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*“We Were Basically Counselors”:
The Unintended Emotional Duties of “Donut Dollies” in the Vietnam War*

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On April 5th, 1975, newspapers across the United States featured an *Associated Press* photo of a teary-eyed, Amerasian toddler and his consoling, adoptive mother. “It was a reunion both happy and sad for Luke, a Vietnamese orphan who arrived in the United States a month ago,” the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* described, “as he watches other war-displaced babies arrive at Stapleton International Airport in Denver.”¹ The headline of the *Sun-Times*, furthermore, proclaimed, “I Cry for Vietnam,” in large letters above the photo of Luke and his mother, Terre.² Similar captions and headlines appeared in Indiana’s *Journal and Courier*, Ohio’s *The Evening Independent*, *The Des Moines Register*, West Virginia’s *Charleston Daily Mail*, and Delaware’s *The News Journal*.

The poignant photo was used to illustrate the ongoing effort in 1975 to move hundreds of orphans out of South Vietnam as American forces were pulling out of Vietnam. Perhaps the photo was also widely circulated because it symbolically represented the complicated and unintended consequences of the war. With their candid embrace captured in the photo, Luke and Terre represented two particular ramifications of the Vietnam War: the fate of thousands of

¹ *Chicago Tribune*, April 5, 1975, p. 1, Center for the Study of War Experience, Regis University, Denver, Colorado.

² *Sun-Times*, April 5, 1975, p. 59, Center for the Study of War Experience, Regis University, Denver, Colorado.

orphans who had lost their parents or were conceived by Vietnamese women and American soldiers and the choice to adopt internationally from a war-torn country.

“It’s such a beautiful, touching picture,” Terre, the mother in the photo, said during an oral history interview I conducted with her in the summer of 2015, “but here’s the funny of it.” Funny was not a word I would have used to describe the photo when Terre showed it to me, but humor was exactly what Terre expressed as she recounted how and when the photo was taken. The newspapers failed to tell the “real story” behind Luke’s tears, according to Terre, because, in actuality, “he wanted a pop and I wouldn’t give it to him.” Terre worked for an adoption agency at the time and had brought Luke with her to the airport to greet the incoming children. Terre described the particular instance:

I said, “No, you’re not getting a pop,” so [Luke] started crying. And then they came in and they took the picture and I was trying to comfort him, so they didn’t stop to ask me. And it made for good press. I suppose in a way that’s kind of a symbol of media and how they can turn things.

After telling the story, Terre started to laugh and asked me, “Isn’t that classic?” I agreed and we laughed together about the funny, unexpected backstory of the poignant photo.³

Terre’s amusement in telling me the *Associated Press* photo story was only one of many emotions she conveyed while recounting her life experiences. When Terre was a college student, for example, the Vietnam War became increasingly contested in the public sphere and in her personal life. Terre described the vivid moment when her college boyfriend’s draft number was called and how conflicted she felt when sister became an antiwar activist while her father and more conservative peers remained supportive of the war. In the polarized sociopolitical climate,

³ Terre, interviewed by author, August 3, 2015, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience, Regis University, Denver, Colorado.

Terre decided that she was “going to go and figure out” what the war in Vietnam meant. “I’m going to go over,” Terre narrated as her younger self, “and I’ll be there and it will all make sense to me.”⁴ Terre also recalled that she knew that the war “was going to define my generation and [she] just wanted to be a part of it.”⁵

Terre explored her options for going to Vietnam and learned about the Red Cross’s Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas (SRAO) program in 1970, the same year that she graduated from college. The SRAO program hired young, college-educated American women to serve as “morale boosters” for the soldiers through recreational programs and activities.⁶ Terre considered the SRAO opportunity a “perfect plan” for going to Vietnam as it also represented an “adventure.” Terre, who considered herself a “women’s libber,” decided to “make up [her] own mind” and do what she wanted despite gendered expectations of marriage and motherhood following college at the time.⁷

I interviewed Terre for an ongoing oral history project at Regis University’s Center for the Study of War Experience. Terre shared the emotional events she witnessed and participated in while in the SRAO program including the adventure of traveling abroad, the chaos of the war, the difficult and rewarding aspects of her job, and the quick bonds made with other SRAO women and soldiers. After the SRAO program, Terre found the transition back to the American way of life to be difficult and frustrating. She then backpacked through Europe for a year before

⁴ Terre, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

⁵ Terre, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

⁶ Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge: New York, 2011), 65.

