Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins at the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University initiating an oral history interview with Beth Parks. Today’s date is 16 June 2004. I am in the interview room of the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock and I’m speaking by telephone with Beth, who is in Maine.

Good morning, Beth.

Beth Parks: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Beth, let’s begin just with some general biographical data. Can you tell me where you were born and when?

BP: Glen Falls, New York, December 27, 1941.

LC: Ok. And let me know a little bit about your family situation. What did your parents do? How long had they been married when you were born?

BP: My parents had been married for several years. I was the second child; my brother was two and three-quarters years older than I was. Dad had been a political researcher for one of the major Washington newspapers and Mom had been a registered nurse in Washington, DC. My father’s parents – my grandfather – had been in business and had been embezzled by his partner and so he – his doctor had told him to quit. So, my grandparents wanted to move to the country, my father and mother then left their jobs in Washington and moved to the country, bought an old farmhouse that was really in rotten condition and about seventy some odd acres of land and then renovated that, and then they opened a what we call farm vacations type of deal in those days, where people came up from the city for the summertime and lived in the country with us.

LC: And the seventy acres, can you describe the land?
BP: Oh, it was wonderful; it’s in the Adirondack Mountains. We were on the side of a hill that sloped down into a valley and a meadow with a stream that ran through it into a lake, which we owned part of, and that was at the base of a mountain. Our next-door neighbor was a dude ranch.

LC: Really?

BP: Tons of horses and all that kind of thing when I was growing up. It was wonderful. The nearest neighbors, nearest kid my age was about a half a mile away on another mountain. Very few of us out in that area, but it was really wonderful.

LC: Did that result in you and your brother kind of palling around?

BP: Not necessarily, but I had one girl who was my age, and we were like sisters. So, and my brother had – there was a boy his age not too far away, and they were best friends. I don’t know that we spent that much time together except beating each other up all the time.

LC: Ok, that’s – yeah, I have a brother almost exactly the same distance older. Yeah, that’s kind of what I remember too, was him pounding on me. (Laughter) It taught me a little bit how to defend myself though, I think.

BP: Oh yeah.

LC: Yeah.

BP: Have to learn how to steal each other’s toys and everything.

LC: That’s right. That’s right. And there was no problem about you guys taking it outside the house, I don’t know about you but my parents said stuff like that, ‘Get out of the house if you’re going to do that.’

BP: ‘Get out of the house when you do that.’ Yeah.

LC: Exactly. Did you get to go over and ride the horses that the neighbors had at this dude ranch?

BP: I didn’t ride at the dude ranch. I went over and played with them all the time, but for liability reasons, I didn’t ride. However, there were some folks up the road that had a horse and I went up there and took lessons. Horses, I should say. And I took lessons.

LC: This sounds pretty idyllic, as a place to grow up.

BP: I thought it was wonderful.
LC: Do you think it was wonderful still, as you look back?
BP: Oh yeah. Absolutely.
LC: Yeah. Your dad had worked for a newspaper? Which one? Can you say?
BP: I think it was the *Post*, but I’m no sure.
LC: Did he not refer to it very much?
BP: No, he never talked about it.
LC: Had he had any military service?
BP: He had not. He had been in the Military Academy Staunton, in Virginia as a young man, but he was too old – or too young for World War I and too old for World War II.
LC: Why – go ahead, Beth.
BP: No, he was within three weeks of having to go into World War II himself, he was on the draft board.
LC: Oh is that right?
BP: Yeah, it was very, very close. And the end of the war came just three weeks before he was going to have to go.
LC: And what was his full name?
LC: Ok. And what about your mom? What was her name?
BP: Mary Waites, W-A-I-T-E-S.
LC: And where was she actually from?
BP: She was from Amanda Township in a place called Circleville in Ohio.
LC: I actually know where that is.
BP: You do?
LC: Oh yeah. I’m from Michigan.
BP: Nobody knows where Circleville is.
LC: I know, that’s frightening, I know. I can tell you about that later.
BP: Oh, my word. I want to know.
LC: And had her family been in farming or something?
BP: Yes, her father was a farmer.
LC: Ok. And how was it that she came to be a nurse? Do you know?
BP: Yeah. She had gone to business college as a young person, and this was during the Depression. She wound up going to Washington, DC. The same school that I went to, thirty – she graduated thirty years before I did.

LC: And which school is that?

BP: Capital City School of Nursing.

LC: Ok.

BP: At in her day it was Gallinger Hospital, but they changed the name to DC General. Gallinger Memorial.

LC: And was it on the same campus when she was there as when you were there?

BP: Yeah.

LC: The same place in DC?

BP: Same place in DC.

LC: Whereabouts?

BP: Northeast. On…

LC: Somewhere up by Howard?

BP: No, no, it’s up…

LC: Further up?

BP: Yeah. Howard’s actually more central.

LC: Ok.

BP: 19th and E Street. Northeast.

LC: Oh, ok. And it was called –

BP: Maybe southeast. All of a sudden I can’t – it’s southeast. I’m sorry.

LC: Oh, ok. Southeast.

BP: On the Anacostia River.

LC: Ok, I’m with you now.

BP: Sorry.

LC: That’s ok. No problem. I don’t know east from west either, I have horrible trouble with that. Don’t know why. But when your mom went there, she was coming all the way from Ohio?

BP: Yes.

LC: How did that come to be? Do you know?
BP: I don’t really know why she did that. I’m sure she told me, and I have forgotten.

LC: She though did pursue the career and actually worked as a nurse?

BP: Yes, she did. She was an operating room supervisor.

LC: Oh really? And had she done that up in New York State as well?

BP: When she got married, she left nursing. And then, oh, in the late ‘50s, she – when things got really tight and the economy was bad, she went back to work as a private duty nurse, briefly, just before my dad died, and then for a while after he died, and then she kind of fell into the job of being school nurse. Dad was on the school board and was really well respected in the area, so they offered the job to her. There had been a nurse at that high school – or, at that school, not high school, it was K-12 for many, many, many years, and she just – it just happened that she retired to take care of her dad, so they offered the job to Mom.

LC: And did she take it out of necessity, or was it something she needed to do or wanted to do?

BP: No, she took it out of necessity, because she had really no way of supporting herself, at that point, with two kids in college, or two kids in school.

LC: Yeah. Where did your brother end up going?

BP: Well, he actually went to a construction place down in North Carolina and learned heavy construction.

LC: Ok, so he was pursuing trades?

BP: Yeah, he pursued trades.

LC: And what high school did you actually attend?

BP: It was called the Warrensburg Central School.

LC: And that would be near Glen Falls, is that right?

BP: Yeah, it’s in Warrensburg, which is north of Glen Falls.

LC: What year did you graduate?

BP: 1959.

LC: What kind of student were you?
BP: Pretty good one. I was always on the Honor Roll, but I was always really, really busy. The grades weren’t that important. Well, I say important, I always wanted to be on the Honor Roll.

LC: Ok. But that was just kind of the minimum that you needed to do and then you had other pursuits?

BP: Oh, I was into everything, all kinds of clubs and oh, editor of the paper, editor of the yearbook, those kinds of things. And I’d work after school jobs in high school, too.

LC: Like what kind of jobs?

BP: I worked for a florist and I also was a telephone operator in a town about twelve miles north of Warrensburg.

LC: What was the population of this town?

BP: Which one, Warrensburg or where I worked?

LC: The one you were running the switchboard at.

BP: Oh, small. It was a ring down type of a deal where the phones, they had to go through the operator to reach a person.

LC: Yeah, that’s what I’m visualizing.

BP: Yeah, so here’s the switchboard and everybody’s phone, [somebody picks up the phone,] the light comes on and you plug in and say ‘Operator,’ and they tell you what they want to do, and you plug them into somebody else.

LC: You dial it for them?

BP: Yeah, you actually didn’t even have to dial. It was just a switch. Pretty funny.

LC: Yeah. Can you describe the phone system, like did everyone – was it party lines, or did each person, or was it just businesses that had phones, or what was the setup?

BP: No, they had mostly party lines, but some people did have private phones, those were fairly expensive in those days, and yeah. And then the fun was doing the long distance stuff.

LC: And how is that fun?
BP: Oh, it was just different, it was a little different strategy that you had to use, and it was just kind of neat talking with people from away, because we were so provincial, you know?

LC: Oh, I’m sure.

BP: So, it was fun.

LC: So you had to dial – you actually had to make the connection for a call that was going outside the local area?

BP: Yeah, you had to call an operator in that area, and then they would put the call through.

LC: This is astounding. And how long did you do that?

BP: Oh, a couple of years in high school, and the last summer that I was there, too, so it was…

LC: How’d you get the job?

BP: One of my other classmates and I did it, and she had a license where she could drive after dark, and I didn’t, so I commuted up with her until I got my own license. I started working when I was fifteen.

LC: Yeah, you’re pretty ambitious and as you say into a lot, it sounds like.

BP: Yeah, I was in a lot of stuff.

LC: What about in school? You mentioned the newspaper. Was there student government or music or language? Or what kind of clubs were you in?

BP: Oh, I did the language stuff that was available, I was in band.

LC: What’d you play?

BP: Actually, I had wanted to play the saxophone but my brother stole that, so I wound up playing the trumpet. I took piano for a number of years, and I’ve got these short little hands and I was not good at it, nor can I really have one hand work well when the other’s doing something else, like typing, which I still can’t type. So I wound up taking a cornet/trumpet, which has three fingerings, so I didn’t have to worry about being coordinated.

LC: Pretty much one hand, three things, yeah. Were you any good?

BP: I played first trumpet, but I would not say that I was any good, no. It’s just that everybody else was worse than I was.
LC: And how big was the band? I mean…
BP: Oh, I don’t know. Probably thirty-five, forty kids.
LC: And the graduating class would have had…how many?
BP: We had I think thirty. I was going to say twenty-seven, but actually in our
yearbook we wound up with thirty kids graduating, which was sizable. My brother’s
class had fifteen.
LC: Oh, so this was like a balloon class? Of thirty?
BP: Yeah, that was the largest class they’d had in quite a while.
LC: With regard to the academics, were there any subjects that particularly held
allure for you, or any teachers that you recall who were important?
BP: Oh, yeah. Biology was my big thing. I was good at languages and English
and all, but I think biology certainly was my favorite.
LC: What kind of a setup did you have for studying biology at that time? Did
you have a lab, anything that would resemble a lab?
BP: Yeah, it was kind of a lab, and we did some neat stuff. The fellow who
taught biology to us was an old guy, in fact he retired when I was in high school, who
would worked for the railroad, and he was just a real old, homespun fellow. But he made
it fun and he made it interesting, and I just enjoyed it.
LC: How did he do that? By his personality, or did he have tricks?
BP: Personality more that anything else.
LC: He was an engaging kind of guy?
BP: He was. He was just an interesting gentleman.
LC: Do you remember his name?
BP: Frank Cameron.
LC: Like C-A-M-E-R-O-N?
BP: That’s correct. Benjamin Franklin Cameron.
LC: I like that, that’s good. He had worked on the railroad?
BP: He had.
LC: Did he talk about that at all?
BP: Yeah, he did. And it was kind of interesting. There was nothing pretentious
about this guy at all, and I certainly remember him talking about pulling – well, we were
talking about allergies and chemistry, and that type of thing, about his having to pull
poison ivy with his bare hands because he didn’t have any problem. Of course then he
became sensitized to it.

LC: Yeah, that’s an up north thing. And a serious one. Tell me about your year
of graduation. What kinds of plans did you have? What were you looking forward to?
Were you thinking about college or continuing your education, or had you not kind of
formed plans yet?

BP: No, in those days – how old are you, Laura, by the way?
LC: Forty-two.
BP: Forty-two. Ah, you’re just a kid.
LC: I know, I keep getting that. It’s wonderful for me, but…
BP: Yeah, absolutely. In those days, we didn’t have much choice. It was nurse,
secretary, teacher, housewife. And really, that was it. And because I was interested in
biology, nurse was the option for me. And my mom was a nurse. I also had a first cousin
on my dad’s side who was a nurse. Both my mom and my cousin were operating room
nurses. So I kind of just had a knack for that type of thing, I guess. So I wanted to be a
nurse from the time I started out as a child, and I just had that one vision that I was going
to do. So that’s what I pursued. I had applied to go to college at Strong Memorial
Hospital, University of Rochester in New York, and then Dad died, and we just didn’t
have the money to do that, so I applied for that, actually civil service position in
Washington. So they paid me to go to school, basically.

LC: And this was a civil service? How was that arranged?
BP: Well, it was based on scholarship. It was a very competitive thing. We had
fifteen – we started out with twenty-seven kids in that class, and graduated fifteen,
fourteen of the originals. They had kids from all over the country. Highly competitive.
LC: Now this is at Capital City?
BP: Yeah, Capital City. Now the reason that I got that was because when I went
to Washington on our senior trip, my mother had a classmate who was still a good friend
of hers, who was at the school, and she asked if I would go and have dinner with her
when I got down there, so a couple of friends and I went to dinner with her, and she said,
‘Beth, if you ever change your mind about going to Rochester, come on down here and
we’ll get you in.’

LC: Did you have any trepidation about kind of ringing up one of your mom’s
friends?

BP: Yeah, a little bit, I wasn’t very comfortable in doing that. But I did it.

LC: Yeah, sometimes it’s the right thing to do just…was she on the faculty, then?

BP: Yes.

LC: Ok. What was her area of instruction, do you know? Did she tell you?

BP: Psych and soc.

LC: Ok. Were those areas that drew you at all? Or were you –

BP: Hmm, not necessarily. Although once I got in there I didn’t mind them. I
wasn’t really familiar with what that was all about at the time, as a seventeen-year-old.

LC: Right, yes. Just a young kid. Did you, though, have any…let’s see how to
say this. A lot of gals got married right after graduating from high school.

BP: Yes. Or in high school.

LC: Or even in high school, and of course that still happens, but then it was so
much more common, and I just wonder how was your focus arranged such that that
wasn’t – you know, you were always thinking about nursing school? Is it just because it
had been on your mind for so long as a possibility or as the likely path?

BP: Well, I wanted to go to school. Actually, I had wanted to go to college, not
just to a trade school type of a thing. And in terms of marriage, I figured that would fit in
anywhere. But Dad had always told me that, even if I got into nursing school and I hated
it, not to quit, because no matter what happened, if there was a war or a depression or if
my husband died and left me with a pile of kids, I’d always be able to get a job. And I
thought that was really good advice.

LC: Did you think that at the time?

BP: Absolutely, because after I was in school for about two weeks, I said, ‘Oh,
nursing is not for me.’

LC: Really?

BP: Yeah. But I stayed and stuck it out.

LC: And you sort of heard his words?
BP: Oh, all the time. Absolutely.
LC: Even though of course by that time he had died?
BP: He had died, yeah. He died my senior year.
LC: And was that a sudden death?
BP: Yes, he had a heart attack. He was only fifty-three.
LC: Only fifty-three?
BP: Yeah.
LC: How did that affect you and your brother? I can imagine how it affected your mom, because you said. But losing him at that point?
BP: Oh, it was horribly difficult. If you had known my family, my mom and dad got married a little late. He was thirty, she was twenty-nine. And they were just totally in love. You never saw them without their arms around each other, or kissing and hugging.
LC: Really?
BP: Oh, yeah. It was wonderful. After my mom died here in 1992, all my classmates who came back to see me all said, ‘We envied you so much growing up because your parents were so much in love,’ and, you know, ‘Our parents were always fighting, blah blah blah.’ And so it was hard. Mom was totally devastated, my brother just fell apart, and it was very, very difficult.
LC: Was he away down in North Carolina?
BP: No, he was back home at that point, and he just had a really rough time. Just a rough time with it. And so did my mom. But boy, she pulled herself up and went back to work doing this school nursing thing. She went back to college, she finally got her degree at age sixty-seven.
LC: Really? Where did she go?
BP: She went to Plattsburgh.
LC: No kidding. Why did she do that?
BP: Well, it was required for her to be working on a degree in order to keep that school nurse position. And she had only had a diploma.
LC: Was it also a matter of pride for her in some way?
BP: I don’t think she would have done it had it not been required. But she did very well. She was a good student.

LC: That’s very cool.

BP: Yeah, it was cool. She also had to do the town census, so that was her summer job, and she also went to summer school. Plus, trying to keep the farm going, which she finally did have to get rid of.

LC: I was going to ask whether she was able to keep the property.

BP: No, there was just too much work to be done and, no, she could not do that.

LC: What ended up happening? Did she move into town then?

BP: Yes, she bought a piece of property in town and built a house and moved into that. Had to sell everything off of the farm for virtually nothing in those days because we were still in a recession.

LC: Right, when did this all happen?

BP: 1962, I think, she sold the farm. And we were – financially, things were not good up in that area. A lot of the vacation businesses were going out at that time. We had a zillion dude ranches; they all folded. It just happened to be that particular time. In fact, I went back after mom died, my brother and I were selling some things that she had kept, and she had retained some of the oriental rugs that my grandparents had, and it turned out that the person who was a dealer in rugs, I think had the rug that we grew up with. My brother and I looked at it and said, ‘Well we hated it then and we hate it now.’ The rug itself sold for what the entire farm went with the rug in it. It’s like seventeen thousand dollars.

LC: Oh my goodness.

BP: Oh, my word. I mean that’s what the rug was valued at then, and the dining room table and furniture that we had were worth far more than that. So all those things just went with the farm. She just gave it away, basically. Now they’ve subdivided, and every little piece that goes off for like a hundred grand.

LC: Yeah. Does it make you nuts to think about it?

BP: That’s just the way the world works. What are you going to do?

LC: Ok. Ok. That’s true.
BP: I wish she’d been able to keep some of that stuff. My husband hadn’t seen it when we went up there the first time. He said, ‘My God, why didn’t you tell me about this?’ And I said, ‘I did, you just weren’t listening.’

LC: ‘You didn’t hear me.’

BP: No. Oh, I want to go back for a second.

LC: Please do.

BP: You had asked about some of the other jobs that I’d had in school, and I probably would forget to mention that if I didn’t. I worked for my parents waiting tables. I babysat for some of their guests so that their guests could relax and enjoy themselves. I was a sales girl at a couple of places. I worked at a girls’ camp starting back in 1957, and I should just mention that one to you because it cracks me up.

LC: Where was it?

BP: A place called Point O’ Pines Girls’ Camp, the first year they had opened in Brant Lake, New York. And the reason this cracks me up at this point in time, I really enjoyed the job, we had a blast. I was the one that pursued that and got jobs for three of my other friends, so the four of us spent the summer up there.

LC: I can well believe that, I can see that happening.

BP: So, we just had a wonderful time. We’re all still friends now. But it was funny because when my mom [actually brother] died, I went back up and my sister-in-law and her youngest child and I were just driving around one day and had gone up in the Brant Lake area, and I said, ‘Oh, Point O’ Pines, I used to work there.’ So she said, ‘Yeah, it’s still in operation today. I think the fellow who started that up died.’ But nevertheless, I came back to work and I had just gotten a computer that had access to the Internet. So, they had Yahoo people search, and I thought, ‘Well, this is kind of funny.’

