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Oral History
Marie Sturtevant
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Murielle: This is an interview with Marie Sturtevant, okay, this is for the Franco American Heritage Collection. My name is Murielle Guay. Marie, we are going to ask you a few questions. At any time if you feel that you want to stop the interview, just go ahead and say so. Okay?

Marie: Yes.

Murielle: Alright, this is going to be a little bit about your background, when and where were you born?

Marie: In Lewiston.

Murielle: and when?

Marie: 1940.

Murielle: 1940, and did you grow up in Lewiston?

Marie: No, I grew up in Sabattus.

Murielle: How long were you in Sabattus?

Marie: 48 years.

Murielle: Where were your parents raised and born?

Marie: Okay, my father, he was raised in Turner. My mother was raised in Lewiston and her parents were from Canada.

Murielle: Oh, ok, and where did they go to school, your parents?

Marie: My father- gee I don't know where my father - I guess the Lewiston schools. They moved to Lewiston when he was a child and they were until this, I guess that some years later, my mother went to Lewiston schools, that was primarily St. Peter's and before they had the high school and the closest [...].

Murielle: Okay, Can you briefly describe your childhood and your family life?

Marie: Ah, well, my early childhood was during World War II, being born right before the American engagement in World War II. My oldest brothers were drafted at the end of World War II. I think it was a difficult childhood because my father was an alcoholic and so that, some of the problems of dysfunctional families were are, and I think there were also some problems related to cultural differences. My mother being very strong French Canadian, her mother didn't speak English. My father was from an Irish Anglo-Saxon background probably didn't share all their values. So it made for some stress encounter.

Murielle: I would imagine, yeah. How many members in your immediate family?

Marie: Well, there's two families, my father was married twice, so there was three children from his first wife and then, two children from, I have a sister that, a full sister, a half sister and two half brothers.

Murielle: Makes Christmas pretty interesting. Okay, how about your grandparents? You said they were from Canada?

Marie: Ah, yah, both of my ah – my grandmother Plourde, she was born in [...] in Canada, not too far from Quebec. It's in the province of Quebec, French Canadian. She came to this country, gee Aunt Anna was two;, the youngest one was born in this country, all the others were born in Canada. I guess she must have been about 10 years old when she came to this country. My grandfather Plourde came as a young child to this country. Shortly after they arrived, his father died and so, and they came to Lewiston. So his mother, I guess raised 8 or 10 children by herself. And of course, in those days there was no welfare system, so, they both came from pretty much at least in the beginning, low income conditions.

Murielle: Sounds like we treaded the same waters.

Marie: I think that is probably true, the French Canadian immigrant. Lot of them came down for work. They followed the railroads.

Murielle: Exactly, any job they could find.

Marie: Any job, they were hard working. I know my grandfather Plourde was involved in supporting of the family when he was 10. He went to work in the mills. Of course, in those days they did have child labor and so him and his older brother, Uncle Joe, literally supported the younger children.

Murielle: Okay. Did you work at all before you entered the military?

Marie: Yes, I was already an RN [Registered Nurse] when I went into the army in 1966. I was entered while I was in my Baccalaureate Program. I had gone through the school of nursing at St. Mary's [Hospital, Lewiston] and had my diploma of nursing. I had worked at the Marcotte Home two years as a supervisor when I went into the military.

Murielle: How old where you when you entered the military?

Marie: I was 26 years old.

Murielle: What made you decide to enter the military?

Marie: Well, it was Vietnam and I had read an article requesting for either volunteer – not volunteer, but contract nurses. The military at the time were looking for nurses. It was right before a [the] Tet [Offensive] of [19]67 and '68. So Vietnam was at its peak. I always had a desire to go into the army. So I went to the Boston Army Base, and of course I don't meet the height or weight requirements. They were also interested because Vietnam being a French speaking country, they also wanted somebody with that spoke the language. So I went, made an appointment and went and got into the army on a technicality. I really, because the Army Nurse Corps had no criteria of their own for admission. They only went by went by recommendations of the WACs, Women's Army Corp, and I had an uncle that was working for the Surgeon General's office at the time.

