

Flora Haus: 'I Just Wanted to Help'



"Nice Jewish girls don't go into the military."

That's what Flora Haus' mother said when then 20-year-old Haus announced she was joining the Navy. Her mother had reason for concern. It was 1969, when the Vietnam War was near its height, and the conflict was growing increasingly unpopular on the home front.

But Haus, MSN, RN, now the education program coordinator for Nursing Research and Development at Cedars-Sinai, was determined. She was a newly minted graduate of New York's Phillips Beth Israel School of Nursing, eager to make her mark on the world. Haus enlisted in the Navy Nurse Corps after a military recruiter showed her class a film about the USS Sanctuary, an 800-patient-capacity hospital ship that treated sick and wounded soldiers in Vietnam.

"Something about it just spoke to me — I was a goner," Haus said. "It had nothing to do with the rightness or the wrongness of the war. I just wanted to help the men who were fighting."



With her parents' blessing, she underwent six weeks of officer training at Naval Station Newport in Rhode Island. The Navy then stationed her at Bethesda National Naval Medical Center (now Walter Reed National Military Medical Center) in Maryland.

The Navy immediately placed a lot of responsibility on the new lieutenant's shoulders. Haus led two very busy hospital units: a 25-bed pulmonary unit and a 37-bed orthopedic unit. She also managed a team of hospital corpsmen — all of them men and most of them older than she was — who did the hands-on nursing care.

The beds were always full, usually with soldiers, sailors and Marines, many of whom still had the dirt of Vietnam caked on them when they arrived. It was not unusual for them to act as if they were still fighting a guerrilla war.

One night, Haus tapped a sleeping Marine on the shoulder to give him his medication. The Marine sat up and — still sleeping — punched Haus in the jaw so hard that she fell against the next bed. The sleeping soldier in that bed then sat up and, also still sleeping, clamped a meaty arm around her neck and squeezed.

"It was a funny and painful lesson," she said. "No one told me not to wake up a Marine with a touch. It taught me so much about the world they had just come from. They had to learn how to protect themselves even in their sleep."

Haus' most poignant experience came when she met the soldier whose name, rank, service and the date he went missing was etched on a metal bracelet she wore. At the time, some Americans wore POW/MIA bracelets to help bring attention to soldiers who had been captured by the enemy or who had gone missing in action.

By coincidence, Haus saw his name on the paperwork of incoming wounded soldiers. Somehow, he also found out that the person wearing the bracelet with his name on it was a nurse at the hospital. And he wanted to meet her.

"The soldiers believed very strongly that the people who wore those bracelets helped keep them alive. When he arrived, he said, 'Where is she? Where is Lt. Zimmerman?'" said Haus, whose maiden name is Zimmerman.

"I went to his room and we stared at each other for a long time. Then we hugged and just cried."

She visited the soldier — a tall, young colonel in the Air Force — when she could, and met his family. When he died a month later from his wounds, she attended his funeral at Arlington National Cemetery.

Haus left the Navy in 1973, after she met the man she was to marry. She raised a family in Virginia while continuing to work as a nurse. She now has two grown children. Her son is a restaurant manager, and her daughter, Melanie Haus, CN II, is a nurse at Cedars-Sinai.

Haus said she learned invaluable lessons in the Navy, such as the importance and purpose of structure and process.

"The Navy taught me accountability, more than anything," Haus said. "The rules and regulations form a framework that help ensures the safety of those you are responsible for. That organized way of thinking forms the basis of patient care."

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