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**‘We were not your average American girl’:  
The Donut Dollies and Female Agency in the  
Vietnam War.**



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**'We were not your average American girl': The Donut Dollies and Female Agency in the Vietnam War**

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Dentice, 'Docs Donut Dollie Tribute', war-veterans.org, n.d. < <https://www.war-veterans.org/DonutDollie.htm> > [accessed 24 April 2024].

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**Abbreviations:**

SRA0 – Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas.

GI – Colloquial term referring to American troops.

## **Introduction:**

During the Vietnam War the Red Cross deployed over 700 women, aged between 21 and 24 as part of the SRAO who were known affectionately by the term 'Donut Dollies'. The SRAO was established and deployed during both World Wars, wherein the women were often stationed at Doughnut dispensaries, colloquially inaugurating the 'darling name that stuck'<sup>2</sup>. In Vietnam, they were recognised for their iconic powder blue dresses, and 'girl next door'<sup>3</sup> dispositions for which they were recruited. Touring in pairs and small units, the Dollies were tasked with providing the troops 'smiles, songs, games, and a touch of back home'<sup>4</sup>, often done so through the implementation of planned recreation programs. They are thus remembered amongst male veterans and in popular culture as 'angels that fixed the souls of many'<sup>5</sup>; praised for their "heroic" servitude to others. In scholarship, there is considerable emphasis on their performance of femininity, outlined as emblems of ideal American femininity. Asserted as 'the suburban domestic ideal'<sup>6</sup> and 'a mother or a sister rather than a pin-up girl'<sup>7</sup>, the Dollies have been referenced in terms of the service they provided to the troops and, more broadly, to the war effort itself. Even when attempting to break out from these restraining stereotypes, it is claimed that 'the irony of these women as symbols of the life they were fleeing is inescapable'<sup>8</sup>. There is particular emphasis on sexual abuse and emotional exhaustion faced by the Dollies at the hands of GIs, issues that have become key justifications for their supposed victimhood within current scholarship. The Dollies are exclusively framed as wholesome, chaste, abused and submissive receptacles of patriarchal ideals; fondly in the eyes of GIs and pityingly in the eyes of historians, but invariably as victims.

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<sup>2</sup> Pdoggbiker, 'Rare Photos From The Vietnam War Brought To Life With Color', Cherrieswriter, 23 April 2022 <<https://cherrieswriter.com/2022/04/23/rare-photos-from-the-vietnam-war-brought-to-life-with-color/>> [accessed 24 April 2024].

<sup>3</sup> 'The Donut Dollies of Vietnam', Armyhistory.org, n.d. <<https://armyhistory.org/the-donut-dollies-of-vietnam/>> [accessed 22 April 2024].

<sup>4</sup> 'The Donut Dollies of Vietnam', Armyhistory.org.

<sup>5</sup> Floyd Brown, 'These ladies were a bright light in a sometimes very dark place (...)', The Donut Dollies, 18 July 2020 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-donut-dollie-paula-wright-haley/>> [accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>6</sup> Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, p. 79.

<sup>8</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, p. 72.

Despite this, oral and written testimonies given by the Dollies themselves reveal that they do not identify their experience within these parameters of victimhood. According to the Dollies' own repeated assertions, they were vibrant individuals in search of community, adventure, and belonging; all of which they believed they achieved, thereby rendering their service the 'best experience of our lives'<sup>9</sup>. Qualitative analysis of the experience of American women in Vietnam reveal 96% of participants to have described a positive experience, and 68% to have described a negative experience in their accounts<sup>10</sup>. Despite the dangerous and male-dominated nature of their environment, these women overwhelmingly described their time in-country as fulfilling, exciting, or at least emotionally varied, yet historical depiction of the Dollies conveys the inverse. Binary narratives of vulnerability and victimhood dominate the current discourse, in direct contradiction to the Dollies' recollections.

As stated by Kaila Story, to assume the historical 'subordination of women' is to 'ignore the multiple sites of empowerment and agency exercised by (them)'<sup>11</sup>. The voices of these women must be given due consideration in order to reveal the ways in which they secured the autonomy and gratification of which they report. One of the ways this can be achieved is through employing a 'multi-faceted' approach which demands that 'as we speak of oppression we (should) also speak of resistance'<sup>12</sup>. The analysed source base reveals multiple sites of defiance and indifference to Red Cross guidelines which see the Dollies pursuing their individual desires in resistance to their intended "angelic" image. This research intends to gain an understanding of how the Dollies themselves understood and navigated their environment in order to exert agency and autonomy.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Jud Nichols Tayloe', The Donut Dollies, 29 May 2020 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-donut-dollie-judy-nichols-tayloe/>> [accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>10</sup> Anica Pless Kaiser, Daniel H. Kabat, Avron Spiro III, Eve H. Davison, Jeanne Mager Stellman, 'Women at war: The crucible of Vietnam', *SSM - Population Health*, 3 (2017), pp. 236-224 (p. 237).

<sup>11</sup> Kaila Adia Story, *Patricia Hill Collins; Reconceiving Motherhood* (Demeter Press, 2014), p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The period studied will primarily focus on the years 1965-1972, during which time the SRAO was stationed in Vietnam. However, the sources drawn upon will expand the scope, in some areas, into the present day; considering the way in which the Dollies have retrospectively chosen to convey their experience.

This dissertation, therefore, will seek to appeal to the source material with fresh eyes; without prior assumption of victimhood, and in earnest consideration of the Dollies' positive accounts of their experience as valid testimonies of their history. Through this, I will argue that SRAO volunteers were able to express considerable agency and autonomy over their actions and identity construction whilst stationed in Vietnam, through exploring unique and alternative expressions of self and systems of belonging to that of civilian America. It will serve to challenge the predominant archetypes of female victimhood in conflict that currently pervade literature on the topic.

### **Historiography:**

This dissertation is situated within the field of gender and conflict; specifically that which focuses on women in 20<sup>th</sup> century combat zones. Literature which directly discusses the Donut Dollies is very limited, encompassed almost entirely within the works of four historians: Stur, Duff, Cassier, and Christopher, whose collective broader consensus frames the Dollies as victims of their circumstance.

Heather Marie Stur's book 'Beyond Combat' exists as the most critical evaluation of femininity and the Vietnam war to date. Her Chapter "She Could Be the Girl Next Door" utilises the Donut Dollies as a case study through which to prove the existence of a 'Cold-war gender ideology' which 'embodied ideas about middle-class domesticity and contained sexuality, two hallmarks of American Cold war culture regarded as essential if the United States were to

triumph over Soviet communism’<sup>13</sup>. Whilst providing crucial insights into the Red Cross’ broader emblematic intentions for the SRAO, she largely disregards the experience of the Dollies themselves, despite relying heavily upon their oral histories. Instead, Stur conveys an image of the Dollies as archetypal victims in order to contribute to a broader overview of systems of patriarchy during conflict. Whilst briefly acknowledging that the ‘actual experiences of donut dollies in Vietnam (...) illustrate the breakdown of those stereotypes’<sup>14</sup>, the Dollies are lent no agency in this; citing the breakdown of female archetypes as incidental occurrence rather than as an example of autonomous resistance.

Elyssa Cassier criticises Stur for her over-emblemising of the Dollies as victimised representations of domestic Cold-War ideals, and for placing disproportionate emphasis upon abusive GI-Dollie relationships. Her focus, however, remains fixed on the ‘violent incidents the Donut Dollies encountered in Vietnam as well as the difficulties returning home’<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, Amy Duff seeks to ‘recover the experience of these women’, but does so with the intention of ‘demonstrating that the demands of war resulted in the need for escapism’<sup>16</sup>. Overarchingly, Cassier and Duff’s interpretations are framed around the suffering and oppression that they faced. The work of Renny Christopher<sup>17</sup> exists primarily as a curation of oral histories accompanied by commentary rather than critical interrogation. Due to this fact, and its date of publication, his work will function primarily to exemplify themes of victimisation which are prevalent in literature.

