

The War Office was convinced that a strongly centralized nursing department was needed and that Florence Nightingale was clearly the most competent person to establish and be the head of such a department.

While striving to reorganize the nursing service, she tirelessly devoted herself to taking care of the wounded and the sick, in particular soldiers with cholera (although her letters rarely mention this aspect of her work). Being very demanding towards herself, she expected blind obedience from her subordinates, and the nurses working under her were bitter in their complaints. Gradually, however, she came to appreciate what the difficulties were; she tried to gain a better understanding of her colleagues' problems and secure the best possible working conditions for them.

In recognition of her services after the Crimean War, the British Government established the Foundation of the Nightingale Training School for Nurses in St. Thomas's Hospital.

Because of her work in the Crimea, and later as head of her school for nurses, Florence Nightingale is looked upon as one of the chief founders of modern nursing techniques. In perusing these selected letters — each one reproduced in its entirety in Sue M. Goldie's work — the reader acquires an extremely vivid impression of her reactions, her frustration, her indignation and, especially, her enthusiasm and total commitment to her vocation as a nurse.

Yet this book is more than a tribute to Florence Nightingale herself and all that she accomplished during the Crimean War. By showing just how vital the work of nurses in the midst of armed conflicts is, it also helps to restore due recognition for the often inadequately appreciated services of those who, in tending sick and wounded soldiers, are after all closest to them in their need.

*Françoise Perret*

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## PLANET OF VICTIMS

### *ICRC delegates on humanitarian mission*

Should the work of an ICRC delegate be called a profession, a speciality, a state of mind, a way of life or a calling? There is no easy answer to this question. But one thing is certain: there is no other job quite like it. This is apparent from reading *La Planète des victimes*, the book devoted by Michel Goeldlin to ICRC delegates in the field.\*

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\* Michel Goeldlin, *La Planète des victimes* (photographs by Yucki Goeldlin), Editions de l'Arve, Geneva, Editions du Griot, Paris, 1990, 280 pages.

Responding to the ICRC's desire both to have a well-written book about the work of its delegates and to promote better knowledge of its humanitarian activities, the writer Michel Goeldlin and his wife, the photographer Yucki Goeldlin, travelled to Angola, El Salvador and the Thai-Cambodian border to observe at first hand the many and varied tasks of a delegate. Few can equal Michel Goeldlin when it comes to setting a scene: he skilfully captures for his reader the geographical, climatic, political and social environment in which the ICRC works. Whether aboard a Hercules transport aircraft, in a refugee camp, in a relief-distribution centre or on the premises of a delegation, Goeldlin enables his reader to share, in his imagination, the everyday work of the delegate, the thousand and one problems that assail him, the doubts he must overcome, the joy of success and the frustration of failure.

In Angola, for example, the author vividly describes the arrival by air of seeds, medicines and blankets without which the isolated population of the Planalto cannot survive; the work of the surgeons and nurses at the Bomba Alta orthopaedic centre; help for lepers in Sao José; wounded people being taken to hospital; detainees in a re-education camp.

In El Salvador, the reader almost feels that he is present as a guerrilla of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front is taken to hospital for treatment, or as ICRC medical staff tackle the most urgent needs in rural areas where the danger comes not only from military operations, but also from cultural taboos. For a delegate, life consists of unexpected situations that must be dealt with immediately. Uncertainty is his daily fare; permission to go to some remote village may, for example, be granted one day and cancelled the next. But sick and undernourished children cannot wait. They have to be helped even if that means spending five hours to cover 60 km, bumping over impossible trails. Some solution will just have to be found. Being a delegate means being present in all circumstances, it means cultivating contacts everywhere, it means persuading the unco-operative guard at a military checkpoint that an ICRC vehicle has to be allowed to pass in order to save lives, it means chatting to young recruits to put over the fundamental humanitarian rules, it means moving heaven and earth to find the parents of a lost child, etc. And all the while the delegate must remain alert for anything new, display endless patience and generally rise above himself to be at the service of the victims of conflict.

At Site 2 on the Thai-Cambodian border, we enter another world, a "country that does not exist" but is peopled by 170,000 refugees living in cramped, impoverished and hazardous conditions. More come every day; others disappear. The delegates are constantly on the go, noting new arrivals, recording departures, searching for those who have disappeared and forwarding messages between camps. Site 2 was shelled while the author was there. He describes how ICRC delegates and their colleagues from the United Nations Border Relief Operation and the UNHCR evacuated the most vulnerable refugees to Site 3 and took seriously wounded people to the Khao I Dang hospital, where medical teams from the ICRC and National Societies worked around the clock.

Unforgettable characters emerge from this epic of human suffering, such as an amputee who calls himself "Fredy de Los Angeles", a young Salvadorean ex-guerilla who does not know who he is and whose case is being looked into by Jeanne from the Central Tracing Agency; Pikul, the Thai field officer who comes from the Golden Triangle and is utterly devoted to the Red Cross; Denise, a Swiss nurse abducted by guerrillas to tend one of their comrades; Barbara, a Canadian nurse, who must take terrible life-and-death decisions when she decides which of the wounded people arriving at the Camacupa hospital in Angola will receive priority care; Eric, who worked all out on the construction of a vast system to distribute drinking water throughout the Santa Cruz area, only to discover that the local inhabitants preferred to "go down to the river in the valley for their germ-laden, death-bringing water".

Why, then, would anyone want to be a delegate? Goeldlin asked a lot of them this question. They replied that they did it to go to interesting places and accomplish something through work that "has more to be said for it, morally, than other spheres of activity", to "improve the world", to "give substance to such a weird concept as neutrality" and to "watch over the application of international humanitarian law". Delegates often remember what they were told during their training: "The time will come, again and again, when you are acutely aware of your own powerlessness, of the limits of what we can do. You will find the enormity of the task discouraging. But you will also see that if you are able to save even one life, all the frustrations will have been worth while".

Michel Goeldlin's book is a tribute not only to the Swiss delegates of the ICRC but also to the local employees and the teams sent out by National Societies and other humanitarian organizations. The book and the striking photographs that illustrate it present a humanitarian profession that is fascinating and unique. It will doubtless inspire many others to follow the same vocation.

*Jacques Meurant*

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## JORNADAS DE DERECHO INTERNACIONAL HUMANITARIO

### *Round Tables on International Humanitarian Law*

The first *Round Table on International Humanitarian Law*, organized by the Seville Provincial Assembly of the Spanish Red Cross and Seville University to mark the 125th anniversary of the Red Cross, was held from 5 to 7 May 1988. It was chaired by *Professor Carrillo Salcedo*, lecturer in public international law, and aroused such wide interest that a special course was organized on the subject from January to June the following year. The second