D-Day: Stories from the Walls

The American Red Cross

During the Maritime Archaeology Trust’s National Lottery Heritage Funded D-Day Stories from the Walls project, volunteers undertook online research into topics and themes linked to D-Day, Southampton, ships and people during the Second World War.

Their findings were used to support project outreach and dissemination.

This Research Article was undertaken by one of our volunteers and represents many hours of hard and diligent work. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all our amazing volunteers.

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# The American Red Cross

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Introduction

This article presents an overview of the American Red Cross (ARC) in the Second World War but with an emphasis on their Club Service in Southampton. The British Red Cross, [BRC] and the Canadian Red Cross [CRC] both contributed immensely, and where necessary worked in tandem with their American counterparts who additionally were providing help to bombed or killed UK civilians. Cal Avery, who carved his name on the Wall was an ARC Field Director but was not involved with the Club Service.

Where applicable, American spelling is retained although both spellings of donuts and doughnuts appear in American records. During WWII, Americans practiced segregation. The term Negro is only included here as direct quotation from contemporary sources.

Background

Refer to https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/National/history-wwii.pdf for an excellent ARC background summary which includes eye-watering wartime statistics on page 5.

The ARC provided various services to armed forces domestically and around the world during the Second World War, essentially of three kinds: Military and Naval Warfare Service wherever personnel were stationed; Camp Service, in the field; and Club Service, which is the focus of this article, summarised on the above website pages 7 and 8.

“Club Service was made available at the request of the U.S. government to able-bodied members of the armed forces serving overseas, while recreational services for the military at home remained, as it had been, limited to hospitals. Overseas the Red Cross staffed and supplied permanent service clubs, travelling clubmobiles, and other recreational facilities that stretched literally around the world. At its peak, the Red Cross operated nearly 2,000 recreational service facilities abroad, staffed by 5,000 Red Cross workers and approximately 140,000, mostly local, volunteers.

Service clubs ranged from large facilities in major cities, often hotels, to small facilities in towns and villages in both the European and Pacific theaters of war. The large clubs offered not only meals and recreational activities but also overnight accommodations and such amenities as barbershops and laundries. Probably the most famous of these was the huge Rainbow Corner Club in London whose doors never shut and where up to 60,000 meals could be served in a single 24-hour period. The smaller clubs provided food and sometimes recreation but not overnight facilities and were usually located in outlying areas close to American military camps. Many were called Donut Dugouts, while those serving sailors were known as Fleet Clubs and airmen went to Aeroclubs. The Red Cross also operated rest homes in some usually rural and tranquil locations overseas for service personnel needing respite from the pressures of war. The homes provided sleeping accommodations, dining room service, and a variety of recreational pursuits for the servicemen who were assigned there by the military authorities.

In London, Cairo, and Melbourne the clubs were spacious, luxurious; in New Guinea the clubs were grass huts; in Iceland they were (corrugated iron and concrete) huts”.

The ARC first set foot, as did American troops early in the war, in Northern Ireland, setting up clubs in Londonderry on 6 May 1942 followed by Belfast. Plans were quickly made for clubs to be opened on...
mainland Britain. By 26 September 1942, 22 clubs were established, using whatever premises were available, often hotels, and another 21 were planned, but none at this stage in Southampton [Fold3: Initial clubs].

It was appreciated that the then American segregation policy of white and black personnel might present a problem. A 1943 file referring to a statement on this made in August 1942 notes: “American Red Cross acts as a medium of communication between the peoples of the US and all American troops in GB whether they be white or coloured. Both are therefore welcome at all American Red Cross Clubs. In localities of concentrated Negro troops, Clubs and Canteens are being staffed by colored male and female personnel”. This was further referred to in a memo: “Policies that were to be pursued in rendering service to negro troops were defined by General Eisenhower. Decided to establish a board of five members to iron out questions in this regard: Purpose of this Board shall be (a) to interpret military policies as they may be formulated in respect to Red Cross service to troops. (b) To recommend to Red Cross where such policies apply as to the method to be adopted in carrying out these policies” [sic] [Fold3: Policy].

