

American Red Cross Women in Vietnam

Sharon Lewis Dickerson, ARC Vietnam: 1970-71

The first American Red Cross Field Directors were sent to South Vietnam in February 1962. The last Red Cross staff members to serve in country departed in March 1973. Official records indicate that a total of 1120 women served with the Red Cross in Vietnam during that 11-year period. Of that number, 627 were young women who were part of the organization's Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas (SRAO) program. The other women served in the Service to Military Hospitals (SMH) and the Service to Military Installations (SMI) programs. In addition to those who served in country, other women served with SMH in support areas including Japan, Okinawa, Guam and the Philippines during the Vietnam War era.

The Red Cross assistance to servicemen in Vietnam expanded rapidly during the early years of the conflict and reached a peak in 1968 when 480 field directors, hospital workers and recreation workers were serving at military installations. During the peak year, Red Cross field directors were assisting an average of 25,500 men each month, providing a valuable link between service personnel in country and their families at home.

Red Cross field directors and recreation workers served with military medical teams in 19 military hospitals. They provided emergency communications between the wounded and ill and their families and conducted recreation programs for patients.

At the request of the military, the Red Cross also sent teams of young women college graduates to Vietnam to operate Red Cross Recreation Centers and to conduct audience-participation recreation programs for men stationed in isolated sections of the country. Based on average figures, 280,500 servicemen took part in these recreation programs and the women—affectionately known as Donut Dollies—traveled 27,000 miles by jeep, truck, airplane and helicopter every month. Red Cross officials estimate that, during the seven

years the program was in operation, the women logged over 2,125,000 miles. The first SRAO unit opened at Danang in September 1965. Others quickly followed at Bien Hoa, Nha Trang, Cam Ranh Air Force and Army, Dien, Quang Tri, Phu Bai, Lai Khe, Dong Tam, Qui Nhon, Xuan Loc and more. In all, there were 28 SRAO unit locations throughout the country. Some operated during the entire run of the program; some were open only a short time. The program ended in May, 1972 when the women stationed at Bien Hoa made a final visit to Firebase Bunker Hill.

Throughout the years of fighting in Vietnam, military commands termed the services of the Red Cross “indispensable” and a “prime factor” in their efforts to maintain the morale of their men at a high level and to look after their welfare. The excellence of this service program stemmed from the longtime experience of helping millions of servicemen and women cope with personal and family emergencies, and to the generation of skilled leadership which the Red Cross developed during World War II and the Korean Conflict.

Red Cross workers shared with military personnel the hardship and privation of life in a war zone. They also shared the dangers of war. Many staff were injured. Five American Red Cross workers died in country. Three of those were women—Hanna E. Crews (died 10/2/69), Virginia E. Kirsch (died 8/16/70) and Lucinda J. Richter (died 2/9/71). All were members of the SRAO program. Their names are inscribed on a commemorative plaque in the Memorial Garden at American Red Cross National Headquarters. The plaque was dedicated on October 15, 1972 during a special ceremony honoring the Red Cross women and men who died in service to their country. A fourth woman, Sharon Wesley, who worked with SRAO in 1971-72, stayed in country to work for a civilian agency following her Red Cross tour. She was killed on April 4, 1975 while participating in “Operation Babylift,” a

humanitarian effort to airlift as many orphans as possible to safety before the fall of Saigon.

Many Red Cross women have been active participants in the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project. Many others have dedicated themselves to the study of issues unique to female Vietnam veterans; to the education of children and the general public regarding women and the Vietnam War; and the preservation of the link which keeps all those who served in Vietnam—and their families—connected in an ever-increasing circle of sisterhood, brotherhood and friendship. Still others have written about their experiences and their healing journeys.

The women who served with the American Red Cross in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War era were unique. Many continue to serve their country—both professionally and on a volunteer basis—either in the Red Cross, the military, or other service organizations.