

Gayle M. Smith
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Julia C. Huebner '20

HUEBNER: This is Julia Huebner with the Dartmouth Vietnam project. Today's date is Friday, February 14th, 2020. I'm sitting here with Gail Smith, G. A. Y. L. E. S. M. I. T. H.. We're in the history hub on the second floor of Carson Hall on the campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, USA. Gail, thank you so much for being here with us today. I know you mentioned in your emails before your latest that before your latest visit to the wall, the Vietnam veterans Memorial in D C in November, 2019 that you wouldn't have had a conversation like this. So I'm all the more appreciative to talk to you about your history now.

For the nuts and bolts of this conversation, we've bought out about two hours [to] two and a half hours. We'll start with some background questions so I can get to know you better. Then we'll talk about your tour in Vietnam. Next we're gonna finish up talking about the legacies of Vietnam, both for you and for the nation. If you'd like a break for any reason, that's absolutely fine. We'll just stop the recording and edit out any break material. And for those of you who are listening in the long future, I'll likely reference Gail's published account from her time in Vietnam, her chapter called "The Nurse with Round Eyes" features in the book *Everything We Had: an Oral History of the Vietnam War by 33 American Soldiers Who Fought in It*, compiled by Al Santoli and published by Random House in 1981.

SMITH: Great.

HUEBNER: All right -- Let's start with the basics. Gail, please tell me where and when you were born.

SMITH: I was born in 1947. Upstate New York. I was the third of three girls. My daddy was a World War II vet and he was [pause]. I was born, of course, after he came home. And he was a cook and an anti-aircraft gunner.

HUEBNER: And tell me again where you were born.

SMITH: Upstate New York state. Troy [NY]. My great uncle was an obstetrician, so he delivered all of us probably for free [laughter].

HUEBNER: Tell me a little bit more about your parents, not just, first, what they did, but also the type of people who they were.

SMITH: Well, I'll tell ya, my parents were -- I was lucky. I had fabulous parents: loving, caring. And they came from [pause]. My mother was an orphan. Her mom died from -- Her father first -- Both of my grandfathers died from tuberculosis. So when Mom was seven, her father died from tuberculosis and when she was 12, her mother died from post-appendectomy infection 'cause antibiotics weren't invented then. So, rather than put her in an orphanage, she just went from family member to family member. And she -- my great uncles, you know, she went around to different family members and they took care of her and she wanted to be either a gym teacher or a dress designer. And my great uncle said, "there's no money in dress designing and girls aren't gym teachers." She said, he said, "You'll be a nurse." He was a doctor. And he said, "You'll always have a job." She hated nursing. She didn't want me to go into nursing. So I said, "Okay, I'll go into nursing" [laughter].

SMITH: You know, I started out at Albany Medical Center [Albany, NY] when I was 14, doing all the things the nurses aides do. And I did it for free 'cause I was a volunteer. I was a candy striper. But you probably don't know about that, there it was a little uniform.

HUEBNER: Tell me more about that.

SMITH: Oh, candy striper?

HUEBNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Oh, well, you know, we did bed pans, bed bags, change linens, talk to people, you know, took vital signs.

HUEBNER: So, let's back up a second.

SMITH: Okay. About daddy?

HUEBNER: Sure, that'd be great.

SMITH: Daddy was born in the mountains just above... Mom was born in town in Voorheesville [NY] and Daddy was born up in the mountains and his father died from tuberculosis. Grandma had a total of five children. She had one and then the next two died before they were a year old, probably from childhood diseases.

And then my dad was born and his and his little brother was born, and grandpa, who I never knew, died from TB. And he wanted Daddy to play

on the bed with him as he was dying from TB. And so, you know, was pretty firm on that. Grandma went along with it. And interestingly enough, he [Daddy] never did actually develop the active disease [TB], but he did have a spot on his lung, so he had been exposed to it then it capsulated. Yep. And then Grandma moved into Schenectady [NY] remarried and had another baby. Grandma had to go down to the spring for water with two babies that are dead and three alive, you know, that's the way it was. And she said once in a while, [a] Native American would come by, hungry, so she would feed them.

HUEBNER: Thank you for sharing that.

SMITH: Oh yeah. But mom and dad were wonderful. They were loving. They were kind. You know, we didn't have a lot of money, that's for sure. But I always -- I felt that I never really wanted for anything. Maybe that was just me. I mean, I always had secondhand clothes cause I thought everybody did that [laughter]. But they were really good kind, caring, loving parents.

HUEBNER: That's great.

SMITH: I always felt supported, always.

HUEBNER: Can you tell me about -- Were there other people in the community that were really important to you as you were growing up?

SMITH: Well, I had a couple of girlfriends, you know. You know, the principal and all those older people, they scared me yet. There wasn't really anybody that's was really that remarkable, [who] stood out. Nope.

HUEBNER: Can you tell me what year you started and then graduated from high school in?

SMITH: Oh, sure - I graduated from high school in 1965.

HUEBNER: So you started in 61?

SMITH: When was Kennedy shot? I was in junior year in high school when Kennedy was shot.

HUEBNER: Can you tell me more about that? Do you remember?

SMITH: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Kennedy was -- I was in history class and our history teacher said that Kennedy had been shot and killed. And it was interesting. We had a few Catholics and one of the girls who was Catholic brought out her rosary and everybody was quiet, tearful and it was pretty remarkable, pretty remarkable. Then I was home, you know, cause they

canceled school and I was watching TV and I saw all Lee Harvey Oswald get shot and then ... Jack Ruby was the perpetrator and he had pancreatic cancer, so he knew he was going down in six months, anyway. So, yeah.

HUEBNER: It sounds like a really tumultuous time. Do you remember how you felt when you were in high school? Maybe felt as comparison to what was happening nationally or internationally with Russia? The Civil Rights movement in the US?

SMITH: I was kind in my own little world and Dad said – I was opposed to the war [in Vietnam] and I said, someday, I'll be a part of that.

SMITH: And so I went to nursing school first and I actually went to a two year -- went to Vermont College [VT] the first two years, became a registered nurse. And they said, "Well, if you go in now, you're just going as a Warrant Officer. If you get your baccalaureate degree, you go in as a regular officer." So I said, "Well, you know." So I worked for a year at Albany Med[ical Center] after I became an R.N. [registered nurse], I went to Syracuse University [NY] and got my BSN [Bachelor of Science in Nursing] and then signed up [to enlist in the Vietnam War]. Of course, as a Lieutenant [in] basic training, you have a private room with maid service [laughter].

HUEBNER: Lucky you! [laughter]

SMITH: It was really hard! And formation in the morning was just miserable. I mean, we tried to make it as best we could, you know, they want us to march and they had music going and nobody was paying attention. You know, most of us were hungover anyway. And what you do is you follow the person in front of you and they give you a command and some will go that way, some would go this way, and then we'd run back together. But then we got down to it. Part of basic training was – they shot a number of live goats -- gave them some anesthesia and shot them in the hindquarters so we could practice debriding wounds, cutting off [and] tying off bleeders -- and goats have long necks -- so we practiced doing tracheotomies -- the nurses did.

HUEBNER: Can we go back and just make sure that I have a full timeline on this? You know so much about your own life, right? I want to make sure I get an accurate timeline about it.

SMITH: Yeah.

HUEBNER: So you graduated high school in '65.

SMITH: Yes.

HUEBNER: After that, your next step was to go to school to become a nurse. Is that right?

SMITH: Yep. And I graduated from there in '67.

HUEBNER: '67. And where were you for nursing school?

SMITH: Vermont College. All the nursing schools I've ever been to it are all now shut down now. [laughter] Syracuse, Boston, all of them.

HUEBNER: So in '67, you were at Vermont College, and you said that your mom didn't want you to be a nurse. So, tell me then, why did you decided to pursue that path?

SMITH: I wanted to take care of people. Mom was so good – Mom didn't like nursing, but she was really wonderful at taking care of people and I wanted to be like her. So that's what I did. And I knew what I was getting into because by the time I was 14, I knew: I could see what was going on for nursing. I could see pretty much what nurses were doing.

HUEBNER: When you said that you could see what was going on, what does that mean?

SMITH: Well, you know, I watched to see what the other nurses, the RNs, were doing. And, even though I was real young, I could see what was going on and what patients -- I would listen to patients and if they think you're going to listen, they'll talk. They talk. Here's this little kid who's listening. So I did that. And after that, I worked for a year at Albany Medical [Hospital] in the emergency room.

HUEBNER: So that was maybe '68?

SMITH: That was '67 to 68.

HUEBNER: And you were at Albany Medical [Hospital]?

SMITH: Albany Medical [Hospital], yep.

HUEBNER: In the emergency room?

SMITH: Yeah.