These themes of victimisation that permeate scholarship of the Donut Dollies are symptomatic of wider historiographical trends regarding women in conflict. Women in

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<sup>13</sup> Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Elyssa Cassier, ‘The Donut Dolly: A “Girl-Next-Door’s” Experience in Vietnam’, *Iowa Historical Review*, 4.2 (2014), pp. 5-41 (p. 6).

<sup>16</sup> Amy Louise Duff, ‘Escapism, normality and domesticity in Vietnam: A re-examination of women’s lives in the Vietnam War (unpublished masters thesis, University of Canterbury, 2018), p. 2  
<<https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/7a47bbf0-cb97-4552-9f4e-6c2a871c4817/content>> [accessed 24 April 2024].

<sup>17</sup> 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*, 1.3 (1989), pp. 33-45.

societies at war have been consistently historicised as 'placeholders of the normal': 'as sweethearts they cheer soldiers and heal them when they return; as nurses they put men back together and serve as substitute mothers'<sup>18</sup>. Themes of sexual assault, and the allegorisation of women's bodies as 'battlefields'<sup>19</sup> also predominate narratives of women in conflict. The female experience has been theorised symbolically through their servitude to men and to war efforts more broadly, constituting macroscopic and binary narratives of subservience and victimhood which deny the autonomy expressed by women both at the time and today.

However, developments within the field of agency in conflict challenge these narratives of victimhood. Cynthia Enloe argues that 'we need to examine conflict from the ground up rather than simply focusing on the international'<sup>20</sup>, emphasising the need for microscopic histories of the daily lives of women in revealing their agency, before broader cultural assertions can be made. She posits the importance of taking the voices of women seriously to grasp how 'women have sought to resist'<sup>21</sup> the effects of war, and to understand their experiences holistically. Francoise Thebaud promotes the use of oral histories and first-hand accounts in actioning this approach, asserting that through the voices of women, historians can overturn 'standard classifications of Victims and definitions of heroism and (to) demonstrate how varied experiences could be'<sup>22</sup>.

Medina Haeri and Nadine Puechguirbal apply this theory to women within the Red Cross, although they do not reference the SRAO directly. They criticise the way in which 'women have been traditionally portrayed in conflict as vulnerable and helpless victims of war' due to an assumption of biological inferiority, calling for 'the need to move away from these essentialist representations to a more pluralistic understanding of the roles and experiences

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<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Prugl, 'Review: Gender and War: Causes, Constructions, and Critique', *Perspectives on Politics*, 2.1 (2003), pp. 335-342 (p. 335).

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Hynes, 'On the Battlefield of women's bodies: an overview of the harm of war to women', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 27 (2004), pp. 431-445.

<sup>20</sup> Cynthia Enloe, Anita Lacey, Thomas Gregory, 'Twenty-five years of Bananas, Beaches and Bases: A conversation with Cynthia Enloe', *Journal of Sociology*, 3 (2016), pp. 537-550 (p. 538).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Francoise Thebaud, 'Understanding twentieth century wars through women and gender: forty years of historiography', *Gendered Laws of War*, 39 (2014), pp. 152-178 (p. 157).

that women have during conflict’<sup>23</sup>. Crucially, they posit that, within Red Cross policy, ‘refusing to recognize their agency means that many of the most fundamental decisions regarding their security and access to material resources are taken by men’<sup>24</sup>. A lack of recognition of the historical agency of women in war leads to a removal of their autonomy in the present day; further justifying the need for histories which reveal the autonomy expressed by women such as the Donut Dollies during conflict.

Scholarship on female agency under conflict has yet to encompass an evaluation of the Donut Dollies. This dissertation will seek to reconcile this by applying the philosophy of the latter field of historiography to the subject matter of the former. In doing so, it will attempt to bridge a gap between the two and offer a history of the Donut Dollies which advocates for their autonomy. Due to the range of content discussed, from themes of military kin to uniforms and identity, a multitude of specialised fields of scholarship will also be drawn upon, to supplement this core framework.

## **Methodology:**

This dissertation will predominantly utilise online communities and blogs, which provide a deep wealth of source material including oral and written histories, images, documents, and community discourse. Archives housed in the Library of Congress and Texas Tech University, the leading American archive for the Vietnam War, offer limited access to material relating to the Donut Dollies. Many of the available sources have been provided by the Department of Defence and GIs, rendering them reflective of external perspectives on the Dollies, and therefore of restricted use within this dissertation which seeks to understand the Dollies perception of their own experience. The archival gap left by public archives has been filled

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<sup>23</sup> Medina Haeri, Nadine Puechguirbal, ‘From Helplessness to Agency: Examining the Plurality of Women’s Experiences in Armed Conflict’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, 877 (2010), pp. 103-122 (p. 105).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

with the work of ‘pseudo-trained hobbyists’<sup>25</sup>: veterans and amateur enthusiasts who have called upon former Donut Dollies to share their experiences online. Within this context, such sites will be referred to as ‘amateur archives’<sup>26</sup>, as recommended by Kyler Zeleny.

Jessica Ogden advocates for the importance of amateur archives in increasing ‘the accessibility of historically marginalised or minoritised community content’<sup>27</sup>, such as the Dollies, on whom “official” source material is finite. This previously unearthed material, provided by the Dollies themselves, is also accompanied by discourse which contextualises them in a way that reveals their importance to the individuals involved. These archives can therefore ‘depoliticise the practice of archiving’<sup>28</sup> through their existence as an ‘open, multi-vocal, democratic source’<sup>29</sup>.

Three amateur archives will be drawn upon to provide the majority of source material: The Donut Dollie Facebook page<sup>30</sup>, ‘Doc’s Donut Dollie Tribute’ page<sup>31</sup>, and the ‘Donut Dollie Detail’ pages within the ‘The Donut Dollies’ website<sup>32</sup>. Though different in nature, written accounts and oral histories will be employed together to avoid overreliance on either, thus reducing the impact of methodological issues that they present individually. This dissertation will heavily draw on both oral histories and written accounts provided by these sites. Language used by the Dollies can offer ‘valuable insight into (their) experiences, behaviour and sense of self’<sup>33</sup>. Constructions of self, and subjective perceptions of events are rendered

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<sup>25</sup> Kyler Clarke Zeleny, ‘Amateur Archives: The Uses of Public and Private Archives in a Digital World’, *The International Journal of the Image*, 3.7 (2016), pp. 33-44 (p. 36).

<sup>26</sup> Zeleny, ‘Amateur Archives’.

<sup>27</sup> Jessica Ogden, “‘Everything on the internet can be saved’: Archive Team, Tumblr and the cultural significance of web archiving”, *Digital Technology, Culture and Society*, 1-2.6 (2022), pp. 113-132 (p. 9).

<sup>28</sup> Ogden, “‘Everything on the internet can be saved”, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Fiona Gill, Catriona Elder, ‘Data and archives: The internet as site and subject’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 4.15 (2012), pp. 271-279 (p. 271).

<sup>30</sup> ‘The Donut Dollies’, Facebook, n.d. < <https://www.facebook.com/thedonutdollies> > [accessed 24 April 2023].

<sup>31</sup> Jeff Dentice, ‘Docs Donut Dollie Tribute’, war-veterans.org, n.d. < <https://www.war-veterans.org/DonutDollie.htm> > [accessed 24 April 2024].

<sup>32</sup> ‘The Donut Dollie Detail’, The Donut Dollies, n.d. < <https://www.donutdollies.com/category/donut-dollie-detail/> > [accessed 23 April 2024].

