



Retired Colonel Jan McCarthy likens a good dose of medicine to having a good sense of humour. “Even in the military you’ve got to have a sense of humour. There are times you badly need it.” She says humour has helped her get through some tough times. “In Vietnam, some funny things happened. Like the toilet blowing up, and we had a tidal wave and had to evacuate the hospital.”

Jan enlisted in the Australian Army in 1966 and was appointed to the Royal Australian

Army Nursing Corps. Prior to serving, Jan spent two years in the United Kingdom. “I just felt when I came home that as much as I loved nursing, I wanted that little bit extra. I thought maybe joining the army I could get that. And, my father was a World War 1 veteran and my mother had lost her brother in the First World War.”

During her more than 26 years of service, Jan was part of the second group of Australian army nurses to serve in Vietnam, in 1968-69. There, she was posted to 1st Australian Field Hospital Vietnam. “It was very confronting many times. I was in theatre and later on in intensive care, so you saw a lot of them severely wounded and we had a big breakout of malaria there. They were very brave young men.”

She also completed a deployment to Singapore as Matron of ANZUK Woodlands Hospital in 1972.

In 1988, Jan was appointed Matron in Chief/Director Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps until her discharge in 1992.

Transitioning into civilian life was a challenging time. “The first year I was at a bit of a loss because I’d been very busy as Director Army Nursing and it took me about 12 months to settle down again. You miss a lot of things about the military.”

Having spent her professional career looking after people and saving lives, it is only natural that in retirement, Jan continues her legacy. For many years, she has generously volunteered her time with the Returned Nurses Sub-Branch of the RSL, where she is currently the President. She is so proud of the diverse range of work they do. “We get a lot of requests from various people that want to know about their great grandmother for instance, we have fundraising for ANZAC Day selling badges and on Remembrance Day selling poppies. We look after our members - we’ve had 104 year olds until recently - so you certainly get involved with looking after people and making sure they’re alright and visiting people in care in nursing homes and things like that.”

Just like during her military service, Jan continues to treasure mateship – a term that embodies so many qualities, including the idea of looking out for and looking after each other. “There is a lot of friendship. And you’re giving something back to the community. You can take things all your life, but you’ve got to give back.”

And what Jan gets in return is a priceless reward. “It’s the fact that you’re caring about your members and you’re doing something for those that we don’t have anymore and certainly those we’ve lost during wars and post war eras. Caring for those you’ve served with who have fallen on harder times than yourself.”