Just about everybody that I knew had real simple names like Charlie Wheeler or Pete Smith, you know zillions of them. So I thought, now who do I know that has an unusual name that I might be able to check? So I thought, ‘Hmm, Point O’ Pines, Esther Kartiganer. How many of those could there be?’ She was a counselor. So I plug that in, and bingo. There’s one of them in New York City. So I write and I say, are you the E.K. who was a camp counselor at Point O’ Pines Camp for Girls in the summer of 1957? I worked in the kitchen [and remembered] your name, I thought I would try this out. I get
an email, I’m sitting at my desk and an email comes up. It’s E.K. at CBS news. And I said, ‘CBS news? Tell me more.’ And she said, ‘Oh, I’m a senior producer of 60 Minutes.’ She’s won Emmys up to ying yang, and all these things. It just cracks me up.

LC: Oh, you’re kidding. That’s wild.

BP: I turned that into a thing here a few years back. I took the kids down. The guy who was the lighting producer – or, [lighting] director for The Lion King, [on Broadway] when that had walked off with every award in the book, is a graduate of U. Maine. So he invited us to come down – when I was taking this group of kids down to New York to come backstage and meet the actors and directors and all, which we did. And then E.K. allowed – I took nine kids down, so three of them went to CBS, three to ABC, and three to NBC. We were all in the director’s booths on the same night, watching the news being produced, which just cracks me up.

LC: Sweet.

BP: Yeah. So, I know with Peter Jennings, the kids got to sit in his chair and talk with him. Our kids got to see Dan Rather doing a public service announcement. It was just neat.

LC: Cool. Wow. That’s incredible, these kinds of things made possible by the Internet. I mean, especially this sort of ‘early generation,’ what will be later seen as the early generation of the Internet. Yeah, that’s astounding, yeah. What a great opportunity for the kids, too.

BP: Yes. We did lots of weird and wonderful things for the kids. One time we took the kids to Spain and they got to meet the King of Spain. They got to have a mock cocktail party with Christopher Columbus, the twentieth lineal descendant of the original.

LC: No way.

BP: We went all across Spain with all these TV and newspaper people following us. We had a good time.

LC: What year was this?

BP: 1992. We had a good time.

LC: And just to clarify your faculty position.

BP: Oh yeah.

LC: Yeah, go ahead and tell me.
BP: The faculty position at the University of Maine, Cooperative Extension. I work with 4-H kids as part of what I do.

LC: And how long have you been on the faculty?
BP: Twenty-three years.
LC: And you’re retiring this summer?
BP: I’m retiring in four weeks. Four weeks from today, I should be at home.
(Laughter)

LC: She said with a nefarious laugh. Whatever will you get up to?
BP: Yeah, really.

LC: Well Beth, I want to take you back a little bit to Capital City
BP: Sure, go ahead. I didn’t mean to digress.

LC: No, that’s actually wonderful, I love stuff like that. To Capital City. How long was the curriculum supposed to last?

BP: Three years.

LC: And what did you – first of all, you completed there, correct?
BP: I did.

LC: What years were you actually enrolled?

LC: Ok. And in ’62, what kind of diploma or recognition did you earn?
BP: Three-year diploma.

LC: Ok. And is it called a diploma in nursing? Is that correct?
BP: Yes.

LC: Tell me about the structure of the curriculum. Now, you’re faculty. Can you remember how it was devised at Capital City?

BP: Oh, dear. We started off my first year doing primarily class work and some visits to the floors. We had – many of our faculty members were residents, lived in the nurses’ quarters where we lived. Some of them lived off and then commuted in, but many of them lived right there in the nurses’ quarters. So we had class, I think, from 8:00 AM until 3:00 or 3:30 every day, with some visits into the hospital. The second two years was primarily hospital work. And frankly, they did kind of use us as slave labor.

LC: Yes.
BP: They would deny that, but yes, we did the work.

LC: Did you rotate through departments or wards?

BP: Yes, we rotated though departments.

LC: Ok. Did you have to do any medtech training?

BP: Medtech training? I’m not sure what that means.

LC: Like, for example, culturing, doing blood work?

BP: No.

LC: Nothing like that?

BP: No.

LC: Ok, so all people-oriented work?

BP: People-oriented work and taking care of the patients on the floors.

LC: Ok. And can you assess the level of the training? I mean, you’ve already said that you had to do some slave labor type stuff. But in general, were you getting a good education?

BP: At the time, that was considered one of the best schools in the country. And I can’t tell you by what standards. I know that they were, I know that they were fully accredited. They believed in what they called ‘comprehensive nursing care.’ They were one of the first hospitals in the country that did that, where instead of just going on and doing several tasks for many, many patients, we actually had like five patients, six patients apiece, and we were completely responsible for all of their care, everything from their physical care to their social needs, their religious needs. All of those kinds of things we were responsible for.

LC: So you were doing actually casework stuff as well as clinical?

BP: Yeah.

LC: Ok. That’s pretty amazing, actually, for the early ‘60s.

BP: Yes, it was. Late ‘50s, early ‘60s. And yeah. Absolutely. We took care of everything on those patients, and we did a good job at that, too.

LC: Yeah, that kind of integrated approach is supposed to be like the new wave, you know, now. That’s interesting. Can you tell me a little bit about the hospital itself?

First of all, was it Capital City, or what was it called?
BP: The hospital was called DC General Hospital in those days, and prior that it
had been Gallinger Memorial Hospital in my mother’s day, and the buildings – many of
the buildings were quite old, in fact the nurses’ quarters where mother was as a young
person had been condemned. And they built a new nurses’ quarters in 1932, and that’s
where I lived, but they were still using the the condemned nurses quarters for the doctors’
quarters in 1959.

LC: No kidding.

BP: And many of the buildings had been condemned, and some of them were
torn down while I was there, and some new things were built. They built a new doctors’
residence while I as there.

LC: Were some of those nineteenth century structures?

BP: Oh, yeah. You bet. And we were adjacent to the DC jail, which no longer
existed, and I can tell you that at midnight when they executed somebody, the lights
would dim because all that power was sucked out of the hospital for executions.

LC: Did you guys know that was going on?

BP: Yes. Oh yeah. You bet.

LC: How did you know?

BP: Well, it was just kind of common knowledge and something that you
expected. And we were always told, particularly if we had something that was drawing
power, to be aware that the power would be going down at midnight for an execution so
that we weren’t doing something on a patient that required a lot of power. Yeah.

LC: How did you feel about that?

BP: It was just a matter of something that happened. A little weird, but that was
just the time.

LC: The nurses’ quarters. Can you describe where you lived?

BP: The building was called Anne Archbold Hall. It had four stories. It had a
nice sunroof on it. It was set up pretty nicely. There were long hallways with solaria at
either end, and we did have a library at the ground level that was open to the physicians
as well as the students. It was actually quite nice; it had an elevator in it. Lights were on
twenty-four hours a day because people worked shift work.

LC: It sounds quite gracious.
BP: It actually was. The ground floor had lounges and so forth where we could entertain. It had a receptionist, where people had to go by the receptionist in order to come upstairs. And no men allowed, unfortunately, in any of our rooms, except on moving day. Moving in or moving out.

LC: Who was monitoring that?

BP: The receptionist. Very stringent. And any incoming phone calls had to go through her as well. She would ring us directly.

LC: Ok. And she was a bit of a toughie?

BP: Oh yeah. There was one young – I say young, she wasn’t young – there was a black gal who had been my mother’s personal maid when she and dad got married and were living close by, and then she became one of the receptionists. Her name was Leonia Brown, and she was one of the nicest people I have ever met in my life. Other folks would go along with that as well.

LC: Sure, uh-huh.

BP: And I will not mention the name of the woman that was just a miserable old bag that we all despised. (Laughter)

LC: I’ll bet. Did you have a particular connection with Miss Brown?

BP: Yeah, Leonia? No, she was awfully nice to me, but she was awfully nice to everybody. We just loved her to death. She was a little tiny thing. Just the sweetest gal in the whole wide world.

LC: You mentioned that she is, or was, African-American; I don’t know whether she’s still alive.

BP: No, I’m sure she’s gone now. She’d be over a hundred.

LC: Ok, so she was older. Well yeah, she had worked for your mom.

BP: For my mom, yeah.

LC: Were there race issues there? Was it an all-white school?

BP: No, hey had begun admitting African-American students. We called them ‘black.’ Actually, we called them ‘colored’ in those days. It’s funny how things change. They insisted on being called ‘colored’ at that time. About ten years later I had gotten a letter from one of my classmates who said, ‘If you come back, make sure you call them ‘black’ because if you say ‘colored,’ you’d get stabbed.’ And of course then it changed
where ‘African-American’ was the terminology. So whatever was politically correct at
the time. ‘Colored’ was politically correct at the time. DC was still, well, I guess they
called it integrated, but blacks and whites still used different facilities. Blacks rode in the
back of the bus. I usually went and sat with them. I used to love to get a tan, so I had
trouble getting served in restaurants.

LC: Did that actually happen to you?
BP: Oh, yeah. Sure.
LC: Do you remember it?
BP: Did that bother me? No, I was an honorary black person.
LC: Can you describe an incident where something happened to you because
there was an assumption that you were?
BP: No, I just automatically went and sat with black people. That didn’t bother
me a bit. And black people even thought I was mixed. I have blue eyes, but because I
used to like to get a tan. Finally my instructors told me I couldn’t go out on the sunroof
anymore.
LC: Why did they say that?
BP: Because I was getting too dark, and I looked like a black person.
LC: Ok, they weren’t worried about melanoma?
BP: Well, I’m sure they were. But nevertheless. We did have race issues. These
were in the days before…well, actually, I was there working when Martin Luther King
did all of his stuff. So there were beginning to be racial tensions. I didn’t notice the
racial tensions much. I mean people, African-Americans who wanted to work, had good
jobs. Many of my supervisors were African-American, on the floors. The patients were
almost, I think, we were 98% black. At that time, it was a hospital for indigent patients,
basically. But Martin Luther King was really stirring up the race things, and it was a
forum for him, really, to get that stuff going for Civil Rights in those days.

LC: Did any VIPs ever come by the hospital? That you recall?
BP: Did any who?
LC: VIPs?
BP: VIPs? Oh yeah, sure. I was there during the end of the Eisenhower
administration, and so the Kennedys – I was there for all the Kennedy debates and for the
elections and the inauguration. I actually went to the inauguration and my husband was
marching in the parade. And Jackie – well, both Kennedys – came to the hospital
periodically. Jackie was the person who was at the dedication for the new pediatrics
building that they put up.

LC: When would that have been?
LC: Did you go?
BP: I did not go to the dedication. I did crash the inaugural ball, however, and so
did most of my classmates. When it was held at the armory.

LC: Ok Beth, now you need to tell me about that. You were at the inauguration
earlier in the day?
BP: Yeah. Oh God, it was cold. I had a real bad chest cold and I thought I had
pneumonia. So, I actually wound up walking. It was seventeen blocks to the capitol
building.

LC: You walked from the hospital?
BP: From the hospital, yeah.
LC: That’s a long walk.
BP: It was a long walk. And it was cold. So we wound up actually getting into
the NBC truck that might have some heat in it or something.

LC: How did you manage that?
BP: I just walked up and talked to somebody and said, ‘Hey, can I get warm?’
And they said, ‘Sure, come on in.’
LC: How cold was it? Thirty degrees?
BP: It was cold. I can’t tell you, I think it was in the twenties. And I was really
surprised that a lot of the people at the inauguration, Kennedy didn’t wear a hat. I mean,
he had a top hat and all, but he as I recall was bareheaded, as, was it Carl Sandburg who
spoke?
LC: Yes.
LC: And do you remember the speech at all? Do you remember actually being
there?
BP: Oh, yeah.
LC: How far were you from the swearing in area?
BP: Oh…
LC: This would be on the west side of the capitol, I’m thinking.
BP: Yeah, west side of the capitol. How far was I? Gee, I could easily see
without binoculars or anything. So, not very far away. I didn’t stay for the further parade
much, though. I finally walked back to the hospital.
LC: Now, why did you go?
BP: Why did I go? It just seemed like a neat thing to do. How often is this going
to happen, where you can walk down to an inauguration?
LC: Were you politically sensitive at all?
BP: Nope. Not at all. Totally apolitical.
LC: Did you feel anything particular for Kennedy?
BP: Yeah, I thought he was neat.
LC: Why?
BP: Well, I don’t know. Well, let’s put it this way. He was a young person’s
president. And having grown up in the Cold War years, where most of the politicians
were old men, old white men, this was the first president who just seemed young and
dynamic and full of vim and vigor. And he had kids, people out running, you know,
jogging. He was the first jogging president. And he had such a wonderful sense of
humor. So, as a young person, I felt really motivated just to be a good American, and I
was proud of my country for the first time, I think.
LC: That’s interesting. It wasn’t about policies.
BP: No. Absolutely not.
LC: You mentioned that he came by the hospital at some point. Did you see him
there?
BP: Yeah. We’d all be hanging out the window, and he’d wave and say, ‘Hi,
girls.’
LC: Do you remember the occasion?
BP: No. No, just that somebody said, ‘Hey, Kennedy’s driving by.’ So, we all
hung out our windows. It was pretty cool.
LC: Yeah, it is cool. Let me go ahead and ask you kind of a forward, fast forward question. When he was shot, can you tell me about how that affected you, if at all?

BP: Yeah, because I really enjoyed Kennedy while I was there. I just thought it was a neat time to be in DC. It was super. Did we know he was fooling around? Yes, everybody knew, it was not a big thing. I probably would have done it myself.

LC: If you’d gotten a chance?

BP: What?

LC: If you’d had a chance?

BP: If I’d had a chance. You bet.

LC: Well, there you go, Beth.

BP: So anyway, no, I really enjoyed him, and it was a time that you could really laugh a lot. And I don’t know if you remember Vaughn Meader or not, but he had the hit records out, the album *The First Family*, where they imitated the President. Vaughn Meader was the one who imitated Jack Kennedy, and it was just really cool. So, nobody told me that Kennedy had been shot. I was working nights at DC General in the operating room. And when my husband came home that afternoon and he said, ‘Kennedy’s been shot,’ I said, ‘That’s not funny.’ Because I really did like Kennedy a lot. And he said, ‘No, I’m serious.’ And my first thought was, ‘Uh oh, Vaughn Meader’s out of a job.’

LC: Wow.

BP: And then it really hit. I said to my next-door neighbors, ‘Why in God’s name didn’t you come and wake me up?’ And they said, ‘Listen, we knew that you had an awful time sleeping, and that you would never be able to sleep if we came over and got you.’ So, I guess I was one of the last people in the world to know that this had happened. And having to go to work that night and sitting in the OR the whole time after they brought his body back and all, and he was lying in state. I did not go down to the rotunda. And I just couldn’t. We all, I think, just sat there and cried for the whole – for a week or so. It was really hard. It was like losing a member of the family the way that it felt to me.

LC: Did you go to any of the public events in Washington?
BP: I did not.
LC: It was too hard?
BP: Yeah. Too painful. I’m not a funeral person, anyway, so it was just too hard for me to do that. I don’t think I watched much of it on TV either.

LC: Did you see any other people during the time you were working in Washington who were public figures that might well be included in here? People who you saw?
BP: Well, Bobby Kennedy. When I left DC General and I was working at Hadley Memorial Hospital, we had done some emergency surgery on someone who worked for him. So, he had called the operating room personally, which I thought was pretty cool. I got to work with, I guess, some pretty impressive surgeons. At least, I was told they were impressive. I don’t even remember their names, but I guess there were some really world-renowned people that I worked with. Scrubbed with on emergencies.

LC: And where is Hadley?
BP: Hadley’s across the river in Anacostia. It’s up from Bolling Air Force Base.
LC: And who was the person who RFK was calling to inquire after?
BP: I don’t remember. Somebody who worked for him.
LC: Somebody in his office?
BP: I don’t think it was a particularly high-ranking person.
LC: But somebody in his office, probably.
BP: Yeah, somebody on his staff.
LC: Yeah, that’s pretty impressive, that he called to find out what was going on.
BP: Yeah. He called personally to find out what was happening.
LC: Yeah. When did you actually move down to Hadley across the river?
BP: February of ’64 I switched jobs.
LC: Why did you move?
BP: Well first of all, it was real easy. My husband was at Bolling, so it was real easy and convenient for me to be over there. But the work at DC General was not necessarily pleasant. We had a supervisor who was just not a nice individual.

LC: Male or female?
BP: It was a female. She seemed very nice when she came to interview for the position, and I was looking forward to working with her, but she had a screw loose.

LC: That happens.

BP: Yeah. She was just really hard on the people, and she wound up slapping one of our – one of the gals who happened to be an African-American, who was just a lovely person. Far outclassed anybody in the OR and certainly outclassed the supervisor, and the supervisor slapped her over something that was real stupid, and I said, ‘I am not putting up with this.’ So, I resigned.

LC: Was this do you think race-based against this gal?

BP: I don’t know that it was necessarily race-based, but there may have been a racial overtone in there.

LC: And this happened while they were on duty?

BP: Yeah.

LC: Wow.

BP: I said, ‘Uh uh. Oh no, this lady’s got a screw loose, I’m leaving.’ I know that she had told us – for example – this was one of the first tips that there was something a little bit wrong. With the United Way – we were all supposed to donate to United Way and she wanted a hundred percent. And she told us that we all had to give ten percent of our salary. And I did, and I said, ‘This is not right.’ We didn’t make very darned much money for me to give up ten percent of what I was making to the United Way. And I did it, but I was not going to do it again.

LC: But you didn’t feel good about it at all?

BP: No, in fact since then I really haven’t donated to United Way.

LC: Ok.

BP: Sorry about that.

LC: Well.

BP: Although I work with them all the time.

LC: That’s the way it goes. Tell me about meeting your husband, and when did you get married? And what’s his name?

BP: Charles E. Parks. We’re no longer married. I was in my senior year of nursing school, in fact I’d been engaged to another guy, and we – oh, I know what had
happened. Working, I was a senior and working on the floors, and I wound up getting an infection, a big boil on the back of my leg, and I had to have that drained and I was in isolation for a week or so. And one of the gals, the day I got out of isolation, said, ‘Hey, you need to go someplace.’ So, she invited me to join with her and her boyfriend and some friends to go up to Annapolis and have a picnic. So I rode in the car with them, and he was in the front seat, and I thought he had a very nice…I liked the back of his head.

LC: Alrighty then.

BP: Anyway, yeah, we started dating, and we got married about three months later.

LC: And was he in the Air Force at that time?

BP: He was, yeah. And her boyfriend was his roommate at Bolling.

LC: Ok. And how long had he been in the Air Force when you knew him?

BP: Oh, good Lord, this is forty-some odd years ago. He had been in for maybe eight years, I would say.

LC: And what did he do?

BP: He worked in Supply.

LC: Can you tell me what kind of work he did at Bolling?

BP: Just Supply, he worked in Supply. They requisitioned things and stocked the warehouse and all that.

LC: Ok, like parts rather than like food.

BP: Yeah, whatever.

LC: Whatever?

BP: I had no idea, Supply is Supply.

LC: Ok. And so, were you living in Anacostia then?

BP: Um, no. I had to stay at the school for a while. And then, actually – I wasn’t supposed to get married. So nobody knew about it except my classmates, who all went to the wedding. But we lived out in Laurel, Maryland.

LC: Why weren’t you supposed to get married?

BP: They were always afraid that somebody would get pregnant and then not finish school. They wanted to make sure you were going to finish.
LC: And they thought that you not getting married would prevent you from getting pregnant?

BP: Apparently.

LC: Hmm. Ok, so this was a reg that you were living under?

BP: Yes.

LC: Ok. And was it a regulation of the nurses’ quarters, or of the school itself?

BP: Of the school.

