



90,000 volunteers
One remarkable legacy

VAD CASUALTIES DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

VAD casualties during the First World War

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Following the outbreak of the First World War on 4 August 1914, the British Red Cross formed the Joint War Committee with the Order of St John. They worked together and pooled their fundraising activities and resources. The committee supplied services and machinery in Britain and in the conflict areas abroad. Many men and women working for the Joint War Committee died in service whilst caring for naval and military forces at home and abroad.

War work

Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) carried out important work during the war in the UK and abroad. They assisted with cooking, clerical tasks and nursing. They aided the sick and injured from the battlefields in very dangerous circumstances. Diseases such as cholera, typhoid and the Spanish flu struck the troops and affected many of the VADs. There were also a number of VAD casualties during the conflict. It is impossible to know the exact number of casualties due to gaps in records and inconsistencies between different sources.

The VADs who died were commemorated after the war. S.H. Best writes: "During the war the great Seven Sisters window in York Minster was taken down, and when the hostilities were ended it was decided that it should be re-lead and put back as a memorial to the women who lost their lives in the Great War."

Deaths

During the war, 128 nursing members, 11 general service members and six Joint War Committee hospital members were killed. More than 100 other VAD members not directly working for the Red Cross were also killed. The Roll of Honour contains records of the deaths of 498 Joint War Committee members. Though we cannot be entirely sure of the cause, most of those deaths recorded were probably due to health problems associated with old age. Examples of diseases caught include cerebro-spinal meningitis, tuberculosis and septic poisoning due to contact with infected wounds.

We do know that eight VADs died in the sinking of SS Osmanieh on 31 December 1917. Contracted as hired transport by the British navy, the boat struck a mine laid by the German submarine UC 34 and quickly sank, killing 199 people including 8 VAD nurses. They are commemorated at the Alexandria (Hadra) war memorial cemetery.

The most common stated cause of death was pneumonia caused by Spanish flu.

Spanish flu pandemic

It is thought that Spanish flu struck in 1918, spreading due to the vast movement of the population, with troops living in close proximity. VADs helped those suffering from influenza at home and abroad. Joyce Sapwell, a VAD serving in France, recounted: "About one third of

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the staff were down with it, and the hospital was full". Many of the nurses caught the flu whilst attending patients and continued working until their deaths.

An obituary in the Red Cross Journal, 1918 stated that: "Miss Elger died on February 10th from pneumonia following influenza... For two and a half years she was a devoted and conscientious worker at Clayton Court Hospital, where her loss is felt most keenly by all who knew her. Clayton Court, it will be remembered, was most generously placed at the disposal of the Red Cross by Mr and Mrs Elger early in the war. After doing so much to help their country, it seems hard that they should have to bear this further personal sacrifice."

Although VAD nurses were those most affected by the flu within the Red Cross, other members also lost their lives. These included Mr E A Alley, who "was the assistant honorary secretary of East Lancashire... He was especially concerned with the work of the men's detachments, in the unloading of ambulance trains coming into Manchester, provision of staff for military hospitals, and the recruiting of orderlies for abroad. He was also the chairman of the foodstuffs board, which was largely responsible for the provisioning of the hospitals in the Branch."

Awards for VADs who saw service

Many VADs put themselves through dangerous circumstances to aid sick and wounded soldiers. This bravery resulted in many volunteers receiving awards for their service. The 1914 star was introduced in 1917 for service in France and Flanders between 5 August and 22 November 1914. The 1914 star was awarded to around 20 VADs. In 1919 a clasp bearing the same dates was authorised and given to personnel who had been under fire between those dates.

Authorised in 1918, the 1914/15 star was awarded to personnel who saw service in France and Flanders from 23 November 1914 to 31 December 1915, and to personnel who saw service in any other operational theatre from 5 August 1914 to 31 December 1915. The 1915 star was awarded to around 800 VADs.

Sources

- > S.H. Best, *The Story of the British Red Cross* by (London, 1938)
- > Joint War Committee Reports 1914–1919 (London, 1921)
- > nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/medal-index-cards-ww1.htm
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- > redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/Museum-and-archives/Historical-factsheets/Spanish-influenza

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> [British Red Cross archives of VAD casualties during the First World War](#)

> shipwrecksofegypt.com/

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