

Red Cross Ft. Carson Women Share Experiences of Deployment Overseas

Deborah MacSwain, Pikes Peak Chapter Volunteer

September 2005—The American Red Cross provides Emergency Communications for United States service men and women and their families worldwide, 24 hrs a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. The program started when Clara Barton and other women volunteers wrote letters home for the wounded soldiers of both sides during the Civil War. Since then millions of communications, from early hand written notes, to WWII “yellow-grams”, ticker tape messages during Viet Nam, and since Operation Desert Shield telephone and email messages have been sent to U.S. Armed Forces. More than 1,500,000 telephone and email messages have been sent on behalf of military members and their families each year since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Through a sophisticated network of communications, usually starting at a home town Red Cross Chapter, the Red Cross verifies the information and then sends the message to Red Cross staff “on the ground” in Iraq, Afghanistan, or some other far off place to give to the soldier, sailor, airman or marine. Delivering the message, confirming an emergency, or helping a soldier with emergency leave procedures is not glamorous work. It can be tough and emotional. Often the Red Cross staff do more than just “deliver messages”. They are the seen as a “neutral” person, someone a soldier can talk to someone who cares.

A relatively small group of National Red Cross mobile staff are designated to deploy whenever they are needed. Here in Colorado Springs, four Red Crossers have returned from deployment to Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan. All four are women and all four are stationed at Ft. Carson. They have lived in the same conditions and have endured the same hardships as the military they supported. Their experiences give a little insight into what it is like to be deployed and to be supporting the military in the theatre of operations.

Like the military, Red Cross staff are separated from their families and loved ones. Some are single, while others are married with children and grandchildren. Vicki Bengtson, from Louisiana, and Dee Swanier from Mississippi, both served at Camp Doha at the start of the war. Bengtson was in charge of all the Red Cross operations throughout the region and proud of those with whom she served. Her most vivid memory was at the start of the war. A soldier was sitting in the Red Cross office. She went over and he started talking to her about the war,

the losses and how he was trying to cope with his emotions. On a lighter note, another soldier came in on his way home to let her know it was the memory of a “red-headed Red Cross woman who smiled his way when he first arrived that kept him going”.

Swanier remembers the thousands of pallets of comfort items that came from Red Cross chapters all over the United States. The items contained in thousands of boxes needed to be unpacked and repacked in individual comfort kits for the soldiers and marines fighting in Iraq. She recruited soldiers who recruited other soldier volunteers and together they set up an assembly line in a hanger. Commanders and soldiers working together packed more than 20,000 Red Cross comfort kits, placed them in containers and sent them on their way via helicopters “up north”. All this was done in a mere non-stop 18 hours!

Red Cross staff have emergencies too. Jacquie Mack, from Detroit and her two co-workers were stationed in Balad, Iraq when the Tsunami struck Indonesia and Thailand. One of her co-workers had relatives vacationing in Thailand. It took a while, but they were able to locate his relatives and find out they were fine. According to Mack “There was a very positive feeling during the holidays. Many were away from their families for the first time and were very appreciative of the Red Cross presence”. One older reservist sat down next to Mack and asked, “Are you Red Cross? Oh man, I’m from the mid-west, I volunteer for the Red Cross back home, I’m 55 and new to the military scene...what is it like (here)?” Mack made friends with people she would not usually have met. “Once, two soldiers came in for coffee. One was from California and very hip; the other was very country. One talked a lot, the other listened. They came each day for coffee and we formed a kinship. When they did not come in to the office I worried.” Mack’s most touching experience came at the end of her tour. In Balad, she had assisted a service man whose son had a serious illness that required emergency leave. Her tour of duty was over and she was waiting for her flight out of Kuwait when the same service man came up to thank her. As it turned out, both were on the same flight. Unfortunately, their plane was delayed and when they arrived in Dallas he had missed his flight home. Ever a Red Crosser....Mack talked to the ticket agent and they were able to get the service man out on the next flight. For her part, Mack returned to her family in Colorado Springs.

Caryn Modawell, from Wisconsin, deployed to Bagram, Afghanistan and later to Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. Like her co-workers, Modawell found that military members of all ranks liked to visit the Red Cross office. One couple was an enlisted brother and his officer sister. Both enjoyed meeting and spending time at the Red Cross office, although Modawell joked “it was hard for the brother to have to salute his sister”. One of the units Modawell served was the 43rd ASG from Ft. Carson. She provided deployment briefings prior to their leaving Colorado, not knowing she would later be working with them in Kuwait. Some of the donated items that she helped distribute to the outlying camps were phone cards, Starbucks coffee, and AFES gift certificates. These “gifts” from the states

were greatly appreciated by the military. "One reservist who came in to our office was very distraught. It was the first time he and his wife had been away from each other and it was their 25th wedding anniversary. He could not find a card to send so....we looked at all the blank greeting cards that had been sent by Chapters and found one he could use. He was very grateful, grabbed me, cried and thanked me over and over." She was touched.

The American Red Cross is the only organization in the world that provides Emergency Communications and services to the United States Military and their families. For more information on the Armed Forces Emergency Services program, please call the Pikes Peak Chapter at (719)632-3563.