



**TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH
MARSHA FOUR
11 NOVEMBER 2012**

QUESTION: Why did you join the military?

MARSHA FOUR: Well, it sounded like a very good idea at the time [LAUGHS]. I have to tell you, I didn't join the military because I wanted to be a part of a patriotic movement for Vietnam, I mean that wasn't it, during that time. Quite frankly, I was in nurses training, and I was in school and knew the things that really matter to me were grades, and whether I had a date on Friday night. We weren't really tuned in to public affairs, and political stories of the time, and it didn't affect us, you know, young woman's life and trying to move on. It really didn't touch me, the Vietnam War didn't, until a time when in the middle of the night one of our classmates was notified that her brother had been killed in Vietnam, and that was the first time, I think, that any of us said, oh my God, this is real. That was really the first time it hit home. But before that there was, in Vietnam not like today, 12-month tours. And they had to rotate people in and out to keep the troop level high enough, and that certainly was the case for medical staff and nurses, and so, there was a push for, you know, in the schools of nursing to back up those required needs. So we had the recruiters from the different services come in and it was a real good story, I mean they didn't mention Vietnam, that was not even on the table. It was, wow, if you sign up with us, we'll pay you while you're in school, you'll get to work in a government hospital, and not a city hospital or a private hospital and that means, you won't have to go looking for a job when you graduate. We'll let you go to any one of three of your best choices, you can even go on the buddy plan and you'll never get sent overseas unless you request it. Well, that was like, wow, that was great. I had girlfriends that got to buy cars while they were in school, we didn't have any money. It was an opportunity for us to sort of secure future plans after we graduated and so a lot of us jumped at that opportunity. Most of us had no clue what it was going to mean to us. I think there were a certain number of us that maybe wasn't even sure we wanted to be nurses at that point in time. We were all in our second year of nurses training.

QUESTION: What did your friends say when you said you were joining the Army?

MARSHA FOUR: Well, my friends in nurses training didn't react one way or the other, pretty much, I mean, they all gone through the rigmarole of the recruiters and 20 percent of our class joined, so, that wasn't unusual. I didn't have a lot of friends before I got to nurse's training that were very long lasting, because my father worked for the railroad and we moved around a lot. I had been in six grade schools and three high schools so I didn't have any real roots anywhere. My parents were a little disappointed, my mother was unhappy and my father was concerned.

QUESTION: Did you ever think you were putting yourself in danger when you joined?

MARSHA FOUR: No. Not a wink of it, we were nurses. We were going to be in hospitals somewhere, just taking care of patients. Going to Vietnam sort of wasn't even in my head at the time, especially when I first signed up and everything, it wasn't really until basic training in Fort Sam Houston. For nurses it was much different than it was for the women who were in the Women's Army Corps and the WAVES, they had basic training. We, as one of my friends like to put it, had basic orientation, how to wear the uniform, and where to put the ribbons and do the salute and all that stuff. Fort Sam Houston turned out to be really the first time I think that any

of us drew the conclusion that we were marked women and that we were going to be headed for Vietnam, because, well, that's the only thing they gave to us in basic training, how to march, we never marched again. But, you know, we had to set up an evac hospital, the rules of the Geneva Convention, what happens in an ambush, what should you tell the enemy, what an airvac was; so when all these things started dribbling in our heads it was pretty clear that probably some of us would get orders for Vietnam. Some of the girls even talked about requesting those orders to go. I had a very good friend who requested it several times and the best she could get was Korea. I got to my first duty assignment, which was for Campbell, Kentucky, which was not on my list, which was very disturbing. About five months into that tour I received my orders that I was going to Vietnam. It was shocking; it sort of knocks you to your knees. It came out of the blue, it was very unsuspecting, it was a big dark hole, nobody knew what it was going to be like. I don't think you really even know enough to be afraid. I think the biggest thing I kept thinking about was that I was going to be gone for a whole year, on the other side of the world and I wouldn't get to go home, I wouldn't see my family, at the time I had a boyfriend. A year is a very long time in a young persons life. Now it seems to like zip by. But it seems forever when you're only like 22-years-old. I think that's the thing that really sort of got under my skin the most. I was afraid about that, I was afraid to be gone that long, and I knew I would be lonely. But other than that I really didn't know what it was going to be like.

