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ORAL HISTORY

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Ernestine S. Thornton
(Signature - Interviewee)

P.O. Box 863
(Address)

Charleston, WV 25323

DATE Nov 21, 1984

John Kewen
(Signature - Witness)

COMPLETED

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Mrs. Thornton
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WEST VIRGINIA VIETNAM VETERANS

WVVV.16

AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Ernestine Thornton

CONDUCTED BY: John C. Hennen, Jr.

NOVEMBER 21, 1984

TRANSCRIBED BY: Jessica Elza

TYPED BY: Gina Kehali Kates

COMPLETED

John: November, what's the day, the 21st? (21st) November 21st. This is John Hennen. I'm at the Vet Center in Charleston with Ernestine Thornton, a Vietnam era veteran's project, and we're getting ready to do an interview. Uh, first we'll get a little background information on Mrs. Thornton uh, could you tell us where you were born and raised and a little bit about your family.

Ernestine: Yeah, I was born and raised in uh, I was born in Wyoming County, uh, WV., a little place called Hanna, which was barely a wide spot in the road. I went to school, my first uh, 3 or 4 years there in grade school. Uh, my father was a coal miner. Eventually, he became a mine owner and operator. So, while we were a little better off than average uh, uh, coal miners children, I think uh, I was one of uh, I was next to last of 7 children. All my brothers and sisters except one are older than I am. I lived for a couple of years in Virginia and was living in Ohio on a Dairy farm when my father died. Uh, we moved back to uh, Leager, WV, which is in McDowell County uh, southern WV. Uh, back to the coal fields and uh, I finished high school in Leager, WV. Uh, went straight into uh, nursing school at Lewis Hill Hospital uh, in Roanoke, Virginia (Roanoke) yeah, uh, and that was that covered a 3 year time span, 33 months. After I graduated, I returned to uh,, Welch to work uh, I was very young and very idealistic and those were the Kennedy years and I was strongly influenced by Mr. Kennedy's uh, ideals. The...the call to young people uh, I think most of the people my age group were uh, after about 2 years I was getting bored with uh, nursing in a small town and there were rumbles and rumors of war in IndoChina and I began to look at military service as a uh, final option for me. Uh, I finally made up my mind to enter the Army in 1964 in August and was commissioned as 2nd Lieutenant. I did my basic training down at uh, Fort Sam, Houston. It was a 6-week period at that time, very slow. And very uh, port of tea and crumpets. Uh, (uh-huh), for young ladies, we were really not like what was a women's army corps that time. We did, we had a lot of discipline, we did some marching. I did learn uh, uh, basic things like uh, some of the men's training now. Uh, a lot of uh, physical training, a lot of uh, weapons instruction, but nothing that would help me to in the kind of work I was to do later in Vietnam. I was totally unprepared by officer's basic down there after that. I was expected to be a lady and an officer, and a good nurse. And mind my own business and get along real well. My first duty station was Fort uh, Benning, Georgia. And I served in the emergency room there as a head nurse. Again, in a position I really wasn't qualified for, but uh, they needed one, and I got tagged. I really wanted to go overseas, (uh-huh), and I had a brother who was combat veteran from Korea, and he use to tell me a lot about what Korea was like. So, I think I had 3 choices for oversea's assignments, and I put down one of them, of the three I put down, was Korea and this is what I got. So, I spent thirteen months in Korea, and loved it, love it. I was up on 21st Evac Hospital. And uh, oh, that's a little village called uh, Lu Pian City, really was the military title for it, and we were away from Seoul. We were a close-knit unit, full service hospital. And uh, we got

alot of good work, and a lot of good people and a lot of parties and ah, I really enjoyed it. (uh-huh)

John: How many nurse's were in your unit? Uh...