ARC in Southampton

During the First World War, Southampton was a Port of Embarkation just as in the Second World War, and the ARC had a Southampton headquarters as shown in Figure 1. It was above a bank and overlooked one of the many small waterside parks for which the duty is noted. The picture shows Major Joseph M. Hartfield of New York and other Red Cross officers on a tour of inspection.

The exact whereabouts of the Second World War ARC clubs in Southampton, and when they were established, is uncertain. Appendix 1 shows that one was open in Southampton as at 31 July 1943. It was reported that Club Directors as at February 1944 in Southampton included Mr Christopher Sower at 1-4a High Street and Ernest Dawson with title “Negro Staffer” [sic], Carlton Club, London Road – each had their title prefaced with “Acting” [Fold3: 1944 Clubs]. The American records in 1944 of units in the area, the camp marshalling areas, and the arrival and departure of ships, all make mention of the “donuts and coffee” services provided by the ARC. One American report notes: “When D-Day came, the last people on the docks waving farewell to the troopships leaving British ports every few hours were blue-clad, trousered Clubmobile girls, serving coffee and doughnuts to the men as they came out of the marshalling areas, marching along the docks and on to their ships. Not two days later, the girls were on the docks again, this time on a sadder errand. They were meeting the hospital ships returning with the first wounded. They served the hot coffee again, handed round the doughnuts – and never flinched from this first contact with the ugly reality of war” [ARC: D-Day]. “A special type of compact metal trolley with rubber tyres has been
designed for this service. Each trolley carries the equivalent of 440 cups of coffee in four large thermos urns and has special wire trays sufficient to carry 1,220 doughnuts” [ARC: Trolley].

From a report of the first detailed inspection of the ARC in Southampton conducted in early February 1945, it appears that there were seven premises utilising residences, office buildings, shops and one church, dictated partly by the previous bombing. Some of the premises included dormitories, used by about 450 nightly, and “were within a few blocks of the main down-town club”. During the second half of 1944, the ARC clubmobile base, with crew captain Rosemary Langheldt, was the Dolphin Hotel in the High Street but it may not have been the main club which, it is thought, was beside the Bargate, subsequently Burton’s Menswear, and this is similar to the recorded address of the ARC Doughnut Kitchen, Behind Bargate, High Street. Nos 1-4a High Street is in front of the Bargate. The above-mentioned church is thought to have been in London Road and was used by the black troops. It is unclear if the 1944 addresses were the same as referred to in early 1945.

The Southampton ARC staff at this time comprised Christopher Sower, Director and also Assistant Supervisor of the Red Cross Zone, Gilmore Harris, Field Director, Miss Helene Donnaly, Assistant Director, four Red Cross ladies, 250 paid civilians, 150 volunteer British civilians, women and girls. It was reported that there were more volunteers than could be used, and all were doing excellent work [Fold3: ARC 22.12.44]. The clubs were busy – serving food to approximately 30,000 men per week, providing enormous quantities of cigarettes not just within the club premises, twice-a-week movies, dances between three and four times a week reported as having “no problem about getting girls”, and two overworked barbers at the main club. The dormitory premises also provided a cleaning, pressing and alteration clothes service. ARC also assisted with care services associated with illegitimate children, prospective marriages to local women, and assisting with communications to loved ones at home. Members of the British and Allied Forces were not admitted to the Clubs after 10.00 pm, simply due to the sheer volume of Americans and limited space in the clubs. Although all soldiers were able to go to either club, the segregated troops preferred to keep apart and frequent their own clubs. It was reported that there was very little trouble.

American reporting for the black club was separate. The church premises in use since March 1944 were reported as being heated, clean, cheerful, although old and requiring constant repair. The ARC Field Director in charge was Miss Geneva E. Mercombes with one ARC assistant, 23 paid British staff, and a volunteer roster of 35 out of 45 British women. Here, two dances per week were held, the admitted girls having been vetted by local security, with other nights for films, whist tournaments, ENSA or GI shows, informal games, and bingo! However, the troops preferred to play basketball or billiards or ping pong to having a show. Meals served in January 1945 totalled just over 20,000.