<sup>33</sup> Angela Davis, Andrea Hajek, Laura King, ‘Gender, Subjectivity and Oral History’, *History Workshop Journal*, 73 (2012), pp. 261-364 (p. 362).

particularly poignant within 'sensitive history of any conflict'<sup>34</sup>, in that they lend voice and therefore agency to historical actors who have otherwise been victimised within historiography. The intervention of memory within first-hand accounts must be acknowledged, however. Nostalgia, commonly construed as fostering unreliability, will be used in this context to reveal the 'subjective or personal meanings of past events'<sup>35</sup>. This dissertation will derive value from the subjectivity with which the Dollies' recount their experience. Through taking seriously their 'overall experience of the conflict', including instances of positive, nostalgic reflection, 'their methods of coping and regaining agency' will be revealed<sup>36</sup>; positing a narrative which emphasises that which is significant to the women themselves. Through this, I will both challenge archetypal victimhood of women in conflict, and re-centre the Dollies' voices within their own histories.

This dissertation will also engage with images taken by the Dollies, often of themselves; a source-base largely neglected within the current scholarship. Since the rise of Kodak in the 1960s, photographs and photography have functioned as women's 'social practice'<sup>37</sup>, acting as 'public signifiers of individual or group identity'<sup>38</sup>. Images taken by the Dollies can be used both to indicate their understanding of themselves and the reception of their experience, as well as to display the way in which they 'maintain(ed) kinship ties'<sup>39</sup> with their peers; a core tenet in their collective identity construction. These images can also 'authenticate(s) the reality of the past' and provide 'material connection'<sup>40</sup> to narratives claimed by the Dollies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, further soothing tensions which arise due to memory loss and distortion.

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<sup>34</sup> Francoise Thebaud, Anne Stevens, 'Understanding twentieth-century wars through women and gender: forty years of historiography', *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, 39 (2014), pp. 152-178 (p. 157).

<sup>35</sup> Alistair Thomson, 'Making the Most of Memories', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 9 (1999), pp. 291-301 (p. 291).

<sup>36</sup> Salma Kahale, 'Oral history as a method of promoting inclusive and gender-sensitive justice', *Journal of the British Academy*, 3.9 (2021), pp. 51-71 (p. 65).

<sup>37</sup> Gillian Rose, 'Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, The Public and The Politics of Sentiment' (Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Michelle Janning, Helen Scalise 'Gender and Generation in the Home Curation of Family Photography', *Journal of Family Issues*, 12.36 (2013), pp. 1702-1725 (p. 1704).

<sup>39</sup> Janning, Scalise, 'Gender and Generation in the Home Curation of Family Photography', p. 1702.

<sup>40</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 6.

Through an exploration of previously unexamined online communities, this dissertation seeks to present a holistic narrative of the Dollies' experience, which re-centres these women within their own stories, amplifies their voices, and ultimately challenges narratives of victimhood.

### **Structure:**

The three chapters selected have been entirely informed by the frequency and emphasis with which certain themes have been referred to by the Dollies themselves; each chapter is dedicated to a significant and recurrent theme in their testimonies. This has been done with the intention of allowing the Dollies' voices to permeate into the content discussed. Chapter 1 discusses the galvanising effect of fictive kinship on the Dollies' experience of alternative systems of belonging and sense of collective identity. Chapter 2 focuses on the way in which these women resisted images of angelic 'purity' through illicit romantic relationships with GIs; an issue previously contested as a core tenet within the Dollies' victimhood. Chapter 3 discusses varied attitudes towards uniform regulations to reveal specific identity constructions, exposing their agency through resistance to categorisation within typical "feminine" archetypes. Together, they depict a holistic and humanising history of their experience.

## **Chapter 1: Sisterhood and Fictive Kin in Vietnam**

When asked what her ‘fondest or most interesting memories of your time serving in Vietnam’ were, Kitt Cotton cited:

*‘Making some of the best friends among my Donut Dolly sisters, who can relate and share memories that the rest of the world will never be able to understand’<sup>41</sup>.*

The Dollies’ shared experience as women in Vietnam allowed for the creation of pseudo-familial communities amongst their “sister” Dollies and GI “brothers”. The familial language used evidences the creation of mock-sibling relationships ‘on par with ‘family or blood ties’<sup>42</sup>, and subsequently a ‘collective identity’<sup>43</sup> which the women credit in providing social enrichment and a sense of belonging not offered to them in civilian life. Whilst the creation of ‘strong friendships’<sup>44</sup> are acknowledged in Duff’s work, they are minimised as a necessity used to ‘cope with their situations’<sup>45</sup>. Elsewhere in the literature, these relationships are completely neglected, despite their frequent appearance within oral and written accounts. Iterations of these relationships continue via online communities, evidencing their significance to the women at the time, as well as the continuing enrichment that they provide the Dollies today.

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Kit Sparrow Cotton’, The Donut Dollies, 26 June 2022 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-donut-dollie-kit-sparrow-cotton/>> [accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>42</sup> Nina Graeger, ‘Brothers in Arms: Kinship, gender and military organizations’ in *Kinship in International Relations*, ed. by K. Haugevik, I. B. Neumann (Routledge, 2018), pp. 81-100 (p. 83).

<sup>43</sup> Kyler Clarke Zeleny, ‘Amateur Archives: The Uses of Public and Private Archives in a Digital World’, *The International Journal of the Image*, 3, 7 (2016), pp. 33-44 (p. 36).

<sup>44</sup> Amy Louise Duff, ‘Escapism, normality and domesticity in Vietnam: A re-examination of women’s lives in the Vietnam War (unpublished masters thesis, University of Canterbury, 2018), p. 83 <<https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/7a47bbf0-cb97-4552-9f4e-6c2a871c4817/content>> [accessed 24 April 2024].

<sup>45</sup> Duff, ‘Escapism, normality and domesticity in Vietnam’, p. 84.

The construction of fictive sisterhood secured the Dollies' understanding of self and place during their time in Vietnam. The frequency with which sisterhood and 'camaraderie'<sup>46</sup> are mentioned throughout accounts are testament to the centrality of 'familial kinship ties'<sup>47</sup> within the women's sense of satisfaction, security, and pride. Justine Lee and Evelyn Jacobs state:

*'We had majored in different areas of study, had different personalities, different appearances and different beliefs, but we all made the same choice'*<sup>48</sup>.

*'We shared a unique bond with all our Dolly sisters, no matter what year we served'*<sup>49</sup>.

The collective identity and sense of unanimity that developed, evidenced by the use of 'we', was based upon their 'choice' to be part of the SRAO, which superseded apparent differences and created a sorority rooted in their unique situation. This transcending of time, physical proximity, and blood relation indicates the creation of 'imagined communities and ways of belonging'<sup>50</sup> wherein the nature of the Dollies sisterhood was defined not just by the fruitfulness of interpersonal friendship but by the distinct specificity of their situation as minority factions of women in a male-dominated environment<sup>51</sup>. This unanimous self-identification as a bonded sisterhood 'offer(ed) a comforting collective script'<sup>52</sup> and secured the basis for an egalitarian sorority which reflected the Dollies' individual decisions to serve in the war. The Dollies' sisterhood functioned as an alternative neo-familial unit which was constructed upon their autonomous decisions to partake in war and therefore challenged 'the

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<sup>46</sup> Skip Vaughan, "Donut Dollie' Brought Smiles to Troops in Vietnam", U.S. Department of Defence, 8 September 2021 <<https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/Story/Article/2767760/donut-dollie-brought-smiles-to-troops-in-vietnam/>>[accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>47</sup> Kathleen Ryan, 'Beyond Kinship: Constructing Family Through Military Service', *Oral History Forum*, 29 (2009), pp. 1-36, (p. 1).

<sup>48</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Justin Lee (Lewis) Moyer', The Donut Dollies, 5 June 2020 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-donut-dollie-justine-lee-lewis-moyer/>>[accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>49</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Evelyn Safford Jacobs', The Donut Dollies, 18 March 2022 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-red-cross-donut-dollie-evelyn-safford-jacobs/>>[accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>50</sup> Svetlana Boym, Restorative Nostalgia: Conspiracies and Return to Origins in *The Future Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), p. 42.

