



90,000 volunteers
One remarkable legacy

VOLUNTEERING DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Volunteering 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 to pool their fundraising activities and resources. The committee supplied services and machinery in Britain and in the conflict areas abroad. They also organised Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) at home and abroad, which were of vital importance in providing aid to naval and military forces during the war. There were many types of voluntary service during the war and the majority of volunteering initiatives were organised by the Joint War Committee.

Volunteers

VADs were formed in 1909 by the British Red Cross and the Order of St John at the request of the War Office. Volunteers were trained in medical practices and to make use of local resources to improvise stretchers and other methods of transport. They also knew how to convert local buildings into shelters and rest stations for the sick and wounded. By October 1910, 202 detachments had been registered with over 6,000 volunteers.

Outbreak of the First World War

Membership of the detachments grew on the outbreak of the war in 1914. The British Red Cross and the Order of St John, a body that could also raise detachments under the War Office voluntary aid scheme, combined to form the Joint War Committee on 24 August 1914.

Viscount Chilston was nominated as chief county director, to supervise the work of the VADs throughout the United Kingdom. He was the official channel of communication with the War Office. Dame Katherine Furse G.B.E. became head of the VAD department in early 1915.

The committee organised joint wartime fundraising and relief work with the greatest possible efficiency and economy, under the protection of the Red Cross emblem and name. From 4 August, the Red Cross also selected suitable buildings for general hospitals, prepared schedules of equipment for the hospitals and submitted schemes to establish auxiliary hospitals and convalescent homes for wounded servicemen.

Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs)

These were formed in 1909 by the Red Cross and the Order of St John. Their initial purpose was to support the territorial medical services at times of war, but it was soon realised that detachments could play an important role during peacetime by supporting the services of the statutory authorities.

County branches of the Red Cross organised local units called Voluntary Aid Detachments (often abbreviated to VAD). Voluntary Aid Detachment members themselves came to be known simply as 'VADs'. Made up of men and women in every county, the VADs carried out a range

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of voluntary positions including nursing, transport duties, and the organisation of rest stations, working parties and hospitals. Some refused to take a salary, and many of them worked at a low rate of pay even when their experience and qualifications entitled them to more.

At the height of demand at the start of the war, uncertified members were called for by press appeals and were accepted for war work as 'special service probationers'. However, this relaxation in standards was discontinued as soon as possible and probationers were considered for certification as VADs.

Composition of Voluntary Aid Detachments

The 1910 regulations for the composition of VADs were:

Men's

- > one commandant
- > one medical officer
- > one quartermaster
- > one pharmacist
- > four section leaders
- > 48 men (four sections of 12 men each).

Total: 56

Women's:

- > one commandant (man or woman)
- > one quartermaster (man or woman)
- > one trained nurse as lady superintendent (a certified nurse who has completed three years' training at a hospital with a training school attached)
- > 20 women, of whom four should be qualified as cooks.

Total: 23

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Regulations

Nurses who wanted to be appointed completed an application form and would then appear before the selection board. After an interview, references were followed up. When applying to full-time nursing positions there were a number of rules for potential candidates:

- > No VAD member should question what work she does for the sick or wounded, whether soldiers, sailors or civilians
 - > Where health certificates and references were satisfactory candidates were put on the lists for home or foreign service. A good knowledge of French was desirable for foreign service. All nurses had to be equally willing to work night or day, at home or abroad.
 - > Accepted candidates would be vaccinated against enteric diseases such as typhoid.
 - > Indoor uniforms had to be provided by the nurses.
 - > When outside the hospitals, when off-duty and in the hostels, they must conform to VAD regulations.
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Conditions of employment for men's VADs were:

- > Must be enlisted under the same conditions as the home hospitals reserve of the St John Ambulance Brigade
 - > Men between 18 and 36 years of age will not be accepted unless they can produce good reasons for non-enlistment in combatant units
 - > Men required for service abroad must agree to be inoculated against enteric fever.
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Training

At the outbreak of the war, many people were inspired to train to help the sick and wounded. Therefore there was a great demand for lecturers. Women needed to be taught first aid, home nursing and hygiene by approved medical practitioners, as well as classes in cookery. They practised the work of a hospital ward and in many cases trained in an infirmary. Male detachments were trained in first aid in-the-field and stretcher bearing. Specialist classes to become a masseuse or to use an x-ray machine were available to talented VADs.