⁷ Terre, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

the reality of student loans and a “real job” kicked in. Terre wanted to find something “purposeful” to do and went back to Vietnam in 1974 to work with an adoption agency. She “fell in love with a little guy,” Luke, adopted him, and returned to the U.S. in February of 1975, which, as Terre elucidated, “was scary as Saigon was falling swiftly.”⁸

While listening to Terre’s narrative, I was captivated. I had recorded many stories of war experience prior to meeting Terre, but her perspective was altogether different. As a civilian woman who experienced the immediate repercussions of war on the Vietnamese civilians and on the American troops, Terre’s nuanced account demonstrated the complexities and multiple perspectives of war. She questioned the validity of the war, but willingly went to it. She perceived the military tactics as wasteful while refusing to turn away from the suffering and devastation caused by them. She acknowledged that she supported the American soldiers, but not the war in general. Terre recognized that she was “more confused than ever” about the war when she returned home. Her SRAO experience in Vietnam did not offer clarity as she had hoped, but rather added more complexity.⁹

When Terre mentioned that she remained in contact with her some of SRAO friends, I jumped at the opportunity to interview them. I drove two hours to Windsor, Colorado to interview Lindie at her cattle ranch. We drank tea in the kitchen as she told me her SRAO experiences and how they influenced her life. She handed me a box full of photos, official SRAO training materials, and a copy of her poetry collection she composed during and after her time in Vietnam to take to our archive. I happened to catch another SRAO friend, Dorner, while she was

⁸ Terre, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

⁹ Terre, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

passing through Denver on a long road trip. She gave me programming materials from the Red Cross that offer a glimpse into the types of games and trivia the SRAO women created. I also made a weekend trip south five hours to New Mexico and interviewed Pam in her mountain home where we shared cake, coffee, and laughter about her adorable dogs. In each interaction and interview, I experienced a comfortable and engaging dynamic that enabled emotional memories to be shared, discussed, and recorded. With similar personality traits, gender and racial identities, senses of humor, and emotional responses to certain stories, I felt a kinship with the four women. In other words, I could truly put myself in their shoes.

Since the Red Cross frequently rotated SRAO women around to different American bases in South Vietnam, the women I interviewed did not serve at the exact same time or in the same locations. Their assignments however occasionally overlapped during their one-year placement. Pam and Lindie, for example, trained for the SRAO in the same orientation while Dorner remembered programming with Pam and Terre on different occasions. With these shared experiences, the women told stories about each other and, in a few cases unprompted by me, shared the same story from different perspectives.

The oral histories interlace in intriguing ways that prompted me to analyze them collectively. Though each woman had a distinct narrative style, they conveyed similar types of affective experiences and memories. As my article demonstrates, emotions largely shaped their experiences in the SRAO program and influenced how they remembered them. This is not to suggest that all SRAO women had similar affective experiences and memories, but rather asserts that the four testimonies that I studied constitute a particular perspective within the context of the Vietnam War that has largely been ignored in the scholarship of the topic.

In what follows, I briefly contextualize the SRAO program as it pertains to the specific stories and then explore the emotional aspects of their experiences. I use selected quotes and anecdotes from each interviewee to illustrate their connectedness. I end the article by addressing how recording the oral history interviews served as affective events in themselves and influenced how the women narrated their past experiences.

