



90,000 volunteers  
**One remarkable legacy**

# BRITISH RED CROSS TRANSPORT DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Refusing to ignore people in crisis

## **British Red Cross transport during the First World War**

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When the British army entered the Peninsular (1807–1814) and Crimean (1853 – 1856) wars, no efficient method of hospital transport existed. The situation was not much better in August 1914 when the expeditionary force landed in France. Although Sir Alfred Keogh, director-general of the army medical service had appealed repeatedly for motor ambulances, these had not been sanctioned. Motor ambulances had never been used in war, they cost money, and possibly the general staff feared that the convoys of these unreliable vehicles would congest the roads. The wounded men of 1914 were therefore shaken and rocked in horse-drawn ambulance wagons and lumbering motor wagons. Journeys were agonising, especially over the stone roads of northern France.

The Times appealed for ambulance funds in October 1914, raising enough for 512 vehicles within three weeks. By the end of January 1915, more than 1,000 ambulances and motor vehicles of all kinds had been despatched, and had carried 100,000 patients.

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### **Transport of sick and wounded soldiers**

Red Cross volunteers unloaded trains and placed the wounded in ambulances, attended to luggage and stretchers, and provided hospital squads to await the arrival of the ambulances. These men also accompanied wounded officers from one hospital to another. Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) were constantly on standby.

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### **Motorised ambulances**

The first ever motorised ambulances to transport wounded people were used in the First World War. On 12 September 1914, a small meeting was held at the Royal Automobile Club, at which a few members offered to place themselves and their cars at the disposal of the Red Cross. The Red Cross established the motor ambulance department, which sent 3,446 motor vehicles, including 2171 motor ambulances, to various destinations throughout the war. In total, 94 ambulances were destroyed by the enemy and subsequently scrapped by the Joint War Committee.

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### **Motor vehicles**

Motor cars also played an important part in transporting the wounded. Private owners lent and often drove their own cars in order to transport patients. The motor vehicles were often used to supplement motor ambulances, carrying patients who could sit up.

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### **Hospital trains**

The first ever hospital train, the Princess Christian hospital train, was transported to South Africa to be used during the Boer War (1899–1902). The train supplied the wounded with clothing and

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toiletries and removed the more seriously injured to Cape Town. The Princess Christian carried 7,548 badly injured soldiers. The no. 4 hospital train, known as the 'white train', was used during the First World War.

In the First World War the UK flour millers' association presented the Red Cross with two specially built and equipped ambulance trains constructed by Great Western and Great Eastern Railways. The trains were used in France during 1915 with another train, which was converted from ordinary French rolling stock. The three trains carried 461,844 patients throughout the course of the war.

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### Hospital ships and launches

The first boat owned by the Red Cross for transporting the wounded was The Queen Victoria, used during the Egyptian campaign of 1885. Society members served on the Mayflower in 1898, when an expedition was sent to Sudan. This marked the first time that the Red Cross and the army medical services worked together.

During 1915, three of the earliest motor launches were placed to serve in Mesopotamia, on the Tigris. Soon after, the motor launch department was formed to organise further launches and replace the use of inferior craft.

- > Thirty-three Red Cross launches were in operation in Mesopotamia by the end of 1916
  - > Four river motor-launches were sent to the Dardanelles during the fighting between Turkey and the allied forces
  - > The Red Cross River Hospital Ship Nahba made round-trips carrying patients between Basra and Baghdad from May 1917
  - > Six specially equipped 'pulling' motor launches were provided for the evacuation from the Gallipoli beaches, during the Gallipoli campaign 1915-1916.
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### Barge transport

Barges were converted into hospitals during the war and operated on the river Seine. In the Worcestershire canals, 70-foot long barges transported between 16 and 24 "lying down" stretcher cases and 20 or more sitting patients.

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### Ambulance drivers

A very high standard was expected from ambulance drivers. Many people remarked on their

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professional attitude and high standard of work. Though the ambulances were mainly used for base work, drivers were sometimes placed in the line of fire when transporting wounded men from the Front.