Murielle: Connections huh?

Marie: And of course for my initial physical, they didn't know that and I didn't even think of it. But, they did call the surgeon's general's office to see about whether, you know what they could do to get me in because there was really a drastic need for nurses. Two questions were asked, "Was she able to perform the duties of a profession nurse before entering?" Of course, the answer was yes. Because the Army Nurse Corp, the ANC had no criteria of their own then they felt that the AN C was knocked down by the WACS, so I got in on three waivers.

Murielle: It was meant to be, right?

Marie: and then I got to Fort Sam Huston [Texas], which was my first assignment. I had an interview with Colonel Fisher and she said, How did you get in the army? I told her and she asked me where I had had my interview and admission physical? I said, Boston Army Base and her response was that they usually don't do it there.

Murielle: So you were in.

Marie: I was in.

Murielle: Did you friends or relatives at the time that were in the military of any form?

Marie: Yeah, my mother's brother was still active duty at the time. He had gone in on the National Guard had been drafted through the National Guard at the beginning of World War II or the middle of World War II and had made a career of it. He was a [...] Colonel at the time. My mother's sister's husband was in the [...] at the lawyers and the at the time was working at the Surgeon General's office.

Murielle: Excellent! Now, your Franco American background, you have interviewed a few other people and I guess my main concern is, was there any discrimination at all concerning that in where you were, or who you were, to people your worked with?

Marie: In the army?

Murielle: Yeah.

Marie: I never felt discrimination in the army. I think probably because I was a professional and I had a Baccalaureate by the time I was active duty. I was simply recognized for my excellence in nursing and the army did give me a citation for outstanding nursing. I found that the majority of the areas in terms of prejudice were encountered with blacks. It was the time of the black power and I don't even think French Canadians were even recognized as a minority group at that time. Besides I had a name of Sturtevant.

Murielle: That's true. That's true, good point.

Marie: And it's true because I think in all of my professional career, because I have the name of Sturtevant, I'm not recognized as having French-Canadian background and I do speak, and write and read fluently in French. People are very astounded; where is the French coming from?

Murielle: Do you think it would have been any different for you if you would have had a French name, such as mine, Guay, or Blais, or you know?

Marie: I think from the number of French jokes, maybe. That is a lot of, I mean, and I think it was still the time of cultural jokes. You still hear them but not quite as caustic, they was always the joke about the dumb Frenchman, which isn't true because, in looking at my own family, even though they were low income and most of them went on to work a really responsible positions and they are highly intelligent people.

Murielle: Thank you very much.

Marie: It's true.

Murielle: How about any discrimination because you were a woman in the service?

Marie: Ah, I guess I really never considered any discrimination. I think there was some issues related, to women and they were involved with more when they enlisted. I found that I did pretty much what I did and wanted to do in the service. I know probably some of the limitations were related to value systems and I don't regret the things that I did. I found generally I was working with professional people and they recognized you for your professional ability, rather than a person, the only the conflict sometimes was between the values of an officer and the values of a woman, I know a lot of sexual connotations. I guess probably now in light of sexual abuse, some of them were sexually abusive but I always managed to get the sergeants to take care of it.

Murielle: Now you had a busy life I would have imagined in the armed services?

Marie: Yeah

Murielle: In the Vietnam time, could you tell us a little bit about what your daily or weekly type of activities were at the time?

Marie: Okay, um, well I think my first assignment at Valley Forge Brooke Army Medical Center [Texas], I was on a unit where they have both veterans and I had all the alcoholics, and a lot of the intensive disease and all that, was an extremely critical unit. I also worked on the respiratory where they had some rare disease that came back from Vietnam. In terms of professionally, we worked very hard. It was a time of long hours and I remember complaining that we didn't have enough staff. One of the colonels said to me, "Just wait till you get overseas!" and she was right. From Brooke, I went to Okinawa [Japan]. I was assigned to _____ canal for 18 months.

