



American  
Red Cross

# The Korean War and the American Red Cross

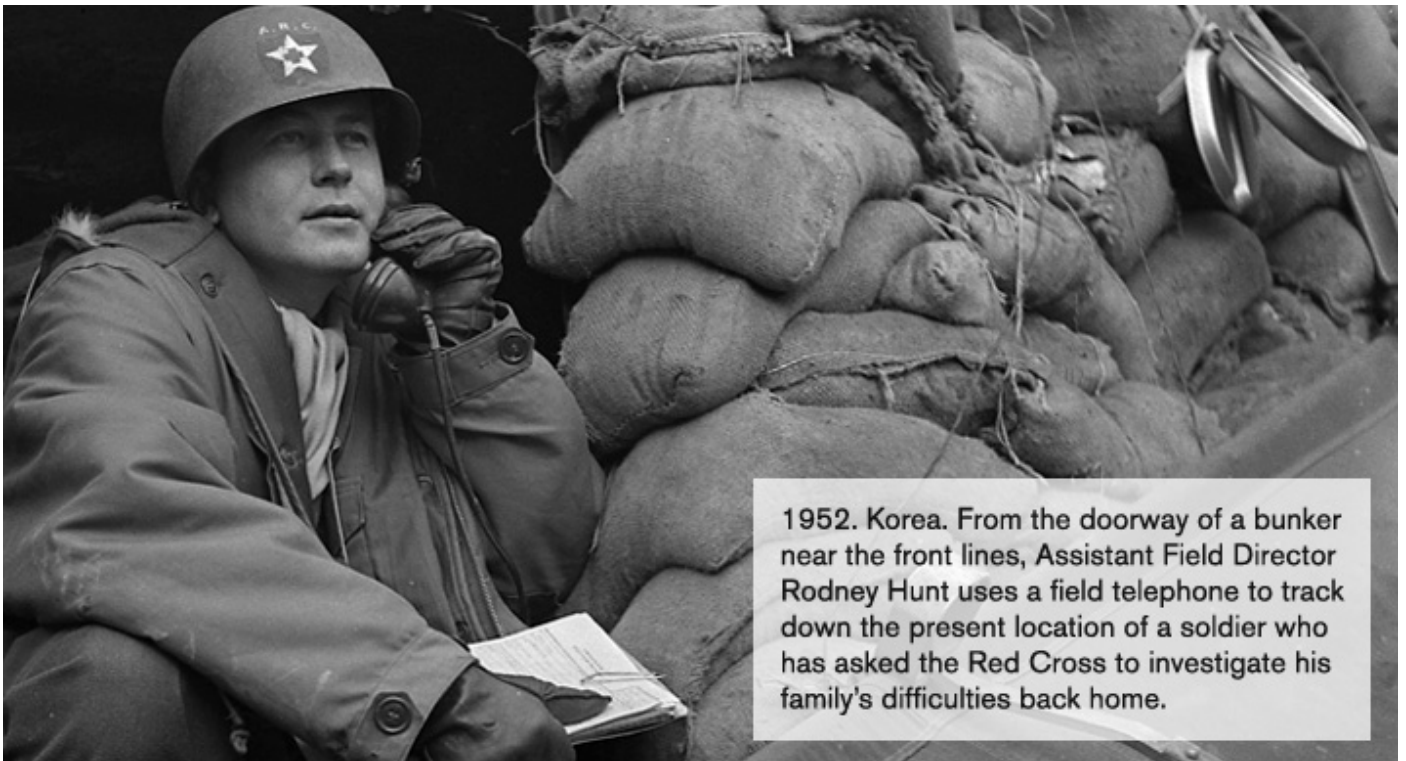
An American Red Cross chapter existed briefly in Seoul, Korea, after World War I, during a period when Americans living abroad formed over 50, short-lived chapters in foreign countries. Following World War II and the collapse of the Japanese empire, the United States and the Soviet Union shared a trusteeship over the Korean peninsula with the Soviet army occupying territory north of the 38th parallel and the U.S. army occupying the south. The American Red Cross provided services to the U.S. occupational forces as mandated by its 1905 congressional charter to act “in matters of voluntary relief and in accord with the military authorities as a medium of communication between the people of the United States” and their armed forces. When the division between the two Koreas, meant to be temporary, became permanent in 1948, the Soviets installed a Communist government in the north and South Koreans formed their own as the Republic of Korea in the south. As the result of these events, Soviet and American troops withdrew from the peninsula and American Red Cross workers left with them (except for a small number who were assisting the Korean Red Cross to rebuild after nearly 50 years of Japanese domination).

