



Armed Forces Information Service
NEWS FEATURE

OFFICE OF ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE (M&RA)
Office of Information for the Armed Forces
Washington, D. C. 20301

YOUR SERVICE BENEFITS "The American Red Cross"

NOTE TO THE EDITOR: This is the eight in a series of feature stories covering benefits which servicemen and women--and their dependents--enjoy because of active duty.

The American Red Cross

WASHINGTON--The American Red Cross is the instrument chosen by Congress to help carry out the obligations assumed by the United States under certain international treaties known as the Geneva or Red Cross Conventions.

Specifically, its Congressional charter imposes on the American Red Cross the duties to act as the medium of voluntary relief and communications between the American people and their Armed Forces and to carry on a system of national and international relief to prevent and mitigate suffering caused by disasters.

All of the activities of the American Red Cross and its chapters support these duties.

Nationally and locally, the American Red Cross is governed by volunteers, most of its duties are performed by volunteers, and it is financed by voluntary contributions.

The above three paragraphs sum up succindtly the relationship of the American Red Cross to the Armed Forces. For example, the ARC is the official approach through the International Committee of the Red Cross at Geneva, Switzerland, for the United States government to inquire about the treatment of our men help captive by North Vietnam.

On behalf of our captives and "missing men," the thrust of the ARC's effort has centered on finding some way to induce North Vietnam to honor its ratification of the Geneva Conventions and provide American prisoners of war humane treatment to which they are entitled.

North Vietnam's intransigence is of long standing, taking the position the Americans they hold are "war criminals" and therefore ineligible for protection under the Geneva Conventions. Hanoi's viewpoint has been fully denied by the International Committee of the Red Cross and by specialists in international law.

When countless cables and letters to National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese representatives failed to produce results, the ARC initiated in October 1969, the massive "Write Hanoi" campaign, which is still in progress. Initial response from the American public was astounding. National Red Cross headquarters in Washington, D.C., alone received more than 165,000 letters by May 1970. This total does not include letters sent to local ARC chapters or those mailed directly to Hanoi or Paris. At the same time, other patriotic organizations and private citizens joined in, conducting their own "Write Hanoi" campaigns. Understandly, there is no way to estimate the total number of letters the North Vietnamese have received except to surmise that when this volume reached Hanoi, the post office was crowded.

Campaign results are always difficult to measure, but the fact stands out that coincident with this drive, there has been an easing on prisoner mail and food parcel restrictions. The volume of mail that American families received from known POWs jumped from 620 letters in January 1969 to 2,700 in November 1970. At the same time, the number of POWs identified by North Vietnam tripled. Hanoi also has allowed, Since February 1970, the shipment of a food parcel to identified prisoners every second month.

Yet the ARC is hardly satisfied with such meager results and slow progress. As of May 6, 1971, the Department of Defense listed 1,170 missing and 460 captured. Moreover, identification of prisoners and notification of those killed or who have died in captivity is merely a first step in applying the Geneva Conventions. Humane treatment under the watchful eye of the International Committee of the Red Cross or some other impartial organization or agent is included in the full application of this treaty.

The Government of South Vietnam allows ICRC officials to inspect its camps where it holds 38,000 prisoners and to interview these men. The Hanoi regime has refused to allow inspection of its camps by any impartial party.

The American Red Cross also has a day-to-day relationship with the Armed Forces. Basically, its charter calls for supporting and supplementing--without duplication--those activities that affect the health, welfare, recreation, and morale of military personnel and their families.

A general catalogue of ARC services to the Armed Forces includes such activities as:

o-Providing blood and blood products to many military, Veterans Administration, and civilian hospitals, and, upon request, replacing blood used by the overseas serviceman's family members who are hospitalized in the United States.

o-Counseling on personal and family problems.

o-Transmitting information between members of the Armed Forces and their families when normal communications channels do not suffice, especially in emergency situations.

o-Providing information needed by the military commanders to assist in his decisions affecting morale and welfare of military personnel or getting the facts to verify granting of emergency leave.

o-Furnishing information to military personnel and their dependents about all Government benefits available--Federal, State, and local.

o-Referring military personnel and their families to social agencies which offer specialized assistance such as legal affairs, medical or psychiatric care, employment, and child welfare services.

o-Providing money--loans or outright grants--to military personnel on emergency leave that requires their presence at home.

o-Making loans to military dependents when allotment checks are lost or late.

o-Offering patients in military hospitals a wide range of services including medically approved recreation programs, help to close relatives visiting patients at military hospitals, and assistance to patients unable to help themselves--from letter writing to running errands and mustering medical volunteers, when so requested.

