

Escapism, normality and domesticity in Vietnam: A re-examination of women's
lives in the Vietnam War

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Abstract

This thesis explores the experiences of military nurses and Red Cross Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas (SRAO) volunteers, also known as “Donut Dollies,” who served in Vietnam. By examining both their working and personal lives demonstrate the many ways in which these women distracted themselves from the war. Escapism and the need for normality was a common feeling between these women and has gone unexplored. Historian Heather Marie Stur provides important insight into the roles of nurses and Donut Dollies through the lens of gender studies. The recently created *Donut Dollie Detail* website holds several fascinating interviews with Donut Dollies. Key memoirs from nurses are written by Lynda Van Devanter, Barbara Hesselman Kautz, and Lou Eisenbrandt. Key memoirs from Donut Dollies are written by Rosemary Thunder Schowebel and Joann Puffer Kotcher. Using these memoirs, along with other sources, this thesis recovers the experiences of nurses and Donut Dollies, highlighting their challenges in both their working and personal lives while serving in Vietnam. This thesis will demonstrate how and why escapism, normality and domesticity was used by these women, uncovering a rarely told narrative of the Vietnam War. Both worked in challenging environments all the while trying to keep their calm during rocket attacks and sniper fire. They lived in harsh conditions, making do with basic facilities and doing their best to keep out the dust, bugs, and any other reminders of the war. Not only did these women live and work in the Vietnam War but they also suffered. They lost friends, watched as men and women they knew died, were vulnerable to sexual assault from American men, and even faced the likelihood of their own death. Recovering the experiences of these women opens and expands a new narrative demonstrating that the demands of war resulted in the need for escapism.

Abbreviations/Glossary

ARC – American Red Cross

GI – Government Issued, a term for Army enlisted men

POW – Prisoner of War

PX – Post Exchange

SRAO – Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas

WAC – Women’s Army Corps

VA – Veterans Administration

Introduction

Traditional war narratives show war as a male dominated environment. Men were on the frontlines and it was men who were at risk and who experienced war, not women. The involvement of women in the Vietnam War is somewhat limited. The Vietnam War saw between 7,500 and 11,000 military women serving in a variety of non-combatant roles in Vietnam.¹ The two largest groups to work in Vietnam were military nurses, encompassing the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and the American Red Cross Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas (SRAO) women. SRAO women were also known as Donut Dollies, a nickname given to them due to their history of serving donuts in World War II. The number of nurses is difficult to pinpoint but out of the 11,000 it is believed that 80 percent were nurses.² It is approximated that around 700 women participated in the SRAO program.³ The Vietnam War reflected the changing thought on traditional gender roles within war. Over ten thousand women served in Vietnam and very few of their experiences have been explored or gained academic attention. Serving as 'non-combatants' in Vietnam meant very little as the combat and danger often came to them. Most of these women recall running to bunkers, seeing or hearing incoming fire, and dealing with it as best they could with one Donut Dolly summarising the danger: "counting the bullet holes became a joke."⁴ Becoming numb to the dangers around them became part of the reason why they needed escapism. Due to minimal academic literature detailing the experiences of these women in Vietnam, there are still perspectives that need to be discussed and explored.

The Vietnam War challenged traditional ideas of women in war. When women are thought of in terms of their involvement in wars, the heroic and near-mythical images of Florence Nightingale or Clara Barton are the most prominent figures. Nightingale is remembered for

¹ Fact Sheet - The Vietnam Women's Memorial Project, Inc. - Fact Sheet on Vietnam Women Veterans, No Date, Folder 15, Box 01, Penni Evans Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 22 Aug. 2017. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=19620115003>

² Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.

³ "Vietnam War and the American Red Cross," The American Red Cross, accessed August 24, 2017, <http://embed.widencdn.net/pdf/plus/americanredcross/yznrsp5jei/history-vietnam-war.pdf?u=0aormr>, page 3.

⁴ Jeanne (Bokina) Christie in, Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 176.

her actions in the Crimean War in the nineteenth century. While her heroism is remembered, her pain is often ignored to support the myth of women being kept safe and separate from war.⁵ Similarly Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, was known for her courage while serving in the American Civil War. As historian Elizabeth Brown Pryor wrote, many remember Barton's bravery, but few know of the fear and conflict she experienced.⁶ Both Barton and Nightingale had their experiences glorified, with their pain and suffering often minimized. For the nurses and Donut Dollies of the Vietnam War it is a similar problem. Recovering their stories of both personal and professional experiences adds balance to this narrative. The challenges that these women faced is rarely examined and consequently how they used escapism is unexplored.

Male narratives were still the norm after the war ended. Historian Susan Jeffords argues that while the Vietnam War may have appeared to have altered the gendered war narrative, the "masculine point of view" was still the dominant narrative.⁷ War continued to be presented as a male narrative, but since Vietnam was a war that divided America and it was a war that they lost, traditional gender narratives began to change. This new narrative took time to emerge, almost 25 years after the war had ended, but it allowed people to understand the roles that women played in the Vietnam War. Scholars like Heather Marie Stur, Kara Dixon Vuic, Kim Heikkila, and Kathryn Marshall all began to explore the experiences of women in Vietnam.⁸ A rise in memoirs from nurses and Donut Dollies also helped expand the field.

There are limited accounts of female narratives, with most scholars focusing on the traditional male narratives either excluding or erasing women from wars. Scholar Haleh Afshar wrote that if the details of women's activities in wars were more broadly known it

⁵ For more on Florence Nightingale, her trauma, and her relationship to the Vietnam War see Elizabeth R. Barker, "Caregivers as Casualties," *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, Vol. 11, No. 5, 1989. 628 - 631.

⁶ Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Clara Barton: Professional Angel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), ix.

⁷ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 51.

⁸ Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat*. Kara Dixon Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Corps in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). Kim Heikkila, *Sisterhood of War: Minnesota Women in Vietnam* (Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2011). Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987).

would be harder to defend the myth that only men were involved in wars.⁹ This thesis examines women who were in non-combatant roles such as nurses and Donut Dollies and demonstrates that despite not being soldiers, their experiences still hold an important place in war narratives. Vietnam resulted in thousands of women being exposed to a horrific war, in which they each had their own unique experiences and stories to tell. Vietnam had no clear battle lines and hence no safe areas: women who served in Vietnam understood combat as much as the men. The changing experiences for women in war can best be seen through the military nurses and the SRAO women, the two largest groups of women in Vietnam. These two groups can be categorised as traditionally feminine roles, that of a healer and a cheerleader, but when these roles faced the reality of Vietnam the roles changed drastically. Women were not kept separate, safe, or innocent in this war.

Literature on these women is very limited. Historian Keith Walker writes on women involved in war and that according to “military policy, women are not supposed to be in life-threatening situations in a war zone, and therefore we have never developed an image of that in our minds. We think of men in combat, and women safely in the rear echelon in offices and hospitals.”¹⁰ The image of women in combat areas was never present in the narratives of war. Narratives of military history are written from a male perspective. Looking at a changing world through the perspective of women highlights these changes and pinpoints changes in social, military, and American history. Yet, as Carol Lynn Mithers concludes “virtually all war memoirs and novels have been written by men. War analyses and studies have been written about men. But men were not the only ones who went to war.”¹¹ There is a lack of literature examining women in the Vietnam War written by women. However, there is a growing field of scholars examining women in war more broadly, such as Cynthia Enloe’s *Does Khaki Become You?* and Carol Cohn’s collections of essays *Women & Wars*.¹²

⁹ Haleh Afshar, “Women and wars: some trajectories towards a feminist peace,” in Haleh Afshar and Deborah Eade, *Development, Women, and War. Feminist Perspectives* (London: Oxfam GB, 2004), 47.

¹⁰ Keith Walker, *A Piece of my Heart: The Stories of 26 American Women who served in Vietnam* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1985), 2.

¹¹ Carol Lynn Mithers, “Missing in Action: Women Warriors in Vietnam,” *Cultural Critique*, No.3: American Representations of Vietnam, 1986, 79.

¹² Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women’s Lives* (London: Pandora Press, 1988). Carol Chon, ed. *Women & Wars* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

Recovering the stories of the women who served in Vietnam is a slowly emerging field. Early books published under the title of *Vietnam Nurse* between 1966 and 1984 highlight that women's experience in wars were not based in reality, with Mithers stating that each book contained "descriptions of female sexual response so bizarre[sic] as to suggest the book was written by a male virgin."¹³ The divide between depictions of women in Vietnam and the reality of their experiences shows a lack of women's voices in literature and shows the idea that women had no legitimate place in war, and in the history of war. These early works highlight that literature written on and by women in war are incredibly rare. Unrealistic depictions of women in the Vietnam War often minimize their experiences, with Jeffords writing "as if they did not participate in the war."¹⁴ Women were only presented in male narratives when they were in acceptably feminine roles.

Nurses in war are put into paradoxical positions in terms of gendered roles. In a society that pushed women into domestic life to start a family, it also accepted women who left domestic life behind to serve in Vietnam. Historian Cynthia Enloe writes that:

nurses serve in combat regardless of official prohibitions. They serve in combat not because of unusual individual bravery – the stuff of nursing romances – but because they are part of a military structure that needs their skills *near* combat. Though military planners and their civilian superiors are not opposed to using nurses in combat, they have resisted the *image* of women nurses as regular troops with regular military rank.¹⁵

Nurses have always been present in wars, but not always accepted. The very *image* of women in war has become rare due to the gendered expectations in war. Narratives have the men as the soldiers and women as the non-combatants. Women are never with the men

¹³ Mithers, "Missing in Action," 82.

¹⁴ Susan Jeffords, "Women, Genders, and the War," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1989, 83.

¹⁵ Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The militarization of women's lives* (London: Pandora Press, 1988), 106-107.

but safe on the side lines. This belief led to a harsh reality for many women and therefore needed to find any form of escapism they could.

The 1960s saw the early stages of second-wave feminism. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963 and became an important book to the feminist movement. Friedan argued that American women, mostly suburban women, had been suffering from a discontent in their lives. Friedan stated that without moving beyond a mother and housewife, women would continue to be unsatisfied and unhappy.¹⁶ Historian Daniel Horowitz argued that Friedan's work was a key factor in the development of the women's movement and highlighted a turning point in feminist history.¹⁷ However, the extent of Friedan's impact is debatable in relation to the Vietnam War as there was no mention of it, or suggestion of its inspiration, from the women who have reflected on their time in Vietnam.

Lynda Van Devanter, an Army nurse in the Vietnam War, broke through traditional narratives in literature on women in the Vietnam War. Devanter's work *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* illustrated the reality of women serving in Vietnam, told through her own experiences. Devanter wrote about her experience while serving as an Army nurse in Vietnam and wrote about the impact it had on her. Devanter wrote that:

As the casualties kept coming in a seemingly endless torrent of human flesh, I began feeling as if I were turning into an old woman. . . Holding the hand of one dying boy could age a person ten years. Holding dozens of hands could thrust a person past senility in a matter of weeks.¹⁸

Devanter did not shy away from telling her story and in doing so broke down the notion of war as a romantic place for women. Veteran Sharon Alden recalls that while Devanter's

¹⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1963), 32.

¹⁷ Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 197.

¹⁸ Lynda Van Devanter, *Home Before Morning: The story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 144.

experience was not hers, it “got the ball rolling, and I fully credit Lynda with opening up the VA.”¹⁹ Devanter’s book illuminated the existence of women in Vietnam in a way not seen before: as veterans. Devanter’s book helped many understand a new narrative of war, that of women, a perspective that had often been erased from war histories.

The 1960s and 1970s were a rapidly changing era, where social and cultural movements were occurring such as the Civil Rights Movement, which further fuelled the women’s movement. Historian William Chafe concludes that “although no single cause could be identified as decisive to the change [women’s movement], a constellation of social and economic forces had come together, each reinforcing the others, to create a total pattern that ensured an ongoing transformation” in the women’s movement.²⁰ The connections between the Vietnam War and the women’s movement in America is outside the scope of this thesis. The women’s movement may not be addressed by the women in this thesis, but they were likely inspired by a new age of political and cultural freedom.

Extensive academic work on women on Vietnam did not occur until almost fifty years after the Vietnam War had started. In 2011, historian Stur wrote *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* which explored the Vietnam War and its relationship with gender roles. Stur argues that “the dragon lady, the girl next door, John Wayne, and the gentle warrior reflected gendered, ultimately patriarchal, beliefs about national security and America’s duty to weaker peoples and nations.”²¹ Stur’s work on gendered imagery explores how these images “remain influential to Americans’ understandings of the armed services and which roles women and men should hold in them.”²² The stereotypical roles that Stur presents displays a new interpretation of linking gender roles to war. Stur’s work was a major development in understanding different narratives in Vietnam.

¹⁹ Interview with Sharon Alden, 01 May 2004, Kara Dixon Vuic Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 11 Feb. 2018, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0378>, 13.

²⁰ William H. Chafe, *Women and Equality: Changing Patterns in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 145.

²¹ For more information on these stereotypes read Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 5.

²² Stur, 14.

Oral history helped deepen the understanding of the experiences of women who served in Vietnam. Kara Dixon Vuic's 2010 work *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* illuminated the stories of 100 nurses and highlighted many aspects of the war that had previously gone unnoticed by academics and the public. It also highlights the important realisation that each nurse had individual war time experiences shaped by their own "personal motivations, gender ideologies, and particular assignments."²³ In Vuic's work she briefly discusses the gendered contradictions visible in Vietnam. A clipping from the *American Journal of Nursing* from 1964 states that nurses enjoyed "stimulating" jobs and enjoyed the "fine social life that is part of being an Army officer."²⁴ These advertisements of nurses in the Vietnam War highlight the gendered belief that women are kept safe in war. Nurses in Vietnam were presented in a positive light, ignoring the harsh reality that nurses experienced.

One of the earliest collections of stories comes from historian Elizabeth Norman, who in 1993 wrote about the experiences of fifty military nurses who had served in Vietnam. Norman wrote that nurses "performed their jobs well under the worst of conditions, so many in fact that they dispelled the common notions about women's stamina, mettle, and endurance."²⁵ Norman's work demonstrates the paradoxes present for women in war. Often women have believed to have been too gentle to withstand war, enforcing the myth that war is a place for men, but upon reflection of their stories we see the myth collapse. This thesis demonstrates that not only did women work and live near warzones, but they coped with it successfully by using escapism.

The works of Vuic and Norman challenge the myth that women were not in war by recovering stories from women who served in Vietnam. Vuic comments that while some nurses had chosen a typical women's career in nursing their "ambitions did not fit the traditional feminine mold[sic] so easily" and that some had chosen Vietnam because they "wanted adventure, a chance to find a different kind of life than that chosen by" many other

²³ Kara Dixon Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 2.

²⁴ Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, authors collection between 82-83.

²⁵ Elizabeth Norman, *Women at War: The story of fifty military nurses who served in Vietnam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 3.

women.²⁶ Expanding beyond traditional expectations for women in war is still a limited area of research. The Vietnam War showed the results of a changing world, one that was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, a growing feminist movement, and a divisive war.

The main sources this thesis uses for Donut Dollies and nurses is the memoirs of those who served. The academic work that exists often focuses on one group, such as Vuic and Norman who focus solely on nurses, with the only exception being Stur. Stur does examine the role of Donut Dollies, but it is limited to examining the domestic imager surrounding the Dollies. These sources present the stories of many nurses and a few Donut Dollies but are limited in their analysis. The new *Donut Dollie Detail* website containing numerous interviews with Donut Dollies is a key source in this thesis.²⁷ These interviews have not yet been used in academic work as the website is relatively new. This thesis aims to demonstrate how the stories of Donut Dollies and nurses in the war show how and why they used escapism to create a sense of normality. Recovering the stories of these women adds to a growing field of women's involvement in the Vietnam War and further shows that women were present in war, and they were not immune to the consequences of war.

This thesis breaks down the personal and professional experiences of nurses and Donut Dollies into separate chapters. Examining their working and personal lives demonstrates the different challenges that they faced in both parts of their lives in Vietnam. By exploring their experiences into two clear sections there is a better understanding of why and what type of escapism these women used to do their jobs and give their lives normalcy. This thesis fills in a gap in the historiography. The importance of this thesis is to elucidate the experiences that have gone unheard and the challenges that these women faced while serving in Vietnam. With new memoirs becoming available and growing interest in the subject there needs to be more academic attention. This thesis uses sources that have not been acknowledged in academic works, such as new memoirs and the new *Donut Dollie Detail* website, which has invaluable information that has not yet been used in academic literature. This thesis aims at recovering these stories, which requires a flexible methodology that is applied to existing

²⁶ Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 4.

²⁷ There is a discrepancy between the spelling of 'Donut Dolly.' Some sources use 'Dollie,' but for consistency 'Dolly' will be used unless directly quoted.

research but also provides a template for future research. War femininity can be seen in Vietnam through the mixture of traditional domestic femininity as escapism combined with their everyday appearance and situations. Nurses would be wearing fatigues and working in the mud and heat yet would wear perfume and decorate their rooms as reminders of home. War femininity is an uncomfortable mix of domestic and war ideals, both prescribed by men.

Examining American military nurses' and Donut Dollies' experiences in Vietnam demonstrates the similarities between these groups. It also reveals the breakdown of traditional gendered beliefs of what women do and how they act in war. In a poem written by Penni Evans, a former Donut Dollie, the experiences of all women are summarised as "you saw smiles, you saw tears, you saw death, you saw courage. You heard laughter, you heard screams, you heard sirens, you heard shells. You felt happy, you felt angry, you felt grief, you felt pain. Maybe you felt nothing at all."²⁸ Evans shows that these women felt and saw a great deal, and not all of it pleasant. This poem reflects the polarising feelings they had while serving. They were not soldiers, but they had their own experiences that impacted them deeply and needed their own forms of escapism. This poem does not conform to the expected experience of women in war. These women went to Vietnam because they wanted to, either to see for themselves the severity of the war or because they felt like they could help their country.

According to Red Cross statistics approximately 700 women were involved, with 110 SRAO serving in the peak of the war, 1969, working in over 17 SRAO units in Vietnam; it is believed that they reached nearly 300,000 servicemen each month for that year.²⁹ Their nickname originated from World War II, but their duties evolved beyond serving donuts. While their job was to give smiles and drinks out to the men, they often acted as much more than that. They helped the men by listening to them and their problems, well after their scheduled hours. Their main job of creating an escape for the men resulted in the women needing an escape for themselves.

²⁸ Penni Evans, 'Sisters,' in Jan Hornung, ed. *Angels in Vietnam: Women who served: Stories and Poems by and about the women who served in Vietnam* (San Jose: Writers Club Press, 2002), 8.

²⁹ American Red Cross, 3.

While the 700 women who served as Donut Dollies may seem small compared to the 8,000 or so military nurses, they were still the second largest group of women in Vietnam. There appears to be no accurate account of the exact numbers of these women in Vietnam. Other statistics for groups such as journalists and missionaries also lack clear statistics, which reflects a general belief that war was men's business and that no one really knew who was in Vietnam. Both nurses and Donut Dollies went to Vietnam to serve in stereotypical feminine roles, yet Vietnam managed to bring a new light to these jobs. Women, both nurses and Donut Dollies, suddenly became more involved in the war, often caught in crossfires and incoming attacks rocking their buildings.

Donut Dollies highlighted the many contradictions within the Vietnam War. Rosemary Schwoebel, a former Donut Dolly, reflected on her time in Vietnam and noted several paradoxes, but it was the paradox of the Donut Dollies she saw most. "Most absurd of all" Schwoebel writes "was just the fact that two young women in little blue dresses could be out there programming and playing games with the guys while artillery fire directed at a distant target took place only yards away."³⁰ Donut Dollies went out to fire bases, which are combat bases that fire artillery supporting advancing troops, to distract the men from the war, which often clashed with the environment they worked in. It seemed absurd that in war hundreds of women would come and play games, while a war went on around them. Schwoebel describes how their work in Vietnam seemed absurd because femininity, and domesticity, were a polarising image in a war zone. It is this polarising image that created war femininity. The men used the Donut Dollies as a distraction and the women similarly used their jobs as a form of escapism.

The contradiction of safe domestic games to the dangerous reality of war is apparent. The two realities were being merged together. General William Westmoreland, the commander of the U.S. forces in Southeast Asia, stated that the American Red Cross in Vietnam were "a hotline to the folks back home, an oasis in the heat of battle, and a comfort during

³⁰ Rosemary Thunder Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir: Adventures of an American Red Cross Donut Dolly 1968-69* (North Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 129.

hospitalization.”³¹ The comparison between a battle and an oasis shows the contradiction: these women did not seem to belong in Vietnam, yet they were there nonetheless and stood out against the harsh landscape of war.

Donut Dollies were often thought of as cheerleaders who were sent to Vietnam to make the men smile. To an extent this is true, but they were more than this. Donut Dollies were college educated young women who went against the trend of settling down and having a domestic lifestyle. Much like the nurses, they needed to adapt to military lifestyle and to the war zones they travelled to. Schwoebel recalls that she received dog tags: “my dog tags bear five lines: name, ID number, blood type, religion, and ARC.”³² Despite the Donut Dollies being part of the American Red Cross with no official connections to the American military, they were issued military standard dog tags. The attitudes and approaches Donut Dollies took allowed them to adapt to Vietnam. The Donut Dollies both reinforced and challenged gender stereotypes. They acted as cheerleaders and wore dresses and makeup, yet they were issued military gear, followed military protocols, worked in fox holes, and survived rocket attacks.

These women were involved in warzones, and their roles, however stereotypical, brought them close to danger and forced them to adapt to the world around them. While not working directly in combat, hospitals and military bases where they lived were prone to enemy fire. From their working conditions to how they relaxed, these women provide a new perspective on the war, one that has had little examination. Nurses could not retain a picture-perfect image while working in mud and under fire. Donut Dollies needed to emotionally disconnect to do their job to help create a distraction from the war. As much as these women distracted the men from the war they needed to have their own ways to escape the war around them.