<sup>51</sup> Paige Gulley, "'After all, who takes care of the Red Cross's morale?": The Experiences of American Red Cross Clubmobile Women during World War II', (unpublished masters thesis, Chapman University, 2020) p. 99 <[https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=war\\_and\\_society\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=war_and_society_theses)>[accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>52</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 42.

patriarchal logic of marriage as the normative model of kinship'<sup>53</sup>. This collective identification ultimately allowed these women to define themselves according to their co-engaged service in the war, providing alternative systems of belonging to that which is offered in civilian life.

Furthermore, the construction of familial units is merited by the Dollies for allowing them to breach spaces ordinarily inaccessible to women. Jeanne Christie claimed the Dollies to be:

*'Exclusive self-managing teams who went where others feared to go. We broke barriers and the standards for what the next generation of women could do.'*<sup>54</sup>

Christie exhibits pride in the women's collective identity and credits the communal nature of their units for their success in transgressing gendered 'barriers'. These sororities provided the unanimity and confidence needed to move between gendered spaces, and challenge behavioural expectations. Abrahams suggests that community participation is one method by which women have been able to successfully engage in 'service for the betterment of themselves (...) and their communities'<sup>55</sup>. Franks reflects similar sentiments in her work on fictive kin amongst female nurses in Vietnam which she claims helped to 'challenge the gender norms that permeated the 20th century military'<sup>56</sup>. Whilst her writing speaks about nurses, their existence as a minority female faction situated amongst GIs, reflects that of the Dollies. Franks argues that it was their existence as a galvanised 'community of women'<sup>57</sup> which allowed them the security to fruitfully transgress gender boundaries in a 'place not making way for women'<sup>58</sup>. In this way, the Dollies' experience within all-female sororities was both an expression and facilitator of their autonomy.

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<sup>53</sup> Shelley Eversley, Michelle Habell-Pallan, 'Introductive: The 1970s', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 4.43 (2015), pp. 14-30 (p. 18).

<sup>54</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Jeanne "Sam" Bokina Christie', The Donut Dollies, 18 August 2017 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-jeanne-sam-bokina-christie/>> [accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>55</sup> Naomi Abrahams, 'Negotiating Power, Identity, Family, and Community: Women's Community Participations', *Gender and Society*, 6.10 (1996), pp. 768-796 (p. 768).

<sup>56</sup> Cassie Franks, 'Second Mothers: Fictive Kinship and Patriotic Feminism in the Army Nurse Corps, 1917-1975', (unpublished masters thesis, Colorado State University, 2022), p. 1 <<https://api.mountainscholar.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/6d4cb70a-1825-4e1c-9855-b0c1f0b04abc/content>> [accessed 19 April 2024].

<sup>57</sup> Franks, 'Second Mothers', p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> 'Oral Histories: "Donut Dolly Camilla Meyerson"', C-SPAN.

Relationships between the Dollies and GIs reflect similar constructions. Evelyn Jacobs recalls:

*'We were like big sisters to those 18-19 year old kids. It changed our lives forever, just like it changed theirs'*<sup>59</sup>.

Although this reference to themselves as 'big sisters' occurs regularly, it relates more significantly to the age difference between them rather than any non-reciprocal emotional dependence. Terry Lee Harmon describes how 'the GIs loved the Donut Dollies and we loved them'<sup>60</sup>, with Camilla Meyerson claiming 'these are my brothers and will always be my brothers'<sup>61</sup>. Collective identifiers such as 'we' are replaced by 'them', indicating that these relationships provided them external comfort, rather than collective solidarity. Nevertheless, the evidenced intimacy displays mutual emotional bonding between them, and moves these relationships beyond the performance of emotional labour in providing genuine fulfilment to the Dollies. These pseudo-familial units often functioned to soothe feelings of 'rootlessness'<sup>62</sup> present among both parties, through providing familiarity. Marcy Beyer describes cooking alongside the troops:

*'With the other guys and me and some of the other service women - it just made for a real nice homelike evening kitchen doing something familiar.'*<sup>63</sup>

Meyerson's recollections evidence a comforting sense of familial belonging which relied upon a nostalgia for the 'family-centred culture' of cold war America<sup>64</sup>. With 78% of households built around nuclear family units in 1950<sup>65</sup>, during the Dollies' childhood, the imitation of domestic families provided a sense of comfort. However, these unorthodox social structures differed from the nuclear home in that they consisted of young men and women operating as

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<sup>59</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Evelyn Safford Jacobs', The Donut Dollies.

<sup>60</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Terry Lee Harmon', The Donut Dollies, November 10 2017 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-terry-lee-harmon/>> [accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>61</sup> 'Oral Histories: "Donut Dolly Camilla Meyerson"', C-SPAN.

<sup>62</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, 2008) p. 161.

<sup>63</sup> 'Marcy G. Beyer Interview', Morehead State University, 31 May 1998 <[https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1158&context=vietnam\\_war\\_oral\\_history](https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1158&context=vietnam_war_oral_history)> [accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>64</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, p. 157.

<sup>65</sup> James R. Wetzel, 'American families: 75 years of change', *Monthly Labour Review*, 3.113 (1990), pp. 4-13, (p. 7).

brothers and sisters rather than hierarchically as mothers, fathers, and children; bonded by shared experience rather than blood. The construction of fictive kin between the Dollies and GIs employed a 'blend of progressive and traditional elements'<sup>66</sup>, which simultaneously replicated, and yet transgressed the nuclear family. Cunningham argues that fictive kinship in modern America functions to 'replace the social values the nuclear family is no longer providing'<sup>67</sup>. Within this context, the 'patriarchal' values upon which the American family was formed<sup>68</sup>, were replaced by shared experience and yearning for comfort. These relationships were not necessarily the 'work of domesticity'<sup>69</sup>, as described by Stur, but rather mutually beneficial social ties which offered the Dollies an alternative sense of belonging to that present in Cold-War America.

Penni Evans states that previous to deployment:

*'I was very much a square peg trying to be fitted into a round hole. I have made my life meaningful and have shared much of who I am that has come from Vietnam'*<sup>70</sup>.

This statement identifies pseudo-families as granting alternative ways of belonging whilst remaining within the bounds of social acceptability. They were a way in which women who didn't feel they conformed to contemporary social ideals 'simultaneously incorporated and upheld, critiqued and challenged dominant cultural images'<sup>71</sup>. Their experience allowed them to depart from the social constrictions of Cold-War America, whilst also receiving comfort from them.

This 'support (and) the love' that rendered the Dollie experience so 'positive and special'<sup>72</sup>, not only enabled agency and fulfilment in Vietnam but have been sustained through time.

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<sup>66</sup> Monika Zychlinska, 'Heroines of Compassion and National Consolers: The Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation and the Politics of Memory', *Journal of American Studies*, 3.56 (2022), pp. 447-482, (p. 452).

<sup>67</sup> Laura Cunningham, 'Fictive Kinship in an American Subculture: "We are Our Brother's Keeper"', *Academia.edu*, pp. 1-26, (p. 3).

<sup>68</sup> Daphne Spain, 'Women's Rights and Gendered Spaces in 1970s Boston', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 32.1 (2011), pp. 152-178.

<sup>69</sup> Heather Stur, *Beyond Comat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 76.

<sup>70</sup> '33. Donut Dollies', *Batting the Breeze*, 15 June 2023 <<https://www.battingthebreeze.com/donut-dollies/#transcript>> [accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>71</sup> Julie Peteet, 'Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone', *Signs*, 1.23 (1997), pp. 103-129 (p. 110).

<sup>72</sup> '33. Donut Dollies', *Batting the Breeze*.