## Wartime Service to the Military

In response to North Korea's invasion of the south on June 25, 1950, the United Nations Security Council voted to come to the defense of South Korea. The UN placed the leadership of its military forces, eventually comprised of troops from 16 member states, plus the Republic of Korea, in the hands of the United States. The American Red Cross took immediate steps to mobilize a paid and volunteer work force under the umbrella of its Service to the Armed Forces and Veterans (SAF&V) to deliver its congressionally mandated services to the military. This was primarily accomplished through the following SAF&V branches.

**Service at Military Installations (SMI)** included field directors and assistants serving military personnel in combat zones and military installations at home and overseas. SMI provided:

- Emergency communications that kept military personnel in touch with their families.
- Financial assistance in the form of interest-free loans and grants for emergency purposes.
- Verification of the need for emergency leave by reporting to military authorities the findings of home chapters regarding emergencies so the military could make decisions about granting or denying leave.
- Counsel and advice concerning personal problems.
- Comfort items, kits, reading material, and other supplies.



1952. Korea. From the doorway of a bunker near the front lines, Assistant Field Director Rodney Hunt uses a field telephone to track down the present location of a soldier who has asked the Red Cross to investigate his family's difficulties back home.



**Service in Military Hospitals** (SMH) provided support to field and base hospitals in Korea, including the just-introduced Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals (M.A.S.H. units), and to hospitals in Japan and the United States. SMH workers provided:

- Communications services, including a free “first-call-home” for the wounded to contact family members.
- Morale support to the wounded.
- Help with personal and family problems.
- Social work support for hospitalized servicemen.
- Medically approved recreational activities.
- Financial aid.
- Distribution of envelopes and sheets of paper for correspondence.

**Home Service** was operated by Red Cross chapters within the United States primarily to benefit the families of service members. Home Service provided:

- Counseling for personal and family problems.
- An emergency link between a distantly stationed man and his family in order to keep the family together and informed during a crisis.
- Assistance with applications for government benefits.
- Financial assistance.
- Referral of family members to other community sources for specialized aid not provided by the Red Cross.

**Service in Veterans Hospitals (SVH)** assisted Veterans Administration hospital staff in the medical, recreational, and welfare programs for Korean War casualties.

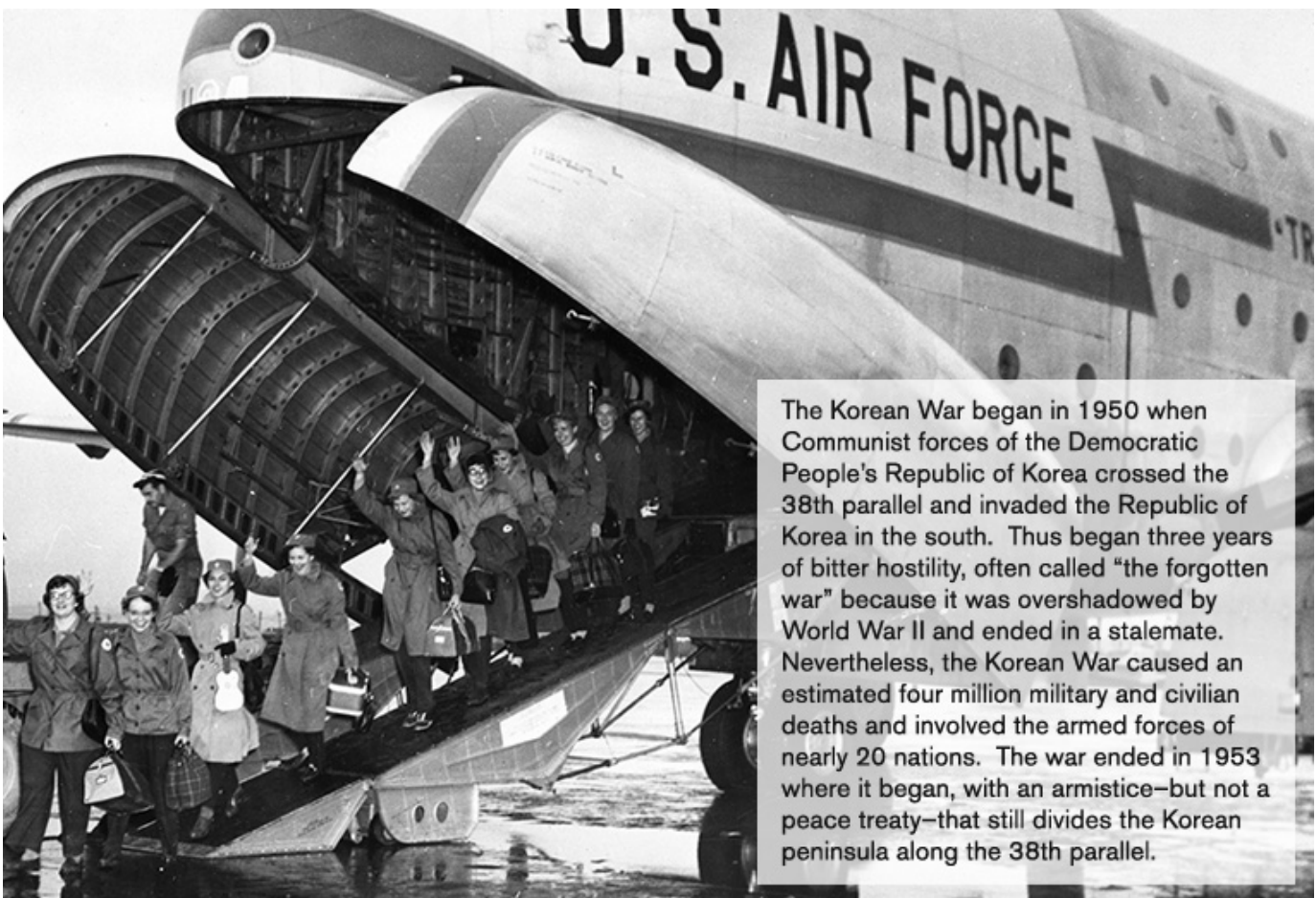
**Service at Veterans Administration Offices** provided assistance to veterans filing applications for service and disability compensation from the Veterans Administration.



