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American Women and the Vietnam War

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Linda Pugsley was a 22-year-old registered nurse working at Boston City Hospital when she joined the United States Air Force in 1967. She went through basic training and flight school and was commissioned a second lieutenant. At the time, she had no political feelings about the Vietnam War, but she wanted to help take care of American servicemen who were injured there. She figured she could handle it. A weekend shift at Boston City Hospital usually included gunshot and stab wounds, car wrecks, and other sorts of bloody trauma. Nothing could have prepared her for Vietnam, though.

The young nurse soon realized that she was not just tending to physical wounds. She and other Vietnam War nurses have talked of how injured troops saw them as angels. There was something about seeing a woman, a woman taking care of them, that brought them comfort. Some nurses wore perfume because it reminded their patients of home. In a military hospital in a war zone, it was at once utterly incongruous and a desperately needed bit of normalcy. Lynda Van Devanter, a nurse whose memoir, *Home before Morning*, was the inspiration for the television drama *China Beach*, wore ribbons in her hair to uphold the feminine image her patients expected and desired. At the same time, she suppressed her emotions and steeled herself to cope with the mental burden of being soothing and pretty to broken and dying men.[1]

Nursing was just one of the avenues through which American women served in the Vietnam War. From the 1950s to the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, American women military personnel deployed to Vietnam with the Women's Army Corps (WAC), the navy, and the marines, as well as the Army Nurse Corps. Civilian women traveled to Vietnam with the American Red Cross, US government agencies, and nongovernmental humanitarian organizations, and as civilian employees of the military. Women were not subject

1 Lynda Van Devanter, *Home before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (New York, 1984).

to the Vietnam-era draft and, for some women, the war offered an opportunity to travel and postpone marriage and motherhood, still the expected roles for young women in the 1960s. Some military women volunteered to go to Vietnam because they wanted to support the war effort or to see for themselves what was really happening on the ground. Others enlisted in the military for college and employment benefits after recruiters promised they would not be sent to Vietnam.

Due to deficiencies in government recordkeeping, we can only estimate how many American women served with the US military in Vietnam. While the Defense Department did not keep accurate records on women, it has estimated that approximately 7,500 women served in Vietnam. The Veterans' Administration has set the number at 11,000. The majority were nurses, mostly from the Army Nurse Corps (ANC). Among those who were not nurses, about 700 women were members of the WAC, while much smaller numbers served in the navy, air force, and marines.[2] Pinning down the numbers of civilian women who worked in Vietnam is even more difficult; estimates have gone as high as 55,000.[3] Although a few women went to Vietnam before the United States committed combat troops and remained in the country until 1975, the majority of American women who served in either military or civilian capacities arrived between 1965, the year of the first deployment of ground troops, and 1973, when the last US combat troops departed.

Military Nurses

Of the military women who served in the war, the majority did so through the Army Nurse Corps. As historian Kara Dixon Vuic has explained, the army began deploying nurses to Saigon in 1956 to train Vietnamese nurses.[4] Nurses had the double duty of treating the physical wounds of servicemen and sometimes Vietnamese civilians, and offering an emotional salve to injured and

2 Another 500 women served in the air force during the Vietnam War, but most of them were stationed in the Pacific and other parts of Southeast Asia, not in Vietnam. Fewer than thirty women marines served in Vietnam. In addition to nurses, nine women navy officers served tours of duty in Vietnam. See Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam* (Boston, 1987), 4; Ron Steinman, *Women in Vietnam: The Oral History* (New York, 2000), 18–20; Susan H. Godson, *Serving Proudly: A History of Women in the US Navy* (Annapolis, MD, 2001), 213; Colonel Mary V. Stremlow, *A History of the Women Marines, 1946–1977* (Washington, DC, 1986), 87.

3 Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 4; Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (Berkeley, 1996), 163.

4 Kara Dixon Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore, 2010), 1.

dying troops. Some nurses held men as they cried out for their parents and took their last breaths. They broke the news that a man would never walk or see again. Literally and figuratively, nurses carried wounded servicemen across the threshold from combat to the aftermath, which could be a drastically altered life or death.

