

Civilian Women in Vietnam: Army Special Services

by Ann Kelsey, DAC, USARV Special Services, Library Branch, 1969-1970

The Army Special Services Program in Vietnam began on July 1, 1966. At that time responsibility for providing a diversified and comprehensive recreation program in support of the morale and welfare of United States and Free World Military Forces was transferred from the United States Navy to the United States Army Vietnam (USARV) with operational responsibility being assumed by the 1st Logistical Command. The Special Services Program was composed of several branches, but the civilians, both women and men, who volunteered to serve one year tours in Vietnam were concentrated in the Arts and Crafts, Entertainment, Library, and Service Club sections. These civilians, many of whom extended for additional one year tours, staffed and operated craft shops, libraries, and service clubs, and coordinated an array of entertainment programs. These facilities and programs provided off duty recreation and relaxation to service men and women from I Corps at the DMZ to IV Corps in the Delta.

In March 1970, at the time that Special Services was reorganized and centralized as the USARV Special Services Agency (Provisional), approximately 99 civilians managed and supervised the 31 craft and photography laboratories, 6 entertainment offices, 23 service clubs, and 39 libraries in Vietnam. Between 1966 and 1972 an estimated 300-600 civilians, about 75% of them women, served in Vietnam as employees of the Special Services.

In pursuit of their mission, the women who served as Special Services librarians and recreation specialists worked long hours in monsoon mud and dusty heat. Because there were far fewer personnel than there were installations requiring their services, they travelled extensively by any available means: jeeps, 2 1/2 ton trucks, helicopters, fixed wing aircraft, and on foot. They endured rocket attacks, mortar barrages, and commando raids mounted against the installations at which they were located, sometimes spending nights in

sandbagged rat-infested bunkers, occasionally composing songs to keep up their spirits.

What did these women do? They managed permanent libraries, similar to small public libraries in the United States, located on larger bases, such as Cam Ranh Bay, Long Binh, Bearcat, Chu Lai, Nha Trang, and Dong Ba Thin. They supervised 250 field library units, and arranged the field distribution of 190,000 magazine subscriptions and 350,000 paperbacks. They offered assistance and instruction in metal enameling, model building, lapidary, photography, painting, and leather working. They directed a variety of recreational programs and activities, from ping pong tournaments to song fests, running them from service clubs in such places as Tay Ninh, Cu Chi, Dong Tam, An Khe, Phu Bai, and Quang Tri. They coordinated USO tours of entertainers and celebrities, and produced, directed, and acted in little theatre productions at larger base camps. They developed Command Military Touring Shows, composed of in-country military personnel, who entertained their fellow soldiers in areas that commercial shows could not go for security reasons.

The women who volunteered to serve with Special Services in Vietnam did so for a variety of reasons. They went for adventure, in search of exciting and rewarding opportunities, and because it presented a challenge, both professional and personal. They went out of patriotism. But mostly they went because they cared about their fellow men and women.

They wanted to serve their country and help to boost the morale of soldiers far from home. Their effectiveness in accomplishing these objectives under extremely difficult working and living conditions was underscored in 1971 when the USARV Special Services Agency was recommended for a Meritorious Unit Commendation.

Women in Special Services assumed a lot of responsibility, learned a lot, did things they had

never done before. Their sense of humor, enthusiasm, creativity, and excitement saw them through. They felt they were a real part of Vietnam, as much a part as any soldier. They gave much, but in return they received a strong sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, something to look back on for the rest of their lives. The women of Special Services, when all is said and done, were just that—special people who provided a very special service.

Sources:

General Historical Records, Relating to the Entertainment Branch, 1970-1972 Folder, Entertainment Branch History Files, RG 472 Records of the United States Army Vietnam, Special Services Agency (Provisional), Entertainment Branch, Box 1, National Archives, Suitland Reference Center.

Department of the Army Overseas Recruitment Center film, *Special Services: Where the Action Is*, 1970.