

**Ann Middleton Aschenbrener,  
American Red Cross Staff Assistant  
South Pacific, World War II**

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*Ann Middleton, American Red Cross Staff Assistant, 1944*

In September of 1944, Ann Middleton of Gibson City, Illinois went to Washington D.C. to join the American Red Cross Overseas Operation. After three weeks' training, the new recruits were shipped by troop train to San Francisco. Before they left the capital, they were outfitted with winter gear by the Red Cross, so they thought they were heading to the Alaskan area. When they got to San Francisco, they were re-issued summer gear and the beautiful winter overcoats and uniforms had to be sent home. They were headed for the South Pacific.

Ann, the daughter of O.R. and Sibyl Middleton, was a recent graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Many of the men in her graduating class at the university had enlisted in the Armed Forces. Women, too, felt drawn to be a part of the war effort. Red Cross recruiters traveled around the country accepting applications for overseas duty. Applicants had to be

college graduates, between 25 and 35 years of age, physically fit, and single. They also had to have good social and listening skills.

The American soldiers in World War II were often just kids. Some had not even graduated from high school. The vast majority had not traveled far from home before going into military service. "They were often troubled, anxious, and very, very homesick. The military designated the American Red Cross to respond to this morale issue." The Red Cross set up all sorts of programs, including the overseas recreation clubs and club-mobiles to address this need. (Interview with James H. Madison, author of *Slinging Doughnuts for the Boys*)

In early fall of 1944, Ann was among the 150 Red Cross personnel who embarked on the newly-built David C. Shanks troop ship headed for the South Pacific. The crossing would take thirty-one days. Accommodations on the ship were deluxe by wartime standards. The living quarters had showers, fresh water and eight women to a double room. During the voyage over, Red Cross

duties consisted in manning the library and helping to organize the entertainment. Many dances were held on the closed hatches. The men organized prize fights. In their leisure time, the girls in the Red Cross played cards.

This troop ship traveled solo, because it was thought to be too fast to need a convoy. However, there were blackouts and lots of advisories: "Navy gunners report for general quarters; No smoking on the open deck; Close all portholes; No unnecessary noise; All troops and first class passengers will report to their 'abandon-ship' stations in 15 minutes." At one point, one of the engines quit, reducing the ship's speed to about 5 knots. It took three days to repair it. This was in Japanese territory, so much time was spent looking for subs. Each morning, everyone on the ship had to stand watch a half hour before daybreak until full light. There was no talking, not even whispering, as sound carries over water. Ann reported it was eerie, to say the least.



*American Red Cross Compound, Papua New Guinea 1944-45*

The ship landed in Milne Bay, New Guinea in the late fall of 1944. After a short time there, Ann was sent to the Red Cross compound near the airfield at Nadzab, which is fifteen miles from Lae in Papua, New Guinea. (The area had been occupied by the Japanese until September of 1943.) Ann was there for the next eight months. She wrote home that the country was beautiful and, although accommodations were primitive, they were "much better than any girl scout camp I was ever in."

The compound was wired to keep the men out and the gals in. The cottages were thatched huts with no walls. Four girls were assigned to each cottage. Ann wrote her parents that, "We have a cot to call a bed, a mosquito netting for a canopy, repellent for incense, and dirty clothes for a pillow. But it's wonderful." Latrines were "four-holers," but they were clean. There were also lots of cats. It wasn't long before Ann, always the cat-lover, had adopted one as a pet.



*Ann Middleton with friend "Dusty"*

The Red Cross had strict uniform regulations. However, instead of the organization's traditional uniform, Red Cross workers in the South Pacific were issued Army clothing: tan shirts and trousers, with brown shoes. They were also restricted in their comings and goings. The women were not allowed to date enlisted men. When they left the compound, Ann wrote that "we have to go by auto - no walking alone at night or by day. At night we must have an M.P. with us or be with an officer. And that officer must stay on certain roads and not stop the car and be going someplace definite. That generally means up Pennsylvania Ave. to the Officers Club."

There was no shortage of good food for the Red Cross volunteers. Ann wrote of menus featuring pork, lamb, chicken, and duck. She loved the bananas, coconut, mangoes, and other tropical fruits. Warm beer took some adjustment. Hard liquor was also readily available.