LC: Ok. When you decided to leave DC itself and move to Anacostia, did you change where you were living, or…

BP: No, we had moved, had actually gotten a place out in Laurel, which is about thirty miles north of DC. No, we just continued to live there and just drove in together.

LC: And were you on shifts then?

BP: No, OR and call. So, I took call a couple times a week. I got to tell you what the price was for this, by the way. Now, I’ve got to drive in from Laurel, which they did let me take calls from home, which was nice. So it’s thirty miles. Actually it was about thirty-five to get into Hadley. Ten dollars for the first case, five dollars for the second case, didn’t matter how long the cases lasted.

LC: No matter how long you were in surgery?

BP: Yup. So you got five dollars for every additional case, and it didn’t matter if you were there for seventy-two hours straight on your feet, that was what you got. Ten bucks for the first case, five dollars for every additional case, and if you had to drive home and come back in, it was still five dollars for that additional case. Not much money, my dear.

LC: That’s amazing, that really is. How long did you stay at Hadley?

BP: Until October of that year, then my husband got orders to go overseas, so we packed up and left in December of that year. October? Maybe I left when he got his orders.

LC: And where was he going?

BP: He was supposed to have gone to Vietnam, so he packed me up bag and baggage and sent me home. My mother was sick, and we didn’t know what was wrong.
with her. So I wanted actually to stay in DC because that’s where all my friends were, and he said, ‘No, you better go home.’ So, I did.

LC: Where was he assigned in Vietnam?

BP: He actually was supposed to go to Da Nang because he was in the Air Force, but he wound up going to Thailand.

LC: Ok. Udorn, or…

BP: What?

LC: Do you know where he was based in Thailand?

BP: It was supposed to have been in Da Nang. Oh, in Thailand? No, I don’t remember.

LC: Ok. And what did you know about Vietnam at this point?

BP: Not much. They were just starting, really, to get interested in the war, and that was in ’64, end of ’64. So things were just starting to heat up, and in the ensuing months people started hearing more about it. Robin Moore had a book on the Green Berets, and then Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler had a hit song on The Ballad of the Green Berets. So that’s basically my knowledge of what was happening in Vietnam. I didn’t read the papers much and didn’t listen to the radio much.

LC: And how difficult was it for you to be separated from your husband?

BP: At the time I thought it was very difficult.

LC: Did you know how long he would be gone? Was it clear that he would be away for a year?

BP: Yeah, it was supposed to be a year, and then I think it was two years if it was going to be in Thailand.

LC: And what was that like?

BP: Kind of miserable, especially since there was a snafu in the paperwork, and I was relying on the allotment for financial support, and it didn’t come. And then I had applied for my license in New York, which is by reciprocity, and damned if they didn’t lose the paperwork for that. So I wasn’t getting an income.

LC: You couldn’t be hired?

BP: I couldn’t be hired. I was hired, and then they wouldn’t let me work. They said that ‘We’ll have to wait until that comes in.’ Of course in those days they didn’t
have faxes or email or anything like that, so it took a long time by mail to finally get that reciprocity back in.

LC: So you were kind of basically hanging out there with no money?
BP: Hanging out there with no money. Yeah.

LC: Ok. And did you call Charlie? Was he gone at this point?
BP: Oh yeah, he was gone.

LC: Ok. When did he actually leave? Do you know? Do you remember?
BP: Yeah. It was right after Christmas in 1964.

LC: Ok. Did you communicate with him while he was over there?
BP: Yeah.

LC: What did you guys use? Tapes? Letters?
BP: We didn’t really have the little tape recorders in those days.

LC: Not til later.
BP: So it was letters, and they’d be sporadic, you know, in terms of you’d get a whole bunch on one day or whatever.

LC: And what, if you remember, what kinds of things was he telling you about his surroundings or his setup or what was happening in Thailand? Did he describe what was going on?
BP: Not really. Not really. Not much. And I don’t know, it seemed to be quite a bit of censorship that was happening in those early days. And I know, certainly when I went over, that we were told what we could and could not write about or talk about.

LC: Like what?
BP: Well, you weren’t supposed to tell where you were or what the operations were like, or anything like that.

LC: So no hard data, basically?
BP: Yeah.

LC: When you finally got your own license issue straightened out, where did you work?
BP: Glen Falls, New York. Actually, the hospital where I was born. I worked in the operating room.

LC: And what kinds of cases would you see at a hospital in that area?
BP: A lot different from DC, which was the Knife and Gun Club. So this was more like, oh, hysterectomies and tonsillectomies and hernias and basic kinds of things. Some orthopedic stuff. So it was nice family medicine kinds of things. It was the largest hospital in the region, but you didn’t get to see all the trauma stuff that DC General was so famous for.

LC: And had you been coping with those trauma cases well when you were in DC?

BP: In DC? Yeah, I was very good at it.

LC: Why was that?

BP: I don’t know. Just had a knack for it.

LC: Didn’t bother you when you would walk away from a case?

BP: No. I didn’t like if people died on my table. That, I didn’t care for. But we saved a lot of lives, and I just had a knack for it. I was good at it.

LC: Ok. At what point did it occur to you that you wanted to enter the military?

BP: Well, as I said, the books were coming out. There was a lot of stuff now starting to come out on the news. America was really pro-war. And driving back and forth to Glen Falls – I used to listen to music, I wasn’t much into listening to the news – but every hour there were multiple requests for anybody who was a nurse who could donate time to please do so. They just didn’t have staffing. So they would say, if you were a nurse, and particularly if you’re an operating nurse and you have some skills that you’d be willing to share, please volunteer.

LC: These are military recruitment commercials?

BP: Yes.

LC: Ok. This was the Army?

BP: Well, I don’t know if it was the Army itself, but the announcer would say. And where it was coming from, I don’t know.

LC: But it was getting into your head?

BP: It was getting into my head. Yeah, you’d hear it all the time. And I thought, ‘Gee, I always wanted to go anyway.’ You know, as a child of World War II and remembering that, and remembering when people came back, all the patriotism and that type of thing, I really did want to do something. And my dad had gotten me a book when
I was twelve or something like that called *The Youngest WAAC*, Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps in those days, and I just thought, ‘Gee, that would be kind of fun to do.’ So, I really wanted to do that just once.

LC: And when did you actually decide to put this into action?
BP: 1966. I said, ‘I am going to do it. This is something I want to do, and I will.’ And so, I volunteered. It must have been in the spring. No. Late spring, early summer, because I actually joined up in August of ’66.

LC: Did you go to a recruiter’s office?
BP: Yes, I did.
LC: Do you remember that?
BP: Oh, yeah.
LC: Ok, tell me about it.
BP: Well, she was very nice. Glowing terms about all this kind of stuff, which was actually poetic justice. She wound up getting sent to my hospital.

LC: In Vietnam?
BP: In Vietnam.
LC: No kidding.
BP: Yep. Poetic justice. That was so funny.
LC: What was her name, do you remember?
BP: I don’t remember her name, but I sure gave it to her when she came over.
LC: I’ll bet. I’ll bet you did.
BP: I laughed. Oh, my word, that was so funny. No, I don’t remember her name.
LC: Well did she give you the straight dope?
BP: Well, she made it sound a lot better than it actually was, but she was going on what she was told, so she didn’t know any better. She was really nice. Nice gal.
LC: That is funny. Yeah. And what was the sort of sign-up terms? Do you remember what they told you?
BP: Well, you’re an obligated volunteer, so it was two years duty. And the deal was that you would have your choice of where you wanted to be stationed, and Vietnam didn’t have to be one of them. You could request anything basically, and you would have
a choice of where you wanted to be stationed. If you went to Vietnam, you had a choice of your duty station when you returned.

LC: That sounds pretty good.

BP: Yeah, it did sound pretty good. Plus, they would give you the GI Bill. And the pay was pretty good, and hazardous duty pay if you went to Vietnam was very good.

LC: And what was your husband’s situation at this point?

BP: By that time I had decided I was out of the marriage.

LC: Had you initiated?

BP: Yes. I had already gone through the paperwork and gone to court by the time I went.

LC: And was the fact of being apart a big piece of that situation?

BP: No, there were just a lot of things that kind of came together after he went overseas. Things that I just didn’t know.

LC: Ok. So, you’re basically making your own decisions now at this point?

BP: Absolutely.

LC: And you reported in August of 1966?

BP: Yes.

LC: Tell me about arriving...down here, I guess, at Fort Sam?

BP: Well, it was big. A little confusing, a lot of people marching and so on and so forth. Didn’t take very long to settle in and meet your classmates and enjoy. I think I mentioned in my written material about the thing that happened in the big auditorium with the doctors and nurses. Must have been twelve hundred of us in there.

LC: Sure, go ahead and tell.

BP: There was a young lieutenant – butter bar lieutenant – got up and he said, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, you need to do everything you can to keep this war going because it’s the only way you’ll get promoted and it’s the only way you’re going to earn medals.’ And really, if I could have gotten up and walked out that minute, I would have done so.

LC: Why?

BP: Well, I thought that we were there to help. You know, here I am this young, patriotic, idealistic person, and I had no idea that there were people who really promoted war and just felt that it was the best thing going. And that’s not what I was about. I’m
not a political person, and I was going [to Vietnam] to help, you know, take care of the
men and so on. But there’s a whole culture of war. I think the first time I heard about the
term ‘War College’ was equally as bad for me. I just didn’t realize that this was a goal of
so many people.

LC: Like an industry.
LC: Career maker.
BP: Career maker.

LC: By the sounds of that announcement. You obviously couldn’t get up and
leave. Any other reactions in the room? Were you looking around at other…
BP: No, I think I was just dumbstruck. And I remember my head reeling for the
rest of the morning and not being able to concentrate very well in marching and classes
because it was just such a surprise to me.
LC: It really threw you.
BP: It really did. It really did. I don’t know. Just…naïve. I was just naïve.
LC: Tell me about the other women in the basic class. How many were there,
and were there any you remember?
BP: I don’t remember how many there were, there were quite a few. Looking
back, I think I remember seeing a picture, and gosh, I guess there must have been an
awful lot of us. I got to know a few people and actually still keep in touch with one of
them who went on to run the SHAPE hospital in Belgium. She’s a real nice gal. Dutch
gal. But you know, you just kind of have loose friendships and stuff for that six weeks
that we were at Fort Sam.
LC: And what was the daily routine like that you remember?
BP: I don’t remember that much. I know that we marched. We went to classes.
We’d go to The Pit in the afternoons. And in the evenings, oftentimes, we would go out
with the guys to private clubs or whatever it was that they were doing. And did a little bit
of studying. Not much.
LC: Ok, we’ll get to that in a minute, Beth. For someone who’s listening to this
but doesn’t understand the reference of The Pit, could you explain that?
BP: Oh, the pit was a – I guess it no longer exists – but it was an area down in the basement of one of the buildings where it was kind of like a bar. People would go and hang out.

LC: And were you being trained to be an officer at this point?

BP: Yes.

LC: Ok. You were looking toward being commissioned.

BP: Yes. As a first lieutenant. That was a guarantee of my going in.

LC: Ok. And what about weapons training for you gals?

BP: A Browning Automatic. We fired out at the range at Fort – at Camp Bullis. And I think I fired an M-1 or something like that. But they didn’t give us an enormous amount of weapons training.

LC: Did you have any qualms about having to be trained on weapons, or did you think they darn well better show you how to use a weapon?

BP: Well, I thought we ought to know how to use one. My father had us learning how to use weapons when we were very small, because he was an excellent marksman. And I’d been in the school rifle club, and in college was a sharpshooter. So, it was just kind of fun for me because I knew I could blow anything away. But I didn’t really coordinate those thoughts with killing people. But I was a good shot.

LC: What else were you supposed to be learning in basic?

BP: Learning about what the hospitals were, how the Army was structured, the various levels, how… I guess structure and function would be the basics of it, so that you knew the difference between a battalion and a company and who commanded what, and what the branches of the service were, and that type of thing.

LC: So this didn’t have a lot to do with medical?

BP: No, a great deal of it did not have much to do with medical. And then there was some medical stuff and we put that to practice out at Camp Bullis.

LC: Ok. Tell me about that. I take it that you went to Bullis from Fort Sam?

BP: From Fort Sam. Yeah, it was just like a field trip. Overnight field trip type of thing, where they had us staying in tents. And we did forced marches and that type of thing. And they had set up a hospital situation in tents, where they anesthetized goats,
shot them through the hind legs, and then we were to debride those wounds. So that was our experience with gunshot wounds.

LC: Ok. And you were probably a bit of an old pro, really, having seen some of this in city hospitals situation.

BP: Yeah. I didn’t much like the idea of shooting the goats, particularly when I found out the value of each goat, which was like, two thousand dollars.

LC: They had a dollar value on the goats?

BP: They had a dollar value on the goats.

LC: How so? How’d you find that out?

BP: Oh, in terms of what it cost the government to procure and take care of these goats when they shoot them and anesthetize them and the whole nine yards. So it just seemed like a big waste of money to me. I felt there was a cheaper way of doing it. But then again I had been raised with government waste.

LC: Yeah, you lived in DC, so…

BP: I thought, ‘Oh yeah, here we go.’

LC: So it wasn’t sort of an animal rights thing that came up in you, it was more, ‘This is just ridiculous.’

BP: There was no need for it, in my opinion.

LC: Was it useful at all for other people, for other trainees who hadn’t had the same experience?

BP: I don’t know. They’d have to tell you.

LC: Did you guys talk about that at all? Like, ‘This is a joke.’

BP: Not really.

LC: Or, ‘We don’t need to be doing this.’

BP: No. Well, I didn’t talk with anybody about it.

LC: Ok. Did they have you go on any kind of orienteering kind of course, or leave you out overnight with a compass or anything like that?

BP: No.

LC: You didn’t have any training like that?

BP: No.

LC: No survival training?
BP: Well, we were told about things like, you brush your teeth, you spit in your helmet, and you use that water to wash your socks type of thing.

LC: But nothing more extensive than that?

BP: Not really.

LC: What about self defense skills?

BP: I should say, they just told you on things like how to chlorinate your water and that type of thing. Self defense? No, not really.

LC: Ok.

BP: They did have us try on a gas mask and they had you run into a tent and take your gas mask off and put it back on again. And unfortunately, while I had my gas mask off, the instructor threw more crystals. And the crystals landed inside my gas mask, which I didn’t know until I put it back on.

LC: That sounds not good.

BP: Ooh!

LC: What…what would that have done? I mean, touching your skin, would’ve that –

BP: Oh, it just burned my eyes horribly. Of course, I took a breath and I just…I can understand how it can incapacitate somebody. But it was like ‘Oh my God, what happened?’ And then, when I pulled it off and my eyes cleared enough to see all these crystals inside the mask…I must have been standing right there when she threw the stuff. Or he, or whoever it was. Oh, my word.

LC: Well. That sounds bad.

BP: It hurt.

LC: Were any of your other classmates hurt during training at all? Do you remember?

BP: Not that I’m aware. Not that I recall.

LC: Ok. What happened after Camp Bullis? What was the next step?

BP: I really don’t recall. That was not at the end of our training. I think quite a ways into it. But we finished our classes, took exams, got our commission, got our first salute, and went home.

LC: Was there some kind of ceremony associated with your commission?
BP: Must have been, but I don’t remember it.
LC: Really?
BP: Couldn’t have been that important to me.
LC: Ok. Were you focusing on getting out of the States and getting over to Vietnam?
BP: Yes.
LC: How did you ensure that that was going to happen, rather than for example being sent to Germany or whatever?
BP: Well, initially, I had made an arrangement with the recruiter that I would go to Vietnam. And I was one of the few, I think, who went directly to Vietnam from Fort Sam. I went home, got my stuff, had a little break and then went directly overseas. Now at home, I had gotten a letter from Marian Tierney, who was the chief nurse of Vietnam, saying, ‘Congratulations on being accepted to go to Vietnam.’ And that I would be assigned to 3rd Field. And within a day or so I got a letter from somebody at 3rd Field saying, well, ‘This is a very lovely hospital; we wear whites, blah blah blah.’ And I wrote back to Colonel Tierney and I said, ‘That’s not why I’m going. I really wanted to be where the action was. And you know, otherwise I wouldn’t have volunteered.’ So she wrote back and said, ‘I fully understand, and when you get to Vietnam, I’ll assign you to a different location.’
LC: 3rd Field was located where?
BP: In Saigon.
LC: Ok. And that just wasn’t what you were about?
LC: How much did you know about the distinctions between Saigon and sort of you know, out.
BP: In the boonies?
LC: Yeah, further in country, as it were.
BP: I really didn’t know that much about it. I just knew I didn’t want to be in a city wearing white uniforms. I wanted to be out and seeing more like what combat was really like.
LC: And your – tell me about your travel over to Vietnam. What was your route?
BP: Oh, let me see. I went from – where did I go from? Albany, New York, I think. And I flew to…I can never remember exactly where I left from. I think it was from Albany, New York. But I flew out to San Francisco. I think I left from Oakland to go to Vietnam, and it was…uh, I was the only woman on the plane. All soldiers.

LC: You were the only woman?

BP: Yes.

LC: Was it a commercial carrier, do you remember?

BP: Yeah, I think so. I really don’t remember. It wasn’t very well appointed, I’ll say that. It wasn’t as bad as the one we came back on, but…But no, it was comfortable. Ok. I think it was a commercial carrier.

LC: And do you remember anything else about the flight, other than you were the only gal on the plane?

BP: It was very long. I had to hang out in California for a little bit, and then we went to, I think – it’s been a long time – we went to Hawaii. It was dark and they gave us a break while they refueled, and I got out and walked around. And I do remember that getting off the plane, I was in uniform. And some of the guys took off, because there were a couple of hours layover, and actually went someplace. And I was afraid I’d miss the plane, and so I kind of hung there. But I know when folks got off, there were girls who were putting leis around their necks. The beautiful, beautiful flowers. And as each man came off, she’d put a lei. There were actually more than one girl. When I got off, they had this one that was really not very nice at all, and she just kind of threw it at me. And it was like, ‘Oh my God, thank you for making me feel so welcome!’

LC: Yeah. And so different from…yeah. Were there any comments or did you catch the edge of anything from guys about you being on the plane and going over? I presume you were in uniform.

BP: No. Not a word. No.

LC: Really? Was anybody nice to you?

BP: Well, I think the fellow in the seat next to me talked to me, and he was very nice. But I didn’t really speak with him that much. And we stopped at, as I remember, Midway, Wake, Guam and the Philippines after Hawaii. And I never saw so many sunrises in my life. We had breakfast every time we got up. It was a very long trip.
LC: What was the mood?
BP: Just kind of quiet. I think everybody was exhausted. I didn’t hear much of anything from anybody.

LC: What mood were you in?
BP: Well, eager to go. Excited to find out what it was going to be. And somewhat apprehensive, because I didn’t know exactly where I was going or what was going to happen. I just had no clue.

LC: Right, you were just going to walk off the plane and then you would be told.
BP: Worry about it when I got there. Yeah.

LC: Yeah. Do you work well with that kind of uncertainty?
BP: Absolutely.
LC: Ok. So you were probably fine with it.
BP: I was.