While these services cover a broad spectrum, there are many things the Red Cross cannot do. The Red Cross cannot commit funds for repaying debts, starting a business, paying a fine, posting bail, paying legal counsel, or supplementing military pay to meet a desired standard of living.

These restrictions do not imply that the Red Cross regards these problems of no consequence.

Rather, the ARC can counsel military families and refer them to other social organizations better equipped to do the particular job, such as military legal assistance offices, various aid societies of the Armed Forces, and Federal, State, and local welfare agencies.

The fact that the ARC does not usually attack social problems over the long haul, although the organization is becoming more and more involved in our nation's pressing social needs, may well be responsible for much of the criticism that comes its way. But the Red Cross has never believed for an instant that it is an organization of absolute virtue and perfect service to humanity. Indeed, the ARC as a slice of American society, often quarrels with itself about goals and best means to achieve them. Around the turn of the century, the method of expending funds with little audit accountability was debated in the national press and on the floor of Congress. The antagonists were two of its famous leaders, Clara Barton and Mabel Boardman, both legends in their own time.

More recently, shortly after World War II, the Red Cross found its popularity had dropped virtually out of sight. A Gallup poll revealed in 1944 that 60 percent of all Americans named it their most popular charitable organization. When the Gallup organization asked the same question in 1947, only 21 percent selected the ARC. No doubt about it, returning GIs from World War II had turned thumbs down and had convinced some of the homefolks to do the same.

Chief gripe seemed to center around the monetary charges the ARC levied in some overseas areas for meals and billets. Returning servicemen felt the American people had donated the monies and they should have such services free of charge.

The ARC was completely sympathetic with this attitude. The only trouble was they couldn't do anything about it. The Secretary of War had ordered the American Red Cross to make nominal charges. The rationale was to equalize the vast discrepancy between the better paid American serviceman and his lower paid wartime allies.

Today, the Red Cross still weighs its activities in terms of individuals served, never as a numbers game; however, facts and figures compiled by the ARC in its last annual report have a way of speaking for themselves. The ARC spent \$56,754,145 for services to members of the Armed Forces, veterans, and their families last year. At military installations and medical facilities, casework services were provided to 121,500 men each month. In local chapters, 2,708,500 services were given to families of servicemen. Loans and grants totaling \$13,363,500 were made to servicemen, veterans, and their families. About 1,095,000 emergency messages were flashed to and from overseas posts.

As this run of statistics implies, the Red Cross job is big and its requires an army of workers. Some 2,310,000 unpaid volunteers--many of them military personnel and their dependents--make up the bulk of the force. A cadre of 14,059 career staff members fill it out, giving day-to-day continuity. Also readily apparent is the global nature of the ARC. Every major military installation at home or overseas has its field director and staff. The historic link between the ARC and the Armed Force is further amplified by the fact that three famous military leaders have headed up the organization at one time or another--Generals George C. Marshall, Alfred M. Gruenther, and James F. Collins.

Actually the Red Cross ideal in all nations was forged by war. Consider these historical landmarks:

o-Before there was any Red Cross society in any nation, America's Clara Barton, the "angel of the battlefield," was doing the essential Red Cross job for the Union forces during the Civil War and even for the Confederate forces to a lesser extent.

o-About the same time, Swiss businessman Henri Dunant, in reaction to the carnage of the battle of Solferino in northern Italy, became the godfather of the Red Cross ideal, which was rendered into treaty and flag at Geneva in the late summer of 1864.

o-Red Cross relief and battlefield efforts worked so well during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 that it was said not a man could lie uncared for or unfed on the field of battle.

o-Clara Barton, back from service with the Red Cross during the Franco-Prussian conflict, founded the American Red Cross in 1881 and was chiefly instrumental in persuading the U.S. government to sign the Geneva Conventions in 1882.

o-The American Red Cross first went to war with American forces in Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898.

o-The ARC came of age in World War I with over 10,000 professionals and hundreds of volunteers for every paid worker performing morale and welfare services not only for the sick and wounded, but also for the able bodied.

o-World War II saw this huge effort repeated with the ARC leading the way in founding the first national volunteer blood donor service.

o-Postwar years found the American Red Cross moving largely into out-and-out social work, bridging the gap between the military and civilian communities.

o-Continuing its social work mission, the ARC in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts partially returned to its old recreational role in combat zones, largely through the famed clubmobiles.

In war or peace, the American Red Cross moves with our servicemen and women and shares some of their hazards. From the Spanish-American War to the Vietnam conflict, some 289 Red Cross men and women have been killed in line of duty.

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