QUESTION: So, what was it like?

MARSHA FOUR: I had only been in the military a short while before I got there and, I mean, I was a young girl from the Midwest and its like everything you see and your eyes are like, oh, it was a whole new world. I had been pretty sheltered as I grew up in the Midwest, Catholic school, even Catholic nurses training. I never really had experienced the dark side. I had never known anyone who had been shady or anyone who had abused other people or taken advantage of other people, and all of a sudden you're thrust in the middle of a whole new world, a world that most of the girls I knew from home could never have imagined. We flew over on a plane, the girl that was unfortunate enough to be my buddy, full of G.I.s and we, of course, had to be in our summer uniform, which was skirts and nylons and hose and all that stuff, uncomfortable. I mistakenly, because I'd never flown before, took my heels off on the plane. When I had to put them back on to get off the plane, like 24 hours later, I couldn't get on my shoes. But I had to because I had to get off and walk across the tarmac, so I jammed them in there and walked around. I ended up actually with these huge blisters and infections that went up like the back of my legs and I'm thinking, oh, what happened. When we got off that plane they opened that hatch and we started walking down, the heat that hit me, I couldn't breathe. I felt like I had sweat coming out of my fingernails. It was, tropical isn't quite the word I'd use. We had to walk across the tarmac, and as we're coming down under this framed structure, no sides on it, roof, and a lot of guys were standing under it. When they opened that door to our plane these guys started screaming, falling on the ground and ripping their clothes off. I thought what, oh my God. I learned they were waiting to get on the plane we had just brought in. The emotion that they lay bare really did strike a chord, I mean, it sent a very loud message that maybe this really was hell and they couldn't wait to get out.

QUESTION: What year was this?

MARSHA FOUR: 1968. I'm sorry, 1969.

QUESTION: Tell me what the nurses in Vietnam did.

MARSHA: Well, if you compare it to the training that we had, it was very unconventional in a way. Actually, we were permitted to do things we could never do in the States from the professional standpoint and all the laws and jurisdictions and all that kind of stuff. Let me begin by saying everybody's experience was unto themselves. I was at a very small hospital and there were very few of us and staff was limited. So under normal circumstances I was initially assigned to the intensive care recovery room, and my job was to take care of the patients there. I had two corpsmen, so one nurse and two corpsmen. It was a small unit and we had less than, probably, 15 beds on the unit. We worked 12-hour shifts, and we rarely got two days off in a row when we worked. So, you worked some pretty long stretches. A lot of us that went over really hadn't been nurses before. We'd just gotten out of school. We had no experience and here I was in an intensive care recovery room. I had never worked in ICU before. I had never worked in an emergency room before. The corpsmen were amazing instructors to us. On the technical things, the procedural things we had to do. I maybe had started two IVs in my entire life and now I had to put IVs in every person in that unit. I did a lot of IVs and you became very, very, very good at what you did.

QUESTION: Can you talk about what you did in this environment?

MARSHA: Certainly, the thing that we were, the top priority was to take care of the G.I. and make sure that we kept him alive and did all we could to get him out of there. In the intensive care recovery room we had the guys came straight from surgery, and because we were a small hospital, a surgical hospital, we had to do all we could to stabilize them as quickly as possible and get them out to the evac hospitals down south so we had empty beds all the time. In those situations there wasn't a lot of the opportunity to really know anybody and in some ways that's a good thing. We had our stuff down, you know, we knew how to take care of chest tubes and wounds and we had to call a doctor if something's really wrong. I mean, we knew all that kind of stuff. There was a lot of physical care for the guys but I think that the really hardest care to give was the care that they so desperately needed, which was listening to them, and reassuring them that they were going to make it. You know, reassuring them that when they get home their family would be there. There were some who were so badly wounded, I mean, if you were laying in a bed and you had only part of one arm and no legs and you were blind, wouldn't you want to know why God left you alive? Who's going to want you when you go home? Nobody can do anything. There was such desperation for some of them and such depression. Some of them just believed they had lost everything and they wished they had been dead. Those were probably the hard times and often it came at night when you worked night shift. Day shift was pretty busy and night shift was too, but when the sun goes down and the lights dim, and for them they didn't sleep much, sometimes just sitting beside them, holding their hand, or just letting them feel your hand on their face, because they did see us as a piece of home. That's what we were. We were able to be there in place of, for most of them, their moms. But we were good nurses. We were good. We were the best. I worked intensive care recovery room, but when I was off duty, if we had the need, we worked the emergency room, because again, they didn't have much staff either, so when they had a mass casualty come in or they needed that extra assistance, we were able to go down there with them too. And that was when, I say desperate, it was very important to be fast, work furiously, as expeditious as possible, because if you were not it could mean someone's life. And so when I say this sometimes people who are not in the medical field don't understand, but when I say there are certain things that happen in an