LC: Tell me about actually arriving, if you recall.
BP: Well I remember coming out on the airplane and there was a lot of mist in the windows, and kept thinking, ‘Oh, it’s really foggy out.’ But there was condensation within the window itself; you could actually feel the heat and the moisture, which I thought was rather strange. And looking out the window and wondering what was going on beneath us. You know, were there people bombing or what the heck was happening? I didn’t know how dangerous it was. And they said, ‘Listen, we’re going to go in real fast because we may take enemy fire.’ I remember them coming down, and, boy, we just dropped into Tan Son Nhut where we landed. Got off the plane, and I just remember being hit in the face with this horrible heat. Now I’m a northerner, and it was October, and the leaves were turning, and it was frost and everything when I left home, and I just hit this massive amount of heat and humidity. The place was just packed with soldiers milling around or waiting in lines. A lot of wounded, people kind of half-dressed, a lot of bandages, and so on. No women. No American women. Some Vietnamese women walking around in native dress. I wasn’t quite sure where I was supposed to go or what I was supposed to do, so I just asked questions. And somebody told me the chief nurse, Colonel Tierney, was going to send a jeep for me at some point, and just to hang out.

LC: Where did you hang out?
BP: Oh, just walked around.

LC: And no idea where this jeep was supposed to meet you?

BP: Well, I went back and asked a couple of times, and finally somebody had an answer for me, and I met him. The only thing that really got me – here I am in my greens, right? And I’m supposed to meet the chief nurse, and I don’t know exactly where or when or anything like that. Well, I had to go to the bathroom, and I go into this place. Well even in nursing school or any other place I had ever been, you always had privacy if you had to go to the bathroom. Not a big to-do. So here I walk in and it’s just open. Little holes in the middle of the floor. And there were some Vietnamese women there, and having to squat over one of these little holes to go to the bathroom with everybody watching – and they were very curious, me being the American woman. It was very embarrassing for me to do that. And, of course, I missed the hole and sprayed my pantyhose. And so anyway, I tried to compose myself and I went outside and walked across – they had a chain that was dangling between a couple of posts, and I stepped across that, caught my high heel on it and fell flat on my face into a mud puddle. Got up and walked back into the bathroom area again. And they had a mirror, and I looked in it, and all I could see were these two blue eyes looking out of mud. My greens were covered with mud. My face, my hat, everything. So I spent probably a half hour trying to get the mud off. Not very successfully.

LC: Welcome to Vietnam.

BP: Welcome to Vietnam, yeah. So much for my composure.

LC: Yeah. And just to underscore, you said that you’re wearing nylons, heels.

BP: Yeah.

LC: Did you have any…I mean, that’s regulation, obviously.

BP: Well, I shouldn’t have said pantyhose. It wasn’t. It was a garter belt and nylons.

LC: Ok, yeah. Which, you know, really is worse. And that was regulation dress. Did you have to stay in reg dress as far as you knew?

BP: I didn’t know what I would be wearing. That was the last time I ever wore my greens.

LC: Oh, is that right?
BP: Until, I think, I wore greens when I went on leave. I think we had to to get on the plane. But other than that, no.

LC: Ok. Someone showed up for you in a jeep?

BP: Yup. Came with a jeep and just said, ‘Hang onto your hat. We’re going into Saigon, and if you hear fire, rifle fire, just duck.’

LC: That’s what they told you? Just duck?

BP: Yeah. And, ‘Don’t be surprised.’ So I’m thinking, ‘Well, this is going to be cool.’ So they took me into Saigon and the guy dropped me off at this building, and he said, ‘You go on in here, don’t come out.’ I think they had given me a sandwich or something and said, ‘It’s too dangerous for you to walk around, so you don’t want to come out.’ And it was a small room with concrete walls, concrete floor. Smelled awfully bad. Very, very wet. Moldy. And I kind of amused myself— I think I had one bare bulb in the room— I kind of amused myself lying on this lumpy cot watching geckos go up and down the walls.

LC: And you’re waiting for Godot. I mean, did you have any idea what you were waiting for?

BP: Well, they said that she would meet me. I think it was at ten o’clock the next morning. So I was hungry and I was tired.

LC: This was the colonel?

BP: The colonel, yeah.

LC: Did you actually then meet her the next morning?

BP: I did, I did. She actually came and got me. She was very nice.

LC: What was your impression of her?

BP: I don’t remember her very well except for the fact that she seemed very confident, knew what she was doing, and had her finger on everything as far as the nurses were concerned in Vietnam.

LC: And she had a plan for you.

BP: Yup. She said, ‘I’m going to send you to Cu Chi. You want to go where it’s busy? I’m going to put you in the busiest place in the country.’

LC: Was she encouraging of your ambition to be posted somewhere busy?
BP: Oh, she was fine. She was thinking of it as matter-of-fact. ‘This is what you want. This is what you get.’ She was really nice about it. She flew with me. She said, ‘I’ve got to go to the 12th.’ It wasn’t the 12th, it was the 7th. ‘I’ve got to go to the 7th anyway to see somebody, and she said, ‘I’ll ride in the plane with you.’ It wasn’t a plane, it was a helicopter.

LC: Ok. Where did you take off from?
BP: I think from Tan Son Nhut. I really don’t remember that part. I was awfully tired at that point. Kind of disoriented and hot and all that kind of stuff.
LC: Yeah, probably had been miserable. Did you actually get a meal here somewhere?
BP: I don’t remember. I know I ate as soon as I got to 7th Surg, and I don’t remember eating anything other than that stale sandwich prior to that. I must have, but I just don’t remember it.
LC: Ok. So she flew over with you. Did you talk with her?
BP: Well, you couldn’t. It was too loud to talk.
LC: Just too loud. Ok. Now this is probably your first helicopter ride.
BP: Yeah.
LC: How was that?
BP: Cool. Way cool.
LC: Why?
BP: I don’t know, I’d just never been in one before. I loved it. I still do, I’d ride in a helicopter all day every day if I could. It’s just neat.
LC: About how high were you flying? Any idea?
BP: High enough so that we didn’t take any fire coming in, and we landed pretty quickly because they did take fire on a fairly regular basis. I do remember a dentist coming one time and they took fire. And he got out of the plane, there was a rifle round in his backpack. He got out of the plane, walked to the officer’s club and never came out again.
LC: He took up his position in the officer’s club?
BP: He went in, got drunk. He was an Irish guy and, honest to God, he never came out again. It was so funny. People still talk about that.
LC: Wow.

BP: No, nobody shot at us that I know of.

LC: Well, can you give me your appreciation of the 7th Surg as you saw it when you first arrived?

BP: Well, it was pretty bleak. That whole 25th Infantry Division was just moving in. They’d only been there for, I think, a few months, and they’d just defoliated everything. So there were hardly any sprigs of grass or anything growing anywhere. It was just dust. And very, very hot. We slept – the nurses’ hooches. We had two of them separated by a small sandbag bunker – and they were wood frame buildings with a tent top and flaps that you could pull down if it rained. And we had the latrine. The nurses’ latrine was in the back of our hooch, and a shower. And it was not very far to walk down. There was a line of Quonset huts, and the operating room was the last Quonset hut in that line.

LC: How many theaters in that Quonset hut?

BP: We could operate on three men at a time, four under duress. That fourth cubicle we usually used as storage unless we were really hurting.

LC: But standard…

BP: Three.

LC: You were prepared for three. And what about the ward situation?

BP: I don’t know. I actually never went on the wards.

LC: Not ever?

BP: Isn’t that funny? And I got in touch here recently with a gal who was stationed at the 7th and I had a picture of her. And this is another deal, where I track her down on the internet, and her name was Pat Wojdag, W-O-J-D-A-G, and I thought, ‘How many of those can there be?’ And this was just a few months ago. And so I found this name, this guy’s name, and I called it, and it happened to be his aunt. And she and I have been in touch regularly since then. She’s going to go to the reunion down in San Antonio in the fall. She never went in [to the wards] either. We talked about that, and we thought, ‘Well isn’t this strange?’ We didn’t even really get to know each other very well, and there were only a handful of us nurses. And we didn’t go on the wards. You
just worked and you slept, or hung out and read or sunned yourself or whatever it was.
That’s kind of strange, but that’s the way it was.
LC: Beth, did you then have...I’m just trying to get the sense of why that was the
case. When a case would leave the theater and your work as OR nurse was done, was
your focus on either on the next case or on getting something to eat. But not following a
case?
BP: Well, no. I mean, do you mean after a guy life the OR? I didn’t know what
their names were and I didn’t remember their faces and off they went and we never saw
them again
LC: And there weren’t any cases that really got to you?
BP: Oh, sure.
LC: Well I know that there probably were because you said something about that,
but not cases such that –
BP: Triple amputee.
LC: Yeah, exactly.
BP: That’s the one I remember.
LC: Go ahead and tell me about that one.
BP: Well, this was the worst I’d ever seen. I hadn’t been in country very long,
and we took some very major casualties from Operation ATTLEBORO. It was the first
one; it was out in Tay Ninh. 196th Light Brigade. I think we took over two hundred
wounded. Two hundred, two hundred and fifty, something like that. It was just amazing,
we certainly couldn’t deal with them all, and the dead were stacked up like cordwood.
Well anyway, this one guy comes in and he’s a triple amputee. Both legs are gone and
the lower part of his body is this delta of thick, black, dark red tissue. His genitals were
gone. He had lost one arm that was – actually it was just a twisted mass of greenish
tissue with the arm attached. It had just gone around and around and around, like in a
wring [old washing machine]. And he had lost an eye. And everything else was just
peppered with fragments. He was just a mess. They had actually been riding in a jeep
and hit a land mine. And I looked at him, and I have to admit that I kind of staggered a
little bit when I saw him, and I went in and they just said, ‘Get working,’ so I grabbed a
scissors and a pair of forceps and just started hacking away at the tissue. We had quite a
few people come in and start hacking, there was just so much to cut away on this guy. So
the head of the OR, the OR supervisor, her name was Chris Butler. She came in and she
got this funny look on her face, and I thought well that’s weird, I’m sure Chris has seen
worse than this. And she went back out and she came back in and she was just absolutely
ashen, and I said ‘Chris, what’s the matter?’ And she said, ‘I had to make sure. I went
out back and looked at his chart.’ And she said, ‘That’s my cousin.’ And it was, I mean,
it was just awful. We had to use a probe to find out where his anus was. But we got him
fixed up and all and sent him off to Saigon. When he realized what happened to him, he
just went into cardiac arrest and died.

LC: And did she find that out from Saigon?
BP: That he had died? I don’t know who told me that he died, but I found out he
died.

LC: Obviously that’s just a horrific set of injuries. How far away from the
median that you would see in a masscal situation was that?
BP: That’s the worst.
LC: Grievous. I mean that’s just…
BP: Yeah, that’s the type of thing that’s just the worst. I remember one time at
the 12th, walking up and down the lines, because as I said, we used to stack the dead up
and collect the bodies. And one time, I was walking – I was really tired and almost
hallucinating because I’d been on my feet for so long without anything to eat – and it was
dark and kind of rainy, and I walked out and I was looking at this line of body bags, and
just thinking, ‘This is just absolutely ridiculous.’ And then looking at one, this one [body
bag] thinking, ‘This one really looks strange,’ because it’s a great big body in there but it
just didn’t look right, and then I realized it didn’t have a head, and that one kind of…that
was it. I think I went out and had a little too much to drink that night. I don’t remember.
I probably went back and went to bed.

LC: Was Operation ATTLEBORO, in terms of the number of serious casualties,
one of the worst times for you?
BP: That was, because that was the first one, and that was followed by CEDAR
FALLS. And I can’t remember the ones after that, I kind of lost track of them, but those
were the first two that I remember. There might have been something in between. But we knew when they went out, anytime they [the soldiers] went out in the Ho Bo Woods or the Boi Loi Woods, that we were going to take heavy casualties. The Iron Triangle, they called it.

LC: And how much did you know about troop commitments like that?
BP: Nothing.
LC: Before they actually happened?
BP: Oh, we knew they were going out, because we’d see them going out. We knew there’d be something happening, and we’d know that they were going to go out to such-and-such an area, and that we could expect casualties. We never knew how heavy those casualties were going to be.

LC: Ok. And were you working on shifts until you would have a masscal, and then it was just sort of all hand sort of thing?
BP: Yeah. At the 7th, we’d go over in the morning and just see what there was and we might be able to turn around and go back to the hooch, or take the day off, or whatever. And then when we worked, we just worked. Somebody took first call, or second cal, or whatever. So the first call person was on all the time, and then the second, third, fourth call came in if they were needed, and then could leave when they were not needed.

LC: And Beth, when you had a large influx of casualties all at once, who was doing triage?
BP: The doctors primarily would do triage, and I cannot remember precisely who did it at the 7th. I’ve helped triage in both places, but I just don’t remember who it was who did it. Surgeons.

LC: Ok. Was there a particular protocol for triage in the medical situation in the military context that was different from in civilian hospitals?
BP: I don’t know, I really hadn’t triaged in civilian hospitals, per se.
LC: Ok. Tell me a little bit if you can about the types of enemy weapons that were inflicting the most difficult injuries that you saw in the OR.
BP: Well, the 25th Infantry Division put up a little teaching display so that people could see what some of those looked like. What a Claymore mine looked like, what
a…some of the punji pits, the bear trap, some of the different kinds of shells that they used. At that time…by that time they had discovered that we had tunnels that underlay the entire 25th Infantry Division. Nobody really knew that, I don’t think, when we started. But we couldn’t figure out how these little Vietnamese guys, VC, were popping up in the middle of the compound and blowing people away in the middle of the night. And they started finding these tunnels, or spider holes, that the guys were popping up out of. So anyway, that’s what we saw. Other than that, you know, the [Vietnamese] kids would get things, containers, and they would fill them with whatever kind of metal pieces or anything that would inflict a wound, and then they would use those. A lot of stuff was just improvised that they used to blow up our people. A lot of booby traps and the lines and all that type of thing.

LC: And for example, in OR, can you describe what it would be like to see an injury caused by a step-on mine? A land mine kind of thing?

BP: Well, with the land mines, if they took a step on it directly, of course a lot of the people were just killed. And I didn’t see the bodies generally when they came in. But if they came to the operating room, they were just multiple frag wounds. A lot of the times, a leg would be missing, or partially missing, or twisted around, and you just had to decide at what level you would take the leg off. But the most of what you saw day in and day out were fragment wounds, and they would just be multiple holes, bleeding holes in somebody’s legs and lower body. And then our task simply was – at the 7th Surg – was simply to open those up, take out the fragments, irrigate the wounds, leave them open, and send them over to post-op. And they did not come back to us for any kind of treatment in the OR. Which was very different from the 12th Evac, where we did delayed primary closures. But with these folks, they either went back to duty or they were shipped out to another hospital.

LC: Ok. What’s a delayed primary closure?

BP: All wounds in this type of situation are considered dirty. And so, if you close a dirty wound, it can get infected. So basically what they would do is open the wound, clean it out really well, make sure that the foreign bodies are out of there, put the guys on antibiotics, and as the wounds began to heal up, then you brought them back into the operating room, scraped the wound so that all the tissue was nice and fresh and
bleeding, and then you closed the wound as you would any kind of a cut. And dressed it and then sent the guys back to their ward.

LC: Ok. Where and by whom was the decision made to send particularly heavily wounded men on to another hospital?

BP: I don’t know who made those decisions. Physicians, I’m sure.

LC: Did you know anything about the rest of the channels? Men who were being treated say in Saigon or Da Nang or in Japan, or how that worked?

BP: Well, they often sent them up to the 3rd Field.

LC: Which was –

BP: Sometimes when we were taking heavy casualties, we just sent them to any hospital that could accept them, 93rd Evac or wherever. They just sent them every place, any place where they could operate. But once they left us, they would go usually to Saigon and then on to the Philippines, or Japan, or wherever. And no, I knew nothing about how that happened.

LC: Ok. Some of the other health professionals that you were working with, I wonder if you can talk about the relationship between the nurses generally now, not necessarily on a personal basis. But that’s fine if you want to throw that in. What kind of sense did the nurses have of like, dust-off pilots who were bringing these guys in?

BP: What do you mean?

LC: Did you see them? Did you talk to them? Did they tell you anything, or were they in and out?

BP: They were pretty much in and out. But we partied with them.

LC: You partied with them? Ok, so when there was down time you might see them.

BP: Yes.

LC: Ok. Did you have a sense of the risks that they were taking to get these wounded guys in to you? Or were they not talking about that?

BP: Yeah, they took a lot of risks. They didn’t talk about it.

LC: But you just knew? Had to know on some level?

BP: Oh sure.
LC: What about the medics? Did you see corpsmen or medics from the field at all?
BP: Generally not from the field, but we had corpsmen who worked with us certainly in the hospital.
LC: And what was the relationship between the nurses and enlisted men who were corpsmen?
BP: Well, we each had our jobs to do. The nurses outranked the corpsmen.
LC: Yes. Was there any friction there because of that?
BP: Hmm. No, amazingly, I did not feel any. Now, maybe other people did. But I know I got called out at one point at the 12th for calling people by their first name, but we were pretty much on first-name basis. I never had anybody refuse to do anything for me, and you know, we just got along well and everybody did their jobs.
LC: Did you see much of the Graves Registration people?
BP: No.
LC: Again, those were enlisted personnel, largely. No interaction with them generally?
BP: No. Not me. Maybe the other people did.
LC: Ok. And what about the surgeons? What was the relationship like with the guys that you were working with?
BP: Well, I got to know the ones at the 12th better than the ones at the 7th because I wasn’t at the 7th that long. But they were very friendly and nice. And you know, we’d talk and so on and so forth. The only problem that I recall is that the doctors, the had more doctors than they had nurses, so we had a tendency of being on our feet for many, many hours going case after case, where the doctors always got a break. So that used to gall me a little bit. I sure would like to be able to have time to go get something to eat or just sit out a case or something like that, because they [the doctors] did. They had enough staff to be able to do that. Other than that, they were really good, and I think they treated us very well. And certainly we helped them a lot in that we often did debridements and DPCs and so on.
LC: Was it largely a professional relationship? Did it border on friendly?
BP: Both. I mean, it was friendly/professional, I would say.
LC: Ok. Were there any sort of you know, gender-based tensions that you saw or that came your way?

BP: I didn’t notice if there were. The doctors always are mini-gods, and the nurses do know that they are beneath them, but other than that, no, I didn’t really notice anything. Nor did I notice again with the enlisted men – there were no enlisted women – I did not notice any of the enlisted men having a lot of trouble with the nurses.

LC: Doctors hitting on nurses? Enlisted men hitting on nurses?

BP: Well, of course. That’s the way life is.

LC: Was that problematical?

BP: No, I don’t think so.

LC: How would you, for example, handle it?

BP: Well, either you do or you don’t.

LC: I mean, if you weren’t interested. Let’s say if you weren’t interested.

BP: Well, I think the same as in any other part of life. If you’re not interested, that becomes clear pretty quickly.

LC: Ok.

BP: Now, I will say this. For the men, being one of, I think in the beginning at the 7th, one of a dozen or so nurses and probably twenty-four hundred men – they’re after you all the time. There’s no question about that. For the most part, they were fine. I mean, people treated you very well. The guys would do anything to be near a round-eyed woman. So, we could go anyplace, do anything we wanted, and we were treated well. However, for the little guys who were perverts, you never knew what was going to happen. For example, one time during a mass casualty, I had to go to the bathroom pretty badly, and as I was heading toward the latrine, two of the nurses were coming back and they said, ‘Be careful, some idiot put a leg in there, so just look where you’re going.’