Across the examined amateur archives, the Dollies speak of reunions that have taken place. Penni Evans describes:

*'All of these women, some of them I knew in-country and most of 'em I didn't, and they're ... talking about my thoughts and my feelings (...) And I'm going "Oh my god, I'm not alone". And I cried that night. Not easily, not easy tears, in the arms of two of my Donut Dolly sisters'*<sup>73</sup>

The occurrence of these reunions is testament to the longevity of sisterhood as an established social structure rather than temporary co-dependence. They evidence the sustained importance of sorority in these women's' identities but also the way in which these relationships have taken on new meaning in old age. They now function to psychologically process resurfaced trauma, constituting relationships which are 'long-lasting, intimate and ones that could be relied on'<sup>74</sup> for emotional wellbeing. Amateur archives function today as 'digitally mediated systems of belonging'<sup>75</sup> which evidence and facilitate the continuation of important social enrichment.

The agency, support, and fulfilment provided by fictive kinship remain today as a way for these women find place and community, whilst also functioning to verify fictive kin as a core tenet of the Dollies' identity and experience whilst stationed in-country. The existence of these social structures exposes moments of support, comfort, and solidarity that occurred within their service, challenging overarching narratives of suffering. The Dollies asserted agency in their ability to establish unorthodox relationships as a result of their independent experiences, subsequently achieving social enrichment, community, and sense of place in the process.

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<sup>73</sup> '33. Donut Dollies', *Batting the Breeze*.

<sup>74</sup> Liz Brewster, Brigit McWade, Samuel J. A. Clark, 'A point of connection? Wellbeing, the veteran identity and older adults', *Ageing and Society*, 41 (2021), pp. 1984-2005 (p. 1988).

<sup>75</sup> Brady Robards, 'Belonging and Neo-Tribalism on Social Media Site Reddit' in *Neo-Tribes: Consumption, Leisure and Tourism* ed. by Anne Hardy, Andy Bennet, Brady Robards (Springer, 2018), pp. 187-206 (p. 189).

## **Chapter 2: Rule Breaking and Romance**

Familial relationships were often supplemented with romantic or sexual connections which served a gratifying purpose for individual Dollies, rather than contributing to a collective sense of contentment. Popular culture and literature often characterise the Dollies primarily by their supposed moral “purity”, embodied frequently in their depiction as virginal ‘angels’<sup>76</sup>. As suggested by Christopher, the women underwent an ‘indoctrination into how to be “ladylike”’ during their training in which they were required to ‘serve men selflessly’<sup>77</sup>. In stating this, Christopher suggests that these restrictive conservative values were successfully internalised by the Dollies. First-hand accounts and images instead evidence the eager engagement of the women in illicit relationships which defy their intended purpose as sexless ‘pal(s) rather than a paramour’<sup>78</sup>. Evidence of these relationships challenges narratives of “purity”, as well as revealing instances of instigation and therefore autonomy in the Dollies’ desire for connection.

Dating was heavily ‘frowned upon by the Red Cross’<sup>79</sup>, with ‘strict orders against impropriety’<sup>80</sup>. Despite this, sexual and romantic engagement were commonplace and visible. Penni Evans stated:

*‘I know some of the girls dated some of the men that they met over there and at least fifteen married men that they met in Vietnam and most of them are still married’<sup>81</sup>.*

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<sup>76</sup> Kim Heikkila, ‘Review: Sisterhood of War: Women in Vietnam’, *Minnesota Historical Society*, 208 (2011), pp. 385-387 (p. 386).

<sup>77</sup> 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*, 1.3 (1989), pp. 33-45 (p. 38).

<sup>78</sup> Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 79.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Penni Evans’, *The Donut Dollies*, 10 Mark 2017 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/dd-penni-evans/>> [accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>80</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, p. 91.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Penni Evans’, *The Donut Dollies*.

'Dating' was a known practice in Vietnam, and constituted direct defiance of Red Cross guidelines, with Dollies instead prioritising light-hearted fun and emotional wellbeing. The longevity of many of these relationships is testament to the enriching and reciprocal nature of them; evidencing the agency of many of the Dollies in pursuing satisfying relationships which catered to their own needs. Patty Fortenberry states:

*'Thank God I married a soldier whom I met there at that time because he completely understands what it all meant to me'*<sup>82</sup>.

Fortenberry not only exposes her experience as a gateway to new social connections, but challenges the assertion that Dollies were forced to 'subordinate their own needs to the needs of others'<sup>83</sup>. She intentionally breached guidelines to seek a relationship with another person who could appropriately emotionally engage with her. Overtly stated consent in these relationships refutes assertions of helpless subjectivity and instead evidences their willing instigation in establishing romantic connections. Their enthusiastic participation in extra-platonic relationships can be further evidenced in the images below:

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<sup>82</sup> Patty Fortenberry, 'I too was a Donut Dolly in Vietnam (...)', 3 April 2015 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/>> [accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>83</sup> Christopher, "I Never Really Became A Woman Veteran Until... I Saw the Wall", p. 38.



**FIGURE 1 MARGO SMITH, 1970.**

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<sup>84</sup> Jeff Dentice, 'Docs Donut Dollie Tribute', war-veterans.org, n.d. < <https://www.war-veterans.org/DonutDollie.htm> > [accessed 20 April 2024].



**FIGURE 2 LOU RUNDLE AT FIREBASE GIBALTAR.**

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Although the nature of the relationships pictured above are unknown, it is likely that they exceed the platonic, or at least display a playfulness which does not abide by conservative Red Cross regulations. The pair in the first image has caught the attention of those surrounding them; possibly due to the position in which they are sat. The embrace may suggest a perceived humorous inversion of gender roles which, even if non-romantic in nature, indicates the illicit transgression of formality intended by the Red Cross. The taking of a photograph 'which is always willed'<sup>86</sup>, in this context reveals intentionality and complicity within relationships in Vietnam that have otherwise been considered threatening and non-consensual<sup>87</sup>. As stated by Sontag, 'it hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as the photographs get taken and are cherished'<sup>88</sup>. The fact that these images were taken on

<sup>85</sup> The Donut Dollies, Facebook, 12 November 2018  
<<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1354266744704892&set=pb.100063517330497.-2207520000>> [accessed 24 April 2024].

<sup>86</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Penguin, 1979), p. 42.

<sup>87</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, p. 95.

<sup>88</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 8.

Dollie cameras, kept, and re-shared publicly by them is testament to the perceived sentimentality and therefore consensual nature of these relationships.

Apparent fears of Dollie sexuality within Red Cross policy further evidence the frequency of extra-platonic relations between the Dollies and troops. The Red Cross often transferred the women at least once during their deployment ‘to discourage romantic relationships with GIs’<sup>89</sup>, and threatened to discharge a Dollie should she ‘place(d) herself into a sexually compromising position’<sup>90</sup>. The existence of these policies is ample evidence that romantic and sexual relationships were not uncommon. Stur discusses this tension surrounding Dollie sexuality within the broader context of national crisis: ‘If the girl next door gave up her purity (...) then what was American fighting for?’<sup>91</sup>. However, when ‘looking at war through women’s eyes’<sup>92</sup> and re-centring the Dollies experiences, such policies of sexual containment are more significantly indicative of their strong-willed pursuit of connection. The number of relationships that persevered, and therefore the number of Dollies that resisted these restrictions, evidence the individual autonomy enacted by the Dollies in service of themselves. With the voices of Dollies so central to this interpretation, it must be transparently noted that some Dollies dislike associations of romance with their service. Camilla Meyerson stated, about a theatre production based upon the Dollies:

*‘It was romance here and romance there. I thought, I do not want to be a part of anything that is represented in that way.’*<sup>93</sup>

However, it is this difference in approaches to issues like romantic relationships which exposes the Dollies’ agency in enacting individual preference. Exposure of overtly expressed opinion either way serves to humanise them as a varied group of individuals acting based upon differing inclinations, rather than homogenously falling victim to Red Cross ‘indoctrination’.

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<sup>89</sup> Jessica M. Frazier, ‘Women and the US War in Vietnam’, *American History* (2019), pp. 1-18 (p. 6).

<sup>90</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, p. 91.

