



American
Red Cross

Vietnam War and the American Red Cross

During the eight years of American combat activity in the war (1965-1973), the Red Cross handled more than 2,168,000 emergency communications between servicemen and their families. Red Cross field directors and chapter staff at home assisted an average of 27,800 servicemen each month with personal and family problems. An average of over 280,000 servicemen a month participated in recreation activities at Red Cross centers and in SRAO programs in Vietnam and neighboring countries.

Military commanders expressed high praise for the Red Cross, calling the services of the organization “indispensable” and “prime factors” in their efforts to maintain the high morale of their men and to look after their welfare. Writing to Red Cross national headquarters in 1968, General William Westmoreland, then commander of the U.S. forces in Southeast Asia, stated, “Serving our men on the battlefields here in Vietnam, the American Red Cross is a hotline to the folks back home, an oasis in the heat of battle, and a comfort during hospitalization.” The excellence of this service stemmed from the generation of skilled leadership and experience that the Red Cross developed during World War II, the Korean War and the intervening years to help millions of servicemen and women cope with personal and family emergencies and hardships.

Services to the Military

The first American Red Cross field director arrived in South Vietnam in February 1962. Red Cross assistance to the armed forces expanded rapidly as the number of American service personnel increased, especially after the introduction of combat troops in 1965. The number of Red Cross workers in Vietnam and support areas in Southeast Asia peaked at nearly 500 in the 1968-1969 period, at the same time that American troop strength was at its height. The American Red Cross moved its personnel out of Vietnam when the United States withdrew its fighting forces in March 1973. For a time afterwards, the Red Cross used Bangkok, Thailand, as the base for its reduced operations in the region. Throughout the time Red Cross workers were in Vietnam, they shared the hardships and dangers of war with the military personnel they were there to serve. Five American Red Cross staff members lost their lives in Vietnam and many others were injured.

American Red Cross Services to the Armed Forces and Veterans (SAF&V) provided assistance to the military in Vietnam and other countries of the Far East through these three branches.



Services at Military Installations (SMI). The Red Cross assigned field directors and assistant field directors to military bases and units throughout South Vietnam. Their purpose was to provide counseling and assistance to servicemen and women with regard to personal and family problems, help in emergency situations and aid with communications to and from home. At its peak in 1969, the Red Cross operated 67 field stations in Vietnam staffed by more than 200 American Red Cross field personnel.

Service to Military and Veterans Hospitals (SMVH). Field directors, assistant field directors, other Red Cross workers and volunteers provided the same types of welfare services in military hospitals as those provided by SMI among the able-bodied in the field. In addition, SMVH personnel offered recreational activities for patients and assisted the medical staff in care and treatment of the injured. In the later years of the war, SMVH workers collaborated with military authorities in developing drug-abuse treatment programs for addicted service personnel. The majority of SMVH activities occurred outside of Vietnam since most of the injured were evacuated as soon as possible to medical facilities in other parts of the Far East.

In 1969, 60 SMVH staff served at 20 hospitals and two hospital ships in Vietnam, while over 3,000 Red Cross staff and trained volunteers served in hospitals in Japan, the Philippines, Okinawa, Guam, Korea, and Hawaii, where the seriously ill and wounded were sent before being transported home.



Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas (SRAO). At the request of military authorities, the American Red Cross sent teams of young women—all college graduates—to Vietnam beginning in 1965 to serve as SRAO workers. Their main activity was to conduct light entertainment and audience participation programs for service personnel, featuring such things as quizzes, games and musical performances. Often referred to as Donut Dollies, they also served refreshments to the troops in the tradition of the traveling Clubmobiles of World War II and the Korean War. The SRAO program staffed stationary Red Cross recreational centers and traveled by helicopter, truck and jeep to bring “a touch of home” to the troops in the field. In the peak year of 1969, 110 young women operated 17 SRAO units in Vietnam. It was estimated that they reached nearly 300,000 servicemen each month that year.

Services on the Home Front

Like their counterparts overseas, domestic SMI teams provided services to the able-bodied at military installations throughout the United States and SMVH teams assisted the ill and injured at domestic military and veterans' hospitals. The Red Cross offered several special programs and additional services on the home front.

Service to Military Families (SMF). Staff and volunteers at local Red Cross chapters offered assistance to the families of service personnel. SMF services included counseling, facilitating communications and providing help for families in applying for government benefits and emergency financial assistance. SMF staff and volunteers saw men off at induction points, visited families of new recruits, organized Military Wives Clubs, sponsored Armed Forces Family Nights and recorded and sent thousands of "Voices from Home" tape recordings to servicemen overseas.