The majority of ambulance drivers were taken from male VADs. Men at home often divided their time between working as local ambulance drivers and acting as night orderlies in auxiliary hospitals. However, as more men enlisted, many women volunteered as ambulance drivers. An example of a female ambulance convoy in France was at Étretat:

“From the nature of the work and the difficulty of providing suitable accommodation it was never possible to substitute women for men drivers at Havre, but Women VAD Drivers were established at Étretat in April 1916, where a small Convoy of 13 Ambulances carried out the evacuation in connection with the Hospital and Camps in that area under the supervision of the Havre Headquarters. This was the first VAD Convoy established in France.”

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### Uniform

Women's ambulance drivers had to wear a particular uniform when outside:

- > Hat – blue felt, shape as straw, regulation ribbon
- > Gabardine cap – blue, of special Red Cross Pattern, with peak to front and strap over top
- > Long coat – blue, double breasted, cut loose, inverted pleat, with belt of same material. Sleeves loose, with strap and button at wrist. Roll collar to button over ears or to wear open. Plain shoulder straps. British Red Cross Society's county badge or emblem should be worn on left breast.
- > Long coat – for summer wear. Thin navy blue serge, waterproofed stand and fall collar, turned back cuffs, plain shoulder straps, five black buttons to front, two pockets, strap at back, scarlet Italian lining; sleeves also lined. Society's county badge or emblem should be worn on left breast
- > Jacket – blue serge, step end collar, panel front and back, two hip pockets with square flap to button. Four special black horn British Red Cross Society's buttons to front. Two smaller sizes on pockets. Society's county badge or emblem should be worn on left breast.
- > Skirt – blue serge, five gore, 13-inch inverted pleat, seams stitched, five 5 rows of stitching, patch pockets 6 ½ inches by 7 ½ inches with pointed flap to button, right hand side; centre of pocket on seam. Top pocket six inches below waist-band. The skirt of the costume should be made to admit of 10-inch ground clearance.
- > Blouse – white with polo collar, pleat down front, cuff fastening with button. Low neck blouse may not be worn.

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- > A blue blouse may also be worn as follows: navy blue thin washable material; special pattern, with two breast pockets, and detachable polo collar. Low neck blouse may not be worn.
  - > Tie - plain black crepe de chine, wide ends
  - > Belt – black patent leather 1 ½ inches wide
  - > Woollen jacket – ladies, knitted colour lovat mixture (or plain grey), plain back, full-length sleeves, two hip pockets, six small black British Red Cross Society's buttons to front
  - > Mackintosh – black rubber proof, stand and fall collar, five black four-hole British Red Cross Society buttons to front, strap and button on cuff, two square hip pockets
  - > Gloves – white. Except on parade, light grey in lieu of white gloves may be worn
  - > Boots or shoes – ordinary black with black stockings
  - > Haversack – blue jean with detachable white lining. To be worn unrolled on the left hip a little to the back, the sling stall pass under the right shoulder strap; the rear sling of haversack to pass under strap at back of coat to retain in position.
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## Fundraising

The 'Times appeal', issued on 2 October 1914, was instrumental in raising funds for ambulances. One vehicle cost £400 (approximately £17,500 today) and the appeal raised enough money to buy 512 ambulances within three weeks. An example of local support was the Berkshire Branch who raised £2,109 12s 7d for the 'Times Appeal'. The Red Cross bought practically every chassis in the country that was suitable for the purpose.

The 'Dennis-Bayley fund' and the 'transport of wounded fund' helped maintain the vehicles and there a number of cars were presented as gifts to the Red Cross.

The 'British farmers Red Cross fund' raised money mainly through agricultural markets. Around 1,600 were organised during the war. The proceeds were donated to particular schemes, such providing motor ambulances, cars and lorries for the various battle-fronts. More than 150 ambulances were provided in this way. Hospitals, known as British farmers hospitals, were supported by this fund in Belgium, France and Serbia.

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## Ambulance service abroad

Boulogne was the site of the Red Cross ambulance garage. From October 1914 and during the first battle of Ypres, hospital trains of wounded men arrived and patients were transferred from

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the trains to hospitals in the city. During the war, the Boulogne ambulance convoys transported 1,823, 458 sick and wounded men.