HUEBNER: Doing a year of residency or --

SMITH: No, I was just a staff RN. Yeah. So, you know, you see all kinds of stuff in the emergency room. I used to wear -- that was the era before seatbelts -- and the bars used to close at three [o'clock in the morning]. And on Friday nights I used to wear a butcher's apron and I'd be soaked with blood, right straight into my underpants every Friday night. Some of them survived, some of them didn't.

And then after that, then I went to a Syracuse University from 1968 to 1970.

HUEBNER: And what degree did you pursue when you were at Syracuse?

SMITH: A BSN.

HUEBNER: Can you -- I'm not as familiar with the subject -- Can you just say real quick, what a BSN is?

SMITH: Baccalaureate in science and nursing.

HUEBNER: Thank you.

SMITH: Yeah! [laughter] Keep asking me questions.

SMITH: And then, for that summer, I was a camp nurse for 500 little boys. Oh, God [laughter]. And I said, "Oh, Jesus, you know, I hope I never have boys" [laughter]. I was very busy with these little boys. The 10-year olds didn't want to change their underwear, so they wind up with rashes. And then they get older and you can't get them out of the shower and stuff like that.

The military came to swear me in -- into the military. Two guys came, two officers came [and said]. "Raise your hand."

HUEBNER: "They came to the camp?"

SMITH: "Oh yeah. But I was in my bikini, so I was on the beach. So I went up to the infirmary in my bikini and they swore me in -- [in] the pink one. And they probably thought, "Holy -- This is gonna be interesting!" [laughter] ... And they said, "Okay, well, thank you ma'am." And they left. [laughter]

HUEBNER: So, tell me more: when did you decide formally that you wanted to serve in Vietnam as a nurse?

SMITH: When I was at Vermont College [in] 1968.

HUEBNER: And why did you decide in 1968 that you wanted to serve?

SMITH: Because I felt that being involved in this war was the wrong thing. It was the draft -- when the draft is on, your life is at stake. And that's why the students were demonstrating. I mean, it's not like now -- [today], you volunteer [because] the draft is over with. But back then your life was at stake. Everybody -- If you weren't marching -- when I was at Syracuse -- If you weren't doing something against the war, you weren't doing your job as a student. I mean, I, when my daughter Jessie [Jessica K. Friedman] went to Oberlin [College], which was supposed to be progressive and all, I thought, "Nobody's demonstrating." There are no signs.

At Syracuse, the administration building was always occupied -- burning the flag, hanging Nixon or whoever was it -- an effigy -- you had to be doing something. You look at this campus [campus of Dartmouth College] this is quiet, for crying out loud! and there's enough stuff going on that you should be active.

HUEBNER: So I'm really interested about this. Because you'd said earlier that you were opposed to the war --

SMITH: Yes, I was --

HUEBNER: And you just said that it was the wrong thing.

SMITH: Yes.

HUEBNER: And a lot of people would choose not to serve if they thought it was the wrong thing. So I'm curious as to why or how you square that: Being opposed to the war but also wanting to serve.

SMITH: I wanted to bring back people that I didn't think belonged there in the first place. And I was willing to sacrifice my life to do that. I mean, they're out there and I thought, "Well, you know, they don't belong here. Maybe I can do something to bring them back home and help them." And I was able to do that. So they lived -- some -- most of them lived.

HUEBNER: Can you tell me why you thought the War was wrong?

SMITH: [Pause] It didn't seem like -- It seemed like a thing so far away that it didn't make sense. It just didn't make sense to me. It just didn't make sense. It's not like World War II; it wasn't like Korea. I mean, this was a country in a civil war. And what the heck are we doing over there?

And when I got there, we used to make a joke that if they bombed this whole place and turned it into a parking lot, that would even be a waste. [Pause]. That's what we felt.

But, fortunately, I was able to bring some people home. I was in a little surgical hospital. Our policy is: if you can't kill them or cure them in 30 days, they get that off. So everyone – if you've got a broken finger, you get med evac'd. "Get outta here, go back home!" [laughter] We're doing everything we can to get you back home.

HUEBNER: Can we go back to -- I guess it was the summer of '70 when you were working at the summer camp, is that right?

SMITH: Oh yeah.

HUEBNER: And someone came to swear you in from the military --

SMITH: In my pink bikini! [laughter]

HUEBNER: Tell me, then, someone came to swear you in: did you leave that next day?

SMITH: Oh, no, I finished my job at the camp and then I went in to Fort Sam, San Antonio, Texas for my Basic [Training] in September [1970].

HUEBNER: And that was September of 1970?

SMITH: Yep, and then I was in Vietnam from November 12th, 1970 to November 12th, 1971.

HUEBNER: Tell me more about that training in San Antonio.

SMITH: Basic was march and then group, I joke, sort of like a wake-up thing you do in the morning. And practicing surgery on a goat, knowing that I'd have to do it on a person, which I actually did have to wind up doing. And also [pause] managing a weapon.

There was 253 of us nurses. I didn't know much of anything, hardly, about a weapon. We all had 45 caliber pistols. It was one-on-one. We could have opted out of it. And I said, "You know, I'm going to Vietnam -- I better learn how to do this." And so, you know, there was one [trained] guy [matched with] one nurse just to be sure that the gun was pointed in the right direction.

I looked out there, at the target, and it was the figure of a man. And I said, "Well, okay." And, of course, I couldn't hit anything. He [the trained man] says, "You keep hitting the ground." I said, "Well, move it [the target] in closer! I can't see it." He says, "Well okay." They moved in and closer and I think I got a couple bullets in there. And then they talked about magazines. Do you know what a magazine is?

HUEBNER: For a gun?

SMITH: Yeah! Well, I didn't. And they talked about "your magazines" and thought, gee, I didn't bring any magazines. And I didn't think anybody else did, either! I'm gonna be sitting here for a long time [laughter]. So then I figured it out 'cause they explained it to me.

HUEBNER: So, at your basic training, you said there were 253 nurses. Were all the nurses female at the time?

SMITH: At our group, they were.

HUEBNER: And it was just the 253 women, then, who were at training together?

SMITH: Yeah. But then went to all kinds of military hospitals across the US. Just a certain number of us went to Vietnam and I signed up for Vietnam. So they said, "No problem, here you go."

HUEBNER: So everyone else was going to be a nurse, a military nurse, but everyone was going to be deployed to different places. Not necessarily to Vietnam.

SMITH: [For] some of them, the military had paid for their nursing education. So they owed them [the US military] three years, four years, something like that. Yeah.

HUEBNER: And you just voluntarily enlisted? So the government didn't pay for any part of your nursing?

SMITH: Nope.

HUEBNER: So in November of 1970, you went from San Antonio to Vietnam. Bring me to that plane ride. What were you thinking?

SMITH: Well, I'll tell you -- Before I left, I gave away my things to my sisters. Because I thought, well, I might not come back. I said, if I come back, I want my shit back [laughter]. So they said, "Okay, if you'll come back, we'll give it back."

But I didn't want to do that to my parents 'cause they were really worried. Daddy certainly knew what I was in for. And mom had always said, "I'm glad I had girls, because now I don't have to worry about them going to war." And I did the worst thing. I did the worst thing. That was tough. That was very tough. Getting on that plane, looking out the window, wondering if I was going to come back. I saw where I was going to be buried. Because I had a plot.

HUEBNER: In the [United] States? In upstate New York?

SMITH: Yep. I saw where I was going to be buried.

I said, well, this is where I'll land. I said "If they get me, I hope they get me good." It's over with quick. But they didn't get me [laughter].

HUEBNER: Did your parents or any family members protest your decision or try to talk you out of going to Vietnam?

SMITH: Daddy said, "Is there anything we can do for you?" And I said, "You march against this war and get me home." And he says, "I can't do that."

HUEBNER: Why do you think he said that?

SMITH: He's military: you do with the government tells you to do. If the government says you go to war, you go to war. That's what he learned. That's what he did.

HUEBNER: And you said earlier that your mother was not pleased that you decided to go.

SMITH: Oh, she was terrified. Terrified.

HUEBNER: Did you -- was there a reckoning when you came home?

SMITH: Oh yeah. I hugged my Daddy first. I said, "I made it." I whispered in his ear: "I made it." It's like -- I made it! I went through all of this.

I went through all of this and I got to get on the plane [from Vietnam to the United States]. And when, when the plane landed first in Hawaii, boy did we cheer ... Everybody on the plane went up because we're all coming out of Vietnam. We had big cheer. Yeah.

HUEBNER: Did your sisters ever consider going to Vietnam?

SMITH: Oh, no. [Laughter] No. Linda, my oldest sister, she was married. No, that wasn't for them.

HUEBNER: Did you have any friends, whether it was at Syracuse or Vermont College or even during your time as a staff RN at Albany Medical that considered going [to Vietnam] alongside you?

SMITH: Nope. Nobody. Nobody.

