

## British Red Cross activity during the First World War

Following the outbreak of war in August 1914, the British Red Cross formed the Joint War Committee with the Order of St John to pool fundraising activity and resources and work together under the protective emblem of the Red Cross.

Members of the British Red Cross and the Order of St John were organised into Voluntary Aid Detachments. The term VAD was also used for an individual member as well as a detachment. All members were trained in first aid and some undertook training in nursing, cookery and hygiene and sanitation.

Throughout the war VADs worked in hospitals, convalescent homes, rest stations, packing centres, medical supply depots and work parties. The Joint War Committee organised the volunteers alongside technical and professional staff. It also supplied the machinery and mechanisms to provide these services in Britain and in the conflict areas of Europe, the Middle East, Russia and East Africa.

### Voluntary Aid Detachments

Just before the declaration of war, the numbers of Voluntary Aid Detachments raised by the British Red Cross and the Order of St John and registered by the War Office were as follows:

	Detachments		Personnel	
	British Red Cross	St John	British Red Cross	St John
Women	1,582	241	40,018	6,773
Men	408	143	17,666	5,865
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,990</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>57,714</b>	<b>12,638</b>

By the time that the Armistice was called in 1918 these figures had increased significantly:

	Detachments		Personnel	
	British Red Cross	St John	British Red Cross	St John
Women	2,534	713	66,211	24,440
Men	560	276	24,712	10,630
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,094</b>	<b>989</b>	<b>90,923</b>	<b>35,070</b>

## Auxiliary hospitals and convalescent homes

During the War the British Red Cross provided auxiliary hospitals and convalescent homes for wounded service men. During peacetime the British Red Cross had been preparing for this. It had already secured buildings, equipment and staff so that many temporary hospitals were available for use as soon as wounded men began to arrive from abroad.

Despite this preparation, on the outbreak of War both the Joint War Committee and the War Office were inundated with additional offers of buildings. It was the Committee's job to sort through these 5000 offers to assess the suitability of the premises for use as temporary hospitals. The buildings on offer varied greatly including town halls, schools, large and small private houses, both in the country and in towns and cities. Those deemed suitable by the Commission were established as auxiliary hospitals. These were attached to Central Military Hospitals, which directed the movement of the patients, who remained under military control.

In all, there were over 3000 of these hospitals, which were administered under County Directors. They were usually staffed by:

- > a Commandant, who was in charge of the hospital, except for medical and nursing services;
- > a Quartermaster, who was responsible for the receipt, custody and issue of article in the provision store;
- > a Matron, who directed the work of the nursing staff;
- > members of the local Voluntary Aid Detachment, who were trained in first aid and home nursing.

In many cases ladies in the neighbourhood gave part-time service, although it was often necessary to supplement voluntary work by paid labour, such as in the case of cooks. Medical attendance was provided locally and was usually voluntary, despite the extra strain that the medical profession was already under at that time.

The patients at these hospitals were generally the less seriously wounded and those in need of convalescence. The servicemen preferred the auxiliary hospitals as the discipline was not as strict as in the Military Hospitals, conditions were less crowded and the surroundings more homely.

## Transport for the wounded

### Motorised Ambulances

The Joint War Committee was the first to supply motorised ambulances to the battlefields. The first convoy arrived in France in September 1914 and proved much more effective in the war terrain than the horse drawn ambulances used in previous conflicts.

The 'Times Appeal', issued on 2 October 1914, was instrumental in raising funds for the provision of ambulances. A successful response led to sufficient funds within 3 weeks to purchase 512 Ambulances. The Red Cross bought practically every chassis in the country that was suitable for the purpose.

There were additional appeals, the 'Dennis-Bayley Fund' and 'Transport of Wounded Fund' which helped maintain the upkeep of the vehicles and there were also a number of Cars presented as gifts to the Society.

Each ambulance carried on average 3939 cases and each driver on average 3000 cases. A total of 2500, both male and female, drivers served.

### **Trains**

The UK Flour Millers' Association presented the Red Cross with two ambulance trains, specially built and equipped, constructed by Great Western and Great Eastern Railways. The trains were working in France during 1915, with another train, converted from ordinary French rolling stock. The three trains carried 461,844 patients.

### **Work parties**

Work parties were set up by voluntary groups across the country to help supply hospitals with such items as bandages and clothing. Queen Mary's Needlework Guild (QMNG) was one of many voluntary organisations founded at the start of the First World War to supply gifts and comforts to troops in the field and to sick and wounded soldiers in hospitals at home and abroad. These included pyjamas, bed-jackets, bed-socks, operation stockings, bags, bandages and dressings.

During the war the Queen Mary's Needlework Guild worked as part of the War Hospitals Supply Depot providing bandages and other items for military hospitals. Work parties who worked as part of the Joint War Committee of the British Red Cross and Order of St John supplied similar items to auxiliary voluntary hospitals.

QMNG worked alongside work parties co-ordinated by the Joint War Committee of the British Red Cross and Order of St John and work parties co-ordinated by a special department of the War Office.

### **The Wounded and Missing Department**

#### **Work at Home**

The British Red Cross established offices to deal with enquiries for the missing in Paris, Boulogne and London in the early stages of the War. An office was set up in London

before the end of 1914. It began on a small scale at 83 Pall Mall and then the London office of the Wounded and Missing Department was opened at 20 Arlington Street, lent by Lord Salisbury, in April 1915 with a staff of about twenty voluntary workers, besides typists and this became the clearing-house for all enquiries received from the public and also for all reports collected by the searchers in hospitals at home and abroad. All incoming enquiries were registered in the office and included in the printed monthly enquiry list, which was distributed to all searchers and the searchers' reports, as they were received, were communicated to the enquirers.