All ambulances and lorries that arrived in France from England were received at the Red Cross garage in Boulogne, before being distributed to other units around France. There was also a large garage at Boulogne, which serviced the ambulance convoys and other vehicles. By May 1915 there were 50 mechanics in the ambulance department at Boulogne although many of the mechanics also volunteered to drive ambulances or carry the wounded when necessary.

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### **Volunteer field ambulance sections**

In April 1918 the War Office asked the territorial force association to raise at the earliest possible moment 18 volunteer field ambulance sections for service at home, in the event of an emergency. In response to the appeal by the county director, a number of Red Cross men's detachments joined the scheme. Thirteen sections were formed but after the armistice they were no longer needed.

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### **Home ambulance service**

In 1919, the Joint Council of the Order of St John and the British Red Cross Society decided to establish a service to help meet the need for an 'unbroken' range of ambulance stations throughout the country. It started as a trial and was not intended as a permanent service. The Joint War Committee appointed a home service ambulance committee to control and work a scheme, consisting of 500 ambulances, in the service of the sick and injured throughout the country.

The committee planned for all counties to operate and control the ambulances in their area. During the war, the military forces provided necessary medical knowledge and equipment, and the ambulances were primarily used for transport. After the war, civilian ambulances were staffed by qualified and trained attendants.

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### **Friends ambulance unit and the British Red Cross**

"The relationship between the Red Cross commission in France and the Friends Ambulance Unit was very close. From the early days the Friends were largely dependent on the British Red Cross and the Order of St John for vehicles to supplement the small fleet provided by members of the Unit, and when in the summer of 1915 it was decided to withdraw the small Red Cross Branch which had been established at Dunkirk for work with the French, several of the ambulances and lorries attached to that Branch were handed over to the Friends Ambulance Unit.

The work of the Unit at that time consisted principally in Civilian Relief, but the additional

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ambulances provided by the Joint Committee enabled it to provide two ambulance convoys, S.S.A. 13 and S.S.A. 14, for service with the French Army. These two convoys were employed on front-line work at the extreme north end of the line, and as there were considerable movements of French wounded in Dunkirk, a third Unit, which was called the “FAU Groupement,” was established to deal with this work.”

The Friends’ Ambulance work in France also included “staffing the Red Cross Ambulance Trains and of Hospital Ships, the staffing of No. 3 FAU Hospital at Abbeville, and of the Queen Alexandra Hospital at Malo-les-Bains, Dunkirk. The Unit also rendered service to the Belgians and French in connection with Sacré Coeur hospital at Ypres and the Hospital Elisabeth at Poperinghe, and with temporary civilian hospitals at Hazebrouck and Watten. It also undertook extensive work of a general character in Belgium, such as anti-typhoid inoculation, water purification at Ypres, the evacuation of exposed villages in 1915 and 1916, and the evacuation of civilians during the general advance on the Lys front in 1918, with further relief operations during and after the Allied advance into Belgium, October, 1918 – February, 1919. The Unit’s Civilian Health and Sanitary Section also made house-to-house investigations of civilian conditions in Belgium. In England the Friends organised the Haxby Road Hospital at York and the Uffculme FAU Hospital at Moor Green, Birmingham, supplying also part of the personnel of the King George Hospital and the orderly staff at the Star and Garter, Richmond.”

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### Ambulance work on the lines of communication

This branch of the work dates from early in October 1914. Up to that time uncertainty regarding military operations had prevented the use of Boulogne as a hospital base, but in the middle of October hurried preparations begun to “provide for the wounded expected from the Ypres area. As hospital centres were established at Boulogne and along the coast the Red Cross was invited to undertake the transport of the wounded until all the work from Dunkirk to Deauville was entrusted to the ambulances and personnel of the Joint Committee or of two Societies working under the Red Cross Commissioner – the Scottish Branch of the British Red Cross and the Friends Ambulance.”

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### Cover photo

Vauxhall Ambulance BRCS Garage Boulogne 1916. © British Red Cross.