SRAO Oral Histories in Context

In 1953, the Red Cross established the SRAO program to support the troops in the Korean War. The Red Cross reinstated the SRAO program in 1965 and hired approximately 630 young, single, and college-educated American women to go to Vietnam.¹⁰ Each SRAO woman received \$4,800 in compensation for a one-year contract.¹¹ In the training workbook that Lindie saved, the Red Cross's mission for the SRAO was "to act as the medium of voluntary relief and communication between American people and their armed forces."¹² The SRAO fit into the Red Cross mission by providing emotional respite to American troops through recreation and diversion activities.

Scholars of the Red Cross argue that the program represented more than a morale boost for the American troops. Heather Stur, the most prominent scholar on the subject, focuses on the dominant gender ideologies of the Cold War and how they influenced the creation of the SRAO. In *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era*, Stur argues that the "white,

¹⁰ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 65; Heather Stur, "Combat Nurses and Donut Dollies," *New York Times*, January 31, 2017, p 2.

¹¹ Ellysa Cassier, "The Donut Dolly: A 'Girl-Next-Door's' Experience in Vietnam," *Iowa Historical Review* 4, no. 2 (2014): 8, <https://doi.org/10.17077/2373-1842.1025.8>.

¹² Red Cross, "SRAO Training Workbook," Lindie McKee Collection, Center for the Study of War Experience.

suburban, domestic ideal” that permeated American popular culture and Cold War politics shaped the selection process for SRAO women. The Red Cross primarily hired women who could serve as reminders “of the ‘girl next door’” and “symbols of middle-class domesticity.” Stur asserts that the SRAO program ultimately attempted to “symbolize the American way of life that soldiers were fighting to protect.”¹³

While the Red Cross endorsed a certain standard of femininity, however, the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s challenged the very gender, race, and class standards of the program. The Red Cross, according to Stur, “intentionally constructed an image of American women as wholesome, girlish, and chaste,” but also unintentionally provided an opportunity for the women to subvert conventional gender roles by traveling abroad and postponing marital and maternal obligations. The war zone, too, had “its own conventions dictating women’s purposes and acceptable sexual expression.” In many ways, as Stur aptly acknowledges, the SRAO women inadvertently represented the gender and racial tensions that were being contested in the United States at the time.¹⁴

The four women I interviewed however did not mention the Red Cross’s mission, gender and racial tensions, morale boosting, or Cold War ideology as primary reasons for joining. Dorner, for example, remembered feeling intrigued by the SRAO because she “always wanted travel and adventure.” Dorner’s post-college options “were the Peace Corps or the Red Cross” and the Red Cross seemed more appealing as it only required a one-year commitment.¹⁵ Pam, in

¹³ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 65.

¹⁴ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 95; Stur, “Combat Nurses and Donut Dollies,” 2.

¹⁵ Dorner, interviewed by author, September 15, 2015, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience, Regis University, Denver, Colorado.

comparison, knew of the program because her sister worked with the SRAO in South Korea in the mid-1950s. “I also thought,” Pam interjected, “it was exciting and I could see the world and I would be a *long* way from home.” She clarified that she had “no altruistic reasons” for joining, but rather sought travel and adventure.¹⁶

Terre, Dorner, and Lindie mentioned that the media coverage of the war and campus protests influenced their decisions to join the SRAO. Lindie, for example, mentioned that she did not “trust the media too much with their reporting.” Seeking out ways to “go to Vietnam and see what it was like for myself,” she wrote to the Red Cross and later joined the SRAO.¹⁷ Dorner was also “curious about the war” because of the major protests and “didn't understand how war was run.” She remembered thinking, “Well, I'll just go.”¹⁸ Terre, too, decided that she wanted to go to Vietnam to “straighten it all out” in the perplexing social and political climate.¹⁹

The SRAO recruits, as the Red Cross called them, received a two-week training in Washington D.C. prior to departing to Vietnam. One scholar argues that SRAO training was “grossly inadequate” in preparing the young women for their job duties in Vietnam.²⁰ The women I interviewed echoed the sentiment, though in other terms. Terre called their training “ridiculous,” Pam remembered it being “boring,” and Lindie concluded that it “wasn't relevant

¹⁶ Pam, interviewed by author, January 28, 2016, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience, Regis University, Denver, Colorado.