HUEBNER: And so, then, the idea to go to Vietnam really was of your own --

SMITH: Oh, absolutely --

HUEBNER: Like moral volition. This was what you wanted to do.

SMITH: Yeah, I wanted to do it cause I didn't think people belong there and I wanted to see what I could do to bring them home. So I did.

HUEBNER: And so on that plane ride, then: you left San Antonio.

SMITH: Oh yeah. Then I came home for like a week or so.

HUEBNER: You went home?

SMITH: Yeah, and then I got on a plane in Albany and went to Chicago and out to California and got on another plane, went to Vietnam.

HUEBNER: And you flew in to where?

SMITH: Tan Son Nhat Airport [Vietnam]. Yeah, that was where we all landed.

HUEBNER: Could you just spell that for me just so I know I have it right?

SMITH: Gee whiz. [Laughter]

HUEBNER: If it's not perfect, that's totally fine [Laughter].

SMITH: It's near Saigon [Vietnam]. Near Long Binh [Vietnam]. L O N G - B I N H.

HUEBNER: And you got off the plane with how many other people? --

SMITH: Well, the first thing they said was, if we get hit -- first of all, you're going to come in like this [motions hand in in horizontal and then sharply vertical angle, to indicate an abrupt plane landing], because they were taking pot shots at the plane. They said if there's action, you get a crawl on the ground and go into the hangar. Just crawl. But we didn't get hit. And then -

HUEBNER: And how many of you were there on the plane going in?

SMITH: Oh, it's probably couple hundred.

HUEBNER: And all nurses or just enlisted folks, generally?

SMITH: No, no, no: Just everybody. Yeah.

HUEBNER: And so you arrived near Long Binh? And what was, and you stepped off the plane and what did you see? What did you feel?

SMITH: Well, I stepped off the plane and I got a ride, somebody in a Jeep or something to get to the camp -- got my clothes and stuff and we had a shower, but [in which] you have to pull the chain. And it was cold, of course, and it was bugs everywhere. So my girlfriend and I were doing the shower together and somebody was swatting the bugs [laughter] and then the beds we were in had bed bugs. So I had bites all over my legs and then we got hit. [Laughter]. That was pretty loud but I figured well, you know, here we are.

HUEBNER: And this was in Long Binh where you stayed for how long before you went to Binh Thuy [Vietnam]?

SMITH: Maybe a week, four or five days, something like that. Then I got on another plane and uh, went down to IV Corps down to Binh Thuy, the little hospital down in Binh Thuy.

HUEBNER: When you went, how many nurses did you arrive with? Was it just you?

SMITH: Three.

HUEBNER: Three others?

SMITH: Just two others, and myself, down there.

HUEBNER: Did you become friends with those people that you started with?

SMITH: There were like my -- we had private rooms so it was a hooch, you know, a two-level hooch. No, we were kind of -- we didn't really become friends. We worked together cause we were working 12 hour days and you come home go to the officer's club for a drink or something and go to sleep. You really had to be on the ball: to get ready to get up. If we got a lot of incoming, you know, a lot of casualties -- get up and you stay there.

HUEBNER: At the hospital that you were at in Binh Thuy. How many nurses were there, generally?

SMITH: I'd say 20.

HUEBNER: And who were the other folks that were working as staff members in the hospital? It was, so the 20 nurses and I'm assuming --

SMITH: The doctors, people that worked in the lab, people that worked in the dental thing, sort of like your basic hospital ... head injuries went up North -- we didn't do -- tried to stabilize them [but] big head injuries and spinal cord injuries, they went up North.

HUEBNER: Can you describe to me as you remember it, who was the person -- could you describe to me the typical nurse?

SMITH: [Laughter]. Well, you know what? Everybody's got different personality and everybody deals with things. There was a couple of nurses that were lazy. I thought, I want to just smack 'em. You know, you get up and you'd do your dance. And there was -- I remember -- cause I would come on duty and I had 44 patients.

HUEBNER: You had 44 patients at any given time.

SMITH: Oh yeah, I had my beds lined up. I had 22 in this floor and I had one medic worker and I had 22 in the next, next area over. So the less acute ones were over there. Everybody on V's [intravenous (IV) line] and fresh gunshot wounds stuff like that was right in front of me.

So the first thing I would do is -- when you come on duty, you're female and all the guys say, "Oh, it's a girl!" [Laughter]. So I would eyeball everybody, and they'd be looking at me or talking or looking at each other and laughing. I'd look at them, be sure everybody was okay, see how much was left in their IV bottle. And I went down the line.

This guy over here [Paul K. Barnes] wasn't looking at me and I said -- so I went down, he was out. And so, I pulled the covers back and he was sitting in a pool of blood. And he was a Navy seal. That's where I learned about what Navy seals do. They're assassination teams. That's what they do. One doesn't get hit; they all get hit. Maybe there's a couple of survivors, a couple of deaths, the rest come to us.

[I] pulled it up and I told the medic, I said, "Get me tourniquet," and he had a guillotine amp [amputation] his leg was pretty much off when he came in, so they just did a g-tine amp and you do reconstruction later. And he had bleeders at the stump and that's why he was bleeding out, he was unconscious, cold, clammy, sweaty. And so, I said, "Get the doctor." And I had an IV started. and I said, "Get blood." So I had, I got a unit in a blood in, I just ran it in quick before the doctor even got there and he got there quick. The doc said, "You know, this is how you clamp off a bleeder." I said, "Yeah, I know." So I got the suture and stuff and clamped off his bleeders and by then, he was awake. And he called me on the phone years later. And he says, "I remember you clamping up bleeders in my stump." So, he made it home [laughter].

HUEBNER: Was, was this situation like that typical of what you did every day or was that an anomaly?

SMITH: Well, I mean that was the most dramatic one.

There's another guy -- I mean, I could tell: instinct tells me when things are not right.

With the limited knowledge that nurses had back then -- nurses back then weren't even using stethoscopes to listen to lungs -- we were just doing blood pressures. We didn't know how to do that.

One guy came in, [and he] didn't have a scratch on him, but he had been in a Jeep and he hit a mine, [which] popped him up in the air and his Jeep up in the air. And [he] came in. And he's talking to me, but I could not hear his blood pressure, couldn't hear it. I said, "Something's wrong, something's wrong". And I kept taking his blood and talking to the doctor. I said, "His hemoglobin hematic [hematocrit] -- it's going down. There's something wrong." The doc -- and I was on nights [the night shift]. I had -- it was a light above every bed. And the doctor said, "Oh, I can't have you keeping this light on all night. I'll put him in the unit." And later on, and he [the doctor] says, "It's a good thing you did that because he had ruptured spleen and bilateral pneumothorax.

It was just from the blast, just from the trauma. So, after that they put me in the unit and they said, well, maybe you should be in the unit.

HUEBNER: Can you tell me what the unit is --

SMITH: Oh, the ICU [with a] combination ICU-recovery room.

HUEBNER: And so, if we can go through the kind of the basics of what your "title" was --

SMITH: [I was] your basic staff nurse. At the end [in November, 1971] I was a night supervisor cause I was working in the emergency room.

HUEBNER: And so when did you start over that year? [When did you begin] working in the emergency room?

SMITH: The last three months. First of course I worked in medicine [treating] fevers of unknown origin, leftover gunshot wounds that weren't too bad.

And then, my most of my remarkable one: I came on duty, and the nurse said, "You know, we've got a gunshot wound to the neck". And I thought, Oh God." But [the other nurse says], "He's okay." And I said, "Oh really?" So I looked at him and he's sitting in his bed, just looking around, probably a little stiff neck, a little bandage here [points to front of neck], and another one for the exit wound back here [points to back of neck]. And it [the bullet] missed everything. It missed everything, all the nerves, all the blood vessels, everything. A gunshot wound to the neck. And then, [featured in]

this Ken burns film on Vietnam: there he was. There he was! The medics got him loaded up, it happened to be on film. The guy had a gunshot wound to the neck, and the medic said, "You're going to be okay." I said to Matt [Matthew J. Friedman D'61, husband], "I took care of that guy." You don't forget that.

So, then, from there, I went over to post-op [post-operation] all my gunshot wounds and drag wounds and stuff like that.

And then I went to the Intensive Care Unit. And in the Intensive Care Unit was a combination thing. We took our post-ops -- military post-ops -- recovery room basically -- those that really needed to be in ICU, like real critical patients and some Vietnamese that were really bad[ly injured].

There was some children, we hit a school.

HUEBNER: There was a school near the hospital?

SMITH: Well, you know, in town. We made a mistake and hit a school. So we got those children [as patients at the hospital]. But there was one child that was dying and the parents were there. It's interesting what parents do when their children are dying. We didn't speak the same language, but they wanted me to baptize him [the child]. It's like "cover all your bases". So I baptized him, did the dance, the child died. Wrapped him up. Put him in a container out back. It's kinda hard.