The number of ANC nurses in-country increased to a peak of 906 in June 1968 before declining as US troops withdrew from Vietnam, and in total approximately 5,000 army nurses served in the conflict between 1956 and 1973. Nurses served one-year tours, held various medical specializations, and worked in hospitals of all sizes, in Saigon and out in the field.[5] Nurses had a variety of reasons for joining the corps, including the wish to avoid, at least temporarily, becoming wives and mothers. Even as they viewed the army as an escape from the assumed social roles, nurses faced some servicemen who viewed them as angelic caregivers who were stand-ins for women back home, and others who resisted their authority and sexually harassed them, expressing either an unwillingness or an inability to accept female nurses as legitimate military personnel. Although male nurses served in the ANC, men comprised less than 30 percent of the army nurses in Vietnam, illustrating the staying power of the idea that nursing was women's work.[6]

The popular image of Vietnam War combat typically features infantrymen caught in a surprise ambush or tripping a booby-trap wire, but nurses also dealt directly with the human consequences of the fighting. "You learn real soon that you can't fall apart over every nineteen-year-old you send home in a body bag," said Paula Quindlen, an army nurse who served at the 27th Surgical Hospital in Chu Lai. The work was intense; in hospitals, most shifts were twelve hours, and most nurses worked six days a week. Working in the intensive care units in Quy Nhơn and Saigon, Judy Davis treated patients who were "blown to hell." To cope, she lost herself in her work, using cigarettes and wine to medicate her own emotional pain. When she had down time between flights, Linda Pugsley dealt with the pain by going to the Officers' Club, drinking, and dancing to the music of the Filipino cover bands that sometimes played concerts there. Among all the things the air force had trained her to do, it had not taught her how to deal with the emotions of war. Pugsley eventually decided that she would not learn the names of the men she treated, not wanting to see them as friends. Aware that Americans generally saw women

5 Ibid., 2. See also Elizabeth Norman, *Women at War: The Story of Fifty Military Nurses Who Served in Vietnam* (Philadelphia, 1990); Van Devanter, *Home before Morning*; Winnie Smith, *American Daughter Gone to War* (New York, 1994).

6 Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 2–12.

as maternal, Pugsley was not surprised when she became a stand-in for a serviceman's mother or wife. "Sometimes when the young men would be crying, sometimes it was really kind of hard," she said. "They'd hold your hand and just cry for their mom or their girlfriend. Sometimes you were the last one they saw, and you didn't mind taking that place." While working at the 12th Evacuation Hospital in Cu Chi, nurse Lily Lee Adams wore Chantilly perfume because she knew it brought her wounded patients a comforting connection to home.[7]

Like many male GIs, most nurses concentrated on the details of their duties rather than the politics of the war. For some, specific aspects of those duties raised their awareness of the tensions and contradictions of the American mission. One of those duties was taking care of wounded Vietnamese. According to Sylvia Lutz Holland, there was a hierarchy of priorities, with American GIs at the top, followed by Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops, Vietnamese civilians, and then Viet Cong. For part of her tour, Holland worked in the Vietnamese ward at the 312th Evacuation Hospital in Chu Lai, where she treated patients for a variety of injuries and illnesses, including children suffering napalm burns. She developed a profound sense of respect for the Vietnamese, who seemed to survive even as they lost their homes and their loved ones. "They took care of one another and would absorb people from other families who weren't even blood relatives," Holland said. "They were warm and caring. Family members were always in the hospital. They'd sleep under the beds or on the floor."[8] For Sandra Pang and Lynda Alexander, treating wounded Vietnamese was simply part of the job. Lola McGourty pitied the Vietnamese patients she treated, but she was ambivalent about working with them because she felt that they did not want the Americans to be in Vietnam. She felt especially sorry for Vietnamese women, whose position as sex objects for US troops became clear as she treated troops' venereal diseases. "Some of them [Vietnamese women] were nurses, some of them were teachers, and the rest of them it seemed relied on prostitution to survive, and we made them prostitutes."[9] The hospital where Paula Quindlen worked did not have a POW ward, but some POWs passed through her hospital, and she had to care for them in intensive care recovery. "It was hard to treat them because they had blown up our guys," she said. Linda Pugsley differentiated between

7 Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (New York, 2011).

8 Christian Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York, 2003), 173.

9 Telephone interview of Lola McGourty by the author, 2006.

Figure 4.1 Nurses tend to wounded American soldiers as they prepare to depart for the United States from Tân Sơn Nhất Air Base (January 11, 1967).
Source: Bettmann / Contributor / Bettmann / Getty Images.

Vietnamese ally and enemy, considering the South Vietnamese to be "lovely people" but refusing to treat Viet Cong or North Vietnamese army troops.[10] Nurses saw, and in some cases personally struggled with, the tension between the US mission of protecting South Vietnam from communist insurgency and the bloody consequences of the war that accompanied that mission.