The traditional role of healer, an acceptable role for women to take in war, quickly became a role in which nurses had more authority than most soldiers and often saw more death and carnage than the soldiers would. The experiences of the Donut Dollies, who were sent as

³¹ American Red Cross, 1.

³² Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 31.

reminders of home and to bring a smile to the men, also show a world of paradoxes and of the challenges of gendered expectations. Recovering the stories of nurses and Donut Dollies creates a perspective that has not been previously covered. When presented together these women's experiences highlight the complexities of the Vietnam War. Examining the Vietnam War and the experiences of Donut Dollies and nurses it is obvious that they were not kept separate and safe from the war. This thesis explores how these women used escapism to do their job and cope with the war.

Nursing in a warzone

Nurses' working lives were often polarising experiences, going from moments of panic to sadness. There were only passing periods of relaxation between battles, smiles were fleeting, and exhaustion pushed nurses to the limits. In Vietnam, nurses were not working in normal military hospitals which had a full staff, clean sanitary conditions, and facilities that would prepare them for anything. They were working in messy, make-shift wards that lacked any resemblance to civilian hospitals. For some nurses the hospitals they worked in were a surprise, as Susan O'Neill recalled it was a shock to work in a rubber hospital that was inflatable.³³

Understanding where and how they worked is a key part in understanding the experiences of nurses who served in Vietnam. The working situations nurses encountered varied slightly from base to base but the general experience of working in Vietnam was one of chaos. Many nurses made comments about the contrast between the military hospitals they dealt with in Vietnam compared to the civilian hospitals in the United States. Nurses had to deal with extra responsibilities, a lack of basic facilities and supplies, uniform problems, and a general sense of chaos while working during their tours in Vietnam. Nurses also had to learn how to work under intense conditions and to improvise when supplies were thin.³⁴

There has been limited study on the working conditions of nurses in the Vietnam War, which deserves examination so that the full experience of nurses in Vietnam is understood. The work of each corps, Air Force, Army, and Navy, varied somewhat but all had similar difficulties in their working lives. Ideas of being Florence Nightingale were often quickly crushed under the reality of working in a warzone with minimal training and discovering that the of safety recruiters promised them did not exist. Enloe writes about the struggles of women being in romanticised wars:

³³ Interview with Susan Kramer O'Neill, 15 March 2004, Stacks, Susan Kramer O'Neill Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 15 Apr. 2018.
<https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0350>. 47.

³⁴ Mary T. Sarnecky, "Field Expediency: How Army Nurses in Vietnam 'Made Do.'" *The American Journal of Nursing*, 107, 2007, 52.

Because they were women and because military nursing was defined in feminised terms, they were not allowed to show their anger with their military compatriots, the men they served with. They were supposed to soothe and comfort, not display anger.³⁵

Nurses could not lash out in the same way soldiers could, they had to internalise their anger at the situations they were forced into. Nurses were expected to keep up the image of passive and caring women.

In depth research into the work American nurses did during the Vietnam War is limited to a handful of works. Stur's *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* explores how the Vietnam War challenged and embraced the gender roles that were dominant in America. Stur's exploration into how nurses were viewed in the war highlights the many expectations put onto women and the belief that somehow women were kept separate from the war. Kathryn Marshall, Vuic and Norman have added to the growing oral history of women's experiences in the Vietnam War.

Many aspects of nurses' experiences have gone unheard. Dealing with patients that have injuries they've never seen before and mourning patients they could not save show how nurses were not prepared for Vietnam. It also highlights experiences that are not often written about in academic work. This is best highlighted in a poem by a nurse named 'Dusty.' Dusty writes about a dying patient:

I am the last person you will see. I am the last person you will touch. I am the last person who will love you. So long, David – my name is Dusty. David – who will give me something for my pain?³⁶

What makes this so important is the emphasis on Dusty being the last person David will interact with and then the line 'who will give me something for my pain?' Nurses are so

³⁵ Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?*, 110.

³⁶ Dusty, "Hello, David." In Lynda Van Devanter and Joan A. Fuery, ed, *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace. Writings of Women in the Vietnam War* (New York: Warner Books, 1991), 44.

often overlooked that the pain they experience is hardly discussed. They were the last person many men saw as they died, yet there is no acknowledgment of this in literature. There is no one to comfort or help the nurses through their own pain. Nurses had strong emotional relationships with their patients and it is demonstrated in this poem. Dusty states that she will be the last person to love him. Nurses cared for their patients as if they were family. Nurses were not safe from the horrors of Vietnam. They experienced death and heartbreak, and often had to watch as men died in their care. They did not run away from the sound of sirens, instead running towards it to do their job.

The roles nurses took on and the facilities they worked in varied depending where they were based in South Vietnam. There were small 60- to 100-bed surgical hospitals, 300- to 400-bed field hospitals, and 400- to 500-bed evacuation hospitals, in addition to specialized medical detachment units connected to hospitals and a 1,300-bed convalescent centre.³⁷ Military hospitals were broken down into specific units within the hospital. There was the emergency room (ER), operating room (OR), intensive care (ICU), orthopaedics, medical, and more.³⁸ Sometimes there was more than one hospital on a single military base, for example in Pleiku, which held the 71st Evac hospital and the 18th surgical hospital.³⁹ Each corps had varying types of facilities in which nurses worked. Various hospital types meant various types of injuries and diseases, most of which these nurses had never seen before. Army nurses were stationed around South Vietnam at various hospitals, while Air Force nurses were stationed at evacuation hospitals and Navy nurses were stationed on either the U.S.S. *Repose* or the U.S.S. *Sanctuary*.⁴⁰ Each unit had difficulties and various working environment challenges. Nurses in Vietnam had to learn to adapt to these new working conditions and the consequences that came with the new territory.

³⁷ Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 2.

³⁸ Kim Heikkila, *Sisterhood of War: Minnesota Women in Vietnam* (Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2011), 40.

³⁹ Heikkila, *Sisterhood of War*, 40.

⁴⁰ Karen Zeinert, *The Valliant Women of the Vietnam War* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2000), 35-36.

Most nurses in Vietnam were army nurses. They served in various hospital and performed all types of tasks while serving. One nurse summarises the basic tasks that she had to do while working in a recovery room:

take vital signs every fifteen minutes, watch for excessive bleeding, monitor intravenous rates, and administer pain medication as needed. Men waking up from surgery needed to be told where they were and what had happened to them.⁴¹

Nurses would be constantly moving and keeping an eye on their patients, making sure that they would survive the night. Army nurses often had to deal with extreme heat and dusty surroundings due to incoming helicopters that would drop off new patients.

Nurses were unprepared for the environment they were working in. One Army nurse recalls that she “wasn’t prepared for the environment. I don’t think any of us were prepared for no windows, no doors, an open operating room, no running water, no electricity.”⁴² It was a common expectation that they would be working with modern equipment in working facilities. Nurses had to quickly adapt to a militaristic workstyle while still trying to work within a feminine expectation. There was a duality to the role nurses had, they had to heal and care for soldiers while working under challenging circumstances and provide a link to America and domesticity. Doing their job did not always align with domestic ideals, sometimes it meant working in fatigues covered in dust in a hospital with no water or electricity.

Navy nurses who were aboard the U.S.S. *Sanctuary* or the U.S.S *Repose* were on duty for around thirty days at a time. Much like the Army nurses, the sheer number and severity of injuries meant they often worked over one hundred days without a break.⁴³ These nurses worked in demanding work areas. They learnt to deal with a ship that would be rocked by typhoons and harsh waves. They dealt with tying down any equipment that may get

⁴¹Barbara Hesselman Kautz, *When I Die I’m going to Heaven ‘Cause I spent my Time in Hell: A memoir of my year as an Army nurse in Vietnam* (Portsmouth: Piscataqua Press, 2013), 194.

⁴² Elizabeth A. Scannell-Desch, “Lessons learned and advice from Vietnam war nurses: a qualitative study.” *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, Vol. 49, No. 6, 2005, 605.

⁴³ Zeinert, *The Valliant Women of the Vietnam War*, 37.

knocked over or move around during the typhoons.⁴⁴ Demanding situations on-board were not the only concerns for nurses. One extreme case in which Navy nurses were attacked took place on Christmas Eve 1964. The United States Naval Station Hospital, located onshore in Saigon, was attacked by the Viet Cong. Four of the eight nurses who were working at the hospital were injured but all refused care until all the injured men were cared for first. Lieutenants Barbara Wooster, Frances Crumpton, Ann Reynolds, and Ruth Mason were awarded the Purple Heart for their courage during the attack.⁴⁵ While this type of attack was rare, the case of nurses putting their own injuries aside to care for other was common. Being awarded a Purple Heart shows the contradictions that Vietnam created. Women showed as much bravery as the men, yet cases of this bravery being rewarded was rare. Nurses were not kept safe in the side-lines, they were amid a warzone and adapted to it to survive.

Air Force and flight nurses who worked in evacuation hospitals were responsible for stabilizing patients before they were flown out to other American bases in Japan or back in the United States.⁴⁶ Nurses would have to act quickly to assess the injuries and how they would handle a long flight and complications that could arise such as turbulence. Nurses would also be present on the aircrafts in case of complications. Workdays for these nurses were at least twelve hours long and they worked with severely injured soldiers. Most planes that these nurses worked on were converted cargo planes. These planes were not heavily pressurised in comparison to other evacuation planes. This change in air pressure could create issues for the patients, such as the oxygen in the bloodstream to expand and possibly wounds would rupture.⁴⁷ Because of these risks nurses kept a close eye on their patients for the entire flight.

Air Force and flight nurses also had to deal with loading and unloading patients into the planes as comfortably as possible as well as dealing with the change in altitude and keeping

⁴⁴ Zeinert, *The Valliant Women of the Vietnam War*, 37.

⁴⁵ Finis by The Navy Nurses: Station Hospital: Saigon, No Date, Folder 02, Box 01, Helen Roller Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 16 Jul. 2017
<https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=15210102001>, 13.

⁴⁶ Zeinert, 35

⁴⁷ Zeinert, 35.

an eye on equipment during take-off and landing in case it moved with the momentum of the plane. One flight nurse commented that they always had to be on the lookout for dehydration, as the lack of humidity on the planes caused several problems from sore throats to dry eyeballs.⁴⁸ Flight nurses were often the only medical staff present on planes and were responsible for all the decisions involving patient care, a responsibility that they would never have been given in America. The constant vigilance on their patients led to stress and the need to find a way to cope with it. Often these nurses would focus on the one task and shut down their own needs.

Nurses at various hospitals often found themselves in a work place in which they dealt with difficult situations, including a lack of medications, equipment, and sterilization tools. When the 85th Evacuation Hospital was established the operating rooms were set up in canvas tents with little or no lighting, ventilation, or sterilisation processes. At night lanterns were used to light up the tents which attracted many flying insects, creating more sterilisation problems.⁴⁹ To solve this problem, the operating room nurses and technicians used flyswatters. Flyswatters were the only way they could handle the insects, as no bug spray was available, and it was dangerous to use in an operating room.⁵⁰ The 85th Evacuation Hospital also had an issue with clean, running water. Finding clean water for the base was hard to come by and nearby streams were not an option as they may have been contaminated. Clean running water was essential for handwashing and scrubbing in for operations. To combat the water shortage, staff used 50-gallon barrels on structures above the OR so that they had water that flowed down to the OR. These barrels were refilled by Army water truck every few days, meaning that water was never guaranteed and could easily run out.⁵¹ If nurses used all the water before the barrels were refilled they would have no clean water for surgery. These situations not only highlight the difficulties of working in a combat zone but also the harsh reality of Vietnam.

⁴⁸ Norman, *Women at War*, 87.

⁴⁹ Sarnecky, 'Field Expediency,' 55.

⁵⁰ Sarnecky, 55.

⁵¹ Sarnecky, 55.

When put into situations with minimal resources the nursing staff often had to come up with creative solutions. Lieutenant Peggy Adams, an OR nurse situated at the 85th Evacuation Hospital, recalls that when sterilization wrappers for surgical instruments were in short supply they would use B-ration cans and seasickness bags as substitutes.⁵² The shortages that the nurses dealt with at the 85th Evacuation Hospital were not limited to their hospital and occurred at several hospitals throughout the country. Jeanne Markle, who worked at the 93rd and 24th Evacuation Hospitals, recalls having to use the Stars and Stripes newspapers as bandages when they ran out of bandages.⁵³ At the 36th Evacuation Hospital in Vung Tau First Lieutenant Anne Philiben stated they suffered from water shortages, and they would have to make do with minimal water. An example of this was when nurses at the 36th Evacuation Hospital tried to manage infection control and attempt to create a sterilised environment they had basins of germicide and then separate basins of water in which they would dip their hands into.⁵⁴ These shortages highlight the reality of the war nurses were in. This was not what they had been trained to do, and those who had prior nursing experience would have been at city hospitals where shortages of medicine and equipment were rare.

Nurses had to find ways to adapt to the limited medical sources, so they could give the best care for their patients. When Army nurse Lynda Van Devanter arrived at her hospital she noticed that in the emergency room there was a list of the name of every staff member assigned to the hospital, and next to their name was their blood type.⁵⁵ This was done so that if the hospital ran out of a certain blood type they could go to the list and get that person to give blood. Devanter realised that she, and other new replacements were quite literally “new blood.”⁵⁶ Creative solutions were needed to cope with the number of incoming patients.

Nurses’ uniforms seemed to dissolve under the realities of Vietnam. During their early training in the United States it was expected of the nurses to have their lipstick and nail

⁵² Sarnecky, ‘Field Expediency,’ 56.

⁵³ “Interview with Jeanne Markle,” *The Library of Congress*, accessed 6 November 2017, <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.03442/transcript?ID=sr0001>

⁵⁴ Sarnecky, 57.

⁵⁵ Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 80.

⁵⁶ Devanter, 80.

polish matching the trim on their uniforms and that they were to wear high heels, gloves and hats.⁵⁷ One officer referred to the volunteers as a “beauty contest.”⁵⁸ It appears that the military put the appearance of nurses above the ability to work and survive in a warzone. Stur, a historian of women in the Vietnam Era, believes that the focus on the appearance of women and the lack of practicality was “rooted in concerns about public opinion about the Corps.”⁵⁹ In order to counteract women working in a war zone, the military made attempts to push the image of nurses as healers and as ‘girls next door.’ The white uniforms of Army nurses were simply not practical in the heat, dust and mud of Vietnam, and nurses resorted to wearing combat fatigues and boots. Heat, dirt, and blood all tested the capabilities of the military issued nurse uniforms.

On a practical level the uniforms of nurses did not work. One common wound in patients was burn wounds and the nurses used silver nitrate to treat them.⁶⁰ Philiben complained that the silver nitrate would dye their skin and the silver nitrate also wore through their uniforms, making holes in the fabric which only grew after each day.⁶¹ The uniforms themselves were not fit to work in, as many nurses found out, and the white uniforms were switched for combat fatigues as they allowed more movement and handled the heat better than their standard issue white uniforms. Nurses stationed in Saigon were still required to wear their white uniform, but for the rest of nurses their white uniforms were for special occasions. The standard uniforms nurses were required to wear were impractical for several reasons, notably that in the hot weather the white dresses did not breathe well and that being in an environment with blood and open wounds created a more obvious mess on white than it did on the dark green of combat fatigues. Navy nurses had a similar uniform requirement: a starched white uniform with white shoes, nylons, and cap, but in an environment lacking clean running water, electricity, and in hot and humid conditions, keeping the standard uniform was not possible and completely impractical. One Navy nurse,

⁵⁷ Zeinert, *The Valiant Women of the Vietnam War*, 22.

⁵⁸ Zeinert, 22.

⁵⁹ Heather Stur, “The Women’s Army Corps goes to Vietnam,” in Wiest, Andrew; Barbier, Mary Kathryn; Robins, Glenn, eds. *New Perspectives on the Vietnam War: Re-examining the culture and History of a Generation* (New York, Routledge, 2009), 83.

⁶⁰ Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt, *A Time Remembered: American Women in the Vietnam War*, (Novato: Presidio Press, 1999), 7.

⁶¹ Gruhzt-Hoyt, *A Time Remembered*, 7.

Kay Bauer, went to a local Vietnamese woman to make a more casual and lightweight uniform that was more practical for their working environment.⁶² Nurses in all branches of military serving in Vietnam had to find ways to work around standard uniforms. Wearing non-issued combat fatigues or custom-made dresses resulted in few complaints, as many male doctors and military commanders realised that it was too difficult for nurses to work in the uniforms that they were given.

Nurses scarcely focused on maintaining their femininity when it came to their uniforms. In one song titled “WACs Don’t Dress Pretty” the appearance of nurses in Vietnam is addressed: “In old Long Binh city, the WACs don’t dress pretty. They all have to wear jungle boots and fatigues,” the song continues with “Yet the Red Cross and DACs do not wear OD slacks. They wear dresses or skirts, heels and hose, use cologne. But to us Tabor said, Femininity’s dead, WACs are one of the boys while in this combat zone!”⁶³ Nurses focused more on doing their job, which required them to wear fatigues rather than the white dress. As the song suggests, nurses were separated from the Donut Dollies and DACs (Department of American Citizens). However, it was part of the job for the Red Cross to be feminine, while it was not for nurses. As one nurse wrote: “being feminine doesn’t mean wearing a dress.”⁶⁴ They adapted to best do their jobs and while doing so they were ‘one of the boys’ while serving in Vietnam. The appearance of nurses is another contradiction that nurses had to deal with. This demonstrates it that while nurses still had to perform within a feminine role, their fatigues show them adapting to their roles as nurses rather than women. Nurses were still subject to expectations, but Vietnam altered these somewhat, creating the concept of war femininity.

Procedures that would have normally been a doctor’s job were often given to nurses in Vietnam. Throughout the war nurses noted that they all performed duties that would have normally been left for doctors to perform. Nurses inserted endotracheal tubes, started IVs, administered medication and more without so much as a question from the onsite

⁶² Heikkila, *Sisterhood of War*, 78.

⁶³ Donna A. Lowery, *Women Vietnam Veterans: Our Untold Stories* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2015), 585.

⁶⁴ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 114.

doctors.⁶⁵ Doctors were short on time and needed all the help they could get. These nurses hardly had the time or availability of doctors to ask for permission or assistance. Nurses had to act quickly to save the lives of their patients, going out of their comfort zones and doing more than expected. Army Nurse Roberta Rogers recalled that while working at Cu Chi she was overwhelmed with the amount of wounded and had to go on an evacuation run. Rogers recalled that “it is not common for nurses to fly evacuation runs and I have never been in a helicopter before, but no one else is free to go.”⁶⁶ Rogers put herself into situations that she was not trained or prepared for, putting her life in danger to save a patient.

In the nurses’ military training they were pushed to a higher level of medical education compared to civilian nurses, which was done in attempts to prepare them for the demanding situations of working in a combat zone and having to make difficult choices about patient care. Lynda Van Devanter was taught by a surgeon how to tie off blood vessels and how to do a splenectomy.⁶⁷ Nurses needed to be able to accept the challenges presented to them to save lives. Bobby Smith, a former nurse, recalls that she grew up on the romanticised version of nursing one where a nurse would be “walking around behind a doctor with an arm full of charts,” Smith never expected to get her hands dirty, even for the basic changing of bed-pans.⁶⁸ Gendered ideologies had given these women a romanticised vision of nursing, an idea that would collapse in Vietnam. The notion that women were not involved in war is wrong, and as one soldier noted “the nurses, they saw more death than most grunts.”⁶⁹ Nurses dealt with the aftermath of battles, amputating limbs and doing everything they could to help the injured men.

Nurses needed to be able to help in any way possible, and this meant taking on new responsibilities and roles. Philiben recalls how the nurses were often in charge: it was often the nurses who decided when the patients in their care needed to be returned to surgery, how long they needed to keep patients on medication and antibiotics, and when they could

⁶⁵ Dan Freedman, *Nurses in Vietnam the Forgotten Veterans*, (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1987), 4.

⁶⁶ The Army Medical Department and Dustoff Mission- The Dustoffer Newsletter, 01 May 2000, Folder 03, Box 01, Dustoff Association Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 27 Mar. 2018. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=11200103001>, 5.

⁶⁷ Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 86.

⁶⁸ Heikkila, *Sisterhood of War*, 22.

⁶⁹ Hornung, *Angels in Vietnam*, 32.

ambulate.⁷⁰ Saralee McGoran, an operating room nurse at the 12th Evacuation hospital at Cu Chi during 1967, recalls how she too had to quickly learn new skills and adapt to new situations:

a lot of times, especially on a chest or bowel case, my left hand would function as a surgeon and my right had the function of a scrub nurse. I had to learn to do everything with one hand that I had used to do with two.⁷¹

These women became doctors, surgeons, nurses, and caregivers for their patients. When put into a warzone with limited medical supplies, space, medical staff, and time, nurses such as McGoran used everything they had to save lives. Nurses had to be incredibly creative when supplies ran short.

Working hours for nurses varied depending on the amount of casualties brought in, and if there had been a recent combat encounter. The standard hours would be six twelve-hour shifts a week, either at day or night, then a 'sleep day' if working at nights, then a day off.⁷² The cycle would then repeat, one week on day shifts, then the next week night shifts.

Connie Christensen McCall Connolly, an Army nurse, recalls how she often worked thirty-six hours without a break.⁷³ Another nurse, Diane Corcoran, recalls how she too had long hours due to large amounts of casualties. Corcoran recalls being so tired that she once fell asleep while taking the blood pressure of a patient.⁷⁴ After working a fifteen-hour shift Corcoran had ten minutes of sleep before she was called back to help more incoming patients.⁷⁵ Some nurses also felt an obligation to stay on after their shift. Roberta Rogers had just finished her twelve hours shift but when a sudden rush of wounded men arrive she states that "I cannot leave my staff at a moment like this."⁷⁶ Rogers stayed on working well past her shift to help

⁷⁰ Gruhzt-Hoyt, *A Time Remembered*, 9.

