

1909 scheme for the organisation of voluntary aid in England and Wales

The scheme for the organisation of voluntary aid in England and Wales defined the British Red Cross' role in assisting the government in wartime by providing supplementary aid to the territorial medical service was granted on 16 August 1909. A similar scheme for Scotland followed in December 1909.

Why was it needed?

The Territorial and Reserve Forces Act 1907 reformed the reserve forces of the British Army by transferring existing volunteer and yeomanry units into a new territorial force and by redesignating units as part of the Army Reserve.

Part 1 of the act defined the position of the county Branches of the British Red Cross, to work with their respective county territorial associations. The scheme laid down the terms by which the organisation would work with the Territorial Army.

Who was involved?

The executive committee appointed a small committee to consider the situation with the director-general of the Army Medical Service. The executive committee sent a copy of the scheme to every president, vice-president, honorary secretary and committee member of each county Branch. Colonel Sir James Magill was appointed organizing secretary.

What happened as a result of the scheme?

As a result of the scheme, the Red Cross organised voluntary aid detachments (VADs), made up of men and women, in every county to carry out transport duties and staff rest stations and hospitals.

The Red Cross selected suitable buildings for general hospitals, prepared schedules of equipment for the hospitals and submitted schemes to establish auxiliary hospitals and convalescent homes for wounded servicemen.

Each county Branch appointed a county director to be in charge of raising detachments. All VAD members were to be trained in first aid and nursing through St John Ambulance Association. Volunteers were also trained to make use of local resources to improvise stretchers and other methods of transport, and to convert local buildings into shelters and

rest stations for the sick and wounded. By October 1910, 202 detachments had been registered with over six thousand volunteers.

An amended scheme was published in December 1910, which gave county associations authority to employ other means of raising detachments, including registering with the St John Ambulance Brigade and St John Ambulance Association units. A few territorial force association detachments were also raised.

In March 1911, a sub-committee recommended uniforms which would readily distinguish the wearers as belonging to the Red Cross detachments, but which would not appear to be too military.

Membership of the Detachments grew still further on the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The British Red Cross and the Order of St John, a body that was also empowered to raise detachments under the War Office Voluntary Aid Scheme, combined to form the Joint War Committee. This Committee administered the joint wartime fundraising and relief work with the greatest possible efficiency and economy, under the protection of the Red Cross emblem and name.

During the First World War the Joint War Committee administered over 3000 auxiliary convalescent hospitals in Britain staffed by local Voluntary Aid Detachments. As the war progressed and more men were called up for military service, female VADs took on new roles including ambulance drivers, cooks, clerical workers and telephonists.

A further revised scheme was issued in 1923. Detachments could again consist of men or women, but the service was to be of two kinds:

- > mobile – where on mobilisation members would be expected to go wherever their services were needed
- > immobile - where they would carry out their duties from their own homes.

The Voluntary Aid Detachments formed part of the Technical Reserve of the Forces of the Crown.

In addition, British Red Cross detachments were raised and trained to accommodate those wanted to help but who could not give the commitment required by membership of the Voluntary Aid Detachments. The Red Cross detachments were intended to provide and replenish the personnel of the Voluntary Aid Detachments, to supply a reserve in time of emergency and to carry out the duties of a National Red Cross Society.

VADs continued to be at the core of voluntary services until the reorganisation of the Red Cross in 1984.