Despite how difficult it was to handle the casualties, Lynda Alexander, an air force nurse who volunteered for Vietnam in 1968, felt more useful in Vietnam than at any other point in her life. When her tour ended, she did not want to go home. "This was the real thing," Alexander said. "You ever talk about having a feeling of satisfaction, such need? Somebody cared what you did. It was just the most down-to-the-bone thing."[11] Sylvia Lutz Holland, the

10 Telephone interviews of Sandra Pang, Lynda Alexander, Lola McGourty, Paula Quindlen, and Linda Pugsley by the author, 2006.
11 Telephone interviews of Lynda Alexander, Judy Davis, Linda Pugsley, and Paula Quindlen by the author, October–November 2009.

nurse who served at the 312th Evacuation Hospital in Chu Lai from 1968 to 1969, felt a high degree of professional fulfillment during her tour of duty. "It was the only time in my nursing career when I used every bit of knowledge I had and developed a sense of confidence in my judgment as a professional," Holland said.[12] Nurses' experiences in the Vietnam War illustrated the wartime contradiction that saw women actively participating in the supposedly male world of war but only insofar as they embodied conventional femininity and performed the women's work of caregiving.

Women's Army Corps

After nurses, the next largest number of servicewomen who went to Vietnam deployed with the Women's Army Corps. Approximately 700 American women served in Vietnam through the WAC. These servicewomen worked in a variety of fields, including intelligence, office work, air traffic control, and journalism. Like nurses, the first WACs went to Vietnam to train personnel in South Vietnam's Women's Armed Forces Corps (WAFC).[13]

Major Kathleen I. Wilkes and Sergeant 1st Class Betty L. Adams arrived in Saigon in January 1965 and worked with Major Trần Cẩm Hương, director of the WAFC. WAFC personnel worked primarily in secretarial roles to assist the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in its various clerical needs. Some WAFCs also worked as nurses and in "welfare service," taking care of dependants who traveled with ARVN soldiers. WAFCs, like WACs, were not trained in combat, but those employed in the welfare service stayed near combat zones with troops, thus performing "the most dangerous assignments in the corps."[14] In order to be eligible for officer training, WAFC recruits had to pass a test demonstrating that they had the equivalent of a US eleventh-grade education. All other recruits needed the equivalent of a US junior high school degree.[15]

By the end of 1967, membership in the WAFC had risen to about 2,700, and by 1969 the number had jumped to 4,000. At the WAFC school, which was completed in March 1965, recruits took an eight-week basic training course, in

12 Appy, *Patriots*, 171.
13 A precedent for WAC service in Asia was set during World War II, when WACs served in India, China, Burma (now Myanmar), and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). However, the army did not deploy WACs to the Korean War. See Jeanne Holm, *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution* (Novato, CA, 1992), 207–9.
14 Memo, "Women's Armed Forces Corps," Office of Information, US Military Assistance Command Vietnam, November 12, 1966, RG 319, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD [hereafter cited as NARA].
15 Harvey H. Smith et al., *Area Handbook for South Vietnam* (Washington, DC, 1967), 138.

which they participated in physical training, first aid, sanitation, and the use of weapons. An officer training program was created in October 1966, which required officer candidates to take an additional twenty-week course after completing the eight-week basic training. In addition to the skills learned in basic training, officer candidates studied military tactics, public speaking, leadership, and military justice.[16] As part of the officer training program, fifty-one Vietnamese women officers completed advanced training with the Women's Army Corps at the WAC headquarters at Fort McClellan, Alabama.[17]

Most WACs had office jobs in Vietnam, but that did not shield them from combat. During the Tet Offensive in 1968, WACs were caught in the midst of combat.[18] Describing the WAC experience during the month-long campaign, Captain Joanne Murphy wrote to the WAC director, Colonel Elizabeth Hoisington, to tell her of attacks at Long Bình in mid-February. Rocket fire hit the base's ammo dump in the middle of the night while most of the WACs slept.

Those assurances did not always reflect the realities on the ground in Vietnam. Pinkie Houser experienced Viet Cong incoming fire on the ammo dump at Long Bình multiple times during her tour of duty. She remembered two attacks vividly. The first occurred on Christmas Eve 1969, early in the evening, while a group of GIs and WACs were opening presents and laughing at the gag gifts they had received. The first rounds of incoming hit nearby, and that night Houser heard shrapnel hitting her bunker. "Now I was scared and praying that night. I think that's the first time that I had really, really been scared."[19] During the second attack, incoming rockets hit an education center on base, and a sharp piece of iron from one of the rockets pinned a woman colonel to a wall, piercing her through her heart. After receiving the all-clear signal, Houser and some others went to inspect the remains of the education center, and the sight of the colonel shocked her. "I cried. I threw up because I had never seen that before. It was horrible. All my fear came back. My knees were knocking, you know, because I had never seen nothing like that, and the education center just looked like a tornado had gone through it."[20] No promise of safety could withstand the reality of what Houser experienced in Vietnam.