Basically, the latrines were louvered wooden buildings that sat on a concrete pad, and then they used half of fifty-five gallon drums to catch the excreta, and those were taken out and doused with fuel and burned daily. So I go in and I look down, and it’s not just a leg. There was a naked man under there who was lying on his back looking up to see the nurse’s butts, and he had pulled out the barrels that were underneath there. I think we had a three holer there, so when I yelled at him he got up and took off. Or you’d go in at
night to go to the bathroom and there’d be somebody on his hands and knees with a flashlight or a lighter, trying to look at your fanny, or they’d stand outside on the bunker and look into your bedroom at night. One night I woke up, something woke me in the middle of the night, and I guess there was a guy who’d gotten into the hooch – I’m not sure how – and he had his hands all over me, and I woke up and screamed and he took off. That kind of thing was happening all the time.

LC: Did you find this stuff disturbing or just kind of part of what you had to get through? Did it actually disturb you?

BP: I didn’t much care for it, because you didn’t know what people were going to do. I’d gone to a party one night, and they had some latrines in this one area, and they’d marked one just for the women. And I’d gone in, and there was a big African-American guy, probably weighed two hundred twenty, two hundred forty pounds. I said hello to him as I was going in. He was coming out of the other latrine. And I could see out through the louvers that he was standing outside the door, but I didn’t really think anything about it. And as I walked out, he grabbed me and tore my clothes off. And it was one of those deals, I wasn’t sure I could get a scream out. I tried and tried. I always thought I could knee someone in the testicles if they did that to me. But I couldn’t, and he was so big – well over six feet tall – and I’m only five-two. But I finally did get the scream out, and the two men that I was with – two of the physicians came flying out – and the guy dropped me and ran. But I realized, he could’ve hurt me really badly. I still have a scar on my back where the zipper from my dress cut my back. So that was frightening. And they tried to go out and bait that guy with one of the other nurses, but they never caught him.

LC: Who tried to do that?

BP: The fellows that I was with. The two docs.

LC: So it never got reported? Did it get reported?

BP: Oh yeah, they reported it. But they went back out I think with the blessings of the CID, the police.

LC: But nothing as far as you know?

BP: Nothing ever happened that I know.

LC: Well, that’s pretty frightening.
BP: It was frightening. That was frightening.

LC: Did that sort of change your – the way you walked around?

BP: No.

LC: You just kind of continued to be sort of on your guard? Would that be fair?

BP: Yeah. Yeah. I think I was a little more careful in just keeping my eyes open and making sure there was somebody else around. But no, I don’t think it changed my behavior that much.

LC: In the material that you sent us Beth, you mentioned that there was a nurse who seemed to have been – I don’t know. Getting a lot of action, I guess, with enlisted guys.

BP: A little at the 7th?

LC: Yeah. What was up with that?

BP: Huh?

LC: What was up with that, I mean was she…?

BP: I don’t know, she was this beautiful blond California girl, but she kept coming in with all these expensive Kodak carousel and cameras and an Akai tape recorder, and these things cost a lot of money, and I thought, ‘How in the world is she doing this?’ And I finally said something to one of the other nurses, and she said, ‘Well you idiot, she’s selling it. A hundred bucks a pop to the enlisted men.’

LC: Wow.

BP: And then, boy, I tell you, she was raking in the cash. And then the one that really cracked me up, though, was when apparently, she and this enlisted man were out in the POL dump when a mortar round came in. But it didn’t go off, apparently. We joked that they would have gone out with a bang in more ways than one.

LC: Yeah. Yeah.

BP: That was pretty funny, actually.

LC: Well it is. Yeah. It is. And did you have to look at things like that kind of with that black humor?

BP: Oh, everything was black humor. Believe me.

LC: Yeah. Any other incidents come to mind that illustrate that? That aspect?
BP: Oh, that was the best one. That was the best. Yes, there was an enormous amount of black humor that went on. And all I know is that there was a standard joke about one of the ambulances talking at night, and a physician and one of the nurses apparently were going at it in the ambulance. There was a lot of speculation about who it was, so when I went down to my one and only reunion in San Antonio here a few years back, I said something to the physician that I thought was in there, about ‘Hey, who was that with you anyway?’ And he denied ever having been a part of that.

LC: ‘I was nowhere near.’

BP: Yeah. So, I talked to somebody else and they said, ‘Oh yeah, it was him. And one of the nurses who was at the reunion, as well.’

LC: Oh, no kidding.

BP: So they were still making jokes about that. Oh yeah, that was pretty funny.

LC: Beth, I want to ask you about the mortar attacks. It’s come up a couple different times. How often did this happen?

BP: Oh, I’d say about once a week.

LC: Ok. How frightening was it for you?

BP: In the beginning it was pretty frightening, because you’re not used to it and you don’t know where it’s going to hit. By the time I left – I didn’t even, I don’t think I even bothered getting out of bed as a mortar attack was coming in. I figured that I’d probably take a worse chance on running to the bunker than I would just staying in bed. And some people would just get underneath their bunks if they could.

LC: People were hurt, though, on these.

BP: Oh yeah, sure.

LC: Do you remember any of those incidents where the mortar actually found a target and hurt somebody?

BP: Well, I think the one that sticks out in my mind, the worst, was we had a mass casualty situation – well excuse me – that’s not true. We had had one, but it was over and so we were at a point where we could party. We’d been partying with a bunch of guys whose barracks were out behind the nurses’ hooches a ways. You could actually see them from where we were. So we were over there partying, and all of a sudden we heard choppers coming in. And so, basically, as an OR nurse the first thing you do is you
head back anytime you hear choppers, more than one chopper coming. You take off and
go back to the hospital. So we headed back over, and sure enough we were taking a
bunch of casualties. And then we started getting hit. The hospital. So they said – (hang
on a minute). They said, ‘Go on. Get out and try to find cover, because you’ve got all
the explosive gases in the operating room.’ Basically what you do, if you have a patient
on the table, you take them down and then you cover the patient with whatever you can,
including yourself. So we ran outside, and there was no place to run. There were some
low sandbags around. I think it was up by pre-op, and that’s where we headed, I don’t
know why, and laid down there. There were a bunch of us in the operating room. And it
was a beautiful, clear, starry night, and the moon was bright and you could hear the
mortars coming in. And, basically, what happens is when a mortar round lands, you
could tell whether or not it’s inside the perimeter. And then the next time that they let
one loose, it’ll land and you know exactly how far they’re going to raise the barrel, so
you can just know where those next ones are going to come in. So the first one that came
inside the perimeter actually fell on the guys that we’d just been partying with, and you
could hear them screaming. And I said, ‘Uh oh.’ The next one came in, and it was
headed right for us, and you could hear that thing coming and whistling. And it landed,
God, only a few yards from where we were lying, and it did not go off. But that was
some scary. And then they brought in all the guys that we’d been partying with and they
were blown up pretty badly.

LC: How badly?

BP: Well, I remember one guy whose shoulder was blown off, and he was the
boyfriend of one of the nurses. And I just happened to remember his particular wound.

LC: And were they pretty much all hurt?

BP: Yeah.

LC: To one degree or another?

BP: Yeah. Yeah. They’d all taken some kind of fragments and I don’t think
anybody was killed, but that shoulder wound was pretty nasty. And I remember the guy
having to have a chest tube, and when the surgeon took the chest tube out, he just said,
‘This is going to hurt.’ And he yanked it out, and this big, good-looking man just
collapsed.
LC: Really?
BP: Yeah. And I thought, ‘Oh, that was kind of nasty.’ But having been in a car accident and having a chest tube myself and having it pulled out, it really wasn’t all that bad.

LC: Was this accident before you went over?
BP: No, this was just a few years ago. It wasn’t as bad as it looked, but at the time it was pretty gruesome.

LC: Yeah. How did you process stuff like this? You had just been standing over there, and you know, random mortar shell hits those guys and you’re over here and the one that comes and lands near you doesn’t go off. I mean, just sort of psychologically if you can say, how do you handle that?
BP: ‘Holy (blank blank blank blank)!’ And that’s about it. Then you kind of thank your lucky stars and go on doing what you were doing. Did I worry about it or think about it much afterwards? Not really, but I do remember it. That’s one of the things that sticks out in my mind. Because, actually, at the time we had an anesthetist – a fellow whose wife had just had a baby whom he hadn’t seen – and he was lying there crying, and I thought maybe I should go and throw myself on top of him. I didn’t. I mean I started to, but I never made it. I always kind of kicked myself for not being a little faster. Although we were lucky because it didn’t go off, but I probably should have tried to save him.

LC: Because he had a new child?
BP: Yeah. Yeah, he was crying. He was just blubbing.
LC: That must have happened more than once, where people were just absolutely at the end of their ropes.
BP: Oh, sure.

LC: Did it happen more to the nurses, do you think? Than to say the doctors? Or to the medics?
BP: I don’t know. I don’t think so.
LC: Just varied by personality?
BP: Yeah, people who just cracked up no matter who they were.
LC: Did anybody actually have to be reassigned out of there? Health care people?

BP: Oh, I think there were, but I don’t remember.

LC: Ok.

BP: Per se. There were some people who were pretty much basket cases.

LC: Beth, tell me a little bit about relations that you or that the nurses had with local civilians who were coming onto the base area, into the hospital area. Who, for example, was working on the base? Did you know who these Vietnamese were?

BP: I did not know them. It always concerned me a little bit because they could be perfectly good civilians working for us by day and turn into VC by night, and certainly as time went by we realized that they were stealing a lot from us.

LC: What kinds of things?

BP: Well, they’d steal supplies. You know, linens, and…

LC: Medicine?

BP: Yeah, medicines and instruments, surgical instruments and all those kinds of things. I don’t know what else they got away with. But they took an awful lot out. Now supposedly, there was a fully functioning VC operating room right beneath our feet, which we didn’t know at the time.

LC: And when did you find that out?

BP: Oh, not until years later. I was talking with Pete Kama, who married one of the nurses. He had been the aide to General Weyand, and he collaborated when he was interviewed for the book on the tunnels of Cu Chi. So I talked to him one time when he was still living in the United States, and I was working on a book. And he told me a whole bunch of these things. He was up on all that stuff, being the general’s aide.

LC: Yeah, the Intel. And obviously this is years later, much later than the time we’re talking about that you found this out, but how did it make you feel?

BP: A little bit violated. You know, we kind of knew something was happening. We simply didn’t know what it was. In terms of people stealing things, I don’t know. I think I might have mentioned in the write up about a ring that I had. I’d gone to Thailand and had a ring made, selected the stones, and I had a diamond, two sapphires and two rubies, and it was really nice. Unfortunately, the place burned down before I got my
original ring and I had to have a second one made up. And when I got off the plane
coming back from [Thailand], or off the helicopter when I came back, I walked right into
a mass casualty situation. And to my recollection, I’d taken the ring off and put it in my
jacket pocket, and hung it up because I had put on scrubs to go into the OR. When I
came out, the ring was gone. And I thought, ‘Well, I don’t remember going back to the
hooch, but maybe I did.’ I looked everywhere that I could for it and couldn’t find it, and
finally called CID and I said it was missing, or I thought it was, I couldn’t find it. And
they said, ‘Well, one of the Vietnamese has taken it.’ And I said, ‘Well I don’t want to
accuse anybody, I really don’t know. Maybe I did something and don’t remember it.’
And they said, ‘No, trust us.’ So they actually went out. By this time, the people were
going off work, and they caught the woman right at the gate. And she saw them, put the
ring in her mouth, chewed it up, spat it out. They recovered three of the gems and what
was left of the ring. So…oh, well…

LC: Did they return it to you? In whatever state it was in?
BP: Yes.
LC: What’d you do with it?
BP: Oh, threw it in a drawer for years. And then, oh I don’t know, ten or so years
ago, took the remaining stones and the diamond from my mother’s engagement ring and
put them into another setting. Made it really nice.

LC: And when –
BP: Two stones. Two other stones. I had the diamond and a sapphire I think left.
LC: And do you wear it regularly now?
BP: I did, but I was in a car accident and broke my hand, so it’s too small now to
wear on that hand still.

LC: Was it any kind of a process for you to go through to actually, as it were,
reclaim the ring? You know, use the stones, make the new setting. Did it mean anything
to you about your service? Did it bring anything back to you?
BP: Oh, sure. I think every time I looked at it, it reminded me of Vietnam.
Which was a good thing. It wasn’t with bad feelings, per se. But it certainly did remind
me of all the intricacies of that whole experience.
LC: Yeah, absolutely. Were there shortages of things that you really needed to have in the OR at any time, either caused by pilferage or just by lack of good supply lines?

BP: Well, I think the pilferage happened all the time, and heaven only knows exactly where people were always trading things for other things. I think I mentioned in the write up about the autoclave. We needed two autoclaves at the 12th. We got one, and they kept telling us that the other autoclave had been sent to us, so they couldn’t understand why we didn’t get it. And I was up in Saigon, and there it was on the black market with a two hundred dollar price tag. If I’d had the money, I would have bought it. So I’m sure there were a lot of things that wound up like that. But people were always trading stuff, and who did it? I don’t know. Everybody probably from enlisted men to the officers. I think men – I don’t know about the women doing so much, but certainly the guys did a lot of horse trading and thieving and whatever. It was pretty loosey-goosey.

LC: Yeah. Did that make you mad?

BP: It was a fact of life, what are you going to do about it? Except try to find out. The chief nurse, she had been with me at the 7th and was a chief nurse at the 12th, the nurses were – well, she was Madam Molly and we were her girls. And we were instructed to go out and party and come back with whatever we could get, whether it was antibiotics or blankets or whatever. So we were always…

LC: She was who? Madam Molly?

BP: Madam Molly. And her girls.

LC: Ok. How did that moniker come about, do you know?

BP: She gave it to herself. So, yeah, we were sent out to get whatever we could by whatever means we could. I can remember riding in a helicopter drinking champagne out of paper cups or Styrofoam or whatever it was.

LC: You were on a mission.

BP: We were on a mission, yeah. We’d have to go dance and party or whatever it was and come back.

LC: With whatever.

BP: Loaded with whatever.
LC: What kinds of stuff would you actually get? I mean, what could you…?


LC: I was going to say, something for you?

(laughter)

LC: Beth, let’s take a break for a minute.

BP: Sure.

LC: Beth, tell me. Did you have any experience going on civil action projects at all?

BP: I did.

LC: Can you tell me about that?

BP: Well, we were supposed to go out at least once a week. I did not; I went out a couple of times. And basically, went out into the jungle, and they’d have a wooden building set up, kind of a shack where people would line up and come in and be seen by a doctor. And there were just all kinds of weird and wonderful things that we saw. Stuff that I’d only read about in books.

LC: Like?

BP: Oh, tumors and various blindness and insect related diseases, and just…I can’t really be specific. There were just a lot of things. Rashes. Stuff that I’d never seen before.

LC: And you said that you were supposed to go out. Was that sort of an unwritten reg or informal advice from above, or was it actually an order?

BP: No, it wasn’t an order, per se, but they’d say, basically, it was our duty to get out there and do this stuff.

LC: And were you accompanied by any kind of security detail when you would go on these missions?

BP: I don’t remember, necessarily. I’m sure that there must have been somebody who went out with us, but I don’t remember.

LC: Who would you go with?

BP: Well, there’d be a doctor and some nurses. An anesthetist or somebody, whatever. There’d be a bunch of us in a jeep, and off we’d go. Or a couple of jeeps.
LC: When I’ve interviewed other people and thinking particularly of a battalion surgeon who did these MEDCAPs, he said that it just felt completely futile and he got fed up and resentful at having to take risks to help people who he could only help once and on a very limited level. Does any of that sound –

BP: Yeah, that’s why I stopped going.

LC: Is it really?

BP: Yeah.

LC: Those same kinds of issues?

BP: Yeah, that was it. That was it. Plus the fact that a lot of the people we were helping were coming and bombing the heck out of us.

LC: Were you thinking then that you were treating people who were either VC or VC sympathizers?

BP: Oh, sure.

LC: How did you know?

BP: Well, you didn’t know. I mean, that was the problem. But for them to know a lot of the stuff about us, they would’ve had to have that kind of insight. So yeah, you didn’t – there was no way of knowing who the enemy was. But yeah, you bet. So did I really feel like going out and helping people that probably were going to come back and do us harm? No, I wasn’t as eager to do that. I really wasn’t. I enjoyed doing it when I did it, but… Besides, I was an operating room nurse, and a lot of the stuff was general medicine. So, like, I was not particularly talented in doing it.

LC: But it also wasn’t something you wanted to throw yourself into?

BP: I didn’t. No.

LC: Did other nurses have some of the same feelings you did about it?

BP: I don’t know. I didn’t really talk to the other nurses about it.

LC: Ok. What did you guys do – what did you do specifically to relax? You talked about hanging out at the hooch, reading and stuff like that. Where would you get books?

BP: Oh, people would send me books. Or they’d be lying around. Somebody else would have a book, and I’d read it. I think you could buy books at the PX.

LC: What kind of stuff did you like to read? Just, whatever there was?
BP: Yeah. I’d read anything. Read the labels of bottles, it didn’t matter to me.
LC: Was it an escape, or relaxation, or…?
BP: Well, just kill the time, basically. And that’s mostly, you know, you’re kind of a captive audience there. It’s just a very small area that we stayed in and it was just always something to fill the time with. Which either meant hanging out in the hooch, talking with your friends, going to a party – there were always parties going on.
Spending time with special people and all that kind of stuff.
LC: You mentioned you know, partying, and sometimes you guys had a few drinks. How easily available was alcohol?
BP: If you’re a commander and you’ve got people in that kind if situation, to my way of thinking, it’s nice to give them as much free or low-cost booze as you can, because you’ll keep them satisfied, basically. And then they’ll be so hung over the next morning they’re not going to complain about things. But I really do think the use of alcohol in that way was a way of manipulating the people who worked. It was free. It was plentiful. I say free – it was not necessarily free; it was free to the nurses, for the most part, because everybody bought them drinks. But yes, it was plentiful and cheap.
LC: Can you say a little bit more about what you mean by manipulation?
BP: Well, I think when you have people in that type of a situation, you’re going to have a lot of fear, disgruntlement, resentment and all these kinds of things, and the booze pretty well just kept people happy. Or, not necessarily belligerent. Let’s put it that way.
LC: Ok. What about the use of drugs?
BP: I think we preceded that pretty much.
LC: Ok.
BP: And I say that because I know that they had a staff meeting, which I didn’t happen to go to that night, but where they brought in some marijuana and told people to try it so they would recognize it when they saw it. And I don’t think it had been a problem really until after I got there. And then by the time I left in ’67, it was pretty prevalent amongst the enlisted men. I do not know the use in the hospitals, per se. I never saw anybody use it. I still actually don’t know what marijuana smells like.
LC: Really?
BP: Yeah.
LC: Well, me either. And what about diversion of medical supplies, like morphine? Did you hear of any of that?
BP: The only thing that I knew was one of the operating room – actually she wasn’t in the operating room, she was in the central materiel supply, got nailed for stealing Demerol.
LC: And what kind of a drug is that, for someone?
BP: That’s a narcotic. A potent narcotic, up there with morphine.
LC: Ok.
BP: But I think she was supplying some soldiers, and I don’t know whether they were addicts that she was supplying, or what she was doing. But she did get nailed and I believe she was court-martialed.
LC: And that happened while you were there?
BP: Yeah, just as I was leaving. I didn’t really know the details. I just know that there was…people had reported that there was Demerol missing, and then they identified the nurse who was actually taking it.
LC: Ok. And that was in ’67, you’re thinking.
BP: ’67.
LC: Let me ask about another area that certainly became more difficult as the war went on, but I wonder whether you saw anything along these lines in terms of tensions between blacks and whites or between Hispanics and blacks.
BP: I did not see that. Now it doesn’t mean that it didn’t happen. I did not see it.
LC: You mentioned that you had an African-American supervisor.
BP: Supervisor, yeah.
LC: Yeah, tell me about her.
BP: Oh, she was wonderful. She ran the OR. She replaced me, actually. I kind of ran the OR until she got there. She came in as a major and was promoted to lieutenant colonel fairly shortly.
LC: What was her name?
BP: Liz Lyke. Elizabeth L-Y-K-E. And we all used to wear buttons that said ‘We like Liz.’ She was just a delightful person. I, actually we, went and dragged her
kicking and screaming out of her house when we went to the reunion down in San
Antonio.

