First Aid and Training During the Second World War

Refusing to ignore people in crisis
Preparation for the Second World War

In 1935, the British Government set up a special air raid precautions department to deal with the possible side effects of aerial warfare. The British Red Cross was already prepared, and able to provide considerable assistance as 96,789 certificates in ‘first aid in chemical warfare’ had already been issued.

In October 1935, 34 Red Cross male and female officers attended a training school at the anti-gas wing of the small arms school, Winterbourne Gunner, the first time that women had been admitted as students to a military establishment. All of the trainees qualified.

In April 1936, a civilian anti-gas school opened and 51 Red Cross members qualified as instructors.

By 1938, the Red Cross had 2,479 instructors trained in air raid precautions (ARP) and over 100,000 certificates had been issued. The instructors were training ARP officials, air raid wardens, and members of fire brigades in addition to members of the general public.

Training for members during the war

Men and women who joined detachments were trained in first aid, home nursing, hygiene and similar useful subjects. Overall the detachments were organised:

- as a reserve for the nursing services in time of war
- to assist in epidemics or disasters threatening public health
- to be useful to the community in time of peace
- to provide first aid at public functions and gatherings where accidents may occur
- to assist in hospitals, at orthopaedic clinics and welfare centres

Once members joined a detachment and had qualified for certificates in first aid and home nursing, they attended at least 12 practice sessions a year, were present for an annual inspection, and were turned out to the commandant’s satisfaction when asked to perform a public duty.

In a detachment it was the medical officer who gave lectures in first aid, and often the training was planned a whole year ahead. As it could be tedious for senior members to attend the same lectures year after year, they entered competitions to get extra training and special coaching. Before the War Office Inspection there was an annual meeting.

ARP students received anti-gas training and first aid lectures. The anti-gas officer was a specialist, and highly trained.
The Red Cross undertook a role in training men and women as workers in the Civil Defence Casualty services. Members staffed first aid posts, medical aid posts attached to air raid shelters, and rest centres during the Blitz in the major cities. They were able to step in to fill gaps in staffing when local government arrangements could not keep pace with events.

**Case study: Intensive training course at Cambridge**

*(from the British Red Cross Quarterly Review, July 1941)*

“Lectures were from 10-12 and from 2.30-4.30 given by the Divisional Medical Officer and Lady Superintendent and the Regional Nursing Officer of the Ministry of Health and her assistant. Both sets of lectures were followed by demonstrations given by Detachment members, and practices and demonstrations took place in the evenings from 7-8.30.

Examiners were drawn from Detachment Medical Officers and Lady Superintendents etc and a 96 per cent pass was obtained in both subjects, with the result that candidates were able to take up work immediately as Nursing Auxiliaries, full time members at Convalescent Homes, and in one or two cases after the latter course, they enrolled as Mobile VADs. Mobile VADs were those members who were expected to go wherever their services were needed.

A Special Lecture was arranged during each course of a First Aid subject at the University School of Engineering by Dr Shirlaw, Medical Officer at Battersea ARP Services, and by Mr Ghey of Addenbrooke’s Hospital. Also two Convalescent Homes under the Joint War Organisation (JWO) were visited during the second course, where members were seen at work.”

**First aid posts**

First aid posts varied both in size and location. There were posts at St James’s Palace and one in the Houses of Parliament, and others situated in large garages beneath modern blocks of flats, in the basement of hospitals, and in London’s poorest districts. In some posts there were fleets of motor ambulances, with their drivers and stretcher parties always standing by.

Inside the posts were fully equipped rooms for the treatment of gas casualties. There were decontamination cubicles, and trough-like ‘baths’ for stretcher cases to be cleaned with hoses. Sterilised instruments, bandages and dressings were ready and neatly arranged on trays.

The larger first aid posts had as many as 50 Red Cross members who worked in relays during the day and night.
Training for non-Red Cross members

During the Second World War members continued to help local authorities in the education of the public in elementary first aid and air raid precautions. From 1942 assistance was given in instructing men of the Home Guard in first aid, and talks on first aid and nursing were arranged for housewives at the request of the Women’s Voluntary Services for Civil Defence. A further development was the setting up, equipping and staffing of large numbers of first aid points with the approval of local authorities, in connection with the medical services of the Home Guard or wherever official services invited assistance.

In 1946, the National Training Centre at Barnett Hill, Wonersh, Surrey, which had been loaned to the JWO as a convalescent home during the war, was opened by HRH The Princess Royal for the training of Red Cross personnel and for conferences. From 1976 Barnett Hill accommodated commercial courses as well as its own internal training programmes. In 1996 the Sundial Group started managing the house and grounds as a commercial conference centre and purchased the property in 2005.

Sources

> The Red Cross Quarterly Review; April 1939, July 1939, January 1940, July 1941