<sup>91</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, p. 68.

<sup>92</sup> Francoise Thebaud, ‘Understanding twentieth-century wars through women and gender: forty years of historiography’, 39 (2014), pp. 152-178 (p. 155).

<sup>93</sup> ‘Oral Histories: “Donut Dolly Camilla Meyerson”, C-SPAN, 28 July 2017 <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?510733-1/donut-dolly-camilla-meyerson-oral-history-interview>> [accessed 21 April 2024].

It also must be recognised that there were a considerable number of cases of harassment and assault faced by the Dollies which must not be misconstrued as consensual relations. However, the way in which the issue of sexual abuse has been discussed in the scholarship seeks to victimise the Dollies in a manner with which they do not identify. Stur claims that the Dollies ‘became objects of illicit male desire and sexual frustration’<sup>94</sup>, whilst Christopher similarly describes a ‘pattern of subordination of women’s needs to men’s demands’<sup>95</sup> with regards to sexual and emotional servitude. Narratives such as this follow a familiar pattern within scholarship which portrays women at war ‘through the lens of victimhood’<sup>96</sup>, informed by the entrenched belief in their ‘intrinsically weak and helpless’<sup>97</sup> nature, despite considerable assertions by the Dollies themselves to the contrary. A report published in 1997 revealed that 72.6% of the negative post-war psychological effects that female veterans experienced in Vietnam were due to ‘low support from family and friends at homecoming’ and ‘a rejecting reception by society’, with 10.4% associated with sexual trauma<sup>98</sup>. It is likely that these figures are under-representative of sexual misconduct, due to having to report traumatic experiences ‘face to face with an interviewer’<sup>99</sup>. However, such an extreme disparity cannot be dismissed, particularly when analysed in conjunction with testimonies which reflect similar sentiments. It denies the predominantly positive nature of GI-Dollie relations which provided these women with meaning and satisfaction by their own admission. Judy Taloe states, in direct contrast to existing scholarship:

*‘We **wanted** to be there and we loved the GIs with all our hearts! We got so physically and mentally tired from our work, but we **never** tired of the men.’<sup>100</sup>.*

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<sup>94</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, p. 69.

<sup>95</sup> Christopher, “‘I Never Really Became A Woman Veteran Until... I Saw the Wall’”, p. 4.

<sup>96</sup> Medina Haeri, Nadine Puechguirbal, ‘From helplessness to agency: examining the plurality of women’s experiences in armed conflict’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, 877 (2010), pp. 103-122 (p. 106).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Alan Fontana, Linda Spoonster Schwartz, Robert Rosenheck, ‘Posttraumatic Stress Disorder among Female Vietnam veterans: A Causal Model of Etiology’, *Am J Public Health*, 2.87 (1997), pp. 169-175 (p. 173).

<sup>99</sup> Fontana, Schwartz, Rosenheck, ‘Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Female Vietnam veterans’, p. 170.

<sup>100</sup> ‘Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Jud Nichols Tayloe’, The Donut Dollies, 29 May 2020 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-donut-dollie-judy-nichols-tayloe/>> [accessed 21 April 2024].

Whilst sexual harassment and assault is mentioned in several examined narratives, positive and consensual relationships overwhelmingly dominate accounts.

Furthermore, statistics gathered in 1978 expose that 44% of sampled women had experienced an attempted or actual rape in their lifetime in America<sup>101</sup>. Horrific statistics though these are, they do suggest the experience of the Dollies in Vietnam to be symptomatic of broader contemporary gendered relations, rather than due to Dollies' supposed performance of 'traditional gender and sexual ideals'<sup>102</sup>. Wartime sexual violence must not be underplayed regardless of its prevalence. However, in the case of American women in conflict, there is a considerable lack of scholarship which explores the nuance of their experiences and situates women as holistic historical actors, rather than one-dimensional, ever-despairing victims of patriarchy. The effects of victimising women in warzones against their overtly stated will serve as a source of epistemological oppression; marking women's place in history as a homogenous and perpetually persecuted mass, which ultimately denies their agency.<sup>103</sup> Accusations of irony and naivety<sup>104</sup> which purportedly blind the Dollies from their own lived experiences are invalidating and perpetuate the very systems of oppression that they seek to criticise. Many of the Dollies intentionally sought out romantic connection and emotional engagement which benefited them as individuals, displaying agency in their rejection of constrictive Red Cross guidelines in the process.

Core justifications for the victimisation of the Donut Dollies have been grounded in assertions of overwhelming sexual harassment, and a "heroic" neglect of their own emotional needs in their servitude of the troops. By the Dollies' own repeatedly stated admission, this narrative is misrepresentative of their experience. The Dollies' willingness to breach guidelines demonstrates autonomous defiance in the name of social and emotional satisfaction. Where nostalgia may occlude the accuracy of statements made by the Dollies, contemporary images

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<sup>101</sup> Diane E. H. Russell, Nancy Howell, 'The Prevalence of Rape in the United States Revisited', *Signs*, 4.8 (1983), pp. 688-695 (p. 690).

<sup>102</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, p. 69.

<sup>103</sup> Haeri, Puechguirbal, 'From helplessness to agency', p. 104.

<sup>104</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, p. 72.

and Red Cross policy reinforce them. Evidence of resistance to sexual containment disputes victimised and virginal imagery of the Dollies which prevails in popular culture and scholarship, and instead reveals humanised and holistic narratives.

### **Chapter 3: ‘The Supportive Gals in Blue’: Uniform and Identity Construction**

The power blue A-line dresses for which the ‘supportive gals in blue’<sup>105</sup> became so recognisable, were intended by the Red Cross to convey the women as ‘healers and cheerleaders’<sup>106</sup>, ‘symbols of purity and goodness’<sup>107</sup>. To maintain this precarious image, strict guidelines were instated regarding appearance and conduct. Varying levels of compliance with these regulations, indicated in first-hand accounts and images, evidence the Dollies’ changing and alternative understandings of identity and gender expression. As stated by Parsa, ‘uniform, given its distinctive materiality on the surface, creates visually recognizable categories of people’<sup>108</sup>. The women’s resistance to, and varied attitudes toward, this visual categorisation are indications of expressed autonomy over their own identity construction.

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<sup>105</sup> ‘Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Justine Lee (Lewis) Moyer, The Donut Dollies, 5 June 2020 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-donut-dollie-justine-lee-lewis-moyer/>> [accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>106</sup> Duff, Amy Louise, ‘Escapism, normality and domesticity in Vietnam: A re-examination of women’s lives in the Vietnam War (unpublished masters thesis, University of Canterbury, 2018), p. 6 <<https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/7a47bbf0-cb97-4552-9f4e-6c2a871c4817/content>> [accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>107</sup> Doug Bradley, ‘Vietnam’s Donut Dollies: Unsung, They Served, Too’, *Next Avenue*, 9 December 2014 <<https://www.nextavenue.org/vietnams-donut-dollies-unsung-they-served-too/>> [accessed 22 April 2024].

<sup>108</sup> Amin Parsa, ‘Military Uniform and Lethal Targeting’ in *International Law on Armed Conflict in Uniform: Clothing and Discipline in the Modern World* ed. by Jane Tynan, Lisa Godson (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), pp. 239-254 (p. 241).

Acceptance letters stated that their 'uniform skirt must be sufficiently long enough to cover the kneecap' and that 'uniforms cannot be worn as tightly as some current styles advocate'<sup>109</sup>. Such directives indicate an attempt to construct a 'wholesome, girlish, and chaste'<sup>110</sup> aesthetic which distanced the women from the 'high style'<sup>111</sup> modern American woman. The image below captures the Dollies during training, illustrating the immaculate performance of femininity expected of them. It evidences the implementation of an 'enormous amount of discipline' to render these women 'ornamented surface(s)' for the visual consumption of GIs<sup>112</sup>.