Ernestine: (approximately) Probably around 50, 55, I say. We were full bull service because we had qualified surgeons uh, qualified neuro-surgeons, qualified orthopedic surgeons, you know, all services uh, operative in an overseas small country. We were doing real well. I got some experience my first mass calls situation, mass casualty management there (uh-nuh), and uh, well what happened was there were a lot of unexploded army ordinance left around, still in Korea after all these years and uh, metal is very uh, precious ...any...any type of metal is very precious to the Koreans. There's just very little of it. So, they attempted to melt down shell, (mmm), for the metal casing and exploded that shell and leveling the village of about 200 people. (hmm) All those came through out hospital. (hmm) So, I had my first experience there with uh, mass casualties. Uh, the Vietnam was really heated up the first uh, combat units were going from Nam. There were two uh, Korean divisions being readied to go over. The White Horse and the Tiger, which were elite divisions of Korean troops. Uh, and I read the 'Stars and Stripes' everyday, and I listened to Armed Forces radio everyday. And I became more and more sure I...that I had to go to Vietnam. So, I volunteered from Korea, and was accepted. Completed my tour there, and flew directly to uh, Vietnam, in the spring of '66, and that was unusual, in that was two hardships tours back to back. (mmm) But they were getting a little bit tight for nurses and uh, the draft had kicked in at home and they were needing to push these units into Vietnam and so they accepted me uh, when I flew to uh, I landed in Saigon, found out there were no quarters available in the city of Saigon for nurses. Before uh, (the Army didn't have anything ready for you?) The Army didn't provide uh, no, uh, one chief nurse did finally did put me up in a place called a BOC #1. They emptied the men's, one of the men's uh, BOC's and put me up there and I was the only woman there. And about 2 days of that, when she was trying to get me on a plane up country, and I said the hell with it. And went over to the 3rd field hospital where there were some nurses who were friends of mine. (uh-huh), that'd I'd served with in other places. Packed in with them for 2 or 3 days. That's about 4 days all together right? I managed to get on a freight up country to Qui Nhon. And uh, well, it was pretty much of a shock. The war was just gearing up. It was a lot of confusion. I was surrounded by weapons uh, I...I had my first uh, taste of...of shelling in combat. As our place came to Tansuant uh, airfield (hmm), in Saigon. The field was being snelled, and once we were on the ground, again I was the only woman on that place. And had...I had to be taken off last and taken off by men bearing arms. This was...my first exposure to shell fire, mortar fire (uh-huh), and they were lickin' the field with mortars, the VC were hitting pretty hard at that time. Fortunately, nobody was injured that night, and that was a pretty common occurrence for them. They were used to it: happens every night at Tansuant, it kind of jarred my bones a little. I got into uh, Quonyang, mmm,

as I say, it was just mass confusion. We were still living in tents uh, they were putting up tents for the nurses and they had built no quarters. Our hospital was not yet under a roof. Part of it was on trucks, part of it was in uh, tents just about any way we could work. We had no mess facility; we were using uh, an officers, uh, aviation officers mess hall. Which was just a tiny, little uh, you know, boarded shack with a couple of barrels and a board over it for a serving table. It was pretty rough. Uh, shower facilities, almost are non-existent. You just had to catch a shower whenever you could, wherever you could ask some men. You know, can we use your shower facilities tonight? And their's weren't great, either. You know, everybody was in the same boat. But we were rear echelon troops, so we had it a little better than the people out in the field. You know, who were moving every day. Uh, gradually over a period of 2 to 3 months, some you know, some order began to emerge from the confusion. In the meantime, we were still trying to run pretty much a full-service hospital, an evacuation hospital, this was the 85th Evac. Uh, there's not a great deal to highlight that year in Vietnam but us, a great deal of sameness. Hard, brutal work 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, for 7 months, the first 7 months that I was there. Uh, I was allowed uh, one _____ Bangkok, and I had a brother stationed in uh, Thailand, so we were able to go together for that. That was the first real break I had from it. Uh, later, I was able to go to Hong Kong for a week uh, during that time. One thing that bothers me most now is that I don't know the names and the faces of the men I worked on, there were so many of them. (uh-huh) But I can't ever know, and it bothers me but you know, still how could I possibly? I mean, in the month of November in 1966 we ran 5,000 casualties through the 85th Evac. That's about 60 or 65 nurses, maybe 25 doctors, I don't know how many corpsman and assistant people, involved with that. But we took care of, passed through our system 5,000 people. (in one month?) In one month. The month of November, and those are official army figures I just found the other day. Uh, there was really no place to get away from the war for nurses. We were permitted uh, to travel kind of freely around Quonyang in the outlying areas, it was too ...considered too dangerous when you got out there you were taking your life in your own hands. We did on several occasions, and once was ambused and once was enough for me. Uh, one...one time you know, close violent combat was enough. I did carry a gun a good part of the time that I was there, and lived with that constant sense of something was about to happen. Uh, I didn't lose that feeling for years, sometimes still have them. (uh-huh) But when I didn't wear a gun, I had one always at hand, and under my head when I was sleeping, or right by the bed, whatever. There was always other weapons in the quarters, too, like I became used to living in the world of weapons and waiting for that thing to happen, which you know, may or may not occur. Uh, never any ...any mass uh, attack on our hospital or anything like that. But there were numerous isolated instances of sniper firing. Uh, mortar, rocket fire, uh, shelling, one thing or another, small arms fire really was our uh, our little hospital, quontset huts. We were raided several times, with machine gun fire and you know, pretty hard on the patients to uh, by the time I was ready to