In addition to these services, the Red Cross introduced an SAF&V recreational program in 1950 in response to a military request, just as it had done during World Wars I and II when it ran clubs, canteens, and mobile units equipped to serve doughnuts and coffee and provide light entertainment to the troops. The Red Cross had turned these activities over to the Army Special Services shortly after World War II. The first Red Cross recreational center in Korea opened in November 1950 and within a few months the number of both permanent and mobile units grew to 24—with services provided not only to American troops but also to the military personnel of all the UN forces involved in the war. This program lasted until June 1952, when the military felt capable of taking over responsibility for all recreational programs for the able-bodied and the Red Cross withdrew from the service.

At the request of the Department of Defense, the American Red Cross also participated in a blood donor program beginning in 1950 to meet the military's needs for whole blood and plasma, similar to what it had done during World War II. Because this program sometimes fell short of meeting the military's needs,

President Harry Truman issued a directive on December 10, 1951, calling on the Office of Defense Mobilization to provide “a mechanism for the authoritative coordination of an integrated and effective program to meet the nation’s requirements for blood, blood derivatives and related substances.” (It is not true, though often asserted, that Truman named the Red Cross as the nation’s blood collection agency in this directive. In fact, he did not mention the Red Cross, although he likely assumed a major role for it.) In response, the Department of Defense created a National Blood Program in early 1952, with the Red Cross as the “coordinating agency for the collection of blood primarily from the civilian population, through its existing facilities and cooperating blood banks.” The military collected blood for the program from its members in its own facilities. The National Program continued until the end of the war. All told, the Red Cross collected nearly five million pints of blood for military use. As a result of achieving an adequate blood supply—coupled with the introduction of helicopters to rapidly transport the wounded from the field and M.A.S.H units located just behind the lines—only 2 out of every 100 wounded soldiers reaching aid stations died in the Korean War, as compared with 5 in World War II and 8 to 11 in World War I.



The Korean War began in 1950 when Communist forces of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea crossed the 38th parallel and invaded the Republic of Korea in the south. Thus began three years of bitter hostility, often called “the forgotten war” because it was overshadowed by World War II and ended in a stalemate. Nevertheless, the Korean War caused an estimated four million military and civilian deaths and involved the armed forces of nearly 20 nations. The war ended in 1953 where it began, with an armistice—but not a peace treaty—that still divides the Korean peninsula along the 38th parallel.

Up a hill and down in Korea was the regular routine for Assistant Field Director "Pete" Murray of the American Red Cross as he carried comfort supplies in a hand grenade box to the troops.



