AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS SOCIETY

The worst of situations can often bring out the best in people. The outbreak of World War I on August 4 1914 saw the beginning of the Australian Red Cross Society. This is now one of the world's oldest and largest national Red Cross Societies.

On the outbreak of war Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, wife the Governor General, cabled the British Red Cross Society to obtain permission to form an Australian Branch of that Society. British Red Cross quickly agreed.

The first executive committee was formed on August 11 1914, with a central office opened on King Street, Sydney. Three days later, the Australian Government asked for assistance with the provision of some medical supplies for the 1,700 troops of the first Expeditionary Force to leave Australia.

Australian Red Cross has been active every day since then. The outbreak of peace in 1918 did not see the end of the need for Red Cross.

The Red Cross work gradually expanded in the war years. The war was longer and bigger than anyone expected and so the Red Cross Society had to be innovative to keep up with the changing needs. More injured personnel were returning back to Australia than from any previous war, with greater needs.

In the early years of the war and into the 1920s, there was no "welfare state" and so returning service personnel received little assistance from the government. Red Cross was part of the network of voluntary organizations that provided a form of "welfare state" in terms of healthcare, assistance to disabled personnel and employment opportunities.

By the end of September 1914, the women of NSW had raised relief supplies for Australian troops to the value of 19,000 pounds. They also raised cash from the general public, with 3,000 pounds going to the British Red Cross Society and 500 pounds to the besieged Belgian one. From the outset the Australian Society was part of an international network and so was raising money to assist other parts of the network.

As the sick and wounded Australian troops began returning from overseas, there was a need for convalescent homes. In NSW alone 14 such homes were opened. By 1918, Red Cross in NSW was operating 16 convalescent homes, five homes for people with nervous problems and five sanatoria.

In September 1915, Red Cross received from a crippled soldier the first application for an artificial limb. Red Cross was henceforth a supplier of artificial limbs, surgical boots etc.

By the middle of 1916, Red Cross had opened "Bodington" and "Shuna" in the Blue Mountains for the treatment of tuberculosis. In 1920 Red Cross established at Beelbangera in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA) the Red Cross War Chest Farm Colony to assist men with chest problems to earn a living by light farming work. Having recovered their health they were able to obtain land in the MIA to run as their own properties.

Red Cross was also a major provider of food. Food was prepared in the Red Cross Kitchen, with jam and pickles from the Red Cross Jam and Pickle Factory. Fresh fruit and vegetables were also supplied. Their produce went to military hospitals, as well as Red Cross medical facilities.

The Red Cross Kitchen in Sydney supplied meals to people working in Red Cross industries and returned soldiers who were in Sydney prior to their return home to other parts of eastern Australia. About 2 million meals were supplied during the war.

By June 1918 an average of 600 families of returned, missing, killed or wounded soldiers were calling at the Fruit and Vegetable Deport for their weekly supplies of food.

Red Cross also established the Blinded Soldiers' Tea Company that gave incapacitated men active and useful employment. A tea-room run by Red Cross volunteers also sold tea made the Tea Company, with the proceeds going to the blind soldiers.

Other companies formed by Red Cross to give employment and income to disabled personnel included the Disabled Soldiers' Basket and Seagrass Industry, the Disabled Soldiers Toy Industry and the Disabled Soldiers' Pottery. All the profits from the sales were ploughed back into the provision of Red Cross services.

Tobacco was also important in those days. Red Cross arranged in 1918 for 2 million cigarettes and 6,000 pounds of tobacco to be shipped to troops overseas. About the same amount went to returned military personnel in Red Cross homes and hospitals.

From May 1918 some returning veterans brought back the killer 'flu that was to do so much damage across the world in the next few years. More people around the world were killed by the flu in the early 1920s than in World War I.

Red Cross created 91 Influenza Emergency Depots where residents could be treated, and nursed with specials diets. Unfortunately, more than 140 'flu workers themselves contracted the disease – five of whom died.

In the early 1920s Red Cross began to distribute motorcycles with sidecars to returned service personnel. These were for people who were paralysed or double amputees (say above both knees). The vehicles had been altered so that they could be controlled from the sidecars. This gave the veterans greater options as to where they lived and worked.

No detail was overlooked. Red Cross even recruited voluntary hairdressers to shave and cut the hair of totally disabled men in Red Cross health facilities.

The money for Red Cross services came from Red Cross branches – 662 across NSW alone. Therefore Red Cross members not only supplied services but they raised money as well.

They also mobilized the business community. A Book Depot was established at 5 Wynyard Street (supplied by the Bank of New South Wales) for voluntary workers to gather and distribute the books and magazines donated by companies and private individuals to Red Cross centres in Australia and overseas.

The end of the war in 1918 did not mean the end of suffering. Red Cross continued to care for the victims of that war and all the others in which Australians have served since 1918.

Its peacetime work in the 1920s included the creation of the Blood Transfusion Service to collect blood donations. (The world record holder for blood donations is currently held by an Australian: James Harrison – 822 times).

It was also the only organization in NSW in the 1920s having a complete chain in the treatment of tuberculosis in all its phases, with work on the prevention of the illness, treatment of it, and aftercare treatment.

Throughout all the early years, it remained a branch of the British Red Cross Society. It became a National Society in its own right in the next world war, in 1941.

The Australian Red Cross has also supplied personnel and funds to the international Red Cross movement. Australian Red Cross personnel have served with distinction in overseas postings.

The International Committee of the Red Cross was formed in Geneva, Switzerland in October 1863. The founder was the Swiss businessperson Henry Dunant, who won the first Noble Peace Prize in 1901 for his efforts.

There are now also 181 national Red Cross Societies around the world, with a membership of 97 million members and volunteers. About 233 million people are assisted on average by the movement each year.

Keith Suter