And then there was one woman in labor and she delivered in silence. They don't -- no anesthesia -- but they never say anything. It's silent. The whole thing is silent. I go, "woah."

One of my medics got caught up in drugs and he became septic and I knew he was dying. Not much I could do about that.

And then my burn patient that I told you about: he was -- he came in talking to me, [and I] loaded him up with as much morphine as I could -- talk -- whispered in his ear, said "You're not alone." I looked him up.

HUEBNER: Could you say more about the burn patient just now that we're on the recording?

SMITH: The patient was -- it was, July 17th, 1971. And he was in a helicopter [that] got shot down. There was another helicopter circling overhead and most of -- there's three guys in it. The other two were killed instantly.

My patient got out, [and] he was in flames. So this guy, you know, [from] the other helicopter came down [to rescue the burn patient]. [He] put the

flames out and threw him [the burn patient] into the [heli]copter and brought him into us. And he's burned [on] 100% of his body. And the bones are sticking out of his right leg.

And he was talking to me. And he came in about maybe two o'clock in the afternoon. I came on duty at seven [o'clock]. And the other nurses were saying, "He's got a track scholarship to Penn State [University, PA]. And I said, "Oh." And then we'd been talking about that. And so I said, "Okay." And, whenever-- most of my patients know when they're going to die, they know it. They know even before they get hit over there. [They say], "It didn't feel right, may not come back from this one." And that happened.

So I went over to him and I said, "I hear you got a scholarship to Penn State."

He says, "Yeah, but I don't think I'm gonna make it. I'm not gonna make it out of this one."

I said, "You're right." I said, "Do you want me to write a letter to your parents or [you] got a girlfriend or something?"

And he says, "No."

And those were the last words he spoke.

And I said, "Well, you're not going to be alone."

[I] gave him some morphine as much as I could and whispered in his ears. Because -- usually -- I hold hands, but he had four hands. This one [creates fist] was meat. And this one [with other hand, cups hand below fist] was skin of his hand, all in one piece. It was like this [continues to make a fist and cupped hand to demonstrate how the skin was loosely hanging off the bottom of what was left of his hand]. Of course, you can't recognize him -- 100% burns. It was hopeless, a hopeless situation. He knew it.

So, I had to put him in a bag and send him home to his mother.

That was hard. I was upset.

And then, there was a supervisor, a nursing supervisor. He was in the ER. And he came in and he gave me a Coke. I thought that was the most important thing in the world to me. That he cared enough -- he knew how upset I was that this guy died, and he gave me a Coke.

I never forgot that.

HUEBNER: Over time, dealing or seeing and addressing the trauma how do you feel -- first, how do you think your emotions changed over time?

SMITH: Not at all.

HUEBNER: That's really interesting. Can you say more about that?

SMITH: It's like it happened yesterday. I see it. I can see it all, right in my head, I can see everything. And it was hard for me to come to this today because it's like -- I don't know -- ordinarily, for a long time, I wasn't thinking of it too much, hardly at all. But [pause] I see it like was yesterday.

[I] think about his parents. I actually found him [and] his family, online, [as] part about a demonstration of the wall [Vietnam Veterans War Memorial, Washington, D.C.]. They had pictures and stuff and somebody had written -- his cousin actually -- had written a little notation back in 2005. And I found it just last year [in 2019]. So I said, "I'll just, I'll email her, and see what happens."

[In the cousin's email reply], she said -- I told her I was with him -- and she said, "The military told me he died right away." Which is probably just as well. She said, "He's got a little brother, and his little brother never got over it.

So [pause] just one of those things. I took a picture and went to the wall in November. I had a picture of him because his cousin put it up [online]. [It was his] high school picture. And so, I put it at the base of his panel and I always say hello to him and to the other guys that I knew that I had supper with one night and [were] gone the next.

So you don't make friends because they're not going to be here. They couldn't, might not be here the next time.

HUEBNER: Do you remember the name of the man who was burned?

SMITH: Yes.

HUEBNER: Could you tell me now?

SMITH: Oh yeah. Actually, I looked up a Find a Grave and I printed off a picture of it, of his tombstone and where he's buried and there's a picture, there's what we call death pictures. They take a picture of you so they can put it in the newspaper after you die. And his picture was his on his stone. Yeah. His name is John Lopochonski [Spec John Henry Lopochonsky]. L. O. P. O. C. H. O. N. S. K. I. Yeah.

HUEBNER: Thank you.

SMITH: Yup.

HUEBNER: When you were in Vietnam, how did you cope with a lot of these really distressing things?

SMITH: [Pause] Well, when you're a nurse -- and I worked in the emergency room when I was younger -- you learn when you leave the hospital leave it behind or you're never going to survive. So when you walk out the door, you push it aside. And for some things, it's hard. Like when John was burned -- I'm sure you haven't ever smelled a burn patient, but it gets in you. You wash your hair. You blow your nose. You brush your teeth. You take a shower. The smell of burned flesh is still in you and it lasts for about three days.

HUEBNER: Did you have confidants, friends that you were able to process a lot of this with?

SMITH: Now you don't process this stuff. You just try and hang on. You don't process stuff like this. You just keep on going forward and say, "Okay, I hope I make. Hope I make it."

HUEBNER: Were there ways that might've been pleasant distractions, like a recreational activity, that you and the nurses would do to decompress?

SMITH: Yeah, we had a pool. We'd go swimming in the pool once in a while. The civilians, you know, Americans civilian contractors, gave us a pool. So we could swim in that once in a while during the day.

I was never really big drinker, so, I went to the officer's club and talked and fooled around, but you know, just wasn't a big drinker.

HUEBNER: Tell me how -- intellectually -- when you were in Vietnam ... I know that before you left for your tour that you were against the War.

SMITH: Oh, yes.

HUEBNER: How did your views of American politicians or American decision decisions to be involved in Vietnam change over your one year tour?

SMITH: Big fucking liars. All of them. General Westmoreland was the worst. He was the worst. You know, he twists the stuff up and give it to the President. We knew what was happening. They knew what was happening.

HUEBNER: Where were you getting your news from when you were in Vietnam?

SMITH: Each other.

HUEBNER: Can you go on about that?

SMITH: Well, they said we weren't supposed to be in Cambodia. Well, we do – We're coming in [i.e. patients were coming into hospitals] from Cambodia. This Vietnamization Program -- we're supposed to be teaching them how to do stuff and sometimes there were problems.

I remember one guy, they were – in the helicopter. I guess there was a little argument up there between the South Vietnamese army military person and the [American] pilot. And so the South Vietnamese pulled out his gun and put it to the pilot's head. He says, "We go home now." No problem.

There were other times -- they're supposed to be fighting for their country. So they would gotten into – the South Vietnamese army dudes got into it – they got into a hotspot -- So they called in some of our helicopters and said, "Get us outta here. We've got wounded, we've got wounded."

So they got them [the South Vietnamese combatants] on the helicopters, moved bandages and blood. So, then they took off the bandages and there was nothing wrong.

You know, what happened to them? They [the American pilot and crew] went up about a thousand feet [in the helicopter]. They [the Vietnamese who lied about their injuries] got dumped out.

[Pause]

HUEBNER: The people to come in for treatment at the hospital -- You said there were at least a few Vietnamese, because there was a group of Vietnamese children that were treated -- Were there Vietnamese combat folks [who got treatment at the hospital]?

SMITH: Only if it was a really interesting case, because if our doctors got bored, they go into their Vietnamese hospital and pick up – they'd say, "This guy's a disaster. Let's take him into our hospital and we'll see if we can treat him." Ordinarily, we didn't take them [Vietnamese].

HUEBNER: How did you view the Vietnamese people were when you were in Vietnam?

SMITH: [Pause] Not very well. They should be fighting her own fricking war, not letting us die. That's the lesson that should be learned: Don't fight a war for somebody else. They want it bad enough, they'll do it [themselves]. Unless it's a situation like World War II and you'd have people in the [concentration] camps and stuff. You got to stop them, you got to stop them. But before I left, the nursing supervisor said, "If you sign up for another tour, we'll make you captain."

And I said, "I won't live that long." [Pause]

HUEBNER: And why did you say that?

SMITH: Because I was on the edge. I said I was angry. With what was going on, all my patients were dying. What were they dying for? What were they dying for? What were they wounded for? Why did they -- What'd you lose your leg for? Back then, it was a big deal. I had a patient say, "Who's going to look at me now with one leg?"

I was talking to some of the guys at supper, I said, -- [They said], "If you come up with me, you could be door gunner for a day."

HUEBNER: You could be, sorry, what?