## War End & Prisoner Exchanges

The UN forces eventually pushed the North Koreans back above the 38th parallel, reaching almost all the way to the Chinese border. In response, Chinese forces joined the war in late 1950 and struck a devastating blow against the UN troops, particularly in the area of the Chosin Reservoir. This caused a bitter and costly UN retreat southward with Seoul falling once again into Communist hands in January 1951. Soon after, a series of UN counteroffensives resulted in the recapture of Seoul and the war stalled along lines close to the 38th parallel. In July 1951, truce talks began but it took until July 25, 1953 to achieve an armistice. In the interim, fierce battles raged, with heavy casualties inflicted on both sides, although hostilities did not move far from the 38th parallel along which the demilitarized zone was established that divides the two Koreas today.

Prior to the armistice, an agreement was reached for the exchange of the sick and wounded. Called "Operation Little Switch," this exchange occurred in April and May 1953, and resulted in the return of 684 members of the UN forces and 6,670 North Koreans and Chinese. The American Red Cross was on hand for this exchange to distribute comfort kits and reading material to the UN prisoners as they were released. The Red Cross offered many more of its services when the men reached medical facilities in Japan and during transport to and after their return home.

During the armistice negotiations, the North Koreans and Chinese insisted that the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent be excluded from its traditional role of participating in the exchange of prisoners. The Communists regarded the International Committee as being partial to the UN cause. Instead, they agreed to the creation of Joint Red Cross Teams, made up of representatives of the Red Cross societies from the belligerent nations, to visit POW camps and participate in the prisoner exchange. As members of the Joint Teams, American Red Cross workers were able to provide badly needed supplies and comfort articles to some prisoners while they were still held in North Korea and a broad range of comfort, communications, and recreational services to the prisoners during their release and afterwards. The exchange of prisoners, called "Operation Big Switch," began in August 1953 and continued for several months. North Korea released 12,773 prisoners to the UN Command and 75,823 Communist prisoners were released to North Korea. (Another 22,604 UN Command prisoners and 359 Communist prisoners expressed the desire to remain with their captors. A UN Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission, assisted by the Indian Red Cross Society, settled their cases on an individual basis.)

While its efforts never achieved the mammoth scale of the two world wars, the Red Cross was successful at meeting the challenges placed on it by the Korean War. At the peak of wartime activity in 1952, on a monthly average, 10,000 workers were assigned to military installations at home and abroad, over 54,000 volunteers were involved in the blood collection program, more than 25,000 volunteers worked in military hospitals, another 28,000 in Veterans Administration hospitals, and 9,000 participated in the Home Service. Two American Red Cross male workers lost their lives in service to the military during the Korean War.

## Post War

In order to obtain South Korea's agreement to the cease-fire in 1953, the United States promised its ally increased military assistance, the continued presence of U.S. troops, and a mutual security treaty. As a result, American military forces remained in South Korea and the American Red Cross continued to provide its services to the military, at first under the SAF&V system and, since 1995, as part of AFES (Armed Forces Emergency Services). While the role of the Red Cross since the war has been mainly to bolster the morale of troops and help them combat boredom, occasionally hostilities have flared up requiring more extensive services. This occurred, for example, when the crew of the USS Pueblo, seized by North Korea in 1968, was released from almost a year in prison and needed various forms of assistance. In addition to serving American troops, the American Red Cross has continued to lend its hand to the South Korean Red Cross society in dealing with the results of conflict and the challenges of recovery afterward.



Near the end of the war, the U.S. military asked the Red Cross to resume a mobile recreation program in Korea to supplement its own programs in fixed facilities. Accordingly, two months after the cease-fire, the Red Cross introduced its first Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas (SRAO) units. Eventually ten in number, they were made up of paid teams of young, college-educated women who traveled to forward and isolated locations to serve light refreshments and stage programs calling on the participation of servicemen in games, skits, and quizzes related to life at home. The SRAO program lasted for 20 years. By the time it ended in 1973, 899 women



had traveled a total of 2.9 million miles bringing “a touch of home” and much cheer to members of the U.S. armed forces in South Korea.

Over time, the number of military dependents who have moved to South Korea to be near their loved ones has grown. As a consequence, AFES units have been called upon to expand their services to include family members. Thus, some of today’s AFES units operate much like full-scale Red Cross chapters at home as they strive to fulfill the varied needs of their American communities overseas.