¹⁷ Lindie, interviewed by author, October 20, 2015. recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience, Regis University, Denver, Colorado.

¹⁸ Dorner, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

¹⁹ Terre, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

²⁰ Cassier, “The Donut Dolly,” 8.

enough to remember.”²¹ Dorner recalled that the training was primarily “the history of the Red Cross” with strict rules on “exactly what we’d be sent home for” which included excessive drinking, sex, and taking unauthorized flights.²² “It was ‘Don’t mess up the Red Cross name,’” Terre remembered. “‘Don’t carry a gun. Don’t shorten your skirts. Don’t wear beads.’” All of the women commented on the excessive guidelines and inspections regarding their uniforms. “I mean black heels in a war zone,” Terre said pointedly, amused by this particular aspect of her SRAO experience, “with little cute skirts...silly little hats.”²³

The real training, according to Pam and Lindie, was “on the job” in Vietnam.²⁴ Once they arrived, they learned the two nicknames that the troops called the SRAO women: “round eyes,” to contrast with the Asian women who were referred to derogatorily as “slant eyes,” and “Donut Dollies.” The latter nickname originated from World War II where Red Cross volunteers handed out donuts and coffee to the American soldiers. “It was a term of endearment,” Terre explained.

After a week in Saigon, they shadowed other SRAO women before being stationed at different bases, namely Chu Lai, Bien Hoa, Long Bien, Phu Bai, Da Nang, Hue, Qui Nhon, and Camp Eagle. Some days their job was to run the “club mobile” units or work in the recreation centers, “but mainly,” according to Dorner, “we flew out to fire support bases with our programs.” The SRAO women served hot meals and distributed decks of cards, snacks, juice and soda. They brought games to play, magic and card tricks, trivia, and multiple-choice activities

²¹ Terre, Pam, and Dorner, interviewed by author, recordings and transcripts, Center for the Study of War Experience.

²² Dorner, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

²³ Terre, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

²⁴ Terre and Lindie, interviewed by author, recordings and transcripts, Center for the Study of War Experience.

regarding popular culture and history. Terre and Lindie recalled learning that the job required much improvisation as the size, mood, and location of the groups varied.

Shortly after Terre, Lindie, Pam, and Dorner arrived in Vietnam in 1970 and 1971, they encountered many frustrated “grunts” and a confusing war. It was “supposedly winding down,” Lindie explained based on the media accounts in the United States before she left, “but one of the biggest pushes of the whole war was going on.” Lindie explained how the mood in Vietnam in 1970 shifted her perspective of the war in general:

I believed the propaganda that if we didn't stop the Communists in Vietnam, they were going to take over the entire Orient. I believed that. When I got over there, I started listening to the guys and what they thought. And they had their finger on it. They knew it was a waste. They knew it wasn't going to work. So that's how I changed my mind.

For Terre, the war was “far worse than what [she] thought.” And Dorner, too, determined that she “couldn't pretend that there was anything noble in the war” after arriving in Vietnam.²⁵

1970 and 1971 also marked the last two years of the SRAO program, which greatly impacted the way the women I interviewed interacted with the soldiers. In *Beyond Combat*, Stur differentiates the attitude of the SRAO women before and after the Tet Offensive in 1968, considered a major turning point in the war. After 1968, the SRAO women, Stur asserts, “seemed to identify more with the troops than with the Red Cross.” The Donut Dollies were “breaking rules” more frequently and one Red Cross director, according to Stur, “viewed the insolence as part of larger rejection of authority that was occurring among the troops as well.”²⁶

²⁵ Terre, Dorner, and Lindie, interviewed by author, recordings and transcripts, Center for the Study of War Experience.

²⁶ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 86.