The department continued to grow and moved to Norfolk House, St James Square in July 1915 and then to 18 Carlton House Terrace in November 1915, lent by Lord Astor, where it remained until the end of the war. Sir Louis Mallet was the Director of the Department from April 1915 to September 1916 succeeded by the Earl of Lucan from September 1916 to the close of work in March 1919.

In October 1916, the section of the department which dealt with prisoners of war was removed to form part of the newly-constituted Central prisoners of War committee and from that time onwards, all matters referring to prisoners of war was handed over to that committee.

The War Office largely regulated the scope of the work from the beginning. Facilities were given to the Wounded and Missing department for visiting the hospitals and consulting the War Office records, but it was not officially recognised until July 1915, when it was stated that we should be the only organisation permitted to make such enquiries for the missing and the work carried on in close liaison with the Casualty department of the War Office.

In July 1916 the Department started to make enquiries for all the missing, whether or not friends or relatives had made a special application. It was judged best to begin enquiring for every missing man as soon as he was so reported. The War Office supplied the Department with an annotated copy of the daily communiqué of casualties, giving the details essential for search (but omitted from the published casualty lists) of the missing man's battalion and company, with the date of the casualty. The Wounded and Missing included all these names in their enquiry list and therefore often had information to hand when the family of the missing man made an enquiry. The War Office, in letting the next-of-kin about a casualty, they automatically referred them to us for further information.

The searching of hospitals at home started in 1915 and was gradually developed all over the country. The different districts were placed under the charge of a head searcher. That person, usually a local volunteer, was responsible for seeing that the first-line hospitals, which were those receiving wounded direct from France, were searched and every new draft of wounded were questioned with regard to the missing of the list.

Regular searches in the base hospitals and army rest camps abroad and hospitals at home, about 1200 searchers were employed in the UK, meant a very wide circulation of

the monthly enquiry list. After the Armistice, searching was carried out with very good results at the various reception camps in France and England, to which repatriated prisoners of war were first sent.

'Wounded' enquiries were referred to the War office or to the regimental record offices and reports on the wounded man's condition, where the hospital was known, were obtained by telegram from the hospital searcher. 'Missing' enquiries were classified according to the front on which the man was missing and passed to the section that prepared the monthly list for printing.

Another section of the office checked the periodical lists received direct from Germany through the Frankfurt Red Cross, of those reported prisoners of war, in order that their names be removed from the next enquiry list. All enquiries relating to men in the forces in Italy and the East were dealt with in a separate section, as were all enquiries for officers in France.

It soon became established in writing to relatives waiting for information about the 'missing' that official forms and methods should be discarded, so that each enquirer might feel that a certain personal interest was taken in his or her case. During the War the Department received 342,248 enquiries.

### **Work in France**

In August 1914, two or three Red Cross workers began to collect lists of wounded in the hospitals and to answer enquiries received at the Paris Red Cross Headquarters. In addition to making enquiries in hospital, Lord Robert Cecil visited the Villers Cotterets district in order to find and mark graves. Arrangements were made for various visitors to collect daily lists of admissions to hospitals in Paris and the neighbourhood. Lists of admissions were also received from the French Government. The casualty list from the *Times* was also put on a card index and all enquiries checked against it. Letters addressed to soldiers picked up on the Marne battlefields were brought to the office and they undertook to return them to the writers.

On 20 October the office moved from a room in a hotel into rooms at No 23 Rue de la paix. The Army Agents occupied the same building and were also receiving enquiries. A joint list of names was telegraphed daily to the Deputy Adjutant General, 3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon at Nantes, asking whether a casualty had been reported. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon was the branch of the General Headquarters in France which dealt with records, casualties and reinforcements.

The first list of British prisoners, containing 128 names, was received on 28 November 1914 from the United States Consul-General in Paris. Later these lists came from the Geneva Red Cross, twice a week, as they were received from Germany. Information was sent direct to the relations, often reaching them ten days before it was received from the War Office.

In November 1914, the editor of the *Evening News* advertised every day in his paper, long lists of names, headed 'Where Are These Men?' and these lists were brought to the Paris Office in order to obtain information.

Another branch of work consisted of tracing graves. An additional Red Cross unit started operations in the North and communicated with the Boulogne office. Towards the end of March 1915, the whole of the graves work was taken over by the War Office.

A watching list was also used in all offices in France; admission to hospitals in all areas could be checked against it and relations of sick and wounded officers who chose to register their name could be informed immediately of the location and condition of the patient. There were over 1500 names on the list.

The Paris office ceased to exist on 5 June 1915 as the hospitals in the area had closed. An office opened in Boulogne on 1 November 1914 and was transferred to the Hotel Christol on 30 May 1915. The office began with three searchers and grew to twelve by October 1917. The Military authorities in Hospitals and camps gave assistance where they could, for example the Deputy Director of Medical Services made telephone enquiries from casualty clearing stations and hospitals with which the Department could not communicate. The office was closed on 22 February 1919. During the War there were also offices in Rouen, Le Treport, Etaples, Havre, Calais and Marseilles.

## The Armistice

By the end of the war the British Red Cross had:

- > provided 90,000 VADs who had been mobilized to work at home and abroad
- > established 1786 auxiliary hospitals
- > provided and staffed ambulances, hospital trains and motor launches
- > dispatched over 47,000 food parcels a month
- > supplied 4,000,000 books through the Red Cross War Library
- > raised £21,885,035
- > spent £20,058,355 on hospitals, medicine, clothing and aftercare to the sick and wounded.

The names of many personnel who lost their lives are recorded on war memorials throughout the country and overseas. In 1920 the British Red Cross War Medal was instituted and awarded to some 41,000 members who had served in the United Kingdom between 1914 and 1919 and were not eligible for British military medals.