

# A Piece of My Heart

ANNE SIMON AUGER AS TOLD TO KEITH WALKER

I remember driving down to Fort Sam Houston with two of the girls who had signed up with me. I can still see us flying down those freeways heading south toward Texas. We felt like we were invincible. We owned the world; we were free, independent. It was really neat.

I remember trying on our combat boots and ponchos and our uniforms; we'd never worn anything so ridiculous in our lives. And we would parade 'round and play games in them and think we were really cool . . . We learned how to march. We thought that was so funny. I remember we had field training. We were given compasses and had to go out and find our way back: we never had so much fun. We got lost twelve times to Tuesday—it didn't matter. We had a little bit of medical training in the field where they would wrap some volunteer up in bandages, put a tag on him saying what was wrong with him, and we had to take care of him. It was totally unrealistic. It was another game. We knew what to do and how to do it from the lesson, but we didn't have any idea of what we were getting ourselves into. We were given weapons training in that they showed us how to fire an M-16, but they wouldn't let us do it. Of course I didn't want to anyway—they were too noisy. They took us through a mock Vietnam village. That was a little scary when they had the punji stick<sup>1</sup> trap come up, but again it was no big deal. And I don't see how the Army could have done any different. I hated them for years for not training me better for Vietnam, but I don't think it could possibly

<sup>1</sup> **punji stick:** a sharpened bamboo stake concealed in high grass intended to wound the feet and legs of enemy soldiers; often coated with excrement so as to cause an infection

be done. I don't think you can train anybody or teach anybody to experience something that horrible without having them simply live it. . . . Anyway. We got through Fort Sam. It was a lark.

I went to Fort Devons in Massachusetts for six months. I was assigned to the orthopedic ward, and 100 percent of my patients were Vietnam casualties. They were long-term; they had been in Japan before they came to us. I didn't even relate them to Vietnam, and it bothers me now, because they could have been suffering some of the distress that I have, and I didn't recognize it. I know some of them acted really wild and crazy, but I figured it was just because they were kids. While I was there I was dating a psychologist. He was a captain. I'll never forget when I got my orders he was the first one I showed them to, and I was excited. "I'm going to Vietnam!" I told him. He was upset because he was staying there and I was leaving; he thought the man should go. It hadn't dawned on me before that I should be anything but excited. I didn't think to question anything that was going on or to wonder what I was getting myself into. I was just out for experiences at the time, I guess.

So, I remember flying over from Travis. I was the only woman on the plane. There must have been two hundred men on the plane. But everybody was polite and friendly until we got within sight of Vietnam, and then it all just quieted down. Nobody talked; nobody said anything. Everybody had their noses glued to the window. We saw puffs of smoke. The plane took a sudden turn up, and we heard we were being fired on. That was the first time it dawned on me that my life may be in peril. Then I started thinking, "Why would they want to shoot me? I haven't done anything to them." Anyway, we took this steep, real fast dive into Long Binh, and we landed in Vietnam. I remember talking to the nurse in charge of assigning people, and she actually gave me a choice of where I wanted to go. The other nurses with me knew just about where they wanted to go. They all had choices, and I had no idea of one place from another. So I told her to send me wherever she wanted, and she still wouldn't do that. She said, "North or south?" I said, "I don't know." I finally just decided, "Oh hell, send me north. If I'm going to be here I might as well get as close to the North Vietnamese as I can," which is really irrational now, but at the time I didn't know what I was doing. So she assigned me to the 91st Evac.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> **91st Evac:** a hospital near the front lines; Evac is short for "evacuation"

I was assigned to intensive care and recovery, which is like jumping straight into the fire. I had no preparation for it. I was six months out of nursing school and had worked in a newborn nursery until I joined the Army. It was hectic. It was fast paced. It was depressing. I spent six months there. Two of the incidents that really stand out from those six months: One was when I was working recovery. I had been there a few months, long enough to get numb and build a few walls. This eighteen-year-old GI came into my recovery ward. He had been through surgery. He'd been in an APC<sup>3</sup> that ran over a mine, and I think he was the only survivor. He was just a young kid; I don't even think he had hair on his face yet. And he came out of the anesthesia crying for his mother. I felt so helpless. I was barely older than he was, and he's crying, "Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!" I didn't know what to do. . . . I just held him, and I think that's all I did. It worked, but it was a real experience for me because I certainly wasn't maternal at the time and hadn't thought that that would ever come up. It got me to realize how young and innocent and how naïve these poor kids were. And their choices had been taken away from them.