emergency setting that are very routine, you do this, this, this, you've got it down and you're good at it, and that's what it was like there. I think it's a little, I don't know, insidious is the word I want to use, but I remember the very first real casualty that I saw, something I will never forget. You think about I hadn't worked in an emergency room before either, it's amazing what destructive force can do to the body and what it can make it look like and how someone can even still be alive through that. But, you know, unfortunately it becomes a very part of the routine. Isn't that sad? There comes a point in time where you have to just pull it together and do what you got to do. I mean, we had our mission, our mission was to take care of the troops, heal them, treat them, and so, we had this sewn down inside of us. But in order to do that we had to take care of ourselves too. We took care of ourselves by oftentimes distancing ourselves from the reality of what's there. We, and this is going against all of the wonderful teachings of the Sisters of the Charity of St. Vicente de Paul and nurses training, where every patient is a name and a human soul. It's not a bed number. That's how I was raised. That's how I was taught, and so it went against all of those things to have to step back away from that and I don't believe I ever lost the sense of knowing it was a human soul. There was still a deep sadness about all of it. But we had to, let's just say, not get involved on a personal level because if we did, we couldn't function as expeditiously as possible, which got in the way. And so often times, especially when we worked out in the emergency room, it was like, okay, I got it, you're here. We're doing a chest and a leg and a belly and a foot, and that's what it was. So just focus on that, do that. That's how we took care of ourselves and, you know, it's really very funny because even with saying all those things, we'd listen for those helicopters. We could hear them from way out, and we knew they were coming. We went right up to the emergency room. We needed to be a part of that, because we needed to help them, we needed to save them. So there's just such conflict here about protecting ourselves, but yet needing to be a part of that adrenaline rush that you got from doing this work, and I don't know, sometimes I don't know if all that fits together in something that can be called healthy, but maybe that's what kept us alive, thinking we were the best, we were going to make it for them and we did all that. And the other thing we did was we partied very hard. Yeah. That, I think, in order to balance this extreme, you have to have another extreme. And there wasn't much else to do.

QUESTION: There was danger there. Did that ever enter into your consciousness?

MARSHA: Only in the beginning, I was in the country probably about five or six days at Camp Evans when I first got there and, of course, we all had our helmets and we all had flat jackets. I was sitting on the bed in my hooch, and I had a single sectioned area in this wooden structure that was built, and I was sitting on my bed and I think I was writing a letter home because we didn't have cell phones. I heard this whistle, and it got louder and louder and I thought wow, it didn't take too long to realize it was a rocket coming in. It got louder and louder and I thought, oh, please God, hit something soon. It hit a latrine outside of our nurses' quarters and it's like I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where to go, I didn't know where I should roll out. I didn't know what to do. But the one thing, we all took care of each other. In the nurses' quarters you all know who the new guy was. So the minute that all happened there are a couple of nurses that came down, come on, get your helmet, get your flak jack and get down, we're going out to the bunker. That was the first time I really thought that I could be personally threatened by the enemy. So, they taught me to, in your flak jacket, be sure you have a can of soda and cigarettes and candy bars and stuff cause you never know how long you're going to be in the bunker. Toilet paper, bring it all. So we were all loaded up when we went to the bunkers. [LAUGHS]

After a while you get so used to hearing the noise of war, it can be all day long. You'd hear the gunships come in, and you'd hear the guns ships turn off and the rotors, you know, get quiet. As soon as they were shut down we always had incoming, because they knew the deal.

QUESTION:

Tell us about helicopters.

MARSHA: Well, in a way they were like the automobiles [LAUGHS] in Vietnam. I mean everything went by chopper. Here you hear ambulance sirens. And that's what tells you something's happening. Over there it was helicopters. They were the ambulances of the hospitals. They were the sirens in a way.