Lindie demonstrated the feeling with her comment that she “didn’t trust any higher rank, you trusted the guys in the field.” Dorner also illustrated the phenomenon by explaining that she witnessed troops disobeying orders because “nobody wanted to be the last to die in Vietnam.”²⁷

Although the feeling of frustration with the war was palpable, Lindie and Dorner said the SRAO programming and their personal conversations never involved politics. The programs remained largely geared at uplifting the emotional well being of the men and distracting them from the war. In direct contrast to the “childlike and innocent” programming that the SRAO provided, however, the women I interviewed also invested much time and energy in emotional caregiving that involved mediation, trauma, grief, and other intense emotions. The women learned how to read each situation to understand where they were meeting the group or individual emotionally. Stur suggests that the women served as “emotional caretakers,” but I take the suggestion a step further to assert that emotions served as a principal aspect of their SRAO experiences and created the multiple roles they filled and navigated. The roles, in large part, were steeped in emotional needs of the soldiers.²⁸ Consequently, the unexpected emotionality of their experience had lasting impacts on the women I interviewed and therefore influenced the ways in which the women shared and remembered their experiences.

Navigating the Complex Emotional Landscape

The official SRAO duties evidently involved emotions as the primary mission of the program was to boost morale. In order to successfully engage the troops, Lindie said she “had to be a good actress” and put on a “smiley and cheery and happy-go-lucky act too.” Pam explained

²⁷ Lindie and Dorner, interviewed by author, recordings and transcripts, Center for the Study of War Experience.

²⁸ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 86.

that “Dorner and Lindie and Terre were easy to program with because we just became these comedians.”²⁹ In each oral history, the women recalled the fun and rewarding aspects of their job. “The more [the troops] laughed,” Lindie explained, “the more we really thought we were helping them out.” Pam described their job as “a hoot” and thoroughly enjoyed it. Dorner noted that it was “fun” and that they were always smiling. “When you have a job that the primary mission every day is to bring joy,” Terre summarized it succinctly, “how can you not get such payback?”³⁰

There was much more to their jobs than fun and games, however, beyond what the Red Cross officially prescribed. In order to alleviate some of the restlessness, boredom, and grief that accompanied the “war that had no purpose,” as Stur referred to it, Terre, Lindie, Pam, and Dorner realized that simply starting a conversation with the soldiers helped distract them.³¹ Asking how they were and where they were from, for example, prompted the troops to discuss personal issues with the Donut Dollies. “We were basically counselors,” Terre determined. “We were choosing a different avenue on how to do it because we couldn’t set up shop and say, ‘Come here and tell me what’s wrong.’” The men discussed their sadness about family members, break-ups, and friends they had lost. The SRAO women also heard excitement for new babies and mixed feelings about returning home. Terre believed that the “real healing, the real diversion” occurred in the impromptu conversations.³²

²⁹ Pam, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

³⁰ Terre, Pam, Dorner, and Lindie, interviewed by author, recordings and transcripts, Center for the Study of War Experience.

³¹ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 86.

³² Terre, Pam, Dorner, interviewed by author, recordings and transcripts, Center for the Study of War Experience.

The women therefore needed to remain emotionally approachable to the men who wanted to discuss their feelings and prod those who were more reticent.

Dorner vividly recalled when she learned how conversations could be used to distract soldiers from shock and grief. Pam and Dorner were paired together for programming and realized that that “something bad had happened as soon as a chopper sat down.” Dorner remembered thinking that the men looked “intimidating” with “dead eyes.” Dorner, nervous, wanted to avoid interacting with them. Pam, however, “hopped off that chopper and went right to them.” Pam lessened the solemn mood with conversation about football and where they were from. “And so that’s how I learned to be a Donut Dolly,” Dorner stated.³³ It was not the SRAO training, games, or recreation that made Dorner a Donut Dolly, it was the ability to engage with and mitigate intense emotions.³⁴

Since the Donut Dollies conversed with the men frequently and gauged their emotions effectively, they began to serve as unofficial mediators between the “grunts,” or infantrymen, and the higher-ranking officials. “We could often tell them more about how their men were,” Pam recounted, “than their own officers or their own men.”³⁵ Some of the “upper officers” noticed that the Donut Dollies connected emotionally to the grunts and used them purposefully as intermediaries. “They would use us as the eyes and the ears of what was going on,” Terre explained. Terre met frequently with one officer who would whistle at her to come to his office where he placed milk and cookies out for her and asked her questions about the morale.

