

Women in Vietnam

by [Ray Kisonas](#) , last modified May 10, 2008 10:58PM



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- Evening News photo by KIM BRENT Betty Cannon (left) and Juanita Shellito applaud Saturday after taking part in the unveiling of a statue and plaque at Heck Park honoring the women who served in the armed forces during the Vietnam War.

During a three-month period in 1965, Juanita Shellito flew to Vietnam seven times to help evacuate dozens of wounded American soldiers.

"I took care of the men," she said. "Sometimes they wanted me to hold their hand."

On New Year's Day, 1970, Betty Cannon of Erie was flown to Saigon, where she spent six weeks, working 12- to 16-hour days, fixing an underground computer that was responsible for reinforcing the front lines with supplies, including casualty replacements.

"I made sure the men in the field had food and ammo and anything else they needed," she said. "I went in and did my job. The guys were awesome. They treated me like a queen."

The two were members of the armed services who have gone, for the most part, unrecognized in society. They are women who served in Vietnam and, in Monroe County, they are unrecognized no more.

On Saturday under a blue sky, officials and uniformed soldiers saluted the women of Vietnam with their own memorial at Heck Park on N. Dixie Hwy. The statue of a servicewoman, standing about 5 feet tall and painted bronze, commemorates the 265,500 women who served overseas during the campaign.

"Everyone who visits this park knows we haven't forgotten," said Don Reed, president of Monroe County Post 142, Vietnam Veterans of America.

In addressing the crowd, which included dignitaries such as U.S. Rep. John D. Dingell, D-Dearborn, and other politicians, Air Force Brig. Gen. Carol Ann Fausone of Lansing said the memorial to women was the only one she knew of outside of the one at The Mall in Washington, D.C.

She praised the local chapter for creating such a dedication and said women played key roles in the Vietnam War, even if it wasn't in combat.

"Women in the service are different," Gen. Fausone said. "But that difference does not minimize our contribution and service to this great country."

Mrs. Cannon and Mrs. Shellito, who helped unveil the memorial, said they understood their roles in the war did not include combat, but they are proud of their contribution and believe they played an important part.

Mrs. Shellito, 61, a Bedford High School graduate and resident of Toledo, joined the Army because she wanted to pursue a career in nursing. She was 18 and training at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C., when she unexpectedly was sent overseas as part of an air evacuation team.

Seven times she flew the 3,000 miles to Vietnam and back helping dozens of the wounded in the process.

"It hurt because I knew some of the guys wouldn't make it," she said. "Yes, I do feel proud I was there and I helped those guys. I did something."

Mrs. Cannon, a 61-year-old Erie resident, joined the Marine Corps to learn about computers and did not think she would be sent to Vietnam. She was one of 48 women at boot camp.

Back then, the women of the service were required to take such training as etiquette and makeup classes in addition to drills.

"We were to be ladies first and Marines second," Mrs. Cannon recalled. "Even today they look at me and say, 'You were a Marine?' "

Mrs. Cannon was stationed in Kansas City when she received her orders to deploy. She said she was a little naive about the war but the severity of the conflict became evident immediately upon her arrival in Saigon.

"There were body bags, hundreds of them, and they were just stacked," Mrs. Cannon recalled. "Then it kind of hit me."

Computer technology at the time was in its toddler years and the giant machines had to be kept underground to maintain a 50-degree temperature. The discs were as large as tabletops in the '60s.

She was 21 at the time and felt the danger of being in Saigon when she saw the flashes in the distance.

"There was no really safe place in Vietnam," Mrs. Cannon said. "You could go eat and get blown up."

The two women left the service and eventually raised families. Mrs. Cannon ended up working in a factory. Although health issues prevented her from becoming a registered nurse, Mrs. Shellito worked in the field helping people.

Both are pleased with the memorial, which now completes the Vietnam dedications at Heck Park. Glenn R. Podhola, past president and secretary for Post 142, said Saturday's dedication concludes the veterans' goals for the park.

"This is an important day," Mr. Podhola told the crowd. "It is the culmination of a lot of years of hard work. Our mission is complete."

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