

The Australian Red Cross during World War I

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The Australian Red Cross was borne out of a war that holds a special place in Australian history. The young nation, federated only thirteen years before in 1901, was keen to make its mark on the international stage fighting alongside Britain, the so-called mother country, as an equal partner. Perhaps our most sacred cultural institution, Anzac Day, commemorates the landing of Australian troops on the Gallipoli Peninsula on 25 April 1915, an event that many regard as the true birth of our nation. From a population of just under five million, nearly 417,000 enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (henceforth AIF), with around 324,000 serving overseas. Of those, around 58,000—roughly one in five—were killed and an additional hundreds of thousands were wounded. The AIF was a volunteer force, and would remain so throughout the war, thus making Australia unique among the combatant nations. Yes this spirit of voluntary sacrifice was not limited to those who served in the military. Australian civilians—women, men, and children—threw themselves unstintingly behind the war effort, doing whatever they could to support their “boys” overseas. It was against this backdrop of willing voluntarism that the Australian Red Cross first took shape.

Mobilizing for War

The mobilization of the AIF is a well-known chapter in Australia’s history. Less well known is the remarkable response of the Australian public and the impact it had in the early days of the war. Yet the parallels between the mobilization of the military forces and humanitarian efforts on the home front are indeed striking. The Australian public’s eagerness to support the war effort initially took the form of what Governor-General Ronald Munro Ferguson described as an “orgy of alms.”¹

Patriotic funds were formed in the hundreds, precipitating a veritable deluge of donations. Even those opposed to the war could find a fund that aligned with their social and political beliefs. There were funds to assist Australian soldiers and their families, funds to care for horses and Belgian children, funds to provide musical instruments and church huts for troops in France, and funds that provided shiploads of meat and food to Britain.²

Yet this generosity went beyond donations of money and goods. Many chose to volunteer their time and labor to the cause by joining, among other organizations, the Red Cross thereby expediting its rise to become Australia’s largest voluntary organization. Within weeks of war’s outbreak, the Australian Red Cross (as it was generally referred to) had become a household name, garnering the admiration of the thousands of Australians, and especially

1 This chapter comes from Melanie Oppenheimer, *The Power of Humanity. 100 Years of Australian Red Cross*, Sydney, Harper Collins, 2014. It was commissioned for the centenary of the Australian Red Cross.

2 For a comprehensive study of Australian patriotic funds, see Melanie Oppenheimer, *All Work, No Pay: Australian Volunteers in War*, Ohio Productions, Walcha, 2002; *Daily Advertiser (Wagga Wagga)*, 4 August 1914, quoted in Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1974, p. 5; letter from Ronald Munro Ferguson to A. Bonar Law, 13 July 1915, Novar Papers, MS696/727–732, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

women, who had been “left behind” on the home front. From Port Douglas in the tropical far north of Queensland to the gold town of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia, women flocked to the Red Cross to become the volunteer troops on the home front, in much the same way as the military troops were being mobilized for war.

In line with the International Red Cross’ motto, “humanity in the midst of war,” Red Cross volunteers in Europe cared for sick and wounded soldiers, assisted their dependents, and tried to help civilians caught up in the war. In Australia, far from the battlefield, the volunteers’ duties in the early months of the war had a different focus. They concentrated their energies on raising funds, collecting materials, and making goods to be sent to the front, proving themselves to be extremely adept at these tasks. They sent thousands of pounds overseas, as well as shirts and socks, towels and mufflers, packets of cigarettes and boxes of chocolates, medical supplies, crutches, and artificial legs.

The Red Cross’ adherence to the Geneva Convention at times conflicted with the organization’s desire to fulfill its patriotic duty, challenging its leaders from the very onset. The £9,000 provided to the Director General of Australian Medical Services to assist in equipping military hospitals is one such example, as this was a Commonwealth government responsibility, not a Red Cross one. Yet in the early stages of the war, the medical services depended almost entirely on Red Cross supplies of bandages, splints, sterilized linen, and hospital equipment.

Lady Helen at the Helm

Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, the wife of Australia’s sixth Governor-General, founded the Australian Branch of the British Red Cross Society in August 1914 upon the outbreak of war. She loosely based the Australian organization on the Scottish model with which she was familiar. A staunch advocate of Queen Alexandra’s belief that Red Cross work was essentially a feminine endeavor, Lady Helen wanted to ensure that women would occupy leadership roles at all levels of the organization she established in Australia, contrasting with both the British Red Cross, whose executive committee positions were filled by men, and the Canadian Red Cross, where women were not originally included in the leadership structure. The Australian Branch’s structure mirrored the newly federated nation; the societies formed in each state were independent bodies, called “state divisions.” Each society was headed by the wife of the State Governor in question, who, as president, was responsible for all Red Cross work in her state, including the network of local branches established in each state.

Lady Helen graciously allowed her home—the Government House in Melbourne—to become the headquarters of the Australian Red Cross’ national body. This included the central depot, which was established in residence’s magnificent ballroom. Following its transformation into both a factory and a warehouse, the nascent headquarters would receive, create, and



◀ *Lady Helen Munro Ferguson*

dispatch a multitude of Red Cross goods throughout the war. The vast room was divided into sections, with long trestle tables running the length of the ballroom, each piled high with goods. The whirl of sewing machines and the hum of industry replaced the gaiety of the violin and waltz. Industrious volunteers assembled and packed Red Cross parcels in stiff brown paper and twine. Others created bandages out of yards of old linen, packed reading materials, or sorted through the socks, pajamas, and other articles of clothing lovingly made by women and girls across the country. Each day over the course of more than four years, upwards of three hundred volunteers—predominantly women—walked through the ornate steel gates and up the groomed pebbled driveway to toil in the central depot. Local women's voluntary organizations filled weekly rosters. Eventually there were forty permanent staff members working at the central depot, including the ever-laborious depot manager. Motor trucks, plodding draft horses, and carts arrived and departed with regimental regularity, either

delivering goods to be transformed into useful items or leaving piled high with wooden crates stamped with the distinctive red cross, each ready for transport to the docks and shipment overseas.

The Red Cross' inhabitation of the Government House would, over time, expand into the tower, where the secretary, Philadelphia Robertson, worked; into the dining room where meetings were held; and into the state drawing room where it was not uncommon to see more than fifty bales of flannel stacked atop one another, scandalizing the household staff who recoiled at the idea of the precious carpets being covered in fluff. Eventually the horse stables were repurposed into a workshop where workers constructed crutches, deckchairs, folding tables, screens, trays, bedside lockers, and various other Red Cross products. Even the staff of the Government House were enlisted to field telephone calls and mail, so much so that Orchard, the hall porter who had worked there so long that "he was on the inventory," remarked that "one of these days, [the] Red Cross would have the governor-general out on the lawn."³ At the end of the war, the value of all goods dispatched from the central depot, most shipped overseas, was estimated at £1,276,666.

All these activities were overseen by Lady Helen. Her office was nearby—a small, humble room just off the main hallway adjacent to the ballroom. From there she kept a watchful eye on proceedings, answered questions, directed operations, and would often be seen in the fray, sleeves rolled up, working with her compatriots. Lady Helen's use of vice-regal space gave her direct control over affairs and emphasized, when necessary, her position and power within the organization. As the war progressed, she presided over an increasingly large and complex business. She would, on a daily basis, deal with a multitude of unprecedented issues in an emotionally charged and constantly changing environment—issues that today would be handled by professionally trained human resource managers. Since the depot was in her own home, Lady Helen took personally any criticism leveled against the organization, such as media reports claiming that a mice plague had spoiled goods in the spring of 1917. She responded by allowing the general public unfettered access to the federal depot, personally guiding representatives of every Victorian branch around the entirety of the facility for two long afternoons. Her aim was to scotch rumors of vermin and provide her visitors with "ocular proof" that neither rust nor mice had corroded or destroyed anything in the depot.⁴

Lady Helen was described by Philadelphia Robertson as having "the guiding hand and the controlling brain of the Red Cross network." She presided over every meeting of the Central Council, the governing body of the Society. "Important resolutions were never better framed [...] nor were wiser judgments than hers forthcoming," suggested Robertson.⁵

3 Philadelphia N. Robertson, *Red Cross Yesterdays*, JC Stephens, Melbourne, 1950, p. 15.

4 *Table Talk*, 6 September 1917.

5 Philadelphia Robertson, 'The Late Viscountess Novar,' No 33, Box 191, ARC Archives (National), Melbourne.

Lady Helen was ably assisted by “our Philadelphia,” as Robertson was affectionately known, who had been brought into the organization to be secretary to the society in November 1914. Unmarried, with Scottish heritage, and of a similar age to Lady Helen, Robertson’s duties included typing correspondence for the President, the Council, and its committees as well as keeping minutes and editing monthly leaflets. Philadelphia would stay with the Red Cross for the next thirty-two years, becoming a leading figure in the Australian movement. There were only a few paid staff members employed during the war, one of which was Robertson, but also included store managers, transport officers, and various clerks. The vast bulk of Red Cross work was carried out by its army of volunteers, from the President through to the thousands of volunteers at the branch level.