³³ Dorner, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

³⁴ Dorner, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

³⁵ Pam, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

Terre acknowledged that the act of whistling at her was “sexist,” but she had to put her ideals aside in order to advocate for the men. They had to be “diplomatic” and “schmooze” when interacting with “higher-ups,” as Terre described, to get what they wanted in terms of helicopter transportation or hot meals and new uniforms for the particular units.³⁶

The women also detailed how they served as a reassuring presence to injured and grieving soldiers. They visited hospitals and interacted with soldiers who had, in some cases, lost limbs. Terre recalled that “they wanted to see how people back home would react to them.” Since the Donut Dollies symbolized their sisters, mothers, and girlfriends, the disabled soldiers would, according to Terre, “watch our faces and we'd have to figure out how to normalize it; how to put a spin on it.” Terre clarified that they tried not to give “false hope,” but attempted instead to provide some sort of comfort by being composed with their reactions to the injuries.³⁷

Dorner recounted a graphic memory where she was asked to visit a particular man named Andy. Dorner, not knowing the extent of his wounds before she arrived, found it “hard initially to make sense of his face. He'd taken a round across his mid-face and so he didn't have a nose or eyes.” Andy eventually asked, ““What do you think my girlfriend's gonna say?”” Dorner, as she had learned to do, attempted to alleviate Andy’s concerns and lighten the mood. ““Well, I saw you before you took the round and you weren't that good looking,” she responded lightheartedly, “so I don't think it's going to be a problem.” Interacting with a man whose life had been dramatically altered and the way she needed to turn a permanent disfigurement into an affable joke made a lasting impact on Dorner.

³⁶ Terre, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

³⁷ Lindie, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

“That was probably my most difficult experience,” Dorner explained tearfully. “That’s the moment that really of anything that haunts me because it was—I just wasn’t expecting it. It was unexpected and I really wasn’t prepared.”³⁸

Terre recounted one of her most vivid and “rough” encounters as well. Her encounter did not involve an injured soldier, however, but a man convicted of war crimes. Terre was in Chu Lai when Lieutenant William Calley was on trial for his involvement in the My Lai Massacre, where American soldiers killed an estimated five hundred Vietnamese civilians in 1968. “Part of the trial was to bring him back there and My Lai was by Chu Lai,” Terre explained. Terre remembered that Lieutenant Calley’s “prison guards” asked, “‘Are you guys doing anything? We just don’t know what to do at night.’” Terre admitted that she was “not exactly sure how serious it all was. I certainly knew who he was. And I certainly knew some of the story.” When Lieutenant Calley joined their group, they “didn’t want it to be uncomfortable for anyone.” Here, again, Terre exemplified how the Donut Dollies normalized affective events as they were happening, but narrated the memories of the events with strong feelings.³⁹

Terre described her unexpected encounter with Lieutenant Calley further. She expressively repeated that Lieutenant Calley “was just a kid.” Terre mentioned that she did not “know what [she] expected, but [she] surely didn’t expect that.” In Terre’s memory, “[Lieutenant Calley] wasn’t a murderer. He wasn’t this monster. He was scared. He was young.” Terre in no way was excusing Lieutenant Calley’s war crimes by sharing such opinions of him.

³⁸ Dorner, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

³⁹ Terre, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

In other parts of her oral history, she expressed immense sadness for what the Vietnamese population experienced and endured. “War,” as Terre put it concisely, “is devastating.”⁴⁰

Perhaps the most unexpected aspects of the emotional caregiving involved handling confessions of wrongdoing and remorse. The Donut Dollies were put in positions to mitigate moral injuries, a term used to describe “perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations,” according to the National Center for PTSD.⁴¹ Dorner, for example, explained that they needed to remain non-judgmental when listening to confessions of war crimes or remorse.