SMITH: You could be door gunner -- go up in a helicopter. And he said, "We can shoot some water buffalo." I said, "I don't want to shoot animals. I want to shoot the enemy." And then I thought, "If I'm trying to shoot the enemy, they're going to be firing back." [Laughter]. And I only have two weeks left. [Laughter]. I don't think this is a good idea.

But I mean it's really pretty clear: I was walking on a very fine line of sanity. Very fine line.

HUEBNER: Yeah.

SMITH: But I knew I was going to be changed. I just didn't know how. I felt very guilty about leaving, very guilty about leaving.

HUEBNER: Let's talk more about that. So your tour officially ended in November of 1971 is that right?

SMITH: Right.

HUEBNER: And so you knew that you were going to be coming back state side and you were going to be leaving behind your -- either the friends that you had met at the hospital and all those experiences --

SMITH: The patients!

HUEBNER: The patients. And how – I'm assuming once you got to Vietnam, you knew how long the tour was going to be.

SMITH: Oh yeah.

HUEBNER: And so in those weeks and days leading up to when you knew that you were leaving –

SMITH: Yeah --

HUEBNER: -- How did you feel?

SMITH: "Hope I make it!" "I hope nobody gets me at this point!" [Laughter]. And I did.

The emergency room -- it was like just four litters, and the door was here in the helipad was out there. I came out with my stuff. The guy on a stretcher here just walked into the tail rotor. You know what a tail rotor is?

HUEBNER: No,

SMITH: On a helicopter, there's a tail. And it goes so fast [so that] you can't see it. He walked into it. He was lucky; some people had been decapitated. But he gets *dang, dang, dang, dang*. [He was a] big guy, otherwise his arm would've been off.

And I said, well, you know, tour's up.

He's there on the stretcher, somebody taking care of him. And I got on that helicopter. I didn't walk into the tail rotor. [Laughter]

HUEBNER: That is very good.

SMITH: I thought, God damn! Not doing that! [Laughter]

HUEBNER: To spend a little bit more about actual time in Vietnam –

SMITH: Yeah.

HUEBNER: Before we go back to the States: What do you think the tone at the hospital was like?

SMITH: Try to make it fun once in a while. Make it funny.

HUEBNER: Do you have examples of how people tried to make it funny?

SMITH: Well [on] Halloween we'd wear a mop heads [laughter], do something funny. I think it's sort of interesting. It's hard to make it funny, but we did crazy, stupid stuff.

We were all young, you know, our CO, he was temporary. He was so drunk one time. Holy moly.

HUEBNER: Could you explain to me real quick what a CO is?

SMITH: Commanding officer.

HUEBNER: Thank you.

SMITH: They were worried they're going to have to intubate him. He was so drunk and unconscious. I went, "Jesus!", I'll just take over.

And then one time the NVA were close by -- we knew they were coming by cause the doctors came in to the intensive care unit and slept in the beds in the ICU and had two bandoliers of ammo, an M16 and .45. And I thought, "Well they're close." But they decided not to hit us. They could of hit us anytime they wanted.

HUEBNER: Do you have a hunch as to why they decided not to hit the hospital?

SMITH: They were just infiltrating, just getting things set up. That's what they do. You can't tell one from another.

HUEBNER: And the actual, the place that you were in, it was pretty close to Can Tho, is that right?

SMITH: It was close to where?

HUEBNER: To Can Tho? [Pause] What was the closest city to the hospital?

SMITH: Binh Thuy was the horse town, so to speak, dirt road, houses on the river.

HUEBNER: And what was the closest city to you all?

SMITH: Can Tho.

HUEBNER: Can Tho, I understand.

SMITH: That was the province capitol that was seven miles down the road.

HUEBNER: Did you get to Can Tho often?

SMITH: I did, [but] no not very often.

First of all, if you eat, you got to risk getting hepatitis, 'cause there's chickens and stuff running all over the restaurant, you know. And the other thing was you risk getting shot. So, actually, when I went, I went on a two and a half ton truck and they said, "You need to lie on the floor so they don't see you because they'll pick you off." So, we lay the floor and they all had arms and we got off, had a supper, and I got back on the truck, lay on the floor, went back to the hospital. [Laughter]

HUEBNER: What do you want to get out of your service in Vietnam?

SMITH: What?

HUEBNER: Like, when you were going over, did you have an objective?

SMITH: Yes: My objective was to bring home as many people as I could. And that's what I did.

HUEBNER: And so you feel like you accomplished what you wanted to get out of it?

SMITH: Yup. Yup.

HUEBNER: Did you have a supervisor at the hospital?

SMITH: Yeah.

HUEBNER: Did you agree with their -- the way they decided to do --?

SMITH: No, you see, the supervisors were regular army. They're what we called lifers, so they believed in the war, they believed in whatever. So you didn't discuss it. I did my thing. They did their thing. That was that.

HUEBNER: If you look at the entire body of nurses -- how many were there?

SMITH: Probably around 20.

HUEBNER: 20? What do you think was the split between people who, like you, believed that you were there to get folks home and that you didn't believe in the war versus people who are quite steadfast in their belief?

SMITH: We never discussed it.

HUEBNER: Really?

SMITH: Never discussed it. You don't discuss stuff like that when you're just trying to go from day to day.

HUEBNER: Were there any other topics that were quite off limits?

SMITH: No [Laughter]. Political discussions. Yeah. No, no, Nope. Nope.

HUEBNER: Did you have correspondence with your family via letters?

SMITH: Oh yeah, I'd send 'em tapes. Told them what it was like.

One time, they contacted the Red Cross cause I they hadn't heard from me from a little while.

Now our mess officer --you know what a mess officer?

HUEBNER: No,

SMITH: The guy in charge of the cafeteria. He was selling food, our food, to the Vietnamese, cause he was making some bucks on the side and I couldn't get enough food for my patients. They were wounded and wanted a little more and I said, "I tried and I can't get it - can't get more food."

But then, you know, here's kind of – I had a guy I was dating, had befriended him, and – you had better turn that off.

HUEBNER: Okay.

[Recording is paused at 59:08].

SMITH: I don't want to have any incriminating stuff.

HUEBNER: No, of course not. [Laughter].

Was there anyone who you were with in Vietnam that you still keep in touch with or was particularly influential?

SMITH: Nobody I kept in touch with. [There was] that one fellow that called me that I saved his life, basically, [via] amputation.

HUEBNER: Do you remember his name?

SMITH: Yeah - Paul Barnes. B. A. R. N. E. S. Yeah. He said, "If you hadn't done that I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have children. I wouldn't."

[Pause] But, no, you kinda like don't want to remember anything 'cause you feel ... when I came over I had a hard time. I didn't want to listen to the news because the boxes were coming back. God, you know, I felt so guilty about leaving them. I felt so guilty. The war wasn't over, the wounded were still coming in. I should be there taking care of them, but I wouldn't have lived another year to do it anyway.

HUEBNER: Do you think you wouldn't have lived because you would have been a fatality?

SMITH: Oh, yeah.

HUEBNER: From the Vietnamese?

SMITH: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I would have been a door gunner. [Laughter]. A door gunner for a day!

HUEBNER: I don't understand.

SMITH: A door gunner, you know: they would have taken me up in a helicopter and they said, you know, you can be door gunner.

HUEBNER: And that would have been it?

SMITH: Yeah, I'd probably get shot. Hate it when that happens. [Laughter]. It's always a disappointment, you know [Laughter].

HUEBNER: So when you came home, you flew from Vietnam to?

SMITH: I got into Travis Air Force Base in California, which is where they have some of the quarantine patients right now from China [note: reference to the 2020 Coronavirus outbreak]. Travis Air Force Base. And from there, I flew into Texas to see my great uncle who delivered me cause he was dying. He was old. And then met my parents there and then drove back to upstate New York. And I became a nurse on the ski patrol up at Stowe [Mountain Resort, VT]. I applied for the job before I left, you know, I said, "I can't go in a hospital." I can't deal. Let me party and be on the ski patrol for a year, [and] get some free skiing. And so, I did that and then I went to graduate school.

HUEBNER: So just to get the timeline right here: so '71, you came back home.

SMITH: Yep.

HUEBNER: And then between '71 and '72, you were at Stowe.

SMITH: Yeah, I was at Stowe, for that winter. Then, that summer of '72, I was at the Albany VA [Albany Veterans Affairs Medical Center, NY], worked as a nurse at the Albany VA. And then in September, I went into graduate school at BU [Boston University, MA].

HUEBNER: So that would be the next – so '73, then?

SMITH: Mmhmm.

HUEBNER: Then you went to graduate school for nursing?

SMITH: Oh yeah, yeah.

HUEBNER: Boston university, just to make sure?

SMITH: Yeah, yeah.

HUEBNER: I'm interested to hear that you went to go work for the Albany VA because when you came back you said that you wouldn't be able to go to a hospital and you didn't want to discuss Vietnam, and then you chose to go to the VA.