Lady Helen remained in touch with her constituency by allotting time to travel around Australia. With the governor-general, she travelled to every state more than once, energizing the Red Cross and other women’s organizations, such as bush nursing and infant welfare groups. She crisscrossed the continent, even sailed across Bass Strait in March 1918 to meet with members, workers, and friends of the Red Cross in Tasmania. An “earnest, untiring worker” herself, Lady Helen gave a “sympathetic and stimulating address” to the Tasmanians and encouraged them to reach out to others who might still not recognize the “magnitude and importance of the Red Cross work.”⁶

The State Divisions

State Divisions of the Australian Red Cross were quickly established. In New South Wales, for instance, volunteers resurrected the branch formed in 1913, with Lady Edeline Strickland as its president. An executive committee was appointed on 11 August, with the division beginning operations the following day from its central office in King Street, Sydney. The members of the committee were a group of highly energetic women and men, all of whom would play longstanding roles in the New South Wales branch, that included Miss Nancy Consett Stephen, Mrs. Langer Owen, Mr. James Fairfax, the Hon. James Ashton, MLC, and Joint Secretaries, the very capable Misses Marjorie Mort, and Gladys Owen. Within three days and with only twenty-four hours’ notice, goods for the comfort and welfare of the first expeditionary force bound for German New Guinea were dispatched on SS *Berrima*. After a few months, the division relocated to larger premises at 215 George Street. A depot for receiving and dispatching goods was established in the basement of Sydney Town Hall.

In Queensland, a public meeting attended by around 600 people was held on 13 August at the Albert Hall in Brisbane. Red Cross activities were initially held in a room offered by the Queensland Transport Ambulance Brigade in Ann Street and later in rooms at the Inns of

6 Australian Branch, Tasmanian Division, *4th Annual Report*, 1 August 1918, pp. 7–8.

Court on Adelaide Street. Meetings were held at the British Medical Association and space was allocated in the basement of the Town Hall to store Red Cross goods.

A public meeting was held in the Tasmanian city of Hobart's town hall on 14 August. Albeit the smallest state of the commonwealth, Tasmania was the only division to have two committees or, as they were then called, sections. This was a highly effective arrangement with one committee based in Launceston serving the north and the other, based in Hobart, which served the south.



▲ Ladies at Government House 1916

The South Australian Division was formed at a meeting jointly convened on 14 August by Lady Marie Galway, the cultured, intelligent, charming wife of the governor, who was part German and a Roman Catholic, and the wife of the mayor, Mrs. A. A. Simpson. Lady Galway, like Lady Helen, opened the doors of her home to the Red Cross, leading to both the South Australian Division Headquarters and a central packing depot to be established at the conveniently located Government House on North Terrace. As in Melbourne, the residence's stables were later procured to pack soldiers' comforts.

The small Western Australian Division, led by Lady Clara Barron, used a room in Perth's Government House as a Red Cross storeroom. Battling record drought, the spoiling of the 1914 wheat crop, and a severe trade depression, this Division was slower to get going than its counterparts in the eastern states, being formed in mid-September.

The Victorian Division was formed at a public meeting held in Melbourne Town Hall on 21 August. Many members had already been involved in the establishment of the National Headquarters the previous week. Its office was at the Old Treasury Buildings, Spring Street. Difficulties born out of a rivalry between the State and National Headquarters would, however, embroil Melbourne from the very beginning—the unfortunate result of having both the governor-general and governor of Victoria resident in Melbourne. It was agreed very early on that the Victorian Division, under the presidency of the beautiful and youthful Lady Margaret Stanley, wife of the governor, would focus on the expanding branch network and fundraising in that state whereas the national body, led by Lady Helen, would attend to the broader administrative and institutional aspects of Red Cross work in Australia and overseas. Despite the best of intentions, there were ructions. Melbourne was too small for two sets of vice-regal couples. Jealousies and differences in personality also played a role. Not only was there a generational gap between Lady Helen and Margaret Stanley, the latter disliked her vice-regal duties while Lady Helen relished them. Margaret was busy with her large family, whilst Lady Helen had none, although she did raise her niece and nephew, Veronica and Basil Blackwood, in the Government House during the war.

Furthermore, Lady Helen was constantly disappointed by the increasingly hands-on role of the Victorian governor, Arthur Stanley. She saw the Red Cross as essentially a women's organization, yet believed he was taking control:

As usual the women are taking a very back seat & now the Red X has become so popular they—after running it for 16 months—are beginning to be ousted. A new Council has been elected and Victoria has nominated only men—this is little A. Stanley's fault, he has swept his wife aside & runs her show.⁷

Such frustrations fomented a growing sense of animosity that was only further exacerbated by ongoing problems throughout the war.

7 Letter from Lady Helen to Elizabeth Haldane, 1 February 1916, MS6026.f.2, Haldane Papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

A National Constitution

By May 1915, when a Division was formed in the Northern Territory, the Red Cross had divisions throughout Australia. All this activity occurred before the Australian branch had drawn up a constitution—getting the organization up and running was considered more important.

It was not until February 1915 that Lady Helen submitted a draft constitution to the Central Council. After the divisions had commented on the document's text, the Central Council adopted the constitution on 5 August 1915, nearly a year after the first meeting of the Australian branch. The role of women was enshrined, with the wives of governors and governors-general to serve as the presidents of state divisions and the Australian branch. The wives of both the prime minister and the minister for defense were also accorded a position on the council.

The objects of the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society, formulated in accordance with the most recent Geneva Convention, were:

- (a) To supply hospitals, ambulances, vehicles, clothing, comforts etc, for the sick and wounded in time of war, and to generally supplement the hospitals, medical stores and equipment for the Medical Services of the Army and Navy
- (b) To contribute aid to the sick and wounded irrespective of nationality, even though the British Forces are not engaged
- (c) To enroll men and women who are qualified by having obtained certificates in first aid and home nursing, into Voluntary Aid Detachments for home service and to co-operate with the St John's Ambulance Association and Brigade in the formation of units of trained men and women
- (d) To render assistance in the case of any great public disaster, calamity or need, subject to the approval of Council, or in case of emergency of the President.⁸

Thirty years later, a leading barrister lampooned the final document as being “only suitable for a suburban football club.”⁹ The haste with which it had been written would cause much heartache in years to come. The funding arrangements it set out for a national headquarters posed a significant problem, as did the number of divisional representatives allocated to the Executive Council. Still, the constitution served the organization well during its formative years.

⁸ Constitution, First Annual Report of the Australian Branch of the British Red Cross Society, pp. 20–21.

⁹ Quoted in Robertson, *Red Cross Yesterdays*, p. 13.

The Finance Committee

On the suggestion of Lady Helen, a Finance Committee was formed in July 1915. This small but powerful committee was comprised one representative of each division and office bearers of the Australian branch. Chaired by Lady Helen, key members included the wealthy Melbourne businessman and politician Sir Edward Miller, who served as the Honorary Treasurer of the Australian Red Cross from 1914 to 1928 (his wife was convenor of the central depot committee); the New South Wales politician James Ashton, who would develop a close working relationship with Lady Helen through the war; and Dr Edith Barrett, who held the position of Honorary Secretary of the committee and worked tirelessly for both the Victorian Division and Headquarters until the late 1930s. All major policy of Australian Red Cross was decided by this influential committee.

Before long, Lady Helen would experience problems with several of the male members on the Finance Committee. With her insistence on chairing all committees, held in the imposing state drawing room in Government House, she regularly encountered hostility and resentment as a strong-willed woman in a position of authority. This is keenly illustrated in a quote from Frederick Fairbairn, who represented the Queensland Division on the Finance Committee:

We are up against a brick wall with Lady H. She likes to have her finger into every pie [...] Our Finance Committee, which practically controls the important work of the Council, has quite useful personnel (Ashton particularly standing out) and [I] am sure we could do much better work, if we had a man in the chair as the Canadians have [...] She is a very clever, capable woman, which possibly only makes matters worse, as it only makes her more self-willed.¹⁰

Many of the male Australian Red Cross leaders, all prominent men of business, politics, law or medicine, were unable to accept a woman in charge. Yet Lady Helen had outstanding leadership qualities. As her husband noted, she had “made the Red X move here, without her nothing w[oul]d have been arrived at save perfect chaos.”

This friction continued throughout the war, though there is little to suggest that Lady Helen was anything but a highly competent manager with prodigious business and leadership skills. Her husband paid her what he no doubt considered the ultimate compliment: “Her business faculties are like those of a well-trained man.”¹¹

10 Letter from Fairbairn to Murdoch, 13 December 1917, ARC Executive Correspondence [No 33], ARC Archives (National), Melbourne.