⁷¹ Saralee McGoran in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 248.

⁷² Hesselman Kautz, 29.

⁷³ Gruhzt-Hoyt, 13.

⁷⁴ Gruhzt-Hoyt, 43.

⁷⁵ Gruhzt-Hoyt, 43.

⁷⁶ The Army Medical Department and Dustoff Mission- The Dustoffer Newsletter, 01 May 2000, Folder 03, Box 01, Dustoff Association Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 27 Mar. 2018. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=11200103001>, 5.

both the wounded and her staff. Vietnam continued to prove that the war was always present for the nurses and they had no way to remove themselves from it.

The number of hours nurses had to work reflect both the chaos of working in a war and the intense stress nurses were put under to save as many lives as possible. Army nurse Pat Johnson, who worked at various hospitals from 1966 through to 1968, recalled how when she worked in an emergency room she worked her usual hours as well as whenever she was needed. Johnson recalled that having to work fourteen or sixteen-hour shifts were common and only having roughly five hours off before having to go back to work was also common.⁷⁷ Nurses would end up working around the clock to save lives. The hours that nurses worked were extended after the Tet Offensive, commonly up to around thirty hours. They would then need rest, or they would be completely run down from exhaustion.⁷⁸ Nurses had little reprieve from the war: even on their off days they could be called in to amputate limbs or assist in surgery. With nurses living nearby the military hospitals, or even on base, there was little separation between work and life. Nurses would spend most of their time caring for military men and engrossed themselves into their work. Creating emotional and mental distance between themselves and their work was a necessary coping mechanism, complemented by other forms of escapism in their personal lives, like decorating and going out.

Nurses would also have to care for Vietnamese civilians and Vietnamese POWs. Due to a language barrier and sometimes hostile actions from the POWs this sometimes meant the care given would take longer and be more difficult.⁷⁹ Not only was there a language barrier, but when treating POWs there was also a risk to their own safety. Evacuation hospitals dealt with a variety of patients and were more likely to treat POWs. Aida Nancy Sanchez, who served at the 95th evacuation hospital in Da Nang between 1970 and 1972, recalls treating a POW woman: "As I approached to treat her, she grabbed my neck and tried very hard to choke me as if she wanted to kill me."⁸⁰ A nearby sergeant managed to get the woman off

⁷⁷ Pat Johnson in Walker, *A Piece of my Heart*, 47-48.

⁷⁸ Zeinert, *The Valliant Women of the Vietnam War*, 34.

⁷⁹ Zeinert, 34.

⁸⁰ Aida Nancy Sanchez, in Lowery, ed. *Women Vietnam Veterans*, 463.

Sanchez. Nurses were put into situations that were extremely dangerous and they were often unprepared and untrained for.

The assessment of the extent and urgency of wounds to decide the order in which patients would be treated, known as triage, was difficult for many nurses in Vietnam. Nurses often had to decide which men would live, and which would have to wait, and likely die. Triage was a job that was usually assigned to doctors, but due to the staff constraints nurses often did triage instead. In small hospitals, which only had around sixty beds, they often could not operate on minor shrapnel wounds because they simply did not have the time for them and instead had to focus on major wounds.⁸¹ Decisions like these resulted in nurses creating triage categories to put patients in. One was the 'expectant' patients, those whose wounds were too severe, and they were expected to die. Nurses would then make them comfortable and let them die in peace.⁸² The other categories were men who might survive, and those who were likely to survive. Devanter recalls that "even the ones who were triaged out, the 'expectant ones,'" were not just shunted over to a corner. Somebody would always go and take their hand and speak to them quietly, just in case they *could* hear."⁸³ Nurses spent a lot of time simply sitting with the men they put into the expectant category. Sitting with men as they slowly died was an emotionally taxing job and one that is often ignored and demonstrates the emotional toll that their job had on them.

Vietnam triages worked by prioritising those who needed the least care to ensure more men got care. Other men would be given quick attention to allow nurses and doctors the ability to move onto the next patient as soon as possible. To get through serious cases as quickly as possible, multiple nurses and doctors might work on one person at the same time. Nurses might remove shrapnel from the body while doctors performed surgery or treated serious wounds such as amputations. For many nurses, placing men into triage categories was difficult. It meant having to understand which men would die, who they would be unable to save. Triage demonstrates how unprepared nurses were for this type of work. Triage was

⁸¹ Johnson, in Walker, *A Piece of my Heart*, 49.

⁸² Jacqueline Navarra Rhoads, in Freedman, *Nurses in Vietnam*, 14.

⁸³ Myra MacPherson, "Vietnam Nurses: These Are the Women who went to War," *MS. Magazine*, June 1984, 56.

not taught to most nurses during their training, and it would have been a common belief that the doctors would have done triage instead. Nurses stationed at hospitals closer to combat, such as Saigon, Da Nang and Cu Chi, often had to deal with triage more often. Triage work shows that Vietnam was a place where traditional boundaries of gendered work blurred, and nurses had to quickly step up to the role.

The amount of wounded and casualties meant that nurses often had to deal with watching men die right in front of them. For some this was an extremely difficult task, and for other they quickly became emotionally numb to do the job. Penny Kettlewell recalls her emotional detachment in a poem where she recalls finding a dead body stored in the break room: "I then saw his face, that of a child in terror, and only hours ago alive as I, or maybe I was dead as he."⁸⁴ Kettlewell expresses her inability to emotionally cope with the number of dead men she encountered. Nurses like Kettlewell illuminate the huge amount of trauma that they dealt with and how at times they felt as dead as the corpses around them. Nurses saw and dealt with injuries they were never prepared for. From napalm burns to land mine wounds they learnt quickly to assess and treat patients, taking on a tough exterior to overcome the trauma of the experience. By separating themselves emotionally from what was going on was a form of escapism, one that many nurses used to keep on working and living in Vietnam.

For many nurses expressing their emotional pain is difficult. For some nurses, poetry was an easy way to express their pain. In a poem by Lily Lee Adams the pain of being with men in their last moments is shown. Adams writes about her friendships that "only lasted a few seconds."⁸⁵ Adams recalls being called 'mom' and 'Mary' and how she took those roles upon herself without hesitation.⁸⁶ Adams took on the role of a mother and a girlfriend in hopes that it would help these men and would somehow make their deaths easier. Taking on the role of a mother or sister was a reinforcement of domesticity and gender roles but also another form of escapism. To be someone other than themselves while comfort dying soldiers made the process easier, they were able to detach themselves from the situation.

⁸⁴ Penny Kettlewell, "The Coffee Room Soldier." Devanter and Furey, eds. *Visions of War*, 47.

⁸⁵ Lily Lee Adams, "The Friendship only lasted a few Seconds," Devanter and Furey, *Visions of War*, 38-39.

⁸⁶ Adams, Devanter and Furey, *Visions of War*, 38.

Just as the soldiers needed the comfort so did the nurses. To act as a mother in the last moments of a soldier's life also gave comfort to the nurses, as they hoped it eased the pain of the soldier. Their role as nurses could be very emotionally isolating. The myth that women were kept separate from war is completely broken down in Vietnam. These nurses dealt with dying men daily and were often the ones who comforted them as they died.

Introduction into working life in Vietnam were often chaotic and a jarring reminder that these women were in a war zone. Several nurses recall having to work on their first day on base, often with severe cases. Multiple nurses landed in Vietnam under fire. Connie Christensen McCall Connolly recalled how early on in her duty she had to assist with a triple amputation and that disposing of amputated limbs was almost a daily routine.⁸⁷ An unnamed Navy nurse went to Vietnam with ten years of experience in the operating room and she was shocked with the casualties and injuries of the men she had to treat.⁸⁸ It seemed that no matter the preparation nurses had before they served in Vietnam, they were unprepared for the challenges they would face. The common belief that women could not handle the stress of war is nothing more than a myth in Vietnam. While the conditions were overwhelming the nurses continued to work, using whatever coping mechanism they could. Even those who were prepared for the physical wounds were overwhelmed with the emotional trauma.

For nurses, dealing with patients was never easy and each nurse had to find their own ways to get through. Army nurse Kate O'Hare Palmer, who worked in the 2nd Surgical Hospital in Chu Lai, was given a rough welcome to Vietnam. Only hours after she had arrived at the base she was asked to assist in the operating room.⁸⁹ Palmer had not even been given a tour of the base before she was thrown into the reality of being a nurse in Vietnam. According to a procedure and checklist, nurses were to be first shown around the facility and shown the location of key items in each ward. They were to be introduced to the staff and patients; shown the location of emergency drugs, such as oxygen tanks, shown the routes of evacuation and locations of bunkers; they were shown how to use the emergency lights and

⁸⁷ Gruhzt-Hoyt, *A Time Remembered*, 13.

⁸⁸ Norman, *Women at War*, 34.

⁸⁹ Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 5.

electrical switches and finally shown the ward mail box and how to handle and distribute patient and staff mail.⁹⁰ However, it is clear from the stories of nurses that this was not always the case. Some nurses were working before they knew where the ward they were stationed in was.

Nurses working in Vietnam offered no safety from the war. Vietnam had no clear battle lines, no schedule of battles, and buildings like hospitals were not off limits during the war. Military hospitals were often under attack and nurses had to protect themselves and their patients too. This included assisting in moving patients to bunkers or safer areas of the base, moving the medical equipment needed to keep them alive, and also covering patients unable to move in protective gear underneath their hospital beds.⁹¹ If the power went out nurses had to check on their patients with flashlights or powered up emergency generators to help keep equipment, such as respirators, working through the power outage. Sharon Alden, an army nurse, recalled that during attacks she had to check on the patients while crawling around in the dark and that she “had to feel and make sure that everything was okay and shine a little flashlight to see if the IV was still dripping. . . You learned to improvise and overcome.”⁹² Alden’s recollection of working under fire reveals that nurses in Vietnam were hardly conforming to the expected image of a nurse. Devanter recalls that while assisting on surgery of a patient an attack took place, and that they had to continue working on the man during the attack. Devanter remembered: “we lowered the table closer to the floor and Carl and I performed the surgery while kneeling,” but eventually they had “decided to put the table back to the original position regardless of the V.C. rockets.”⁹³ Nurses did not always have the opportunity to follow protocol and get their patients and themselves to safety. Sometimes the only thing they could do was work through the attack, risking their own safety in the process.

⁹⁰ Procedure and Checklist, 67th Evacuation Hospital - Orientation Procedure for Military Nurses, 27 February 1967, Folder 04, Box 01, Patricia Bryant Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 16 Aug. 2017, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=23040104004>.

⁹¹ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 107.

⁹² Interview with Sharon Alden, 01 May 2004, Kara Dixon Vuic Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 28 Mar. 2018, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0378>, 16.

⁹³ Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 101.

During attacks nurses also had to care about the mental wellbeing of their patients and try to keep them calm during attacks. Some patients would cry out for a gun in attempts to fight back which resulted nurses trying to calm these men down.⁹⁴ Nurses had to commit to all aspects of the men's wellbeing. While the men's care was their top priority, their own safety seemed to be put aside. Nurses often ignored their own safety to insure their patients' health. Dana Shuster, a nurse in Cu Chi, wrote a poem expressing the belief that women would be protected while in Vietnam. "Momma is real glad I'm in Vietnam, working in a hospital where I am safe, where nobody I know gets killed. Guess Cu Chi doesn't make Momma's down-home news."⁹⁵ The belief that nurses were sheltered in hospitals shows the polarisation between reality and expectations. Many believed that working in a hospital would mean that women were safe, but in Vietnam nurses worked surrounded by various types of danger.

Nurses had to often ignore their fight or flight responses and instead put themselves in harm's way to ensure the safety of the men they were caring for. It was often during attacks that nurses realized that this was not what they had signed up for and discovered the truth behind working in a war zone. Lily Lee Adams, a nurse working at the 12th Evacuation Hospital at Cu Chi in 1969, recalls how during one attack she realized that "these men were trained to survive in a war zone but that I was not – that I could get killed."⁹⁶ Adams felt scared during these attacks and in hindsight reveals that she believed that if she had been killed it would have been the Army's fault because, as Adams recalls, they taught her nothing and it was from the men around her that she learnt about surviving. Nurses were given no training in how to deal with working under fire or in situations where their own safety was at risk, as it was believed that they would never encounter dangerous situations.

Nurses had to act quickly under attack and sometimes put themselves at risk to save the lives of others. Nurses were frequently injured but only few sought medical attention, so the exact number of injuries is unknown. Navy nurse Mary L. Nester, who worked at the Naval Support Activities Hospital, dealt with the hospital being regularly attacked. Nester recalls

⁹⁴ Zeinert, *The Valiant Women*, 34-35.

⁹⁵ Dana Shuster, "Letter from Home," in Devanter and Furey, ed., *Visions of War*, 34.

⁹⁶ Lily Lee Adams in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 213.

how in 1969 during an attack she had to look after patients. Nester was one of the twenty-nine nurses who received the Navy Commendation Medal. She received her medal specifically for taking care of patients under “conditions less than ideal” and for training Vietnamese nursing assistants.⁹⁷ Stating that Nester worked in less than ideal conditions is an understatement. The rarity in which medals or recognition highlights that women were hardly even considered for awards for their bravery. In the eyes of many, notably the military, nurses were still just working in the background. Caroline Hisako Tanaka recalls the injuries she received while serving in Vietnam. During her tour she had a field phone knocked out of her hand by a bolt of lightning and subsequently received burnt fingertips but did not seek medical attention.⁹⁸ Tanaka felt that since her injuries were not serious she continued to work. In 1968, she had a foreign body removed from her left eye, how the foreign body got there is unknown to her.⁹⁹ Tanaka was discharged from the Army Nurse Corps with a 10 percent hearing loss which she attributes to being constantly exposed to the noise of the helicopter and being near an ammo dump when it exploded.¹⁰⁰ Tanaka felt that since she considered her injuries were not serious she should continue to work. Nurses took on self-sacrificing roles that sometimes worked against them and led to several injuries going unnoticed and neglected. Nurses like Tanaka had to deal with long lasting consequences due to their time in Vietnam.

Nurses worked near and in the firing line of the war. The hospitals they worked in came under fire and were sometimes vulnerable to the weather, and yet nurses were always putting the patients first. Covering or moving patients before going to bunkers, calming down patients while they pushed down their own feelings of panic, and brushing off their own injuries so they could keep working was the reality of their job. This shows that nurses often put their patients first and themselves last. The idea that they were nurses first and women second, seemed to be a common mind-set with nurses. Nurses minimized their

⁹⁷ Nurse Wins Navy Commendation Medal - newspaper article, 01 January 1970, Folder 01, Box 01, Mary L. Conley Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 10 Sep. 2017 <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=18750101009>.

⁹⁸ Memoir: Carolyn Hisako Tanaka: Experiencing War: Veterans History Project (*Library of Congress*). Accessed 1 Aug. 2017. <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.07154/pageturner?ID=pm0001001>.

⁹⁹ Tanaka, *Library of Congress*.

¹⁰⁰ Tanaka, *Library of Congress*.

injuries to cope with the war. By ignoring their own injuries, they demonstrated how they emotionally detached themselves from their work.

Navy, Air Force, and Army nurses all worked under various working conditions, but what they share is the harsh reality of working in a war zone that they had received little preparation for. Nurses had never worked in a combat zone quite like Vietnam. The weather was extreme and military hospitals were not given non-combatant safety and hospitals underwent attacks frequently. Nurses were sent over in the form of stereotypical feminine healers, but the reality of war quickly turned them into combat boot wearing nurses. Even something as standard as working hours changed in Vietnam, twelve hours became twenty, rest days became on-call days. For these nurses, most of whom were fresh out of college, Vietnam was a rude awakening to the realities of war.

Helmets and Hair Curlers

Information on nurses tends to focus solely on their working experiences. Personal lives outside of their nursing jobs have been overlooked. Nurses lived in a warzone, often without a clear separation from the combat zones. Working in a military environment was challenging, but so was living in a one. Military nurses dealt with living in environments completely foreign to them, living without the luxuries they knew in America, and dealing with new threats that came with living in a warzone. Living in Vietnam meant that new threats arose, but new friendships and skills were made too. Vietnam brought to light a new aspect of being a woman in war. Vietnam was a new world for these women and meant that experiences they may never have had were now available. They could interact and exist in a new culture, meet new people and form new bonds that would never had occurred in America. Nurses had to deal with a new living environment and dealing with the downsides of living in an all-male environment, such as sexual harassment and rape. However, nurses also welcomed new relationships, whether they were platonic, romantic, or sexual. Some of these relationships developed into lifelong friendships, marriage, and even pregnancy. Their personal lives show how war femininity worked and how they used escapism to remind them of traditional domesticity.

Literature into the personal lives of nurses in the Vietnam War is extremely limited. The main sources for information on the topic come from the memoirs and interviews of nurses. Stur, Kim Heikkila, Kara Vuic Dixon, and Elizabeth Norman explore nurses in Vietnam but there is little information on their personal lives. The lack of analysis on the personal lives of nurses shows, perhaps not a disinterest, but an unexplored area of a bizarre normality in a war. When reflecting on war the main topic is the battle, the planning, the suffering and those involved; not on how nurses spent their days off. Historian Angela Raven-Roberts writes that it is important to ask the question where are the women? in relation to wars as it often reveals that “we need to *look at war* differently to see its gendered features and gendered impacts.”¹⁰¹ The personal lives of nurses reveal as much about gendered

¹⁰¹ Angela Raven-Roberts, “Women and the Political Economy of War,” in *Women & Wars*, ed. Carol Cohn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 39.

expectations and how they developed in a warzone as much as their professional lives. War is more than the battles it consists of; the social and cultural dynamics that evolve within the war reveal a new outlook on how women cope living in a war zone.

Nurses' residences varied from tents and Quonset huts to air-conditioned trailers and apartment like buildings. Living quarters in the army were known as 'hooches,' and 'cabins' in the Navy.¹⁰² Quonset huts were small prefabricated living quarters that nurses slept in. The type of living quarters depended on the location and size of the base.¹⁰³ Larger bases situated close to large cities were more likely to have better amenities and smaller bases in remote areas had very primitive amenities. Nurses who were on larger bases typically had access to relatively modern bathroom facilities.¹⁰⁴ Army nurse Pat Johnson recalls that when serving at the 18th Surgical Hospital in Pleiku that they did not have any separate facilities for the women. They had one shower with a reversible sign on the outside of it for either "Men" or "Women." The shower itself was a basic one, relying on a fifty-gallon oil drum on top that had an immersion heater.¹⁰⁵ These basic facilities reflect that many women had to quickly adjust to military life and become just as immersed in military cultures as the men did. This also demonstrates how the military was ill prepared for having women in a war zone. There was an expectation that there were no women who worked and lived in a military, and war, environment.

Many nurses had to deal with cold showers and little time to use them. Lynda Van Devanter, an army nursing serving at the 71st Evacuation Hospital, noted the lack of warm showers. She writes that she would have given anything for a hot shower.¹⁰⁶ This was common throughout many bases in Vietnam. Rhona Marie Knox Prescott, an army nurse who served at multiple hospitals, noted that at the 616th hospital in An Khe they only had one shower which was outside.¹⁰⁷ The shower water was supplied by a bag that was heated by the

¹⁰² Norman, *Women at War*, 20.

¹⁰³ Heikkila, *Sisterhood of War*, 41.

¹⁰⁴ Heikkila, 42.

¹⁰⁵ Pat Johnson in Walker, *A Piece of my Heart*, 47.

¹⁰⁶ Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 158.

¹⁰⁷ "Interview Transcript: Rhona Marie Knox Prescott: Veterans History Project, Library Of Congress". 2017. *Memory.Loc.Gov*. Accessed October 1, 2017. <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.01146/transcript?!D=sr0001>.

sunlight and refilled every day. Nurses had to be mindful of their time in the shower, so they did not use all the water before it was refilled the next day. For Rhona, the shower was the highlight of her 'home' life. Vietnam seemed to be an entirely different universe for these women. Nurses went from the comfort of American suburbia to the jungles of Vietnam.

The hooches themselves were relatively small, given that there were differences between different bases, and had only the bare necessities within them.¹⁰⁸ Lou Eisenbrandt recalls that her room was approximately 9x12 feet in size with one of the four walls being a screen with wooded louvers.¹⁰⁹ The screen stopped insects and rodents getting into the room while allowing the sea breeze to cool the room, while the wooden louvers stopped the room from flooding during monsoon season. Another army nurse described her accommodation as a row of Quonset huts, with two rooms inside each hut and each room would hold at least two people.¹¹⁰ There were no bathrooms or sinks within the Quonset huts, only communal toilets and showers in the middle of the row of huts. Vietnam offered no sanctuary for nurses, no home away from home. Nurses could not finish their shifts and return to their rooms and enjoy their time off. Their rooms only further reminded them that they were not home, that they were not safe, and that were in the middle of a war.

Navy nurses' space was cramped, and they shared a room that was only big enough for one person to stand; the other would have to stay in their bunk or go outside.¹¹¹ Their uniforms had to put outside their cabins on a hook in the passageway as there was simply no space to store them in the cabins. Navy nurses, unlike Army nurses, did not have the ability to simply leave the ship and take a break from their environment. Some Navy nurses recall rarely leaving the ship. Much like several army nurses, Navy nurses had to deal with a communal bathroom and shower room. One navy nurse recalled that on each deck there was a bathroom with three toilets and two showers.¹¹² Much like the men who served in Vietnam,

¹⁰⁸ Please note that there are variations on the spelling of 'hooch,' some spell it 'hootch' but for continuity purposes 'hooch' shall be used unless used in direct quotations.