SMITH: Well, you see, I had partied for about four months up in Stowe [Laughter]. So I kind of was a little bit more relaxed than I was. When you go to the VA back then -- I had a few Vietnam vets -- that was for veterans, not active duty -- but that's from all, all the bores taking care of them.

And back then we used to -- it's more strict right now: who you admit for how long you admit them to the hospital. But a lot of these vets would come in for the winter.

HUEBNER: And did those memories of Vietnam resurface when you were working at the Albany VA?

SMITH: No. I mean I took care of some Vietnam vets with amputations: had their legs blown off, come back in a little osteoporosis and a little osteomyelitis and stuff. But that didn't, it didn't, it just didn't --

HUEBNER: You wrote in your account, "*The Nurse with Round with Eyes*" that --

SMITH: -- That wasn't my idea. I just spoke into a mic and they wrote it out. Al [Santoli] wrote it.

HUEBNER: But you had said --

SMITH: Oh, sure.

HUEBNER: As part of the account that when you came back you felt very numb.

SMITH: Oh, I was numb.

HUEBNER: Can you say more about that?

SMITH: I came home and I said to myself, "Now I know what it feels like to be a hundred." Because I feel like I'm a hundred. I had no joy, no sadness, no emotion. It was like everything had been drained out. It just wasn't there. No love, no hate, no nothing. No nothing.

It's just hard to explain it. It's just like, you're empty. Been emptied. You've done everything you can do and now, you're empty.

And then, I was skiing – [using] those were the [ski] poles with the straps - - and I fell. Put that thumb right back there [twists thumb backwards to mimic nature of injury] and I'll tell you that hurt. I cried. And I thought, "It's coming back." Normally, I'd just say, "Jesus – That hurts!" [Laughter]. I actually cried. I had a cast and all that stuff. I skied with it, anyway, cased [Laughter]. Just got a big glove [Laughter].

HUEBNER: When you came home, you said earlier that that you had whispered in your dad's ear –

SMITH: I made it.

HUEBNER: That you made it.

SMITH: I just said that in his ear when I got off the plane and I saw him for the first time. [I] hugged him, hugged mom ...

HUEBNER: And they were there to greet you, when you got back?

SMITH: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

HUEBNER: Were they worried about you emotionally or psychologically after you'd come home? Did they ask you anything about the war?

SMITH: I don't know. I know that they knew that I didn't act right sometimes.

HUEBNER: Say more about that.

SMITH: Well, when the news was on, I had to leave the room or ask them if I can drive the car, just get away. And then, the first time I drove the car over to visit my grandmother, my sister was in the passenger seat and I was driving mom's -- somebody's car -- probably mom and dad's.

And my sister said to me, "What's the matter? Can't you see?"

And I was -- I thought, "Well, I was looking at the tree line," thinking that something's going to come out and shoot me. It's always distracted. Now they do this thing [hand position] looking for someone who's trying to kill me.

I said, well, that's stupid. And then I remember going to the grocery store after the boat people came over and I seen a South Vietnamese woman in the grocery store up here. And I went, "Jesus, I don't have a weapon. I don't have a weapon on me."

I went, "Wait a minute, she's not going to try and kill me -- I don't think." You know, but I wasn't sure. So I kind of skipped that aisle [Laughter].

It's stuff like that creeps in. Doesn't creep in anymore. Like that ...

Just this guy. He creeps in.

HUEBNER: John Lopochonsky?

SMITH: Yeah, he creeps in a lot. He creeps in a lot.

HUEBNER: Is there anything that sparks that, or just, randomly?

SMITH: Part of it was coming here. You know, I thought I made my peace. Thought I had it all wrapped up when I went to the Wall the last time [the Vietnam Veterans Memorial]. I guess I really haven't.

His parents now know how he really died cause his parents are dead.

HUEBNER: But [did] his parents knew before they passed, [did they know] the true story?

SMITH: No, they never knew.

HUEBNER: Oh, they never knew where. That was your point.

SMITH: They never knew. They said he was killed instantly.

HUEBNER: But I think you had said that you had talked to maybe one of his --

SMITH: His cousins, cousins. That's right. And then I saw the birthday -- the death dates of his parents. Yeah, I did that yesterday. Yeah. So now they know. His father was a World War II vet, lost his arm, Then he lost his son [at age] 21. Then he lost his son.

HUEBNER: You have this great quote in "*The Nurse with Round Eyes*." You had said ... oh no, I've lost it ...

SMITH: That's okay.

HUEBNER: ... You had said that the army was the ultimate unit of organized crime.

SMITH: Oh God, yes. Sure.

HUEBNER: Say more about that.

SMITH: Well, look at the mess officer who was selling our food! You can sell just about everything. Anything you want and get away with it. Just make money. And that happened all the time. Happened a lot, you know, equipment and stuff like that. [People would] disassemble weapons and send them home, piece by piece.

I wasn't too interested in that. I just wanted to get my stuff home without any cockroaches in it. I told my parents, I said, "Put my stuff -- garage -- [when I'm] home and put it in the garage. Don't put -- don't open it up and don't bring it into house. [Laughter]. Damn these stupid, these cockroaches were like this [makes large hand motion to indicate the size of the cockroaches]. I mean, I used to, when I was in Vietnam, take my underwear and shake it out.

HUEBNER: Make sure there was nothing in there! [Laughter].

SMITH: Make sure there were no critters in it! Hate it when that happens! [Laughter].

HUEBNER: If we go back to the timeline: you started at Boston University in '73.

SMITH: Yeah.

HUEBNER: And how long did, how long did it take to get your Master's?

SMITH: [A] Master's degree: 12 months. It was a 12 month program.

HUEBNER: So then by '74 --

SMITH: -- I came up here in '73 so I was done with my graduate education.

HUEBNER: Oh, you were done then -- you graduated in '73. Okay.

SMITH: And I came up here in September. It was a September to September program, 12 months. Then I came up here to the VA.

HUEBNER: To the VA and the VA in –

SMITH: The VA right here, in White River Junction [VT] and I saw this dude here [motions to husband who has joined the interview].

HUEBNER: Hi, Matt[hew] Friedman '61. [laughter].

SMITH: And I said, I said to him, "I'm having a hard time in my life. How about a prescription for Valium?"

And he said, "Sure."

He said, "You want to go to the movies tonight?" [Laughter].

And I said, "Sure." [Laughter].

And that was 44 years ago. So, we're still dating [Laughter].

HUEBNER: What a great thing to be able to say.

FRIEDMAN: That was Valium Day.

SMITH: Yeah, Romance. The left -- people say, "What's the secret to be married for so long?" Nobody ever asked me that and I said, "It's chemistry. I can't explain it."

It's just -- I thought getting married was dumb [laughter] and I met him and I thought -- I got scared -- cause I was so used to being independent and I thought, why throw away the best thing I've ever had?

So when my daughter -- we sent her for to Denmark for a semester abroad -- and she thought men were disposable items also [Laughter].

She called me, she says -- about the two weeks before she's supposed to come home -- She says, "Mom, I met somebody special." I thought, "What?" She never said that before. And I thought to myself, "You can't throw away love." She said, "I want to stay here for the summer." I said, "Okay." She said, "But first I need \$800." [I said] okay. And this is the best part: [she said] "I'll pay you back." I said, "Right -- sure you will!" [Laughter] So they eventually got married and they came here and they moved into the bedroom next to ours -- Oh dear! You know, you know all the things that happen with kids.

HUEBNER: Walk me through, briefly, the timeline from '74 to now. Have you been working at the VA since?

SMITH: I was working, actually. I've worked in different hospitals around here. I was a nursing instructor. I became a nurse practitioner, went to UMass, ([it] was certificate program back there after in '76.) Oh, I became a nurse practitioner. So I worked at Mt. Ascutney Hospital [VT]. I worked at the VA, started at the VA, where I met him [motions to Matt Friedman '61] and then we had babies and worked down there.

And I worked at Springfield Hospital [VT] in the emergency room, worked at Dartmouth Hitchcock [Medical Center] [NH] as a nursing instructor. [I] worked for a couple of local colleges as a clinical instructor.

[I] had eight students on the floor that were mine [who] I had to supervise and teach and I was kind and caring but they worked hard, they were adult students. They work really hard and I really love my students, but if they're butt-sitters, that doesn't go well with me.

HUEBNER: Tell me what a butt-sitter is.

SMITH: Well, you sit there at a frickin' desk. You don't go out there and you take care of your patients [Laughter]. You know, you've got to see them -- eyeball them -- see what's going on. Talk to them. Listen to them. But what was so interesting about that --because I'm a listener and they felt safe -- [In] every single group I had, there was at least one abused female -- sexually abused as a child or being abused presently. Every single one.

HUEBNER: Every single one in a group of students that you've taught or patients that came in?