leave Vietnam. I had lost uh, probably 30 lbs. or more. Uh, I was down to probably 123 lbs., which is, least that I have weighed since I left high school. Uh, I was in pretty good health except I was exhausted just (uh-huh), absolutely exhausted. Uh, suffering from dysentery and uh, amebic uh, amebic dysentery and a couple of other tropical diseases that took a little time to clear up after I came back home.

John: That was, I guess, pretty wide-spread (yes it was). Uh-huh. (uh-huh, yeah)

Ernestine: Even on, even on medication the preventive type medication, a lot of people had it. Uh, one of my friends came home with malaria and she knew that she had malaria but she was determined to bring it right on home with her and have it treated in the United States. (uh-huh) So, that wasn't at all uncommon.

John: Did I really uh, I'm not really sure how I should phrase this. When you for instance, you said you had 5,000 casualties go through in one month (uh-huh), uh, did...did you all have any kind of fire warning of when you were going to be like swamped with work...?

Ernestine: Nothing more than a phone call or a radio call. (just right ahead of when your group came in). Right ahead, uh, when the, when the choppers were beginning to land. There were times when we saw...I've worked all day and all night uh, maybe to stretch out. I remember one time in particular that I could no longer, in working in ICU, I could no longer read the positive and negative gauges on IPB machines or on a respirator. Uh, and that's very important distinction. So, I had to leave out of there. Probably 17 or 18 hours that I had been working then. I went outside of the ICU a little hut that we had for ICU, laid down on the cot out there and slept 3 or 4 hours. Got up and went back. There was never any let up from it. (hmmm-hmm) They just, you know, we'd have a few days when things would be quiet; there would be a you know, not more than 30 or 40 people in a K & E, Emergency receiving staying of course, of a 12 hour day, but that was unusual.

John: Did you always have access to all the supplies you needed?

Ernestine: No, later on in my tour I took over as head nurse of a POW ward. They're supposedly Prisoners of War. Viet cong, NVA (uh-huh), uh, when the hospital's supply situation; antibiotics uh, bandages, so forth, would get low. I'd strip my shelves from that ward first and move them to the other ward where I was head nurse. (uh-huh) Uh, it was not a very satisfactory way to do business but it has to be done. I felt it had to be done. There were times when uh, I could call Saigon. I could get supplies within 24 hours; sometimes it took a week. And there's no, you know and there's nothing else that you could use. (hmm)

John: What about uh, well, all nurses of course were...were in similar situations as volunteers. And I assume went in with the

same ideas like you mentioned, the idealism in the Kennedy years. How did that evolve or change or if it did, over the...over the course of your...your tour there, among you, and among you and your fellow nurses?