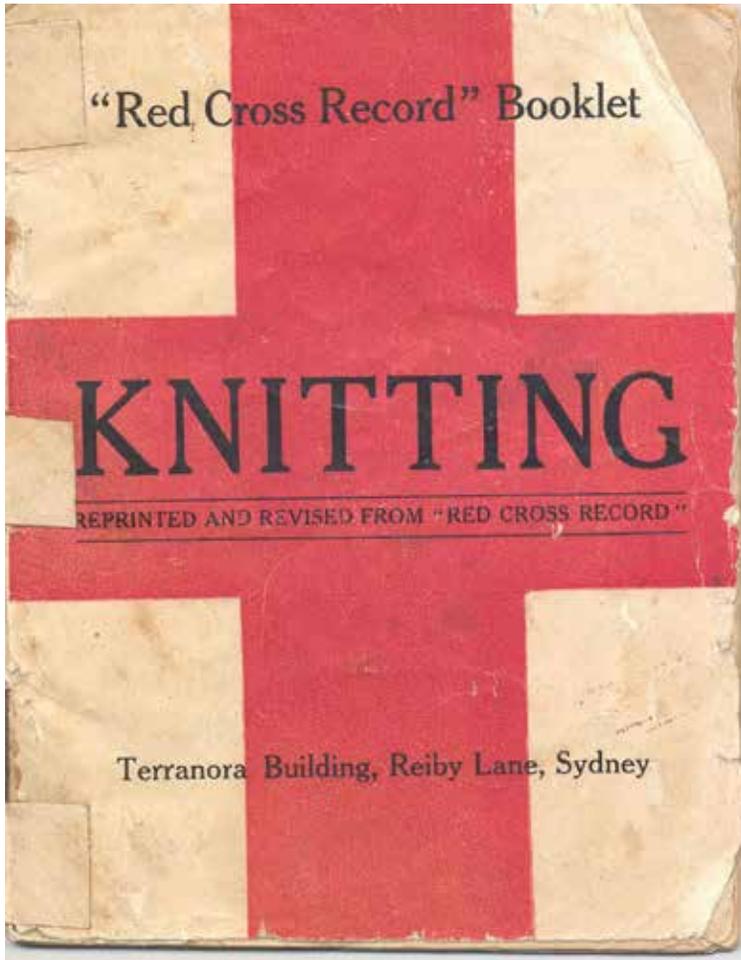
11 Ronald Munro Ferguson to Hermione Blackwood, 12 February 1917. D1071 KH/9/1. Dufferin Papers, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Belfast; ‘Address by Her Excellency at Third Annual Meeting of ARCS,’ *Argus*, 18 October 1917; quoted from the Dufferin Papers, in Melanie Oppenheimer, ‘The Best PM for the Empire in War?: Lady Helen Munro Ferguson and the Australian Red Cross Society, 1914–1920,’ *Australian Historical Studies*, April 2002, no. 119, p.122.

Local Branches

The third crucial tier of the Australian Red Cross was the local branch network. Though it is impossible to know exactly which was first established, we can name some of the early branches, or “circles,” as they were known in South Australia. The Bulli–Woonona branch in New South Wales held its first meeting on Wednesday, 6 August 1914. The people of Southern Queensland were likewise quickly mobilized, with a public meeting taking place at Toowoomba on 7 August and the first meeting of the branch held four days later. The Toowoomba branch would become a conduit for surrounding smaller branches, supplying them with essential items such as knitting wool, needles, and patterns, as well as cut-out garments ready to be sewn. The ladies of the New South Wales Southern Highlands were quick off the mark, too. Over 150 women—and a few men—convened in Goulburn on 13 August for a meeting led by the town’s mayoress, eager to form a branch and get to work. At Nowra on the south coast, a public meeting was held on 14 August at the School of Arts, where sixty ladies elected the local doctor’s wife, Mrs. Nea Rodway, as president, and Miss Emma Brice, a member of a prominent local family, as secretary. Perhaps hoping that the financial skills of her husband would rub off on her, they elected Mrs. Ruby Hayles, wife of the local bank manager, as treasurer. Although Mrs. Rodway later confessed to having had no idea how to conduct a meeting when she was first elected, she obviously learned quickly, as she was awarded an OBE after fifty years of service, much of that time as president. The nearby towns of Berry and Bomaderry also established early branches, as did Singleton and Broken Hill. By 28 August 1914, numerous country branches, such as Bowral, Forbes, Lismore, Grafton, Jamberoo, Cobargo, and Gerringong, had joined the Sydney suburbs of Arncliffe, Lindfield, St. Leonards, Darling Point, Granville, Neutral Bay, Roseville, Chatswood, Greenwich and Drummoyne in establishing a Red Cross branch.¹² By mid September, branches had been formed across Queensland, in towns both large and small, such as Warwick, Cairns, Cunnamulla, and Nambour. Early Red Cross branches established in South Australia in August 1914 include Glen Osmond, Hindmarsh, and St. Peters in Adelaide and Burra, as well as Crystal Brook near Port Pirie. St. Mary’s in Tasmania was also one of the first branches in that state, formed on 24 August.

Victoria can boast to having one of the first Red Cross branches in the Bendigo suburb of Kennington, which held its first meeting on 8 August. The Ballan branch was formed on 20 August 1914 at a meeting held at the local mechanics’ institute. Miss Theresa McCoppin (later Graham), who ran the Commercial Hotel with her sister Eliza, was elected Honorary Secretary, a position she held for the next forty-nine years. The small group of women met fortnightly throughout the war, holding sewing meetings in the local hotel. They regularly sent parcels of

¹² A Very Brief History of the Bulli–Woonona Branch of the ARCS, NSW Division,’ Branch Records Box 83, ARC Archives (NSW), Sydney; ‘History of the Toowoomba Branch, ARC, 1914–2001,’ ARC Archives (NSW), Sydney; *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 15 August 1914; South Coast Red Cross Branches during World War I, courtesy of Alan Clark, 23 November 2011; ‘Red Cross,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 August 1914.



◀ An Australian Red Cross knitting booklet

goods including knitted socks, towels, handkerchiefs, mufflers, face washers, and rabbit skin vests to the central depot. Other country branches in towns such as Geelong, Warrnambool, Bendigo, Port Fairy, Wangaratta, and Ballarat were early leaders, with working-class suburbs such as Port Melbourne and Williamstown also establishing active branches.¹³

By June 1918, Victoria had, at 886, the highest number of Red Cross branches. New South Wales had 632 branches, South Australia 369, Queensland 225, and Western Australia 148. Northern Tasmania had 108 branches by 1917 and Southern Tasmania had 67. Being such a sparsely populated area with little infrastructure, the Northern Territory did not have any branches as such, but reported a membership of 145 in 1917.

¹³ See, for example, *Burra Record* (SA), 26 August 1914; *Port Pirie Recorder and North Western Mail* (SA), 25 August 1914; and *The Mercury* (Tas), 28 August 1914; June Huggins, *Ballan Red Cross: 75 Years of Service*, privately published, 1989.

Branches were generally based in specific suburbs, country towns, villages, and rural communities. Yet the contributions of the many voluntary organizations, churches, and private businesses that formed Red Cross branches should not be understated. Not only did the Catholic Workers Association branches sprout up in Darlinghurst and North Sydney, the Maribyrnong Ladies' Cricket Club established a branch in Victoria and Melbourne University founded a branch in its namesake city. These branches came to form the bedrock of the Red Cross movement in Australia.

A Women's Organization

Red Cross branch membership was overwhelmingly female. Branch meetings gave members an excuse to meet, knit, sew, and socialize on a regular basis. Red Cross work gave them an active, tangible duty to accomplish for the war effort. Members met wherever they could find a suitable space. Sometimes it was in a local member's home—in her living room or kitchen, or on the verandah, or wherever she kept her sewing machine—while other larger branches used municipal facilities such as churches or community halls, tin sheds, Schools of Arts, or even a local hotel. Sewing circles often required a wooden trestle table or, at the very least, a large kitchen table to cut out grey flannel shirts and other items. Knitting socks was easily done, a task completed either in a group, thereby making it much more fun, or alone at home sitting by the fire once all the daily household chores had been completed. This quiet, contemplative task was done day in and day out across the nation throughout the war by thousands and thousands of Australian women.

Red Cross membership also exposed women to various organizational procedures, such as conducting meetings and taking minutes, and provided them opportunities to practice leadership. Red Cross work was “a revelation to the world” in showing that Australian women could “rise to vocations undreamed of hitherto.”¹⁴ Red Cross gatherings offered women a secular environment in which to meet away from the influence of the church, the other major organizational focus of women's lives at that time.

Although most members came from the middle classes, working-class women and girls were enticed to join as well, especially in smaller, rural communities. The Red Cross was especially relevant to countrywomen, many of whom lived tough, isolated lives. Charlotte Appeldorff, for example, helped to form a Red Cross branch in Collinsvale, a small farming and timber area near the Tasmanian city of Hobart. Her daughter Gwendolyne recalls that the women of Collinsvale were proficient homemakers, skills that they used in their Red Cross fundraising. Her mother was an exquisite organizer, as Gwendolyne recounts, so that once the branch was up and running she was “in it up to her eyeballs.” Charlotte would later become President of the Collinsvale Red Cross branch during World War II.

¹⁴ *The Woman*, 1 February 1916.

Men's Auxiliaries

Though the Red Cross was primarily a women's organization, men could and did join, at least at the branch level, and often held office positions, too. Some men became members of their local branches alongside the women of their community while others joined "men's only" branches or sections. Many of these volunteers were returned servicemen discharged from the army on medical grounds or men deemed unfit for active service.

The central depot at the Government House had a men's section, as did the state divisions. In Queensland, for example, the Central Men's Auxiliary began in 1915 and soon had branches in the bigger towns of Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton, Mount Morgan, Bundaberg, Maryborough, Toowoomba, Ipswich, and Warwick. The members built a range of items for use by sick, wounded, and invalided soldiers, such as walking sticks and crutches, as well as trays, lockers, bed-rests, folding stools, tables, and bookshelves for use in hospitals. Men's Auxiliaries also constructed the special wooden crates emblazoned with the distinctive red cross for overseas shipments.