**FIGURE 3 DOLLIES DURING TRAINING.**

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However, the way in which the Dollies spoke of, and wore, their uniforms in-situ, exposes a considerable rift between the intended image and the Dollies' understanding of their own

<sup>109</sup> 'The Donut Dollies', Facebook, 8 March 2022

<[https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2376387899159433&set=ecnf.100063517330497&locale=en\\_GB](https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2376387899159433&set=ecnf.100063517330497&locale=en_GB)> [accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>110</sup> Heather Stur, 'Perfume and lipstick in the boonies: Red Cross SRAO and the Vietnam War', *A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, 2.1 (2008), pp. 151-165 (p. 152).

<sup>111</sup> Texas Tech University, 'The Vietnam Center & Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive', n.d.

<<https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/images.php?img=/images/1645/16450116036B.pdf>> [accessed 23 April 2024].

<sup>112</sup> Angela King, 'The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5 (2004), pp. 29-39 (p. 36).

<sup>113</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Evelyn Safford Jacobs', The Donut Dollies, 18 March 2022 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-red-cross-donut-dollie-evelyn-safford-jacobs/>> [accessed 24 April 2024].

identity. Camilla Meyerson explains: 'we had a dress uniform, we wore the heels, we had a hat and gloves', but that when 'in-country and the temperature is a hundred and five', these regulations were neglected in the name of practicality'<sup>114</sup>. Paula Haley recounts having to 'get up very early, put on the skimpy uniform (and) rush to the helicopter pad'<sup>115</sup>, with skimpy, in this context, referencing the delicate and inadequate nature of their uniforms. The Dollies express disdain for the 'silly'<sup>116</sup> clothing provided, favouring their ability to operate physically within their environment 'deep in the jungle, often under extremely dangerous circumstances'<sup>117</sup>. Their distaste indicates a lack of identification with the image of domesticated 'girl next door'<sup>118</sup>, resulting in the open flouting of these regulations, evidenced in images such as these:

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<sup>114</sup> 'Oral Histories: "Donut Dolly Camilla Meyerson"', C-SPAN, 28 July 2017 <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?510733-1/donut-dolly-camilla-meyerson-oral-history-interview>>[accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>115</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Paula Wright Haley', The Donut Dollies, 17 July 2020 <<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-donut-dollie-paula-wright-haley/>> [accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>116</sup> '33. Donut Dollies', Batting the Breeze, 15 June 2023 <<https://www.battingthebreeze.com/donut-dollies/#transcript>> [accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>117</sup> Anica Pless Kaiser, Daniel H. Kabat, Avron Spiro III, Eve H. Davison, Jeanne Mager Stellman, 'Women at war: The crucible of Vietnam', *SSM - Population Health*, 3 (2017), pp. 236-224 (p. 237).

<sup>118</sup> Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 68.



**FIGURE 4 DOLLIES PICTURED UNKNOWN**



**FIGURE 5 PENNI EVANS, 1970/71.**

<sup>119</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Penni Evans', The Donut Dollies, 10 March 2017 < <https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/dd-penni-evans/> > [accessed 20 April 2024]. /

<sup>120</sup> Dentice, Jeff, 'Docs Donut Dollie Tribute', war-veterans.org, n.d. < <https://www.war-veterans.org/DonutDollie.htm> > [accessed 20 April 2024].

With their dresses worn well above the knee, uniforms hidden under non-regulation apparel, and hair worn below the collar, which was also strictly against Red Cross guidelines<sup>121</sup>, these Dollies openly breached 'conservative'<sup>122</sup> Red Cross regulations. The significant visual contrast between images shown of Dollies in training versus those taken in-country is testament to the disparity between Red Cross ideology and Dollies' self-identification. Considering 'one's choice of dress, hairstyles, and self-fashioning as part of one's display of gender to the outside world'<sup>123</sup>, the decision to breach uniform rules, reflected their own sense of self and femininity; one which was influenced more by the 'current styles'<sup>124</sup> of 1970s America. According to Holland, visual 'identities are hardwon standpoints that (...) make at least a modicum of self-direction possible'<sup>125</sup>. Through their defiant aesthetic 'self-fashioning', these women exerted agency and 'self-direction'<sup>126</sup> over their own image to appropriately navigate their surroundings and reject images of purity and domesticity.

However, the issue becomes more nuanced when considering Dollies' specific notions of self-definition. Stur suggests that the actualities of the Dollie experience expose the 'disconnect between the ideals of Cold War domesticity and the realities of social changes taking place in the United States'<sup>127</sup>. However, the Dollies' various constructions of identity do not lie neatly on either side of this binary. The specificity of their situation in Vietnam resulted in an almost unanimous rejection of the 'conservative'<sup>128</sup> ideals that their uniform represented, in some way. However, it must be noted that beyond this, the intervention of individual autonomy over their expressed identities means that constructions of femininity were varied across the 700 Dollies. Nevertheless, the sources reveal recurring themes which can be identified as core aspects of a shared expression of identity.

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<sup>121</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, p. 79.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Betty Luther Hillman, "'The Clothes I Wear Help Me to Known My Own Power": The Politics of Gender Presentation in the Era of Women's Liberation', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 2.34 (2013), pp. 155-185 (p. 157).

<sup>124</sup> 'The Donut Dollies', Facebook, 8 March 2022

<[https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2376387899159433&set=ecnf.100063517330497&locale=en\\_GB](https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2376387899159433&set=ecnf.100063517330497&locale=en_GB)> [accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>125</sup> Dorothy Holland, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Heather Stur, *America and the Vietnam War: Re-Examining the Culture and History of a Generation* (Routledge, 2009), p. 80.

<sup>128</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, p. 79.

Paula Haley states that on return to the US:

*'I was totally aware of what I had missed, no fancy anything and I had forgotten what I used to be'*<sup>129</sup>.

Haley's description suggests feelings of alienation regarding her reintegration into American society. The absence of 'fancy anything' delineates her lack of commodity and groomed appearance to be central to Haley's feelings of estrangement. Reduced use of makeup and 'civilian clothes', due to their situation in a combat-zone, rendered them eventually somewhat irrelevant to many of the Dollies' constructions of self and femininity. Many Dollies express pride in their difference to civilian women. Sheilla Rosenberg and Sherry Taylor state:

*'We were not your average American girl, but girls who were part of a new generation of women who wanted adventure, more freedom, recognition and authority!'*<sup>130</sup>

*'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'*<sup>131</sup>

Both women identify collective identity amongst their sisters, as well as their independence and autonomous involvement in public and political spheres, to be at the core of their identities as women. Notably, these statements were made retrospectively, lending these assertions the definition that they, at the time, likely could not clearly express. However, they provide a concise delineation of the specific niche of femininity which these women feel they inhabited and allow their voices to be heard regarding their own self-definition. Both women also exhibit public recognition to be particularly relevant to their sense of self. Often, the blue dresses are credited as a way in which that the Dollies became publicly visible. Whilst rejecting the conservative image that their uniforms were supposed to represent, the Dollies stated

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<sup>129</sup> 'Meet Paula Wright Haley', The Donut Dollies.

<sup>130</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Sheila Otto Rosenberg', The Donut Dollies, 1 December 2017 < <https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-sheila-otto-rosenberg/> > [accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>131</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Sherry Giles Cozzalio', The Donut Dollies, 3 November 2017 < <https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/ddd-sherry-giles-cozzalio-taylor/> > [accessed 21 April 2024].

awareness of the importance of them in securing safety and admiration. Camilla Meyerson states, citing her uniform:

*'I do not ever need to be a movie star, I know what it's like'*<sup>132</sup>,

and Nancy Calcese recalls, when attending a Christmas performance:

*'As everyone saw our uniforms, the entire audience stood up and applauded'*<sup>133</sup>.