¹⁰⁹ Lou Eisenbrandt, *Vietnam Nurse: Mending & Remembering*, (Atlanta: Deeds Publishing, 2015), 21.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Scannell-Desch, "The Culture of War: A Study of Women Military Nurses in Vietnam," *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 11, 2, 2000, 91.

¹¹¹ Scannell-Desch, "The Culture of War," 91.

¹¹² Scannell-Desch, "The Culture of War," 91.

women were given no luxuries. Vietnam was harsh, and for Navy nurses it could feel almost claustrophobic, they were stuck with the war with no way to easily leave the ships.

Living in a war zone meant that the living conditions for nurses were often less than ideal. Nurses had several challenges to overcome. When given the chance to sleep nurses had to learn how to sleep through battle noises, monsoon rains, and the noise of nurses coming and going throughout the night. For some nurses their rooms were not safe. The 3rd Surgical Hospital underwent heavy mortar and recoilless rifle fire.¹¹³ It resulted in many parts of the hospital being heavily damaged, including the nurses' quarters. Similarly, the 71st Evacuation Hospital was attacked, and shrapnel and glass damaged the nurses' quarters.¹¹⁴ Nurses safety could never be guaranteed. Even in their own rooms they had to be vigilant, looking and listening for any sign of danger.

Enemy fire was a real concern for many nurses serving in Vietnam. Nurses had to learn how to act quickly in an incoming attack to avoid getting hurt while still protecting their patients if they were on duty. Enemy fire was not the only threat to their safety. Harsh weather, especially during monsoon season, resulted in damaged buildings, physical injuries and stress for the nurses. An example of this happened at the 91st Evacuation Hospital in Chu Lai where a strong wind blew the roof of the nurses' quarters and destroyed all their possessions.¹¹⁵ Not all dangers came from enemy fire: there were also dangers from living in quickly constructed buildings in a country where weather had not been considered.

Decorating rooms to bring a sense of home and safety was a common form of escapism for nurses. Rooms often lacked decorations, and to make the rooms feel like home nurses would decorate them with curtains, posters, coloured paint, and use creative ways to make furniture. Eisenbrandt used the trunk that she brought with her as a make-shift nightstand which she covered with a colourful piece of fabric.¹¹⁶ Adding normality to a warzone was important to these nurses, to have some sort of escape from the war was what they needed

¹¹³ "Office of Medical History". 2017. *History.Amedd.Army.Mil*. Accessed October 9 2017.

<http://history.amedd.army.mil/booksdocs/vietnam/medicalsupport/chapter4.html>.

¹¹⁴ Norman, *Women at War*, 77.

¹¹⁵ Norman, 77.

¹¹⁶ Eisenbrandt, *Vietnam Nurse*, 21.

to survive. It was also done to create a divide from their work. Nurses worked and lived in a militaristic environment, but by decorating their rooms it helped separate themselves from the war. One army nurse recalled how she had decorated her hooch up to have mahogany panelling, three individual rooms, a wet bar, a TV, and even a garden and a screen door.¹¹⁷ Other nurses had painted their hooches various colours and managed to get rugs and bedspreads from Sears in America.¹¹⁸ It seems that simple items to decorate a drab room brought joy into the lives of nurses. Decorating their rooms also showed that these women lived in Vietnam, not just worked. Decorating was a form of escapism. On their off-time nurses could think about how they wanted to paint and modify their space or simply look at their decorated room and pretend they were not in the middle of a warzone. The rooms before personalisation were often painted in dull colours and looked uninviting. Lynda Van Devanter described her shared hooch: "The Pleiku red dust was everywhere: on the pale green walls, the floors, and even the ceilings. We spent hours trying to scrub it out, but were unsuccessful."¹¹⁹ Decorating was also not limited to rooms. Devanter describes how they got creative in order to make the bathroom more useable: "we put a tabletop on the shower floor over some two by fours so we don't have to stand on the moldy[sic] cement, and we stole some paint to cover the crud in the latrine."¹²⁰ Devanter also writes that these types of 'home' touches made her time in Vietnam more bearable.¹²¹ The need to find normality and comfort in a warzone is far from surprising. With nurses working long hours, sometimes up to thirty-six, having a moment's reprieve meant that they could separate themselves from the war. The number of nurses who decorated their rooms shows that these women had made themselves their own home in Vietnam.

Some nurses were lucky enough to have a room to themselves while others shared their rooms. Nurses often recalled feeling that they had no privacy while in Vietnam. At one point in 1968 there were sixteen women sharing one large tent at the 95th Evacuation Hospital.¹²² One nurse recalls "a nurse came down and asked if she could use my room. I asked her what

¹¹⁷ Scannell-Desch, "The Culture of War," 91.

¹¹⁸ Scannell-Desch, 91.

¹¹⁹ Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 89.

¹²⁰ Devanter, 106-107.

¹²¹ Devanter, 143.

¹²² Norman, *Women at War*, 77.

she had in mind, and she said she was looking for a place to cry. There just wasn't any place to be alone."¹²³ To be alone was a challenge and often nurses had to resort to learning to suppress their emotions or find other outlets to cope with their emotions. Privacy was near impossible. In a male-dominated environment, women were a commodity, and were often sought out by the men for several reasons. Women did not stop existing after their shifts ended, and their private lives were anything but private.

When military bases were under attack nurses, whether on or off duty, had to find somewhere safe until the attack subsided. Often nurses went into bunkers with the men, but this soon changed in some hospitals. Nurses' living quarters were sandbagged to chest height so that nurses could be protected during an attack. When the alarm sounded it was suggested that nurses were to put on their helmet and protective jackets and go underneath their bunks until the attack ended.¹²⁴ However, if nurses had 'any bust at all' they simply couldn't fit underneath their bunks and instead found ways around this by getting under the bed first and putting the jacket around themselves.¹²⁵ Simply by being a woman, by having breasts, they had yet another reminder that the military was not equipped to house and protect women. Each hospital had its own bedding and evacuation rules and cases of nurses being injured during these types of attacks were rare.

Nurses' professional and personal lives often blurred together in a warzone. Rhona Marie Knox Prescott recalls that she did not really remember a lot of her time off duty.¹²⁶ Off duty time varied greatly: nurses based at hospitals that were not often busy had more off duty time to relax, while nurses at busy hospitals spent their off time sleeping before they were called back to work. Again, Vietnam created a chaotic environment that would not yield to a nurse's schedule. Getting rest was important for nurses so that they could function as best as they could for the next rush of patients.

¹²³ Elizabeth Scannell-Desch, "The Lived Experience of Women," 123.

¹²⁴ Norman, 66-67.

¹²⁵ Norman, 67.

¹²⁶ "Interview Transcript: Rhona Marie Knox Prescott: Veterans History Project, Library Of Congress". 2017. *Memory.Loc.Gov*. Accessed October 1, 2017. <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.01146/transcript?!D=sr0001>.

Nurses managed to have social lives outside of the hospital. Judy Jenkins recalls being invited to a promotion party where she and a fellow nurse got dressed in silk clothing, heels, and hairpieces.¹²⁷ These women attended parties, went out to dinners, and enjoyed Vietnam outside of the hospitals whenever they could, but sometimes they got their entertainment and fun on base. Patricia M. Pavlis recalls having a base 'mascot' which was a small dog that the base had adopted. The dog was found on Christmas and was therefore called 'Chris.' Pavlis noted the amount of joy she got from the dog and that she would save food from her food tray to feed the dog and that she asked her parents to mail her dog treats.¹²⁸ Holidays were also a time for enjoyment for many nurses. If they had the opportunity to they would enjoy the day. Jenkins recalls dressing up in a Santa Claus suit and took stockings to the soldiers in the guard towers around the base.¹²⁹ Nurses took pleasure in the small things, whether it was having a pet to spend time with or enjoying the holidays.

The USO Bob Hope show is an example of how nurses were more like the soldiers they worked with than most people realise. When looking at various photographs of the USO Bob Hope show it is difficult to spot the women because they are in the same uniforms as the men. An example of this can be seen in a photo of Rhona Marie Knox Prescott with her corpsmen shows these women easily blended in with the men.¹³⁰ Army nurse Lou Eisenbrandt remembers wheeling patients down to the show.¹³¹ The main source of entertainment for nurses came from themselves. They often had to make their own fun, and as Frances Buckley recalls it was the little things that brought the most fun. Buckley recalls that while they had simple things like card games they also had "cookouts on the top deck. . . we even had a show called Fan Tail Follies, and anybody that had any talent sang or did things like that, and that was fun."¹³² Much like the men if the women wanted to have

¹²⁷ Judy Jenkins, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 131.

¹²⁸ Patricia M. Pavlis, in Lowery, *Women Vietnam Veterans*, 410.

¹²⁹ Jenkins, Marshall, 133.

¹³⁰ "Enlargement: Rhona Marie Knox Prescott: Experiencing War: Veterans History Project," *Library Of Congress*. 2018. Memory.Loc.Gov. Accessed April 21 2018.

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.01146/enlarge?ID=ph0004001&page=1>.

¹³¹ Eisenbrandt, *Vietnam Nurse*, 41.

¹³² "Interview Transcript: Frances Buckley," *The Library of Congress*, Accessed April 5 2018.

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.18970/transcript?ID=sr0001>.

fun they needed to make it themselves. Simple cookouts or small talent shows were another form of escapism that these nurses used.

Nurses who lived in remote areas never got to see a USO show; celebrities such as Bob Hope never came to visit them and relied on escapism to get their own entertainment. They would organise music and movies to dance to and watch as if they were back in America.¹³³ Nurses who were near a town could enjoy their off time there. In Chu Lai there was a small American restaurant, the Jaded Duck, which while having no “serious ambiance” provided a much-needed getaway from the hospital.¹³⁴ Going out and having a meal, either with fellow women or the men, brought a normality to their lives. They could be themselves, rather than a nurse, on this occasion. Nurses had a life outside of their job and it is equally important to examine their personal lives in wartime.

Time off, either in the form of breaks or off duty time, was a welcome relief from the blood and bodies of their working lives. Lou Eisenbrandt, an army nurse who served at the 91st Evacuation Hospital, recalls that the highlight of her workday was the ‘free time,’ or break, they were given if the day permitted.¹³⁵ These blocks of time were important to the nurses as it was time that they could get away from their wards and do what they wanted.

Eisenbrandt recalls some of the most popular activities for breaks during her time in Vietnam, “Reading, journaling, working on our tans at the beach, taking the boat out for a bit of water-skiing.”¹³⁶ The beach was popular among the women because most of the buildings were not air-conditioned and the beach offered a much-needed relief from the heat. Even if the breaks were too short to go to the beach, having a quick nap was always a welcomed option. Eisenbrandt said that it was better to remove herself and her thoughts from the hospital than spending her breaks within the base.¹³⁷ However, these breaks were not always guaranteed. If hospitals were expecting large numbers of wounded to arrive after a battle, breaks would be denied so they could prepare for the oncoming rush of

¹³³ Noonie Fortin, *Women at Risk: We Also Served* (San Jose: Writers Club Press, 2002), 15.

¹³⁴ Eisenbrandt, *Vietnam Nurse*, 35.

¹³⁵ Eisenbrandt, 30.

¹³⁶ Eisenbrandt, 31.

¹³⁷ Eisenbrandt, 31.

wounded men.¹³⁸ It seems that being able to take a break, even if it meant having a nap, was a cherished moment for the nurses. Breaks allowed nurses to remove themselves physically and mentally from images of mangled bodies and blood. Breaks could even remind nurses of home: “there was always music playing in someone’s room or hooch to remind you of home.”¹³⁹ Little moments to help remedy homesickness and take a break away from work helped many nurses mentally and physically prepare for going back to work as well as creating a sense of ‘home’ in Vietnam. It seems though, that the priority was on these women to be nurses first and women second, similar to how they were expected to care for the wellbeing of soldiers before their own safety. In their personal time there were still restrictions on how far they could remove themselves from their work.

Since American women were the minority in Vietnam, nurses were told unofficially to be aware of their actions. At bases like the 18th Surgical Hospital the chief nurse highlighted the importance of being discreet in the nurses’ activities, this included not letting the nurses sunbathe or wear Bermuda shorts in their time off, as she felt that it might be “too much temptation for the men.”¹⁴⁰ This ideology was not new to Vietnam, as it was common in American since the 1950s, but was highlighted by the instructions given to nurses. While no formal evidence can be found of this type of instruction it nonetheless happened due to the number of nurses who have reported being told this or something similar.

Nurses had to become very self-conscious during their personal time in Vietnam. Palmer looked forward to being able to swim and relax on the nearby beach, but she also felt nervous about being in a bathing suit around large number of men and ended up only going to the beach once.¹⁴¹ Nurses were told by superiors to be aware of not only their actions, but how they would be seen in an all-male environment. One nurse, Lynne Hudson, struggled to cope with the attention she was given from the men.¹⁴² She recalled how she could not walk down the street or go anywhere without being whistled at or receive

¹³⁸ Eisenbrandt, *Vietnam Nurse*, 31.

¹³⁹ Eisenbrandt, 32.

¹⁴⁰ Pat Johnson in Walker, *A Piece of my Heart*, 47.

¹⁴¹ Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 6.

¹⁴² Vuic, 142.

attention from the men.¹⁴³ The lives of these women were dominated by men while they served in Vietnam. Most of their interactions with men were professional, treating injured men, but when off duty they were still surrounded by men. The eyes of men were always on the women.

Isolation could be a common feeling for nurses. Everything around the women reminded them that they were not home, and their friends and family were far away. Lynn Kohl, an army nurse who served in 1969, recalls that the chaos of Vietnam became commonplace and reminders that she was in a war zone were persistent.¹⁴⁴ The military environment they lived in did not help either. For most of the nurses the only other women they could talk to were other nurses they worked with, giving them no feeling of a personal life, just a continued work life. The main form of contact to family and friends back home was through letters. Devanter writes while in Vietnam to her parents about lonely she was: "Does anybody know I'm here? If you all only knew how bad it is to look day after day at an empty mailbox and wait while they holler every name but yours at mail call. Just a few words, please."¹⁴⁵ Nurses spent much of their time taking care of others, and at times needed someone to take care of them. There was very little to remind these nurses of home, so making their own reminders of normalcy was important to them.

There was a sense that the nurses needed to retain some femininity, if not for themselves, for the men. One nurse was told by a fellow nurse to "just keep wearing makeup. The guys like that. Wear mascara and lipstick and you'll look good, and wear perfume."¹⁴⁶ Helping the men became more than healing, it became part of their job to soothe their souls. Their personal lives became just as much about the men as their working lives did. Men needed comfort and they found it in the nurses. Seeing an American woman meant seeing a reminder of home, of their sisters, mothers, and sweethearts, and the women grew up with the ideology that they were caregivers and felt like they could not say no to the men. It was escapism for both the men and women. Putting on makeup or wearing perfume was a way

¹⁴³ Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 142.

¹⁴⁴ Heikkila, *Sisterhood of War*, 36.

¹⁴⁵ Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 129-130.

¹⁴⁶ Heikkila, 78.

to achieve a sense of normality in their lives. Despite living in hot, humid conditions that did not favour American femininity the nurses continued to wear makeup, put curlers in their hair at night, and wear perfume. They did not stop being women because they were in a war. For many nurses who worked long hours and in fatigues, putting on makeup and perfume was a welcome change that could help nurses separate themselves from the war. After working long hours, filled with blood and sweat, applying makeup and doing their hair helped as an escape from the war. Devanter writes in a letter home that “perfume is such a morale booster. Ask any guy over here. The patients get a kick out of it.”¹⁴⁷ This suggest that the reason nurses liked to wear perfume had more to do with the men than their own personal desire to be stereotypically ‘feminine.’ However, this is debatable as most nurses have not shown any signs that the men were the sole reason they wore perfume and makeup.

Feminine hygiene and beauty products were also in short supply in Vietnam. Lynda Van Devanter, an army nurse who served at the 71st Evacuation Hospital and later 67th Evacuation Hospital, noted that trying to be ‘feminine’ in a war zone was a struggle. Van Devanter recalls that she struggled to find perfume, tampons, or toiletries of any kind, and even contact lens solution was hard to come by.¹⁴⁸ For nurses such as Lynda who dyed their hair they often asked family members or friends to send products over so that they could keep up their appearance during the war.¹⁴⁹ Other nurses recalled that the local PX (Post Exchange) did not sell many items women needed, and often nurses would have to rely on family members to send items such as shampoo and conditioner, hair spray, and tampons.¹⁵⁰ Nurses stationed in Pleiku struggled more than other nurses since they were at the end of the supply line, sometimes never getting the items they ordered.¹⁵¹ Beauty and feminine products were in such demand that as displayed by the nurses in Pleiku, some bases never received their orders because the supplies had been taken by other bases. Post exchanges rarely sold beauty or feminine products because they did not expect women to

¹⁴⁷ Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 125.

¹⁴⁸ Devanter, 157.

¹⁴⁹ Devanter, 157.

¹⁵⁰ Devanter, 157.

¹⁵¹ The Retired Officer Magazine: Women in Vietnam, 01 November 1993, Folder 01, Box 01, Mary L. Conley Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 16 July 2017, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=18750101018>. 6.

be in Vietnam. Some nurses became so used to their limited lifestyles in Vietnam that when they went on R&R in Hong Kong they could not believe their surroundings. Devanter spent her first day entirely in a hot bath and laughed every time the toilet flushed as part of her was convinced that the running water and flushing toilet were not real.¹⁵² Some nurses decided to live without hair dye, makeup and curlers, considering it not worth the effort. Others decided to try and keep up their normal routines as if they were still back in America.

Nurses had to be aware of the dangers from both the Viet Cong and the men they served alongside. While rare, incidents of assault did occur. Exact numbers of rape and sexual harassment are not clear as many nurses either do not wish to discuss the matter or simply chose to forget the memories. Edie Meeks, an army nurse who served in Vietnam during 1968, recalls how she had suppressed her memory of being raped while serving.¹⁵³ Barbara Hesselman Kautz, an Army nurse who served at the 24th Evacuation Hospital, recalled a frightening night with an American soldier:

I was roused to full consciousness by the sensation of the sheet being pulled off my body. Standing at the foot of the bed was a man I had never seen before. I screamed and he ran, the entire incident taking no more than thirty seconds. But I felt as violated as if I had been raped. For many nights afterward I couldn't sleep without a light on.¹⁵⁴

It was this attack that Hesselman realised the danger she was in while in Vietnam. This attack also reveals why so many women needed to find forms of escapism.

Most attacks on women were stopped before anything serious happened. Lynn Bower recalled that male soldiers stepped in when another soldier attacked a nurse in Bower's living quarters.¹⁵⁵ Hesselman was also present when another attack took place, this time on

¹⁵² Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 191.

¹⁵³ Ruth Tam, "Vietnam War nurse: 'I saw people do stuff they'd never do at home,'" *The Washington Post*, November 8, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2013/11/08/vietnam-war-nurse-i-saw-people-do-stuff-theyd-never-do-at-home/?utm_term=.1c966011eec0

¹⁵⁴ Hesselman, *When I Die I'm Going to Heaven*, 64.

¹⁵⁵ Heikkila, *Sisterhood of War*, 81.

a Red Cross Volunteer named Kathleen. When Hesselman heard Kathleen scream she and other nurses rushed to her aid. When Barbara saw a man running out of Kathleen's room Barbara instantly took chase. Barbara ran after the man in bare feet until other soldiers went after the attacker.¹⁵⁶ Nurses did not often think of protecting themselves from the men they served alongside. When Barbara was asked if she was safe in Vietnam she never discussed that she felt scared of her own men, because "it was too complicated to tell them I felt safe from the enemy but not from our own men."¹⁵⁷ After the attack a curfew was enforced, late night rendezvous were no longer allowed, even for married couples, and more security was put up to protect the nurses.¹⁵⁸ The military was not prepared to have women serving and living alongside men in a war, and had no official rules or protection which led to the women often being put in dangerous situations.

While attacks on nurses did occur, the relationship between enlisted men and nurses was mostly positive. These enlisted men would look out for the women and come to their aid if attacks were to occur. When one nurse was attacked by a soldier, other men quickly saw what was happening and prevented the attack from going any further.¹⁵⁹ In this case too, security was increased, and nurses had a guard on permanent duty outside their hooches. Since women were so rare in Vietnam eyes were always on them, meaning that it was difficult for someone to assault a woman without someone seeing or hearing it. Attacks from U.S. soldiers were the exception, not the rule. In one questionnaire that involved around 250 nurses it was revealed that over half of the nurses experienced sexual harassment in the form of "sexual remarks, physical contact, such as touching, and requests for sex."¹⁶⁰ In the same questionnaire three percent of the nurses reported being raped.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ Heikkila, *Sisterhood of War*, 66.

¹⁵⁷ Heikkila, 69.

¹⁵⁸ Heikkila, 68.

¹⁵⁹ Heikkila, 81.

¹⁶⁰ Letter from Marianne Jacobs to Nurse Veteran - re: Questionnaire Results from Study Regarding Experiences in Vietnam, No Date, Folder 05, Box 01, Patricia Bryant Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 24 Aug.

2017, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=23040105006>

¹⁶¹ Letter from Marianne Jacobs to Nurse Veteran - re: Questionnaire Results from Study Regarding Experiences in Vietnam, No Date, Folder 05, Box 01, Patricia Bryant Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 24 Aug.

2017, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=23040105006>

What is difficult is that with questionnaires such as this, nurses may be under represented in their experiences. Many women may not have wanted to even complete the questionnaire, meaning that these statistics can never be completely representative. However, they give us a basic understanding of what some of the nurses experienced. For those who experienced sexual assault finding their own ways to cope and handle the experiences was needed to keep working in Vietnam. Finding a form of escapism was needed to help overcome challenging experiences.