QUESTION: Tell me what the memorial experience meant to you.

MARSHA: Well I think first I have to go back to this place where, you know, when I got home from the military. Yes I served in the military, done, that's it, and I moved on. It wasn't until probably like in 1987, that someone said to me they're going to be building this memorial in Washington for women who were in Vietnam. I said really? And she said I know you were there. She said do you want to come hear about it? I said okay. So I went and I listened to it and met another woman that was there who was actually giving this information out. I got kind of interested in it and I figured I'd try to find out a little more about it because for the first time I was actually standing with another woman who served in Vietnam as a nurse. And there was this little spark inside, sort of that was like maybe you better check this out, see what this is. There was a hard long road to get that memorial built, and a lot of struggles. Finally it was done and the memorial was put down on the area it was dedicated to over by the wall. We were going to have this huge dedication. By this point I became very involved with Vietnam Veterans of America, which allowed me to really stretch some of my advocacy and stuff like that. But, we came down here for that parade and we all had to go buy ribbons, and it was like joy. It was like somebody understood; somebody recognized the contribution that we made as women, you know, in the military during those times. It was validation in a way. People were marching along with signs 95th of that, third surge, anybody know so-and-so. And they were everywhere and you just roamed around praying that you'd find somebody that you knew. That, you know, had shared that same time with you, that had been in that same place. It was really one of the most uplifting days in my life. You didn't want to think about the bad times, it was about a celebration of what we accomplished. It was a celebration of knowing that we had contributed something, that we really were a part of history, that what we did had some matter and some worth. It was about all of those things. Sometimes it's just hard to bring it into words. And actually it's not just about women who were in Vietnam, it was about all the women who served during the Vietnam era, because we all had a function during that wartime. We were all at a level that was compatible with winning and with keeping the military on mark.

QUESTION: Talk about post-traumatic stress in women.

MARSHA: I am of the belief that I don't know of anybody who can go through extraordinary experiences without having some level of PTSD. It's just the way your body reacts to some level of PTSD. Mental health issues are so complex because so much of our lives, past lives, play into how we can deal with it, how we understand it, how we cope with it. Certainly our level of relationships with other people and the support we get from other people can help us move through it. PTSD, and I'm not a scientist, I'm just a nurse, no I am a nurse. I'm not just a nurse.

I'm a nurse. I'm not a doctor; I'm not a psychologist. But you're really lucky if you get to put it, all those experiences, in a little box and put it in the closet and close the door and move on. I except there's another part of me that says hiding it doesn't really make it go away. I'm a believer that all of the things that you experience in life brings you to a point that makes you who you are. I think from Vietnam I look at as young as we were we were all just kind of formulating these parts of our psychological being that help to bring stability to our lives and help us form healthy relationships, and that was all kind of screwed up by the war. I always joked about the fact that I handled my PTSD by getting involved with veterans all my life. But I can't walk away from that. I think PTSD becomes a problem when it interferes with your life. Do I have it? Yes. I have it. I have it. I agree, I do. I admit it. I know a lot of people with it. It's what you do about it. It's first of all recognizing, understanding, and how you find some reconciliation with it and how you cope with it in your life so that it doesn't affect and hurt other people. To begin, you know, [LAUGHS] some parts of my life are like black and white. But they're not. We're all so complicated and I guess you can only hope that you come out the other side. Not having lost your identity you can come out the other side and not be afraid to trust other people. And you come out the other side and still see the sun. When I was in the military only 2 percent of the force could be female and that's not true today. There's no top on it. And there are a lot of women serving today that we, as women from the past, are so proud of. They have, I believe, moved that marker along. We moved that marker along and we pushed the envelope far enough that they could, you know, push it just a little further. And they've taken it to places that we never dreamed of. And we are so proud of them. And they have become now again part of the history that women are making in this country, in the military, and yeah, there are sacrifices, there's sacrifices in life. That's what life is, in a way. If you don't sacrifice you can't feel the glory of accomplishment. If you are going to bleed, you are, but you heal. You find a way to heal. These women have and will have some extraordinary experiences in their life, yes. They may come away with disabilities just like anyone else who serves. But they are capable, and they are strong, and they are willing to be a part of our military and serve in a way that even they, I think, never imagined.

