

The Unsung Heroes of Vietnam

Those USO Club Women

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Here it is 1993, nearly 19 years since the last USO Club closed in Vietnam, and still people are amazed to learn that American women volunteered for civilian service in Vietnam with USO Clubs. I'd like to tell you a little about these women, what they did, how they lived, and what the experience means to them after all these years.

But first a history update. The USO was created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 to meet the morale needs of the servicemen and women during World War II. The USO was composed of six member agencies who gave financial and personnel support to assist the role of the USO. These agencies were the YMCA, the YWCA, the Jewish Welfare Board, the Salvation Army, Travelers' Aid, and National Catholic Community Services.

To staff the clubs, run the canteens, sew the buttons on uniforms, be mother/girlfriend, women from all walks of life signed up to be "VICTORY BELLES." Vietnam had its share of victory belles, but they were called Associate Directors and Directors. The role was the same: bring a touch of home to our soldiers wherever they go, wherever they are. As the USO logo says: "A Home Away From Home."

Vietnam may have been a different war, with all front and no rear, but the danger was the same. Not only was it a messy war and increasingly controversial, but it required the USO's civilian activities to become a vital arm of the national organization. General William Westmoreland realized this way back in 1963 when he told the Department of Defense that there was a need for USO Clubs in Vietnam.

The first club, the Saigon USO, opened in April of 1963. It was to be an alliance that stretched eleven years to 1974, when all the women with USO Clubs left Vietnam. It is to be noted that USO shows and USO Clubs were totally separate functions of the national USO.

As the war escalated, so did the need for USO Club staffers. Many young women were recruited directly from college campuses with degrees in theatre, broadcasting, and recreation. Knowing the risk, these young women signed up anyway and for the longest tours in Vietnam, 18 months. They were not required to wear a uniform. Civilian clothes only. In this case, the mini dress. Many of the women ordered clothes from the Sears Catalogue or purchased them on R&R's in Bangkok. No slacks were allowed. Perfume a must. They were told upon arrival in Vietnam that the men were never to see them cry. Sam Anderson, the Executive Director of the USO in Vietnam, told everyone the same thing: "Your job in Vietnam is to be happy. Never let the men see you cry." Maybe that's why the USO gave its USO Club staffers a week R&R every three months. The stress could get to you otherwise. The housing for the women could be in a BOQ, a villa or a quonset hut.

Since the request for volunteers was granted by the Department of Defense, all orders were cut by said agency. Each volunteer was given the rank of GS-10 or Captain. Her airfare was paid by the national USO. However, if the volunteer wanted out of her assignment earlier than her eighteen months tenure, she would have to pay her own way home.

At the peak of the war, the USO had 22 clubs in Vietnam. As the war dwindled, the clubs did likewise to 17. Each club was self-supporting; snack bars, barbershops, gift shops, overseas telephone line, photo labs, and hot showers. Many of the clubs were on the beach as in the Da Nang and Vung Tau areas. The main clubs were the previously mentioned Saigon USO, the four in the vicinity of Da Nang: the China Beach USO, the Freedom Hill USO, the Golden Gate USO, and the Liberty Center, and three clubs at Cam Rahn Bay: the Cam Rahn Bay #1 USO, the Aloha USO and the Coffee Bar USO.

All clubs had three volunteers at all times for the duration of the war.

To cheer military personnel in the remotest areas or on warships in the China Sea, the USO Club women brought programs to them: a Christmas party, a rock group, a Texas-style barbecue. Since many civilian communities in 'Nam were off limits to uniformed personnel due to the danger of terrorist attacks, the USO Clubs offered the only safe and sane diversion. The familiar red, white and blue USO sign, with its six stars depicting the six agencies, marked the place where a fast-food snack and a milkshake, a chess game with a buddy, or just reading hometown newspapers were there for everyone.

Through all this and more, the USO women stuck it out. Although most civilians at home came to know the USO only through televised replays of the Bob Hope Christmas Shows, the real unsung heroes were the staff people who put everything they had into the Vietnam effort, round the clock, month after month, year after year. The morale of the USO Club women never wavered.

Sam Anderson says of the women who staffed USO Clubs: "All the women did a wonderful job in Vietnam. By far the women were the bulk of the USO staff. They did marvelous work. Our role in Vietnam could not have been accomplished if not for these completely unselfish women. They were always in great danger." Anderson said no USO Club staffer was killed in Vietnam.

However, it is to be sadly noted, that a young volunteer who worked at the Chu Lai USO, Holly, completed her 18 months tour and went home. She was overwhelmed by what she saw during those 18 months in Vietnam and could not discuss her feeling, which today would be called Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, to anyone. She purchased a gun and committed suicide. Her pain gone at last. Holly will be remembered by her sisters on November 11th at the dedication of the Vietnam Women's Memorial. A recognition long overdue.