Hospitals came under attack during the war, which meant that nurses were often in the line of fire. As Jeanne Holm has written, the dangers nurses

16 Phung Thi Hanh, *South Vietnam's Women in Uniform* (Saigon, 1970).
17 Bettie J. Morden, *The Women's Army Corps, 1945–1978* (Washington, DC, 1990), 217.
18 Holm, *Women in the Military*, 230.
19 Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 41–2.
20 Ibid., 46–7.

faced "were generally greater than those experienced by the clerks, personnel specialists, intelligence officers, stenographers, and others, *male and female*," assigned to rear posts in Vietnam.[21] Nine army nurses died in Vietnam, one of whom was Sharon Lane, killed during a mortar attack on the 312th Evacuation Hospital in Chu Lai in June 1968. The rockets hit early on a Sunday morning, one landing directly on the Vietnamese ward where Lane worked. A piece of shrapnel hit her below her collarbone, cutting her aorta.[22]

Lane's death was traumatic for nurse Sylvia Lutz Holland, whom Lane replaced in the Vietnamese ward when it was time for Holland to move on to a rotation in the emergency room. A group of corpsmen rushed Lane into the emergency room after the attack, but Holland took one look at her and knew she was gone. "She had a big hole in her neck. She was pale and her pupils were fixed," Holland remembered. "The surgeon came in and tried to start an IV but there weren't any veins. Then he was gonna open her chest and massage her heart. I said there was no reason to do it, she's dead. He kept saying, 'No she isn't.' Then he started crying." Holland struggled with survivor's guilt for a long time after Lane's death, knowing that she would have been the one in the line of fire had Lane not arrived in-country to replace her.[23]

Donut Dollies

The Red Cross had sent teams of women overseas to work with troops since World War II. They served coffee and donuts, which earned them the nickname "donut dollies." The Red Cross initiated the Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas (SRAO) program in 1953 when it sent teams of women to South Korea to work with US troops fighting in the Korean War. In 1965, fearing the impact on troop morale of what was already looking to be a long war, Defense Department officials asked the Red Cross to establish an SRAO program in Vietnam. From 1965 through 1972, nearly 630 women served in Vietnam through the program. Defense officials also requested that donut dollies work at recreation centers. Defense Department authorities noted that it was possible US troops could be in Vietnam for a "long duration" with infrequent combat moments and thus could have considerable idle time.

21 Holm, *Women in the Military*, 207 (emphasis in original).

22 Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 2; http://krccnetwork.org/tbs/2010/05/31/for-them-a-memorial-day-tribute-by-jay-maloney-2/?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=For_Them__A_Memorial_Day_Tribute_by_Jay_Maloney&utm_medium=email.

23 Appy, *Patriots*, 173.

Boredom coupled with isolation could make it "difficult to maintain the morale of trained, combat ready troops."[24]

Some donut dollies staffed recreation centers established by the army's Special Services division and the United Service Organizations (USO) where servicemen could shoot pool, listen to music, read, play games, write letters, or sit and talk.[25] Others traveled, usually by helicopter, to fire support bases in remote areas where troops waited to go into battle. SRAO women traveled in pairs and took games, snacks, soda, and juice with them. In the predeparture training session, Red Cross instructors told the women that they were meant to be a "touch of home" for the troops, a reminder of wives, girlfriends, mothers, and sisters back home. The teams of donut dollies were known as "clubmobile" units, and they were meant to provide a pleasant diversion from the monotony of waiting for combat. They should be the girl next door – cute, friendly, and caring, not sexual. Their powder-blue dresses projected a perky innocence but were impractical in Vietnam's heat, dust, and mud.