LC: She lives down here?

BP: Yes. And I know there was a group of people, I got down on my knees and
just said, ‘Thank you for being such a…’ I mean, there aren’t too many people I really
would just get down on my knees in front of, and she’s one of them. That’s how much I
appreciated this gal.

LC: Wow.

BP: She’s just a delightful individual, just real laid back and very caring, very
sweet person. And certainly competent in what she did. But just a delight to work for.
And we had a number of black people and Hispanics who worked with us…and I don’t
remember…I certainly didn’t see anything between nurses and enlisted men, or doctors
and enlisted men, or whatever, in terms of race. Now what happened in their own
quarters, I can’t tell you.

LC: Sure.

BP: I do know that there was a gay guy who got the snort beat out of him. This
was an enlisted man, and he got very, very badly beaten in his hooch. And also, there
was – well I’m assuming he was gay – one of the male nurses that the doctors used to
make fun of all the time. Said that he’d make a good wife.

LC: How did you know that the fellow that was beaten up badly was – ?

BP: He told me. I asked him what happened.

LC: He told you that he was gay?

BP: No, he didn’t. I said, ‘Are you gay?’ And he said, ‘No.’ But I’m sure he
was.

LC: Uh-huh. And do you know anything else about the incident?

BP: No.

LC: What were his injuries?

BP: Oh, facial. Facial injuries. Very, very bad. I mean, his face was just a
disaster. Black eyes and all that. I don’t know about the rest. I really didn’t talk to him
that much. He was an awfully nice fellow. Awfully nice.
LC: And the nurse who probably was gay or was certainly seen that way. Can you tell me a little bit about the ridicule there?

BP: Oh, the doctors used to say, ‘Oh blah blah blah, he (whatever his name was) would make a wonderful wife.’ And that’s about all I heard.

LC: Yeah. Did that stuff bother you?

BP: I don’t like to see people made fun of, period. Whatever they are. Folks can’t help what they are, whether it’s the color of their skin, or who they were raised with or by, or their nationality, or probably their sexuality, I just don’t like to see people made fun of.

LC: Did any of that kind of thing ever come toward nurses who weren’t making themselves, you know sexually available? ‘Oh, that must be a dyke,’ or something like that; did you ever hear anything like that?

BP: I didn’t hear it, but I imagine it was said. I know that when my husband and I had talked about going, he said, ‘Oh, you know what they say about nurses,’ and I thought, ‘Well, gee, that’s too bad, isn’t it?’

LC: What do they say about nurses?

BP: Well, that’s all he said. He didn’t point out, but I’m sure that’s what he meant.

LC: He was alluding to the fact that all nurses must be lesbians?

BP: Yeah. And that certainly was by no means the case.

LC: Yes, as some of the stories you’ve told demonstrate quite clearly. Were there any lesbians that you know of?

BP: I was not aware of any. I mean, probably there were people that I wasn’t aware of until there was, oh, I’d been there for quite a few months, there was a gal who moved into our hooch, a major, and she had this gal – I just kind of looked at this other woman and thought boy, she looks like a football player – and they were inseparable, so I’m assuming that there was something going on there. You know, to look for anything? No, not necessarily. And did I see any evidence of a lot of things going on between women? No. I saw a lot of blatant heterosexual activity. I didn’t see any of that [things going on between women]. That doesn’t mean it didn’t happen, but I didn’t see it and I wasn’t looking for it.
LC: Right. Did any heat come down on the major and her friend?
BP: I have absolutely no idea. She didn’t work in the OR, so… I didn’t really get
to know people outside the OR very much.
LC: Yeah. Let me ask you, Beth, about letters back and forth in communication
with home. Were you writing to anyone, maybe your mom?
BP: Sure.
LC: How important were letters back and forth?
BP: Very important. And then when the tapes, the small tape machines became
really available, we used those as well. But yeah, we looked forward to that. But stuff
was sporadic, it might be a week or two before we’d get anything, and I know that would
be the way with my stuff going home. I was surprised that a couple of my classmates
who were up to visit me last fall – they’re going to be coming up again this fall – anyway
we hadn’t really seen each other to sit down and talk since we graduated from nursing
school, and they apparently kept my letters. So I thought that was kind of strange.
LC: No kidding?
BP: Yeah. I know Mom kept all my letters.
LC: Who else were you communicating with? Did you have friends?
BP: Oh sure. I had friends. I wrote to them on a fairly regular basis. Some more
than others.
LC: Yeah. And Beth, did you tell them what life was like there? Were you, you
know as it were, real with them, or did you not want to let people know so much about
the harder edges?
BP: Well, I think I was pretty realistic about it. I really don’t remember saying
that much, but apparently they thought I said a lot or I don’t think they would have kept
my letters. I don’t remember writing. I might say we were mortared, or we had masscals
or something like that, or it was really hot. Or sometimes it was hard trying to get the
dust and the bugs out of the letters before you sealed up the envelope.
LC: Ok. Yikes. Were you ever able to make a phone call home?
BP: I did.
LC: How’d that go?
BP: Oh, it was pretty cool, because you did it with a two-way radio and it had to be patched through a number of places. And so it was you know, ‘Hi how are you? Over.’

LC: Right, right.

BP: ‘Fine. How are you? Over.’

LC: Did you talk to your mom? Or who did you talk to?

BP: Yeah. Yeah. My mom and one of my friends who – Mom and the one friend of mine used to both get on the phone, go together to the place. I can’t remember how we did that. If they had to go to a certain place, or if they were both just on a home phone. I can’t remember.

LC: Was it a good experience for you, or was it tough afterwards, or do you remember?

BP: Oh, it was fine. It was wonderful, being able to talk. I didn’t do it very often because as time went by – see, there weren’t many of us when I first went because I was there kind of in the beginning. And as more and more people came, there was more and more demand for use of that MARS station. Yeah, I didn’t want to yak on the phone when there were plenty of guys who really needed to call home.

LC: I see. Tell me about that transition, your own transition from the 7th to when the 12th Evac came in to Cu Chi. How did things change for you?

BP: Rather dramatically, actually. At the 7th, I knew I was going to be temporary with the 7th and then be stationed with the 12th, and my job was going to be to set up the operating room. And I was asked to set up the two operating room Quonsets and the central material supply Quonset, which supplied the entire hospital. I didn’t know anything about how to do any of that. And there was not an instruction manual. Nobody knew how to do it and we weren’t really taught how to do it. So it was like, ‘Oh my God, now what do I do?’ I did fly out to Tay Ninh to look at the hospital out there.

LC: Which one was it?

BP: The 45th. It was a MUST hospital, I can’t remember what that stood for, but it was the inflatable hospital.

LC: Yeah.

BP: Bad idea in a combat zone.
LC: Yeah, the rubber, the big rubber…it was a bad idea, why?
BP: Well, it’s not a good thing to have when you have mortars flying around, because they just deflated.
LC: Right. I could guess.
BP: It was stupid. Yeah, well, what can I say?
LC: So you flew out to see what they were doing?
BP: Just to look at it. And that was a MASH hospital, as well. I’d never really seen an evac hospital, so I didn’t have a clue. Fortunately, some of the guys knew more about what they were supposed to do, and I also was in charge of building – setting up one of the nurses’ hooches and making sure it was ready for people to move in. So it was just like, ‘My God, I don’t have a clue!’ Given a team of men, I had no idea, so I just relied very heavily on them and hoped that they wouldn’t just destroy me and make fun of me and whatnot. But we wound up to be a real good working team.
LC: Were these enlisted guys?
BP: Yeah, they were enlisted guys.
LC: And guys who had some longer experience?
BP: Yeah, there were two guys, an African-American and a white guy who both had quite a bit of experience, and they were wonderful. I just really relied on them very heavily. But the younger fellows were very, very good to me. And they were known at the hospital as Beth’s boys, and that’s how they always referred to themselves.
LC: What were their names, if you can tell us?
BP: Howie Corcimiglia, now dead. C-O-R-C-I-M-I-G-L-I-A. And he was really, really good. This is one of the guys that was with me at the 7th. Fred Schlicher, S-C-H-L-I-C-H-E-R. He was the white guy, the sergeant. The African-American, I can’t think of his name, offhand. And – if you had asked me earlier, I could have thought or looked it up.
LC: That’s ok, no problem.
BP: He was just a nice guy. Oh, by the way, I just have to throw this one in as an aside. I can see this guy’s face just as clearly as day. He was just so funny and so nice. At any rate, I walk in one day and we’re setting up the central materiel section, and these two guys are in there with some of the other enlisted men, and I said – I hopped up on the
table where they were folding linen – and I said, ‘Ok, here I am, boys. Five hundred
bucks a pop. And the black guy pulls this wad of bills out of his pocket that would have
choked a horse and starts to count off five hundred dollars in small bills. (Laughs) I
didn’t realize that they’d had payday – (whoops, all my stuff just fell on the floor) –
they’d had payday, and they gambled, played poker the night before.
LC: Yeah, you should’ve maybe raised the price there a little; you didn’t know it
was within their price range.
BP: I slunk out the door. It was a while before I slunk back in again.
LC: That was bold of you, anyway.
BP: Oh, well. Of course they laughed, and they teased me about that for a long
time. That was pretty funny.
LC: Yeah. And it’s part of what you guys were doing, ribbing each other and all
I’m sure.
BP: Oh, all the time. You bet.
LC: How else could you survive, really? Let me know, Beth, anything you recall
about working with or seeing American allies. Like for example, ARVN. Did you ever
have any interaction with ARVN military? Or, I’m sorry, medical personnel?
BP: Not with medical personnel, but with regular ARVN. And one time, the
boys and I – oh, I shouldn’t…well, maybe I told this in the write up, too, but the way that
I treated them was to take them into Cu Chi and pay for them to get something to eat and
go to the whorehouse. So, that was one of the reasons, probably, they were so good to
me.
LC: You would pay for this?
BP: Oh, yeah.
LC: Why would you do that?
BP: Just as a treat. You have no idea how hard they worked for me. They just
killed themselves. It was incredible, I can’t imagine that these guys would work so hard.
But they just, they did everything. Anything I asked them to do, and they were just so
gracious about it. And without any women around for them, you know it was a treat.
And some of them partook and some of them didn’t. But yeah, what are you going to
give them? So anyway. So I’m down there one time, and – I can’t remember who it was
– one of the fellows was with me and I don’t remember if it was an enlisted man or an
officer, but he was going to sell me for the equivalent of like, two dollars and fifty cents
or something – I can’t remember how many piasters it was – to an ARVN. Then the
ARVN starts peeling out this money too. Oh, it was bad. But yeah, it’s just black humor.
What can I say?
LC: Right, exactly. And in Cu Chi town –
BP: That was in Cu Chi town, by the way.
LC: Ok. There were no doubt numerous houses of prostitution and bars and all
of that, was that all in a certain sector of the town or was it just all over the place?
BP: It was pretty well all over the place. What I didn’t realize in the beginning
is, we would go into town, there would be these signs for ‘car wash’ alongside the road at
some shack. And a lot of the women did laundry, so you’d see fatigues and stuff hanging
out on these clotheslines and all. But ‘car wash.’ And I said, ‘Who’s got any cars to
wash?’ Well, it turns out that those were all little houses of ill repute, and there were a
lot of them.
LC: Ok, so that was just like code or something.
BP: Yeah, sort of. I finally said, ‘Where are all the cars?’ And then somebody
said, ‘Well, you idiot,’ you know. ‘Those are whorehouses.’ And then they had the ones
downtown. There was one called the Mono Queen, and the girls all had their numbers on
a fan, and the guys would go up – it was all enclosed in chicken wire – and they’d go up
and pick out their girl by the number.
LC: Did you ever see these Vietnamese women?
BP: Oh yeah. Actually, in my film I’ve got nice pictures of them. Really good
pictures.
LC: Did you have any feelings about what they were doing to survive, basically?
BP: Nope. That’s what they did to survive. Except they were so young. Oh my
word. Some of those kids were teenagers, you know? It didn’t look like they were more
than twelve or thirteen.
LC: Yeah. And was that a bit upsetting on some level?
BP: It’s just the way it is, you know? Happens with every war.
LC: Yeah, that’s certainly true. Certainly true.
BP: I used to look at it and say, ‘Ok, well…’

LC: How important was music for you? Did you guys have a lot of music?

BP: Yeah. My friend, my surgeon friend and I would sit out every evening and
listen to what was called ‘Music by Candlelight’, which you guys now would call
elevator music and probably barf at, but we really enjoyed it, and we’d sit out and have
our little chair out in the dirt and listen to that. I can’t remember how long the program
was on for. An hour, or something like that. So we’d usually have a glass of wine or
something and just sit there and relax. And then, of course, when you went out to party
with the guys, they had jukeboxes and whatnot. Everybody got these Akai tape
recorders. That was the thing to get, and then they’d get tapes from home. So there was
always music. And yes, it was very important.

LC: Any songs that when you hear them, make you go to Cu Chi immediately?

BP: Yup. “House of the Rising Sun”, that was one of their favorites. A lot of
times, when I hear the Mamas and the Papas, with “Monday, Monday”, that one always
brings it up. “Windy” was one that I remember, and “My Big Red Balloon,” “Would
You Like to Fly in My…” whatever it was – The Association, I guess. Anyway, those
are the ones that for me most readily come to mind.

LC: You did have an R&R, is that right?

BP: I did.

LC: Ok, where did you go, and how did that go?

BP: Well, we used to sneak out a lot – this is before they put the kibosh on it after
a nurse got killed – but we used to sneak out a lot and go up to Cu Chi or Vung Tau. Not
Cu Chi. To Saigon or Vung Tau. Especially Vung Tau. It had a wonderful beach. And
I took an R&R to – where the heck did we go? Did I go to Vung Tau on R&R? That’s
pretty bad, I can’t even remember.

LC: That would have been where all the Australians were and all?

BP: Yeah. I guess Vung Tau was our R&R. I went to Thailand on vacation. Oh!
No, I take it back. I went to Thailand [on leave] and to Penang in Malaysia on R&R.
These others were just side trips. Sneaking out and, you know, going and having fun
before they stopped people from being able to do that.

LC: You mentioned a nurse being killed. What’s that reference?
BP: I don’t remember who that was, somebody up north. But that was the excuse they gave us at the hospital when they said, ‘You gals can’t go out and fly around anymore like you’re doing. You can’t go out and drive tanks,’ or all those things that we…See, being one of the only women there, you could do anything. The fellows would let you fly their planes and drive their tanks and their helicopters or whatever it was. Shoot their guns.

LC: And were you pretty much doing this kind of stuff?
BP: Oh, yeah.
LC: So you would get off base with no…I mean, am I right in thinking you had no security detail or anything like that?
BP: You bet. We just snuck out.
LC: Would you like, grab a jeep and just go?
BP: Well, usually one of the fellows would have the jeep, or it might be somebody that you knew, and generally somebody knew where you were. Your chief nurse may or may not. But some of your friends would know that you were going out, in case you didn’t come back.

LC: Right. Buddy system, that kind of thing.
BP: Yeah, sure.
LC: Tell me about going to Penang on R&R. How long were you there?
BP: Penang was one week.
LC: What did you do?
BP: Stayed on the beach. And there was this little motel type of dealie right on the beach, and we’d go out and eat on the beach and swim and walk around. And we went up, I remember one time – and I can’t remember how we did this – but we drove up to, oh, this place up in the mountains. It was a beautiful rain forest area. And it was clean, and a real modern building and everything. I don’t remember exactly what that was, but most of the time we just stayed around on the beach. We ate and drank and slept.

LC: Was this primarily for nurses or exclusively for nurses?
BP: No, no, no. It was me and my surgeon friend.
LC: Ok. And so you were there for a week. Was it tough going back to Cu Chi?
BP: I would just as soon have stayed there for the rest of my life. He was eager to get back to work. He was a very dedicated surgeon, so once he got rested…But he got really sick, and I practically had to carry him back to Cu Chi.

LC: Like food poisoning sick?

BP: I guess, he got – it was like the flu or something. He was running a temperature and chills and he could barely walk.

LC: He was a mess.

BP: Yeah. Because we’d gone out one day and I bought a whole bunch of equipment. I wanted to get my tape recorder and a camera and all, so I thought he was going to be able to help carry that stuff back. And he couldn’t. I had to lug it all, and him.

LC: Yeah. That’s not a good way for any kind of break to end. But he recovered all right?

BP: Oh, yeah. Sure.

LC: Did you ever figure out what it was?

BP: No. We just said some flu or something.

LC: Fever of unknown origin kind of thing? And you also had a little bit of time in Thailand, you mentioned?

BP: Yeah, a couple of weeks in Thailand.

LC: Whereabouts?

BP: Bangkok. And then we traveled. Used that as a base and traveled.

LC: Did you go up north in Thailand?

BP: Not far.

LC: As far as Chiang Mai?

BP: No.

LC: Ok. How did you get around?

BP: We hired a guy who is a driver, for twenty bucks and a carton of cigarettes, to be at our beck and call for two weeks.

LC: And he was yours for two weeks?

BP: He was. Anyplace, anytime, whatever, morning til night.

LC: Wow. How did you know where to go?
BP: Oh. I don’t know. He told us a lot.

LC: Ok.

BP: And – I can’t remember. We drove around – geez, I don’t remember how we did this. We must’ve gotten a cab. Maybe it was him who picked us up at the airport. That’s probably what happened. He probably picked us up at the airport and we asked about a place to stay, and we went to this motel. And it was very nice, had a pool and all that kind of stuff. And a nice restaurant. And then I think that’s when we bargained with him to be our person, our driver, for the next two weeks.

LC: Was that a good time in Thailand? Did you learn anything about Thailand or the Thai people?

BP: I loved the Thai people. I don’t know that they had the political unrest at that time, but we could go anyplace and do anything. It was extremely safe, and the Thai people were so gracious and so nice. They were just absolutely delightful. I never felt uncomfortable while I was there. I could have lived there forever; it would not have bothered me. On the way back, we missed the flight back to Vietnam and so we stayed with him and his family. He and his wife got out of their bed, and there were three of us, and we piled into their bed.

LC: No kidding? Wow.

BP: Yeah, two girls and a guy.

LC: That’s amazing.

BP: It was. And I said to him the next morning, his name was Prayoon, and I said, ‘Prayoon, aren’t you afraid that somebody will just kill you and steal everything that you have?’ And he said ‘No, we Thais believe that we come into the world with nothing and we leave with nothing. So everything that we do is the good that we do right while we’re here, and we don’t worry.’ I was so impressed by that and I’ve never forgotten it. The gal who was on that trip was down in Washington here back in November, and she asked me if I remembered that, and I said, ‘You bet I do.’ It’s been one of my guiding principles ever since that day.