SMITH: No -- a group of students that I taught. Yeah.

HUEBNER: I wonder why that is.

SMITH: Statistically, that's about what it is. One of seven females, sexually abused, molested, whatever. And I thought, "Boy, they were right. They were right." But they [when the students] would tell me, sometimes I'd have to walk the hall until they got it all out. Then I could get back to work again.

HUEBNER: You describe yourself as a listener, and so it's clear that people have -- even if you've wanted people to share with you -- it's a lot of burden to put on your shoulders.

SMITH: [Pause]. I never felt like it was a burden. No, I never did. I felt like, "This is me. This is what I do. You can tell me, get it out."

No, no, never felt it was a burden.

HUEBNER: Really?

SMITH: I thought it was really great.

I had two great experiences: being a nursing instructor and being a nurse in Vietnam. Because my patients in Vietnam: they would do anything for each other, and they would do anything for me. And I would do anything for them.

And one of the things I was told ... I had my 22 beds right here was a door and there was a perimeter. And my medic said M16s. And the policy was [if] somebody knocks on the door after night, you shoot first. and ask questions later. So nobody better be drunk on the other side of the thing because they're going to get nailed. But I can't -- I was willing to do that from a patients: kill anybody. I had to save my patients. [I'd do it] in a heartbeat -- in less than a heartbeat.

HUEBNER: Did you ever have to use --

SMITH: A weapon? No.

I got a little scared. I said to some guy I was dating, I said "I got to get a weapon. It's a fucking war zone." [Laughter] So I went to supply and they said, "We don't give women weapons." So, the guy I was dating gave me a grenade launcher. [Laughter] I thought, "Well, we're all going up with this thing!" I had this grenade launcher in my rom! I thought, "Jesus!". Never had to use it, I just gave it back. We're all going to blow up if I use this thing.

HUEBNER: Can you tell me a little bit more, just generally, what you thought the gender dynamics were like when you were over in Vietnam?

SMITH: That's very interesting. When men are in front of each other, even at stateside, they're real careful, cause they don't want to get shot down in front of their friends.

But they treated me like a queen. They really -- they wouldn't do anything, anything that disturbed me, nothing. And I knew that if they had a weapon, they -- I got in trouble -- that would be the end of them: [the end of] whoever was screwing around.

They were perfect. They were crazy once in a while, but you know ... We had some Navy dudes. Oh God, they can drink! And they do behind my back and I can never -- I just turned the other way. We had some sort of an inspection. Like I care about an inspection [Laughter]. So you put a piece of sheet over the dirty laundry basket and then the CL came in, and

she pulled back the sheet, and there were empty liquor bottles on the top! I went, "Oh god!". Some of my Navy Seals: I knew what they were doing. I said, "Well okay, let's just put them in the trash and go on." [Laughter]

I also knew, before I went [to Vietnam] -- cause I knew -- In basic training, I met up with some CIA guys and they said five nurses have been massacred. [A] hospital up North was overrun.

They said, "You sure you know what you're doing?"

I said, "I'm willing to take the chance."

Two went down in a helicopter crash. One was -- during a rocket attack, she was killed. They're all in the wall [Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C.]

[But, I] took the chance.

HUEBNER: Looking back on the war, how did Vietnam most effect your life?

SMITH: I met my wonderful husband [Laughter]. He understood me perfectly. That's why I went into post traumatic stress disorder! [Laughter]

I worked at the VA and he just kinda -- it was chemistry, anyway -- But he always understood. He had good sense of humor. He's a lot like my father, he had good sense of humor. [He's] kind. [He] put up with my shit [Laughter].

But when I was 29 we went out and I think 30 -- 32 -- when I got married. 32 and you were -- something like that, it's been so long!

FRIEDMAN: It was '76. You were 29 when we got married. We got married in '76. You were 29. Because you wanted to get married before you turned 30. That was a big deal. I was a youthful 36. [Laughter].

SMITH: Then we had kids a couple of years later. I told my kids, I said -- some parents want their children to have children right away. I said, "Girls: don't have kids until you don't want anything else. I mean, let's be real clear on this!" [Laughter].

And they said, "Don't worry mom."

HUEBNER: How many children do you have?

SMITH: I have two stepchildren, which are more like my kids, cause we got married. Let's see: Ezra [Ezra Friedman] was 5 and Abby [Abigail J.

Friedman] was about 8 when we got married. And then we had two biological [kids], Jessie's 42 and Becky's [Rebecca M. Friedman] [is age] 37.

HUEBNER: Okay. If one of them came home and said, "We want to go to Iraq, Afghanistan ..." what would your response be?

SMITH: "If it's in your heart, you have to do it." [Pause] Sure, I'd be worried. But, if it's what your conviction is, you will be happy. If you don't fulfill it, you'll always think: "I should've, should've, should've."

HUEBNER: You discussed -- or you spoke earlier -- that the part of Vietnam that most effected your life was meeting Matt. And you described the work that he's done -- and I've read some of the work that you've done, Matt through PTSD and being in charge of all these different organizations that are trying to spread awareness ... Do you, Gail, feel like you had PTSD coming back from Vietnam?

SMITH: Oh yeah [laughter]. Oh yeah. When I came home? You bet I did. You bet I did. [During] hunting season, I'd go bonkers. 'Cause we live in the country and there's gunfire and I went, "Oh Jesus."

I did. There's no question about it. But -- It took about five years I settled down, settled down. Memories come back. Sometimes, I have trouble sleeping like I have the last couple nights, but it was because I knew I was going to come [here, today] and talk about it.

But we're nearly done -- that stuff doesn't keep me awake, doesn't stop me from doing stuff.

I was just worried about my daughter going to Vietnam. She went with a medical student group [from] here. I said, "Jessie, I can't save you." What could I do? She brought home a cigarette lighter or something.

I said, "You know where this came from?" Dead G.I.

HUEBNER: Really?

SMITH: Yep.

HUEBNER: Have you had any interest in going back to Vietnam?

SMITH: Never. I will never, ever, ever go back again. Too many memories. I'll never do that. Yeah, I mean, they'd [the Vietnamese would] be nice to me and all that stuff, but probably most of them [from the Vietnam era] are

dead now anyway. But I'll never go back. I know a lot of people say it's therapeutic. Well, I don't think it's going to be therapeutic for me.

HUEBNER: Knowing what you know now, would you still choose to serve again?

SMITH: Yup. If I could. When 9/11 happened, I had two little kids at home. And I found out about it, and went "Jesus – I had to get a uniform back on."

And I went, "Wait a minute: I did my time in Hell and I'm married, I have two little children, I can't do that. I can't do that." Yep: two little girls at home. No. Feisty. Like their mother. [Laughter]. That's good, I like that. [Laughter]. Just like you!

HUEBNER: Something like that! [Laughter].

After all this time, historians still can't come to a consensus about what Vietnam means – historically, geopolitically -- Do you -- what does Vietnam mean?

SMITH: What it means is we haven't learned a damn thing.

We haven't learned a damn thing. You've got to understand the culture. Nobody understood. They don't understand the cultures where we are now! You gotta know what you're fighting, what you're up against. You've got to understand them. And how invested are they in defending themselves?

You know, I get the Kurds, I get that, I get the White Helmets.

If you've got children, you want to try to protect your children, so you go into these camps.

But we really haven't learned anything. Because a lot of it has to do with economics. War makes money. War is lucrative business. You think of all the armaments, all the -- Boeing, all of that stuff -- man, they're making money, they're making money.

And I look at the politics today. You've got to spend more on military spending? Well, you know, that's more tax dollars that's going to armaments that makes money, makes stocks go up.

HUEBNER: Would you say that you're anti-war now? Just generally?

SMITH: Yeah. It depends on the circumstance, but yes. I'd rather see the money spent on education for kids that can't afford to go to school. Or [on] school

lunch programs [or] Planned Parenthood, stuff like that. It's a public health issue, really.

I mean, think about the people with PTSD for crying out loud. I mean -- people don't realize that the people at the VA now, people like myself on disability because my Addison's Disease -- that if you get hit, if you get injured, if you get sick, whatever -- that's -- the cost of that is the tip of the iceberg, because it's the cost for the rest of that person's life. And [of] all the veterans' lives. I mean, you don't -- you can't even imagine.

There's this is one little thing here [makes ripple effect motion with hands]. Billions and billions of dollars. People don't think about the real cost of the war.

HUEBNER: And to you, how would you define the real cost?

SMITH: How would I define it? Probably the most devastating cost is the emotional cost. People that just can't get it together, can't -- years after years [and] they just can't get it together.

