



Staff photos by Dan Gross

Lorna House talks about her experiences as an Army nurse serving in Vietnam during the war.

# Willing and able

## Female veterans defied Vietnam-era norms

By **SYLVIA CARIGNAN** and **NANCY LAVIN**

scarignan@newspost.com nlavin@newspost.com

Connie Devilbiss vividly remembers the day she learned the results of her Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, used to determine military roles.

The assignment officer didn't look up as she walked into the room where he sat. He was fixated on her high test scores.

"You can have any job in the military that you want," she remembers him saying.

Only then did he raise his gaze from the paper in front of him. He realized the person standing before him was a woman.

"Oh, no you can't," he told her.

Those four words resounded with Dev-

ilbiss. They captured much of her experience as a female in the military, where she saw discrimination and unfair practices.

Women made up about 1 percent of U.S. active duty service members in 1965, the year U.S. ground combat operations began in Vietnam, according to the Congressional record.

Devilbiss enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1970, toward the end of the Vietnam War era.

"Which are you?" was a question frequently posed to Devilbiss and other women service members. The expected answer was one of two options.

"You were either a dyke or a whore," Devilbiss explained.

Devilbiss never went to Vietnam. She offered to go, but by the time she completed basic training, new troops were no longer being sent overseas.

Devilbiss instead went to Fort McClellan, an Army post in Alabama where she was a supply and procurement officer responsible for training troops and recruiting new members.

When she began, women were separated from their male counterparts in a designated Women's Army Corps — the only corps classified by gender instead of occupation.

Although she trained fellow females,

(See **VETERANS A5**)

## Veterans

(Continued from A1)

she still interacted with other male officers, who were quick to make known their perception of women in the military.

Adamstown resident Lorna House became a registered nurse before joining the Army in 1968.

As part of the Army Nurse Corps, she wanted to work in operating rooms. She got her wish.

When the Army sent her to Vietnam, she worked at a hospital on the end of National Route 1A, otherwise known as Highway 1.

She had been there for a week when the first mortar attack hit the hospital. She was trained to put on her flak jacket and helmet, and head to a bunker, unless she was involved in surgery.

If that was the case, she had to continue working.

She cared for American service members, as well as Vietnamese civilians.

"It just depended on what was happening at the time," she said.

The commanding officers at her hospital were male physicians.

"That's just the way things were at that particular time," she said.

But the chief nurse there during her service was always a woman, which was also typical for the military at the time, she said.

House became a registered nurse before she joined the military. It's a career she wanted since she was about 4 years old.

She remembers her mother dragging her, kicking and screaming, to a hospital to have her tonsils taken out.

"When my mom brought me home from the hospital, I said, 'I want to be a nurse when I grow up,' and she looked at me thinking, 'You just devastated this poor nurse and you wanna be a nurse?'" she said.

She wavered from her path to consider other options, but nursing was her passion.

Devilbiss felt drawn to military service at a young age.

"I felt a sense of duty, of patriotism ... of reacting to and trying to assist anybody whose voice is being lost, who is a target of aggression," she said.

When the Frederick native graduated from Frederick High School in 1966, women were not permitted to attend a military academy. She wrote a letter, requesting to be admitted anyway.

The response she received was pleasant, but the denial was firm.

She instead pursued higher education at Keuka College in New York. As the conflict in Vietnam intensified, so, too, did her call to serve.

She graduated with a bachelor's degree in sociology and psychology in 1970. Soon after, she enlisted.

The U.S. Army began gender-integrated basic training in 1973 at the tail end of Devilbiss' active duty. That meant she was now training both men and women. Men did not always react well to taking orders from a female.

"Sometimes it was a bitter pill to swallow," Devilbiss said.

But as an officer, she out-

## About this series

This is the sixth and final part of a series about the stories and sacrifices of local men and women during the Vietnam War. The series complements a Maryland Public Television initiative this month honoring veterans of the war.

The first story in the series, on Vietnam veterans affected by post-traumatic stress disorder after the war, was published in January.

The second story in the series, on local residents preserving hundreds of Vietnam veter-

ranked them. She gave orders and they had no choice but to follow.

The situation had improved by the time she reenlisted as a reservist with the U.S. Air Force in 1980. She worked alongside men as an electrical specialist and later as an aircraft armament systems specialist.

It was still tough to prove herself.

"Eventually, with competence came acceptance," she said.

When House moved up the ranks after the war, she said, the biggest change she saw in the Army Nurse Corps was greater upward mobility for nurses.

In the late 1980s, she was assigned to a now-defunct Army lab at Fort Detrick. When the commanding officer left temporarily, she was in charge.

"I thought everybody was going to have apoplexy because I was a senior officer, and I was going to be in charge," she said.

After handling a crisis that came on her watch, she received praise for handling the situation calmly.

"And it was never a question after that," she said.

Unlike many Vietnam-era veterans, particularly those who served "in country," Devilbiss said she found the transition to civilian life fairly easy.

As a woman, there was little chance people would identify her as a veteran. And though she was proud of her service, she didn't publicize it either. Public perception of Vietnam veterans was still largely negative in 1973 when she left the Army.

She began a master's program in sociology at Purdue University after the Vietnam War. She threw herself into her studies. After earning her master's, she began a doctorate program, focused on the gender roles within the military.

Writing was her outlet, she said, a way to cope with frustrations she felt in her own experiences.

After House came home from Vietnam, she tried working in a civilian hospital, but it wasn't the right fit.

"I missed the camaraderie we had in the operating room. I missed the autonomy that, as a nurse, I had in the operating room, and I missed the collegiality," House said.

She joined the Army again, and received an assignment to work at Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco, which has since closed.

She remembers being told that she could wear her civilian clothes to work to avoid the potential harassment that her military uniform could provoke.

ans' stories, was published in February.

The third story in the series, on Vietnam veterans coping with health problems related to Agent Orange exposure, was published in March.

The fourth story in the series, about family members of Vietnam veterans killed in combat or who died after returning home, was published in April.

The fifth story in the series, about the camaraderie Vietnam veterans found at veteran service organizations upon their return home, was published in May.

## Bios

### Lorna Rittenhouse House

**Branch:** U.S. Army

**Rank:** colonel

**Service dates:** 1968 to 1995

**Commendations:** Legion of Merit, Meritorious Service Medal, Army Commendation Medal, Army Achievement Medal, Army Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal with four bronze service stars, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal, Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation with Palm

### Margaret

#### Conrad Devilbiss

**Branch:** U.S. Army

**Rank:** first lieutenant

**Service dates:** November 1970 to February 1973

**Commendations:** National Defense Service Medal  
Devilbiss also served as a sergeant in the U.S. Air Force Air Guard from 1980 to 1990.

She remembers trying to get across the Golden Gate Bridge, which offered free tickets for members of the military. But when she was wearing her civilian clothing, ticket takers told her to pay the full price.

"They thought I was an Army wife trying to use the tickets," she said. "So I used to take my Army raincoat, with my captain's bars, in the car."

Devilbiss currently works as an adjunct professor at Gettysburg College and at Mount St. Mary's University.

Devilbiss still sees discrimination in the military's policies and treatment of homosexual and transgender people. From the sociologist's perspective, she views it as a sexuality issue, but she has seen progress toward gender equality in recent years.

Her female students are able to attend military academies, for example.

She also noted the recent decision to allow female combat officers in the military, announced earlier this year.

"I never thought I would see a military where all jobs were open to women," she said. "And then bingo, here we are."

Asked if she felt anger or resentment toward the people or the institution that discriminated against her, she said no.

"I think it was unfair," she said. "But you live your life as best you can."