatically changed for him.

E: Did you write anyone--did you form any friendships in that brief time? And if so, did any of them write back to you?

M: I met a young helicopter pilot when I was in basic that I did communicate with. This was before I met Pat. After my first assignment at Ft. Seal, I was really interested in knowing more about Pat. I discontinued the communications with him before he came back. He was the one the I definitely checked when I went to the Vietnam Memorial because I hadn't heard. He was a medical helicopter pilot and I knew that the chances of something happening were pretty high. I was relieved to see that his name was not on the Wall.

E: Do you remember the type of stuff you talked about? For example, I interviewed a woman earlier that said her guy always

talked about the weather and how he missed the sledding. He would say that you probably have snow in Kentucky and I don't have any.

M: Well, he sent me some pictures of what they were doing and where he was living. I remember him telling me some of the things he was doing. You could tell that it was really hard and that life was difficult over there. I think he was probably concerned about his survival.

E: Once you got your commission, where did you go?

M: My first assignment was at Ft. Seal?, Oklahoma. I was assigned to a medical surgical ward and I also had some experience in psychiatric nursing. I really did not have that many Vietnam patients. It was more of what you might expect at a regular community. Of course, I did have the opportunity of meeting a lot of men like Pat, who had returned from Vietnam. I can't remember that many who were on their way, but our expectation when we graduated from Walter Reed and went to basic was that many of us were going to be assigned to Vietnam. That was where they needed nurses in the military and I figured after your first assignment that you had a good chance of going over there. Several of my friends and I decided that we could take some action on our own. I wasn't really sure that was what I really wanted to do. I would not have had any trouble if I had received an assignment, but I thought that if I really want to work someplace else and have the opportunity, which in the Army I had really enjoyed the opportunity to travel. So, I asked to be

assigned to Europe. I was fortunate enough that all three of my friends and I were assigned to Europe. Right after that, however, several of the nurses got orders for Vietnam.

E: It was luck of the draw.

M: I could have been one of the ones who served over there and I do think my life would have been different. I don't think my outlook on life would have been the same. I had the opportunity of knowing several nurses who did work in Vietnam. I guess I'm saying that after hearing some of their experiences. It was a difficult time. I think they carry a lot of burdens. I feel that I'm fortunate.

E: While you were at Walter Reed, I assume that is where you had the majority of your contact with returning Vietnam vets? I may be completely off, but I get the sense that this was a difficult time for you?

M: It was sad, but it was also accepted that we were at a place where these people would come and you would try to provide the best medical care that you could for these young people. One thing that I do remember is these Air Force buses that would come. They would drop off people who had been transferred to our facility. We always had a lot of admissions during the week of people returning from Vietnam.

E: Was it a tragic--- I mean, what kind of people were admitted? What type of wounds did they have?

M: A lot of the ones that I remember were amputees. We were a facility that did provide a lot of services in helping the

amputees. We did have a convalescent center that was associated with Walter Reed. I also saw a lot of these young people who just came to Walter Reed for treatment and then were moved close by. You did see some of the people that were treated for mental illness. It may have had nothing to do with them being in Vietnam, it was just one of things that would have happened. I don't remember that time as being really sad or tragic. It was more of accepting and learning how to do nursing care. I felt good about being there because it was a place that people got good care. I did feel good about serving my country.

E: What was your duty in Europe like?

M: It was a lot of fun. I worked in a clinic that was part of the Allied Forces of Central Europe. There were several of the countries that were part of NATO were assigned there. The Army just had a very small clinic and I happened to be the nurse that was assigned to this clinic. It was a small post and we had Army and Air Force personnel there that we treated. I don't remember any Navy personnel. I guess the young men that I remember were those that were drafted and served as my corpsmen. My feeling was that I had the opportunity to provide care, but also the opportunity to explore other places of the world. I remember how fortunate the corpsmen were to be there instead of Vietnam.

E: Was that ever discussed among the Army community?

M: No. I'm sure they did realize that they lucked out, but they were drafted and it did interrupt their lives. Several of them were college students.

E: What years are we talking about?

M: Roughly 1971 through 1973. I was at Ft. Seal from 1970 to 1971.

E: That was part of your training?

M: Ft. Seal was my first assignment. Walter Reed Army Hospital from 1968 to 1970 and that was part of my college experience.

E: Was most of your classes in nursing or did you get some traditional college classes, like literature?