The American report, from which the above is drawn, concluded that “the Red Cross is doing an excellent job in Southampton, and that the fine cooperation of local British volunteers in that city is especially noteworthy”[Fold3: ARC Report 5-7.02.1945].
Red Cross Clubmobiles

The above report makes reference to four clubmobiles which covered the marshalling areas near Southampton as troops there were usually en-route for the port and were not able to visit the clubs. Clubmobiles were conceived by the late prominent New York banker, Harvey D. Gibson, Red Cross Commissioner to Great Britain. He wanted to ensure that service personnel who were at remote camps or airfields were not disadvantaged compared to those in locations where Red Cross clubs were established and he therefore envisaged a mobile service additional to the clubs [ARC: Clubmobiles].

The solution was to adapt a vehicle to carry means of making coffee, and donuts (as hamburgers were impractical) and a Ford truck with small 10 hp engine was prototyped in America. It had a dough making machine and a hob, and a primus stove for hot water. Volunteers from America were required as “Clubmobile Girls” aged between 25 and 35. Inundated with applications, only those who met the stiff standards required, were quickly taught how to use the equipment for the volumes envisaged, and ferried across the Atlantic [Clubmobile: Prototype]. They were also required to wear uniforms, of which there are several formats [Clubmobile: Uniforms].

“In Britain, Clubmobiles were created from buses loaned to the ARC by London’s Green Line Bus company, they were ideal for the job as they were quickly and easily modified into mobile kitchen units, with the addition of offside dispensing hatches and the rear could be converted into a lounge with built-in benches which turned into bunks if needed. Every vehicle was given a name (mostly they were named after U.S. State’s) contained a built-in doughnut machine and a primus stove for heating water for the all-important American coffee. On board there was a Victrola record player with loud speakers for blasting out the latest tunes from back home, paperback books, magazines, cigarettes, candy, gum, and most importantly they brought the GI’s, a little taste of home” [Clubmobile: Conversion]. The conversions were painted grey, and Appendix 2 expands on the American view of these conversions.

![Figure 2: Views of Buses Converted to Clubmobiles](http://www.countrybus.org/T-regal/T8.htm)
The Clubmobiles in Britain were driven by a British man and crewed by three American “Clubmobile Girls” who quickly became known as “Donut Dollies” as they became the stars of the show making donuts and coffee in prodigious quantities.

“Next to the women themselves, the doughnuts and the coffee served with them were among the GI’s most beloved symbols of home and they also became the trademark of the wartime Red Cross. The Doughnut Corporation of America loaned the Red Cross 468 doughnut machines, each which could turn out 48 dozen each hour. As time went on, these proved inadequate in keeping up with the demands of the soldiers and the Red Cross set up central bakeries to supply the majority of the doughnuts served to the GIs. Just how many doughnuts are we talking about? A report for December 1944 showed that 205 Red Cross women in Great Britain served 4,659,728 doughnuts to the troops” [ARC: Clubmobiles].

Everything distributed on a clubmobile was free and the hours needed by the Dollies were long and almost every day. Another report, dated 6 January 1945, mentions that “Service and Officer’s Clubs in Britain is only 127... An activity which has increased however is the ‘pup’ of the Club Division – the Doughnut Dugout, a small installation serving only coffee, cokes and doughnuts in places where a small number of troops does not justify a complete operation. 46 Dugouts are at present operating” [ARC: Dugouts].
Following the troops to Normandy, the Donut Dollies, three per vehicle, were first trained in how to drive and maintain the vehicles, converted 2½ tonne armoured GMC trucks, which were all equipped in addition to the key components with a small lounge with table which doubled, if necessary, as bunk beds, and some had a small cinema. Nearly 100 of these conversions were made and they followed the troops through Europe, complete with the associated dangers and hardships along the way until the war was over [Clubmobile: GMC]. This operation is further expanded in Appendix 3.