SRAO workers typically lived on or near the US military installation where they worked. On-base billets ranged from Quonset or wood huts with detached bathrooms and showers to air-conditioned trailers with indoor plumbing.[26] The program was open only to women who were college graduates between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-four, so the women tended to be a few years older and more educated than the average American GI in Vietnam. From 1967 to 1968, the program's peak year in Vietnam, an average of 280,500 servicemen participated in SRAO activities each month at twenty major bases. Clubmobile units traversed an average of more than 27,000 miles (44,000 km) each month to remote fire bases isolated from larger military installations. The Red Cross estimated that clubmobile teams traveled more than 2 million miles (3.2 million km) during the seven years the SRAO program operated in the Vietnam War.[27]

Women's motives for joining SRAO were as varied as those of their military sisters. Jeanne Christie headed to Vietnam with the Red Cross in January 1967 to escape Wisconsin winters and the watchful eyes of her parents. It seemed a good way to "break away from home" after she graduated from the University of Wisconsin.[28] Yet other women joined SRAO because

24 Ibid.
25 "Department of Defense Request for SRAO in Vietnam," June 4, 1965, RG 200, NARA.
26 "How the SRAO Staff Live in Vietnam," RG 200, NARA.
27 "Red Cross Clubmobile Girls Coming Home from Vietnam," American Red Cross News Service, May 26, 1972, Jeanne Christie Collection, University of Denver Penrose Library, Special Collections, Denver, Colorado.
28 Interview of Jeanne Christie by the author, telephone, 2006.

gender discrimination barred them from overseas government work. Nancy Warner, while in graduate school in 1968 at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, dreamed of joining the Foreign Service. But "back then when you went to do something like join the Foreign Service or apply for any of those kinds of jobs as a woman, the biggest part of the application process was, 'How fast can you type?' And that was discouraging to me because it wasn't exactly what I had in mind."[29] Going to Vietnam was, for her, a perfect solution to postcollege restlessness.[30] J. Holley Watts, the daughter of a World War II veteran, joined the Red Cross to go to Vietnam because she "was affected by JFK's inaugural speech," in which he called on Americans to help spread the ideals of freedom and democracy throughout the world. She also wanted to travel and, when she graduated with a psychology degree from Rosemont College in Pennsylvania, she was interested in neither graduate school nor marriage. When Watts signed up for the SRAO program in the mid-1960s, she had the choice of Korea or Vietnam, and she chose the latter because she had a cousin in the marines who had been deployed there.[31] Jennifer Young left her home in suburban St. Louis in 1968 after graduating from college and joined the Red Cross because she wanted to help the young men sent off to war. She believed it was unfair that women got a "free ticket" out of service in Vietnam. "I just felt so bad for what some of them were having to experience because of the draft," she said.[32]

Some donut dollies went to Vietnam specifically to help resolve their own questions about the war. Rene Johnson's father was in the military and had spent time in Vietnam in the early 1960s. He returned home believing that the United States was "getting ready to make the biggest mistake that it's ever made. He said he would fight to the death to defend his country, but that's not what we were doing." At the time, the Johnson family lived at Fort Benning, Georgia, and Rene was in college at Florida State University in Tallahassee, so she heard the opinions of both sides of the Vietnam debate. The soldiers she knew at Fort Benning argued that the United States was bringing freedom and independence to the Vietnamese, but on campus at Florida State students expressed the belief that the war was unjust and immoral. "As the years went on and I was losing friends, I just ended up deciding I needed to go over and see for myself what was going on," Johnson said.[33]

29 Interview of Nancy Warner by the author, June 12, 2006.
30 Ibid.
31 Interview of J. Holley Watts by the author, telephone, 2006.
32 Interview with Jennifer Young, by the author, telephone, June 6, 2006.
33 Author's telephone interview with Rene Johnson, June 5, 2006.

Eileen O'Neill signed up for SRAO because she was curious about the war, and she had dated a man who had served a tour of duty in Vietnam in 1968. Ultimately, though, "it was as much for the travel and adventure as anything else," she said. She suspected the war "had to be more complicated than either side of the demonstrators were arguing. We'd still hark back to Kennedy's inaugural address of going places and doing things for the rest of the world, and a lot of idealism and the sense of, this couldn't be really as bad as it appears."[34] By the time Johnson and O'Neill went to Vietnam in the late 1960s, opposition to the war was widespread in the United States, and American women had launched a public challenge to Cold War domesticity. Even before second-wave feminism hit the late 1960s with full force, women had worked within the cultural confines of domesticity to protest nuclear proliferation and war. Groups such as Women Strike for Peace used the maternal ideal to argue that women had a responsibility to oppose conflict. While some women's activists challenged the domestic ideal, the Red Cross continued to cling to it and exported aspects of it to Vietnam. The irony in the donut dollies' experiences is inescapable. Many SRAO workers participated in the program specifically to transcend the constraints of the ideal they were supposed to represent. Ostensibly passive embodiments of the values informing US policy, women like Johnson and O'Neill joined SRAO in part to judge the war for themselves.

