



SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS IN THE VIETNAM WAR

PART 1 OF 2

If war is evidence of humanity's capacity to achieve its goals through violence, thankfully, it is also proof of the power of service to alleviate suffering through empathy and kindness. The Red Cross (RC), United Service Organizations (USO), and faith-based charity organizations, such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS) supported U.S. service members and the South Vietnamese people at great personal risk to themselves. In a war without clearly defined front lines, the improvised explosive device, boobytrap, rocket, or mortar round cared little whether its target was a civilian or service member, or man or a woman. Those who carried the weight of RC, USO, and CRS committed themselves to the concept of beneficence – that of mercy, kindness, generosity, and charity. Separate and apart from the U.S. military, yet no less vital, these persons gave their time, labor, and in some cases, their lives, over in the service to others.

When I went [to Vietnam] because I thought if young men my age had to go, I ought to do something, too....It was an educational, interesting, frightening, and stress-filled year.

— Nancymay S. Healy



A helping hand. American Red Cross volunteer Brooke Berry helped this patient in the 97th Evacuation Hospital in Long Binh record a message for his family back home, December 1967. (Mark Stevens / American Red Cross)

THE AMERICAN RED CROSS

The first American Red Cross field director arrived in South Vietnam in February 1962. Thereafter, Red Cross assistance expanded quickly to meet the war's growing demands. The American Red Cross sponsored three programs in Vietnam during the war in support of the U.S. Armed Forces: Service to Military Installations; Service to Military Hospitals; and Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas. The ARC also supported U.S. Prisoners of War (POWs). To provide aid and comfort to the people of South Vietnam, the American Red Cross worked with private sector and government entities. By 1969, there were 67 RC field stations manned by more than 200 field directors, assistant field directors, and personnel.

SERVICE TO MILITARY INSTALLATIONS (SMI)

The Red Cross established field stations co-located with many U.S. military bases across South Vietnam. SMI programs employed men and women who took the lead in communicating to military personnel important personal events back home, which included births and deaths, family illnesses, as well as other personal events. Where needed, they aided in arranging emergency leave for U.S. military personnel. From 1962 to 1973, the Red Cross facilitated more than 2,168,000 emergency communications between service members and their families.

SERVICE TO MILITARY AND VETERANS HOSPITALS (SMVH)

Red Cross workers and trained volunteers also assisted with the care and treatment of injured service members in military medical facilities

in-country. Here they provided social welfare help like that given at military installations. This included coordination of volunteer activities, and a program of recreation for patients as well. In 1969, more than 60 SMVH Red Cross personnel served in 20 military hospitals and aboard two hospital ships in South Vietnam. Concurrently, more than 3,000 Red Cross personnel cared for seriously ill and wounded service members in Japan, the Philippines, Okinawa, and Guam prior to the service members' air evacuation back to the United States.

SUPPLEMENTAL RECREATION ACTIVITIES OVERSEAS (SRAO)

The Red Cross sent 627 single, female, college graduates ages 21-27, to South Vietnam to serve in SRAO teams. Their mission was to conduct morale boosting activities suitable for transport to fire bases, landing zones or anywhere military units operated. These portable activities, known as programs, were created from available materials and designed after popular game and quiz shows. The participation programs engaged the men and encouraged laughter, camaraderie, and a brief respite from their circumstances. The Donut Dollies travelled to different military units by military jeep, truck or helicopter. The women operated Recreation Centers with ping-pong, pool tables, paperback libraries, and special events at larger base camps. Following in the tradition of the World War II and Korea era Donut Dollies, the women in Vietnam served Kool-Aid and coffee. Ms. Holley Watts, who served with SRAO during the Vietnam War stated of her experience, "We were just out of college with a thirst for adventure and a desire to do something real. We tried to bring a touch of home to the combat zone." In 1969, the peak year, 17 SRAO units made up of 110 women operated throughout South Vietnam providing support to an estimated 300,000 service members per month.



Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas. Soldiers welcome American Red Cross Donut Dollies arriving at a base in Pleiku bearing bags of games and snacks, 1969. (Courtesy of James Caccavo)



Service to Military and Veterans Hospitals. American Red Cross Donut Dollies spread holiday cheer at the 17th Field Hospital in An Khe, December 1968. (Courtesy of James Caccavo)



Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas. American Red Cross Donut Dollies traveled to forward combat bases to boost morale and offer distractions from the stress of war by playing games. (Courtesy of James Caccavo)

Seeing life and death and the realities of an experience like serving in Vietnam sorts out the important things from the inconsequential. The Vietnam experience also taught me that risk is good for the soul...and I could accomplish anything if I put my mind to it.