Then the other incident. We had a sergeant, must have been in his mid forties; he was a drinker, an alcoholic. And he wasn't even involved first line in the war—he was a supply sergeant or something. He came into our intensive care unit with a bleeding ulcer. I remember spending two hours pumping ice water into his stomach, pulling it out, and pumping it back in. We were also pumping blood into him. He died, and he had a family back home, and I thought, "My God, it's bad enough to die over here legitimately"—the gunshot wound—but to die that way seemed like such an awful waste.

The patient that chased me off the ward . . . was a lieutenant named . . . I don't remember his last name—his first name was John. He was twenty-one. He'd gotten married before he came to Vietnam. And he was shot in his face. He absolutely lost his entire face from ear to ear. He had no nose. He was blind. It didn't matter, I guess, because he was absolutely a vegetable. He was alive and breathing; tubes and machines were keeping him alive. . . . I just . . . couldn't handle it. To think of how one instant had affected his life. . . . His wife's life was completely changed, his parents, his friends, me—it affected me too. And all

3 APC: armored personnel carrier



because of one split second. I got to realizing how vulnerable everybody was. And how vulnerable I was. I took care of him for a week. They finally shipped him to Japan, and I never heard from him again. I don't know if he's dead or alive. I don't know how his wife or his family are doing. I don't know how he's doing. It seems like every patient on that ward, when they left, took a piece of me with them. They came in, we would treat them for a few hours or a few days, and then we'd send them off and never hear a word. I had this real need to see one GI who'd survived the war after an injury, because I never saw them—never heard from them again. There was one time in Vietnam when I came so close to writing to my mother and asking her to check around and see if she could find one whole eighteen-year-old. I didn't believe we could have any left. After John left I just couldn't handle it any more. We had too many bodies lying in those beds minus arms and legs, genitals, and faces, and things like that can't be put back together again.

I found I'd built up walls real effectively. I was patient and tender with the GIs. I didn't talk to them a lot because I was afraid to—afraid of losing my cool. I was very professional, but I was distant. I worry sometimes about the way I treated those GIs in intensive care (this was an insight I only got a year ago). . . . I was afraid, because I didn't feel I had done my best with them. Because of the walls I'd put up I didn't listen to them, didn't hear

what they might be trying to tell me even just in gestures or whatever. I wasn't open to them because I was so closed to myself.

I got out of ICU.<sup>4</sup> I couldn't handle any more. I asked to be transferred to the Vietnamese ward. Everybody had to do that—spend a rotation in the ward. This is where I found out that war doesn't just hit soldiers, that nobody is safe from war. I can still see this little boy—he was about nine months old. He had both of his legs in a cast and one arm in a cast and his entire abdomen bandaged, because he'd gotten in the way. I delivered a baby for a POW, a stillborn baby. It amazed me that life still went on even in a war. Because it seemed like everything should just stop. We had lots of medical problems too when we weren't too busy with war injuries. I had an eight-year-old girl who died of malnutrition. That's something that we only read about in our textbooks. Her mother brought her in, reluctantly, and she said we had twenty-four hours to cure her. She didn't trust us. If we couldn't cure the kid in twenty-four hours, she was taking her away. She did take her away, and the kid died the day after. To come from a background like I did, where everybody has plenty to eat, a lot of security, and to witness what these kids went through. They were older at the age of four than I was at eighteen. And I'll never forget that look on their faces, that old-man look on those young kids' faces, because they'd lived through so much. That still haunts me today.

The POWs.<sup>5</sup> I took a lot of my frustrations out on them—in innocuous ways. I made one POW chew his aspirin when he wanted something for pain because I didn't think he had any right to complain while there were so many GIs injured . . . just on the next ward. One of the POWs attacked me once—tried to choke me—and I hit back at him. But I think before I even made contact with him, the two MPs<sup>6</sup> were all over him. I never saw him again. We had one twelve-year-old NVA who had killed five GIs. Twelve years old! And he would brag about it to me. He would spit at me. I have never seen such hate. To see the loathing that he had in his eyes was frightening. But at almost the same time, we had a kid on the other side of the ward who was about the same age. He was a scout for the GIs, so he was on “our side.” And the GIs just babied him. They thought he was the coolest kid, and he was so tough he scared me.