The discharge of any women who came into a parental role in any shape, whether biological or a guardian, highlighted the army's ideas of keeping gender norms in place. Hesselman recalls how she was present when one of her fellow nurses, Ellen, went into labour. Hesselman said that no one had noticed Ellen's baby bump but believes that it was hidden mostly by her fatigues.¹⁶² Ellen's focus on her job rather than herself was a form of escapism, she minimized her own needs to do her job. Hesselman never found out the consequences of Ellen's pregnancy but knew that the situation was being handled between Ellen, her partner, and army officials. It is possible that pregnancies were kept quiet from the public to avoid fresh debates over the changing gender roles and whether a woman belonged in a war. If a debate began about where women should 'belong,' the Army might lose some of its nurses. Instead it kept pregnancies quiet and often discharged the women. Discharging women who came into parental roles demonstrates the belief that women did not belong in a war, that a more domestic life would be appropriate.

Despite the Army's policy on discharging pregnant women, they made no strong effort to supply women in Vietnam with birth control. Diana Dwan Poole, an army nurse, recalls that there were no birth control pills at the 67th Evacuation Hospital but did remember that it was the physicians who often brought back birth control pills from their time in Japan.¹⁶³ Devanter recalls that "if we might be unladylike enough to want birth control pills, which were kept in a safe and rarely dispensed, we could expect the wrath of God, or our

¹⁶² Hesselman, *When I die I'm Going to Heaven*, 130.

¹⁶³ Kara Dixon Vuic, "I'm afraid we're going to have to just change our ways': Marriage, Motherhood, and Pregnancy in the Army Nurse Corps during the Vietnam War," *Signs*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2007, 1015-1016.

commander, to descend upon us.”¹⁶⁴ These women had very little agency over their personal lives in Vietnam and those in control wanted these nurses to maintain a ‘ladylike’ image even while serving in a war.

Even in war strong relationships were formed. As Eisenbrandt stated: “I learned very early on in my tour that there were certain individuals that I would grow to consider family. One of the first things that became very clear to me was that I would need to rely on the friendship of my fellow medical personnel to survive what lay ahead.”¹⁶⁵ Nurses relied on the people around to get through the stress and dangers of Vietnam. It is believed that only six nurses married men while they were in Vietnam.¹⁶⁶ This small amount is likely due to several concerns nurses had about getting involved with enlisted men. Enlisted men had the possibility of dying or being injured and since nurses had to distance themselves from their patients many thought keeping a casual relationship was better than a serious one. Another consideration is that many women did marry after the war. Having to make emotional connections with men could be difficult for some during the war.

Some relationships demonstrate how nurses were used as escapism by the men. Lieutenant Colonel Ruth Sidisin, a nurse, recalls that every night someone would yell ‘mom’ at her and wave. Sidisin states that “I guess I don’t know any nurses who weren’t adopted by guys.”¹⁶⁷ Another nurse, Mary Breed, was nicknamed Mom Breed after her tendency to go around covering men with blankets while they slept.¹⁶⁸ The men used nurses as a form of escapism, to pretend that they had their mothers with them. The nurses too brought into this escapism. If they were ‘mom’ then they were not a nurse in a war zone. Domestic roles and reminders can be seen in the relationships that nurses had with the men.

Once home many nurses found it easier to connect to veterans who understood their experiences. Shirley Menard, an army nurse who served at the 8th Field Hospital in Nha Trang, remembers that when she served in the military women did not date enlisted men,

¹⁶⁴ Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 122.

¹⁶⁵ Eisenbrandt, *Vietnam Nurse*, 80.

¹⁶⁶ Norman, *Women at War*, 73.

¹⁶⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Ruth Sidisin, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 30.

¹⁶⁸ Heikkila, *Sisterhood of War*, 67.

let alone marry them. Menard states that it was not considered appropriate for nurses to be married at the time, as it was part of an old-fashioned rule that their “number one priority was to nursing in the military.”¹⁶⁹ However in a warzone where comfort was needed, relationships formed and even marriage. These women were living in a double standard. Society expected them to settle down and start a family, but the military expected them to focus on their jobs and have no personal life. When serving in Vietnam some nurses found ways to recreate domesticity as an escape from the war. They could focus on their jobs but on their off time they would decorate their rooms as reminders of home.

Relationships were not always a conscious decision. When it came to more intimate relationships Devanter states, “I had never figured I would develop any feelings” for someone she met while on duty.¹⁷⁰ Devanter writes on how these relationships may not have been formed out of love, but out of the need for comfort. Devanter recalls that many women, including herself, had the idea that if they “were careful, and didn’t get too attached, I would not be hurt.”¹⁷¹ Emotional detachment and hesitancy to enter any sort of emotional relationship was common. The man they were dating could end up on the operating table in front of them, and emotionally break them. Yet to be completely shut off, seemed near impossible for most nurses. Nurses needed comfort from the men in the same way the men sought comfort from the nurses. Relationships became a way to add normality to the war but were also a struggle. Many nurses, such as Devanter, became emotionally distant from those around them, but still needed a distraction from the war.

Some married couples went to Vietnam together. For married couples in Vietnam, living quarters together were never a guarantee. At some locations that had larger bases, such as the 12th Evacuation Hospital in Cu Chi, they had designated areas in which couples could live together.¹⁷² While it was possible for married couples to live together in Vietnam, it was not always easy. Sometimes couples would choose to live off-base, so they could be together, or find a nearby hotel to spend time together. When housing was not available for married

¹⁶⁹ Shirley Menard in Freedman, ed., *Nurses in Vietnam*, 107-108.

¹⁷⁰ Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 145.

¹⁷¹ Devanter, 144.

¹⁷² Vuic, “I’m afraid we’re going to have to just change our ways,” 1003.

couples, some chief nurses organised times and locations where the couples could meet. The chief nurse at the 85th Evacuation Hospital, Madelyn N. Parks, set aside a room for married nurses and their visiting husbands.¹⁷³ Domestic life, in this case marriage, appeared to be a foreign concept to the military. There was no formal expectation that married couples would be in Vietnam together, most likely due to the idea of women serving in the military being absurd at the time.

Nurses struggled to maintain a traditional sense of normality in Vietnam. Strong bonds formed between nurses, and even casual relationships with enlisted men helped give a sense of normality to the nurses. Yet it was these bonds that also reminded them that they were not home. Nurses would often confide in their friends to talk about the things they saw while working. Devanter summarises this bond in the following: “where there is nothing remotely resembling sanity around you, you tend to try to find some sense of normalcy, some feeling of comfort, some communication with another person on a level removed from that environment of destruction.” Having any form of escapism was necessary for these women. As Devanter states there is a need to find a sense of normalcy that can remove them from such a harsh environment. Devanter writes more on the polarising feelings that she and other nurses felt while in Vietnam:

you spend hours, days, and weeks working with a person, sharing the agony and joy, the laughter and tears, the hopes and disappointments. Inevitably, the time will come when you’ve finally experienced all the pain, emptiness, and ugliness you can stand. And in that final, quiet moment, all you want to do is lean against somebody and cry.¹⁷⁴

The need to be cared for, to have someone to hold, is a constant theme in the writings from nurses. This also demonstrates the need for normalcy and escapism. The polarising feelings of joy and pain shows the need to find normalcy in whatever form possible, and in this case that is in relationships.

¹⁷³ Vuic, ‘I’m afraid we’re going to have to just change our ways,’ 1004.

¹⁷⁴ Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 105-6.

Going into a war zone as chaotic as Vietnam resulted in many nurses finding a form of escapism. These nurses came from a “society that told them that their duty, as women, was to stay home and tend to family also told them that their duty, as nurses, was to put their skills to use in caring for young men battling against communism in Vietnam.”¹⁷⁵ Yet Vietnam brought them something else. They became nurses, caregivers, therapists, surgeons, mothers, sisters, sweethearts, and friends all combined in one. They embodied domestic ideals to escape the war. To be reminders for the men, and themselves, of domestic America. Nurses needed to become more like the men around them to survive, while still appeasing the expectations of gendered roles. The way they lived revealed as much about the gendered experience of war as their working lives. Nurses decorating their rooms and finding their own ways to relax demonstrates how and why they used escapism in Vietnam. Relationships, both platonic and romantic, reveal the desire to have normalcy. Much like how when working they took on a rough exterior to cope with the job, in their personal lives they decorated their rooms and formed strong bonds with other to retain some sort normality.

¹⁷⁵ Heikkila, *Sisterhood of War*, 34.

Cheerleaders in Foxholes

In 1965 General William Westmoreland requested the SRAO program, the Donut Dollies, to boost morale in Vietnam. The goal of the SRAO was to provide entertainment and audience participation programs for troops. This involved quizzes, numerous types of games, and musical performances.¹⁷⁶ SRAO women represented a touch of home and a reminder to the men of what they were fighting for. They dealt with maintaining the image of ideal female domesticity while being under strenuous environmental conditions. SRAO women would have to travel long and dangerous distances to reach bases. They had to keep a smile even in grim situations. Donut Dollies were the main form of escapism for the soldiers. While working in Vietnam Donut Dollies came across several challenges that resulted in Donut Dollies needing their own distractions, rather than just be the distraction.

Analysis on the role Donut Dollies played in the war is limited, with the most notable being Stur's *Beyond Combat*, which explores the gendered issues surrounding Donut Dollies in Vietnam. Stur examines the Cold War ideology and its impact on the presentation of the Donut Dollies. She argues that the Donut Dollies were meant to contrast the image of the Vietnamese 'dragon ladies.'¹⁷⁷ Expanding on Stur's insight into the jobs of Donut Dollies reveals the way in which they acted as distractions from the war and how they gave and needed normality. Similarly, the work *Officer, Nurse, Woman* by Kara Dixon Vuic expands on the importance placed on femininity during the war but fails to mention the Donut Dollies. Apart from Stur, academic work on the Donut Dollies is almost non-existent. The most notable change in academic interest in Donut Dollies has been through the *Donut Dollie Detail*, edited by Jim Gardner.¹⁷⁸ This website records interviews with Donut Dollies covering their time spent in Vietnam. Using these interviews allows for greater analysis into both the work they did and the aftermath of it. However, with more information being released on

¹⁷⁶ American Red Cross, "Vietnam War and the American Red Cross," <http://embed.widencdn.net/pdf/plus/americanredcross/yznrsp5jei/history-vietnam-war.pdf?u=0aormr>, Accessed August 24, 2017, 3.

¹⁷⁷ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 65.

¹⁷⁸ "The Donut Dollie Detail | THE DONUT DOLLIES". 2018. *Donutdollies.Com*. Accessed August 4, 2018. <http://www.donutdollies.com/category/donut-dollie-detail/>

their role in Vietnam, through memoirs, interviews and archival works, a more complete view of their role in Vietnam starts to emerge.

Both groups brought a sense of 'comfort' and a type of escapism to the men around them. Vuic writes that a nurse and her looks were important and that it was believed that "her beauty countered the brutality of the war, allowing the soldier to forget his pain and the war in which he had been wounded."¹⁷⁹ Similarly, Donut Dollies were to be reminders of home, of America. Stur found that, according to one Donut Dollie, the SRAO was "all that was wholesome and good about girls, women, moms, sisters, wives" waiting for U.S. servicemen back home.¹⁸⁰ These women were to be feminine reminders of home. As stated by Stur, both the men and the women who served in Vietnam were living in a world where "fantasy no longer held sway."¹⁸¹ Donut Dollies were meant to represent domestic ideals but ended up being women working in war in several ways. The polarising position they were put in resulted in several ways in which escapism was used for the Donut Dollies and the soldiers.

Perceptions on Donut Dollies have often been of young naive girls who went to Vietnam to play with the troops. However, examining memoirs and interviews from the Donut Dollies reveals a vastly different story. Nancy Smoyer, a former Donut Dolly who served in 1968-69, found a description of what qualities were found in a 'typical' Donut Dollie: "Men love them, fathers tolerate them, the military supports them. . . She is sly as a fox and has the stories of a combat veteran. . . A Red Cross girl is gay, magical creature. You can lock her out of your forward area battlefields, but not out of your heart."¹⁸² These women needed to be clever and, as described, had stories to match that of a combat veteran, highlighting that they were not separate from the war. The use of the word 'creature' suggests that they are something other than human. Their ability to work in a warzone while maintaining a bright outlook is what could make them seem otherworldly.

¹⁷⁹ Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 38.

¹⁸⁰ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 65.

¹⁸¹ Heather Stur. "Perfume and lipstick in the boonies: Red Cross SRAO and the Vietnam War." *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, Vol 1, No 2, 2008, 156.

¹⁸² Nancy Smoyer, *Donut Dollies in Vietnam: Baby-Blue Dresses and OD Green* (Chopper Books, 2017), 4-5.

The paradoxes of having the Donut Dollies in Vietnam become increasingly apparent with further examination. Stur wrote on some of these, stating that they were “unarmed because they were civilian women, yet deployed to combat zones to do the women’s work of boosting troop morale, donut dollies were put in harm’s way even though they were supposed to be protected.”¹⁸³ Donut Dollies were sent to be a distraction from the war, yet were in an environment where the war could not be ignored. Their safety was put at risk and Donut Dollies adapted to their chaotic work life. Most Donut Dollies noted the chaotic life they led while in Vietnam. Donut Dolly Cindy Randolph noted that it was the incongruities that made Vietnam so crazy for her: “you could be sitting at a general’s dinner table having this fantastic meal and then, the next day, be up to your waist in mud trying to program.”¹⁸⁴ Much like how the women were sent to Vietnam to play games with the men, they were still intelligent young women who all held college degrees and who must have shown emotional stability, good physical skills, and the ability to work under pressure simple just to have met the standards of the program.¹⁸⁵ The number of times these women were put in physical, psychological, and emotional harm is numerous. Yet these women minimised the dangers, with Cherie Rankin explained it was just in “the course of doing your job.”¹⁸⁶ Much like nurses Donut Dollies distanced themselves from the reality of their situation.

To become a Donut Dollie, women had to be college graduates between the ages of 21 to 24. They had to have the permission of their parents to go to Vietnam.¹⁸⁷ These women were highly educated and aware of the tensions surrounding the Vietnam War. Donut Dollies were to be an image of purity and a reminder of home for the American troops. Although the Red Cross reached out to colleges, the Nation Council of Negro Women, the African American employment agencies and the Urban League, there was only one African American Donut Dolly stationed in Vietnam by 1968.¹⁸⁸ Religion appears to have played

¹⁸³ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 89.

¹⁸⁴ Cindy Randolph, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 241.

¹⁸⁵ Orientation Notebook and Employment Documents of Jennifer Young Beginning with her Tour with the American Red Cross in Vietnam, 08 November 1968, Folder 16, Box 01, Jennifer Young Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 03 Apr. 2018, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=16450116001>

¹⁸⁶ Cherie Rankin, in Marshall, 72.

¹⁸⁷ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 66.

¹⁸⁸ Stur, 100

little, if any part, in recruitment. While dog tags were printed with the religion of the wearer, no records of prejudice against certain religions can be found.

Donut Dollies were to represent the purity of America. Penni Evans, an SRAO volunteer, stated that they were to be “non-sexual symbols of purity and goodness.”¹⁸⁹ They were to be an innocent symbol of America, a reminder of what needed to be protected. In a poem written by Fran Jokubaitis the SRAO is “a work that’s always cheery, a smile that’s ever bright, these are the tools of SRAO, we use to win the fight.”¹⁹⁰ She continues: “Our goal must ever be, to bring a touch of stateside, to the men who fight to free. Their mission cannot waver, now ours whose task is clear, to help them hold “Old Glory” high, and give them pride to bear.”¹⁹¹ This poem highlights the intentions of the SRAO program. The SRAO volunteers were to be a reminder of what the troops were fighting for. This reflects past ideas of women supporting the troops without having to be involved in the war.

The SRAO women reflect the idea that women would support the men involved in the war but would not participate in the war. Rosemary Thunder Schwoebel, a former SRAO volunteer, recalls having to complete a fourteen-page application, after which she flew to Washington, DC, to do a full day interview involving several people.¹⁹² It appears that being the ‘girl next door’ required in depth interviews and security checks. This shows that while they were looking for reminders of innocence, the Red Cross needed to make sure that these women would be able to withstand the stress of a war. Finally, after an FBI background check, Schwoebel was accepted into the program. Schwoebel then underwent a series of inoculations including typhoid, yellow fever, gamma globulin, typhus, cholera, and bubonic plague.¹⁹³ The training for Vietnam was limited to information on other services provided by the Red Cross and history on the involvement of the Red Cross in previous wars and peacetime. Schwoebel made the comment that while they were told what they would

¹⁸⁹ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 79.

¹⁹⁰ A Poem for Jennifer Young from Fran Jokubaitis, No Date, Folder 15, Box 01, Jennifer Young Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 24 Oct. 2017, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=16450115005>.

¹⁹¹ A Poem for Jennifer Young from Fran Jokubaitis, No Date, Folder 15, Box 01, Jennifer Young Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 24 Oct. 2017, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=16450115005>

¹⁹² Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 4.

¹⁹³ Schwoebel, 4.

be doing in Vietnam, the “training would be on the job.”¹⁹⁴ While there was an in-depth recruitment process, there was no training that would be helpful to the Donut Dollies, creating a schism between reality and the romanticised version of the Donut Dollies.

The World War II nickname of Donut Dolly followed SRAO volunteers to the Vietnam War, their responsibilities changed dramatically. While serving food and drinks was still a main job that the women did, they did more than that. The Donut Dollies were an escape from the war. Billy Dabel, a soldier who served in Vietnam during 1969, said that the Donut Dollies created an illusion: “It was as if the war was black and white, but when the Dollies came, it suddenly turned to colour.”¹⁹⁵ Going from black and white to colour demonstrates the polarisation of these women in the war. The job they had revealed a stereotypical feminine role of women during times of crisis, one of a caregiver. Women have long been considered gentle and compassionate, which was a key aspect of the Donut Dollies. Unlike the nurses who often wore army fatigues and blended, to an extent, into the army, the Donut Dollies wore baby blue dresses complete with makeup and heels. The Donut Dollies created a contrast from the mud and jungle; they brought the sense of the ‘girl next door’ that many enlisted men were missing.

Uniforms for the SRAO women were generally more practical than those of the military nurses. Donut Dollies wore a light blue A-line dress that stood out against the blue and brown landscape of Vietnam. Unlike the nurses, the Donut Dollies’ uniforms were suitable for their job, whereas the nurses’ uniforms were impractical for what was required of them. According to Red Cross regulations the uniform was not intended to fit in a “high style” fashion, in that it should not be tight or short.¹⁹⁶ For the Vietnam-bound women they were required to have two scarves that would match the dress.¹⁹⁷ SRAO women were expected to look the part of a sister, a mother, or a girlfriend. Donut Dollies were a form of escapism for the men and needed to look the part. Schwoebel recalls that some of the rules on

¹⁹⁴ Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 4.

¹⁹⁵ "Hello Dollies! | Historynet". 2011. *Historynet*. Accessed November 8, 2017. <http://www.historynet.com/hello-dollies.htm>

¹⁹⁶ SRAO Service and Induction and Orientation to The American National Red Cross, 08 November 1968, Folder 16, Box 01, Jennifer Young Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. PDF 2, Accessed 24 Oct. 2017, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=16450116036>, 3.

¹⁹⁷ SRAO Service and Induction and Orientation, 4.

appearance and uniform were rather pedantic, including that if they had long hair it had to be neatly worn up.¹⁹⁸ However, Schwoebel states that she hardly ever tied up her hair as whenever she did she looked like a scarecrow, with hair sticking out messily, due to the wind from travelling in helicopters. Schwoebel compromised and tied her hair to the back or the side.¹⁹⁹ The uniforms given to the Donut Dollies were traditionally feminine and designed to stand out from the brown and green colours of Vietnam and the military. These uniforms demonstrate that Donut Dollies were to be a form of escapism for the men and give a visual break from the war.

Routine working days for SRAO volunteers were rare. SRAO volunteers had two types of routines: they could work on base in recreation centres and visit hospitals or go on clubmobile trips. These trips meant going out to remote military bases to entertain the troops. Often Donut Dollies recall working long and tiring days that rarely had routine to them. Nancy Olsen Hewitt recalls that

every day was different and we had to be flexible with our schedules because of weather and transportation... Our day was comprised of planning for activities in the center, staffing the center, greeting our guests, making props for our clubmobile runs, flying to firebases, or riding in a jeep or truck to go to another base, visiting the hospitals, serving lunch in a mess hall, waiting for a chopper to come pick us up.²⁰⁰

Donut Dollies also had to be prepared that trips to other bases could be cancelled at short notice as they were not allowed to travel to bases under attack or on high alert. Eileen O'Neill describes working in the recreation centre in Da Nang as a few girls that would be "putting on pool or pingpong tournaments, playing cards or other games with the guys, or just talking."²⁰¹ Simple games could provide a quiet escape from the war. Having a chaotic

¹⁹⁸ Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 20.

¹⁹⁹ Schwoebel, 20.

²⁰⁰ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Nancy Olsen Hewitt". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-nancy-olsen-hewitt/>.

²⁰¹ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Eileen O'Neill". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-eileen-oneill/>.

daily routine of flying or driving to various bases meant that they also welcomed the games they played with the men.

