

Women Marines in Vietnam

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Companion to greater opportunity is greater responsibility and for women in the Marine Corps in the 1960s that meant service in the war torn Republic of Vietnam. The announcement was made and plans were set in 1967 for one officer and nine enlisted women to fill desk billets with the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), based in Saigon. Generally, they were to work with the Marine Corps Personnel Section on the staff of the Commander, Naval forces, Vietnam. The section provided administrative support to Marines assigned as far north as the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Later, another officer billet was added and Lieutenant Colonels Ruth J. O'Holleran and Ruth F. Reinholz eventually served as historians with the Military History Branch, Secretary Joint Staff, MACV.

Care was taken to select mature, stable WMs who could be expected to adapt to strange surroundings and cope in an emergency. Interested women Marines were asked to volunteer by notifying their commanding officer or by indicating their desire to serve in Vietnam on their fitness reports. There was no shortage of volunteers, but not all met the criteria. Then there were a number of women who would willingly accept, but not volunteer for orders to a combat zone. Theoretically, all WMs who served in Vietnam were volunteers in that nearly all had expressed their willingness to go and none objected. When Master Sergeant Bridget V. Connolly was asked what made her volunteer for duty in Saigon, she laughed and said, "Who volunteered? I received my orders in the guard mail." She became a legitimate volunteer when her initial tour ended and she extended for an additional six months.

The first woman Marine to report to Vietnam for duty was Master Sergeant Barbara J. Dulinsky, who arrived on 18 March 1967. After an 18-hour flight, she landed at dusk at Bien Hoa, about 30 miles north of Saigon. Travel

was restricted after dark on the unsecure roads, so she was billeted overnight at the airfield. The next morning she was taken by bus and armed escort to Koeppler Compound in Saigon and there her tour began with a security lecture. The briefing was not concerned with security of classified material as one might expect, but with security in day-to-day living in Vietnam, such as recognizing booby traps, and checking cabs upon entering to ensure there was a handle inside. Arrival procedures were similar for most WMs.

At first, the enlisted women were quartered in the Ambassador Hotel, and later they moved to the Plaza, a hotel-dormitory, two to a room. Women of other services and several hundred men called the Plaza home. By spring 1968, the enlisted women were moved to the Billings Bachelor Enlisted Quarters (BEQ), located near MACV Headquarters and Tan Son Nhut airbase.

Generally, the women officers were billeted in Le Qui Don, a hotel-like Bachelor Officers Quarters (BOQ). Company grade of officers were usually assigned two to a room; WMs and WAVES billeted together. Like the Plaza and Billings BEQ, Le Qui Don Hotel was air conditioned, but electricity was a sometime thing.

There were no eating facilities in either the Billings BEQ or the Le Qui Don BOQ. Most of the women cooked in their room on hot plates or with electric skillets. When the power was out, they managed with charcoal-grilled meals served by candlelight.

There were no laundry facilities, but for about \$15 a month, each woman hired a maid who cleaned her room and washed and pressed her uniforms. Before leaving the United States the women Marines were cautioned to bring an ample supply of nylons, sturdy cotton lingerie, and summer uniforms. Not only were these items scarce in the post exchange that catered to male troops, but the maids were unduly hard on them. Lieutenant Colonel Elaine E. Filkins

(later Davies) spoke of looking out her window to see the maid laundering her nylon stockings and lingerie in a creek by pounding them with rocks. The garments that survived were a mass of torn, short elastic threads. Girdles and bras were short lived "in the combat zone".

Nylon hosiery was luxury. Women of some services were even excused from wearing them when in uniform, a privilege not extended to women Marines. Vietnamese women were fascinated by the sheer stockings and Lieutenant Colonel Vera M. Jones told of walking down the streets of Saigon and being startled by the touch of a Vietnamese woman feeling her stockings.

The women were advised to arrive with four to six pairs of dress pumps for uniform wear because the streets were hard on shoes and repair service was unsatisfactory. In the "Information on Saigon" booklet provided each woman before leaving the United State was written, "...bring a dozen sets of heel lifts... Heels can easily be extracted with a pair of pliers and new ones inserted with little difficulty."

For the most part the WMs worked in Saigon, but on occasion duty took them outside the city. In January 1969, Captain Filkins, in a letter to the Director of Women Marines, wrote:

"In early December, Corporal Spaatz and I traveled to Da Nang with nearly 100 SRB/OQRs (service record books/officer qualification records) to conduct an audit of the service records of the men stationed in the north. The Army I Corps had been most kind in aiding us in our efforts to provide administrative assistance to our widely scattered men. Corporal Spaatz is a fine representative for the WMs with her professional handling of the audit. It was obvious that the men enjoyed the unfamiliar click of the female high heeled shoes. The weather was on our side so were able to wear the dress with pumps the entire visit."

When the weather was unusually wet or when the city was under attack, the women

wore utilities and oxfords. In addition the Army issued field uniforms, oxfords, and combat boots to any woman required to wear them for duty.