M: The first two years were meeting the requirements of Maryland's College of Nursing. So, I had a regular college experience for the first two years. I really don't remember too much being said about Vietnam, except for having one chemistry lab instructor my sophomore year that was very concerned about his possibility of being drafted in the military. I just remember this man being concerned.

E: Did you ever develop any strong opinions or attitudes about Vietnam during this period or later? If so, was there a shift in your opinion of the war?

M: I think that I've had more of a change in the past few years in looking back. In a way, I do feel that our government was not really honest with us. I think that we were deceived and that it impacted a lot of young people's lives. I'm not sure if it was worth it. I still feel that people do have an obligation to their country and it does bother me that some people did try to avoid military service. I don't think that was right. I know a lot of young men who did serve and lost their lives. I'm not so

sure that our country should have been so involved in that war. It would make me more cautious in my vote. If I thought we were getting involved in any particular conflict, I would hope that it was really being looked at carefully. It would be something that our country really decided that we needed to do.

E: Did you have any siblings?

M: I'm the oldest of ten.

E: Oh, my gosh.

M: That's why I needed a scholarship program.

E: Did any of your siblings serve in Vietnam?

M: They did not serve in Vietnam, but they did have some military service. I have a brother who is fourteen months younger than I am that went into the Air Force at the same time that I was in school. He never was assigned to Vietnam and I guess I always felt that he was safe. I had another brother who served in the Marine Reserves at that time. He also did not serve in Vietnam. I had another brother who served in the Army and most of his time was spent in Europe. He was not a Vietnam veteran.

E: In that period, did any returning Vietnam vets go to Europe for treatment? Towards the later part of the war, there were some drug problems and did you ever see any of those coming to Europe if they went back to the States?

M: I do think there was evidence of some drugs, but I can't say that I had a lot of experience with military people coming right from Vietnam to Europe. Most of the personnel were not recent

Vietnam returnees. I do know that the people in the medical field were concerned about the drug situation.

E: Do you have any particular memory that hangs on to you about the Vietnam War?

M: (pause)

E: If you don't that is fine. We always ask if there is any compelling or enduring memory.

M: Well, I think I remember the buses that arrived at Walter Reed that were bringing these patients to us. I did have the experience of seeing General Westmoreland, who was visiting Walter Reed to visit some of the patients.

E: What was your impression?

M: I would have to say that I was a little bit in awe. I thought that was a positive action for him to take.

E: He is striking figure from the photographs that I've seen. He really is a good looking guy.

E: Have you been to the Wall?

M: Yes. We made a trip in the middle of the 1980's with our boys. It was quite a moving experience. I was really touched by what I saw and what I felt of walking along the Wall. I'm glad that there is a memorial and I hope that we don't forget.

E: Did you and Pat have different experiences at the Wall? Did you talk about it afterwards?

M: I would say that because we had our young boys with us at that time that we were more involved with caring with the children. I remember that both of us were quite while we were there. I don't

remember that we really discussed what it felt like to be there.
I would like to go back.

E: Were you excited to see them put up a Women's Memorial?

M: Yes.

E: Do you correspond with anyone that went to Walter Reed with you or was with you in Europe?

M: My class was pretty tight during school. The other day, I got a newsletter from my class. Periodically, I hear what people are doing and I still write letters and communicate with a few of the people. One of my classmates actually served thirty years of active duty, which is quite an accomplishment. I had another really close friend who retired as a colonel a few years ago. We did go to D.C. to see her retirement ceremony. There were about ten or fifteen of my classmates that went to Vietnam and I'm looking forward to talking with them at our next reunion.

E: Where do you have those types of reunions? Do you have them in D.C.?

M: Our last one was in D.C. Our next one on Memorial Day weekend during the year 2000 in D.C. in conjunction with Retired Army Nurses Association. We're hoping to have all the classes that graduated from this institution.

E: Are you glad that you became a nurse?

M: I don't have any regrets.

E: Can you think of anything else?

M: I feel positive in the sense that without the Vietnam War, I would not have met my husband. I met a wonderful man and I'm so glad that he came back from Vietnam.

E: When did you meet him?

M: In 1970.

E: Had he finished his tour of duty?

M: Yes.

E: That's interesting because I know that Vietnam did not help a lot of couple's relationships.

E: Well, that's about all I have.

M: Yes, I think that's it.

E: Thank you for your time.