The recreation centres and clubmobile units were intended to reach as many enlisted men as possible. They were to provide an escape and a distraction, from the war around them and to boost the morale of the men. Whether it meant playing games that made the men smile, serving food with a smile at meal times, or simply talking to the men, the Donut Dollies attempted to create escape from the war. Agnes Fortune says that they were “just making it better for those who were there.”²⁰² Donut Dollies used their stereotypical femininity, their caring and emotional side, to help ease the distress of the men. They acted as sisters and friends while playing games, bringing part of America to Vietnam. Joann Kotcher recalls that the simple things in their femininity helped the men:

I took a moment to fix a broken fingernail with the diamond nail file my mother had sent me. The crew chief behind me sat casually, one arm draped across his machine gun, and watched me. He didn't try to conceal his smile. “Wow. That's something. Here you are filing your nails, and the jungle is down below.”²⁰³

Simple acts of domesticity reveal the impact the Donut Dollies had on soldiers. This also serves as a reminder that the Donut Dollies worked among the dangers of Vietnam, whether travelling in helicopters or working out at fire bases.

Playing games and organising activities with the troops was the heart of the work that SRAO volunteers did. Occasionally Donut Dollies would organise special events. One example was the organisation of a carnival. The Donut Dollies organised several events including a ring-toss and a throw-a-baseball game.²⁰⁴ Events like these were challenging because of the lack of staff, the carnival was organised and run by only three Donut Dollies. Joann Kotcher, a Donut Dolly who visited multiple bases, recalls that the most popular activity was a talent

²⁰² "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Agnes Fortune". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed November 5, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-red-cross-donut-dollie-agnes-fortune/>.

²⁰³ Joann Puffer Kotcher, *Donut Dolly: An American Red Cross Girl's War in Vietnam* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2011), 80.

²⁰⁴ Kotcher, *Donut Dolly*, 124.

show.²⁰⁵ Events such as the carnival were often done on special occasions and the activities were usually games, trivia and activities that could be easily transported from base to base. The programs lasted from forty-five minutes to an hour and were different every week. Having trivia style programs worked well with the time constraint and meant that there were no major props needed for the program. These programs aimed to help give a break from the war and give the men a reminder of home as if they were back home playing games with their family.

Trivia style programs were often based around American television quiz shows including, 'The Price is Right,' 'Psychodelic Concentration,' and 'TV Trivia.'²⁰⁶ The questions in trivia programs would always be based around American cities, states, historical events, and sporting events. SRAO women were there to act as a reminder of home, and therefore their programs needed to act as a reminder as well. Examples of these questions were naming American cities through clues such as, "A fox's cave plus a French word," with the answer being "Denver". Other question types were naming nicknames of popular cities, listing all the states on a map, and questions on state capitals.²⁰⁷ Basing questions on American TV shows helped remind the men of home. Back in America the men might have watched these shows with family, and by playing them in Vietnam it served as a reminder of the 'good' things in their life. Escapism in the form of games and quizzes reveal the impact of the Donut Dollies and reveals how much research and time was spent in creating the games which was the Donut Dollies form of escapism.

Having an American woman playing trivia games represented the America that many of the men would have grown up in. It brought up ideas of the typical family life in the form of games. Enloe writes that "if women can be made to play the role of wives, daughters, mothers, and 'sweethearts,'... *then* women can be an invaluable resource to

²⁰⁵ Kotcher, *Donut Dolly*, 138.

²⁰⁶ The American Magazine - Volume 1, Number 1, 23 January 1942, Folder 01, Box 01, Harold Lutz Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 24 Oct. 2017, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=22620101008>

²⁰⁷ Red Cross Donut Dolly Activity - U.S. State and State Capital Quizzes and Answers, No Date, Folder 02, Box 01, Janet Olson Fortune Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 09 Aug. 2017, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=11000102002>

commanders.”²⁰⁸ Donut Dollies were invaluable as they helped the men remember home, remember the ones they loved and what they were fighting for. The roles Donut Dollies played were supported by the military despite the military not being supportive of women being in combat zones.

Certain games had more of an impact than others, and Donut Dollies needed to have more physical games to help engage the men. Cherie Rankin, an SRAO volunteer based in Da Nang, Cam Ranh and Phan Rang, recalls one game that was always effective:

One of the main games we’d do with them was slamboard. You’d divide the guys into teams. . . And then you and the woman you were programming with would ask a question and the guys would have to find the answer on the card. Then they’d run up to the board and slam it on. The first team to get up there got the point, you know. . . They’d get so into the energy of the game they’d forget everything else and be tearing up to that board. The boards, as you can imagine, had to be helicopterproof, bulletproof, and especially menproof. Those guys would come flying up to those boards, hit them with all their weight. They really were getting all their aggression and stuff out, you know.²⁰⁹

The games that the SRAO women played often involved the men getting involved in a competitive way. The men would be getting their aggression out through these games. Donut Dollies helped the men emotionally, they helped with the anger and boredom by playing engaging games, and they helped with sadness and frustration by talking to them. To soldiers the Donut Dollies were sweet reminders of home, but also allowed for the men to let their aggression out in physical competition games. The types of games they played were a type of escapism, where those playing and even the Donut Dollies themselves could focus on the game at hand rather than the war.

²⁰⁸ Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?* 5.

²⁰⁹ Cherie Rankin, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 71.

Visits to various units did not always mean programming; sometimes the women showed up to simply serve food or to listen to the men. Men did not care what they did; just that they were there was enough. Jeanne Christie, who served in 1967 and 1968, noted that:

when we were out in the field the men loved anything we did. For instance, when we went into the LZs the guys would sit on the hill or whatever and watch us in total awe. Some of them would flock to you and talk as fast as they could; others couldn't say a thing. But all of them would stare.²¹⁰

Donut Dollies became the centre of attention, as men wanted to spend time with an American girl and get a reminder of home and safety. Seeing an American woman in a blue dress walking across a fire base would have come to a shock for many men.

Despite no Donut Dollies dying from enemy attacks, they were exposed to danger, especially during base visits. Joann Puffer Kotcher, a Donut Dolly who served in An Khe in Vietnam explains how she and others dealt with their new type of workplace:

we knew we had to get accustomed to a dangerous workplace. The only way to survive was to adapt to its demands, or leave it. Since we all had a strong sense of duty, we learned that booms, fizzes, bangs, hisses, and pops meant specific problems. We accepted their warnings and went on with our job.²¹¹

Learning the sounds of incoming and outgoing fire meant that specific noises had meanings. Booms and swishes meant incoming fire, while a swish then a boom meant it was outgoing. Being able to identify these noises meant that the Donut Dollies could cope better while waiting in bunkers or under their cots. It was necessary to survive the stress of working in a war zone. Understanding the noises of incoming and outgoing fire again highlights how much these women had integrated with military lifestyle.

²¹⁰ Jeanne Christie, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 177.

²¹¹ Kotcher, *Donut Dolly*, 54.

Distracting themselves from the danger surrounding them was important to keeping their morale up. Kotcher states that they would make conversations during attacks in attempts to take their mind off the attack.²¹² Jeanne Christie made comment on her safety during her time in Vietnam, “things changed rapidly and counting the bullet holes became a joke.”²¹³ Agnes Fortune recalls that a helicopter she was in was shot down, but luckily the pilot managed to land safely at a base camp.²¹⁴ Fortune recalls other close calls including being shot at while riding in a jeep and being near rocket attacks while working in the field.²¹⁵ This demonstrate the polarising position they were put in. Donut Dollies were sent to Vietnam to act as morale boosters, yet they were frequently exposed to the dangers of a war.

Working in basic facilities meant that other challenges arose. Schwoebel recalls that while working at the 85th Evacuation base she came prepared with a bag in case of having to use the toilet. Schwoebel asked if there were any closed latrines on the base and she was told no. Schwoebel then had to use the plastic bag she brought with her.²¹⁶ Schwoebel also recalls that when visiting “Tanker Valley” they were rushed out to a new “powder room” they had just finished building and they were excited for a real American girl to use it.²¹⁷ Private latrines that women could use were a rare luxury in Vietnam. Just as nurses struggled with bathroom facilities, there were no facilities for the Donut Dollies either as it was widely believed that no women would be staying in fire bases or other military bases.

There are accounts of the living conditions being relatively well equipped for the women, but it became challenging while out working on various fire bases and camps. Schwoebel recalls that latrines at firebases were open-air, but luckily, she never had to use one. Schwoebel states that the key to avoid using the toilets was to sweat so much that all the water they drank was used to sweat rather than to have to go to the bathroom.²¹⁸ Keeping up the look of a Donut Dolly was demanding in the conditions they worked in. Gusts from

²¹² Kotcher, *Donut Dolly*, 54.

²¹³ Jeanne Christie, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 176.

²¹⁴ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Agnes Fortune". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed November 5, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-red-cross-donut-dollie-agnes-fortune/>.

²¹⁵ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Agnes Fortune". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed November 5, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-red-cross-donut-dollie-agnes-fortune/>.

²¹⁶ Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 103.

²¹⁷ Schwoebel, 36.

²¹⁸ Schwoebel, 119.

the helicopters made having pristine hair almost impossible, blushed cheeks were covered in dirt and dust, and perfume was often overpowered by long days of sweat in the hot and humid weather. Despite these conditions the Donut Dollies persisted in trying to maintain a sense of normalcy.

Working in Vietnam as a non-combatant has its own problems and can reveal polarising feelings that Donut Dollies had. They were to be reminders of domesticity to the men, and that meant they did not have a way to release their own anger and frustrations at times.

Judy Jenkins recalls that in Vietnam the Donut Dollies were

noncombatants in a place where we could have gotten killed just as easily as the men. Only we couldn't shoot back. We never had a chance. So what do you do with all your fear and anger? You internalize it. You just absorb it. Because you have a job to do, and that job involves taking care of people.²¹⁹

Jenkins' statement shows the paradoxical position that the Donut Dollies found themselves in during the war. They were placed in a war zone with the sole intention of caring for, and boosting the morale of, enlisted men serving in the South. By keeping their identity of the 'girl next door' and being a civilian in a war zone they were open to being in the line of fire. They had to adjust to gunfire, riding helicopters to landing zones, and managing to suppress their own personal emotions to survive. Finding their own sense of normality while in Vietnam was difficult to do, so many focused on their job.

Travelling between bases was a large part of their job. The SRAO women travelled more than 27,000 miles each month to various bases around South Vietnam.²²⁰ Donut Dollies travelled by helicopter, jeeps and trucks to reach the bases. The women who were allocated to clubmobile units travelled almost every day of the week to meet soldiers out in the field. Travelling to fire bases also meant an increased risk of being caught in a cross fire. Donut

²¹⁹ Judy Jenkins quoted in Renny Christopher, "' I never really became a woman veteran until. . . I saw the Wall": A review of Oral Histories and Personal Narratives by women veterans of the War,' *Vietnam Generation*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1989, 38.

²²⁰ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 66.

Dollies travelled to various bases by various means of transport, yet the nurses stationed at Cu Chi were not allowed to be in convoys due to the immediate danger from mines and ambushes.²²¹ It seems that the safety of the Donut Dollies was not always considered. Rankin recalls how she and one other woman had been dropped by helicopter into the middle of the jungle and had to wait for the men to come and get them. On the way to the base they were attacked by enemy fire.²²² According to regulations Donut Dollies were only supposed to go to a base if it had been secured and cleared, and Rankin makes comment on how they should not have really been there at all.²²³ Cases like this show that the rules put in place to keep these women safe during the war were not always followed, and that the idea that these women could be truly safe in a warzone was naive. Donut Dollies visited combat zones daily while doing their job and minimized their fears about being in danger.

While Donut Dollies often encountered danger while travelling, either due to enemy attacks or accidents, they often dismissed or minimised it. The dismissive nature of the danger they encountered is likely another form of escapism. Schwoebel recalls that while flying to a base the helicopter pilot started low-levelling along the road of a village and ended up with the rotor blade hitting a truck on the road. Schwoebel recalls that it was common knowledge that if the blade hit the ground the helicopter would most likely explode. Luckily the pilot managed to correct the course of the helicopter long enough for Schwoebel and her working partner to jump out of the helicopter when it got close enough to the ground.²²⁴ Out of the event both Schwoebel and her partner received a bracelet made from a Huey helicopter tail rotor chain. These bracelets were normally only worn by the men who had been involved in helicopter accidents, but the two Donut Dollies were given them since they had indeed been in a helicopter accident.²²⁵ These bracelets show that the idea that these women were kept safe during war is incorrect. Not only this but it also illuminates small ways in which Donut Dollies were welcomed into a masculine world, receiving a gift that was generally reserved for men. Travelling showed a paradox within the war, the military

²²¹ Connie L. Reeves, "Invisible Soldiers: Military Nurses," Francine D'Amico and Laurie Weinstein, ed, *Gender Camouflage: Women and the U.S. Military* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 22.

²²² Rankin in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 67.

²²³ Rankin in Marshall, 67.

²²⁴ Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 44.

²²⁵ Schwoebel, 46.

needed the women to help the men, but they did not want women put in a position of danger. Women did not belong in combat zones, or dangerous areas at all in a war, yet there they were; handing out drinks and smiling.

The main goal of the Donut Dollies was to be a temporary distraction to the men from the war around them. This meant that Donut Dollies had to always smile. Jeanne Christie recalls that while the job was difficult at times,

you did the best you could and if the Donut Dollie you were working with, fell apart, you did the best to pull it all back together. We learned to make jokes, laugh at ourselves, take a deeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep breath, gather composure and smile!²²⁶

Smiling became a key part of the job. Christie commented that the mood of a Donut Dolly impacted that of the men. “We learned that our composure helped their composure. If you could get someone to laugh, then they couldn’t cry.”²²⁷ Donut Dollies were a form of escapism for the men but being Donut Dollies became the women’s form of escapism. By smiling and playing games they could ignore the war going on around them. Learning to read the atmosphere and the moods of the men was important to how they would approach the men.

Donut Dollies would occasionally visit hospitals, which was a mixed bag of emotions. Eileen O’Neill remembers that “it was much more difficult if the guys were badly hurt; we tried to keep our smiles on, but it would be difficult. We just tried to let them know that we cared, without letting any tears slip out.”²²⁸ Rosemary Schwoebel recalls that working as a Donut Dolly was “much more than a job; it was a 24/7 way of life.”²²⁹ Schwoebel’s comment is similar to how many nurses adapted. Donut Dollies became a symbol of relief, on or off duty, and needed to keep up the look of a Donut Dollie. Much like nurses Donut Dollies

²²⁶ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Jeanne "Sam" Bokina Christie". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-jeanne-sam-bokina-christie/>.

²²⁷ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Jeanne "Sam" Bokina Christie". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-jeanne-sam-bokina-christie/>.

²²⁸ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Eileen O’Neill". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-eileen-oneill/>.

²²⁹ Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 5.

could not break down, if not for themselves but for the men. Both nurses and Donut Dollies felt like they needed to be smiling for the men in hopes that a smile might bring them comfort. Keeping their act together and smiling was also part of escaping the war.

Donut Dollies were to be a genuine, happy and innocent reminder of home. However, during the war that idea dissolved and while they could still put on an act and a smile, it was hiding the women underneath who had been exposed to some of the dangers of a war. Smiling, as Kotcher remembers, was all that was needed sometimes to brighten the day of the men, "all we had to do was smile while we handed them some dessert or gave them some bread."²³⁰ A smile became part of their uniform just as much as the dresses and lipstick were. Seeing a smiling woman was a reminder of home. It was a simple gesture that gave the men an escape from the war, the illusion of normalcy.

The main response to the SRAO volunteers was positive. However, there were cases where enlisted men felt uncomfortable with the women. Many Donut Dollies felt like as long as they could get the men to smile they had in some way done their job. A moment of relief from the war was what the purpose of the SRAO was founded to do. Kotcher recalls that their presence and programs did not always work:

The first thing I always did with a group of soldiers was smile. That was all it usually took to lighten them up. I smiled. They didn't smile back. In training we had been taught how to catch a man's eye and smile. I tried that. One man gave me a half-hearted smile. No one else responded. They were stressed. That wasn't going to work. I got out my diamond nail file and filed my nails, the feminine gesture that had delighted the door gunner on the way to Buon Blech. The magic failed. . . Nothing worked. Instead of smiling I realized that it would be better just to look pleasant. I settled back and tried to relax. They knew I appreciated how they felt.²³¹

Kotcher recalls that sometimes escapism did not work, and that the reality of the war was too much for the men. When this happened, when nail files and smiles were not enough,

²³⁰ Kotcher, *Donut Dolly*, 45.

²³¹ Kotcher, 112.

Donut Dollies learnt to become a comforting, but discreet, presence. When the men could not handle being happy sometimes just being there for the men was what was needed.

Making the men smile was not always easy. Susan McLean recalls that the men she worked with either hated or loved the Donut Dollies. McLean felt like the men thought they were “teasing them, or we reminded them of home and they didn’t want to think of home, or they would say that we were just there for the officers.”²³² Eileen O’Neill has some similar memories of men being frustrated with the Donut Dollies as they were women they could look at but not touch or date.²³³ Linda Wilson, another Donut Dollie, recalled a similar feeling when visiting some men. Wilson felt like the men would emotionally shut down and that “to have two American females drop out of the sky in a helicopter and play these silly games” was overwhelming and too contrasting from the war for the men to handle.²³⁴ Whether it was due to sexual tensions or emotional wounds for some men, the Donut Dollies represented a world they did not live in or have access to anymore. While Donut Dollies were accepted overall, there were of course exceptions.

The Donut Dollies brought with them connotations of traditional feminine roles and care. They served food and played games, however they also offered their time to simply listen to soldiers if they needed it. This idea is confirmed in the writings of several Donut Dollies and in the writings of historians who have explored this idea, such as Stur. Stur writes that the Donut Dollies “participated in the Vietnam War effort without openly disrupting the masculine character of combat or challenging the gender roles that Cold War-era culture had prescribed for them. Because the Donut Dolly image was based on the suburban domestic ideal, embodied in the “girl next door,” the SRAO program enforced the gender stereotypes that formed the basis for both Cold War domesticity and foreign policy.”²³⁵ While arguments such as these are true, there is more to it than that. Often ideas on how something should play out and the reality are different. The same goes for the Donut Dollies.

²³² Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 85.

²³³ Stur, 79.

²³⁴ Stur, 79.

²³⁵ Stur, 67.

While the Donut Dollies portrayed stereotypical gender roles of a caring mother, sister or friend, they were also challenging them as they avoided marriage and motherhood back in America. At the same time, they embraced their femininity. They worked in combat zones and delaying their own domestic lives back in America. Gender roles in Vietnam were complex. Emily Strange, a Donut Dolly, wrote a poem about the job description of a Donut Dolly: "It was my calling to take away fear and replace it with hope, to return sanity to a world gone insane."²³⁶ Strange writing that she replaced fear with hope shows how Donut Dollies were used as escapism. The Donut Dollies themselves used their jobs to replace their own fears about being in a war zone with the hope that they were helping the men. Donut Dollies were to create a distraction from the world and return normalcy to a war zone.

Donut Dollies managed to keep a sense of traditional femininity in Vietnam, but they also created a series of paradoxes and contradictions by working in and near combat areas. Sheila Otto Rosenberg comments on how the women involved with the SRAO program were not the average American girl. Rather, they were women who were "part of a new generation of women who wanted adventure, more freedom, recognition, and authority."²³⁷ These were women who were growing up and living in a time where gender norms were beginning to be challenged and change.

While the impact the Donut Dollies, much like the role of nurses, had on the women's movement has yet to be studied one Donut Dolly, Sherry Giles Cozzalio Taylor, believes that they did impact the women's movement: "we were pretty radical. We went to war – a very unpopular war – to support our country and the guys who answered the call to serve. We were young, independent women who were at the forefront of the women's movement. We made a difference."²³⁸ Taylor demonstrates that they were in a conflicting position where they volunteered to go to Vietnam and work near combat, yet they were there to

²³⁶ Poem: 'Job Description,' "Donut Dollie: Emily Strange". 2014. *Memoirsfromnam.Blogspot.Co.Nz*. Accessed November 8, 2017. <http://memoirsfromnam.blogspot.co.nz/2014/04/donut-dollie-emily-strange.html>.

²³⁷ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Sheila Otto Rosenberg". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed December 5, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-sheila-otto-rosenberg/>

²³⁸ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Sherry Giles Cozzalio Taylor". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed December 5, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-sherry-giles-cozzalio-taylor/>

create a form of escapism by playing games and reminding soldiers of home. Donut Dollies volunteered to put themselves at risk in the belief that they were doing what they could to support their country. Donut Dollies did make a significant impact on the women's movement. While this requires further research, it is easy to see how these women, who were travelling between firebases and going into the foxholes and towers, were proving that women could handle war. The very contradictions that the Donut Dollies exhibited showed how they both challenged and conformed to gendered work roles during a war.

Donut Dollies quickly adjusted to working in military environment. As Kotcher recounted, over the course of her time in Vietnam: "I wasn't even really scared. I had dived into bunkers so many times it was part of the routine."²³⁹ Kotcher shows that many became numb to the dangers she encountered. Despite these women having little or no presence in academic literature, they were in Vietnam, in a war. However, there was still a desperate attempt to keep them away from the military and keep them as 'ladies.' Kotcher recalls that during one attack as they went into the bunker: "The female nurses arrived. They had their helmets, flak vest, fatigues, and combat boots. Sandra and I wore short sleeve dresses and loafers."²⁴⁰ Unlike the nurses they were given no protective gear while out working. The only protective gear they were given was back in their rooms. Donut Dollies walked around Vietnam with little protection and ignored the danger they were in, so they could do their jobs.

²³⁹ Kotcher, *Donut Dolly*, 176.

²⁴⁰ Kotcher, 59.