The Tet offensive of January-February 1968, a large scale enemy attack that disrupted the city, brought some changes to the lives of WMs in Saigon. At the time enlisted women were still quartered at the Plaza which received automatic weapons fire. Bus service to many of the BOWs and BEWs was cut off, confining the women to their quarters.

Captain Jones was unable to leave the Le Qui Don for a day and a half before bus service, with armed escorts, resumed. Excerpts of a letter from Captain Jones to Colonel Bishop told something of the situation:

3 February 1968. It's hard to believe that a war is going on around me. I sit here calmly typing this letter and yet can get up, walk to a window, and watch the helicopters making machine gun and rocket strikes in the area of the golf course which is about three blocks away. At night, I lie in bed and listen to the mortar rounds going off. The streets, which are normally crowded with traffic, are virtually bare.... MSgt Dulinsky, Cpl Hensley, and Cpl Wilson finally got into work this afternoon. Cpls Hensley and Wilson plan to spend the night.

Excerpts from a letter from Master Sergeant Dulinsky elaborated:

"9 February 1968. We are still on a 24-hour curfew, with all hands in utilities....MACV personnel (Women included) were bussed down to Koeppler compound and issued 3 pair of jungle fatigues and a pair of jungle boots.

Right now, most of us don't look the picture of 'the New Image.' Whew! Hardly! I can't determine at night, if I'm pooped from the work day or from carrying around these anvils tied to my feet called combat boots.

Our Young-uns (and me too inside) were scared,

but you'd have been proud of them. They turned to in the mess, cashiering, washing dishes, serving and clearing tables."

Although the Tet offensive kept the women from attending the celebration of the silver anniversary of the women Marines in Okinawa, they were not without a celebration. Thanks to a WAVE and male Marines, they had a cake in the office and the traditional cake cutting ceremony.

The command expected each person to work 60 productive hours a week. Time off was precious, and recreational facilities were limited. Bowling was a popular sport, and old American television shows were broadcast a few hours each evening. The city was often under curfew with the Americans back in their quarters by 2000 or 2200. Movies were available several nights a week in some of the BEQs and BOQs. A number of the women kept busy during their off-duty hours by working at the Armed Forces Television Station, helping at various orphanages, and visiting Vietnamese families. Captain Jones, the only woman Marine who attended Vietnamese language school, taught English to a class of Vietnamese policemen.

Captain Filkins, interested in an orphanage for blind girls, solicited soap, clothing, linens, toys, and supplies from the women Marine companies at home. In her letter she wrote,

"They are rather confined in their small, dark world of the orphanage so they seem quite thrilled when visitors come to see them....Many of these children are lucky if they are picked up and held for a few minutes each week."

One woman Marine in particular, Staff Sergeant Ermelinda Salazar (later Esquibel), who touched the lives of Vietnamese orphans, was nominated for the 1970 Unsung Heroine Award sponsored by the Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary, and was immortalized in a painting by Marine artist

Cliff Yound. During her 15 months in Adigon, Staff Sergeant Salazar essentially took over a MACV civic action project involving the St. Vincent de Paul orphanage.

In a letter dated 10 September 1969, to Gunnery Sergeant Helen a Dowd, she told of her work with the children:

"I don't remember if I mentioned to you that I had been working with the orphanage supported by MACV. It is not a big one - only 75 children ages from a few weeks old to about 11 or 12 years of age. They are precious and quite lively....This whole orphanage is taken care of by two Catholic sistersOne of them is rather advanced in age (about in her 60's) and the other is quite young and active. Still and all, Gunny, these two souls work themselves to death....The two sisters are Vietnamese who speak no English at all....And me? I know a limited number of broken phrases and words in Vietnamese... Since I've been working at the orphanage. I've had to overcome much repugnance. There's a lot of sickness and disease here in Vietnam....So when I say the orphanage it doesn't have the same connotation that it does back in the states where the children are well fed...and healthy for at least they have medical facilities and medicines available. These children have nothing! If the WM company is wondering about any projects for Christmas here is something you can think about. Anything and everything is needed."

Determined that these children would have a party, Staff Sergeant Salazar personally contacted Marine units for contributions, arranged a site and bus transportation, enlisted interested people to help, and wrapped individual gifts for each child. Her interest continued after the holidays and in spite of 11-hour workdays, six days a week, she was able to influence other Marines to follow her lead in working at the orphanage. Nominating her for the Unsung Heroine Award, her commanding officer wrote:

"Her unusual and untiring efforts to assist these otherwise forgotten children reflect great credit upon herself, the United States Marine Corps, this command, and the United States."

Women marines in Vietnam normally numbered eight or 10 enlisted women and one or two officers at any one time for a total of about 28 enlisted women and eight officers between 1967 and 1973. Their letters and interviews reveal their apprehension before arriving in Saigon, their satisfaction with their tour, and their increased sense, of being a Marine.

This is an excerpt from *A History of the Women Marines, 1946-1977*, by Colonel Mary V. Stremlow, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, published by the History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps Washington, D.C. 1986.