Classes and examinations were arranged locally until July 1916 when they were held at the College of Ambulance, 3 Vere Street, under an agreement with the owner, Sir James Cantlie.

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The fee to be examined was 1s 6d for evening candidates and 2s for day candidates. Two Red Cross Officers supervised the examinations.

An example of a teaching institution was Tredegar House, No. 99, Bow Road, E., which was the London hospital's training home for probationers. Tredegar House was used to train the recruits before they were sent to work on the hospital wards. Members had to stay at Tredegar House for seven weeks where they received instruction, board, lodging and half-a-crown a week for laundry, but no other pay.

They were examined on the sixth week. After passing the exams and receiving first aid and home nursing certificates, they worked at a hospital for a month's trial. If they passed the trial they were accepted into a hospital for a three months' "hard work" before they were accepted full-time. Women were also given self-defence classes to cope with any patients who attacked them and lifeguard training for hospitals near water.

Uniform

In 1911 a uniform sub-committee recommended the adoption of a standard uniform for VADs "having regard to economy, utility and the practical duties the Red Cross detachment would be required to perform on mobilisation".

The men's uniform consisted of a blue tunic, breeches, wrap-around leggings called 'putties' and a peaked cap. A greatcoat with the Red Cross emblem sewn on the breast was worn outdoors. At the outbreak of the war in 1914 this uniform was issued to Red Cross volunteers in standard British army khaki green.

Special service

As the war went on, duties increased and regulations relaxed as the demand for personnel grew. In February 1915 the War Office proposed that:

'In view of the fact that a largely increased supply of fully trained Nurses will be required for the necessary expansion of Military Hospitals at home and abroad, it is suggested that Members of recognised VADs might advantageously be employed, and so enable us to release a number of fully trained nurses for duty in new hospitals'. (p192)

A new system of "special service" was introduced to supply nursing members to Military Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) hospitals. These had been staffed exclusively by army nurses and orderlies from the RAMC. The VADs were also posted to Red Cross hospitals, both in England and France by the VAD Joint Committee of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St. John at Devonshire House.

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Conditions of employment for VADs stated that they must be trained in first aid and home nursing, they were required to work under fully trained nurses, and they had to be between 23 and 38 years of age. These VADs were to be paid for their service (suggested at £20 a year).

The first request for VADs from military hospitals in England came early in 1915 and from France in May of the same year. These were quickly followed by demands from Malta and from Egypt, each asking for 200 members. The Royal Naval Hospitals requested to be supplied with VAD nursing members in 1917, who were to reside in special hostels. The New Zealand hospitals, RAF hospitals, WRNS sick bays and QMAAC sick bays were aided in the same way.

Regulations for nursing members for naval and military hospitals:

- > Must be members of or attached to a Voluntary Aid Detachment
- > Members with hospital experience and First Aid Home Nursing Certificates will be given preference in appointment.
- > 21 to 46 years of age
- > Must be inoculated against enteric fever
- > Join for one months' probation, and then sign a contract for six months
- > Come directly under the Admiralty of War Office from date of appointment
- > £20 per annum pay (initial)
- > Required to live in nurses' quarters, and to be 'absolutely' under the control of the matron
- > £5 per annum allowances (quarters, food, washing, travelling paid)
- > Seven days' leave in first six months, 14 days' leave in second six months

General service

In addition to these "special service" nurses, a "general service" section of the VADs was established in September 1915. As men went off to fight, VADs were supplied in their place, carrying out their duties and working in civic positions such as dispensers, clerks, cooks, and storekeepers. General service members had to be interviewed by a responsible woman appointed by the Red Cross county director, and were assigned a VAD number. For people who did not have the money, time or inclination to complete nursing training, this was an additional way to contribute to Red Cross activities in Britain. By 1919, 11,000 men had been released for active service and were replaced by women in this section.