On Okinawa I served as head nurse, which now they call them unit managers. I was responsible for two units, well actually it was three for 24 hours. We worked six days a week. On many days I worked 12 to 15 hours and then the night nurse would call out. She was civilian service and I would end of working her shift. Sometimes I would work 20 hours a day. I had all, 75 % of the patients I took care of were immediate evacuees from, they came by Mac planes from Vietnam. We were the first facility for definitely treatment. I was there, I did receive all the wounded from all services. We did get all services from both Tet '68 and '69.

Murielle: You must have seen a lot of stuff.

Marie: I saw a lot and I would not do it again and I wouldn't give up. Yah, but I would not do it again. There was a high incidence of mental illness on our unit because of those that we treated went back to Vietnam even though they had life threatening wounds and went back into combat. That was really a conflict from a professional value system because you are getting somebody well to go back with the potential of getting killed. Probably about only a third were evacuated stateside and ended up with discharges with medical disabilities. I also recognized that if we hadn't been there, a lot of people wouldn't have made it home.

Murielle: I tend to agree with you, sure.

Marie: They wouldn't have made it home. We really made the difference because Vietnam was the first war where they were actually picked up at the battlesite, and within hours was triaged and within 24 hours were evacuated. So the mortality rate was lower in Vietnam; although we had a lot of deaths in Vietnam. It was lower per injury rate than any other war. Those with double amputees and quad amputees did survive with disabilities, large percentage of burns we did, also had the burns on our unit. Those did survive. Although most of the burns went to Japan.

Murielle: How many were you that worked on this unit? How many professional nurses, doctors?

Marie: I was usually the only professional nurse and sometimes I had another professional nurse with me. I had two 91-C's, which would be equal to two LPNs.

Murielle: How many soldiers, how many individuals a day?

Marie: The bed capacity for the unit was initially 60 beds. Then I had about six corpsmen, we did about 200 dressings per day. Then I initiated a surgical intensive care, that cut down on the beds a few but we also got far sicker individuals. We really ran a good unit. My nickname was Napoleon.

Murielle: I would imagine.

Marie: The guys used to complain that we worked harder on our units than any others? I don't know if that was true but I think because the number of dressings and the complexity of the dressings, everybody worked over time and six days a week. I mean.

Murielle: I was going to ask you, what did you do for yourself, personally to take yourself away from that?

Marie: There was no taking away, there was none. What time off you had you spent in sleeping.

Murielle: Energize a little bit.

Marie: I think that was, I remembering seeing "Mash" came out at the time. I saw it in Philadelphia and it was banned by the military at the time. So I had gone to see it downtown. This was immediately when I came back from overseas. I cried through the movie and the audience laughed. I didn't think it was funny because some of the characters, I could see my own staff and myself in there.

Murielle: Exactly, I would imagine from what you just said to me.

Marie: Then I had some good friends, one of my real good friends, we went through basic together and then when we came back, she went to Vietnam and I went to Okinawa, then we were back together at Valley Forge. Vietnam was one of the few wars where the V[iet] C[ong] and the Kmer Rouge and the Red Chinese actually hit hospitals. I know Peggy, in one of her letters she wrote, that the hospital got bombed and she lost her – it broke her bottle of perfume and she said "That was the only thing feminine I had."

Then one of the residents, which I had gone out with, Dave, went to Vietnam and he tells me about how they used to go joy riding. In other words, just take the military vehicles and just take a ride in the country till they started bombing the big cities. He said, "Guess what? We are not joy riding anymore."

There were a lot of nurses killed in Vietnam. They are not recorded and I think that is probably the big issues of the monument of Vietnam for women. In fact, it was Peggy's - not Peggy's but Mary-Jane's – roommate – tech mate – in Vietnam that was originally selected to make the stature for the memorial, Vietnam Memorial in Washington. They finally decided not to use her because she was too old, us on ten years later and I'm sure they could have taken a picture from her earlier years. She was a very pretty girl but instead they took a young WAC, model type. There was a lot of hard feelings with the women because of that.