Ernestine: I think I...I began, I began to pick up ...I was stubborn about letting go of it (laughs), I still felt...I was exhausted, to the point of exhaustion but I still...I'm becoming and if now this, looking back on it, I needed some treatment then, um, at the point that I was becoming angry (uh-huh). But younger nurses were already beginning to question why are we doing what we're doing? Why are we here, you know? Why are we messing with these people? Uh, I refused to even think about it. I refused to even question that the mighty United States Army wasn't doing the best they could do for the people of South Vietnam (uh-huh). It was later on about 1969 or '70 that I...I really began to question it and was becoming bitter and cynical, and ...and all the rest. They tell me now that I had all symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress disorder, then. (uh-huh) Nobody recognized what it was (right). So, I guess wasn't 'till about 1980 that we even knew what it was. Uh, I wouldn't trade the time I spent in Vietnam, the experience I can look at isolated incidents and be glad for what I did to know that I did the best that I could. I don't really to this day, know how we saved the number of people that we did. (uh-huh) Under the primitive kind of conditions, uh, it's all right. I've heard nurses say, in Washington, this last trip say that well, I've saw worse things at the University of Minnesota before I went to Vietnam. I can't say that that's true, but I saw mining accidents in Welch, West Virginia that were bad and I treated those patients on a long term basis if they survived the initial injury. But I saw things on a day to day basis that would exhaust the trauma team at Charleston General. I know and we dealt with that every day. Now, I'm speaking only of the nurses and I have no idea what those doctors, what kind of condition they came back in, because they're probably the most isolated of the Vietnam veterans. (the doctors?) The doctors; they just have not come forward (uh-huh), I wonder a lot about it. And I have a good feeling about doctors that I served with, in general, they were fine men. To...to have been able to keep up the quality of care that they did.

John: Were the doctors mostly volunteers, too? Or were they draftees?

Ernestine: No, many of those that I served with were draftees. (they're draftees) And that makes it doubly good for me to say that about them, because the ...in spite of having been drafted, upheld the highest principles of medical care.

John: Now, immediately after your tour, it says it was ..it a one year tour? (yes) You went on to do the same (right), as uh, combat soldiers uh, so now, what was your next step? After that.

Ernestine: I came back to a well, I had 45 days leave, and spent that with my folks in...in McDowell County uh, noticed some

problems then in adjusting you know. It was too quiet, had trouble sleeping (uh-huh). Uh, as soon as I got back to the Army post, I started drinking heavily. And using sleeping pills. Uh, that continued. Went into the intensive care unit at uh, Fort Bragg and found out that the Army had messed up my...the orders and I was supposed to be at Ft. Sam Houston in school. An advanced army officers career course. (uh-huh) So, they finally got some orders and got me out of Fort Bragg and down to Fort Sam Houston, created a big mess for me financially. I you know, bought a car, house trailer, and all that. (is this 1969?) No, this is '68. ('68, okay) And...and uh, I went to school for the next year. No, the next 6 months and then that course and then a couple of months at Fort Benjamin Harris, Indiana. For a recruit, for a recruiting school. I got tapped for recruiting duty and decided I would like it. Public speaking and you know, dealing with (uh-huh), with new nurses and that sort of thing. And volunteered for it, or signed up for it or the same Uh, what on after school, about 2 years I was in Cincinnati and in Columbus, Ohio and that's where I first ran into the anti-war uh people. (uh-huh) They picketed my office from time to time; figuring out what was going on. Me and the Marines seemed to catch a whole lot of it. (uh-huh) Began to have serious doubts about what we were doing in Vietnam, then. Didn't join any organizations or you know, take any action of any kind. Uh, I continued to drink real heavy, draughts really heavy in during those months. Those last months on recruiting duty uh, that may have been because I was away from an Army Post my ...I had my little support system and essentially, on my own traveling (pretty isolated), pretty isolated. Uh, after I came off of recruiting duty, my 2-year tour rotated on to uh, Fort Leavenworth, Missouri. And that was a bad post. The chief nurse there locked horns immediately and as soon as I put in 6 months there, uh, I flew myself to Washington. And asked for a transfer out of that place. And they told me they couldn't transfer me and I said you can have my damn resignation, then. I want out (uh-huh), and I really didn't see any point in...in going on it ...in the military. And I was bitter and disillusioned and I really felt like I had been sold a bill of goods. They reconsidered and cut orders for me to go to Walter Reed. I landed in Walter Reed as head nurse of uh, the Vietnam returnee amputee ward. (mmmh) And that's what I did for the next three years, and that's probably the best work that I did in the Army. Even with all my problems of Post Traumatic Stress, with drinking related to that. Eventually, to have, you know, to..to wind up in the hospital near the medical ward for depression; uh, the best work that I did the entire time I was in the Army, was to run that ward at Walter Reed, 'cause this was the fellows I saw get well (right). And there I encountered more and more men like I suppose it's alright to say. Men like Dave Evans, who had gone over and given you know, parts of themselves. (uh-huh) And who is asking why the hell are we doing this? And I'm listening at that point I joined uh, Vietnam veterans against the war. Uh, I was reprimanded a couple of times. And threatened with uh, disciplinary action. I'm probably lucky to have gotten out of the military with an Honorable discharge. But there was never question that I would. But I was lucky I think. Looking back on

