General Overview

Upon the declaration of war in September 1939, the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St John joined forces, as they had done in the First World War. They formed the Joint War Organisation to ensure activities were carried out efficiently and under the protection of the Red Cross emblem. The organisation carried out extensive services for the sick and wounded, for prisoners of war and for civilians needing relief as a result of enemy action, at home and abroad.

British Red Cross members worked in hospitals and convalescent homes, nurseries, ambulance units, rest stations and supply depots providing welfare and nursing support. All of the work was funded by the Duke of Gloucester’s Red Cross and St John Appeal, which had raised over £54 million by 1946.

The signing of the third Geneva Convention in 1929 had established comprehensive rules for the treatment of prisoners of war and the Joint War Organisation sent over twenty million standard food parcels, invalid food parcels, medical supplies, educational books and recreational material to those affected.

1939

In January the Ministry of Health formed the Central Emergency Committee for the Nursing Profession for the purpose of recruiting and training a Civil Nursing Reserve. The Reserve was to comprise three categories: trained nurses; assistant nurses; and nursing auxiliaries.

The Auxiliaries were to be recruited from three sources:

- The British Red Cross Society
- The St. John Ambulance Brigade
- Persons who volunteered for National Service in this capacity

In 1939 40,544 Voluntary Aid Detachment members were enrolled, of whom 32,421 were known as immobile members. In April of that year however, in order to meet the Ministry of Health’s need for trained nursing members, the War Office decided to reduce the existing number of immobile nursing members. Instructions were given for the release of up to 50 per cent of the total strength of these from their VAD obligations, and such members were free to offer their services to the Civil Nursing Reserve. At the same time it was indicated that a further 40 per cent would be freed in the near future.

The administration of a grant of £50,000 for the Relief of Refugee Spanish Internees in France, as a result of the Spanish Civil War, was entrusted to the British Red Cross Society by the Government and was carried out in co-operation with the French Army Medical Services and the French Red Cross.

Owing to the intensive training afforded by the Society in the preceding years and successful
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Recruitment, the outbreak of the Second World War in September found the Detachments of the Society in a state of efficiency and mobilisation was effected in forty-eight hours. Several thousand active male and female VAD members took their places with the medical services of the Armed Forces of the Crown at home and abroad; many thousands of men and women proceeded to their posts with the Civil Defence Casualty Services and many thousands of female members, who had joined the Civil Nursing Reserve, completed the staffs of Emergency Medical Service Hospitals.

Valuable work was done in connection with the evacuation of children and old people and the setting up of sick bays. Assistance was also given in transferring patients from hospitals in vulnerable areas and the boys and girls of the Junior Red Cross responded splendidly to the call for service in many ways.

In addition, the Central Hospital Supply Service was organised throughout the country and became responsible for the work parties which formed in practically every town and village to make hospital garments and surgical dressings.

HRH The Duke of Gloucester’s Red Cross and St John Fund was established and contributions poured in, not from the homeland only, but from all parts of the Empire and from groups of British people across the world.

1940-1941

Male members of the VAD answered the Government’s appeal for stretcher-bearers for hospitals throughout the country. Commissions, with their own vehicles and stores, were appointed to serve with the British Expeditionary Force in France and in the Middle East. Women drivers were attached for service with the Army at home and librarians and divisional therapists were provided for duty in Service and emergency hospitals. Members assisted the Wounded and Missing Department of the War Organisation by serving as liaison officers and searchers in hospitals. The detachments cared for refugees from abroad, from Gibraltar and from the Channel Islands, staffed medical posts, opened rest stations for the troops (especially during the evacuation of Dunkirk) and members continued to help local authorities in the education of the public in elementary first aid and air raid precautions. The War Organisation opened many convalescent homes in which the Society’s officers and members served as commandants, matrons, sisters, quartermasters, secretaries, masseuses, nursing members, orderlies, drivers and general service members.

Owing to the capture of a large number of British troops and the breakdown of direct communications with Geneva, resulting from the fall of France, a heavy strain was thrown on both the Wounded and Missing Department and the Prisoners of War Department. Contact with Geneva was restored by means of the cable service and the supply and despatch of parcels through Lisbon and Marseilles was gradually established and became one of the primary tasks of the War Organisation.
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During the Battle of Britain London members staffed the first aid posts in underground railway stations and other shelters but members from all parts of the country travelled to the capital to provide necessary support for this work. In cities, towns and villages subjected to aerial bombardment, detachments shared in the work of the casualty services. Rest centres for people who had lost their homes were staffed and temporary homes established for old people whose homes had been bombed.