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Overseas service

VADs were sent abroad during both World Wars as the Committee and the Organisation operated commissions overseas in countries such as France, Italy and Russia. However some VADs were so keen to help that a circular was issued by the War Office in October 1914 stating that all VADs should hold themselves ready – but not leave the country without permission. Male detachments were frequently sent to France to work as transport officers or orderlies in hospitals.

Working parties and work depots

On the outbreak of the First World War, the Red Cross was practically the only organisation ready to collect and distribute clothes and other items. Working parties were formed across the country with the co-operation of the surrounding villages. Though not strictly Red Cross work, they organised the supply of hospital clothing including socks, shirts, blankets and belts for soldiers. Working parties also made essential hospital equipment such as bandages, splints, swabs and clothing. Other innumerable societies, associations, guilds and funds for supplying clothing and other items to various units of the army and navy sprung into existence.

Queen Mary's Needlework Guild (QMNG) was one of many voluntary organisations founded at the start of the war to supply gifts to troops in the field and to sick and wounded soldiers in hospitals at home and abroad. Gifts included pyjamas, bed-jackets, bed-socks, operation stockings, bags, bandages and dressings. During the war the QMNG worked as part of the war hospitals supply depot, providing bandages and other items for military hospitals.

Work depots were established in every major town to collate and despatch clothing from the working parties. Surgical stores were also created to organise store supplies including sphagnum moss, chloroform and ether. From the depots, items were sent to Red Cross headquarters or directly to soldiers in auxiliary hospitals at home or abroad.

Air raid duty

The police accepted the offer of VADs for air raid duty from Colonel Bate, secretary for the London branch of the Red Cross. The emblem of the Red Cross seemed to inspire a certain feeling of confidence in the crowds which assembled in the underground railway stations and other refuges in the poorer districts of London. Granaries opening on the riverside, open-air arches, cellars, tunnels, council schools and public buildings were among these refuges.

Members wore the Red Cross emblem as a distinctive badge, and were provided with a respirator. They dealt largely with fits, faints, hysteria and maternity cases.

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Rest stations

Rest stations were not part of Red Cross work but at railway stations they were organised and manned by local VADs. They provided food and other supplies for soldiers arriving by ambulance train whilst they waited to be transported to local hospitals or to travel on to another destination. A wounded soldier arriving at Bristol station by ambulance train stated that:

“We arrived at the Bristol Station about 2am on Whit Money, a sore, tired lot, after any weary hours on train and boat... We certainly didn't expect any fuss to be made of us at that hour of the morning, so you can imagine our glad surprise to see a bright array of Red Cross sisters and smart looking Ambulance Corps men standing splendidly to attention as the long ambulance train moved slowly into the station...”

Transport

Male detachments were almost entirely in charge transporting sick and wounded soldiers from ambulance train or ship to local hospitals. They also ferried patients between hospitals. Motor drivers had to go to London or Glasgow to go through the motor testing school. This was required for the role of transport officer as it provided suitable experience in driving and a good knowledge of running repairs. Male detachments were also frequently sent abroad to France to work as ambulance drivers, often coming under fire as they transported men away from the Front.

Personal training achievements

- > Advanced certificates – there were three advance certificates, granted for a second success in first aid, home nursing and hygiene and sanitation. Must be 12 months since previous exam
 - > Proficiency badges – these badges were only issued to bona-fide members of British Red Cross VAD. No other persons were allowed it. Granted for a third success in first aid, home nursing and hygiene and sanitation. Must be 12 months since previous exam. Must have an advanced certificate or two certificates in the individual subjects – 12 months
 - > Merit badge – issued to members of the VAD with three proficiency badges
 - > Bars – were granted to each of the three proficiency badges. For the fourth and subsequent success in any one subject
 - > Technical badges – issued to medical officers, pharmacists, trained nurses
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Honours and awards

The Red Cross war medal was awarded to members of the Red Cross or its VADs who served in the UK between 4 August 1914 and 31 December 1919 and were therefore not eligible for British military medals, whose unpaid service amounted to at least 1,000 hours, or ambulance drivers and bearers who gave 500 hours unpaid service. The medal was introduced in 1920 and was awarded to some 41,000 members who had served in the United Kingdom.