Life Finds a Way

The few sources on the Donut Dollies focus on the work they did rather than their social and personal lives in Vietnam. The personal lives of Donut Dollies reveal just as much about their experiences in Vietnam and highlight their struggles to live in a warzone. Eileen O'Neill remembers that being a Donut Dolly meant that she could never have a "down day" as they had to keep their own feelings hidden to keep the morale of the troops up.²⁴¹ There was little difference between the working and personal lives of the Donut Dollies. Donut Dollies were expected to give escapism and normality to soldiers they met even if they were off duty, such as on weekends or at night. As Rosemary Schwoebel states being a Donut Dolly in Vietnam was more than a job, that it was a "24/7 way of life."²⁴² The focus on their work life is due to Donut Dollies having limited personal time. Even when off duty there was an expectation for the Donut Dollies to be entertainment for the men. While the private and public lives of the Donut Dollies often blurred together, these women still had personal experiences outside of their job.

Vietnam brought about a completely different and new standard of living which the women would have to adjust to, and new experiences, both good and bad, would arise. Such experiences are told by Jeanne Christie who recalls her time in Vietnam:

while in country, I had experienced serious illness, been sexually harassed, experienced a person break into my quarters, and dealt with peeping toms. I even had to deal with being told that my Donut Dollie photos had been found on a captured VC. These challenges and dangers refined my thinking and attitude.²⁴³

Christie highlights the number of dangers she encountered while in Vietnam and notes how they changed her thinking. Vietnam challenged what it meant to be a woman in a war zone,

²⁴¹ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Eileen O'Neill". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-eileen-oneill/>.

²⁴² Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 5.

²⁴³ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Jeanne "Sam" Bokina Christie". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-jeanne-sam-bokina-christie/>.

and how to act in one. Donut Dollies needed their own ways to cope with the challenges presented to them

Academic work on the private lives of Donut Dollies is limited, with Stur's work *Beyond Combat* having the most insight into their living conditions and social lives. The main source of information on this area is from personal memoirs, testimonies, and interviews collected. Specifically, the work done on the previously mentioned *The Donut Dollie Detail* has proved invaluable when researching the lives of these women. Memoirs by former Donut Dollies, Rosemary Thunder Schwoebel, Nancy Smoyer, Joann Puffer Kotcher, and collected interviews by those such as Kathryn Marshall reveal a slowly emerging academic field. The Texas Tech University Vietnam Centre and Archive has a wide range of useful Red Cross documents, but information from Red Cross supervisors or superiors, rulebooks, and official documents is limited. Much of the work has to do with uniforms and job descriptions rather than the actual women.

Living quarters varied for Donut Dollies depending on where they were situated but they often stayed on military bases and similar housing to those of the nurses'. On-base military accommodation ranged from Quonset or wood huts with separate communal bathrooms to air-conditioned trailers with indoor plumbing.²⁴⁴ Military bases that had the air-conditioned trailers were Phu Bai, Cam Ranh Bay, Phan Rang, Binh Thuy, Chu Lai, and Long Binh.²⁴⁵ Donut Dollies had separate living quarters to the men which shows both a desire to keep the Donut Dollies away from the men and to keep them in relatively nice conditions to help keep up their appearance in order to please the men. These trailers housed up to four women and included a kitchen and lounge area. Air-conditioned trailers made putting on makeup, doing their hair, and keeping their clothing clean more manageable. At other areas, like Da Nang, some Donut Dollies stayed rooms above the Army barracks and then shared a lounge with the Special Services and USO women.²⁴⁶ Others stayed in a five-bedroom, two-

²⁴⁴ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 74.

²⁴⁵ Stur, 74

²⁴⁶ Stur, 74

bathroom house which was surrounded by a wall. For those at Bien Hoa they stayed in a twelve-bedroom Quonset hut with an air-conditioned lounge and kitchen.²⁴⁷

Other accommodation included private homes or in hotels. Schwoebel recalls that while stationed near Bien Hoa the Donut Dollies lived in tropical housing where “every girl has her own room. We’ve got indoor plumbing, hot & cold running water but no air conditioning.”²⁴⁸ Schwoebel recalls that while the tropical housing had no air conditioning they used electric fans to deal with the heat.²⁴⁹ This type of housing was on the better end of housing available to women during the war. Schwoebel recalls that this housing even had “a movie theatre, tennis courts, skeet shooting, swimming pool,” and a chapel.²⁵⁰ While this standard of housing is relatively rare to read about it shows how these women lived while serving in Vietnam. It also demonstrates why these women needed to have their own forms of escapism.

The fact that these Donut Dollies had better housing than the nurses shows a divide most likely caused by the purpose of the Donut Dollies, and their separation from the military. Donut Dollies were considered civilians and often had ‘civilian’ housing in comparison to the nurses who were generally always housed in hooches within military bases. Their civilian status highlights a major difference between Donut Dollies and nurses. Nurses stayed on military bases and hardly had such luxuries as pools. Donut Dollies were not required to stay in military bases, making it easier for the women to have personal lives outside of their jobs. Being civilians made it somewhat easier to distract themselves from the war, there were still factors, such as the weather and nearby attacks, that reminded the Donut Dollies that they were in a warzone.

As mentioned beforehand, the seaside village was by far the nicest of the accommodation available to the Donut Dollies. The Donut Dollies had the nicest accommodation available in Vietnam in comparison to military accommodation. The status of civilian mixed with their

²⁴⁷ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 74

²⁴⁸ Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 15.

²⁴⁹ Schwoebel, 15.

²⁵⁰ Schwoebel, 15.

status Donut Dollies is responsible for the favourable living quarters. Donut Dollies were a luxury to the men and were often given special treatment. Separation from the military also allowed the women to disconnect from the war, even if it meant for a few hours. This separation from the war was another luxury given to the Donut Dollies rather than the nurses.

The better living conditions that the Donut Dollies had highlights the heavily ingrained ideas of where and women should and should not be in a war. Donut Dolly Dorothy Patterson recalls that she lived air-conditioned trailers with a fence surrounding the compound with military guards standing outside.²⁵¹ Patterson recalls that her off-duty time was good as she “had everything we needed,” and even had the luxury of steaks and having “marshmallow roasts because my mom sent marshmallows and things along to make s’mores.”²⁵² Having foods from home such as steaks and marshmallows helped give the Donut Dollies a hint of home while in Vietnam. This type of escapism shows that even when off duty Donut Dollies still needed a sense of normality. Their own appreciation for the small things could help them bring that same appreciation to the men they visited.

Military fire bases often did not have the facilities to house women and revealed who the military thought would be staying at fire bases. Occasionally Donut Dollies had to spend the night at a fire base, due to either bad weather or transport issues, which resulted in a scramble to find somewhere for the women to stay. Patterson recalls the Army unit went into

a tizzy because they had to empty a whole barracks for the two of us to stay in because they didn’t have sleeping facilities for females. They didn’t have bathrooms for women, a lot of the bases did not have bathrooms for women, they would just kind of clear the area if we were there and needed to use a bathroom, and stand guard while we went in and used it.²⁵³

²⁵¹ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 75.

²⁵² Stur, 75.

²⁵³ Stur, 75.

Military units were unprepared and unequipped to house women, despite the call by the military to have Donut Dollies in-country. Donut Dollies experiences outside their working life shows a disconnect with the people that brought them to Vietnam. The military wanted the Donut Dollies to give the men a reminder of home, but never thought to make facilities for them. Ordinary functions, such as sleeping and using the bathroom, quickly revealed the gendered beliefs that women did not belong in a war zone.

Finding activities to occupy their time was sometimes a struggle. Some Donut Dollies recall using alcohol and drugs (mostly marijuana) to pass the time and to cope with stress. Cindy Randolph remembers that she knew of several Donut Dollies who did drugs while in Vietnam, “drugs made it easier for them to do what they thought was their job.”²⁵⁴ Randolph’s statement reflects that each Donut Dolly sought her own way to relax, or to cope with the job, much like the nurses did. Cases of drug and alcohol use, while rare due to the lack of memoirs, show the stresses put on the Donut Dollies and their need to find an outlet to relax.

There was an expectation that since the Donut Dollies were not fighting and kept far away from the battles that they would be sheltered from the mental and emotional consequences of the war. However, Donut Dollies were not separate from the war, they were caught in crossfires and attacks frequently. For example, Kotcher recalls that “sometimes the places we thought were the safest were the opposite.”²⁵⁵ Even when relaxing on their day off they still had to be alert for the sound of incoming fire, sirens, and everyday noises around them. Living in Vietnam meant having to be ready to run to the bunker at any second. They did not leave the war behind when they finished work.

Donut Dollies had to care for the men which included the men unloading their own personal problems onto the women. Randolph makes a comment on this by stating “some people believe we got paid just for playing cards, but basically I think I got paid for doing therapy.”²⁵⁶ Since American women, or ‘round eyes,’ were so rare men often projected the

²⁵⁴ Cindy Randolph, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 235.

²⁵⁵ Kotcher, *Donut Dolly*, 227.

²⁵⁶ Randolph, in Marshall, 235.

image of an important female figure in their life and would then talk to them in such a way. Men would confess secrets and talk directly about troubling issues as if the women were there to act as their personal therapist. If men usually went to their mothers or girlfriends to express their concerns or worries, in Vietnam they went to the Donut Dollies. They needed rest so that for the next day they could be as 'peppy' and 'fun' as they needed to be for the men.

Vietnam meant new experiences for the Donut Dollies. Schwoebel recalls that while staying at one base she went "skeet shooting, played tennis, played miniature golf, and motorcycle as a passenger."²⁵⁷ Vietnam offered adventure, and it delivered. Even in the downtime of Donut Dollies they seemed to still be on the job. Schwoebel recalls that while staying at Lai Khe, a relatively small base camp, the Donut Dollies had to make their own fun. Schwoebel recalls that on "Wednesday nights, two of us would act as DJs at the local radio station. Simply announcing the next song was an excellent way to reach the GIs, both in the field and on basecamp, with the voice of an American girl further pushing a reminder of home."²⁵⁸ While this was fun for the women it also brought enjoyment to the men listening. Keeping the men happy, despite being off duty, was a prominent thought for the Donut Dollies. Nurses had similar experiences, feeling like they needed to appease the men despite having little time to relax. Creating normality, or finding forms of escapism, sometimes appeared in the simplest ways. Nancy Smoyer provides a photo of a Donut Dolly sunbathing outside a bunker at Cu Chi.²⁵⁹

Relaxing was a challenge for many Donut Dollies as they were constantly sought after. Donut Dolly Jennifer Young, who served in 1968, reflects on why she believes the men were always seeking them out: "I think they sought sympathy. We could lament and give them our female reaction. Maybe through us they got a small, much needed, female reaffirmation of their self-image. They also could express the sadness of a lost love."²⁶⁰ The need to confide in a woman, like they would to a mother, sister, or close friend, was ever present in

²⁵⁷ Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 40.

²⁵⁸ Schwoebel, 40.

²⁵⁹ Smoyer, *Donut Dollies in Vietnam*, 25.

²⁶⁰ Jennifer Young, in Gruhzt-Hoyt, *A Time Remembered*, 185.

Vietnam. Another Donut Dollie, Linda Sullivan Schulte, confirms this belief recalling that “everyone needed a friend.”²⁶¹ When they were not serving as Donut Dollies, but simply as civilians, they were still sought out for a conversation. Donut Dollies provided a sense of normality to the soldiers. Soldiers could seek out these women and talk to them as if they were back home talking to their sister or mother.

Donut Dollies felt underappreciated at times. A common memory that several Donut Dollies has been when they went to and watched the Bob Hope show. Some, like Mary de la Forest-Evans, watched from a distant fire truck, while others got right up close and personal.²⁶² The Bob Hope show has been mentioned several times by Donut Dollies and is reflective in the way that Donut Dollies were seen and how they saw themselves. Cherie Rankin recalls being asked to help with the show which she states was the “insult of the year.”²⁶³ Rankin, as well as other Donut Dollies, saw themselves as women who were serving in Vietnam, and that they too wanted a chance to be entertained rather than be the entertainment. Rankin recalls walking into the stadium that was

filled with thousands and thousands of guys. And when we Red Cross women walked into the stadium. . . we were still in uniform. . . we got a standing ovation. All the men suddenly stood up and started applauding us – it was just incredible. We were all sobbing.²⁶⁴

Donut Dollies took pride in their job and worked hard to entertain the men. When the chance came for someone to entertain the Donut Dollies for a change it seemed like an insult to ask them to work in the show, rather than to be able to sit and enjoy the show. The response from the men when they entered the stadium clearly shows the admiration for the Donut Dollies from the soldiers. The women were appreciated by the men who understood that they provided a valuable form of escapism.

²⁶¹ Linda Sullivan Schulte, in Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt, *A Time Remembered*, 220.

²⁶² "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Mary De La Forest-Evans". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 25, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-mary-evans/>.

²⁶³ Cherie Rankin, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 76.

²⁶⁴ Rankin, in Marshall, 76

The role of morale boosters and entertainment meant that their workdays were ambiguous. Donut Dollies were never off duty, even on holidays. Holidays, such as Christmas, were classed by many Donut Dollies as a workday. Schwoebel recalls that while it was “an unusual workday of thirteen hours, it is, and will always be, my favorite Christmas.” The goal of the Donut Dollies, at least for the unit Schwoebel was part of, was to reach every military unit possible within the First Infantry Division’s Area of Operations throughout the day.²⁶⁵ Holidays show that being a Donut Dolly meant working 24/7. However, Donut Dollies needed a break too. On Christmas Eve Schwoebel and fellow Donut Dollies dressed up and went to General Talbot’s villa. Bing Crosby Christmas music was playing, waiters “were dressed in white jackets, and tables were covered in white cloths and set with china and silverware.”²⁶⁶ Holidays show the importance of bringing normality, or home, to a war zone. Women were reminders of their mothers, their sisters, girlfriends and female friends. In a male-dominated environment seeing a woman helped to bring them into the illusion of home. Judy Jenkins recalls that she had been “so wrapped up in Christmas I’d forgotten about the war. And I felt those guys needed me. They needed me to make things better.”²⁶⁷ The need to make the men feel better, the feminine touch that the Donut Dollies offered at times, was a needed escape in a war zone.

Being a Donut Dolly meant getting caught in certain stereotypes. Attending parties was an expected part of the job but attending these events could create problems for the Donut Dollies. In a study by Juanita Firestone and Cherylon Robinson they uncovered that conflict was faced when Donut Dollies tried to find a middle ground between their official and unofficial expected role behaviours. Donut Dollies escorted officers to military events, the result being that the women were sometimes accused of coming to Viet Nam to make money as prostitutes.²⁶⁸ Donut Dollies were stereotyped as women who came to Vietnam to make a profit instead to help. Much like the nurses these women experienced some backlash when men assumed that the only logical reason for women to come to Vietnam was to make a profit by sleeping with men.

²⁶⁵ Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 82.

²⁶⁶ Schwoebel, 82.

²⁶⁷ Judy Jenkins, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 133.

²⁶⁸ Juanita Firestone and Cherylon Robinson, “Enacting traditional roles in a non-traditional setting: Women employed by the Red Cross in Viet Nam,” *Sex Roles*, Vol 34, No, 1/2, 1996, 51.

Donut Dollies often ended up being victims to lust and rumours instead of being reminders of what the men were fighting for, the girl next door and the sister and the mother. Aspects of being a Donut Dollies were a contradiction in Vietnam. They needed to be kind to the men but not be flirty, to be innocent but be strong enough to handle life in a warzone. Some men saw them as whores who went to Vietnam only to earn money, while other men viewed the women as a sister or friend and protected them as such. These contradicting aspects resulted in many Donut Dollies focusing on how they presented themselves during their personal time as much as they did during their work time. The relationships the Donut Dollies formed showed how they managed to both conform and challenge the gendered expectations put on them by the Red Cross.

The Donut Dollies were in constant demand and often ended up playing the role of whatever the men needed. When planning projects in their free time they would often be interrupted. Kotcher reveals that the Donut Dollies were under the expectation to always be willing to help, to listen and care for, the men. Donut Dollies often played a mother role, a role that brought a sense of normality to the men. Men could be so desperate for attention from the Donut Dollies that they would find any excuse to talk to one. The men missed home, they missed their girlfriends, their sisters, and their mothers, and the Donut Dollies helped ease their homesickness by offering a form of escapism. As Kotcher mentions earlier she could hardly sit down without an interruption from a man needing to talk or seeking comfort. Donut Dollies were always needed to the support for the men, and hardly received any time off or comfort for themselves.

Living in a war zone presented obvious dangers to the Donut Dollies. While they were often housed outside of military bases there was still a chance their buildings could be attacked, bombed or raided. Terre Deegan-Young believes that the Red Cross was naïve in sending women to Vietnam. When discussing the dangers of Vietnam Deegan-Young states that she had no training in what to do if a dangerous incident happened and had never been around guns in her life. Deegan-Young recalls the only training she received was “how we were supposed to BEHAVE – dress appropriately – not date married men – not curse – Red Cross history – military ranks and what they meant. I do not recall ANYTHING that would have

helped me in these situations.”²⁶⁹ Deegan-Young went into Vietnam unprepared for the dangers of Vietnam. Her statement highlights the widely-held belief that since these women were being sent to Vietnam to support the men, rather than fight in it, that they would somehow be kept separate and safe from the war. However, the Donut Dollies were in fox holes, out at fire bases, and were close to incoming fire. They were expected to be stereotypical delicate women, but they had the mental and emotional strength to survive a warzone. This expectation that they did not need to be informed led to conscious decisions to not prepare them in any sense for the world they were entering.

Enemy attacks on bases were common, and often at night when Donut Dollies were off duty and sleeping. Rosemary Thunder Schwoebel recalls that while she was resting in bed one day at Phu Bai she heard the whine of a rocket to which she

hit the floor before the sound of the explosion, and was back on my feet doing the fifty yard dash before the second rocket came in. With each person arriving breathless in the bunker, applause and cheering erupted. We each won our race! I had run over the gravel barefoot. It was sharp, but I never felt a thing.²⁷⁰

Schwoebel recalling that they each won their own race was a light-hearted way of dealing with the dangers of Vietnam. Simply put, if you lost your race, you died. Adjusting too quickly to the military mindset was a common memory from Donut Dollies. Getting to the bunker in time was more important than the image of a pristine ‘American gal,’ as highlighted by Schwoebel who did not even bother to put on shoes before running to the bunker. Cherie Rankin summarises that “there many, many times when you were physically, emotionally, and psychologically threatened.”²⁷¹ These Donut Dollies were exposed to the dangers of combat and adjusted according, yet when the dust settled they put their smiles back on. Donut Dollies needed to constantly be alert in case of attacks, and much like the nurses even their private lives in Vietnam were shaped by the war happening outside their

²⁶⁹ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Terre Deegan-Young". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed November 27, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-terre-deegan-young-2/>.

²⁷⁰ Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 76.

²⁷¹ Cherie Rankin, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 72.

rooms. There is a polarisation between how Donut Dollies were expected to act and the reality of living in a war zone. Donut Dollies could be playing games or talking to men and a moment later they were diving into a bunker.

Sexual assault and harassment was rarely reported in Vietnam, yet still occurred. Even a man working through the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, (MACV) recalls seeing the Donut Dollies being harassed: “Those cowards didn’t have enough guts to make the cat calls to the Donut Dollies faces. They did it behind their backs. The Donut Dollies never showed their vanity, nor hurt feelings.”²⁷² This implies that not only was harassment done behind their backs, but that when the Donut Dollies found out about it, or were aware of it, they ignored how it made them feel. They were there to be positive, to smile and to do that they had to ignore their own feelings. However, more serious cases of sexual harassment and even sexual assault occurred in Vietnam. Donut Dollies were about boosting the morale of the men, and any negative comments towards them had to be ignored to continue to do their job.

There is a gap in the historiography looking at assault and harassment towards the Donut Dollies. Stur writes that a reason there is so little information on this subject is due to the phrase “date rape” did not exist in the 1960s and the women who were assaulted did not have the words to explain what happened to them. Much like the nurses, Donut Dollies have their own experiences with sexual assault and harassment. Jeanne Christie recalls a frightening encounter:

We did have guys attempt to break into our quarters. In fact, one night I heard the dog bark and yelled at this guy. I didn’t have so much as a popsicle stick, yet I got him to halt and put his hands over his head until the MPs could get there. Situations like that were a total game of bluff.²⁷³

²⁷² MACV ArmyAPhoto Team Films Donut Dollies, No Date, Folder 01, Box 02, William Foulke Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 16 Jul. 2017

<https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=10400201010>

²⁷³ Jeanne Christie, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 181.

Christie's experience suggests that her intruder likely thought there would be no challenge from the Donut Dollie, playing on the image they projected. However, life in Vietnam meant that they needed to be more than the cheerleader image they were told to project. Fending for themselves and having to rely on their own courage appears to be common with stories like these. Donut Dollies needed to become tough to live in Vietnam, and Christie's experience reveals this. They needed to project the image of an innocent American girl while also being strong enough to defend themselves.

Rape and sexual assault was a concern for some Donut Dollies. Donut Dolly Jeanne Christie reflects on rape in during her time in Vietnam saying that it was "a fate worse than death."²⁷⁴ Christie goes on to say: "As a woman in Nam, if you got raped you really had no recourse. The military was very nasty about it, and naturally it was always the woman's fault. In Nam I knew of some of the options that were offered any gal who found herself in a family way. None of them were pleasant, and none of them left the gal with an ounce of self-respect. Since Nam, I've heard of many more women who had that happen to them, and they only confirmed what I knew then."²⁷⁵ When Christie states that the military was 'nasty' about rape she is referring to the idea that if they followed the rules nothing would have happened to them, and then of course the woman must have done something wrong. For military nurses they were automatically discharged if they got pregnant. Several reports from nurses show that they were discouraged from making a complaint if assaulted or raped by a man. A similar process seems to be present for the Donut Dollies. Christie's statement shows how unprepared the Red Cross and military were to have women in warzones and how they believed that women had no place in war. Donut Dollies were in a tough situation of being 'nice' to the men but also protecting themselves from advances they did not want.

