

# Featured Veteran



## Sarah Blum Decorated Nurse, Vietnam Veteran, Author

Sarah L. Blum, ARNP is a decorated Nurse Vietnam Veteran, retired nurse psychotherapist and Author of *Women Under Fire: Abuse in the Military*. Sarah's new book, *Warrior Nurse: PTSD and Healing*, is ready for publication.

The first thing that hit me when I arrived in Vietnam in January 1967, was the incredible heat and the smells. I was one of a couple hundred nurses arriving at Bien Hoa Air Base searching among the 200 identical looking olive drab duffle bags for mine, as the sweat penetrated my uniform, rolled down my face and into my eyes. After that ordeal I was taken on an army bus with heavy criss-cross metal grills over the windows, to the 90th replacement battalion. I learned that the window covering was to prevent grenades from coming through. For three days we learned how to receive and send mail, what the Vietnamese money was and how to get it and get paid. We also learned a bit about the culture and areas where we had hospitals. Finally, we were all assigned to hospitals and sent on our way. I went to the 12th Evacuation Hospital at Cu Chi.

The night before I left, I met my drill sergeant from basic training, who asked me where

I would be sent. When I told him, his face drained of color and he said, "Get it changed. You don't want to go there. That is the worst place to be; it is where all the fighting is and it is not safe." I told him, "I can't change it now because I switched with a young nurse who had the same MOS (Military Occupational Specialty). She was scared and crying because she did not want to go to Cu Chi. I had been assigned to the 67th Evacuation Hospital at Qui Nhon and offered to switch with her, because I wanted to be where the action was. The chief nurse agreed because of the severe emotional distress of the other young nurse. I don't care where I am stationed as long as I can help our soldiers." He was not happy about it at all and told me to keep my head down and stay safe.

My footlocker and duffle bag were taken by truck and I was put on a Huey helicopter to go to the 12th Evacuation Hospital. My first helicopter ride was scary because they do not have doors. I felt very vulnerable sitting in a canvas seat in the wide-open space while flying in a war zone, and if you think that was frightening the landing was worse. When they arrived at the hospital, the helicopter crew would not land the helicopter. They told me I had to jump out onto the helipad. The helicopter is very loud and it is hard to be heard over the sounds of the rotor blades. I kept pointing down with my arm and finger, "put this thing down" and they kept shaking their heads and saying, "jump." They hovered the helicopter about six feet over the helipad but would not land it and I had to jump. I guess that was my initiation. Or was it? Next I was saluting our very strict executive officer to find out where to report. He looked starved and professional and did not like my answer to his question, "What is that?" pointing to my ukulele case. I brought a baritone ukulele with me so that I had an instrument to play while there. My answer was a joke to lighten up the situation, "It is a machine gun; I thought I might need it over here." That was the wrong thing to say to him and for the next twenty minutes he yelled at me for being disrespectful to an officer and finally told me where to report.

Fast forward now to my year there, which included creating a space for me in the hooch; a bed, a closet I made from a large equipment box, my footlocker and some shelves I made from wood and Masonite. I could not stand the smell of the sheets that the mama san's washed, so I took some new green operating room sheets, used them all year and washed them myself in an extra-large aluminum bowl for washing clothes. Once I completed my personal space I started working.

We had two Quonset huts for our operating rooms. The main one was called Arizona and in it we had five different partitioned areas that counted as a room. Each area had an operating room (OR) table, equipment for giving anesthesia, a large stainless-steel table I would use for instruments and sterile supplies for each case, an over the table stand that we used during the operation to hold instruments and supplies like suture material and extra instruments. We had one shift only and that was from 9 AM until we were done with scheduled cases for the day and then all the cases generated by the war. We often worked around the clock, but the average was about 16 hours a day. I was on call four nights a week.

We had soldiers with wounds all over their bodies or only parts of their body. Often they lost arms, legs, eyes, or they had shrapnel that tore through major organs in their bodies, which we had to repair. I definitely saw the worst of war and what war does to the land and human beings on it. Yes we were targets and were mortared often. Fortunately, I was never hit and the worst hit to our hospital occurred the month after I left. After I had been there about six months I had a major emotional experience. A young red headed soldier was hit by American artillery and had the lower half of his body blasted severely. From his hipbones down he was black, charred and bleeding. We had four surgeons look at him to decide what they could save and what they could do for him.