Recreation centers and clubmobiles were to provide "wholesome recreation, pool, ping pong, games, cards, whatever," Jennifer Young, a former donut dolly, said. At the centers and on mobile runs out to fire bases, donut dollies usually worked ten-hour shifts. They organized quiz shows and group participation games, served coffee and cold drinks, and talked with soldiers.[35] Some teams emphasized educational activities, while others tried to encourage group interaction or provide relaxation. If there were enough budding thespians in a platoon, SRAO teams worked with them to stage plays and musicals. If areas were unsafe or the troops stationed there had little free time, donut dollies made mobile runs to drop off magazines and puzzle books. For the soldiers who simply wanted to sit down and write a letter, SRAO staff kept supplies of pens and paper on hand.[36] According to an army pamphlet for personnel stationed in Vietnam, donut dollies went to the war to support troop morale by providing "a bit of America in Vietnam."[37]

34 Author's telephone interview with Eileen O'Neill, June 20, 2006.
35 Ibid.
36 Various SRAO Vietnam Quarterly Reports, RG 200, NARA.
37 Headquarters, Department of the Army, "Helpful Hints for Personnel Ordered to Vietnam," pamphlet no. 608–16 (Washington, DC, 1968), 30.

Smiling was a job requirement for donut dollies, so they had to compartmentalize their own fear and sadness about the war. After her friend Michael Stacy died in a helicopter crash in March 1969, donut dolly Emily Strange stopped learning the names of the servicemen she met in Vietnam. She was stationed in the Mekong Delta with the 9th Infantry Division and Mobile Riverine Force beginning in 1968. She had become close to Stacy because they both played guitar, and they often strummed folk tunes together. After Stacy died, Strange realized that she needed to put distance between herself and the men she worked with. It was frightening to think about herself dying, but it was worse to worry about her friends dying. Long after the war, she believed that there were probably men she knew whose names were on the Vietnam Wall, but she would not have to face the pain of knowing for sure. It was her job to make lonely, frightened soldiers feel better, and she had to show up and do her job despite the fear and isolation she herself felt. She called it putting on her "Eleanor Rigby" face that she kept in a jar by the door.

Race

The racial tensions that marked the Cold War era in the United States influenced the decisions and experiences of African American women in Vietnam. Some Black women enlisted in the military in order to serve Black soldiers. Elizabeth Allen, a graduate of Ohio State University who held a master's degree in nursing, enlisted in the Army Nurse Corps in 1967 after learning that Black soldiers were disproportionately assigned to combat units. Allen spent her tour of duty at a hospital in Pleiku, the first US hospital to be bombed during the Tet Offensive of 1968. Others sought to escape the limited options available to them and the racism that marked their daily lives in their hometowns. Looking for a way out of Jim Crow Alabama, Marie Rodgers enlisted in the Army Nurse Corps in 1952 and served in Korea. In 1967, Rodgers volunteered for Vietnam and was assigned to the 24th Evacuation Hospital at Long Bình, where she earned a Bronze Star for her service under fire. For some, the military not only provided an escape from the Jim Crow civilian world but also challenged the concept of racial inequality. Air Force Captain Juanita Forbes was one of 350 air force nurses who rode on medical evacuation missions in Vietnam. As part of her job, Forbes supervised a team that included two female nurses and three white male medical technicians, a structure

that would have been rare in the civilian employment world of the United States in the 1960s.[38]

Although the SRAO program was supposed to offer reminders of home to troops in Vietnam, its racial makeup was fairly homogeneous. The vast majority of American women who joined the SRAO program were white. As Rene Johnson remarked, "We were about as WASP-y as you can get."[39] It was not until 1967 that the Red Cross sent an African American donut dolly to Vietnam. Barbara Lynn, a graduate of Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina, and a former Peace Corps volunteer, arrived at Cam Ranh Bay in July 1967. "As soon as I had arrived, the word spread like wild fire that there was a 'soul sister' at the Red Cross Recreation Center," Lynn told a reporter from *Ebony*. "Many fellows told me that it made them feel good to know that they had someone there to remind them of home. The white girls at the center were nice, they said, but seeing a 'sister' when you came back from the rice paddies was something else."[40]

A fellow Peace Corps volunteer had told Lynn about SRAO, and to her it sounded like a chance to travel, serve her country, and learn at first hand about the Vietnam War. Lynn's father had served in World War II, and he supported her desire to join SRAO. Her grandmother also encouraged her, viewing it as an opportunity that had not been available to African American women when she was young. In Vietnam, Lynn was a unit director, managing about eight donut dollies and acting as the liaison between the Red Cross and the platoons her unit served. Her presence was significant not only because she was the first Black donut dolly stationed there but also because, throughout the war, disproportionate numbers of Black men were drafted and placed in combat units sent to Vietnam.[41] Black GIs she met in Vietnam told her that they "thought they had been forgotten, that the women back home didn't care for them or maybe were not being invited to come over" to Vietnam. Although donut dollies worked with all GIs regardless of race, African American soldiers sought Lynn out for companionship.[42]

