



U.S. Army Captain Elizabeth Jane McCarthy (Ret.) Served in Vietnam, 1971

Elizabeth Jane McCarthy joined the Army Nurse Corps in 1968 while she was attending Massachusetts General Hospital School of Nursing. After the six weeks of basic training in Texas, she was stationed at Walter Reed Army Medical Center for ten months in the Recovery Room/Intensive Care Unit. Then, at age 22, with that minimal experience under her belt, she was sent to the 95th Evacuation Hospital in DaNang, South Vietnam where she worked as a Captain in the pre-operative and receiving area as a triage nurse, separating patients based on severity of injuries and what medical treatments were needed. Sometimes, all she could do was hold a soldier's hand as he breathed his last breath.

In the 1960s, the young men McCarthy grew up with in her town of fewer than 7,000 were being drafted. She was coming home every six months for a funeral of one of her friends, the guys who had to go. By the third funeral (of Allen Keating who was killed in Vietnam at the age of 21), she stood at his grave and said, "I have to do something." She wasn't in favor of the war, but if these men could sacrifice, so could she. At that time, women could not serve in the military except as nurses, or go overseas in another capacity, like with the Red Cross or other aid organizations.

Captain McCarthy came home radicalized, joining Vietnam Veterans Against the War in college and went to protests. Looking back, she realizes now that her difficulty adjusting back to civilian life and subsequent depression at the time were symptoms of undiagnosed PTSD. She has remained active as a Veteran and returns to her home town in Cohasset, Massachusetts, every year to march in the Memorial Day Parade to remember the high cost of war.

Upon returning from the war in Vietnam, Captain McCarthy went to college and nurse anesthesia school using the GI Bill to help pay for her education. She worked as a nurse anesthetist for several years and in 1980 returned to school and received her PhD in Physiology in 1985 from the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda. After completing a fellowship at Navy Medical Research Institute she joined the U.S. Public Health Service as a Commissioned Corps officer where she worked for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as a regulatory scientist reviewing data for the approval of FDA regulated products such as medical devices and drugs.

Captain McCarthy retired from the US Public Health Service Commissioned Corps in 2006 and she continues to work in academia as a professor at the University of North Florida. She served as the first woman Veteran on the Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs and her primary goal on the Commission was to improve care for Veterans in Montgomery County especially those returning from war experiencing the difficulties of post-traumatic stress. Captain McCarthy currently resides in Olney, Maryland.