

Meet Your Neighbor: Dana Petri

Dana Petri (nee Eastes) is one of those increasing rarities—a native Texan. Born in Athens, Texas, she had four older brothers, of which the youngest was nine years older than she. As a child she dreamed of becoming a math professor, but by the time she got around to career planning she opted for Nursing School at Jeff Davis Hospital in Houston. Upon graduation as a Registered Nurse she went to work as Operating Room Nurse for a prominent Houston surgeon, but after a few years she was smitten with an urge for something new and different,

In the early 1950s she joined the Army Nurse Corps, and after basic training in San Antonio she was sent to Ft. Bliss at El Paso. Shortly thereafter she was assigned to an Evacuation Center south of Seoul, Korea. The work of the 11th Evac was mainly preparing and sending recovering soldiers home to the States, and when that was finished she was assigned to a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital—M.A.S.H. for short, at a place called Uijonbu near the 38th Parallel..

By this time the Korean War had entered the cease-fire, so there were no fleets of helicopters delivering large numbers of wounded soldiers from the battlefield as we saw in the popular Alan Alda TV series M.A.S.H.

There was no Hawkeye or Colonel Potter, no Klinger or Radar or Hot-Lips Houlihan or the hapless Major Burns. There certainly were not all the shenanigans portrayed in the TV show, but there were many similarities. Conditions for surgery, for example, were quite primitive. Anesthesia was administered with drip masks, and the only antibiotics available were penicillin and sulfa. The OR had a wooden floor and canvas walls. There were no refrigerated blood banks at Uijonbu, so any blood needed had to be flown in by special order.

CPT Dana Eastes (Petri) in Korea

By the time young Captain Eastes left in early 1955 some of the tents had been replaced with metal Quonset huts, and to her delight the OR was in one of the new buildings, with a concrete floor and parachute silks for insulation against the bitter cold in winter.

Dana's greatest disappointment was that for security purposes women personnel were not allowed to leave the camp without a male escort, so she had no chance to explore the countryside or to get to know the Korean people. Her one experience with them was a very difficult one. "There was a gas line not too far from camp," she recalls, "and one night a villager went out with a match to find the leak. The pipeline blew up and we had a lot of burn victims to take care of, all Korean." There followed a grueling night in the OR reminiscent of the M.A.S.H. on TV when helicopters brought in the wounded en masse after a big battle.

After completing her military service Dana returned Houston where she was a Methodist where she became OR Nursing Director. There had been plenty of men to choose from in Korea (at social events like dances the ratio of men to women was always 10-15 to 1), but it was not until she was back in a Houston hospital that she met the love of her life, Gilbert Petri, who was a manufacturer's rep for medical equipment. For the first and only time she became a bride, and the marriage has lasted since

then and is still going strong. In earlier years Dana and Gil did a lot of traveling to places like Central America, New Zealand and Australia among others, but today and since 2009 they are comfortably at home on the first floor of Treemont's Building B. Dana still welcomes any chance to talk about old times with fellow alumni of her M.A.S.H. unit, and she has nothing but good things to say about the Army. She thinks it built her confidence, helped her self-discipline and was all together a positive experience.

Since May is the month for National Nurses Day it seems an appropriate time to note the vast contributions dedicated nurses have made to their profession and to humanity. Military nurses especially have performed difficult tasks under very difficult conditions. Thanks, all you nurses out there.