

Women in the Vietnam War: Lynda Van Devanter

By Kristine Meldrum Denholm

Though overlooked in history lessons, 11,000 women were stationed in Vietnam, 90% serving as nurses. One was Lynda Van Devanter, who chronicled her memoirs in *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1983, 2001.) It was the first published book by a female Vietnam veteran.

Personal narrative drives any story, gives history a face. And no one knows war's face like a nurse repairing the wounded, comforting the dying. What's powerful is in this autobiography, Van Devanter didn't paint herself a hero; instead, she shows her humanness. She was—quite simply—*real* in her book.

Growing up in Arlington, Virginia, and hearing Kennedy's 1961 "no dream unattainable" speech, she understood her generation was "chosen to change the world." In nursing school, Van Devanter and a friend eagerly signed contracts with an Army recruiting sergeant, then were commissioned as 2nd lieutenants in the Army Nurse Corps. She learned how to fire an M-16, set up a field hospital, work emergency tracheotomies-- and mass casualties. Though a returning sergeant told her Vietnam "sucked, don't do it," others assured her as a female she'd never be sent into danger. She still chose Vietnam for service. It was 1969.

As her plane descended into Saigon hours after First Lieutenant Sharon Lane, a 26-year-old Army nurse from Canton, Ohio, was killed by shrapnel, she learned of 6 more Army nurses who died in helicopter crashes; she soon realized medical personnel "were being sent home in body bags."

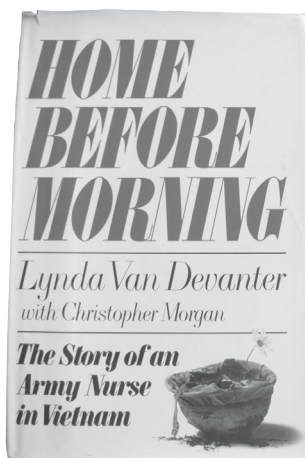
Assigned as a surgical nurse for the 71st Evacuation Hospital in Pleiku, she soon felt the heavy combat and casualties were unending. She detailed the constant barrage of rocket attacks, then the helicopters and call: "Incoming wounded." They readied gurneys, plasma, morphine, prepped for surgery. Then the horror began. Daily.

"No warning could have prepared me for the sheer numbers of mutilated young bodies that copters kept bringing to the 71st," she wrote.

The book is not for the faint of heart. Van Devanter wrote of gruesome injuries: burn cases, Napalm, fragments, infected bullet wounds, bellies destroyed after falling on Viet Cong mines, VC's barbarism, separated body parts. One soldier's prom picture slipped out of his pocket as he died. *Gene and Katie*, it read. 1968.

She wrote the book to tell these families they tried to save their kids, how they held their hands. Gene wasn't forgotten.

The author paced tragedy by stepping out of the OR: cheering for man landing on the moon, and enjoying alcohol, parties and love affairs.



Her no-holds-barred memoirs, "Home Before Morning, the Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam," revealed her life at the 71st Evacuation Hospital in Pleiku and was the basis for the TV show "China Beach."

"When you don't have any sanity around you, you try to find normalcy, comfort, communication with another person on a level removed from the environment of destruction. You want to share moments of happiness," she wrote. Van Devanter was also buoyed by tapes from her parents.

When the year was over—she recalled the elation when they cleared air space—she shared the same harsh homecoming as many male veterans. Dropped off at Oakland Army Terminal to find their own way to San Francisco Airport, "as if you've outlived your usefulness," she hitchhiked.

Instead of rides, she got the finger from a carload, obscenities from another. One threw a carton of trash, hitting her with a soda can. Another passerby taunted: "We don't take Army pigs," then spit on her, calling her a Nazi [expletive.] "What had I done to them?" she wrote. "Didn't they realize those of us who'd seen the war firsthand were probably more antiwar than they were? That we had seen friends suffer and die?"

She stopped revealing her Vietnam service. Instead of questions about medicine in the war, men would ask her who she slept

with in 'Nam. She wore a sweater over her nurse's uniform, hiding her silver bar.

As she tried to readjust, it's here that Van Devanter does not hold back, recounting alcohol abuse, recurring nightmares, PTSD, difficulty in jobs, a marriage and divorce, and engulfing depression.

But what is triumphant in the story arc is the resilience of the human spirit; a VA counselor offered therapy, offering a "structured process for understanding the most difficult experience of my life." Under this umbrella of validation, she began to see how they saved lives.

Writing this book was another way to heal, "to exorcise the Vietnam War from my mind and heart." She learned "war doesn't have to own me; I can own it." She became the founding executive director of the Women's Project of Vietnam Veterans of America, 1979-1984, testifying before Congress for 7,465 women.

She got sober in 1983, married the love of her life in 1984, native Ohioan Tom Buckley (disclaimer: he's my late dad's good friend) and they had a daughter, Molly. She credited Tom, Molly, and stepdaughter Bridgid, with giving her life strength, meaning and love.

Van Devanter Buckley died in 2002, at age 55, from systemic collagen vascular disease, which she attributed to Agent Orange. Though the book was released long ago, it's a compelling read, because history is about the faces...of men *and* women.

A native Clevelander, Kristine Meldrum Denholm is a writer based in Washington.

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LESSONS WE HAVE LEARNED THE HARD WAY

Telling the waiter, on a first date, "Separate checks, please."
Robbing a thrift store.
Buying anything made in Communist Red China.
Believing anything said by a politician.
Buying tomatoes in a supermarket.
Wearing shorts to a wake.

Training your parrot to squawk, "Eat shit and die!"
Leaving a saloon at closing and saying, "I'm fine to drive."
Drawing to an inside straight.
Believing any doctor who says, "You'll feel just a little pinch."
Starting any sentence with, "Well, when I was a kid ..."