Junior Red Cross

Children also contributed significantly to the Red Cross during World War I. At only eight years old when war broke out, Grace Groves lived at Kurrawang, a small railway station town between Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie in Western Australia. Her mother was a member of the Kurrawang Red Cross. Grace remembers the local butcher providing the children with "meat skewers to knit face washers for the soldiers." At their one-teacher school, the children packed Christmas parcels for the soldiers with sweets, a comb, and a face washer. After knitting a pair of socks, she placed a note in the toe, which would cause her to receive a letter from the soldier in Belgium who found it "I thought it was the most wonderful letter I had ever had," she recalled.¹⁵

Australia shares the honor with Canada of being a joint founder of the Junior Red Cross, as both National Societies had junior movements during World War I. In Australia, the Junior Red Cross was the brainchild of the indefatigable Red Cross worker from New South Wales, Eleanor MacKinnon, who was involved with said division from its inception. She was elected to the Divisional Executive Committee in August 1914, sat on a number of committees and sub-committees throughout her career, and edited the *Red Cross Record*.

Early Junior Red Cross circles were formed in Sydney at Glencoe Public School (near Glen Innes in northern New South Wales where MacKinnon lived) and at both Parramatta and Sydney Girls High Schools. In July 1918, the Junior Red Cross was formally incorporated

¹⁵ Oral history interview with Grace Groves, Western Australia.

into the New South Wales school curriculum as a “service activity,” providing lessons in first aid, citizenship, and social responsibility.¹⁶ The voluntary war work of children carried out through state schools, for both the Red Cross and other patriotic funds, was later estimated at around £800,000.

The Production Line

The volume and array of materials, goods, and comforts produced by the thousands of industrious women across Australia from the earliest days of the war are simply unfathomable today. As Lady Helen said, “Australian women were in the field, some eight months before the men went into battle.”¹⁷ This activity continued unabated throughout the war, with the seemingly insatiable need for goods and supplies as relentless as the women volunteers’ desire to create them. The Queensland Division, for example, shipped goods to the value of more than £34,000 to London and Egypt in the twelve months leading up to June 1918, as well as fifty cases of specially prepared wheatmeal biscuits for prisoners of war. During this same period, the Australian Red Cross supplied goods valued at just under £300,000 to allied national societies overseas, hospital transport ships, and Australian Red Cross Commissioners working abroad on behalf of the organization.¹⁸ What makes it all the more extraordinary is that much of this sewing and piecework was done by hand, as electricity was not available in many rural communities at that time.

Members of the small timber and fruit-growing community of Briagolong in remote Gippsland, Victoria, formed a Red Cross branch in October 1915. The women met on alternate Wednesday afternoons for the duration of the war. Using pedal or hand-turned sewing machines, or sewing by hand, these women produced a huge number of articles, including 1,315 flannel undershirts, ninety-seven pairs of pajamas, thirty-six arm stump socks for amputees, and over 1,000 pairs of socks. One member was so devoted that she took her needles and wool with her when she had an emergency appendectomy. The distinctive sound of steel clicking needle on needle was heard from her hospital bed only hours later. If women could not attend the fortnightly meetings because they lived too far from town or had to remain at home with small children, two local women would deliver the raw materials to them and then return to collect the finished products.¹⁹

16 For a history of the early years of Junior Red Cross, see Annie Campbell, “‘Thousands of Tiny Fingers Moving’: The Beginning of the Junior Red Cross Movement in New South Wales, 1914–1925,” *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, December 2004, vol. 90, part 2, December 2004, pp. 184–200.

17 ‘Nettles in the Path,’ *Advertiser*, 9 September 1915.

18 See ARCS, *4th Annual Report, 1917–1918*, p. 5.

19 Dorothy Watt, *In Peace, as in War: Seventy-five years of Red Cross Service at Briagolong*, undated, circa 1990s.

Within a couple of years, the Australian Red Cross became a large, complex “business” that rivaled any department store or manufacturing industry. Overseen and largely staffed by woman, all volunteers, this was a truly remarkable feat. Fruit and vegetable depots supplied military hospitals and the families of servicemen, delivered by Red Cross horses and carts. Red Cross kitchens supplied lunches and both morning and afternoon teas to military hospitals and convalescent homes, in addition to preparing bottled fruits, jams, and pickles. They also ran Red Cross book depots, where newspapers, magazines, and books were collected, sorted, and distributed. Red Cross “industries” or small factory workshops were established where convalescing ex-servicemen did spinning, carpentry, weaving, and basket and toy making as they slowly regained their health. Each division had its own central depot or receiving and distributing service located in its capital city, where all the goods lovingly made in the far-flung branches were sent. Goods were received, sorted, and indexed—the Red Cross was very careful to itemize everything—and then dispatched again by an army of volunteers.

Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs)

Lady Helen believed that Voluntary Aid Detachments, or VADs, were essential to Red Cross war work. This idea proved very popular, particularly with younger women of independent means—women who did not necessarily have or need a paid job. Occupations for young women from the upper and middle classes were considerably limited; most were expected to become wives and mothers and, as a result, had not trained for a career. They could not actively participate in the war, as the military enlisted only fully trained nurses. With their boyfriends and brothers enlisting, becoming a Red Cross VA was the next best option—something they did so with great esprit de corps. Interestingly, Lady Helen would later remark that this was an important quality in a volunteer, as it made it “easier to take orders from those whom under ordinary circumstances you might consider should be taking orders from you.”

Although the idea of cooperating with St. John Ambulance to form both male and female detachments was outlined in some detail in Lady Helen’s initial proposal, which was based on the British model, the vast majority of volunteers were women and girls. VAs, as they were commonly known, worked either full-time or part-time, carrying out a range of domestic and quasi-nursing duties in hospitals and convalescent homes. Trained in first aid and home nursing, this large voluntary army became the public face of the Australian Red Cross, with their white starched dresses and striking red cross emblems on bosom or sleeve. The VA represented selfless, patriotic Australian womanhood, doing her duty with a spirit of loyalty, devotion, and endurance.

In New South Wales, the VAD movement developed quickly, with detachments formed across the city and in the small, northern dairy and timber town of Casino before the end of 1914. This spontaneous and unofficial activity was formalized on 23 February 1915 when



▲ *Members of the Scone Red Cross branch, New South Wales, 1914*

the New South Wales VAD was launched at a meeting held at Sydney Town Hall. Colonel Reuter Roth, a key figure in St. John Ambulance, was appointed Red Cross Director of VADs with detachments officially registered. Tasmania, too, was quick to establish a voluntary aid scheme and, as noted in its first annual report, had formed two detachments, one male and one female, and had issued 187 first-aid certificates within the year.

In response to the disastrous Gallipoli campaign, and with the first hospital ship arriving in Australia in July 1915, a national VAD scheme was formally established the following month. The VADs would help the military care for the returning wounded as well as provide domestic assistance and nursing aid in military hospitals and, later, in Red Cross convalescent homes. Members had to be eighteen years or older, with first-aid and home nursing certificates or the capacity to attain them within six months. Training was conducted together with St. John Ambulance, just as Lady Helen had suggested. VAs joined their local detachment and became qualified in home nursing, first aid, home hygiene, and invalid cookery through a series of lectures and practical work, culminating in examinations and the awarding of certificates. There was also drilling and marching. Each volunteer detachment was made up of twenty



▲ VAs parading outside Government House, Sydney, 1917

women or men, overseen by a commandant, and had a doctor attached. There was also a lady superintendent (or male equivalent if appropriate), who, if possible, was a trained nurse or member of the Australasian Trained Nurses Association.

These quasi-nurses and maids of all work were an invaluable source of free labor. VAs were rostered on at convalescent homes to perform nursing, cooking, and cleaning tasks; they met returning transports and handed out cigarettes and sprigs of wattle, and served refreshments at the Anzac Buffets, set up in Sydney and Melbourne to provide hot meals for soldiers either on their way to or returning from war. Although it was “housework on a large scale,” VAs introduced “the spirit of youth, of hopefulness, and of counsel.”²⁰

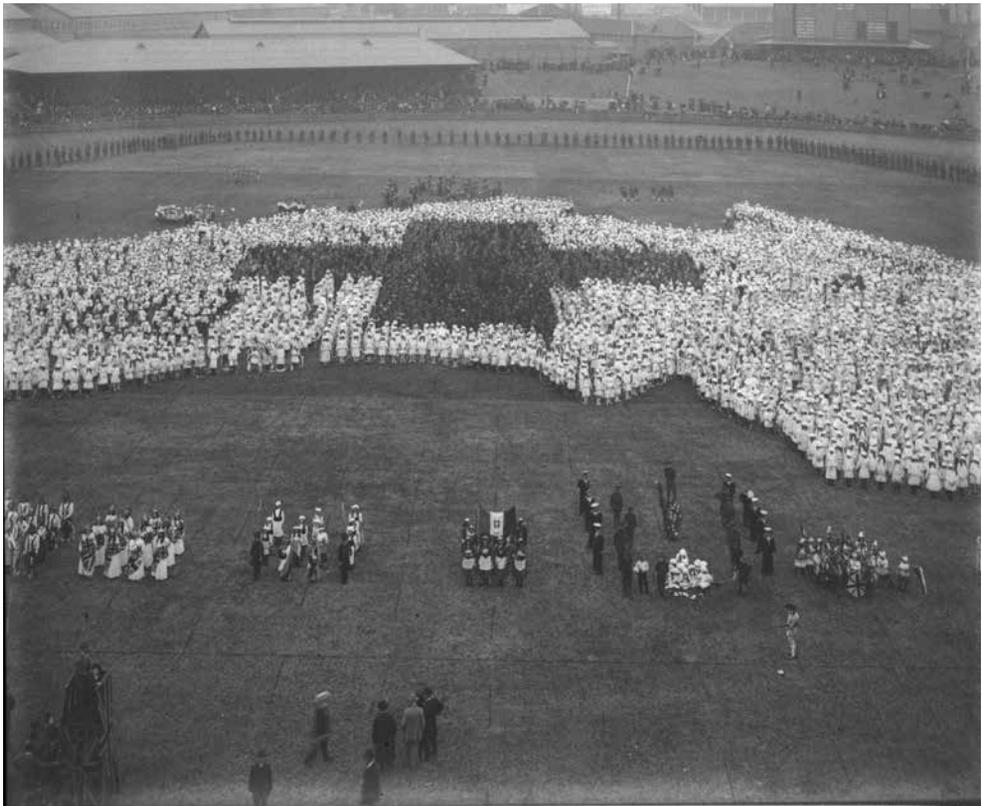
20 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 August 1919.