Murielle: I would imagine.

Marie: I think probably the role of women, especially in healthcare – and probably because the healthcare system is regulated by medical practice and physicians – [women] probably are not recognize, but the women made the difference.

Murielle: Well in listening to you and I've often thought about, we've never heard that much about the nurses up there.

Marie: And a lot of them did get killed. There was quite a few casualties. Some of them had been joyriding, what they called joyriding, they had gone up on helicopters and the helicopters got hit, but also the hospitals were hit and some were killed that way. The major conflict for the nurses at that time was that, and it related to, that they were taking care of the VC, or anybody who came to the hospital. The VC would come after they got them treated and shoot them.

Murielle: Shoot them. [...]

Marie: So there was a lot of conflict and I don't think PTS [Post Traumatic Stress] has been recognized with the women.

Murielle: Exactly, do you associate that with yourself?

Marie: I had a mental breakdown toward the end of my tour on Okinawa. A lot of that was and it took, me sometime to really identify that I was not only French-Canadian background, but I was also the value of life from a Catholic point of view. [pause] They were kids. I was considered at 26 - by then I was 26, 27, 28 maybe - I became the mother figure for 18 year olds. I think you got very close to many of them because many of them stayed up to three months, so you really got very close to many of them. The conflict of sending them back to that battle and or even saying goodbye, I mean there were very few deaths so, but even the deaths that we didn't have, and I recall - I still think of that person. We had a 21 year old lieutenant; he got drafted while he was going to college for his Baccalaureate.

Murielle: You can tell me to stop.

Marie: It's all right. He had been a football hero and his injury affected his lower spine. He was paralyzed from his respiratory muscles down. All he could do was move his fingers, he couldn't move his arms. We had worked very hard with him. I got criticized for not put, to keep him in, I had one large room that I used to use to keep those who were really acutely ill. I got accused of mistreating officers because I put him there because he was close to the nurses' station. But he is one of those that went to a Veteran - the Veterans are going to hate me - but he is one of those that prompted the investigation with Veteran's hospitals. After he left, they left him alone in the room and I found out through his sister because his father was an air force officer. They came back and gave information. He had died because they had left him alone in a room once he got stateside. But there are some really rewards, because when I was transferred back from - to stateside - first of all getting off the plane, I fell flat on my face. I think I was kissing it.

Murielle: I have heard that part alright.

Marie: I did, it was kind of good to be back but it was also the time of the college campuses and the burning. I saw through Armed Force[s] Radio there was this fear of coming back, "Do I still have a country?" because we were hearing of the campuses burning and all of that. I think some of those conflicts came into play. I also, the beginning of drug addiction, we were seeing it. Unfortunately, it

wasn't addiction because they were goofing off; they were medical addictions. I remember working very hard to get them off addictions. I can recall coming back to stateside and being assigned to Valley Forge and 6 of my patients that got discharged from where I was, two days before I was transferred back stateside, and they went to Valley Forge where I was going, and they knew I was going. They had warned everybody that I was coming and they wanted to know. So, when I got there I had all these messages from these guys.

Murielle: That was great.

[end of side one]

Marie: I went to meet some of their families. One guy that, when we had an Okinowa, I mean, had a really a leg injury that left just the bone and skin and everything else was gone. He had got into a medical addiction and all that. I had got him off medical addiction. Anyway, I got to Valley Forge and, I mean the message had been there, he wanted to see me. So, I went to see him, then his wife and his mother and father, and he introduced me as the nurse that got him off addiction. So, I mean there was tremendous reward too.

Murielle: Now you were talking earlier about these kids and they meant an awful lot to you, did you ever have any children of your own?

Marie: I could have never had any children.

Murielle: Never married?

Marie: No, I almost got married overseas but he got transferred.

Murielle: That didn't work out?

Marie: Well, no, I found out later that he was married and made the decision to stay with his wife and I respected that. I still think of him with a great amount of respect and no way did we compromise his marriage. It was a relationship that we both needed at the time.