In August 1968, Major General Charles Stone, commander of the 4th Infantry Division stationed in the Central Highlands, wrote a letter to Quinn

38 Yvonne Latty (ed.), *We Were There: Voices of African American Veterans from World War II to the War in Iraq* (New York, 2004), xvi, 91–8; "Samaritans on Wings: Black Nurse in Vietnam," *Ebony*, May 1970, 60–6.
39 Interview with Rene Johnson by the author, telephone, 2006.
40 Barbara Lynn, "Good Samaritan in Vietnam," *Ebony*, October 1968, 179.
41 Herman Graham, *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville, FL, 2003), 17.
42 Lynn, "Good Samaritan in Vietnam," 182.

Smith, director of the SRAO program in Vietnam, asking for an African American donut dolly. Stone told Smith that African American troops made up nearly 14 percent of his division, and he thought those men would be more likely to participate in SRAO programs if African American women were there. Stone assured Smith that the white donut dollies did not discriminate against Black soldiers, but he noticed that the Black servicemen often seemed reluctant to participate in the SRAO activities. He thought Black women would make them feel more comfortable taking part in the games and entertainment.[43]

Red Cross officials, working to address these racial issues, encountered problems tied to the changing conditions on the homefront, especially after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., which sparked a sharp increase in racial tensions among troops. In the summer of 1968, Lieutenant General James Lampert, the deputy assistant of the Manpower Reserve Affairs division of the Defense Department, visited US military installations in Vietnam to get a sense of the morale and welfare of the troops. When he met with John Gordon, the director of operations for the Red Cross Southeast Asia division, he asked how many African American women worked in the SRAO program. One, Gordon told Lampert, emphasizing that the Red Cross had launched recruitment campaigns aimed at attracting more Black women to sign up for tours in Vietnam. When Barbara Lynn returned home from her tour of duty, the Red Cross made her a recruiting specialist focused on African American women. Also, the Red Cross public relations office had pitched stories to various media outlets, especially African American publications such as *Ebony*.[44]

Red Cross recruiters contacted Black colleges, the National Council of Negro Women, the Urban League, and African American employment agencies. The Red Cross also amended its rule about the number of SRAO workers who could be stationed at a site to allow SRAO units to exceed their quotas if an African American applicant needed a placement.[45] Despite the efforts, by August 1968, only 1 of the 113 SRAO women stationed in Vietnam was African American.[46] "We are very concerned about the lack of Negro staff in this particular Red Cross program," Smith wrote to Stone. "Unfortunately,

43 Letter from Major General Charles Stone, Commander of the 4th Infantry Division, to Quinn Smith, SRAO Director in Vietnam, August 7, 1968, RG 200, NARA.

44 Letter from John Gordon, Director of Operations, Southeast Asia Area Headquarters, American Red Cross, to Robert Lewis, Vice President, American Red Cross, July 3, 1968, RG 200, NARA.

45 Memo from Robert C. Lewis of John F. Higgins, July 31, 1968, RG 200, NARA.

46 Letter from Quinn Smith, SRAO Director in Vietnam, to Major General Charles Stone, Commander of the 4th Infantry Division, August 15, 1968, RG 200, NARA.

there have always been difficulties in recruiting young Negro women for service in the SRAO program, and these difficulties have been unusually severe in recruitment for Vietnam. Even the most concerted efforts to attract the qualified young Negro woman have met with only minimal success."[47] By the end of December, not only had the Red Cross not recruited many more Black women for the SRAO program in Vietnam, but it had "lost two of our fine young Negro women" to marriage.[48] Pondering the difficulty of recruiting Black women for SRAO, Robert C. Lewis, a Red Cross vice president, observed that "it is interesting to note that SRAO has had an integrated staff from its very beginnings, but it has been far more difficult to obtain recruits from young Negro college graduates in the last five years because there are so many other opportunities now being made known to them."[49]