it, things that happen to men, men officers, would've been broken out. Because I had a good record from Vietnam had been decorated over there uh, uh, they still wanted to get me out with a medical and give me some money. And uh, you know, and let that be the end of it.

John: That was your feeling or...or? (their feeling) The Army feeling. (yeah) (The Army's medical board) I've read their _____ since then.

Ernestine: There some things in there that, that tend to, that made believe that's what they were doing. (uh-huh) And maybe that were seeing more, a lot more, that they were seeing in nurses as well as you know, infantry or whatever (referring to PTSD) And they were taken care of just as fast as they could.

John: What was the uh, what would you say the public reaction to you and the Vietnam veterans against the war? (uh-huh) What kind of relationship did y'all have with the general public at that time?

Ernestine: Uneasy uh, the general public supported, but I think they intended to exploit veterans, a good many of these were amputees, my own patients (uh-huh), and uh, I think the uh, anti-war movement the people who, that were really activists in the anti-war movement were exploitive of Vietnam veterans at that time. Uh, I had a big problem, you know, coming on my ward at Walter Reed and actively recruiting men right out of hospital beds for this. (uh-huh) Uh, I had no objections of the men going down town and doing as they pleased but I didn't want people coming in there. (uh-huh) And making a point of a deal out of it. Some of that was happening. There was probably nothing we could do.

John: Did the Vietnam vet...veterans of America grow out of the Vietnam veterans against the war? I was always kind of fuzzy about that.

Ernestine: It's my understanding that, it..it's a little fuzzy but I think that's ...you could say that...that those are it's origins, yeah. Now, Bobby Muller was in there (uh-huh), you know, in the earlyearly days. And you can find a good many others. You know who stayed in the chapter level. Uh, they live some of them in the 1970 and that's about the time I joined (uh-huh), I'm sure they were probably a little more active than I was. You know, my....my opportunities with them were limited. The Army had just you know, had just enough clamp on me. They can manipulate (did they?) a captain all they want to. They could slap me in the brig real quick. (uh-huh) I got caught downtown in that kind of demonstration. So, I had to take steps to make sure I wasn't caught. My support was going on more behind the scenes.

John: Were there many people still active in the service? Or in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War?

Ernestine: Yeah, yeah, mmm-hmm. Yeah. At the time I joined there was. At Walter Reed particularly, um, usually among nurses much younger than me, nurses who've refusing to go to Vietnam. Uh, and there were a group of Walter Reed who just refused to go. (uh-huh) One of them had been a good friend of mine who had been one of my recruits. Uh, she had just made captain and refused to go. She got an honorable discharge. At that point, the Army was simply trying to keep a lid on things. (uh-huh) But you can imagine how much bitterness that was churning up among nurses who had served in 'Nam. And there's still a lot of animosity, I'm sure, from a lot of nurses. Linda Vaudevanter in her book talks about Vietnam Veterans Against the War. I don't know if she belonged to it or not, but (I was going to say is that...), that was going around a good bit then.

John: That's the only literature that I'm aware of that uh, the nursing experiences in Vietnam, is that right?

Ernestine: Yeah, that's the only one that we have to date. I'm hoping uh, there's a nursing memorial project coming out of uh, Minnesota. They've done built a little statue of about _____ a model of about 33 inches high. And they hope to make this a life size thing, if they can raise the money for it. (uh-huh) And by doing this, they ...they hope to publicize the nurses contribution to the war, and some of their feelings of...of what happened to some of their nurses following the war.

