

Doughnut Dollies: in combat in Vietnam without a weapon

Written by By Marley Shebala Sun Correspondent
Friday, 29 May 2015 12:01



WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Mary Tsinnajinnie-Cohoe is a Vietnam War veteran but she will never receive federal veterans’ benefits.

Tsinnajinnie-Cohoe served in Vietnam in 1968 to 1969. And while she never carried a rifle or weapon, she wore powder blue culottes and served doughnuts and coffee with a smile – with the goal of raising the morale of combat-battered military personnel.

Tsinnajinnie was one of 627 single young ladies between the ages of 21-24 years of age, and a college graduate, who went to Vietnam as an American Red Cross SRAO aide or “Doughnut Dolly.”

“Many people don’t know about the SRAO program,” she said as she flashed a smile that could light up a room.

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SRAO is the acronym for Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas.

Tsinnajinnie-Cohoe recalled that during the Vietnam War, the U.S. Department of Defense asked the USO or United Service Organization to provide entertainment and the American Red Cross for its Doughnut Dollies, which is term that came from American service men that were stationed in England during World War II.

At that time, the Doughnut Dollies drove in “clubmobiles” to military bases, where they served fresh doughnuts and hot coffee and also welcomed back airmen from oversea missions by playing music over loud-speakers.

They also created and operated recreational centers.

Boosting morale

Tsinnajinnie-Cohoe said, “Our number one job was to boost the morale of the American G.I.”

And she said they did by hopping on military helicopters or riding in military jeeps and trucks from the main military bases to where the soldiers were. And the soldiers were in combat areas.

There are photos of Tsinnajinnie-Cohoe standing with soldiers in their field bunkers at “LZs and fire bases.”

She explains that LZs means landing zones.

“One thing in training that we were trained never to ask was, ‘How are you?’ We never asked

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that,” she said.

She said that as soon as they arrived at an LZ or fire base, they would start chatting and visiting with the soldiers and engage them in audience participation programs or “silly games.”

Some of the games were competitive and involved knowledge about the United States and the world, she said.

“The good stuff,” she said. “We didn’t really know that Vietnam was very unpopular back in the United States. We wanted to boost the morale about the American GI and so we talked about the United States in a positive way.”

She said that her audience participation program focused on motorcycles because the soldiers were very young.

They were between 18-20 years old, she recalled.

“Our job was to get their minds off what happened and what will happen or may not happen to them,” Tsinnajinnie remembered. “We saw a lot. We met thousands of guys. And some, probably many of them never came back. And those that did come back are veterans now and they’re the ones expressing appreciation online to us.”

On the donutdolly.com website, Christopher R. Barnes of Palm Springs, Calif., wrote, “I was in Tay Ninh, Viet Nam in 1969-70. One of the highlights of my tour was the night a Doughnut Dolly came out to my post and said hi. It was at Christmas when our ... my ... spirits were at a low point.

“I was a military police sentry dog handler guarding the ammunition dump at the Tay Ninh base and had been under a massive amount of stress for the last nine months and hadn’t seen a ‘round eye’ girl for at least that amount of time,” Barnes stated.

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He stated, "I just want to thank that Red Cross girl for risking her safety in order to spruce up my life and Christmas. I hope she has had a good happy and healthy life. God bless her and all those women who were there and risked their lives for the sake of our morale."

Native American service

Tsinnajinnie-Cohoe said that when the traveling Vietnam Memorial Wall came to Window Rock, she finally met one of the Navajo service men that she had met as a Doughnut Dolly.

She also met other Navajo service personnel from the Vietnam War.

"It felt good," she said. "We just chatted and we had a good time visiting."

And it was pleasant to visit without having to explain without any detail, which part of the states they were from.

"I knew where they had been," she said. "They knew that I knew. So we were just very trusting. And we'd just be talking terminologies.

"Slang stuff that guys learned and that we also heard," she said, letting out a little laugh and smile. "So that was fun. Yes. And that was at the Wall."

She recalled seeing and meeting some other Native American and Navajo service men when the Doughnut Dollies were out with their "mobile clubs."

"We're out there doing our program and I would always look to the back," she remembered.

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“And there they are. Not participating. Just watching.

“So after our little program would be over with, I would excuse myself and go way to the back to where they were,” she said. “And we’d chat for a little bit and then just go on.”

She said when the Doughnut Dollies were out in the combat zones, they were welcoming military personnel to the Red Cross SRAO recreational centers, where there were ping pong tables, pool tables, library books, music and “all kinds of activities, just like any recreational centers here [in the states].”

She remembered that at Cam Ranh Bay military base that there were two recreational centers because the base was so large.

The wounded

Cam Ranh Bay served several branches of the military, she explained.

She added that the main bases were also where the military hospitals were located and so the Doughnut Dollies also took their smiles to the wounded, who most often had severe injuries.

She said they had to focus on the faces of the wounded and not the wounds, unlike the military nurses.

“We did fun stuff with them,” she said. “We still had to be smiling. We were still boosting their morale. We didn’t want to make them self-conscious. They were already very self conscience.”

On weekends, which were their leisure time, the Doughnut Dollies would volunteer to go with the military medics to the orphanages, she said.

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Back home

And now, as the only Doughnut Dolly that is Navajo, Tsinnajinnie-Cohoe continues to take her beautiful smile and positive words and thoughts to veterans on the Navajo Reservation.

She has also been involved with the annual Memorial Day “Run For the Wall,” which is focused on military personnel killed or missing in the Vietnam War.

“I can recognize a combat veterans among other veterans,” she said softly with a faint smile. “Just from their faces and their posture and their walk.”

She sighed and added, “We too had those experiences. Probably a lot of us got contact with Agent Orange. We don’t have VA benefits. This has been researched thoroughly. But we are Vietnam veterans and we participated at all levels as much as we could with the military.”

When she returned home from the Vietnam War, she remembered how she felt.

“I felt nothing,” she said. “Just numb. I wanted to go back.”

Tsinnajinnie-Cohoe knows those were symptoms of PTSD or post traumatic stress disorder and so the Gallup Sun asked her how she dealt with her PTSD.

Her answer: “I haven’t.”

But Tsinnajinnie-Cohoe said she wanted to become a Doughnut Dolly.

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“For me personally, like many Navajo families, we come from families loyal to the military,” she said. “My brother, Tom Tsinnajinnie, was with the Marines.

Her brother and her nephew, the late Dennis Willeto, were serving in Vietnam, which she said was another reason she joined the Red Cross.

She said her family didn’t support her decision, but her dad her dad finally gave in and signed the paperwork.

But she was on her own from there. Her family wouldn’t take her from their home in Torreon, N.M., to Cuba, N.M., to catch a bus to Albuquerque.

“I hitchhiked,” she remembered. “I asked for a ride from Torreon to Cuba to get on the bus. I asked for a ride. And I got dropped off. Got on the bus. Got to Albuquerque. Got on the plane to D.C. Got on another plane and went to Virginia. And met all the other ladies who were in my class.”