Money for the Cause

A major role for Red Cross VAs and branch members across the country was to raise money for the cause. The competition between the various charities and patriotic funds was intense and there were continuous calls on the generosity of the Australian public throughout the war. The general convention was to list the names of donors and the amount pledged in the local press, a very public way to galvanize support for the cause.

This youngest national society donated hundreds of thousands of pounds to its parent society for distribution to other national societies, such as the French and Belgium Red Cross Societies. The organization raised over one third of all monies, almost £5 million, donated to Australian patriotic funds over the four years of the war in addition to providing millions of pounds of in-kind support through volunteer labor and goods.

The Australian Red Cross raised funds in a variety of ways—through church collections, patriotic carnivals, gymkhanas, dances, fairs, socials, sports, football matches, race meetings, and art unions. In rural areas, raffles often included live produce such as pigs, poddy calves,



▲ *Australia Day Display, July 1915*

poultry, sheep, and even canaries. A 24-lb Murray cod was put up for auction at Wilcannia, in far western New South Wales, fetching a whopping £400. One of the more unusual events was reported in Nowra, on the south coast of New South Wales, where a Red Cross Fund Day was held. An army of white-robed women with “their conspicuous red crosses” blockaded the street, prompting everyone wanting to pass to pay tribute.

Carnivals were another popular form of fundraising. Public places festooned with bunting, flags, and colorful kiosks helped the people to dig deep. These carnivals were particularly effective when they were tied to significant events such as the launch of a new campaign on the front or heavy losses in battle. In response to the Gallipoli landing, for example, schoolchildren and workers were given a half- or whole-day off on 30 July 1915. It was called Australia Day (the celebration of Australia Day on 26 January is a more recent tradition), and Red Cross branches around the country held fairs and fêtes, calling out to “a loyal and generous people for loyal and generous help.”²¹ The response was overwhelming: in New South Wales alone, the total amount raised was £839,550. Only £689 had been spent in planning and staging the carnivals statewide, revealing an extraordinary level of voluntary and in-kind support.

To mark the Battle of Verdun, fought between French and German troops in which approximately 700,000 to 800,000 casualties were counted, a similar appeal was made on behalf of the French Red Cross during the week of 8–15 July 1916. On Bastille Day, 14 July, the French national day, the tricolor was flown around the country, and street stalls, concerts, and the sale of buttons resulted in spectacular fundraising success. Australians were generous when their donations would flow not only to Australian soldiers overseas but to other allies as well.

Having vice-regal patronage certainly assisted the Australian Red Cross in its fundraising initiatives, as did the involvement of such celebrities as Dame Nellie Melba. The world-renowned singer, and friend of the Munro Fergusons, was passionate about the Red Cross ideal and threw herself into the cause from the beginning. Unanimously elected president of her local Lilydale branch, to the north-east of Melbourne, Melba was encouraged to do what she did best—sing in concert halls—rather than knitting and sewing, which were not her forte. She later wrote:

The wool I wasted, the number of stitches I dropped, the scarves that unraveled, [...] the socks that would never have fitted any human being! If everybody had been as inefficient as I was, our poor armies would have been going about with bare feet.

Melba organized a series of concerts in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, and elsewhere, raising around £10,000 singlehandedly, with more than £1,000 coming directly from the Adelaide concert. Throughout the course of the war she raised over £100,000, largely through the sale of autographed flags and concert programs in return for silver coins.²²

21 ‘Appeal of the Red Cross’ by Professor T.G. Tucker, *Age*, 12 July 1915.

22 McAleer, *The Shire of Lilydale and its Military Heritage*, pp. 29–30, 243.

The Other Side of the World

The extraordinary volunteer effort on the Australian home front was, in the early days of the war at least, focused entirely on what was happening outside the country and on the other side of the world. It was originally believed that Australian troops would be heading for England, so money and goods were dispatched to the Australian High Commissioner in London, former Australian Prime Minister Sir George Reid, for distribution by the British Red Cross. A committee of expatriate Australians was established with Reid as its chair, and all dealings with the British Red Cross were conducted through this committee. Within a year, the Australian Red Cross had sent over £100,000, excluding in-kind goods. To the delight of Australian members, their “magnificent response” from the “youngest of our Branches” was deeply appreciated in London.

When it had become clear that the first AIF was bound for Egypt and not, as first thought, England, the Australian Red Cross agreed that the Director of Medical Services of the AIF, Surgeon-General Williams, was to be responsible for distribution of Red Cross goods and money to Australian troops in Egypt. There were at the time no guidelines setting out what the Australian government should provide for its troops and what duties the Red Cross was expected to perform under the Geneva Convention.

Original Central Council members Dr. Springthorpe and Dr. Barrett enlisted in the Australian Army Medical Corps and traveled to Egypt together with the troops, arriving in January 1915. Both were given honorary ranks: Springthorpe became a lieutenant colonel and Barrett a major (Barrett was later promoted to lieutenant colonel in May 1915). They provided Lady Helen and her council with important information as to the conditions in the field and the types of supplies required. On the advice of Springthorpe and Barrett, a Red Cross depot was established at the 1st Australian General Hospital (AGH), in the basement of the grand Heliopolis Palace Hotel, which had been requisitioned for the war. The depot was administered by a medical officer, nurses, and orderlies.

The Dardanelles campaign—an Allied assault against the Ottomans—began in February 1915 with a naval attack. The landing at Gallipoli on 25 April, so significant to Australians, was part of this campaign. With thousands of wounded and sick pouring into allied hospitals within the “Red Triangle” of Egypt, Malta, and the Greek island of Lemnos, the Australian Red Cross’ response accelerated rapidly as the organization swung into action. Staff was dispatched to the front and vast quantities of supplies were shipped. Major Barrett, now in charge of a budget of £10,000 in Red Cross funds, reported back to the Central Council in early May that, despite enormous pressure, all Australian hospitals and ambulances had received funds and that Red Cross goods were being distributed to every hospital in Alexandria caring for Australian soldiers. Detailed reports of the work carried out were sent to Lady Helen via Sir George Reid. As a branch of the British Red Cross Society, the Australians relied on the mother

Australia



AT THE
Dardanelles

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organization to assist Australian soldiers, especially in Malta, where thousands of Australian troops were treated. An Australian Red Cross commission was eventually based there but only toward the end of the Gallipoli campaign.

In late May 1915, with the Dardanelles campaign deteriorating, the Central Council established an Egypt Committee to seek more direct representation. It was chaired by the British High Commissioner to Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon. As casualties increased, however, it soon became apparent to Red Cross leaders in Australia that they needed increase their efforts. On 13 July 1915, the Central Council passed a resolution appointing two Australian Red Cross Commissioners who were sent to Egypt to act “as the medium of communication for the supply of money and goods [...] and to represent and act on behalf of the Red Cross branch.”²³ Ever mindful of divisional politics, the council selected two esteemed but very different men: from Sydney they chose King’s Counsel and former member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly Adrian Knox and from Melbourne they chose world-renowned tennis player Norman Brookes, nicknamed the Wizard, who had won the Wimbledon men’s singles twice, first in 1907 and then in 1914. Both men acted in a voluntary capacity, with only their out-of-pocket expenses covered by Red Cross. The men were to liaise with the British Red Cross Society to establish what they called a Bureau of Inquiry that would maintain records on missing and wounded Australian soldiers to help civilians in Australia learn what had happened to their loved ones. This marked the beginning of Australian Red Cross’ international involvement with what would later become known as the Field Force and tracing services.

The high-profile men who volunteered their services as Red Cross Commissioners and served abroad reported directly to the Central Council chaired by Lady Helen and communicated through an extensive series of cables and long, detailed reports and letters that took between six to eight weeks to reach Australia. Not surprisingly, this caused logistical problems; for while the commissioners had the power to administer certain monies and policies, their actions required final approval by Lady Helen and her committee. Despite these sorts of administrative problems, the Australian Red Cross Commissioners secured a great deal of relief for the men serving on the frontline. In Egypt, they were ably assisted by scores of Australian women who had followed their husbands, sons, and brothers to Egypt. These women volunteered in the hospitals, providing comforts and recreation facilities lavishly stocked with books and newspapers from home. On railway stations, they dispatched comforts to patients on hospital trains. They provided kitbags to those embarking at Suez, brimming full of pajamas, shirts, undershirts, socks, face washers, envelopes, writing paper, pencils, tins of tooth powder, tobacco, cigarettes, towels, and soap. The army did not supply any of these everyday needs to the men, leaving their provision to the Red Cross and other patriotic funds.