Guys would catch us to confess...and so we would have to, you know, tell them that it was okay; that they would be home soon. That it was just temporary. They'd show us fingers or ears they'd taken and we would—we would make it okay. And they really needed that. And sometimes it was hard to give absolution. But you could just say, “Well, you'll be home soon.” You know, “It will be alright. Once you get home, it will be fine.”

Dorner and other women who heard such confessions and offered absolution for wrongdoing and perhaps even for war crimes were exposed to the harsh realities of the “terrible things that happen” in a war zone. The confessions shocked Dorner and made her question the goodness of humanity as she explained in her interview.⁴²

Pam also shared an anecdote about absolving a moral injury. In 2010, Pam visited a Vietnam War memorial with a friend in New Mexico and a woman Pam did not know recognized her from pictures that the woman’s husband had captured during his time in the military in Vietnam.

⁴⁰ Terre, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

⁴¹ Brett Litz and Shira Maguen, “Moral Injury in Veterans of War,” *PTSD Research Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2012): 1, <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/newsletters/research-quarterly/v23n1.pdf>.

⁴² Dorner, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

A few minutes after confirming that it was indeed Pam in the 1971 photograph, the chance meeting led to a confession. Pam, crying as she narrated the conversation, explained that “he said some things he thought he had done wrong while he was there.” In words similar to Dorner’s response, Pam took the man’s face in her hands and said comfortingly, “We were at war. You did what you had to do to survive. It's okay. Look at us. We are still here. And that's what matters. And you got to let it go.” Pam, her SRAO experiences validated by the encounter, added, “he was okay after that.”⁴³ Pam’s story illustrates that she was still navigating, forty years after her SRAO experiences, the complex emotional landscape of the Vietnam War. And she was not alone in that. Dorner, Terre, and Lindie each expressed how the affective events they experienced during their time in Vietnam took years to process and share publicly.

Conclusion

As the oral histories demonstrated, the Donut Dollies provided emotional support to soldiers in various capacities and, as a result, experienced multiple affective events. For their own emotions, however, there was not an apparent outlet to release them.⁴⁴ They offered emotional openness and support to the men, but hardened their own feelings in the process. “If we were to grieve everything we saw or heard,” Terre concluded after her SRAO experience, “we wouldn't have been able to do what we needed to do.” When asked if they discussed their emotions with their SRAO friends, Dorner and Lindie expressed that they were often too exhausted or too busy to do so. Terre, who later in life completed a degree in counseling, determined that they were “protecting [themselves]” by using “gallows humor” and

⁴³ Pam, interviewed by author, recording and transcript, Center for the Study of War Experience.

⁴⁴ Stur, “Combat Nurses and Donut Dollies,” 2.

becoming numb to the jarring realities of war.⁴⁵ The women experienced difficult transitions back into American society after Vietnam and like many veterans of the war, remained reticent about their SRAO experiences until the late 1980s and 1990s.

Interestingly, Dorner and Terre both mentioned that they only have reminisced about “silly things” and “happy memories” with their SRAO friends. “It’s just recently we’ve been able to tell some of the other stories,” Dorner explained. I, on the other hand, listened to and discussed profoundly emotional stories with the women in our initial meetings. I began to realize that the actual recording of the oral histories, the act of telling their stories, served as affective events. Pam said that “even doing this,” recording the interview, “helped so much.” Lindie told me that recording her story may “help people understand.” Dorner mentioned that she does not bring up her war experiences often, but “I’ll do this and then I’ll be done for a while.”⁴⁶ Why the women may have shared stories with me during the interviews that they have not discussed with each other is beyond me, but most likely it is yet another emotional landscape they are navigating.

⁴⁵ Terre, Pam, Dorner, and Lindie, interviewed by author, recordings and transcripts, Center for the Study of War Experience.

⁴⁶ Terre, Pam, Dorner, and Lindie, interviewed by author, recordings and transcripts, Center for the Study of War Experience.

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