— Linda Sullivan Schulte

POW SUPPORT

The Red Cross also directly supported POWs. Programs included the "Write Hanoi" campaign in which the American Red Cross sent more than 2,400 letters through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva, Switzerland, to North Vietnamese authorities. These letters were meant as an outpouring of humanity and asked the North Vietnamese government to treat POWs humanely in accordance with the 1949 Geneva Convention standards, allow prisoners to send and receive letters, and asked that the prisoners be provided access to adequate medical care. The ARC also handled more than 20,000 letters from families of U.S. POWs to imprisoned Americans in North Vietnam. Finally, the Red Cross provided personal comfort items and recreational services to former POWs as part of OPERATION Homecoming at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines and 31 stateside military hospitals.

SERVICES TO REFUGEES

As early as 1954, the Red Cross directly provided aid to the people in South Vietnam displaced by the war. Over the course of the war, the RC operated some 50 refugee camps in collaboration with the South Vietnamese Red Cross, the United States Agency for International Development, and the government of South Vietnam. Displaced South Vietnamese were provided housing, food, clothing, medical care, and vocational training such as sewing, carpentry, construction, and agricultural skills.

A GRATEFUL NATION THANKS AND HONORS OUR VIETNAM VETERANS

WWW.VIETNAMWAR50TH.COM



SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS IN THE VIETNAM WAR

PART 2 OF 2

Wherever there were troops, wherever there was a USO Center...even places that were on the front lines...every segment received the benefit of the USO.

— Michael Case

UNITED SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

The USO is a nonprofit private organization that provided entertainment and other nonmilitary services to Americans serving in Southeast Asia. The organization opened its first center in Saigon, South Vietnam in April 1963. USO recreation centers were operated by American and Vietnamese workers and many of its employees were women serving 18-month tours. Over the course of the war some 23 recreation centers opened in South Vietnam and Thailand and served nearly one million military personnel per month. USO Centers sought to “bring a little of America to Vietnam” and aid service member morale. They did so by offering food and beverages, barbershops, photo labs, hot showers, music, U.S. newspapers, billiard tables, swimming pools, and overseas phone lines.

When providing entertainment to the troops, the USO attracted famous American entertainers to “help relieve the stresses of war.” The USO hosted more than 5,000 performances in South Vietnam to include the famous and beloved Bob Hope USO Christmas Show. The USO also sponsored celebrity and professional athlete visits to bases, ships, and military hospitals to thank and honor the wounded. In addition to Bob Hope, other celebrities who served with the USO included Sammy Davis Jr., John Wayne, Ann-Margret, Redd Foxx, Wayne Newton, Lola Falana, Diahann Carroll, football star Rosey Grier, Miss America, Connie Stevens, and comedian Martha Raye.

I went to South Vietnam to help the Vietnamese people.... I don't know of any Vietnamese person that I had contact with that was not directly affected by the war, either by the loss of a parent, a sibling, or a member of their extended family.

— Sandra Collingwood

CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES

No one suffered more greatly during the Vietnam War than the people of South Vietnam. Recognizing that, faith-based humanitarian organizations such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS), “the official international humanitarian agency of the Catholic community in the United States,” provided significant assistance to men, women, and children in South Vietnam. CRS personnel were made up of Catholic priests, nuns, and other American citizens. Following the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954, they diligently worked with the U.S., French, and South Vietnamese governments to help nearly one million refugees fleeing from North Vietnam.

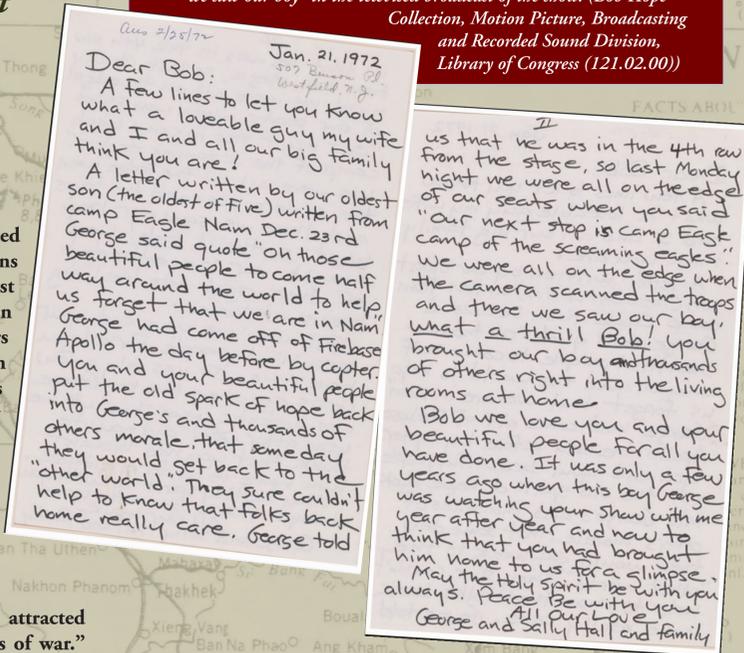
Between 1954 and 1975, CRS workers helped resettle Vietnam War noncombatants and provided food, shelter, clothing, and medical care to needy men, women, and children. The CRS’ mission emphasized finding widows, orphans, and refugees medical care and homes.