1942

While the care of the sick and wounded servicemen and women, prisoners of war, and civilian victims of air raids continued to be the primary work of the Red Cross, the Society did not hesitate to accept new responsibilities. Among these was the appointment of over 1000 welfare officers who were attached to hospitals in this country receiving casualties. Their duties included writing letters for the patients and getting in touch with and arranging accommodation for relatives who wished to visit the patients. Experimental work was also developed within the scope of the Society’s Charters in connection with reconstruction, youth and social services.

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. Much work was also done in connection with the blood transfusion services and many of the Society’s members were themselves donors.

The Reconstruction Sub Committee (subsequently renamed the Planning Sub-Committee) was set up to consider the widening of the scope of the Society’s activities at home so as to maintain the active interest of the many members enrolled for war work with the Society. Plans were also discussed for maintaining after the War the close relations which had developed during the War with the Dominions and Colonies and for the formation of new Branches in the Colonies.

1943

During this year officers and members were posted for service with the Army overseas as commandants, quartermasters, drivers, nursing members in convalescent homes, as welfare officers and searchers and also in connection with civilian relief. In addition, by the wish of the Ministries concerned, Red Cross guides were supplied to escort sick and wounded members of the Services travelling by air and by train.

At the request of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour and National Service, the Society set up a Nursing Aid Service to co-operate with medical officers of health and district nurses for the care of the sick in their homes.
1944

In 1944, for the first time, a British Red Cross Society Unit of over two hundred VAD nursing members proceeded to India for service in military hospitals under the Government of India. Large numbers of welfare officers and ambulance drivers and personnel for convalescent homes and relatives’ hostels were despatched to north-west Europe, North Africa, Tripoli, Italy, the Near East, Sicily and India. Furthermore, civilian relief units were despatched to Greece, Italy and north-west Europe in conjunction with other voluntary organisations.

Officers also went to Sweden, Lisbon and Marseilles to carry out welfare duties in connection with the repatriation of prisoners of war to the United Kingdom – some of the Society’s personnel were employed in transit camps whilst others undertook transport duties.

An acute shortage of nursing staff was reported from the emergency hospitals set up by the Ministry of Health and forty-three Canadian Red Cross nursing members arrived for duty in these hospitals at the invitation of the British Red Cross. Seventy Canadian Red Cross drivers and twenty South African Red Cross drivers arrived for duty with the Transport of Wounded Department.

The sustained attack made on the south of England by means of flying bombs and rockets made additional calls on the Society. Members rendered invaluable service in hospitals, first aid posts, rest centres and shelters, and as ambulance drivers and attendants, and assisted in the evacuation of aged and infirm persons and children from London. Several counties also assisted in the setting up of homes and sickbays.

1945

In 1945 a further unit of VAD nursing members was sent for service under the Government of India, and welfare officers and other personnel proceeded to North-West Europe, India, Italy and the Middle East. Guides were provided to accompany the relatives of soldiers, sailors, and airmen who were dangerously ill overseas.

Civilian relief units continued to operate in Italy, Greece and North-West Europe, performing valuable service in many concentration camps, including the notorious Belsen Camp, whilst further parties of nursing members and drivers of the Canadian Red Cross arrived to take up duties in this country.

After the cessation of hostilities in Europe arrangements were made for members of the Society to assist the Services in the repatriation of prisoners of war both through Russia and the Western Front. A special commission was sent to Russia in this regard, and welfare officers travelled to the ships bringing prisoners back from Odessa.

On the fall of Japan a requisition was received for units of welfare officers to go to Manila, India, America and Canada in connection with the repatriation of prisoners of war, and some of these
welfare officers travelled with the prisoners on their voyages from the Far East. Numerous transit camps were set up by the Government in which Red Cross officers assisted in all types of work, such as transport, the issue of comforts and tracing relatives. Rest homes and convalescent homes were set aside for these ex-prisoners of war and were staffed by members of the Red Cross.

Many letters of appreciation were received from Government departments, and the thanks of both Houses of Parliament were expressed through the Speaker of the House of Commons for the work undertaken in the staffing of the first aid post in the Palace of Westminster throughout the War.

From the outbreak of War to the fall of Japan, 195 members lost their lives by enemy action or on active service.