In Nadzab, Ann and Barb Benedict (who would later serve as Ann's maid of honor at her wedding) ran the Kunai Club, a grass hut built with native labor. Duties as Staff Assistant ranged from getting food for the snack bar to arranging ping pong tourneys, dances, and card tournaments. Other time was spent just talking to a bunch of "homesick" kids, making coffee by the 10 gallons and sandwiches by the tray full. They also operated a clubmobile which provided food and recreation for the G.I.s in more distant army camps. Ann wrote home that she was often exhausted at the end of the day.

Speaking of those who worked in the overseas service clubs, the author James H. Madison observed, "Wearing lipstick and a cheery smile, they greeted G.I.s with the language of America. They looked like the girls back home. They knew how to banter and joke, how to do the jitterbug dances of the day, how to talk about the Brooklyn Dodgers and Glenn Miller." (Madison) This description certainly applied to Ann Middleton and



*Ann Middleton: On the job in the South Pacific*

the other gals who operated the Red Cross recreation centers for the soldiers and sailors of the South Pacific.



*Ann Middleton married Major R. W. Aschenbrener on August 20, 1945.*

Ann wrote home about fun times as well: dates with officers, dances at the Officers Club, fancy dinners. While in New Guinea and before the Army clamped down on the practice, Ann had a couple of exciting plane rides. One was as "co-pilot" in a B-24. Landing was an adventure, because the landing gear wouldn't "show" down and the radio was out. They took a chance and landed safely. Another time she went on a practice run on a bombing range in an A-20. She had to lie on her stomach behind the pilot; the only other seat in the plane was for the tail gunner in the back.

Life for the American Red Cross overseas staff was not without its risks. In a letter written in late November of 1944, Ann wrote, "We had a bit of excitement this week. We thought we were going to be bombed (Tokyo Rose and intelligence), but I guess our Air Corps took care of that. Still,




it was amazing the number of people who dug foxholes around here. I haven't any idea how long it's been since this was bombed last, but at least 7 or 8 months ago.”

In May of 1945, Ann learned that a handsome aviator in the Army Air Forces wanted a date with her. She had to break their first date because she got very sick with Dengue Fever. She finally had that first date with Major Robert (Ash) Aschenbrener and they “hit it off” right away.

In July of 1945, shortly after their meeting, Ann moved with her unit up to Luzon Island in the Philippines. Ann was assigned to a servicemen’s club in a barrio near Clark Air Field, outside of Manila. Ann wrote home that the city must have been beautiful at one time, with the majority of the buildings constructed of white stone. However, at this point in the war, most of the city was rubble. In a section of five or six blocks, there might be only two or three buildings standing. In August of 1945, Ann wrote that Filipino guards had killed a Japanese soldier between their house and the next one.

At about the same time, Major Aschenbrener and other pilots from the Combat Replacement Training Center in Nadzab also moved their operations to Clark Field in the Philippines. A couple of weeks after arriving in the Philippines, the Major and other pilots flew to China to bring back P-38 planes not needed there. Upon his safe return, he buzzed the Red Cross quarters. It wasn’t long before Ann and Ash were talking marriage. They were married on August 20, 1945 and returned to the states in September, on the first available ship. Japan had surrendered to the Allied Forces on August 15, officially ending World War II. As noted in the memo below, Ann served in the American Red Cross from September 7, 1944 to October 15, 1945.

  
**AMERICAN RED CROSS**  
NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS  
WASHINGTON 13, D. C.

Date: *October 20, 1945*

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

*Mrs. Ann B. Aschenbrener* has recently returned from a foreign assignment with the American Red Cross after serving overseas from *Sept. 7, 1944* to *October 15, 1945*. ~~He~~ or plans to remain in the United States. Any courtesies extended to ~~She~~ *Her* will be appreciated by this organization.

*M. Jane Dunlap*  
for: *Clara C. Arthur*  
Assistant Chief, Returns Unit  
Personnel Administration, SAF

77080

Sources: Letters written by Ann Middleton Aschenbrener to her family; IU Press Interview with James H. Madison, author of *Slingshot Doughnuts for the Boys*. Interview posted online for Women’s History Month at [www.atyourlibrary.org](http://www.atyourlibrary.org). Web 18 Nov 2014.

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