While the Red Cross justified its recruitment difficulties as a byproduct of the civil rights movement's success, increasing Black anger over the perceived failures of the movement probably was a more important factor. As Gerald Gill has demonstrated, Black women had criticized US intervention in Vietnam as early as 1964. Some women, including Coretta Scott King and veteran civil rights activist Diane Nash, appealed to a maternal instinct to protect children from combat and to resist foreign policy maneuvers that caused wars.[50] Nash, who traveled to Hanoi in December 1966 and met with members of the government of North Vietnam, including Hồ Chí Minh, explained that a photograph of a Vietnamese woman holding a wounded or dead child inspired her to go to Vietnam. "I saw myself in this mother's place," said Nash, herself a mother. "The death and destruction I witnessed was far worse than any picture could communicate." In an article in *Muhammad Speaks*, Nash recounted her meetings with Vietnamese mothers who lost children in the fighting and stated that "the people of Vietnam identify and sympathize with the struggle of black people in America."[51] Other African American women denounced the war as a waste of Black men's lives. Still others considered it an imperialistic act of aggression by white America against people of color.[52]

47 Ibid.
48 Letter from Mary Louise Dowling, National Director of SRAO, to Quinn Smith, SRAO Director in Vietnam, December 31, 1968, RG 200, NARA.
49 Memo from Robert C. Lewis of John F. Higgins, July 31, 1968, RG 200, NARA.
50 Gerald Gill, "From Maternal Pacifism to Revolutionary Solidarity: African-American Women's Opposition to the Vietnam War," in Barbara L. Tischler (ed.), *Sights on the Sixties* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992), 177–8.
51 "1st Negro Woman to Visit Ho in Hanoi Tells Why America Cannot Win in Asia," *Muhammad Speaks*, February 10, 1967, 7–9.
52 Gill, "From Maternal Pacifism to Revolutionary Solidarity," 178.

To participate in the war effort, then, likely would have seemed traitorous to Black women who opposed it.

In January 1971, in hopes of boosting recruitment for the year, the Red Cross set a quota of four positions in the summer recruiting drive for Black women.[53] Red Cross public relations also continued its press campaign, preparing articles profiling African American SRAO workers like Vivian Hayes, a graduate of North Carolina A&T University. When she arrived at Camp Eagle, where the 101st Airborne Division was stationed, Hayes made it a point to work with African American GIs. "I think it's only natural," she said. "I'm going to say hello and visit with them especially because I think they often feel sort of left out." The only Black member of SRAO in Vietnam at the time, Hayes believed the program would be limited in its usefulness to Black soldiers until it sent more Black women to Vietnam. "The men want to see more black girls over here," Hayes said. "If I were talking to a Sister, trying to persuade her to come over here, I would say, 'You've got Brothers over here who need your help. They need to know we care.'"[54] Vivian Hayes's statement that she would encourage other Black women to join SRAO because Black servicemen needed them reveals a sense of responsibility regardless of her opinion of the Vietnam War. Hayes's call to Black women to let Black troops "know we care" would not have been far removed from the Black Nationalist self-reliance advocated by the Black Panthers and others. Behind a cloak of feminine domestic concern, women like Hayes performed their own forms of activism.

Conclusion

The American public memory of the Vietnam War is a male-dominated tale of combat, that traumatic, life-shattering experience of war: walking point, ambushes, booby traps, seeing friends die, narrowly escaping death. Combat is central to American movies, memoirs, novels, and oral histories about the war even though, as historian Meredith H. Lair has documented, most US troops in Vietnam served in rear-echelon, noncombat positions.[55] Yet even if combat dominates American public memory of the war, American women

53 Memo from Mary Louise Dowling to George Hand, "SRAO Recruitment for 1971," January 25, 1971, RG 200, NARA.

54 "Vivian Hayes Is a Red Cross Clubmobile Girl in Vietnam," Red Cross Press Release, January 1971, RG 200, NARA.

55 Meredith H. Lair, *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011).

should still be central to that story. Military nurses, Women's Army Corps personnel, and civilians who served with the Red Cross saw the consequences of combat regularly. For nurses, and to some degree for SRAO women, dealing with combat was their job, from bandaging the stumps of amputated limbs to holding a serviceman's hand while he cried because he had lost half his platoon in an ambush. Nurses treated soldiers' physical wounds, and Red Cross women worked to boost the morale of troops, tending to their emotional wounds. Their jobs were to care for servicemen emotionally and physically, and they had to figure out how to do their jobs while managing their own mental trauma. American women who served in Vietnam were small in number compared to the men who served but, because of that, their exposure to combat and its consequences was concentrated. They were there to help lighten the burden of servicemen, but they had to be so much to so many, without any release for themselves. Though small in number, the majority of American military and civilian women who served in Vietnam experienced combat indirectly.