Learning how to avoid unwanted attention was part of their lives in Vietnam. Donut Dollies were told to expect various 'advances' from men and "taught to tolerate it."²⁷⁶ The women were given no clear instructions on what to do or how to act in uncomfortable situations. Kotcher recalls her list to dissuade men while off duty: "Keep your distance. Back away if he

²⁷⁴ Jeanne Christie, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 180.

²⁷⁵ Jeanne Christie, in Marshall, 181.

²⁷⁶ Firestone and Robinson, "Enacting traditional roles," 51.

gets too close. Duck if he grabs for you. Don't let him catch your eye. Don't look at him. Pay for his lunch, ouch, you might as well throw a bucket of cold water on him."²⁷⁷ While being friendly while working was fine, Donut Dollies needed to learn how to interact with men while off duty.

Vietnam was a dangerous place for Donut Dollies, and these dangers sometimes came from the American men they were charged with cheering up. Three Donut Dollies died while serving in Vietnam, none from enemy fire. One Donut Dollie, Ginny Kirsch, was murdered by an American soldier in 1977 while she was stationed at Cu Chi.²⁷⁸ Kirsch's death was rare as it was the only death caused by foul play. Hannah Crews died at the 24th Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh in 1969 after sustaining serious injuries in a Jeep accident. Lucinda Richter died in 1971 after medical issues due to the disease Guillain-Barre Syndrome(GBS).²⁷⁹ Reflecting on the murder of Kirsch a fellow Donut Dolly stated that herself, along with other Donut Dollies stationed at Cu Chi, did not process the death fully and that "we were so busy and so out of our element, and it was such a shock just to be there that this was just piling onto the other shocks, and nothing was really being talked about."²⁸⁰ Coping with the pre-existing stress and then the murder of a friend, who was supposedly 'safe' from the war, was too much for many other Donut Dollies and went into a form of shock and ignorance in order to cope. Ignoring the dangers or becoming numb was how these women coped with Vietnam and reflects why they embraced forms of escapism and normalcy.

Strong friendships were formed due to the Donut Dollies working in pairs while working on mobile club units and larger groups in the recreations centres. For Nancy Olsen Hewitt the friendships that she made in Vietnam around half a century ago have lasted to the present day.²⁸¹ Randolph recalls that having strong relationships was key to having a good work day and a good morale within the Donut Dollies: "I had a couple women I worked well with – there would be a lot of impromptu stuff, a lot of going back and forth and teasing, and that

²⁷⁷ Kotcher, *Donut Dolly*, 73.

²⁷⁸ Stur, *Beyond Comat* 95.

²⁷⁹ Kotcher, 191-92.

²⁸⁰ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 95.

²⁸¹ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Nancy Olsen Hewitt". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-nancy-olsen-hewitt/>.

sort of thing would really energize the group.”²⁸² Being in an environment that required the women to give so much of themselves to others, having someone else to bounce off of and have fun with meant that they could find some relief while working. Teri Fisk Hermans shares a similar belief about the friendship between the Donut Dollies: “Many of these women (and their husbands who were vets) are still good friends. We lived together, worked together and had experiences that most women never had.”²⁸³ Spending that much time together meant that incredibly strong relationships were formed.

The friendships made in Vietnam show that just like the men, the Donut Dollies formed strong bonds with each other to cope with their situations. One Donut Dollie recalls:

people were accepted as they were. Rarely did I know – other than where they came from – I rarely knew the backgrounds of these people. It wasn’t important. Just the fact that you were alive was important. Knowing that something could happen to you and you might not be here tomorrow. So you treated people much better over there.²⁸⁴

These unconventional friendships, of only knowing the person as they existed in front of you rather than knowing their whole story, was symbolic of the unconventional role they were put into during the war. The friendships they made were formed out of a war, out of a need to embrace the ‘now’ as tomorrow may never come for some of them. This also displays that in a sense Donut Dollies did not see themselves as separate and safe from the war around them, the reality of the war took its toll on these women.

The friendships and bonds that formed between the Donut Dollies and soldiers was an equally special relationship. Often the men would indeed see them in a domestic lens, seeing them as sisters or as close friends, and would protect them as such. There are multiple accounts where in a dangerous situation, such as a motor attack, the men would

²⁸² Cindy Randolph, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 235.

²⁸³ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Teri Fisk Hermans". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 25, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-teri-fisk-hermans/>

²⁸⁴ Firestone and Robinson, “Enacting traditional roles,” 61.

quite literally throw themselves on top of the Donut Dollies to protect them from any debris or gunfire. Deegan-Young recalls such an event when shots were fired into the group she was with: "one captain threw me and other Donut Dollie down and covered us with a vest."²⁸⁵ Stories of men pulling the Donut Dollies into bunkers or covering them to protect them are common. From these stories it seems that the Red Cross accomplished their mission in making these women like family to the men. The idea that these women represented the 'American girl,' the ones who they were fighting to protect, became literal in Vietnam and became part of the escapism both men and women used to cope with the war.

Death was difficult for the Donut Dollies, much like the nurses. Kotcher reflects stating that she "suffered more than Captain Anderson had. His death was instantaneous, while I was left to dwell on it. Yes, death is sometimes harder for those who remain."²⁸⁶ Maintaining friendships with men was difficult, with some Donut Dollies hesitant to even learn the names of the men in hopes it would make their eventual deaths easier on them. Emily Strange remembers that she stopped learning the names of the soldiers she met in Vietnam after a close friend died in a helicopter.²⁸⁷ Strange could not cope with mourning when she was there to boost the morale of the troops. Whether they dealt with death by accepting it and moving on or suppressing their feelings each Donut Dolly struggled to find a way to deal with death in Vietnam. Much like the nurses they coped in their own ways, some became numb and suppressed their feelings, others minimized the events, and others turned to more extreme measures of escapism like alcohol.

Donut Dollies were well protected by the men they encountered. The protective nature of the men towards the Donut Dollies highlights how much of a positive impact the Donut Dollies had on the men. Several women remember that they were used as substitutes for sisters, reminders of domesticity, which makes the protective nature more understandable. Donut Dollies recall that the men would frequently reprimand their "buddies who behaved

²⁸⁵ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Teri Fisk Hermans". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 25, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-teri-fisk-hermans/>

²⁸⁶ Kotcher, *Donut Dolly*, 239.

²⁸⁷ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 88.

in provocative or rude ways” towards the women.²⁸⁸ Furthermore, the men tried their best to help create as much privacy as possible. When bases did not have closed latrines, separate bedrooms, or similar facilities for women the men would do their best to create any sense of privacy for the women. Whether it was holding up a sheet or creating private areas it reflects the respect they had for the women. The men had plenty of opportunities to be crude or insensitive towards the women, but hardly ever took the opportunity.

The soldiers treated the Donut Dollies with respect and as equals. Schwoebel recalls that one man asked to have a private conversation with her because he was “concerned that he had forgotten how to talk to a woman.”²⁸⁹ Men trusted the women to treat them with the same respect they gave them, on and off duty. Schwoebel also recalls that while out at dinner with a table of men they broke out singing Happy Mother’s Day, the men explained their reasoning to her: “Well, you’re the closest one here to a mother.”²⁹⁰ Similarly, some nurses were referred to as ‘mom.’ The reoccurring domestic role of a mother was adopted by the Donut Dollies and demonstrates how domesticity was applied in a war. The protective way in which some men interacted with the women shows that the goal of the Donut Dollies, to be the ‘girl next door’ and a reminder of domestic America, had been successful.

Donut Dollies were equals with the men, despite their drastically different roles. At a Miss America show in Camp Eagle Schwoebel recalls that “come show time, we were sprinkled among the audience as if we were some of the guys.”²⁹¹ Being ‘one of the guys,’ seemed to be common. Donut Dollies often ate C-rations with the men, brushed their teeth in helmets, and were involved in the military culture just like the men.²⁹² Much like the nurses the Donut Dollies managed to form a bond with the men because they shared similar experiences. Despite being kept separate from military life, Donut Dollies still engaged in military actions such as eating rations and using helmets to brush their teeth.

²⁸⁸ Firestone and Robinson, “Enacting traditional roles,” 54.

²⁸⁹ Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 155.

²⁹⁰ Schwoebel, 156.

²⁹¹ Schwoebel, 135.

²⁹² Cherie Rankin, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 74.

Nurses and Donut Dollies rarely had interactions with each other. There were hints at bitterness towards the Donut Dollies from the nurses. Nancy Warner, a Donut Dollie, states that nurses viewed Donut Dollies as “sunshine girls, whereas nurses were doing painful work,” hinting at the stereotypes put on both groups were believed by the women too.²⁹³ Similarly nurse J. Holley Watts stated: “We need nurses, they send Barbie dolls.”²⁹⁴ The image of Donut Dollies, that of a Barbie doll, appeared to cause tension between the two groups. On reflection nurses said that it was unfortunate that they had a negative view on the Donut Dollies because “they helped pass the time for a lot of our soldiers. Everybody had their role.”²⁹⁵ Donut Dollies did what nurses did not have time for, and nurses did what Donut Dollies could not do.

It was an unspoken rule that the Donut Dollies were not meant to date or be romantically or sexually involved with any enlisted men they met. This was hardly the reality the Donut Dollies lived. Maggie Connor Dutilly recalls that one of her most special moments in Vietnam was when she met her husband.²⁹⁶ In the study by Firestone and Robinson, they wrote that: “Women were frank about their dating and sexual experiences. Respondents spoke of women who were sent home for being pregnant or for involvement with a married man. However, while some women admitted having dated married men, they said they were discrete and their behaviour generally went unnoticed by Red Cross supervisors. Others suggested that the uncertainty and chaos of living in a war zone had the effect of suspending conventional morality.”²⁹⁷ While some were sent home for the mentioned reasons, while information on the subject is incredibly rare, it seems to have gone unnoticed or ignored by supervisors. Finding notes, memos, or information from Red Cross supervisors is almost impossible as little information has been saved. Whether this was due to the chaos of the war or intentional ignorance of superiors it shows that how women act, or rather how they are expected to act, in a war was often allowed to change if in the end their behaviour was beneficial.

²⁹³ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 86.

²⁹⁴ Stur, 86.

²⁹⁵ Stur, 87.

²⁹⁶ "Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Maggie Connor Dutilly". 2017. *THE DONUT DOLLIES*. Accessed October 25, 2017. <http://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-maggie-connor-dutilly/>.

²⁹⁷ Firestone and Robinson, “Enacting traditional roles,” 57.

Being the reminder of home and the domestic ideal meant that even when off-duty there were certain expectations for Donut Dollies and meant that they rarely got any privacy. While it was expected for Donut Dollies not to get romantically or sexually involved with the men in Vietnam, it happened none the less. A lack of privacy meant a lack of true release and separation from the war for the Donut Dollies. Firestone and Robinson found that many Donut Dollies felt like their behaviour “was constantly observed and noted, and left the women with feelings of privacy deprivation, a condition jokingly referred to as “life in a goldfish bowl.””²⁹⁸ There was this unspoken expectation for Donut Dollies to always be ready to help men who wished to talk to them.

Even in relationships privacy was rare. Women often have to be creative so they could have time alone with their boyfriends, with some recalling that “there was a room that we designated as the “passion pit,” and we knew that, when somebody had a date and they wanted to come back, that was their room, and people respected that privacy you kind of had to make appointments.”²⁹⁹ Donut Dollies were a rarity, wherever they went they drew a crowd meaning being alone was a challenge. Kotcher recalls that “if any of us stumbled into romance, the combat zone encouraged us to stumble out of it. There was no chance to be alone.”³⁰⁰ This demonstrates that while relationships happened they were difficult to maintain. Donut Dollies were rarely given any time to be alone, so having a romantic partner was almost impossible. To find a moment's peace was rare. Donut Dollies were expected to be in the public eye all the time, not just on working hours. Donut Dollies represented the Red Cross and needed to be on their best behaviour all the time. This demonstrates how Donut Dollies sacrificed a lot of themselves to do their job.

Finding time simply to sit and reflect was near impossible for the Donut Dollies. The women were always expected to be smiling and interacting with the men. The extent of this can be seen when Schwoebel recalls being in hospital for a mystery fever with another Donut Dollie. Schwoebel recalls that while she was in pain her friend Betsy was not and when

²⁹⁸ Firestone and Robinson, “Enacting traditional roles,” 56.

²⁹⁹ Firestone and Robinson, 55.

³⁰⁰ Kotcher, *Donut Dolly*, 40.

visitors arrived she would keep them entertained as if she was programming to them.³⁰¹ The act of escapism was always active. Despite being in hospital Donut Dollies were expected to be ready and friendly for the men who came to see them. Judy Jenkins has a similar hospital story. While staying in hospital for an intestinal problem she decided against staying in bed and resting and went around talking to the men in the hospital, giving them small gifts such as gum, candy, and cigarettes.³⁰² Even while in hospital these women were trained to put the men first. Privacy was limited to when they needed to sleep, which even then consisted of sharing a room with other Donut Dollies. One could never truly be alone to process the consequences of the war they had seen and hence relied on escapism and normalising their environment to survive.

Donut Dollies had little separation from the war. They worked in it, heard it, smelt it, and lived in it. In a poem by Emily Strange, a Donut Dolly who served at the 9th Infantry Division and Mobile Riverine Force, writes that she was “the mistress of illusion, as I pulled smiles from the dust and heat. The magical genie of “back-in-the-world,” as I created laughter in the mud. But when the show was over I crawled back into my bottle and pulled the cork tightly behind me.”³⁰³ This poem demonstrates how Vietnam created polarising images of Donut Dollies smiling while working in the mud. Furthermore, it shows the escapism Donut Dollies performed. Strange shows that once she was done bringing ‘magic’ to the men she wanted nothing more than to crawl into her genie’s bottle and be left alone. However, as several memoirs and interview reveal, being left alone was hardly common. This poem reflects that while the Donut Dollies genuinely wanted to be there and help the men, it came at a cost. Strange wanted to hide away from the world once her day, or show, was over. Strange writes in the poem “it was my job to perform the miracle of making the war disappear.”³⁰⁴ Strange shows that Donut Dollies were expected to perform miracles, an almost impossible task. This ‘magic’ was another form of escapism. They gave the men a distraction from the war and caring for the men became their distraction from the war.

³⁰¹ Schwoebel, *A Vietnam Memoir*, 104.

³⁰² Judy Jenkins, in Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 133.

³⁰³ Emily Strange, “Job Description: Donut Dolly,” <http://memoirsfromnam.blogspot.co.nz/2014/04/donut-dollie-emily-strange.html>, accessed 11/12/2017.

³⁰⁴ Emily Strange, “Job Description.”

Donut Dollies always had to be smiling, polite and kind. To believe that they could do this constantly is the realities of their lives and of the emotional toll cause by working in a war zone with men who desperately needed an escape from the war. Yet the work of the Donut Dollies was never confined to a set of work hours, for even in their free time they were expected to be reminders of home, and to care for the men even off hours. Donut Dollies were symbols of the traditional gender role of women as caregivers and emotional tethers. One Donut Dolly recalls that a man asked if he could talk to her, so she took him “over to the Club, and he talked an hour about his crash.”³⁰⁵ For the men, the Donut Dollies did represent important female roles from America, and whether they were talking to them as a mother, a sister, or a friend, the men needed to talk to someone they could be emotional with and get a motherly-like comfort from.

Being feminine was a key part of being a Donut Dollie. This was not due to a desire to reinforce gendered roles, but rather that it was what the men, and themselves, needed and helped to distract from the war. Kotcher recalls the joy men got out of seeing her file her nails or her fix her lipstick.³⁰⁶ These women were college educated and breaking against the traditional gendered role of getting married and having a family simply by volunteering to go to Vietnam. Their decisions to be feminine, to be constantly checking their appearance was not done out of vanity or being told to look a certain way, but rather out of the need to do their best in create an escape. Kotcher states that at times she worried about how she looked instead of the danger surrounding her.³⁰⁷ Her job was to create a distraction from the war for the men, and ultimately and escape for herself.

³⁰⁵ Firestone and Robinson, “Enacting traditional roles,” 53.

³⁰⁶ Kotcher, *Donut Dolly*, 80.

³⁰⁷ Kotcher, 82.

Conclusion

The experiences of women who served in the Vietnam War have been largely overlooked. Whether they worked in hospitals or in recreational centres these women worked tirelessly during their time in Vietnam. From incoming enemy fire to movie nights, nurses and Donut Dollies experienced Vietnam through several contradictions. They expected to be protected from the war but were frequently running to bunkers and worked while under attack. Nurses worked hard for hours, sometimes days on end, in attempts to save lives; Donut Dollies travelled around various bases in South Vietnam attempting to relieve the sombre nature of the war. The experiences uncovered by examining various memoirs, interviews, and archival evidence, highlight a side of the Vietnam War that is rarely seen.

Escapism and creating normalcy within a war was how many nurses and Donut Dollies coped with the war. By focusing all their energy into their work, nurses made their chaotic and challenging work normal. Donut Dollies too focused on their work as a form of escapism. In the process of putting all their time into creating games that would distract the men from the war, they too found a distraction from the war. Creating emotional distance between themselves and their work was a necessary coping mechanism that helped to create the illusion that this was a normal day for them. Both groups found that they had a duality in their roles. They were expected to do their jobs to the best of their ability which meant they had to sacrifice some of their femininity, whether this came in the form of their uniforms or going out to fire bases, but at the same time were expected to stay within the boundaries of traditional domestic femininity.

Many of the forms of escapism equated to the domestic feminine norms in America. By painting their nails, doing their hair, and wearing perfume demonstrates how their escapism reflects how they fit into two categories of femininity, that of the domestic femininity and war femininity. Women did not comfortably fit into war femininity, but this expected as it was defined by men. With war being traditionally masculine they found themselves

comfortably fitting into their escapism which reflected traditional domestic femininity. War femininity revealed how the working and personal lives of women, such as nurses and Donut Dollies, were combined to make a new type of femininity.

Nurses experiences are becoming more documented, but still limited. While historians such as Stur and Vuic have given valuable insight into the working lives of nurses in Vietnam, their personal lives and relationships are still relatively unknown. Nurses held complex relationships with the men they encountered. Nurses had various types of relationships with the men, from friends and brothers, to platonic comfort and lovers. These relationships are worthy of future analysis. These women were put in a challenging position of being expected to save as many lives as possible while still staying 'feminine.' As this thesis shows, it was almost impossible to live up to the military's expectations. Dirt, blood, and the chaotic nature of Vietnam meant that these women left behind traditional appearances of nurses in favour of practical green fatigues. How they lived in war is a reminder that the war did not stop when their shift did, and that living in a warzone has its own set of challenges.

Donut Dollies in Vietnam is a significantly under researched area. Most of the works available are memoirs by Donut Dollies, with almost no scholarly work on their experiences in Vietnam. There is a growing interview collection done through the *Donut Dollie Detail*, yet no scholars have yet to use this source for further research into Donut Dollies in Vietnam. The Donut Dollies are an interesting group when examining women in the Vietnam War because they work in a very stereotypical gendered role. They act as morale boosters, as cheerleaders, and as the reminders of home, yet their existence in Vietnam goes against the gendered expectations of the time. Instead of settling down and starting a family these college educated women went to a warzone. They were supposed to be a reminder of what the men needed to protect, yet it was these same women who went out to fire bases and visited men in foxholes with little concern of their own safety. Further examination into their experiences in Vietnam is needed, especially concerning their relationships with enlisted men and nurses.

In 2015 Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced that all military roles will be open to women. Carter stated that “They’ll be allowed to drive tanks, fire mortars and lead infantry soldiers into combat,” adding “They’ll be able to serve as Army Rangers and Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Marine Corps infantry, Air Force parajumpers, and everything else that was previously open only to men.”³⁰⁸ Compared to the roles that women held in the 1960s and 70s, this is a major jump towards women having a visible role in the military. The increase of women in the military means that the experiences of women can become easily accessible. Finding the ways in which women now find forms of escapism would be a point of future research.

The need to study different aspects of women’s experiences in Vietnam, especially their personal lives, is beginning to be understood by scholars. Examining the roles and experiences they had in war reveals gendered expectations in war and allows the gendered features of war to be closely examined. Not only this, but the context in which Donut Dollies were sent and worked in Vietnam is highly interesting. Donut Dollies, despite not working for the military, were given the rank of officer and given dog tags.

These women adapted to their lifestyles in Vietnam. A common coping mechanism for both Donut Dollies and military nurses was emotionally disconnecting. Despite women often being understood as emotionally comforting men, this was hardly the case in Vietnam. Emotional numbing was needed for these women to survive the war. These women were exposed to the horrors of Vietnam but continued to work, sacrificing their own needs to help others. Their bravery and skills have barely been acknowledged. Awards for heroism, like those who were awarded the Purple Heart; Barbara Wooster, Frances Crumpton, Ann Reynolds, and Ruth Mason, or other acknowledgments of their bravery and sacrifices were few and far between.

³⁰⁸ “Carter Opens All Military Occupations, Positions to Women,” Department of Defense, accessed March 3, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/632536/carter-opens-all-military-occupations-positions-to-women/>.

The examination of these women reveals several wartime experiences that have been left untold. Women have been overlooked and forgotten in war narratives, and when they are present it is under a glorified misinterpretation of both the war and their roles in the war. Examination of the two largest groups, military nurses and SRAO volunteers, uncovers numerous experiences that highlight the struggles that women had to endure while serving in Vietnam. Nurses and SRAO volunteers were exposed to danger whether their superiors had expected it or not. Hospitals were attacked and suffering rocket attacks, Donut Dollies experienced being shot at by snipers and endured rocket attacks. The misconceptions of women in Vietnam dissolves after examining the experiences of nurses and Donut Dollies who served in Vietnam. To ignore their experiences is to overlook an important part of the history of the Vietnam War.

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