LC: Yeah. Yeah, it’s something Americans need to work a little harder on, I think. I certainly do. Beth, tell me about attending Bob Hope’s show. I gather that you did have an opportunity to do that. When was that?
BP: It was on the twenty-fifth of December, twenty-fifth anniversary – 1966, the
twenty-fifth anniversary of the 25th Infantry Division, and it was two days before my
twenty-fifth birthday.

LC: Wow. That’s a lot of twenty-fives in there.

BP: You bet.

LC: So, Christmas Day. And where was it?

BP: It was held at the Lightning Bowl at the 25th Infantry Division, over by
headquarters.

LC: Where were you in relation to the stage and what did you see?

BP: Right up in front of the stage, a little bit off to the right.

LC: I figured.

BP: Well, you know, the guys were pretty good about letting the girls do that.

LC: That’s what I thought, yeah. And what kind of entertainment was it? Did
you enjoy it? Was it weird? I mean, what was it like?

BP: Well, I’d really been looking forward to this – big time. And it was really
good. The people who performed were Joey Heatherton, who was a singer/dancer. At
that time, I didn’t even know who she was. Phyllis Diller and Anita Bryant, Jerry
Colonna, Les Brown and his Band of Renown. And the thing that shocked me a little bit
was that I did not realize that Bob Hope did not perform without cues, and he had an
electronic cue board. So everything, every word that he said, was up on the cue card.
And it was like, ‘Holy cow, he can’t even…’ I can’t remember if it was electronic
actually now or not. But every word that he said was programmed. His delivery was
wonderful. But I was kind of disappointed at that, because I could turn around and watch
everything that he was reading as he did it.

LC: Sort of like in Wizard of Oz, looking behind the curtain? The guy operating,
it takes away the mystery sort of thing?

BP: In a way. But he only seemed to me to be ad-libbing prior to that, and there
was nothing that was ad-libbed. Even the ad-libs were programmed, and that surprised
me a lot. It was a great show. I enjoyed it. There were a zillion guys there. Pete Kama
told me years later that when we were having that celebration up top, the word was that
the VC were having as big, if not larger, entertainment right beneath our feet. We were
making so much noise we didn’t know it.

LC: Wow. In some kind of amphitheater in the tunnel complex of some kind?
BP: Yup. That’s what they said.
LC: How’d that make you feel?
BP: Oh, of course I didn’t know about it at the time. But again, it sort of like a
combination. A little bit of being violated. Of course, we were violating them. A little
bit of awe about how they could do this. And it’s just, ‘Wow, this is so cool.’ And the
thought of, ‘Gee, we were really in more danger than we realized. All the time. And we
were kind of stupid.’

LC: Yeah, the danger part is the thing to me that’s so remarkable. I mean, the
enemy so close at a time when the Americans were relaxing and hanging loose and
unaware.
BP: But I think stuff like that happens every day in one form or another, and we
just go along our own merry way, completely oblivious to all the stuff that’s happening
around us.

LC: Yes. And maybe that’s to the good, the oblivious part.
BP: You bet.
LC: When your tour was sort of coming toward its end, what thoughts were you
giving to the thought of staying on in Vietnam?
BP: Oh, I had no thoughts at all. Oh, by the way, I want to interject something
here.
LC: Sure, of course.
BP: My – the dean of the college where I work asked me, after she had seen my
film, what was it that allowed me to survive in that situation. And I replied, ‘Stupidity!’
So when we talk about being naïve or oblivious to what was going on, I really think that
worked to our favor. And I’m proud of that. That’s not a problem for me at all. I think
people drive themselves nuts when they know too much or they worry too much. I don’t
worry at all about anything. Never have, never will, because it’s a waste of energy. In
terms of leaving Vietnam, I really couldn’t wait to get out, and the reason was this. Not
so much because of the danger. Part of it was because my surgeon friend had already
rotated back, as had most of the people with whom I had been very, very close. Because I came in by myself, and there were folks who were there when I got there and folks who all started coming in after I had arrived. But it was kind of in-between. I was the only person who was there for just that amount of time, and the things that I had started when we really had no rules or regulations, and we were flying by the seat of our pants, all that had gone by-the-by. And now, we were being ruled and regulated to death, which I didn’t like. I liked having to improvise with everything: fly by the seat of my pants, do what it took to really make things work, and all of that was going by-the-by as, really, civilization moved in.

LC: Things were getting more micromanaged?
BP: Very much micromanaged. By that time, they had brought in flush toilets, just before I left.

LC: Wow.
BP: Sidewalks, you know all these other kinds of things that were just like, holy cow! No, I liked it the way it was when I got there and we were just…it was nothing.

LC: So the pieces that had worked for you were starting to be taken away or were falling away in some way?
BP: Exactly.

LC: And how long was your enlistment agreement for?
BP: For two years, but I wanted to go to Germany as my guaranteed assignment. I think people who knew me and my surgeon friend were trying to be good to us, and they assigned us both to Valley Forge. And I said no, I really didn’t want to do that. I wanted to go to Germany. So I opted out of that and did go to Germany. And because that was a two-year tour of duty, I had to extend to complete that tour.

LC: And where were you in Germany?
BP: I was in Landstuhl.
LC: With what unit?
BP: 2nd General Hospital.
LC: Ok. As an OR nurse again?
BP: As an OR nurse.
LC: And from when did you actually leave Vietnam then?
BP: I left in October of 1966.
LC: ’67?
BP: ’67, I’m sorry. Thank you. I took thirty days, I think it was, of leave and then went over to Germany.
LC: Ok.
BP: And then did two years there. Got out in – I think it was December 29th – of 1969 and stayed on as a civilian until August. But they wouldn’t let me work in the operating room.
LC: Were you ever tempted to just stay in and become a career person?
BP: Well, I was kind of on the fast track, and I’d only been in the service a couple of years when they wanted to promote me to major. But that would’ve meant they could have pulled me back and sent me back over to Vietnam in charge of a MASH hospital, and I said, ‘I don’t think so, I’m a happy civilian at heart, I can’t play these games.’
LC: By ‘play these games’…
BP: Well, what I should add on to that is that they had…When I was working at 2nd General, I lived on the economy. But you weren’t supposed to go more than a hundred miles from the base at any given time, and you had to tell them where you were going at all times. And you had to be around on weekends so that if they did an alert, one of these practice things, that you were there. And I just wanted to be there to travel, so I was gone all the time. And fortunately, nobody ever bothered me. They caught one of the nurses and court-martialed her.
LC: For…?
BP: For leaving and not having permission. She went to Berlin.
LC: Ok. They court-martialed her?
BP: They court-martialed her. She was a major. And I thought, ‘Uh oh.’ But they really liked me, and they were very good to me, and nobody ever questioned me on all these trips I took.
LC: So you were sort of walking between the cracks there?
BP: I was walking between the cracks. And I was on the fast track; as I said, they would’ve promoted me right up the line.
LC: But you were really adamant that you weren’t going back to Vietnam.
BP: I didn’t want to go back, no. I just – one of the things that they were going
to do is pull me out, I think it was like in February – it was not long after I had gotten
there, and they were going to pull me out and send me to the Middle East because Israel
was having its little thingy.
LC: Yeah, there was a little war going on there.
BP: And I said, ‘I am not going to die for people who are going to be fighting for
a thousand years. They’ve been fighting for a thousand years up until now and they’re
going to keep on fighting, and I’m just not going to die for that.’ So, that was the type of
thing that concerned me.
LC: How much attention were you paying when you were in Germany to the
escalation in Vietnam?
BP: Not much. When I first left, I was really concerned about the people I had
left, because we knew TET was coming. The people who tell you that they weren’t
aware that TET was going to be the way it was…I knew, and I knew very little about
anything, but I knew that TET was going to be bad.
LC: How did you know that that was?
BP: Well, it was common knowledge, I thought on the base, that TET was just
going to be a horrendous event, and I was thrilled to be able to get out of there and very
worried about my colleagues. But I had been told by a lot of my friends, soldiers, that
this was going to be a big one.
LC: No kidding? Wow. And how were you able to get information about what
happened? When TET actually occurred, you must have been pretty concerned.
BP: Yeah. There was a girl who came – actually two of them – who had been
stationed with me who came – who got out of Vietnam and came over to 2nd General. So,
I knew them. I didn’t know them well, but they told me what had happened.
LC: What kinds of things did you hear? Do you recall at all?
BP: No, I don’t. Just that it was awful and they got rocketed and mortared. I
don’t think any of the people I knew got hurt or killed.
LC: Right. But that it was rough.
BP: It was nasty, yeah.
LC: When you actually separated from the service in ’69, you said that you stayed in Germany as a civilian for a little while.

BP: Yes. Eight months.

LC: Ok, eight months. Working at the same hospital?

BP: Yes.

LC: And did your duties change at all when you transferred?

BP: Yeah. I wanted to stay in the OR. That’s what I do, and I did it well. But they had a policy that civilians couldn’t work in the OR. Now there was a gal who was in the service and working in the OR before I got there, and her husband was due to rotate back a couple of months after she was, so she…maybe it was four months, I can’t remember. So she lobbied hard to get a job in the OR, and they said, ‘No, you can’t have it. We can’t pay you for all your overtime. We can’t pay you for your call. You’re going to complain, and that’s going to be not a good situation and so, no, we don’t want you there. So she lobbied really, really hard with the physicians and higher-ups that she knew. And she got the job. And of course, within a month she was bitching and complaining. So she ruined it for me, and they said there would never be another civilian in the OR. So they put me up on the wards, and I was not happy. At all.

LC: That whole precedent thing, that mindless precedence. ‘Well, see, it happened over there.’ And that’s kind of crazy making. They put you on the wards, which made you very unhappy.

BP: Oh, well, I’m not a ward nurse. I didn’t know how to do any of that stuff – I wasn’t up on it. I’d never done any floor duty nursing after the first six months of graduation, and I was just really uncomfortable. And they expected me to do all kinds of things I’d never done before, and it just wasn’t what I did. I was really good as an OR nurse, and I just felt totally incompetent. And I’m sure they felt it as well.

LC: It just wasn’t a viable work setup?

BP: No, not for me. And they had me on nights and evenings, and nights – I just can’t do it – I don’t sleep well. So, it was not comfortable for me at all.

LC: Did that sort of make your decision both to leave the 2nd General and to leave Germany?
BP: No, I only planned to stay until I could complete a few of the trips. So I had not intended to stay past August anyway.

LC: Ok. What was the next step for you?

BP: I came back to the States. I wanted to get warm and moved to Florida.

LC: Whereabouts in Florida?

BP: Clearwater.

LC: Ok, very nice. Yeah, so how did you go from there to Maine? Was there an intermediate step?

BP: Yeah. When I was in Florida, again, I couldn’t get a job in the OR. I just wanted to live in Florida for a while; I always wanted to try that out.

LC: Wait, you couldn’t get a job?

BP: In the OR.

LC: Ok, that’s bizarre.

BP: Well, they had a waiting list as long as your arm. By that time, I think, people had figured out that OR is a pretty nice job – if you can get it.

LC: Ok. Well.

BP: So they said, ‘Yeah, put your name in, but we’ve got thirty-three people ahead of you,’ or whatever it was. And I thought, ‘Oh, brother.’ So I worked on the floors again for a few months and I said, ‘I can’t do this.’ I was on evenings and nights mostly, and I said, ‘That’s it.’ So I got out of nursing and went back to college on GI bill. So I did my first two years down there and then decided I would go up to North Carolina. I thought I would go up to Duke University. I didn’t have a chance to apply because I was doubling up on my courses; I went through two years in fourteen months, I think it was. So I waited until I got out of there [Florida] before I even decided to apply someplace else. I went up, took a look at Duke, didn’t like it. Went to…can’t think of the name of the other college, applied, got in, didn’t really want to go there. And the one I liked was Wake Forest. I went and fell in love with the campus. But they were full, and what they said was, ‘You’ll have to put in your application, and you have to wait, somebody will be dropping out by midterm and we’ll be able to take you.’

LC: Is that how it worked out?

BP: Yeah.
LC: Ok. So you finished at Wake Forest?
BP: At Wake Forest.
LC: And what was the degree actually in?
BP: It was in biology, but that was actually their pre-med degree.
LC: Were you thinking that you’d go to medical school?
BP: No. Here I am thinking, again, women can only be nurse, secretary, teacher, housewife. They made us take a battery of tests before we left, or they wouldn’t give you your diploma. So I’m sitting there – it’s a bunch of practice GREs for graduate school and also a battery of psychological tests – and there’s this girl sitting next to me who had not been a very good student, and her grades were kind of lousy. And I said, ‘Well, Nan, what are you doing now that you’re graduating?’ And she said, ‘I’m going to medical school.’ Well, geez, my jaw must have hit my knees. And I said, ‘Where?’ She said ‘Here. I’ve already been accepted.’ Well, if I had realized, I think I would have stayed on and tried to get into medical school. My grades were much better than, I guess, most of the kids who got in, so...
LC: It just never occurred to you?
BP: Nope. I didn’t realize that a woman could do it.
LC: And this would have been some time in like, ’74 or something like that?
BP: Yup, ’74. Now you have to understand that the whole time I was in Washington – with Georgetown, George Washington, Howard Universities, all these other big places that affiliated with us – there was not one female. I take it back, there was one. Her name was Ruth Jacoby and she was a neurosurgeon, and she brought in one female resident with her. That was the only woman doctor – actually, two doctors – that I ever saw. Ever. There weren’t any. I never saw one anywhere. Not in any of the hospitals that I’d worked at. Even in Clearwater. So, I had never seen a woman doctor. I didn’t know you could do it. First of all, I knew it was going to be expensive. But I just figured it would be impossible, so it never even crossed my mind. So I’ve had pangs about that ever since. But, you know, I’m fine.
LC: Yeah, you’ve come through that. What was your plan with a B.S. in biology then?
BP: Well, it was actually a B.A.
LC: Oh, B.A., I’m sorry.

BP: Funny enough, if you can believe this, because it’s different every place that you go. That was their [Wake Forest] research degree. Many other places, it’s the other way around. But whatever.

LC: Yeah. Sure.

BP: Did I know what I was going to do? I really didn’t. I knew after I left Wake Forest I wanted to do something with biology and preferably with behavior and something with vertebrates. So I was thinking seriously of doing something with marine mammals, although I get horribly seasick. So that kind of pooched that a little bit.

LC: Yeah. Ouch.

BP: And so I just kind of scouted. I was looking at some of the Ivy League colleges. I also looked at doing some of the wildlife stuff out west. And on a whim, when I came up to look at the University of New Hampshire – I didn’t care for that campus either – and just drove up here to Maine to the University of Maine at Orono, which I’d never seen. Never heard of, either. And fell in love with the place. So I applied, came as a special student for a semester, and got in. I had to wait to take my GREs that fall. But got in and won a University Fellowship. They only offer two for the whole university, so I was really fortunate. And between that and the GI Bill, I was ok financially.

LC: And how long were you a student there?

BP: Well, the Master’s program was actually two years, but I did coyote research. So I came’74 and really didn’t get into the school until ’75, and had to do some background courses because I didn’t have any background courses that they needed. And I had to wait for my animals to breed. So it was actually ’79 before I finished the Master’s program.

LC: And did you decide to continue for a Ph.D.?

BP: Yeah. My Ph.D. Actually, it’s an Ed.D., and that’s in educational administration.

LC: Ok. And did that follow right on? Did you continue?
BP: No, I took the job with the University of Maine. I was actually going to be a writer and had started that, and then realized it was sort of like picking crabs. I don’t know if you’ve ever picked crabs or not.

LC: No, but I’ve tried to be a writer.

BP: We have to talk about that.

LC: Yeah.

BP: By the time I pick a crab, I’ve expended so much energy I’m about ready to starve. And writing, to me, was a little like that. I’ve always been able to publish everything that I’ve written, but I was a slow writer. So I took this job – just thinking it would be nice to have a regular paycheck and benefits – and then I could write on the side. Well, the job kept me so busy. Hours were horrendous, and I never had a chance to really write. So, I’m actually looking forward to going back and doing that. Anyway, because I was a faculty member, the university waived the tuition. So I was able to get my doctorate while I was working.

LC: And what year was that awarded?


LC: 1991, ok. But you’ve had faculty status since, am I right in thinking, ’79?

BP: No, faculty status, ’81.

LC: ’81, ok.

BP: I took a year off. Actually, it would be fourteen months, I guess. I didn’t work. I wanted to remodel my house, which I did myself.

LC: You did it yourself?

BP: Mm-hmm.

LC: Any help?

BP: No.

LC: Besides like, the hardware store?

BP: Oh, no. Actually there were a couple of things that I had a couple of men take care of. But most of it I did on my own.

LC: Wow, that’s still amazing. Boy. A writer who can do plumbing, boy, that just doesn’t happen very much.

BP: Oh, plumbing and I don’t get along.
LC: Oh ok, I picked the one area.

BP: When I said I had to have a couple guys do stuff, that was one of them.

LC: I was going to say, leave it to me to find the one.

BP: I can help with that and electricity, but I do not do them on my own. And

I’m not a great carpenter, but I do good finish work.

LC: There you go. It’s all in the presentation, really. Beth, tell me about the film
project that you developed. You referred to it once, and you and I have talked about it.

But for someone who doesn’t have any background, can you just explain what you’ve
done?

BP: Sure. I think, like so many other people who were in Vietnam, we took
pictures. And I’d looked at them at the time and threw them in a box and really didn’t
look at them again. And every place that I moved, they just stayed in a box and I’d stuff
them in a closet. Take them with me. But I really never looked at them again. And back
in 1990, I think it was, I went on sabbatical and I wanted to write a book. And I thought,
‘Well, gee, I’ve got these wonderful pictures (at least I thought they were pretty good).
I’ll take a look at those and use those as a basis for writing,’ and I started doing that. So
that was the first time I’d ever looked at them. Then, when the sabbatical was up and I
had written my dissertation and all, too, so I just didn’t finish the book and threw the stuff
back up in the attic and didn’t look at it again. And when I went to the reunion in Texas
– it must’ve been ’99, ’98 or ’99 for the 12th Evac – it was ’99 [actually, 2000], they had
invited us to bring our pictures. Well, I’d won a national award and had to go to a
conference in Denver to pick that up.

LC: What award was that?

BP: It’s called the Distinguished Service Award.

LC: Awarded by?

BP: National Association of 4-H Agents or something like that. NAE4-HA.

Extension 4-H Agents. So anyway, because I was going to go out anyway, I had a couple
neighbors who wanted to go out with me. We did some traveling out west and there was
no way I was going to carry slides and stuff around with me because they’d get damaged,
or lost, or whatever. So I didn’t bring anything with me. And when we went to the
reunion, we had an evening where people shared slides or film that they’d taken, and I
looked at the stuff and I thought, ‘Gosh, my stuff is at least that good, if not a heck of a
lot better.’ So I decided that I would do a film when I got home. And as it turned out,
trying to get home was not the easiest thing. The shuttle was late coming to get me and
apparently for everybody else, too, and most other people had just given up and taken a
cab. But the shuttle guy didn’t know that, so he’d get out at each place, so by the time we
got to the airport I’d missed my plane, which was not a good thing. And I had the flu. So
I was sitting in there with a raging temperature – and no flight – and half in and half out
of it, listening to music. And I heard some music I liked, so I bought one of the CDs.
And I came back up and liked the CD so much I wound up buying a couple more on the
Internet from this particular artist. And then thought, ‘Geez. I’ll write a grant. I’m too
cheap to do this on my own.’ So I wrote a grant to the Women in Curriculum at the
University of Maine, and they have a three thousand dollar limit, and I got the three
thousand. And I was just going to put together a little film to bring down for this reunion
that’s coming up in November.