4 ICU: Intensive Care Unit; where those with the most serious injuries are taken to recover

5 POWs: Prisoners of War

6 MPs: military policemen

One of my most traumatic and long-lasting experiences happened to me while working the POW ward. An NVA was admitted with gunshot wounds he got during an ambush on a platoon of GIs. This POW was personally responsible for the deaths of six of those GIs. When he was wheeled into my ward, something snapped. I was overwhelmed with uncontrollable feelings of hate and rage. I couldn't go near this guy because I knew, without any doubt, that if I touched him I would kill him. I was shaking from trying to keep my hands off his neck. This scared me to death, and for twelve years after I was scared of experiencing it again. I discovered that I was capable of killing and of violently hating another human being. I had been raised to be a loving and giving person. As a nurse, I had vowed to help *all* who need it. As a human being I should love my brother, whoever he was. I was forced to confront a side of myself I never dreamed existed before.

After four months on the Vietnamese ward, I asked to be transferred again. So I was put on the GI medical ward. That was more depressing than the first two wards I'd been on. Mostly because the people that I had labeled as cop-outs were on that ward. The drug abusers, the alcoholics, the guys in there with malaria—because rather than go out in the field they would not take their malaria pills so they could come down with malaria. I was really very unsympathetic to them. I didn't try to understand them. After so many months of taking care of "legitimate" injuries, I couldn't handle that. I just figured, "Hell, even I can take this. Why can't you? You're supposed to be braver and stronger than I am, and somehow I'm managing."

We were shelled monthly, at least monthly. The closest call we had was when I was on the medical ward. I remember mortars were falling all around us. I had just gotten my sixty patients under their mattresses, and I dove under a bed myself, finally, and then this GI next to me says, "Hey, you forgot . . ." whatever his name was, and sure enough—he was one of our drug ODs—he was lying on top of his bed singing. I had to get out, crawl over to him, pull him out of bed, and put the mattress over him. I remember screaming at him. I was so mad at him for making me take any more chances. This happened the same day that my sister got married. In fact it was almost the same hour, and I thought, "My God, they're partying, and here I am." We had a sapper attack too when I was on that ward. That's when somebody infiltrates our perimeter. There's a certain siren that goes off. At the time, my corpsman on the ward was a

conscientious objector, so he wouldn't handle any firearms. I remember I had to grab the M-16 and stand guard after I had locked the doors. I didn't even know how to fire the damn thing! I finally had to haul one of my patients—he was a lieutenant, I remember—out of bed and had him stand with me in case the gun needed to be fired. Once again, I had the preconception that women were supposed to be taken care of, and it seemed like I was doing all the taking care of.

A lot more happened; I just don't like pulling it out. . . . It's behind me now, and I think what became of me is more important anyway.

I remember on the plane home I held my breath until we were probably a thousand miles from Vietnam, because I was so afraid that something would happen and we'd have to go back. We landed at Sea Tac.<sup>7</sup> I remember getting a hotel room and calling my parents, because they wanted to come out from Michigan to meet me. I ended up going back to the airport to meet them on *my* way home from Vietnam. They wanted to stay for two days in Seattle and sightsee. I can vividly see me sitting on this tour bus, looking out the window at nothing. Feeling up in the air, lost, disoriented. I was still back there. I didn't smile much. They thought I was angry. Well, they didn't know. They were trying to act like things were just the same as always—that a year hadn't gone by and that I hadn't gone anywhere. They were doing that to relax me. . . . I'm sure they were hurting too. I jumped at any noise. I looked at people walking the streets, and there wasn't even fear in their eyes. All I could think was, "If you only knew . . . you wouldn't be so damned complacent." I didn't even feel like going home. I wish I could have gone somewhere for a while—just to be by myself. I was pushed right back into everyday living, when I was still so far away from it and so disjointed that I couldn't possibly fit in. Everybody tried to ignore where I'd been. I guess some people did ask me about Vietnam, and I would say things like "It was okay." Or "Actually it was the pits." That's all I said for ten years. ☹

7 **Sea Tac:** Seattle Tacoma International Airport