

CHINA BEACH

China Beach was a television series about women, mainly nurses, in Vietnam which ran from 1988-1991.

I visited the *China Beach* set because I had harassed Bill Broyles, one of the writers and a Vietnam veteran, by mail long enough that he arranged it. Bill was always very understanding and polite with me, always ending his letters with "Peace." I had told him that I felt like I had been betrayed by a fellow vet in his writing. My understanding, partly from him, partly from hearsay, partly from visiting the set, is that he had some control over it at first but in the second year had little to do with the program. Overall it was a pretty upsetting experience.

The portrayal of the Red Cross Donut Dollies in general was awful--very demeaning and untrue (for instance, we had to have college degrees and she didn't--not a big deal but an example; and they named her Cherry White--I wonder why). When I talked to co-writer John Sacret Young on the set, he professed to not understand the significance of Cherry White and why it was a problem. Neither of them seemed to be able to understand that we might be upset that KC, the woman of "loose morals," said she was a Donut Dollie before she quit to "do business."

Through the four years of the series I think the series sort of got better and those things were brushed over or forgotten by those who didn't care as much as we did. They continued to write really dumb things, like Cherry having her Apocalypse Now experience, but I guess I kind of came to terms with the fact that they at least included us and it wasn't too egregious.

While visiting the set, the actress who played Cherry was totally uninterested in talking to me. When I met her, the first thing I said to her was that she was wearing her name tag on the wrong side of her uniform. Not very tactful on my part, I admit, and she was cool to me afterwards. Probably would have been anyway since she was the "star."

There were two new "Donut Dollies" who were just joining the cast and were very excited to talk to me. I sat in their trailer for a while, showed them pictures and talked. They were supposed to be flying to their assignment that day and I told them how exciting an experience that had been for me. They were surprised because they thought we'd be scared and so, I guess, had been planning to portray it like that.

The only person other than the new DDs who was at all interested in acknowledging me was the man who played the doctor (he also played the hologram doctor on Star Trek). A real gentleman.

The filming experience itself was deadly--as Bill said, it's like watching grass grow. Everything moved so slowly--ages to set up a shot that lasted all of 30 seconds on screen. I'm glad I'm not an actor.



They had a Red Cross "advisor"--a Donut Dollie. It's hard to say how much influence she had--probably not much. Broyles, to his credit, did arrange in the second year to have a day or two of

a Vietnam seminar wherein the actors, writers, etc. learned about Vietnam (finally). He also included a DD program, put on by real DDs. Apparently it went over very well, breaking the tension of so much intensity about Vietnam with fun and games--exactly what we set out to do in Vietnam. So they got a glimpse of what our purpose was. I highly doubt that it made any difference in the tone of the program.



I went to the *China Beach* website and started to write a comment. I got this far: "As a real-life Donut Dollie, the theme from *China Beach* can bring back waves of nostalgia--nostalgia for my tour in Vietnam and the bits and pieces of reality which CB managed to get right. On the other hand, it was painful to see what they got wrong," and then I ran out because I couldn't remember what they got wrong other than minor details. I guess I was so happy to see us finally recognized that I seem to have glossed over the bad.



The next year I was in DC when the cast came there over Veterans Day--Dana Delany, Troy Evans (a real Vietnam vet) and some others. Everyone was crowding around Delany at the hotel. I just watched. And then a vet I'd gotten to know through the years said to me, "She's just an actress. You're the real thing." Those who counted, knew.