Murielle: I would imagine under those circumstances –

Marie: Yah, I mean you just grew close; there was no body to talk to and so, my office, which was the nurse's station, I mean everybody would just pool around it. They would open up their guts, they needed to talk to somebody. So –

Murielle: The support was in your own..

Marie: Yah, I supported them and there was no time...I never dealt with my issues at the time. I dealt with them later and I'm glad that I have dealt with them but, at the time there was not time to deal with my issues.

Murielle: On a personal issue when you were talking about Vietnam and coming back, how did you feel? Cause America at that time was kind of trying to rush everything right under the rug and not talk about it anymore. Did you get –

Marie: I think there was two issues, one was the campus revolt and the dodging and all of that. The questions that I had personally, is “Was there still a United States?” The other issue was the rejection of the military and the lack of recognition of the military. I don’t think the history is still written about Vietnam. There are still to many conflicts and values, there were politics played with it that I don’t think we have said it strong enough but for many years we did stabilize that part of the world. After we left a large amount of the Vietnamese population were just annihilated. I mean, they just murdered, you know, people by people, when the Northern Vietnamese came over and took over, I mean they just killed them, a good part of the population. Um, I think I lost my train of thought. So I think we had a valid role, the country as a whole are saying we did not have a valid role. The politicians were playing games with numbers. I think it left us Vietnam Era Veterans with a sense that of non belonging.

Murielle: That was so sad, that was real sad. Are you involved in any veterans associations right now that you kind of support each other?

Marie: No, because, unfortunately, up to present there hasn’t been any room for women. I would have had to join an auxiliary or a group and there was no way I was going to join an auxiliary or a group. I had fought in my way, not with weapons, but I fought with medicine and to me my weapon was medications and care, and dressings. Those were my weapons and I was successful. But up to present time, there were no women in veterans associations. I mean they all belong and I didn’t feel that I wanted to be the only woman with all men, although I enjoy, that was easy cause I was friendly then, but I did not feel that it was fair for me to belong to the auxiliary, so I did not join any veterans. I think that is true of veterans, the Vietnam Veterans, and I think that is why because they have their separate organization, because they did not join the traditional organizations.

Murielle: It sounds like you had like a full life.

Marie: Yeah.

Murielle: And you spoke about writing a book.

Marie: Yeah, I started writing a book; what really started it was my Vietnam experience because I found that with the physical injuries of way, there was not only psychological injuries but there was this spiritual injury. A lot of them – and I have – Wally, who was a good friend called me up one day and he said, “You know, they have taught us to kill but they have not taught us not to kill after the debriefment [sic]”. So, that spirit of anger and retaliation, I think, is probably, in my conclusion, is probably the major cause for PTS and why drug addiction and other problems are from the veterans of that era. So, the book that I had started working was how the spirit is wounded when people are sick, especially in stressful and traumatic environments.

Murielle: Do you think on a personal note that the spirit can be healed if the individual forgives himself?

Marie: I think it's more than the individual forgiving himself. I have another friend who has worked with me at a local shelter for homeless and he was a medic and experienced PTS. Mainly cause he took care of an 18 year-old dying and had to write a letter to his girlfriend. I think that the sorting out of what is good; I mean not everything was bad with Vietnam. There was some good and we need to take time to process the good, because when we can't see good, then what else is there but to be angry with the bad?

And to recognize that we are human and we have limitations. That is okay to have limitations, to admit them, and to forgive ourselves – yes, for that limitation, but also on a spiritual level. We are in a society that is, although we are a country that expresses that we believe in God, we are a country that is moving away from a belief of God and I think the individual needs to be able to see the goodness of a creator and not just destruction. So, it's taking time and processing in to find out. You know, "How did I use my creative abilities to enrich somebody else's life?" I think that will also cause some healing of the spirit.

Murielle: Excellent. Good interview, Marie. Thank you. Appreciate everything that you've said, every enlightening.

[End]