John: Now, let's see. You say you were at Walter Reed for 3 or 4 years (yeah, uh-huh), what was...uh, what was next? Were you still free?

Ernestine: I...I...I was hospitalized uh, uh, November of '73. (still in the service?) Yeah, still in the service. Then the medical board of 60 days or whatever and by mutual agreement was discharged on medical, well, I was placed on what was called temporary disability in time. (uh-huh) This went out on pay and to be re-evaluated in 18 months, and I liked that. See, I was still getting paid, and all I had to do was sit around. So I traveled a whole lot. Finally, landed myself down to Kentucky where a friend of mine got out of the service. Uh, started working part-time, and re...really began to feel like I was putting pieces of my life back together. (you're working as a nurse?) Working as a nurse, uh-huh. Uh, I went over to Fort Knox and had my uh, evaluation and I probably knocked myself out of a whole lot of money. I just thought I wasn't interested in going back in, didn't want any disability, you know. Let me go. (uh-huh) And they gave me a 50% disability rating through VA, which I never collected on. (really?) And time elapsed. Now I can't collect on. But that's the way I felt at that time. I (inaudible)... (you have no recourse to get it back together), no, uh-huh, no, that dated back to 2 years, which is you know on appeal now, but can't go back the whole 10 years.

John: Hun. What would, when people found out you were a Vietnam veteran, say when you would go into a bar and have a couple of

beers or something, and you'd be talking to somebody and they'd find out you ...you're a Vietnam veteran, what were...what were the response? Was there a typical response? Or uh.

Ernestine: Most people never found it out. My roommate and I were Vietnam veterans. She served much later than I did, but she was much younger. We simply did not ever involve, saying we were ever Vietnam veterans. (uh-huh) Our friends were mostly nurses or the ones she had she retained 3 or 4 close friends from Vietnam. We saw them on vacations. We traveled down to Texas, and Louisiana, and wherever they happened to be at that time, and spent some time with them. Our friends in Lexington were other nurses and husbands and wives were one of her friends.

SIDE 2

Ernestine: I remember when the fall of Saigon one of our friends in from Boston, an Army nurse, who'd gotten out was visiting when that happened. And she was nominated non-veteran, and she was delighted that the whole thing had happened. Frankie and I were hurt and angry and disappointed. And uh, this is the way it ends. You know (uh-huh), so what? This is the way the damn thing ends. (uh-huh) This was 1975, 2 years after ...after we're both out of the Army. Uh, we never really either of us had a chance to sort out our feelings about it. Neither of us had enough of a handle on it, uh, to be able to sit down and sort it out. She was still very angry at the Army, uh, very angry about Vietnam. She was...she was hesitant to talk to me about it other than patient load or procedures or you know, directly relating to nursing work. As to the war, or the thing that happened to her there. She didn't discuss it even with me. Uh, she was a little bit closer to the girl she served with down in Texas. And probably they could talk about it sometimes when they got together. But there's a vet center in ...in Lexington now, and I hope she drops in there from time to time. I feel she'd benefit from some of that. (uh-huh) Unload some of the anger she's still carrying. I don't know that that's happened.

Jon: Do you find that uh, the that...the veterans do take advantage of the...of the services at the vet center? Like for, for instance.

Ernestine: I think so. Yeah. This program has been in place uh, 4 years since 1980, and it was about that time that I realized that I needed some help with it. I was having nightmares. I was drinking heavily. (were you living here in Charleston?) No. I was living in uh, Lexington at that time, and I moved to Huntington and just did not know what the hell I wanted to do with my life. I hated nursing. You know, the concept of nursing, as it was. The hell with it; I don't want to do it any more. (uh-huh) And wind up in the hospital at Chillicothe, VA hospital, November '82. Uh...I got out after I got out of the hospital, I just happened to see the sign downstairs in the church (inaudible)...and I had only been out of the hospital a...a few days I was looking around for a job. And uh, I thought why the

hell not go see what the man's got. Why can't it be told, and I told him what my life had been like since I got you know, the drinking, the uh, the current nightmares. Uh, just total confusion, about those years about what we were doing. Uh, he gave me mutual counseling and he got me into a special group of on contract at Sounding Hills, with a therapist and I even had a few individual therapists over there for a few days so it's evaluation more or less. (What's Sounding Hills? I've heard of that but...) It's a health center. VA uses them as contract people (uh-huh), and it supplies services that they can't do outliving areas, (okay) of VA. Uh, I was able to uh, my working with them you know, and then finally I came to grips with ...to what happened to us during...during those years. How it changed us. How it turned us wrong side out. Uh, (uh-huh), 360 degrees (clears throat).