In 1917 King George V approved the grant of the 1914 star, often referred to as the 'Mons Star', to all those officers and men of the British and Indian expeditionary forces, including civilian medical practitioners, nursing sisters, nurses and others employed with military hospitals, who served in France or Belgium on the establishment of a unit between 5 August 1914 and midnight on 22 November 1914.

On 19 October 1919 it was announced that the King had approved the issue of a clasp to those already awarded the 1914 star "who actually served under the fire of the enemy in France or Belgium" between 5 August and 22 November 1914. In total 365,622 1914 stars were awarded and 145,000 1914 star clasps. Medal rolls for the First World War were held by the National Archives.

Statistics

Summary of Voluntary Aid Detachments raised by the Red Cross, registered and numbered by the War Office:

| | Number of detachments | | | Number of personnel | | |
|--------------|-----------------------|------------|------------|---------------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Men | Women | Total | Men | Women | Total |
| England | 127 | 566 | 693 | 5,172 | 14,962 | 20,134 |
| Wales | 16 | 34 | 50 | 728 | 811 | 1,539 |
| Scotland | 64 | 137 | 201 | 2,256 | 3,710 | 5,966 |
| Total | 207 | 737 | 944 | 8,156 | 19,483 | 27,639 |

Just before the declaration of war, the VADs raised by the Red Cross and the Order of St John and registered by the War Office were:

| | Detachments | | Personnel | |
|--------------|-------------------|------------|-------------------|---------------|
| | British Red Cross | St John | British Red Cross | St John |
| Women | 1,582 | 241 | 40,018 | 6,773 |
| Men | 408 | 143 | 17,666 | 5,865 |
| Total | 1,990 | 384 | 57,714 | 12,638 |

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By the time that the armistice was declared these figures had increased to:

| | Detachments | | Personnel | |
|--------------|-------------------|------------|-------------------|---------------|
| | British Red Cross | St John | British Red Cross | St John |
| Women | 2,534 | 713 | 66,211 | 24,440 |
| Men | 560 | 276 | 24,712 | 10,630 |
| Total | 3,094 | 989 | 90,923 | 35,070 |

Total nursing members posted up to 20 December 1919 17,367

Total general service members 11,000

Joint War Committee hospitals' members 1,755

Honours

Nursing members mentioned in despatches 886

Nursing decorations 329

General service members, mentioned in despatches 103

General service members, decorations 1

Joint War Committee hospitals' members, mentioned in despatches 103

Joint War Committee hospitals' members, decorations 34

Deaths

Nursing members* 128

General service members 11

Joint War Committee hospitals' members 6

* It is known that over 100 other VAD members, not working directly under the Voluntary Aid Department, also laid down their lives.

Scholarships awarded to VADs for further professional training after the war: 557

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After the war

By the end of the war, 90,000 VADs been mobilised to work at home and abroad. After the war the number of VADs declined significantly. Upon the outbreak of the Second World War many women with knowledge of nursing and organising voluntary initiatives joined the Red Cross again to help provide supplementary aid to allied naval and military forces at home and abroad.

Sources

- > Indexes of personnel – The British Red Cross Museum and Archives hold a series of indexes recording the service details of personnel working for both the Joint War Committee and the Joint War Organisation. Details to be found on the record cards may include the dates of service, the nature of the duties performed, the detachment the individual belonged to, the institutions and places where the individual served and any honours that may have been awarded. In addition, there are indexes for personnel who served in military hospitals and trained nurses and volumes listing VADs who received the War Medal. VAD cards will be available online from October 2014.
 - > Reports of the Joint War Committee and the Joint War Finance Committee of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St John of Jerusalem in England on Voluntary Aid rendered to the Sick and Wounded at Home and Abroad and to British Prisoners of War, 1914-1919
 - > Oliver, Beryl (1966) *The British Red Cross in Action*; London; Faber and Faber Limited.
 - > *First Aid*, *The Independent Journal for the Ambulance and Fire Services*, by Arthur B. Dale, January 1913
 - > British Red Cross Society Surrey Branch, Annual Report 1914 – 1916 and 1917
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Cover photo

VADs playing cards with patient. © British Red Cross.