They wake up in the night trying to strangle their partners. I even had, when I was a visiting nurse, I had a World War II vet that was getting confused. [He was] talking to his mother -- [I mean] his daughter was taking care of him and she [the daughter] said, "He's got a gun." I said, "Oh yeah?" He had a .45 [caliber gun] on a string over the head of his bed and every night he pulled that string up to be sure his gun was still there. [The gun was] left over from World War II.

I said, you better get that [gun] out of there, 'cause he's confused and he's going to shoot you.

Yeah. The emotional cost doesn't go, it doesn't go away.

You talk about resilience, and I'm fairly resilient: I can put up with a lot of stuff, and I have.

But some people aren't. They can't get jobs, can't hold jobs. They can't develop, they can't maintain a relationship. They get -- do a lot with drugs and alcohol and stuff. They just can't, can't get through it. And that's forever. That's forever.

HUEBNER: Is there anything else that you'd like to add, as long as we're here together today?

SMITH: No, but I just, I want to thank you for doing this. Now, maybe I'll sleep tonight.

And if you have any more questions, call me.

HUEBNER: You got it. I really, really appreciate your time, Gayle.

SMITH: Well – we'll talk about that later [points to computer containing pictures from her time in Vietnam]. I'm glad to be able to share what I had: the truth.

HUEBNER: Your truth.

SMITH: Yeah, it is my truth. What the truth is – it's different, you're right, the truth is different for everybody. We're all in different circumstances.

HUEBNER: I really, really appreciate all your time.

SMITH: Thank you.

HUEBNER: Great.

SMITH: You are welcome.

HUEBNER: All right.

[Recording is paused]

HUEBNER: All right: Matt Friedman -- Can you go on?

FRIEDMAN: Well, one thing that Gayle didn't tell you about was when she worked as a counselor at the Vet Center [in White River Junction, VT]. Maybe you want to --

SMITH: Well, what are you thinking about?

FRIEDMAN: Well, it's a piece of your postwar experience that wasn't nursing -- although it was consistent with taking care of people -- it was a way of giving back and taking care of [people] in another way.

SMITH: Yeah. That was different. They all have their political beliefs and they shared with me things that they had done and [were] trying to deal with it. We just had the -- you know, it was interesting -- I just discovered one of those groups here. I was the group leader.

[I discovered] how angry I was, of what happened to my patients. How angry -- angry enough to kill -- easily, easily! We've got -- I have a friend -- she said to me, "How can anybody kill somebody?"

I said, "Oh, it's really easy. All you need is a trigger finger that works, [a] decent weapon, [and] a good shot." That's all it takes. That's it.

And then it's gratifying because, [if] they did this to our guys, you're going down. Period.

HUEBNER: Who were you angry at?

SMITH: It's like the whole situation. It's the whole situation. My patients were wounded and they'd come by, the general would come by, one of the COs [Commanding Officers] from the other units [would come by] and give them these purple hearts.

And I would think to myself, "Your leg's gone, your life is screwed up, and you get a medal." That's what you get.

HUEBNER: And it sounds like a lot of this resurfaced when you were working in counseling back here in the [United] States.

SMITH: Actually, I thought about that one while I was watching them getting those medals.

HUEBNER: Did you ever --

SMITH: I never said anything. Never.

HUEBNER: Did you ever consider joining an anti-war protest back in the [United] States?

SMITH: Oh, I did! Yeah, but we were marching and getting gassed.

You know, you go down, you have to be careful. Government would gas you.

HUEBNER: Where, where was this?

SMITH: Washington [D.C.].

HUEBNER: And during what time?

SMITH: I don't know. Actually, I was in a protest when I was in basic training and went to Houston.

HUEBNER: Really?

SMITH: Mmhmm. Yeah. And there were protests at Syracuse University all the time?

HUEBNER: Can you say more? So it seemed that -- Matt had some additional things to add about your time as a counselor. When, when you were counseling here, were you counseling PTSD cases from Vietnam vets?

SMITH: Yeah, I mean they would talk about what the hard parts were for them. They just want to talk to somebody who really understood. And a female -- they didn't want to tell their family, 'cause they didn't the families to know what they really did. But I got it. I know what they did and that was okay.

FRIEDMAN: In '79 that the VA started this Vet Center program and I think there's maybe over 300. We had the first vet center in the country and Gayle became a counselor. At first they wanted to have her -- remember this -- they wanted you to talk to the wives? And you got angry! You said, "I'm a vet, goddammit!" And the vets really wanted to talk to her. They opened up to her because --

SMITH: Because I got it.

FRIEDMAN: -- she's so magnificent in so many ways.

SMITH: They didn't have to explain. They didn't have to hide anything 'cause I already knew. I know what they did. It wasn't pretty.

HUEBNER: Could you, could you give me an example of something you might've heard?

SMITH: Well, you know, shooting somebody, sitting on their body, eating lunch. What they did to our guys, you know ... Cut off their penis, cut off their tongue, stick their penis in their mouth. Tie them to a tree, shoot them. That's, that's what happened to our guys. That's why they always saved one bullet for themselves. So if it looked like they're going to get captured, they'd take their own life.

HUEBNER: The Americans would?

SMITH: Oh yeah. They said, "Save one for yourself. Save one for yourself."

FRIEDMAN: Yeah. I think one of the reasons we were able to really -- Vermont has been way ahead of most of the country -- And I think one of the reasons why I had -- It was accepted by the vets -- was they figured if Gayle could marry me it can't be that bad [Laughter].

HUEBNER: That you could be that bad?

FRIEDMAN: I couldn't be that bad.

SMITH: He's got to be like steel [to marry me].

FRIEDMAN: 'Cause I am definitely not a vet. I've been working with them for 40 years, but I'm not a vet.

SMITH: Yeah, but you put your time in.

HUEBNER: Gayle: Tell me why – or, tell me more about this experience of when you were asked to speak to the wives of these veterans.

SMITH: I did. Because they should -- they didn't really understand why their husbands or partners – whatever -- were acting this way. And I could explain it to them because their partners couldn't explain it. They just reacted. Then, of course, some of them thought that was making a play for their husbands: I was like eight months pregnant at the time! And they started knitting me things [Laughter].

So yeah, it kind of pissed me off.

HUEBNER: Why?

SMITH : Oh, because I am the vet.

But then I was in another group with all men that were Vietnam vets, a group up in Randolph [VT].

HUEBNER: When you say that it pissed you off because you were the vet –

SMITH: Well, and then thought that I should -- because I'm a woman, I should be with the women. [That didn't] sat real well.

HUEBNER: If I were the partner to someone who was a veteran and I came to you and said, "I just don't get it": What would you tell someone like me?

SMITH: I'd say, "What is it that you don't get?"

HUEBNER: Oh, "I don't get that my husband is acting in this way. I don't get the irrational behavior. I don't get that he wakes up in the middle and I don't get it."

SMITH: You don't get it. Are you getting scared, wondering what you're going to do? You're wondering what he's gonna do? [I would] explain why he's acting this way. Doesn't make it any better because you're living with it, but you can understand why he's acting this way.

But it's something that you've got to figure out. It's just really your basic safety. What are you willing to do to try and make this relationship work? You know, if you got kids, you've got to worry about that.

[Pause]. Kids are very sensitive. They know [what's going on. They are] very sensitive.

HUEBNER: All these conversations -- was this emotionally taxing for you? Or no?

SMITH: This? [i.e. this interview]

HUEBNER: No, no, no: All of these conversations that you had over the years in your counseling?

SMITH: Yeah. Mmhmm. Yup. It was. But it never felt like a burden. It just didn't. It was like something ... [pause].

I was being useful. I've always said, "If I can't be useful in some way...".

I want to be useful all my life. [Pause]

HUEBNER: That's really beautiful.

SMITH: Oh. [Laughter]. Just the way it is, that's all. I mean, I'm being useful to you. I want you to do well on your project! [Laughter]. Matt said, "are you sure you don't want to cancel?" I said, "No, no. She's got to have this grade. We've got to get there."

HUEBNER: Great. All right. What else is there that I'm missing? What else is there to add?

FRIEDMAN: Oh, about 40 year's worth!

SMITH: What, honey?

FRIEDMAN: I said, "40 years worth, but nothing --"

SMITH: The usual ups and downs you have with kids, and my mother-in-law. Did you only ... tell me I had three drinks at a time she would come over for supper. I'm not a drinker, but we got through it. Right, honey? [Laughter].

HUEBNER: It was a different fight to fight.

SMITH: Yeah, yeah sure was. [Laughter]. But we made it, we made it.

HUEBNER: That's great. All right. If there's nothing else to add --

FRIEDMAN: I mean, I think Gayle told you what she's going to tell you. I mean, I've already intruded to bring in the vet center stuff and I hope that's okay.

SMITH: Oh yeah, that's fine.

HUEBNER: Alright great, thank you again for all your time.

SMITH: Well, you are welcome! It was a pleasure to get to know you.

HUEBNER: So nice to meet you.