The Donuts
This is given as the “recipe for the Red Cross Donuts”: [Donut: Recipe]

“1 ½ cups sifted flour
¼ tsp baking soda
¼ tsp salt
¼ tsp butter or substitute, melted
¼ tsp ginger
¼ cup molasses
1/4 cup sour milk (buttermilk)
1 egg well beaten

How you put it all together:
Combine half of the flour with the soda, salt and ginger.
Combine the egg, molasses, sour milk and melted butter or substitute.
Blend with flour mixture and stir until thoroughly mixed and smooth.
Add remaining flour to make dough of sufficient to be rolled.
Roll, on floured board, to thickness of 1/4 inch.
Cut with a donut cutter.
Fry in deep hot fat (360 degrees) until lightly browned, about two or three minutes.
Drain on brown paper”.
A Selection for Further Reading:

Refer to https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/National/history-wwii.pdf for an excellent ARC background summary which includes eye-watering wartime statistics on page 5.

https://blogs.redcross.org.uk/world-war-two/2019/06/d-day-how-the-red-cross-helped-in-world-war-ii/
http://www.clubmobile.org/history.html
https://digicom.bpl.lib.me.us/ww_reg_his/169/
https://youtu.be/DePRyZE5zn4
https://history.delaware.gov/ww-ii-donut-dollies-the-american-red-cross/
http://www.clubmobile.org/Normandy_2004_Janet_Blair.htm
https://etd.auburn.edu/bitstream/handle/10415/2616/ramsey_julia_ma_thesis_history_post_defense_and_AUETD_check_5.9.11.pdf;sequence=3

Bibliography


Appendix 1 – ARC Clubs in UK 31.07.1943

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Appendix 2 – Praise for Clubmobiles from American Authorities

The Military authorities are loud in their praise of our Clubmobiles; several high officers have said that the inauguration of this service is one of the greatest things that the American Red Cross has done to build up the morale of these particular detachments of our Forces.

A number of our Clubmobiles will be staffed by colored personnel and will operate from centers where detachments of colored troops are concentrated.

We have done a great deal of experimenting in order to determine the exact type of Clubmobile that will best serve the purpose and it should be borne in mind that we do not have here in Great Britain very much choice as to what type of mobile vehicle can be obtained; in fact it is not at all easy to obtain any proper equipment whatsoever. We have however worked out a very practical solution which seems to meet with a good deal of general commendation. One of the bus services here in London was recently dismantled. Their equipment consisted of single-deck buses, comparatively small in size. We were able to obtain through military channels 40 of them on the basis that they were to initially be converted into ambulances. The interior equipment was therefore taken out and ambulance equipment installed – salvageable however by means of winged nuts. The buses were turned over to us in this condition with the understanding that we would take the ambulance equipment out, store it at the center from which the Clubmobile would operate, and install Clubmobile equipment, also detachable, the theory being that in case of an emergency those Clubmobiles might be required for ambulances whereupon the Clubmobile equipment could be taken out in a few hours time and the ambulance equipment reinstalled, and the crew of one man driver and three American Red Cross girls would be immediately available all over the area for ambulance service. These buses have turned out to be splendid Clubmobiles. The front two-thirds of the body contains all the Clubmobile equipment for making and serving doughnuts, coffee and so forth, with lots of storage space, and the rear third is a miniature club room, very attractive, with three bunks in which the girls can sleep when they are unable to get back to their base at night. These bunks fold up against the wall in the daytime, the room thereby being converted into a comfortable small club.
To give you a little idea of what is involved in the operation of these Clubmobiles you must visualize the delivery department of a large department store with 25 or 30 areas each with routes to be covered. Great Britain is divided into Clubmobile areas, each one of which has a base from which the service fans out. At each base living accommodations with storage facilities are secured for the Clubmobile crews - as a rule a small house is taken over for that purpose, which is known as a Clubmobile Center, the use of which is generally placed at the disposal of our Forces thus creating a small club for them as well. At these bases a stock of all necessary supplies is maintained, Clubmobiles are garaged and arrangements made for their proper maintenance, routes are mapped out within the areas and operations generally supervised.