Camilla further claims that upon her return to America, they would 'change and put on civilian clothes', leading to the consequent realisation that without it, 'you were no one'<sup>134</sup>; unrecognised by those around you. Wearing the iconic blue uniform ensured warm reception and revered status amongst the troops. Diane Love Crocker explains her awareness of the effect that the uniform had upon the GIs:

*'It meant the world to the men and we tried to wear our blue uniforms as often as we could.'*<sup>135</sup>

It is precisely the Dollies' awareness of this fact that renders their uniform a tool of power. Their understanding that 'being seen as an angel protected the women in some ways'<sup>136</sup>, as well as offering them flattery and admiration, meant that the women often played on this trope to successfully perform their job, and felt recognised in an era wherein women's labour often went 'unrecognized'<sup>137</sup>. The various recollections of the blue Dollie dress indicate the emergence of an alternative femininity which relied on practicality, belonging, and recognition, whilst rejecting Cold-War domestic ideals and remaining removed from mainstream "modern" expressions of femininity.

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<sup>132</sup> 'Oral Histories: "Donut Dolly Camilla Meyerson"', C-SPAN.

<sup>133</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Nancy Calcese', The Donut Dollies, 15 May 2020  
<<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-donut-dollie-nancy-calcese/>> [accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>134</sup> 'Oral Histories: "Donut Dolly Camilla Meyerson"', C-SPAN.

<sup>135</sup> 'Meet Red Cross Donut Dollie Diane Love Crocker', The Donut Dollies, 10 July 2020  
<<https://www.donutdollies.com/donut-dollie-detail/meet-donut-dollie-diane-love-crocker/>> [accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>136</sup> Kim Heikkila, 'Review: Sisterhood of War: Women in Vietnam', *Minnesota Historical Society*, 208 (2011), pp. 385-387 (p.386).

<sup>137</sup> Debra Pozega Osburn, *Invisible women in transitional times: The untold stories of working women in the 1950s* (unpublished masters dissertation, Michigan State University, 2001), Abstract  
<[https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Invisible\\_Women\\_in\\_Transitional\\_Times.html?id=\\_OtlfXCCI\\_OC&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Invisible_Women_in_Transitional_Times.html?id=_OtlfXCCI_OC&redir_esc=y)> [accessed 21 April 2024].

Interestingly, the Dollie dress has since developed a different significance in memory; coming to embody sisterhood and community. In recent reunions, the Dollies have attended dressed in their old uniforms or in blue items of clothing reminiscent of them.



**FIGURE 6 VIETNAM HELICOPTER PILOTS ASSOCIATION 39TH REUNION.**



**FIGURE 7 DOLLIE VETERANS DORSET AND MARY.**

The iconic blue of their uniforms has been reappropriated for commemorative and unifying purposes. As stated by Sawyer, 'The wearing of political colours is a significant statement of identity and/ or values. Such public displays help engender an emotional unity'<sup>141</sup>. Whilst these reunions do not constitute a political or social movement as such, the socially unifying effect remains the same. The powder blue, retrospectively, has become a point of contact and source of 'emotional unity' for the women. The Dollies have reappropriated an emblem of servitude into a representation of their sense of belonging. The colour blue has come to demarcate 'identity and commitment (...) at the level of personal, national, and international relationships'<sup>142</sup>; becoming an indicator of sorority which transcends time and distance. It also provides a compelling intervention on the influence of memory. Whilst the use of colour in social movements has been construed as 'a matter of nostalgia'<sup>143</sup>; and therefore, an inaccurate reflection of the subject matter that it references, the nostalgic element of this specific use of blue renders it of heightened importance. It enables the 'past to be brought into present focus'<sup>144</sup> on the Dollies' own terms; with emphasis on the elements that they deem to bring meaning into their lives. The wearing of representations of the uniforms in the present day constitutes a powerful reclamation of previously constricting ideals, exhibiting the exertion of agency, albeit unknowingly, over their own legacy.

An examination of the Dollies' attitudes surrounding their uniforms provides crucial insights into their own alternative constructions and understandings of identity. Through an interrogation of disobedience surrounding their uniforms, assertions of "purity" can be challenged; revealing a holistic view of their histories and allowing individual narratives of identity and empowerment to permeate into the scholarship on women in the Vietnam War.

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<sup>141</sup> Marian Sawyer, 'Wearing your Politics on your Sleeve: The Role of Political Colours in Social Movements', *Social Movement Studies*, 1.6 (2007), pp. 39-56 (p. 46).

<sup>142</sup> Hilda Kuper, 'Costume and Identity', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15 (1973), pp. 348-367 (p. 348).

<sup>143</sup> Sawyer, 'Wearing your Politics on your Sleeve', p. 53.

<sup>144</sup> Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut, 'Finding Meaning in Nostalgia', *Review of General Psychology*, 1.22 (2018), pp. 48-61 (p. 48).

## **Conclusion:**

The Donut Dollies have remained relatively unexplored within histories of 20<sup>th</sup> century conflict. Existing scholarship has examined them almost exclusively through the lens of victimhood; depicting them as polite, submissive, and subsequently abused emblems of patriarchal ideals. The work of Stur, Cassier, and Duff are predicated upon assumptions of victimhood, and therefore interpret their material according to this pre-conceived hypothesis. The Dollies' positivity has been construed as naivety, and sexual relationships blanketed as non-consensual. This dissertation has challenged these assertions by disproving the stated prevalence of these instances of suffering and evidencing the alternative ways in which the Dollies expressed agency both at the time, and today. Through approaching alternative source material, and removing my *own* assumptions of female victimhood, this research has offered a history which conveys and prioritises the lived experience of the Dollies through their eyes. The use of amateur archives has proved invaluable in approaching the topic from the 'ground up', enabling 'recognition of that which is often rendered invisible'<sup>145</sup>. They have provided a considerable volume and variety of previously unexamined source material, as well as contextualising it within their subjective importance to the Dollies themselves. The structure and subject matter of this dissertation has therefore been informed directly by the voices and assertions of the women involved; helping to both reveal their autonomy at the time and enable the amplification of their voices today.

Through an analysis of fictive kinship in Vietnam, a topic which has not yet been addressed in scholarship, unorthodox systems of belonging have been revealed, which enabled the women to gain confidence, security, and emotional fulfilment. Romantic relationships, though a more contentious and delicate issue, have been exposed as both a medium of defiance against Red Cross regulations, as well as a way in which the Dollies individually sought and achieved gratification. Instances of sexual harassment and assault, though undeniably present, have

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<sup>145</sup> Enloe, Cynthia, Anita Lacey, Thomas Gregory, 'Twenty-five years of Bananas, Beaches and Bases: A conversation with Cynthia Enloe', *Journal of Sociology*, 3 (2016), pp. 537-550 (p. 528).

been proven to be overly relied upon by Stur and Duff, to present broader narratives of subservience and victimhood. Chapter 3 revealed the Dollies' attitudes towards and levels of compliance with Red Cross uniform regulations, through which the creation of alternative identity constructions has been revealed. An analysis of online blogs and communities has also expanded the period of study to include examinations of the Dollies' extended veteran experience; allowing me to trace how the examined themes have changed in meaning over time and reinforcing the Dollies' testimonies by evidencing the persistence of fictive kinships, romantic relationships, and collective identities. The sites themselves enable the Dollies to establish their own legacies and reclaim control over discourse relating to their experience. Therefore, the use of them within this research has allowed these empowering discourses to permeate into scholarship.

By paying attention to the microscopic, daily negotiations of the Dollies' lives such as their uniform and social lives, a broader and more holistic understanding of the Dollies as autonomous and well-rounded people has been revealed. Rather than viewing memory and nostalgia as a hindrance within this investigation, they have been used to contextualise the source-base; constructing interpretations which have been strengthened through the supplementation of source types such as contemporary images. This dissertation advocates for the importance of taking seriously the retrospective accounts of, and discourses among, women who have experienced conflict more generally. Through the use of amateur archives, and a questioning of female archetypes of victimhood, female agency under conflict can be exposed and amplified in accordance with their will.



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