23 ARCS, resolution passed at meeting of the Central Council, 13 July 1915, Central Council Minutes, [NO 33], ARC Archives (National), Melbourne.

Scandal and Strife

Only a few months after the landing on Gallipoli, the Australian Red Cross became embroiled in its first public scandal. Until this point there had been occasional negative reports of the pilfering of stores and supplies, stolen Red Cross goods being sold in Egyptian markets, and even the sale of items salvaged from torpedoed vessels. Yet nothing thitherto rivaled the crisis that would come to light. At a meeting of the Central Council held on 19 August 1915, a letter was reported to have been received from Colonel Springthorpe complaining about the way Red Cross goods were distributed, accusing the Australian Red Cross of having failed to establish depots on Gallipoli and to provide comforts to the men on hospital ships, blaming Major Barrett for these blunders. Springthorpe's complaints were leaked to the press.

The fallout was immediate. Barrett resigned (only to find work with the British Red Cross shortly thereafter). Lady Helen cabled Commissioners Knox and Brookes, who had only just arrived in Egypt, asking them to investigate and respond to the charges of maladministration and the alleged breakdown of the organization without delay. In the meantime, she went on the offensive, knowing that the slightest whiff of scandal could damage the momentum of the fledgling organization in Australia and threaten her authority. "I feel deeply for those who, having worked so hard, and sacrificed so much, are being depressed by these charges of failure in Egypt," Lady Helen declared in the press. "I feel it necessary to grasp some of those nettles which have sprung up in the path of the Red Cross Society."²⁴ She argued that these nettles, as she called them, had their origin in a misunderstanding: Colonel Springthorpe did not grasp the society's true aims, the limitations it faced, or the conditions in which it had been working—particularly the chaos of those critical first weeks of the Gallipoli campaign.

A key criticism was that no Australian Red Cross depot had been established on the peninsula. In fact Barrett had written to General William Birdwood, commander of the Australian and New Zealand troops on Gallipoli, about the possible establishment of a depot there. "We really have no corner of our position where a depot could with advantage be started," replied Birdwood, considering such an endeavor too dangerous. Red Cross goods were later supplied and Barrett was told that soldiers would receive them "if the cases are not blown to pieces." A British Red Cross depot was established on the nearby island of Lemnos and another at Cape Helles, the headland at the southwest tip of the Gallipoli peninsula. Transporting goods to Lemnos and Anzac Cove proved to be very difficult, however, and the Australian Red Cross never managed to establish a depot on Gallipoli during the campaign despite its commissioners and searchers being based in Lemnos and having visited the peninsula personally. Though later reports suggested that Red Cross supplies were plentiful, Red Cross commissioners and searchers reported after touring Anzac Cove that, while their provision was "technically outside the sphere of operations of the Red Cross Society," fit soldiers were in

24 *Advertiser*, 9 September 1915.

desperate need of canteens.²⁵ Lady Helen's defense of the organization was spirited. Lengthy articles were published in the press pointing out that the Australian Red Cross had diligently sent thousands of pounds' worth of goods overseas to be distributed to men at the front, in addition to the £5,000 donated to each of the AGHs for equipment that had been gratefully received by medical authorities.

While this argument raged, another drama was silently unfolding. Problems had been simmering at the 1st AGH since the AIF's arrival in Egypt. Strong personalities and structural weaknesses were again to blame. Springthorpe was likely galvanized into writing his original damning critique of Barrett and Australian Red Cross by troubles brewing in the 1st AGH. This controversy, too, was splashed across national newspapers. The hospital's commanding medical officer, South Australian doctor Lieutenant Colonel William Ramsay Smith, was recalled to Australia, along with the Principal Matron, Jane Bell.

A committee of inquiry was established to investigate the charges against Barrett. Hearings began at the Ministry of Justice in Cairo in October 1915, the findings of which were handed down eight months later in June 1916. Barrett was exonerated and Springthorpe's actions were condemned. The committee's decision damned Springthorpe's "violent attacks" in the letters he had written, deeming them unjustified and the strength of his criticism to be "far beyond moderation—beyond what circumstances justify." According to the committee, Springthorpe should have discussed his concerns with Barrett before turning to the council in Australia. He should also have understood the difference between the army's responsibilities and those of the Red Cross.²⁶ This brought to a close a bruising experience for the Australian Red Cross, its first highly publicized internal brawl. Although the crisis had little long-term impact on the Red Cross' reputation in Australia, it revealed that better management was required both at home and abroad.

Shifting Fronts

With the evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula in December 1915, and the posting of the AIF to France early the following year, the war took on a new intensity. Gallipoli may have been our baptism of fire and given birth to the Anzac legend, but the death and destruction on the Western Front were exceptional. Over two and a half years, nearly 300,000 Australian troops fought there, sixty percent of whom becoming casualties. Upwards of 46,000 were killed or died of wounds. The bodies of thousands missing in action were never recovered. Small French and Belgian towns and villages such as Pozières, Ypres, Passchendaele, Fromelles, and Villers-Bretonneux became household names after bloody battles were fought there. Nevertheless, the Australian Red Cross was there at every step of the way, too.

²⁵ Letter to Secretary, ARCS, Government House, Melbourne, 12 December 1915, ARC Executive Correspondence, [NO 33], ARC Archives (National), Melbourne.

²⁶ Dr J.W. Springthorpe Papers, 2 DRL/0701, Series 2, Wallet 3 of 8, Australian War Memorial (AWM), Canberra.

The Australian Red Cross reorganized in response to the changing circumstances of the war. Responsibility for its work and administration overseas were handed over to its commissioners. The High Commissioner to London and his committee moved to a supportive role. Acting on a request from Lady Helen, a finance committee was established in London in early 1916 to look after the financial operations on the Western Front and in Egypt. This powerful committee included Australian Red Cross Commissioners Edwyn “Jim” Hayward and James Murdoch, Surgeon-General Sir Neville Howse, and the Right Hon. Andrew Fisher. The latter was the former Labor leader who had served as Australian prime minister throughout the first year of the war, resigning in October 1915, and who had replaced Sir George Reid as Australia’s High Commissioner to the United Kingdom in January 1916. Bank managers Mr. Percy Arnold from the Bank of Adelaide and Mr. C.A.B. Campion of the Commonwealth Bank completed the membership. The committee oversaw the increasingly complex role of the Australian Red Cross, including the disbursal of the £9,000 expended on prisoners of war (POWs) per month, the purchase of goods, the leasing of stores and offices in London, France, and Egypt, as well as the payment of wages to staff and grants to hospitals.

Commissioners

The Australian Red Cross was served by some inspirational commissioners throughout the war. These volunteers had the huge responsibility of ensuring that the vast quantity of Red Cross goods lovingly made and dispatched from Australia were received, first in the Egyptian distribution centers in Cairo, Ismailia, Alexandria, and Suez, and then later in France. Supplies were initially sent to Marseilles in the southeast and Rouen in the north for the hospitals, casualty clearing stations, and field ambulances established on the Western Front. Depots were later opened in Boulogne, Hazebrouck, Amiens, and Saint-Omer to accommodate goods more efficiently. From mid-1916, the commissioners were given the rank of Honorary Lieutenant Colonel in the Australian Army Medical Corps Reserve. This was in response to the difficulties encountered by the commissioners as they moved around areas closed to civilians.

Some of the commissioners were naturally more capable than others. Norman Brookes was considered “hard to do with” and “lacking in tact.” Lady Helen was advised not to allow him to have too much power, as he found it difficult to work with others. Brookes held his position for eighteen months before being recalled to Australia at the end of 1916. Adrian Knox, on the other hand, was considered a first-rate commissioner, highly competent and capable, but he suffered from ill health after contracting dysentery on a visit to Mudros and Gallipoli, forcing him to return to Australia in January 1916. Douglas Mawson, the well-known Antarctic explorer, expressed interest in becoming a Red Cross Commissioner; however, the timing was never quite right. Commissioner Edwyn “Jim” Hayward, director of the well-known Adelaide department store John Martin & Co., was both popular and highly competent.

He was described as “most considerate and courteous and at the same time efficient” and was said to have “the merit of devolving responsibility really and not in appearance only.” Hayward was the Australian Red Cross representative in Malta and later went on to have a distinguished role as Australian Red Cross Commissioner in France. He was mentioned in dispatches and later received a CBE and OBE for his services.²⁷

One of the most important Commissioners was Scottish-born James A. Murdoch, a “small, jovial, and public-spirited” New South Welshman retailer who served from late 1915 through to the end of the war.²⁸ Regarded by his contemporaries as a man of honesty and integrity, he had one objective: “to serve Australia and the Empire, and to do the duty that lay nearest to [him] at all times without fear or favor.” Murdoch originally went to Egypt as a Red Cross “searcher,” but was later allocated the task of Head Depot Supervisor in Cairo before his appointment as Australia’s third Red Cross Commissioner. Steadfast and reliable, it was not long before he was in charge of all Australian Red Cross activities in England and France. The work was relentless. The overtaxed nerves of the staff meant that Murdoch had to deal with much dissatisfaction—not just from his staff, but also from those whom they served. The pressures of wartime affected Red Cross workers just as much as anyone else. As a successful businessman, Murdoch was continually frustrated by what the Red Cross Movement’s failure to put into practice the “principles of commerce.” On one occasion in July 1917, Lady Helen chided him for this attitude, saying:

I think you sometimes a little forget that we are not a commercial enterprise, and cannot therefore treat those who bring presents and give their work quite in the same cut and dry manner as is possible with producing firms and factory hands. The Red Cross is founded on sentiment, and some latitude must be given to its expression.

