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“WHY I CHOSE NURSING AS A CAREER”

NSNA/JOHNSON & JOHNSON CONSUMER PRODUCTS ESSAY CONTEST — 2nd PLACE WINNER

by William A. Timmons

The whine of the aircraft's hydraulic system became louder as the cargo doors closed. As the doors shut, the soft German twilight slowly disappeared. I shut off the hydraulic system and quickly engaged the manual locks securing the doors. I made my way forward, scanning the cargo as I went. The huge C-141B “Starlifter” was loaded with ten pallets of ammunition destined for a naval base in the Mediterranean. Climbing out of the crew door, I headed for the rest of the enlisted crew who were sitting underneath the starboard wing of the “Starlifter.”

The two flight engineers were discussing the low intelligence levels of loadmasters when I joined them. Since I was the only loadmaster on the crew, it fell upon me to defend the honor of my crew position. As the debate was escalating, a van pulled up and deposited our copilot. Lieutenant Howard looked down and said, “The K-loaders (used to load/unload cargo pallets on aircraft) are on the way out. We are downloading the cargo and are reconfiguring the aircraft for a med-evac mission to pick up someone from a remote base in Canada and carry him to the states.”

An hour later I watched the last of the K-loaders as it backed away from the aircraft. Waiting to the side was an ambulance containing the equipment to convert the large cargo plane into an airborne hospital. While we were loading, the aircraft commander and a female

officer came to the ramp. The “AC” introduced her as Captain Clark, the flight nurse who would be flying with us. He said, “Engine start will be in ten minutes, just tie everything down, and set up on the way to Canada.”

After takeoff, when Captain Clark made her way down from the flight deck, she found I was standing in the back of the darkened cargo compartment looking out the window set into the troop door. The lights of Germany were spread out under us as we climbed to our assigned altitude. The nurse stood in the other door watching as the lights grew smaller, then became twinkling patches set among the dark German countryside. Thin wisps of clouds started swirling past the windows, giving way to solid clouds, covering up the fairy-tale display. I walked to the control panel and flipped on the lights, then untied the equipment so we could begin our work.

Several hours later, high over the Atlantic, Captain Clark and I surveyed the med-evac equipment over cups of coffee. As we sat there I asked her, “What made you become a nurse? Don't you get tired of being around sick people?” I will never forget the glow that entered her eyes as she began talking. And I will never forget that magic hour I spent listening to her as the aircraft sped through the night, high over the Atlantic.

I listened attentively about the difficulties of getting into nursing

school, and the anxiety of waiting to find out if she had been accepted. Furthermore, once accepted, Captain Clark told me about the number of nights she stayed up past midnight preparing for the next day's clinical assignment and the frustrations and tears brought on by demanding instructors. She even admitted the anguish had almost driven her out. Then Captain Clark shared with me some of the moments which made her realize all of the hard work was worthwhile. Moments like watching a family as it went through the strange mix of grief and relief which accompanies the death of a terminally ill patient. Moments like handing a brand-new mother her infant and seeing the joy and amazement on her face. Moments spent watching a young accident victim as he takes his first determined steps with his new prosthetic leg. Moments like escorting an elderly woman to be discharged, knowing how slim her chances for doing so had been months before. And moments when a young girl holds up her teddy bear to have a bandage put on its “stitches.”

Later in the trip, after he had been secured into the spot we had prepared for him, I watched as Captain Clark took care of her patient. Captain Clark was oblivious to the routine of take-off. She sat down only when I informed her we were beginning the take-off roll down the runway. As she set up her equipment and checked her



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monitors she was constantly comforting the patient. We were soon descending into Andrews Air Force Base where an ambulance from Walter Reed Army Medical Center waited. Captain Clark and her patient were soon on their way. Before she left, Captain Clark thanked me for my assistance. She also suggested I think about our discussion on nursing—the profession needed more caring men. As the ambulance drove away I reflected that there was no way I had the compassion and control Captain Clark possessed.

Several years later, after I had left the service, I was traveling with my wife many miles from home. Carol started suffering from intense abdominal pain. By the time we reached the next city, there was no doubt she needed help. I followed the blue signs to the downtown hospital. Observing the pain Carol was in, they quickly escorted us back to one of the rooms. Here we were, a thousand miles from home, Carol in pain, and me not knowing what to do. The nurse came in and started her assessment. By the time she finished, Carol felt better and I was reassured by the friendly professionalism. During the course of the afternoon I was able to observe the emergency room nurses. I was impressed by the variety of personalities, sexes, and races of both the nurses and the people they came in contact with. I was also impressed with the job they were doing and the calm, patient manner they used with all who came in, no matter how big or little the problem. Later that afternoon when Carol was released, I was once again marveling over the people who were nurses.

A month after we had returned from our trip, I reached a point where I had to make some serious decisions about my future. I was frustrated with the direction in which I was headed and knew I did not want to invest any more time in what I was doing—assistant manager with Doubleday Books. Carol had to go to a local hospital because of an accident at work, so I went with her. To keep her mind off what was going on, I was talking with her

about my professional frustrations. She asked, "What about nursing? You have not taken your eyes off of them (the nurses) since we arrived. Last month you were more interested in what the nurses were doing than what I was going through." While I denied the charge, I did listen to what she said. It just seemed bizarre—here I was a twenty-nine-year-old college graduate with a degree in geography thinking about going into the health industry. Well, why not? All of my previous choices did not intrigue me the way nursing did.

I started thinking about the nurses I have come in contact with over the years. These included the intensive care nurses who had cared for my mother as she died, and their support for us. Then there was Captain Clark, the flight nurse, whose enthusiasm about her profession was as big as the skies we had flown in. And finally, I thought about the various emergency room nurses I had observed. Their calm professionalism, cool competency, and ready compassion illustrated qualities I truly desired in a profession. I researched the career at the library and visited a hospital where I talked with members of the nursing staff. I soon realized the limitless possibilities available in nursing. I finally understood that I too could feel a surge of pride and excitement about thinking of myself as a registered nurse.

It has been three years since I made my decision to become a nurse. I know for myself the thrill of mastering new skills, the intensity required for both class and clinical, the heartache felt when a patient passes away, the joy of a baby's birth. I have learned nursing encompasses the lives of people far more than I ever thought. And I am thrilled to be part of it. It is funny—finding my chosen profession has taken me longer than most, but I do not think it would be such a perfect career for me if I had not gone through the experiences I have. I know my past lessons will be my future attributes in relating to my patients and in my contributions to nursing. ■

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