According to the American Council of Voluntary Agencies, over the course of the Vietnam War CRS provided manpower, material, and other assistance to more than 320 schools, 200 medical facilities, as well as homes for the elderly and children. CRS staff and volunteers also established some 19 feeding stations, 61 refugee centers,



Chaplains deliver donations from USA. A pair of U.S. Air Force Chaplains deliver food, clothing, and toys to a Catholic nun at an orphanage in Nha Trang in 1966. (Charles B. Prewitt Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, VA064177)

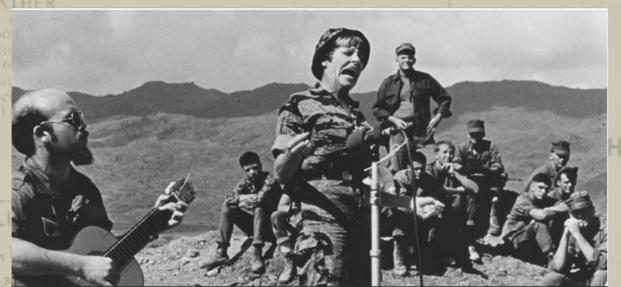
In this letter, the parents of a soldier who attended Hope's 1971 USO Christmas show quote their son's letter and relate their own thrill "when we saw our boy" in the televised broadcast of the show. (Bob Hope Collection, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress (121.02.00))



These celebrities were beloved. To use the example of Martha Raye, who maintained a unique bond with the Special Forces, Vietnam War veteran Tom Squier stated that she “helped everybody she could in Vietnam. She told jokes and played cards with us, treated our wounds.... She was one of us.” Following her death in 1994, Raye was buried with full military honors in the Fort Bragg North Carolina post cemetery as both an honorary colonel in the U.S. Marines and an honorary lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army.



USO tours boosted morale. Visiting the U.S. base at My Tho in 1966, left to right, are Joe Torre and Hank Aaron of the Atlanta Braves, Harmon Killebrew of the Minnesota Twins, Brooks Robinson of the Baltimore Orioles and former St. Louis Cardinals great Stan Musial. (Ray Belford / © 1966, 2022 Stars and Stripes, All Rights Reserved)



Martha Raye, a comedian and singer, began performing for the troops with the USO in 1942, including tours during World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Her 1994 obituary in the New York Times quoted her saying in Vietnam, “They ask so little and give so much. The least we can do back home here is give them the love, the respect, and the dignity that they, our flag, and our country deserve.” (Courtesy of USO)

and 283 family distribution centers to aid the growing number of South Vietnamese caught in the middle of the war.

Following the 1968 Tet offensives, CRS medical personnel established 25 emergency clinics in refugee centers in Saigon, Kontum, and Hue; provided 1,004 tons of food, clothing, and blankets; and 36,548 pounds of medicines and medical supplies. In 1968 alone, the CRS distributed approximately 150 million pounds of U.S. government donated food to more than 800,000 South Vietnamese persons in need.

CRS initiated Community Development teams in 1967. These were small teams made up of a community development specialist, two social workers, and two nurses who would travel often to remote refugee communities and orphanages in small communities throughout South Vietnam. There, community development teams provided medical services, nutrition and hygiene classes, and vocational training.

CRS worked collectively with other aid groups throughout the war. These included the United States Agency for International Development, Catholic

Daughters of America; Catholic Medical Missions; World Medical Relief; Sisters of the Sick Poor; Sisters of Saint Joseph; and U.S. military personnel who served as volunteers at many Catholic orphanages and charities.

In April 1975, as the collapse of South Vietnam approached, teams of Red Cross nurses, staff, and volunteers worked with the U.S. military and other government agencies to evacuate and care for South Vietnamese orphans being transported to the United States. Operation BABYLIFT began with a tragedy. On April 4, 1975, a C-5A Galaxy loaded with more than 300 passengers—including at least 230 orphans, crashed shortly after taking off from Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Miraculously, more than half of the passengers, including 149 orphans survived. Over the course of the 10-day operation, more than 2,600 refugee children were safely transported to the United States where they began new lives with American families.

CONCLUSION

Today the men and women of the Red Cross and USO provide services to wounded service members and veterans in military and VA hospitals and provide invaluable programs for the military and their families whether stationed in the United States or overseas. CRS “provides assistance to people in need in more than 100 countries without regard to race, religion or nationality, working with governments, other faith communities, and secular institutions.”

The legacy of the Red Cross, USO, and Catholic Charities is one of selfless service to mankind during times of war, as well as other disasters, be they man-made or natural. Throughout the 20th century, these organizations have provided exemplary support to the U.S. Armed Forces, their families, and citizens of the world.