I was standing in his blood for hours as we worked on him and what was left. At the end there were some large skin flaps to cover the remainder of his pelvis. He was literally half a man. I was OK during the surgery because I learned to be numb to it all— but then on his day three, the day he came into the OR for the closure of his skin flaps, I snapped. He was at one end of the Quonset hut on a stretcher and I came in from the opposite end. As I walked toward him I saw the flat sheet covering the stretcher and half the length of it was flat because there was nothing there. Finally, my eyes saw the bump that was his bandaged hips and then his torso covered with the sheet and finally his face and eyes. My eyes followed all that up to his face and when I saw his red hair and blue eyes something inside me snapped and I ran out the doors at his end. There were some assault helicopters flying overhead at that moment and I shouted as loudly as I could through my rage and tears at the choppers, “Kill, Kill, Kill—that is all you know how to do! I hate this war!” I have no memory of what I did or how long I was going around the hospital yelling at the sky but I ended up in front of my chief nurse telling her, “You have got to get me out of the OR I can’t take it anymore. Put me on the malaria ward or something.” She shook her head and said, I cannot do that; you just need a rest. Take a few days and go down to the beach at Vung Tau and get yourself together.”

I drank beer, ate pineapples, had great food and talked with the Aussie’s. They were the guys who ran the phones in Vietnam and they were my lifeline. I could talk to them late at night after working 16-18 hours and be able to relax and sleep. In Vung Tau, knowing I had to go back for more horrors of war, I put a strong wall around my heart to be able to do it. Once back home in order to heal, I had to take that wall down and it was not easy.

I left Vietnam where I came in, Bien Hoa Air Base. There were a couple hundred of us lined up on the tarmac in the 110° heat waiting for what we called the ‘freedom bird;’ the plane that would take us home. We all felt like sitting ducks because the airbase was hit with mortars very frequently, especially when soldiers were waiting to go

home. I was terrified that I had lived through that year of hell and would be killed as I was waiting to leave. I know I was not the only one who thought and felt that. When the plane came it was pink and orange, the color of Southwest Airlines. Everyone was tense until the moment the plane actually lifted off the tarmac. At that point I could hear everyone taking in, a much needed, deep breath. It was a collective loud intake of air and relief, “We made it out alive.”

I came into Travis Air Force Base and had to get to San Francisco, International to get a plane to LA. I felt like I was in a fog. They kept us on the plane at Travis for two hours before they let us deplane. They said it was for our safety and told us not to wear our uniforms. They had waited until there were very few people in the airport to let us off. Apparently American Uniformed Service Members were being harassed and attacked by anti-war protestors so we were cautioned not to be in uniform for our own wellbeing. My mind could not fathom what I was being told. “You mean I spent a hellish year in the midst of a war, caring for my brother soldier’s wounds, and now I am home safe but I am at risk here because of my service?”

I took a red and silver bus from Travis AFB to SF International Airport and it was raining. I remember looking out the window of the bus at nothing but the raindrops on the window and finding myself feeling like I was inside the raindrop. The rain seemed friendlier than anything else in that moment.

I was heading for LA to see my nurse friends I worked with before going to Vietnam. It was late at night and I was so glad to finally have someone glad to see me. The next day I had my first experience of culture shock when I was on the way to the hospital to visit my friend Bea and an ambulance went by with the siren blaring. I instinctively dove into the foot-well of the car, as though expecting an attack. My friend Ellie, was shocked by my reaction and so was I. Later we went into a supermarket and when I stepped onto the pad in front of the door and the door suddenly flew open, I jumped back. It took me awhile to acclimate back into society.

I did much better when I finally arrived at Madigan General Hospital (MGH) and stepped into my role as head nurse of the orthopedic ward to take care of “my brother soldiers.” I was glad to be out of the operating room and be able to listen to and talk with them. I received them when they came back from Vietnam, often through a hospital in Guam or Japan, check their wounds and let the doctor know. I got them settled, arranged for a special meal of their choosing and brought the portable phone to their bedside, if they were bedridden, so they could call family members. I loved my job in 1968 as the head nurse of ward 6 and I felt great physically, mentally and emotionally. That was when I first started to understand the impact of the war on my brother soldier’s bodies, mind and spirit. Their physical wounds often would not heal quickly enough and I knew intuitively that it was because their mind and emotions were struggling. That was the beginning of me searching to understand what we now know is PTSD.

From 1968-1970 I was a student at Seattle University and exposed to the Black Panthers and the protests against the war with me being a target. I stopped telling anyone that I was a nurse who served in Vietnam. In 1970 I married another Vietnam Veteran and we had two children. Twelve years later I was part of the very first women veteran’s group at the Seattle Vet Center for 16 weeks, and then did another 16 weeks after that to deal with my PTSD symptoms. That was not enough and by 1984 I was doing therapy with a trauma specialist until 1987. From then on I have worked with veterans and civilians to help them heal their PTSD. Now today, 2021, my book *Warrior Nurse: PTSD and Healing* is being considered for publication.

In 2006 I began interviewing women veterans and did that for six years. With guidance from an editor I hired to help me, I changed the focus from women veteran stories to the culture of abuse toward women in the military. My book: *Women Under Fire: Abuse in the Military* was published in 2013. The website is: [www.womenunderfire.net](http://www.womenunderfire.net)