John: Do you have any contact with uh, with other nurses now? That you (no, I...), started with or that you knew?

Ernestine: No, I established some in Washington this time, while I was up there for the trip. Uh, I happened to meet 2 of the women I served in Quonyang with. I had not seen them in 16 years. One at the base of the statue, and one uh, where'd I meet the other one. Also, right at the statue (uh-huh), 3 or 4 days apart, a real coincidence. We didn't have a whole lot to talk about. It was just a nice...a nice thing to be able to see them. (uh-huh) Know...know that they're doing okay. From uh, I did a taped interview with PBS, taped up there in Minnesota's uh, little project that they were doing. They just wanted you know, a group of nurses. So, I went over and talked with some of the one's there. I understand that other people had problems just about like mine. (uh-huh) But for so many years, definitely after I didn't see my roommate in Lexington any more, a period like almost 4 years. I thought I was the only one. You know...either either there's something really bad with me because nobody else is like me. And then, I come to the vet center a meeting with the people. Because we had to talk openly about it. You find out most of us have similar problems. Thank God, because you know that the burdens are getting lighter. (uh-huh) I mean that. (it is getting lighter?) Yeah, it's much easier to come. Hell, I haven't had a drink in two years. And uh, I don't have nightmares any more. I'm on one medication, but that's better than VA's 6 or 7 that they would have me on if they had their way about it.

John: Uh-huh. What do you ...what do you feel about the Army? (I'll tell ya the truth) Or about the whole crusade?

Ernestine: If it happens again, and I worked in a position to serve in the Army, I'm sure I would. (uh-huh) Uh, that part of me hasn't changed. I don't blame the Army either, for what happened to uh, the young men and women like me. But I think they damn well should find out a little bit more about what they're doing before they commit us to that kind of action against (uh-huh). I would ask before they send my nieces or my nephews, please be able to tell us clearly what you hope to achieve.

(yeah, it...it comes, I wonder if they even had an idea what they were ...what there are out to do. I don't think they did) (Hmm, are you working?) No, not right now. I have been this summer, until the middle of September. (uh-huh) And I'll start school in January. (ah, what...what are you going to do in school?) I'm going to get an un...undergraduate degree in un, social work. I'm going to Oxford College for an MSW (alright). I can use my nursing degree that way, still in a helping profession, without doing direct nursing care. (uh-huh) And I don't really know if this is a result of uh, military service, Vietnam service. Or if just an outgrowth of my whole experience. But I feel like I don't need to be doing the kind of things I was trained for in trauma nursing. I don't need to do it anymore. (uh-huh)

John: I've noticed a lot of the veterans that I've talked to that have ...have gone into these (I guess you call) helping professions or on social service professions, why do you think that is?

Ernestine: Could be survival guilt, that's the first thing that comes to mind after being here in the midst of it all (hmm), for a long time. Uh, you can't escape survival guilt in any type of traumatic situation. It's built in post traumatic distress. Probably the first symptom of it...with the combat soldier, I think it is his buddy, his friend with the nurses (inaudible)...it is those we didn't save (uh-huh), uh, that whole experience was anti-personal, anti-people. We need to do something for each other, to make this world a better place to live in. I think that's why you find so many veterans, veterans are caring people. They care about each other, they care about their communities, the schools. They may not be activists, all of us are not activists. But you find they're concerned and willing to do things where they can to make it better. And they're the best family people. I think I know (really?), yeah, because it means more to them. (uh-huh) Best fathers, best husbands.

John: How 'bout ...you came from a large family. Do you have much contact with your family? (yeah, I do have) Well, like you say, you just went to see your parents (uh-huh), last week (yeah), and well, go ahead.