Service at Veterans Administration Offices (SVAO). SVAO units operated in most veteran's hospitals. They provided counseling services to veterans on a variety of issues and often represented veterans in presenting applications for compensation, pensions and other governmental benefits.

Among the special programs offered to military personnel and their families during the war were:

- “A Free Phone Call Home.” The Red Cross offered a free phone call home to all injured military personnel on their return to the United States. The Red Cross paid for 112,453 such calls during the war years.
- “Shop Early” Program. Chapter volunteers assembled and sent special Christmas gift packets to every serviceman and woman in Vietnam. Between 1966 and 1972, more than 2,950,000 of these Yuletide packages were dispatched.

Programs in Support of Prisoners of War (POWs). In 1969, the American Red Cross participated in the “Write Hanoi” campaign by which a total of 2,414 letters were transmitted to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva, Switzerland, for delivery to North Vietnamese authorities requesting intercession on behalf of captured and missing U.S. servicemen. The Red Cross also sent 19,983 letters from the families of prisoners to the ICRC for forwarding by the North Vietnamese to the POWs. The American Red Cross shipped bi-monthly food parcels intended for U.S. prisoners in North Vietnam. As prisoner exchanges began at the end of the war, North Vietnam accepted American Red Cross POW packets for men about to be released. Red Cross workers and volunteers participated in “Operation Homecoming,” a special activity that occurred at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines (to which most of the POWs were initially sent) and at 31 domestic military hospitals that welcomed the POWs home and provided them with personal comfort items and recreational activities.



Services to Refugees

As early as 1954, the American Red Cross began cooperating with, and providing material assistance to, the people of South Vietnam. By 1969, the value of this relief totaled more than \$2.5 million (\$20 million in today's dollars). During the war years, the American Red Cross operated camps for civilian refugees. Eventually, the American Red Cross operated 50 such camps in cooperation with the United States Agency for International Development, the government of South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese Red Cross Society. In addition, the Red Cross provided food, clothing and comfort items, conducted classes in hygiene, sewing and various industrial and agricultural crafts and helped plan and construct new homes for the refugees.

Operation Babylift. In early spring 1975, as the collapse of South Vietnam and Cambodia neared, some 2,000 infants and youngsters were flown to the United States from Southeast Asia, under the auspices of various agencies authorized to arrange for the adoption of Indochinese orphans in this country. Teams of Red Cross nurses, staff and volunteers worked around the clock greeting the exhausted children and providing them with nursing care as they made their way to new homes in America.

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Operation New Life. In 1975, huge waves of refugees fled Vietnam and Cambodia as the collapse of both governments occurred. The American Red Cross played a vital role in aiding these refugees, first overseas in the Philippines, Guam and Wake Island and later in the United States to which most came. Overseas, the Red Cross provided clothing, communications links, counseling, recreational and personal comfort items, supplementary medical care and food supplies. When the refugees reached the United States, they were temporarily housed in four large centers where the Red Cross provided communications facilities, camp locator systems to reunite families, counseling, day-care centers and support for unaccompanied children. The Red Cross offered recreational and nursing services in cooperation with government agencies and other volunteer organizations. The Red Cross also provided educational programs to help the refugees learn English and adapt to American life. After the refugees left the centers for new homes throughout the United States, local Red Cross chapters continued to provide services for their welfare. Overall, more than 100,000 refugees were resettled in the United States with the help of approximately 3,000 Red Cross workers.

Timeline

The Indochinese peninsula nations of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, had been part of the French colonial empire since the late 1890s. Control of the region fell briefly to the Japanese during World War II. After the defeat of Japan, the French attempted to reestablish their control but met with strong opposition, from communist nationalists concentrated in the northern regions of Vietnam.

1954 - The communist Viet Minh defeated the French at the fierce battle of Dien Bien Phu.

1956 - The French withdrew and Vietnam was divided into two parts, pending nationwide elections scheduled to take place.

1957 - North Vietnam was under communist control and the South was controlled by anti-communist forces supported by the United States, Britain and France. The nationwide elections were never held and conflict between the two Vietnams began.

1962 - The number of American military advisors in Vietnam had grown to 11,000.

1964 - Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution allowing President Lyndon Johnson to wage war against North Vietnam.

1965 - The first American combat troops arrived in the country.

1969 - American troop strength reached its highest point at 549,000 service personnel and remained at over 100,000 until 1972.

1973 - Foiled in its attempt to defeat the communists and with the war having spilled over into neighboring Laos and Cambodia, the United States withdrew its combat troops.

1975 - The last Americans left Vietnam and the communist North took control of Saigon and the rest of South Vietnam.