(4) **CINEMOBILE SERVICE:**

One of the most difficult things to procure in Great Britain from the start of our operations here have been 16 m.m. moving picture sound projectors, the reason being that such great numbers are needed for training instructions for troops. We have a number in the hospitals where our personnel are stationed and in one or two of our Service Clubs which were first opened. Most of our Clubs however have until recently had no facilities whatever for showing movies. In order to surmount this difficulty we have developed a plan of getting maximum use out of our meager existing equipment by making each of our moving picture projectors mobile and calling them "Cinemobiles". We have four now and hope to have four more later. Our Cinemobiles operate on regular routes and schedules within areas carefully mapped out, with the result that every one of our clubs now has movies once a week, one feature film and one short, with a changed program each week.

The operation of this department requires a staff of properly trained projectionists who can also drive the Cinemobile as well as set up and take down the projectors. With a scarcity of man-power it is therefore somewhat of a problem to recruit and train people answering these requirements. It will probably be necessary eventually to use women and some are now being trained by us. The Cinemobile Department also has to have a film library and facilities for keeping the films in proper condition and in circulation.

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Appendix 3 – Clubmobiles for the Continent.

American Red Cross clubmobiles, especially fitted out to accompany the ground forces in the invasion of Europe, were turned over to the Army recently at a ceremony in England.

Mr. Harvey E. Gibson, American Red Cross Commissioner in Great Britain, made the presentation and Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley, commander-in-chief of ground forces in the European Theater of Operations, accepted them on behalf of the Army.

Mr. Gibson said they would be used to take doughnuts, hot coffee, cigarettes and candy as near to the front lines as the military situation permits. They also will carry newspapers, magazines, a phonograph with a large assortament of records, a radio receiving set and an amplifying unit with a range of one-fourth mile.

The new clubmobiles are mounted on standard Army 2-ton, six-shafted trucks capable of crossing rough terrain. Tentative plans for their operation call for a crew of three American Red Cross girls and, as a part of their training, the girls have driven the clubmobiles over tank tracks.

The girls also have been trained as mechanics, and in first aid. Most of them have had several months’ experience in operating clubmobiles in the United Kingdom.

Each fleet of clubmobiles will take with it trailers containing generators so that operations will not depend on local sources of power. Other trailers and trucks will carry supplies. Miss Kay Curtis, 233 Houston Street, Chattanooga, Tennessee, was supervisor of the clubmobile unit inspected by General Bradley.

At the presentation ceremony, General Bradley inspected the vehicles carefully and complimented the American Red Cross officials who designed them. He said the clubmobiles would be greatly appreciated by the troops.

He also shook hands with numbers of the clubmobile crews, most of whom have brothers in the Army or Navy. They include Miss Helen Coffin, 225 Benefit Street, Providence, Rhode Island; Miss Alice Fishbeck, 423 Stevenson Street, Akron, Ohio; Miss Frances Botte, Glendale, Pennsylvania; Miss Berlyn Sevigny, 2701 Pebble Street, Berkeley, California; Miss Ann Pietromarchi, 320 Cheviot Street, Virginia, Minnesota.

Miss Susan Reder, 5331 Grandinto Street, Kansas City, Missouri; Miss Margaret V. Reed, Kingston, Pennsylvania; Miss Barbara Neil, Springfield, Massachusetts; Miss Elsie Williams, 6910 Sheridan Road, Chicago, Illinois; Miss Janie Spruill, 1329 Acor Street, Auburn, Michigan; Miss Leonie Finn, Concord Street, Hartford, Connecticut; Miss Katherine Burns, 2b 35th Street, Syracuse, New York; Miss Joanna Jansen, 3145 Fifth Avenue, New York City.

Miss Martha Stenol, Nineteen Square, Pennsylvania; Miss Ruby Cross, 3132 Jackson Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Miss Lily Goodall, Greenbank, West Virginia; Miss Ann Street, 243 Hayflower Road, Lake Forest, Illinois; Miss Nancy Burkitt, 526 3 1/2 North Avenue, Portland, Oregon; Miss Mary L. Phillips, 500 Broadway, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Miss Elma Blythin, 193 1/2 East 50th Street, Chicago, Illinois; Miss Marian Harburg, Big Cabin City, South Dakota; Miss Dorothy England, Mason City, Montana; Miss Myrtle Sears, 24 East 67th Street, New York City; Miss Jessie N. Leonard, 160 East 70th Street, New York City; Miss Elma L. Xing, Atlanta, Georgia.