

# The Providence Journal

---

## LOCAL

# Women warriors, women's voices: Recalling their time as nurses in Vietnam

**Frank Lennon** Special to The Journal

Published 6:25 a.m. ET March 20, 2023

On March 3, Providence Clemente Veterans' Initiative hosted “Women Warriors, Women’s Voices” at the Providence Athenaeum.

The program, co-sponsored by the Rhode Island State Council for the Arts and the Rhode Island Department of Veterans Services, was organized as part of Women’s History Month.

Nine local women shared their military experiences with a live and virtual audience through poems, stories, essays and readings. Their service ran from Vietnam to the present day. They addressed a broad variety of topics, running the gamut from decompressing after time spent in a combat zone to the challenge unique to the female veteran: balancing motherhood and deployment.

Cumberland resident Jennifer Marquis-Carusio spent 10 years in the Army as an airborne qualified combat photographer. She now serves as the Women Veteran Coordinator for Rhode Island’s Office of Veterans Services. Hers was a short but powerful presentation in which she recited 11 names of female soldiers whose voices were silenced twice, once by the men who killed them and once by the chain of command and system that did not do enough to protect them.

## 'Vietnam never left me,' says a nurse who faced PTSD

Kathy Murray Splinter of Fall River was 19 when she enlisted in the Army in July 1966. My predecessor, Mary K. Talbot, interviewed her for this column in September 2020.

“She was looking for adventure,” wrote Talbot, “a way to see beyond the state line, and a means to pay her last \$150 tuition bill for nursing school.”

Two years later, Splinter found herself in Vietnam. “I was a scared, overwhelmed 21-year-old,” she said last week. “I was treating illnesses and traumas that I never learned about in

nursing school.”

On June 8, 1969, Splinter was lying in her bunk and heard sirens signifying incoming Viet Cong rockets. Sharon Lane, a fellow nurse, was finishing up a night shift when a round landed nearby.

A piece of shrapnel hit Lane in the neck, and Splinter told Talbot that Lane was “dead before she hit the floor. She had only been in country for 45 days.”

Lane, 25, was the only American servicewoman killed by enemy fire in Vietnam.

More than 11,000 military women served in Vietnam (in addition to civilians working for the Red Cross and the State and Defense Departments.) Eight U.S. military women (seven Army nurses and one Air Force nurse) died, along with 59 American civilian women.

All but nine of the 11,000 military women were nurses. Navy nurses served 90-day tours aboard offshore hospital ships, while Air Force nurses transited Vietnam regularly, working flights evacuating wounded soldiers.

Army nurses, however, lived in-country and often treated casualties close to the combat zones. Many, like Splinter, performed medical duties well above their level of training.

“Vietnam never left me,” Splinter told the group at the Athenaeum. She was a PTSD victim before the VA even acknowledged what that was. The illness cost Splinter her marriage and her job before she was able to get treatment and restore stability in her life.

This powerful program can be viewed in its entirety at [vimeo.com/805226184](https://vimeo.com/805226184). It is well worth an hour of your time. I highly recommend it.

## **Million Veteran Program update**

Last August we reported on the VA’s national research program that tries to determine how genes, lifestyle and military exposures affect health and illness.

Started in 2011, MVP is already one of the world’s largest programs on genetics and health, with more than 900,000 enrolled. Program Director Dr. Suma (Sumitra) Muralidhar says, “We are confident we’ll reach the historic million milestone by the end of 2023 or early 2024.”

“Imagine going to the doctor and getting the right care at the right time,” she continued. “Instead of one-size-fits-all, you get personalized health care based on your genes, lifestyle,

military experiences and exposures.”

Understanding differences in our genes can help explain why some people get diseases and respond to certain treatments while others don't.

Data from more than 934,000 enrolled veterans have supported the largest genetic studies to date on post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide prevention and heart disease. Other research includes cancer, diabetes, Gulf War Illness and osteoarthritis.

## **Any veteran can join MVP**

You don't need to receive your care at VA to be part of MVP. To learn more, visit [mvp.va.gov](http://mvp.va.gov) or call (866) 441-6075 to schedule an appointment. Walk-ins are also welcome at the Providence VA from 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at the vaccine clinic on the second floor of the main building (C wing) in room 241.

All that is required from you is a blood sample and your permission for MVP to access your medical records. You may occasionally be asked to take a survey as well.

There is no downside or risk to your privacy. Researchers do not see anything that identifies you, such as your name, date of birth or Social Security number. Insurance companies and employers cannot access your records.

Muralidhar sums up MVP as follows: “Our goal is to use what we learn to build the foundation for more specialized care for veterans.”

## **Announcements**

**Attention Vietnam Vets: Share your feelings about any aspect of your Vietnam experience:** March 29 marks the 50th anniversary of the withdrawal of the last U.S. troops from Vietnam. The March 27 column will address your feelings about the war, then and now. Email me at [veteranscolumn@providencejournal.com](mailto:veteranscolumn@providencejournal.com).

**Also:** If you know any veterans or service members who deserve recognition for the work they are doing today in their civilian employment, please reach out as well.

## **Calendar**

**Saturday, March 25, 9:30 a.m. to noon: National Medal of Honor Day; South Kingstown Dedication & Remembrance Ceremony** will commemorate the sacrifice of

the town's three Medal of Honor recipients and five missing in action service members from World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam. Contemporary Theater Company Patio, 327 Main St., Wakefield. For details call Sharon Henderson at (850) 291-7770, or email yesterdaywhen@gmail.com.

**Sunday, March 26, 4 p.m., annual Veteran of the Year banquet** hosted by United Veterans Council of Woonsocket; Saint Joseph Veterans Association, 99 Louise St., Woonsocket.

**Wednesday, March 29, 11 a.m. Vietnam Veterans Day ceremony**, Veterans Memorial, Deerfield Park, Smithfield, Sponsored by Balfour-Cole Post 64 American Legion. The public is invited, especially those who served in Vietnam. Contact Skip Sweeney, (401) 232-2621.

**Wednesday, March 29, 1 to 4 p.m.: Texas Roadhouse offers Free “Welcome Home” Lunch for Vietnam Veterans on Vietnam Veterans Day.** Providence Vet Center's mobile van will be there to offer veteran services. **There are only 50 spots available, and it is first come, first served. Make reservations** with Missy Beaudoin at (860) 465-6364 or email 278marketing@texasroadhouse.com.

*To report the outcome of a previous activity, or to add a future event to our calendar, please email the details (**including a contact name and phone number/email address**) to veteranscolumn@providencejournal.com.*