QUESTION: Tell me about receiving the Bronze Star?

MARSHA: You know, there's a part of me that's a little taken aback and maybe even embarrassed that I have that, because so many did so many things that were so much more important than whatever I did and nobody ever recognized them. I just feel like I did what I was supposed to do. I don't think I did anything extraordinary. So I don't really dwell on it too much.

QUESTION: What as a Nation can we do to better recognize the service of women who have served?

MARSHA: Well, you know, women are moving up in the world. There have been a lot of progress in that regard. When you look at the Department of Defense and all of the positions that women can now operate, it's just amazing. I think what sort of sets me back a little bit once in a while is when I hear some individuals talk about they don't think women should be doing this job or that job and I'm thinking, I know a lot of men that shouldn't be doing this job or that job, quite frankly. When it comes down to it I say if you can do the job, it's yours baby. We got plenty of fine women who could show them just how to do it. It will take a while for this country to become fully immersed in total acceptance maybe, because it's taken a long time for us to just get to this place. You can't turn some of these things around until some generations

pass and live on. So, it's coming. I have no fear of that. We have some very powerful women, some very strong, powerful women that believe in their abilities and their capabilities and are proving that every day.

QUESTION: Places like the memorial are a step in that direction.

MARSHA: I think the Women In Military Service For America's Memorial here, it is a timeless message, timeless repository of the historical struggle that women have had in this country in proving their patriotism and being accepted for their strengths. It's a history of how we have evolved in our country in regard to its women. It allows us to give honor to women who have been in our lives that served. It's a place where my children can come and see a little bit of what I did in my life. And maybe even their grandchildren they'll bring here to see that. But this is a living memorial in many ways, because it will continue on and on and who knows for how long.

QUESTION: Tell me about the day they opened the doors.

MARSHA: We actually stayed in a hotel over in Arlington and took the metro liner in on the day of the dedication. The metros were filled just with women, and it gave us some kind of indication that oh, it's going to be kind of crowded here today. We got here, got off at the metro site, down at the Arlington Cemetery metro site, got off and up out of the tunnel and oh, my God, it was, I looked to my right, I mean, to my left down toward the memorial, and it was just people, a sea of people and I looked the other way, and you couldn't find an empty place all the way down to the Lincoln Memorial. You sure didn't want to have claustrophobia at that time. There were tens upon tens of thousands of people there, and some men, all helping to give recognition to what the immensity of what this memorial was and will be. And it was about all women. It wasn't just about certain categories of women that served in the military or certain corps of women, it was about all of us, we're all one no matter if we were 92 years old that day, or whether we were just a new recruit, we were all together. And you could hardly walk up through the crowds. It was so powerful, and it's sort of like the first day I happened to go to Colorado and I saw the Rocky Mountains and I cried. There was nothing else to do but cry. It was such an emotional roller coaster that day, and to see all the women were just glorious, and they had all their uniforms on and their old, you know, hats, covers, and everybody wanted to talk and everybody wanted to find out and share what they did. We weaseled our way up to the front. I don't know how we did it, but we weaseled our way up to the front. And I tell you, I stood on a chair and looked back, and you could see that picture that's out on the memorial's entranceway. I don't think anyone could have anticipated what that day was going to be like. I can't imagine that General Vaught wasn't just knocked to her knees, God bless her soul, just knocked to her knees to think that what she had accomplished along with all those who helped her, but accomplished in this memorial, that this day would be so grand. And we had a candlelight walk the last night, we all started at the Lincoln Memorial. To see some of the footage of that with all the candles, all these thousands and thousands of women coming over that bridge with those candles and the memorial to all the women who had passed before us was a real love-in. That was a real love-in. We were talking about the women of today and I, once in a while, have to give a little speech or something, and there were some men in the audience too, and I said, do you know only 2% of the force could be women when I served. Today there's no cap, and 20 percent of the new recruits are female today. And I said we women want you men to know that when we take over the Department of Defense we will protect you too. [LAUGHS] And they all get a kick out of that. But this memorial is very creative about the way it was put together with the computer systems

that are going to allow us to always add information on the women who have served or do serve. It is constantly evolving through the times with different pictorial displays, and different seminars and workshops that are here, different programs that can be presented here. It has such a multidimensional aspect to it. That is truly a gift to us.