Despite differences of opinion, Lady Helen and Commissioner Murdoch worked closely together and had a healthy degree of respect for each other, perhaps because no one knew better than Lady Helen that the Red Cross must “not only satisfy the kind heart of a philanthropist, but also the hard head of the businessman.”²⁹ Though the two did not meet face to face until after the war, they corresponded frequently in writing.

27 Letter from Lizzie Mitchell to Lady Helen, London, 11 December 1918, ARC Executive Correspondence [NO 33], ARC Archives (National), Melbourne.

28 Wolfers, Howard, ‘Murdoch, Sir James Anderson (1867–1939),’ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/murdoch-sir-james-anderson-7691/text13463> (Accessed at 14 March 2024).

29 Letter from Murdoch to Lady Helen, 19 October 1917; letter from Murdoch to Lady Helen, 9 July 1917, ARC Executive Correspondence [NO 33], ARC Archives (National), Melbourne.

Searchers

One area of Red Cross work that grew rapidly was that performed by the Searchers and Enquiry Section. While the casualty lists published in the newspapers every day became compulsive reading for concerned Australian families and relatives, these lists provided only very superficial information about a soldier's fate, such as him having died of wounds, as having been killed in action, or simply as missing. It was only through Red Cross networks that relatives desperate for information had were able to learn more about what had happened to their loved ones, first at Gallipoli and later on the Western Front. The Australian Red Cross worked with the British Red Cross Inquiry Bureau in Cairo, initially using British searchers, but later deciding to dispatch its own. Over 200 applications were received for the newly created positions. By November 1915, four Australian Red Cross searchers, all male, were hard at work enquiring about wounded and missing men. They were Robert Cain and Stanley Addison from Melbourne and Dr. Norman Kater and Anthony Hordern from Sydney—the latter brought with him his own motor car and would go on to become a commissioner. Two were based at Lemnos, the small Greek island used as a staging post for the Gallipoli campaign, and the other two in Egypt. In an average week, the searchers gained 100 useful reports concerning new enquiries for both the British and Australian Red Cross lists. These reports were typed up and distributed to London, Malta, Cairo, and elsewhere. Volunteer Australian Red Cross searchers continued to be appointed in England and France throughout the war.

War Work

Scores of energetic, capable, intelligent, and motivated young Australian women made their own way to Egypt, London, and later France to assist in war work. The Australian Red Cross appointed volunteers in France at the AGHs. Peggy Murdoch, daughter of Commissioner James Murdoch, was placed in charge of the Australian Red Cross depot at the 3rd AGH, near Abbeville. Arriving in July only weeks after the hospital was established, Peggy started from scratch. A portable hut was sent from England and soon she had it furnished and fitted out with shelving and stores.

Another such volunteer was twenty-four-year-old Vera Deakin. Encouraged by family friend and Red Cross Commissioner Norman Brookes, the youngest daughter of former prime minister Alfred Deakin arrived in Egypt in October 1915 with her friend Winifred Johnson. They immediately secured war work with the Australian Red Cross running the newly established Wounded and Missing Bureau. In May 1916, Deakin relocated to London and became Secretary of the Bureau, a role she worked at tirelessly until 1919, when she returned to Melbourne and married Australian soldier and ex-POW Captain Thomas Walter White.

The Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau responded to anxious relatives' inquiries and liaised with searchers, the army, and British Red Cross as to the whereabouts of Australian servicemen who had been reported wounded or missing. This vital overseas work was

supplemented by a network of Australian Red Cross Information Bureaus established in each division with the assistance of highly respected lawyers and barristers from each state. These men were closely involved in committees and personally bore all the expenses they incurred. The bureau in New South Wales started work in July 1915. Within four months, over 500 cables had been on behalf of relatives of Gallipoli casualties. Upwards of 10,000 enquiries were investigated during the war in Queensland alone.

Burgeoning casualty lists from the Western Front dramatically increased the workload of these information bureaus. By mid-1916 more than 200 people a day were already seeking assistance from the New South Wales bureau, which had 4,400 cases on its files. By 1919 this had exploded to 36,000 cases. The digitized Wounded and Missing files now held in the Australian War Memorial are supplemented by surviving South Australian files housed in the State Library of South Australia. They reveal the depths of raw emotion, the aching lack of knowledge, and the loneliness of bereavement for the thousands of civilians back home in Australia who had either lost their loved ones or who had no certainty as to their fate on battlefields on the other side of the world. “I would like to know how long he lived after the wound,” Ellen Jones from Armidale in northern New South Wales pleaded, trying to learn how her son Russell had died. “Did he suffer much, and was he conscious, did he ask for his parents in any way and did he send any message [...] I am so anxious to know all about my dear boy.”³⁰ Amassing information from eyewitnesses in the extremely chaotic situation of battle, Red Cross volunteers pieced together the fate of the soldier in question and relayed that information back to the inquirer. Vera Deakin and others answered each letter personally as best they could. The work came in rushes, especially after the spring offensives on the Western Front in 1917 and 1918. It was an emotionally draining and heart-wrenching job for everyone involved.

The POW Department

On moving to London in early 1916 and in coordination with the British and Canadian Red Cross, the Wounded and Missing Bureau expanded to include a POW Department. Led by Elizabeth Chomley as Honorary Secretary, the Australian Red Cross POW Care Committee played a key role. As soon as the location of an Australian POW was confirmed, a parcel was dispatched to him with the following essential items: “two shirts, two undershirts, three handkerchiefs, two pairs of socks, a toothbrush, powder and shaving gear, a comb, insect powder, a pipe, playing cards, needles, and thread.” From that time on, a weekly parcel with five shillings’ worth of foodstuffs was sent by the Red Cross. Every POW was also supplied with a second weekly parcel of food by the International Red Cross in Switzerland, and every

³⁰ ARCS Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau files, 1914–18, 1 DRL/0428, 6076 Private Thomas Russell Jones, 24th Battalion, letter from mother, 28 May 1917, AWM, Canberra.

six months with a greatcoat, jacket, trousers, cap, boots, canvas shoes, shirts, socks, vests, underpants, cardigans, and gloves, as well as blankets and extra food in winter.

Miss Chomley, as she was always known, worked assiduously for over two years at this very exacting war work. At times she railed against the feeling that because she was a woman, she was viewed contemptuously as an amateur. She clashed with the commissioners, who edited her monthly reports to Lady Helen and the Executive Committee, complaining sarcastically that “every man who is some kind of businessman must necessarily know more about the very special and intricate work of dealing with prisoners of war than I do after all my experience.” However, the POWs held her in high esteem. She advocated for them, ensured they were well supplied with parcels and goods, wrote personally to them and made them feel that someone was looking out for them. “Miss Chomley [...] is excellent,” wrote one to his father. “She was never just satisfied with just any ordinary thing: she wanted the best for us [...] She was a mother to us all.”³¹

Cultural Clashes

Not only was there friction between Australian Red Cross volunteers, such as the commissioners and Miss Chomley, there was also a constant nigggle between the British Red Cross Society and members of its Australian branch. Australian Red Cross commissioners preferred to operate as if they were part of an independent national body; for they felt they had little in common with the British Society. Lady Helen did not approve, as she told Commissioner Murdoch:

I notice on your letter paper, etc you have dropped all reference to the fact that the Australian Red Cross is a Branch of the BRCS. I rather doubt the wisdom of this, especially in view of the fact that we have no status whatever except as part of the BRCS, seeing that Great Britain is the only Signator to the Convention and holds the Charter. I have myself shortened the title on our Report to the Australian Red Cross, BRCS because of the confusion arising when special collections are made for the Parent Society, but such confusion would not exist overseas.³²

The cultural clash between Australian troops and their British counterparts over the Australians’ perceived unruly behavior and indifference to authority were felt in the Red Cross, too. There was an “incompatibility of temperament,” as one Australian Commissioner described it, “which exists owing to the fact that each has been born, bred and brought up under entirely different circumstances, conditions, and environment.”³³ Peggy Murdoch expressed the Australian view most succinctly when she wrote that although the Australian

31 *Argus Weekend Magazine*, 12 February 1938; correspondence from Miss Chomley to Lady Helen, 15 November 1917 and 14 February 1918, ARC Executive Correspondence [NO 33], ARC Archives (National), Melbourne; ARCS, *5th Annual Report*, 1918–1919, p. 10.

32 Letter from Lady Helen to Murdoch, 19 December 1917, ARC Executive Correspondence [NO 33], ARC Archives (National), Melbourne.

33 “The Work of the ARCS in Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Salonika,” report by H.J. Preston, Commissioner, July 1918 to September 1919, ARC Executive Correspondence [NO 33], ARC Archives (National), Melbourne.