LC: This year. 2004.

BP: 2004. And as I started working on this thing, I just became obsessed with it.
And the more that I worked on it, the more I realized I had something very special. So I
just continued doing it, even though it cost me several thousand out of my own pocket.
But I put together a film that is forty-three minutes long. People who see it are just
blown away by it. In fact, I’m showing it tomorrow to a group of nurses on campus.

LC: Really? Wow.

BP: The problem was, because I think that there’s some – everybody who’s seen
it really likes the film, and I’ve been told by a producer here in Maine – who would cost
me close to forty thousand dollars to have them produce it – that she feels that it should
be entered in to art competitions – art film competitions – and that she feels it would
qualify for an Oscar in a special film category. I don’t know if that’s true or not, but they
were pretty excited about it. I just couldn’t afford to pay them to do that type of thing.

LC: The front money that it would take.

BP: Yeah. And I could not get – the reason I was going to have to pay them – is
that I could not get the rights to the music that I used, and I built the film on the music.
LC: So the music, which is not within your control legally, is central to the film’s design?
BP: Exactly. In fact, when you see it, you’ll understand.
LC: Yeah, I can’t wait to see it.
BP: In fact, I was debating on whether I ought to go ahead and send it on down to you or not, and hope I don’t get sued.
LC: Well, we can talk about that. And nothing illegal will happen, she said for the record.
BP: She said for the record.
LC: But it’s something you’re continuing to pursue in terms of possibilities for a release?
BP: Exactly. And I had gotten a contract with what they call a needle-drop company. They’ve got offices in Hollywood and New York where you can purchase music, and it’s a lot of stuff that’s used for Hollywood films. And I could not find anything I wanted. I liked vocals on it [the film], and most of the stuff they had was simply instrumental. As I was – and this was just this spring, a couple of months ago – there were some artists who came down from Canada who were folk singers that I’d heard before and really liked. I found out that they were going to be performing down here, oh, a couple hours’ drive from where I am, on a Friday evening. And I was just too tired to go down. But I did talk with the promoter who had them coming down – they were doing a benefit concert – and asked if he would talk to them. And he said he would, and he just broached the subject with them. So after they left, I showed him the film and he said, ‘Oh yeah, we’ve got to get this thing produced.’ And he says, ‘I think they’ll do the music for you.’ So he says, ‘I’ll make the contact and then you can work directly with them.’ Well, he made the contact or left messages, and he’s never heard back from them. So finally he just said, ‘Well, they’re not answering my phone calls.’ So I said, ‘Well, is there a way that I can call them directly?’ And he’s not answered my voicemails either, so I guess he’s given up on it. Now I’ve got to find somebody else. I really thought they’d be wonderful. But if I can’t make contact, I can’t make contact.
LC: Right. How committed are you to having the film appear in the form in which you want it to appear?
BP: Well, I think there would have to be some modifications. It’s still my film and I would like to be able to maintain that integrity of it, because there is a message there. And that was one of the issues for me, with the folks who wanted to get it out in the film festival circuit. She actually wanted to do two versions of it. One was going to be really cut down. But I do want control over how that is used. It is my material. How open am I? It depends on what it is. There’s a guy who pushed the buttons, and we were always fighting over stuff, and I always won. Almost always won. And he admitted after it was all done that I was right in those decisions. So.

LC: These are artistic decisions?

BP: Yes. Exactly. But you’d have to see it. And anybody who looks at it or anybody who works on it, their view is going to be very different from mine.

LC: Yeah, sure. What message does it have, if you can just – I know that this is going to be different again for every viewer because that’s the kind of medium that it is, but what does it say to you?

BP: My goal in producing this film was that people who were stationed with me at Cu Chi at that time that I was there would look at this film and say, ‘Yes! That’s exactly what it was like!’ And that was all I was trying to do. What I did do was organize it into categories and it starts off with just, Welcome to Vietnam. Then there’s The Hospitals, Going into the Town of Cu Chi, Off to War, The Operating Room. There’s a section on R&R. You know, ‘Get Me Out of Here’ kind of thing. And then there’s a whole section on just showing Vietnam. You know. I titled it ‘The Innocents.’ It’s just showing the people. Oh, there’s Air Strike. That was the other, because I got to go up in the plane and all. So it’s a mixture of slides and live action. But it just shows what it was like. So Ken Hickman, who donated some of the film, and Howie Corcimiglia’s son – Howie’s dead now – but Howie Corcimiglia’s son donated some super eight movies. As did Ken Hickman, who was a nurse anesthetist. And when Ken looked at it – I took it out. I went to Alaska and stopped off in Seattle, and he came to visit me and I showed him the film – and, without any prompting at all, he said, ‘Yes, that’s exactly what it was like!’ So that made me feel really good.

LC: Yeah, mission accomplished, it sounds like.
BP: Mission accomplished, yeah. So I tried to be very unbiased. And I took
every good shot I had, whether it was a movie clip or a slide, and just organized them and
let ’er run. It’s a little hard to describe. But once you see the movie, you’ll understand.
LC: Ok. Beth, let me ask you a couple of sort of big-picture questions. How
much do you feel now, looking back, did you know at the time you were in Vietnam
about why the United States was committing troops there?
BP: I think I had no clue. And you know what? I still think I have no clue.
LC: Have you tried to get a clue?
BP: I don’t know that…. No. Not really. I mean, you talk to a hundred different
people, you’ll get a hundred different answers. So I would just say I have no clue.
LC: Ok. But is it something that you have curiosity about? Or is it like it
happened and I don’t need to understand?
BP: At this point in time, it’s a moot point, anyway. Do I need to understand it?
Not necessarily. The doctors used to say on a regular basis that it was to protect
businessmen’s interests. I had no idea what that meant, but there’s always money to be
made in a war. And what that meant, I don’t know. I trust that the doctors knew more
than I did.
LC: Do you think they knew more than you did?
BP: I have no idea. They thought they did.
LC: You thought then that they did?
BP: Well, doctors always think that they know more than you do.
LC: Ok. Beth, have you ever been to the Wall in Washington?
BP: I have.
LC: What was that experience like for you? Can you say anything about it?
BP: Yeah, that was difficult, and I think it must have been around 19 – late 1980s
that I did that. I was down there for a conference for my work, and a friend of mine took
me over to the Wall. And I didn’t know how I was going to react. I had no desire to go
to the Wall when it came out. I was glad they were doing it, but I just – I had no clue.
This was just going to be one of those things. So I went out there. It was actually this
guy who was the head of the Hubble telescope project and a friend of mine went out, and
we were staying with him. And they just kind of left me alone. And I wanted to go to
the books to look up some names – just the kids that I grew up with that I knew had been
killed. And there were Boy Scouts there, and I couldn’t get anywhere near the books.
And they were laughing and jabbing at the books and tearing out pages of stuff, and it
was just like, ‘Oh my God, this is just horrible.’ But I very quietly waited my turn and
got up. I got there – I remembered the names of the two guys that I grew up with who
were killed, but I could not remember – well, I’ll get to that in a second. I wrote those
down and then I went to the Wall and I looked them up and found the names. But I was
so overwhelmed, I can’t remember exactly what happened. I was looking at the shiny
surface, and all of a sudden, I just saw these images of guys coming at me, of all these
guys that I had worked on. And they, you know, all these horrendous wounds, and it was
just one after another, and the images just kept coming. And I felt myself really getting
weak in the knees. And it was hot out and all. But I put my hand up against that cool
wall, and I think I put my face up on it too, because I was just starting to pass out. And
all I could think of was, ‘Dear God; I can’t remember any of their names.’ And I cannot.
I cannot remember the name of one single person that came across that OR table, and I
did a lot of cases. Oh, with the exception of one, it was the guy that I knew from when I
was a kid who I had come across as a wounded guy. I used to baby sit for him when he
was little.

LC: And he was in your OR room?
BP: He was. He was. I’ll have to just do an aside and tell you that one.
LC: Sure.

BP: I just was scanning down the names of the DPCs, the delayed primary
closures that we were going to do that day, and I saw his name and I said, ‘Oh my God,
it’s John.’ And sure enough, it was. So we go to yakking and all, and we became really
good friends then. He was a little bit younger than I was. But he and other friends
started to come over to my hooch a lot afterwards and talk. He was quite heavily into the
pot stuff by that time, too. At any rate, he told me about being on the ward. I had gone
up on Christmas or – New Year’s, I guess it was – up to see Cardinal Spellman, who had
gone to Saigon to do a presentation. And Charlton Heston was coming to the hospital, so
I passed up Charlton Heston to go see Cardinal Spellman. Well, Charlton Heston went
into the room – I don’t know if I wrote this in the thing or not – Charlton Heston went in
to see the soldiers, and with each one he’d say, ‘Is there anything I can do for you?’
Well, John said, ‘No, thanks anyway.’ And as Charlton Heston was reaching the door,
John said, ‘Yeah there is something you can do for me. Call my mom when you get home, would you? And let her know that I’m ok?’ And Charlton Heston said, ‘Sure,’ and he took out a notebook and wrote John’s name and phone number and his mother’s name on it. And apparently he did call Doris.

LC: Did he?
BP: Doris had worked for my grandfather. John’s mother. And she was this really high powered woman who had her own business and so on, so she was just…. Again, she had her own secretary, and her secretary answered the phone when Charlton Heston called. And the secretary got so flustered she called out, ‘Doris! Doris! God is on the phone!’ So that just kind of cracked me up, because that was in the days when he was playing Moses and all this other stuff. So, yeah.

LC: That’s a good one.
BP: Yeah.

LC: You went to go see Cardinal Spellman?
BP: Yeah.

LC: Why did you choose to go see him?
BP: I don’t know.

LC: Did you know much about him?
BP: No, not really. I knew he was very well respected, and he had a reputation of being quite a great man. And I just thought of the two, he would be the one that I wanted to see. And I can’t remember even now what he talked about.

LC: Did you have any impression or recollection of that visit of the speech or where it was or anything?
BP: Not much, now that you mention it. I did take a picture of him – a close-up actually – which I have in the film. But I don’t remember much of what he said. I enjoyed it. I was glad I went, and I didn’t miss not seeing Charlton Heston.

LC: Yeah. Just as a follow up to that, were there other VIPs, either actors or politicians or anyone like that you remember coming through the wards?
BP: Well, I’ve mentioned a lot of them. The ones that I saw who’d come through with Bob Hope. And there were some that came through by themselves. What I was disappointed in with the actors and actresses was that, for me, with most of these people – oh, Martha Raye was another one – for me, it seemed that a lot of them were coming through for their own reasons – including Bob Hope, which disappointed me a lot – that they were in it more for themselves than for the men. And maybe that was just a conception on my part that was not warranted, but that’s the way they seemed. They put on one face for the guys, and then as soon as the guys would turn their backs, their expressions completely changed, and all. And you could see that they were maintaining their own schedule, their own demeanor, their own ‘front,’ if you will. The only one that struck me as being really for the boys and selfless was Anita Bryant.

LC: No kidding.

BP: Yeah, no kidding. And people laugh when I say that, but that was…

LC: Even Martha Raye?

BP: I did not like Martha Raye at all.

LC: Why?

BP: The reason was that her mouth was so foul. I was embarrassed. I just don’t think I’d ever heard language like that before.

LC: No kidding.

BP: Even some of the guys got up and walked out. I walked out. I couldn’t listen to it. But a lot of the guys just loved her and thought she was wonderful. I just did not like the foul language.

LC: And…but Anita Bryant just struck you as being quite genuine?

BP: Genuine. Yup. That’s the word that I would use, is genuine.

LC: Ok. Did any politicians come through that you remember?

BP: I don’t remember specifically who they were, but we had politicians and we had legislators who came through. And what really upset me about that was that a lot of times we just didn’t have what we needed, and the place was a disaster. You know, we didn’t have the staff, we didn’t have the supplies. And yet, we always knew if somebody was coming and we’d have to get everything just looking shipshape and perfect. So that made the commanding officer look good.
BP: And as soon as the VIP left, everything went back to normal.
LC: It felt like some kind of game or something.
BP: Yeah, it just felt like that it wasn’t – that it was a lie. In other words, what they should’ve been doing was showing the VIPs what we didn’t have, and we could maybe have gotten some funding or some staffing or something. Instead of trying to make it look like the commanding officer was doing this marvelous job of being right on top of everything, which just didn’t happen. At least in my opinion.
LC: Yeah. And resources got focused on creating this impression.
BP: Impression that everything was fine, which it wasn’t. We had to borrow things to make things look good.
LC: Yeah, that’s…
BP: That’s stupid.
LC: And a little bit upsetting. In terms of your own experience as a veteran, have you ever had any kind of negative reaction come at you because you served in Vietnam?
BP: For many years I didn’t say anything about serving in Vietnam.
LC: Why?
BP: Because it was not a topic that people wanted to hear about, I think. And I didn’t want to encourage any negative reactions because, you know. I know how I was treated when I first came back, which was horrible, in California.
LC: What happened?
BP: Well, we got spat upon. And ignored and we couldn’t get served. We were still in uniform; we couldn’t wait to get out of our uniforms. We had a terrible trip coming back in a plane that really was not well heated. We came out of Japan and landed in Alaska, and I tell you, we like to froze. There were three of us nurses. I’d known those gals from Basic, they’d been at the 93rd. But we were all huddled under a blanket trying to keep warm, and one of them kept saying, ‘I can’t wait to get back home, let’s have a drink at the Top of the Mark.’ The Mark Hopkins Hotel.
LC: Sure.
BP: And they wouldn’t serve us.
LC: You were denied service?
BP: Yeah. Well, yeah. They wouldn’t let us in. Now, they said they were closing, but it didn’t seem to me that they were closed at the time. And that was, I think, all of our impression. Maybe I’m wrong on that, but that’s certainly the way I felt. And we wound up having to sleep in a flophouse. We couldn’t get a room anywhere. And it was just awful. It was a terrible experience.

LC: You were spat on? Where?

BP: Yeah. In San Francisco.

LC: At the airport?

BP: On the streets as we were trying to get toward the hotel. People just looked at us. It just was not a pleasant experience at all. We had a rough landing, too. All the tires blew on the plane when we landed, and they had to come out with a fire truck and all that stuff. It was just not a good experience.

LC: That sounds like a nightmare.

BP: It was a nightmare. Not happy.

LC: And so you couldn’t wait to get out of uniform?

BP: Yeah. And Ken – actually, Ken Hickman, whose films I later got, came and picked me up and took me around San Francisco, which was awfully nice of him. And that made me feel better. It was a good friendly face. But no, I couldn’t wait to get out of uniform.

LC: Has the U.S. government – this is again just an opinion that you can offer or decline, too. But has the government supported veterans through the VA and in other ways at an appropriate level? I mean, you used the GI Bill, you mentioned. I just wondered if the resources that ought to be devoted to veterans are being, in your opinion.

BP: I really don’t know. The GI Bill has been extraordinarily helpful. It certainly put me all the way through school. I couldn’t have really done that without the GI Bill. And I knew that going in that they offered that, so it was one of the reasons that I joined. The health facilities, I think the VA hospitals – at least here in Maine, the one that we have up here – is not good. They never can get their funding, the service is bad, there’s been a lot in the news over the years about problems with that. There’s a veteran center here in Bangor where I work. I don’t know to what extent they work. I know there are a lot of veterans around who have had problems with stress, delayed stress
syndrome. I have a very good friend who’s actually had a couple or three tours in Vietnam; he’s a colonel, or was, and he is a professor at the University of Maine. He and I have been friends. He’s fine, but he runs things. He was actually part of a team that established a health care – or, a nursing home – facility here in Bangor for veterans. And he’s on the board of that now. So he does a lot to provide for folks, but I really don’t know what veterans are getting. I think there are an awful lot of them who just kind of crawl off into the woodwork. The ones who are vocal will always say that there’s not enough. I think that there’s been a lot of denial of any responsibility on the part of the government for those folks who had Agent Orange-related problems, or thought they did. I know a lot of people who came back, whose children were born with birth defects, who did not have any problems prior to going. So I’m sure that there are some related things, but the government seems to have denied that. They do seem to be doing some studies. I was part of one that came out of, I think, NIH. But I didn’t think that anything I had was related to Vietnam.

LC: To Agent Orange specifically?

BP: Yeah. I mean, I don’t know that for sure. But I don’t think so.

LC: But you had participated in the study?

BP: I did.

LC: How did they find you? Through the VA?

BP: I can’t remember. I really don’t. That’s probably something I volunteered for. But I don’t know.

LC: Have you been at any point in contact with the VA for medical care for yourself?

BP: I tried one time before I took this job because I didn’t really have medical coverage, and I had had a very bad ankle injury. So I went down to the VA hospital, and I said I would never go again. That was for sure. I was not impressed at all.

LC: What happened?

BP: I don’t know. It was just – it was dirty. I had to wait a very long time to be seen. I don’t remember. I don’t think I was seen by a doctor. It was just one of things that people complain about.

LC: Just pretty dismal.
BP: It was very dismal.

LC: And you’re like, well if I have a choice, I’m not going back there.

BP: You bet that.

LC: Wow.

BP: Yeah. That’s one of the reasons why, what with the job I have with good benefits, I’m thrilled. Yeah, you bet.

LC: Yeah. Universities are good for that, that’s for sure. Beth, is there anything that we haven’t talked about that you’d like to be sure to include in this interview?

BP: Not that I can think of. For me, Vietnam was a really crucial life experience just in terms of getting to know who I was as an individual. That I was a lot stronger than I thought I was. I’d always been, I thought, kind of dependent – a little bit – on other people, although I was ambitious and did a lot of different things. That I relied on my husband a lot for stuff early on. I just never saw myself as an extraordinarily strong person, and I think I felt much better when I came away from that experience. Because I saw people falling apart who were a lot smarter than I was, a lot better educated than I was, and that’s the point [I made] of being stupid. When I responded to my dean’s question, I likened myself to horseshoe crabs and cockroaches – you know, we just survive because we really don’t get bound up with so many of the things that other people do. She didn’t like that answer, but that’s kind of the way I feel.

LC: You gave it to her straight.

BP: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

LC: Not looking for approval, necessarily.

BP: Absolutely not.

LC: Even though she was a dean.

BP: What do I care?

LC: That’s interesting.

BP: Take it or leave it. That was the way it is. I’m going to tell you exactly what I feel. And if I want to term that stupidity, then that’s stupidity.

LC: Call it whatever you want.

BP: Yeah, call it whatever I want. I was there to help take care of soldiers, which is what I did.
LC: And are you proud of having been there and having done that?
BP: Absolutely.
LC: Would you do it again?
BP: Absolutely. At the drop of a hat.
LC: Have you ever thought about going back to Vietnam, Beth?
BP: No. No. Sort of like, you can’t go home again.
LC: That wouldn’t really serve a purpose for you?
BP: No. No, and one of my hooch-mates has been back. And Bob, the guy I was just telling you about, he’s been back – actually two or three times now – to visit. No, I’m not. I guess I might, if somebody paid for it. But is that high on my list of priorities?
 absolutely not.
LC: It’s not a quest that you’re on.
BP: Absolutely not.
LC: Ok. Beth, I want to thank you for your time today. Thank you very much.
BP: Ok.