

Fact Sheet 3A

Women's War Work



Salvation Army Women

Salvation Army women volunteered to work in France, when most other aid societies sent only men. It was a controversial decision for society at the time, but not for The Salvation Army. The Salvation Army's founder, William Booth, is said to have stated, 'Some of my best men are women.' Women would be sent to help in France. The women's conduct and bravery endeared them to the soldiers - as well as their cooking.

Field Kitchens

Women worked in huts giving comfort and refreshments but they also used army field kitchens. This meant they could operate quite close to the front. The conditions were difficult - they were close to danger, they experienced a lack of supplies and long hours. Yet they were expected and trained to overcome this. One response to a lack of supplies had iconic repercussions. A group of American girls only had flour, fat and sugar left, so they decided to make doughnuts. This proved extremely popular with the men - some queued for hours, waiting till it was time to make them. The doughnut (or 'donut') in the USA is still associated with The Salvation Army.

The first doughnuts were made by Helen Purviance and Margaret Sheldon. They made 150 on the first day, 300 the next. Thousands were eventually made daily and doughnut cutters were made from anything handy. Coffee and doughnuts were sold, three for a penny. The girls became known as doughnut girls and doughnut lassies.

Hospital Visiting

The women visited the wounded from all armies in the hospital. They left little gifts, often chocolate and often other little luxuries - toiletries, clothes, writing paper, a Bible or a copy of *The War Cry*. It was a time to bring some cheer to the soldiers, to write a letter on their behalf, to sing or play.

In 1915, Adjutant Lucy Lee records spending two days per week, with a fellow sister, solely doing hospital visits. The aim was to do 400 beds each visit, both British and German. She mentions giving each soldier two sheets of writing paper, two envelopes, a pencil, bar of chocolate, box of peppermints, a *New Testament* and a copy of *The War Cry*. Around her neck she hung notebooks for names of relatives or friends to write to. In her pocket were half a dozen sharp pencils, ready to write with.

Grave Visiting

When a soldier died, a letter was often written to his family. This might describe his final hours and include a description of where he was buried - sometimes a sketch or photograph of the place was included. A bouquet of flowers was laid on his grave on behalf of his family, and flowers from the bouquet were sent as a memento. The graves were tended - as well as could be expected. Sometimes a family member would request a visit, and so they would be escorted to the grave site. This became part of the Salvation Army Grave Visitation Service.



Fact Sheet 3A

Women's War Work



Behaviour

The women selected knew that they were to behave in a professional manner and their conduct was above reproach.

Field Kitchen Stories

In France three Salvation Army women officers slept for nearly three weeks in a haystack, just so they could be closer to the trains that went by and give the soldiers on them food and drink. The men were so grateful they collected 1,600 francs for new uniforms for the women. The women's response: 'I am quite accustomed to hard toils. I have only done what all my comrades are doing - my duty.' And the money was put towards more coffee and doughnuts.

One doughnut lassie who had been serving doughnuts and cocoa under persistent fire said, 'We can die with them, but we cannot leave them.'

In Baccarat, France, there was no stove but all the men wanted were pies, pies, pies. So an old French stove was found in ruins. It had to be half buried in soil to strengthen it and pies were served once a week.

One soldier made a new doughnut cutter, a massive one, for the girls. Why? Because the size didn't matter - they were still going to give him three!

When the line advanced, one group used a German canteen which had only been vacated 24 hours previously. The sign above the door said 'KAMERAD, tritt 'ein' - 'FRIEND, welcome/step in'. They used the Germans' lard, and three tons of supplies were gone in one day. The lassies cooked 10,000 doughnuts. The Red Cross gave them hot chocolate to keep them going. They repeated this for the second day and wore a perpetual grin. 'It was important - each smile is the soldier's own.' At one camp supplies ran very low. The Red Cross only had bread. The Salvation Army had jams and potted meats. So they put their supplies together. 'Made the finest sandwich in the world - The Red Cross and Salvation Army,' recalls a soldier.

At Morte Fontaine, the lassies found the hospital to be very busy, overcrowded, and hot, with no water. The wounded were lying outside on the ground. They put up canvas and bought netting intended for dresses, to provide shade. A driver was sent to find water - a barrel of icy stream water - and they made lemonade and bathed the men. After the war, in New York harbour, a soldier recognised one of the lassies welcoming the boat, and introduced himself as one of the wounded there that day. He thanked her for saving his life as she had helped break his fever.

At Cheppy, while helping evacuate the injured to caves, one of the lassies tripped over debris in the doorway. She refused medical aid and worked on with an injured leg for three weeks, in case it would be used as a reason to send the Salvation Army lassie home from the front.



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Hospital Visit Stories

One soldier requested a homemade cake, so the Salvationist wrote a letter on his behalf requesting one. The wife was most surprised, as she had been informed he had been killed! A cake arrived soon after.

On one visit, a doughnut lassie sang 'There is sunshine in my soul today'. One soldier wrote: 'Dear Mother, You will be surprised to hear that I am in the hospital but I am getting well quickly and am having a good time. But best of all, some Salvation Army people came and sang and talked about sunshine, and while they were talking the sunshine came in through my window - not into my room alone, but into my heart and life as well, where it is going to stay. I know how happy this will make you.'

One mother, whose son was returning to England, wrote: 'I can hardly find words to express my feeling towards you and your Army for the visits paid to my son, and the comforting words in your letter to me. I do thank you, and may you live long to minister to many a mother's son, for it makes things much easier for us all here when we think our heroes in France are receiving kindness and comfort from such God-fearing people.'

Grave Visit Stories

In time for Memorial Day, the American branch of The Salvation Army decorated American graves with flowers - red poppies, creamy white snowballs (hydrangeas or viburnum) and blue cornflowers. The graves were cleaned and flags were sent over to cover them. A service and prayers were said on behalf of the families back home.

In Cheppy, for a time, funerals were held every day and the graves were prayed over, including German graves. 'They are some mother's boy and someone is waiting for them to come home.'

Behaviour

One soldier recalls how the women were respected. If a soldier called one 'Dearie', then they were expected to apologise for the familiar term.

Two doughnut lassies were visiting a house in a village. Two French soldiers came visiting, asking about America. One said he was very pleased with one of the girls, and loved her very much. The girls were shocked - they had only just met. American men did not talk like that. So they got up and ignored them!

A young officer presented some doughnut lassies with a box of candy, saying, 'Gee, we shall miss you like the devil!' - That sure is some comparison!



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Attitude

'We're here to help the boys from the front and we want to help them because we are proud of them.'

One soldier remarked, 'Here's a real honest to goodness American woman in the trenches.'

The reply?

'Yes, your mother couldn't come today so I've come in her place.'