Red Cross was officially a branch of the British Red Cross, they were, for all intents and purposes, independent: “our activities differ so much, our distributions of comforts to the individual being larger and entirely supported by Australian help.”

The Australians’ interaction with sister societies overseas was revealing, too. The Australian Red Cross had little to do with the American Red Cross because America had entered the war so late. The relationship with the Canadian Red Cross was “all that could be desired,” with both organizations willing to help the other when the need arose. Commissioner Hayward felt that the New Zealand branch had thrown “in their lot early with the British Red Cross Society” which was not to New Zealand’s advantage. Australians had much in common with the New Zealanders, “more so than the New Zealanders with the British,” stated one Australian Red Cross Commissioner, adding dryly, “To outsiders, New Zealanders are Australians except that they crush their hats in a different manner.”³⁴

Helping at Home

From the outset, the Australian Red Cross had a close relationship with the army medical services on the home front. When the Australian General Hospitals (AGHs) were established in each state, Red Cross Divisions were very generous with donations of goods, equipment, and money. In New South Wales, for example, the Red Cross spent upwards of £9,000 to help the military establish the Randwick 4th AGH. This included the supply and installation of linoleum for ten ward floors, beds to fill the wards, a pathological laboratory, and X-ray equipment. A Red Cross store was established on site and supplied clothing, hospital comforts, and food to patients. A library and recreation room were also established, as well as mail service for patients that was well stocked with paper, envelopes, pens, pencils, and stamps. Morning and afternoon teas were served every day by Red Cross VAs and volunteers.

³⁴ Interview with Miss Peggy Murdoch, Australian Branch BRCS, Abbeville, 25 April 1919; ‘Australian Branch BRCS in France—A Few Notes Drawn up in Accordance with Colonel Butler’s Memorandum of 15 May 1918; Commissioner Hayward, ARC Executive Correspondence [NO 33], ARC Archives (National), Melbourne.



Similar assistance was offered across the nation. For example, when a military hospital was established in the Tasmanian city of Launceston, the Red Cross spent £300 on furnishings, £250 on equipping the operating theatre, and £57 for a sterilizer—all of this in addition to providing patients underclothes, pajamas, and other essential articles of clothing. Similarly, the Red Cross donated well over £200 in additional equipment to the 9th AGH at Roseneath in Hobara and funded the construction of a recreation room worth £550. A large recreation room was erected adjacent to the 8th AGH in Western Australia at a cost of £1,033 to the division, £500 of which was paid by Fremantle businesses.

Each state division had its own special tasks, based on its home state's geography. For example, the Red Cross in Hobart assisted thousands of returning New Zealand servicemen as they made their way home. Since Western Australia was the first and last port of call for Australian ships going to and returning home from war, the Red Cross often supplied them with goods for their voyage. This was particularly the case for hospital ships, as in the first year of the war, a total of thirty-one hospital ships carrying sick and wounded individuals were met at Fremantle in addition to eighteen hospital ships bound for New Zealand that were berthed at Albany. All received hospital supplies, cigarettes, fruit, and reading materials.

The Red Cross also assisted sick men in the various military camps dotting the country, such as Broadmeadows and Liverpool in New South Wales. In 1915, the Victorian Division became involved with Langwarrin Camp, near Frankston on Melbourne's outskirts. Originally established as a POW camp, it was later used to treat soldiers suffering from venereal disease. Almost 7,000 soldiers went through the camp, many of them returned home from active service to be treated. The Red Cross, along with the YMCA and other benefactors, assisted the Department of Defence in running the facility. They erected bathhouses and recreational halls, installed electric lighting, and supplied furniture. An irrigation room, invaluable in the daily treatment of venereal disease, was also established and paid for by the Red Cross. Beyond all this, the Red Cross further supplied the camp with underclothing, pajamas, and additional bed linen.³⁵

Once the first invalided soldiers returned to Australia in July 1915 on the hospital ship *Kyarra*, the Red Cross began specializing in convalescent and rehabilitation services. A Home Hospitals' Committee was formed at the national level to coordinate the response, but this soon became a divisional responsibility. Whereas only the most serious cases or those requiring long-term recuperation were sent home, the trickle of sick and wounded men soon became a flood. The Australian Red Cross established convalescent homes across the country in both urban and rural areas to meet the demand.

35 Report to the Red Cross Society, Langwarrin VD Camp, ARC Executive Correspondence [NO 33], ARC Archives (National), Melbourne.

These facilities were often housed in substantial family homes, generously loaned to the Red Cross for the duration of the war. Rose Hall, a large two-storey house situated within three acres of gardens and overlooking Sydney Harbour in Darlinghurst, was one example. Another was Broughton Hall, set in a beautiful and peaceful ten-acre plot along the Parramatta River at Rozelle. After spending almost £1,500 on refurbishment and equipping the large house, it was opened by Lady Helen Munro Ferguson and handed over to the military authorities. It was used to care for nerve and mental trauma cases and became known as the 3rd AGH. The Victorian Division established the No. 1 Rest Home at Wirth's Park in October of 1915 with a staff of over 200, located on the present-day site of the National Gallery of Victoria on St. Kilda Road. In South Australia, a Red Cross Hospital with sixty beds was built at Henley Beach. The Queensland Division opened its convalescent home in 1917 at Grangehill, a property lent to the society by its owner at a nominal rent of £1 per year.

The Department of Repatriation was established through the *Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Act*, assented to on 28 September 1917. Upon its creation, department officials requested Red Cross assistance in providing, equipping, and running convalescent homes in each state for discharged soldiers suffering the effects of the war. The department agreed to pay each division six shillings per day for each patient.

The Golden Thread

In August 1914, no one could have imagined how long the war would continue or how much it would challenge and change the country. When peace finally came on 11 November 1918, Australians were exhausted and war-weary, yet relieved. Now the boys could come home and people could resume their lives. After four years of war, Australia had a well-developed, mature, and highly successful national Red Cross society. In December 1918, as part of Australian Red Cross's fourth annual meeting, thousands, predominantly women, packed the Sydney Town Hall to hear their president, Lady Helen, talk about what she described to be their golden thread of purpose. "Red Cross work represented the maternal love of Australia stretching out to encircle her sons on every sea and land," she told them. They now understood "that to them it was given to create, right in the heart of the cyclone of war and hatred, a centre of calm and brotherly kindness."³⁶

Australia was still to face the devastating influenza epidemic otherwise known as the Spanish flu that followed the war. Striking Europe, America, Asia, and Africa, the pandemic killed more than thirty million people in the next year—around two or three times the total number of people killed during the war. The influenza was brought to Australia by the hundreds of thousands of returning men. Infection control procedures involved quarantining ships, inoculations, the

³⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 December 1918.

administration of zinc sulfate inhalations, and daily “temperature parades.” Despite these precautions, the influenza claimed over 11,000 lives in Australia. The Australian Red Cross was put under huge pressure by the epidemic, but played an integral role in its treatment. Thousands of Red Cross volunteers across the nation supported public health departments with a range of tasks, including nursing in local hospitals and in the homes of victims, and providing comforts, pajamas, and surgical masks to hospitals. They helped to staff emergency depots where inoculations were carried out, helping with swabbings, boiling and sterilizing needles, and generally caring for those who were affected by the crowded and uncomfortable conditions. Schools were closed and used as emergency hospitals, mainly staffed by VAs and Red Cross workers, a number of whom succumbed to the flu themselves. In short, although the war officially finished in late 1918, the work of Australian Red Cross continued on.

The organization’s leaders, both in Australia and overseas, were publicly acknowledged by the Australian government with the various honors and awards bestowed on them. While, in 1919, Philadelphia Robertson had discussions about the possible inclusion of a complete volume on the Australian Red Cross in the official history of the war, to be edited by renowned wartime journalist, Charles Bean, this never materialized. Rather, the exploits of the Australian Red Cross during World War I form part of one chapter in volume XI of the official history of the conflict written by Ernest Scott, professor of history at the University of Melbourne. As the Hon. James Ashton reaffirmed, “the nature of the Red Cross movement [...] was essentially from the top to the bottom a woman’s movement [with] men being employed here and there merely to fill up the chinks!”³⁷

We shall leave it to Lady Helen Munro Ferguson to have the final word on the role of Australian Red Cross in World War I. In 1919, she eulogized the volunteer workers, especially the women of Australia, and paid special tribute to them. She also hinted at a possible peacetime future for this national organization borne out of a cruel and remorseless war:

Originating with the war, our Society had to commence operations from the day of its inception; and we may well congratulate ourselves that the hastily improvised machinery worked smoothly, and proved capable of expanding to meet new demands [...] Thanks to the loyal co-operation of Divisions, Branches, Committees, and workers, the great mission of the Society has been accomplished, and a powerful organization has been created, ready at any moment to renew its war activities, and able in days of peace to play a useful part in relieving suffering and promoting national health [...] women from all parts of Australia and from all spheres of life have been drawn together in a common effort; a strong bond has been created between them, and a spirit of unity and comradeship evoked, which will endure long after the close of our Red Cross war activities of 1914–1919.³⁸

37 Letter from E. Glanville Hicks, Department of Repatriation, to Miss Robertson, 18 August 1919, ARC Executive Correspondence [NO 33], ARC Archives (National), Melbourne; ARCS, Leaflet, Quarterly Series, no 4, December 1920, p. 1.

38 ARCS, *5th Annual Report*, 1918–1919, p. 26.