Ernestine: Yeah, I try to stay as...as close as possible. I have an older sister here in Charleston. And uh, I've become real dependant on her. Uh, I call her 2 or 3 times a week, you know, just to sort out what's going on with family and what's happening to everybody, and (inaudible)...and that's a nice thing, she went to Europe for a month. And I...I was lost (uh-huh), but uh, yeah, I've been real close with my family and they, they never really understood I think, what was happening with me, but they've always been real supportive, and they were real supportive of this trip to uh, to Washington, you know. They all made donations and you know, helped out any way that they could, gave me a lot of support going into it.

John: That's uh, the...the...the thing at Washington seems to be some how kind of cathartic experience for...for veterans and the,

and the public uh, you know, you hear a lot (yeah), about that healing process and that type of (inaudible)...do you feel like that's true? Is that?

Ernestine: Oh, yeah, I think so. It was an emotional experience for me. I wasn't here in 1982. And I understand there was a little bit more uh, well, more upheaval than I actually saw with this one. But there was a lot of inner trouble than there was with the men that went up with me. One of the great things I see about this wall is there are all the names of our dead, 58,000 more of them inscribed on that wall. This is the one place in the world that we can go and they're all together. Covering up, God, 11 years (uh-huh) span, uh, some of our dead are lost. A minimum of 2,000. Over 2,000 of our men lost or missing and probably will never be recovered. The names are there too...nobody is left out. The public can come there and finally say, you know, you did a good thing. So it was very emotional for me for that reason uh, tell you what an experience we had. One of the men that went up with me asked me to take pictures of one panel from the...a couple of names that were on there and on the same panel he found names of two of his friends. And this was a late Monday, the last day that we were there when, you know, we looked and looked and look...looked at people's names (uh-huh). In one panel of 4 of us covering maybe a period of 4 years.

John: They're arranged chronologically. (right, yeah) Hmm. When...when are you starting school? Next semester? (Mid-January, uh-huh). That's great (yeah, I'm looking forward to it). I'm intrigued by (inaudible)...never knew much, see I've been out of state for about 7 years. And I never knew much about it. (me neither) I've heard a lot of people are real impressed with it. It's a good service for this community. (ya) Are you active at all with the DVA? (yeah)

Ernestine: Right now I'm uh, treasurer, they've been uh, I only came on the DVA scene this...this past spring (uh-huh), and was a little bit leary about going you know, being the old woman in the crowd. That sort of thing....they were very warm, very receptive to me. Matter of fact, got elected that office right away. And a lot of duties (mmm-hmm), and I liked that and I had enjoyed being an active, not that I haven't been as active this fall as David and some of the others are, (uh-huh), but uh, that's a matter of having no time. You know, all that sort of thing, I intend to continue with them. And...and work with them; they've been good for me. To be received that way as...as one of them is good.

John: They certainly strike me as a real positive activist organization. I'm real impressed with Dave and uh, Rich Richards I met a couple of (uh-huh), weeks ago. (yeah) They won't uh, you know, they won't be denied that's for certain (really). (no, they won't shut up, they won't go away) Yeah. What about that...that...it seemed like for years there was an attitude ...I don't want to inject my own Philosophy here, but the government attitude is they did want Vietnam veterans to go away, and just be quiet. Does that seem familiar?

Ernestine: There was...I think we, yeah, just we....nobody really wants to hear from us. And when ...when something did show up in the newspapers, it tended to be a very negative thing, you know, crazed Vietnam veterans (uh-huh), and drug-crazed hippies (spectacular stuff). Some spectacular uh, uh, yellow journalism kind of thing, and there're all the stereotyped of Vietnam veterans, you know, the long haired guy with the Army jacket. (uh-huh) And my, my (inaudible)....who uh, were really dangerous and a lot of times the public still sees that I'm afraid but I think it's changing, over 4 years I think it's changing (uh-huh). Then the salute in Washington is I think, just sort of tops it off. Uh, just like they gave us a party. You know, (uh-huh), really. Uh, they gave us a party and I was real happy to be here. (hmm, that's good)

John: I wish I could of gone myself or to the one a couple of years ago. (yeah)

END OF INTERVIEW