

## **VOLUNTARY AID DETACHMENT (VAD'S) IN WW1**

The **Voluntary Aid Detachment** (VAD) referred to a voluntary unit providing field nursing services mainly in hospitals, in the United Kingdom and other countries in the British Empire. The VAD system was founded in 1909 with the help of the Red Cross and Order of St. John. By the summer of 1914 there were over 2,500 Voluntary Aid Detachments in Britain. Of these 74,000 VAD members two-thirds were women and girls.

At the outbreak of the First World War VAD members offered their service to the war effort and were inspired to train to help the sick and wounded. They also took classes in cookery.

The British Red Cross was reluctant to allow civilian women a role in overseas hospitals: most volunteers were of the middle and upper classes and unaccustomed to hardship and traditional hospital discipline. Military authorities would not accept VADs at the front line. Men were trained in first aid in-the-field and stretcher bearing. VADs could take classes to become a masseuse or use an x-ray machine

Katharine Furse took two VADs to France in October 1914 restricting them to serve as canteen workers and cooks but caught under fire in a sudden battle they were pressed into emergency hospital service and acquitted themselves well. Furse was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the detachments and female volunteers over the age of twenty-three with more than three months' hospital experience were accepted for overseas service.

Locally we had five known volunteers including Miss Irene Esther Newton from Laindon whose experience included St. Dunstan's teaching the blind, entertaining and waiting at tables, Prisoners of War depots. Miss Edith May Stratton of Langdon Hills employed as a Clerk but saw service in Salonica. Miss Eleanor Bruce from Wickford who saw service helping Belgian refugees also serving in hospitals, making crutched shoes for wounded servicemen at Roehampton and helping with bandaging classes. Mrs. Louisa Elizabeth Methuen of Pitsea who was a trained nurse and employed as such and finally Dorothy H. Mashiter (nee Jones) wife of JP Edward Thomas Mashiter of Gatwick House Billericay who served producing medical garments and other requisites.

VADs were an uneasy addition to military hospitals' rank and order. They lacked the advanced skill and discipline of professionally trained nurses and were often critical of the nursing profession. Relations improved as the war stretched on and VAD members increased their skill and efficiency and trained nurses were more accepting of their contributions.

During four years of war 38,000 VADs worked in hospitals and served as ambulance drivers and cooks. They served near the Western Front and in Mesopotamia and Gallipoli. VAD hospitals were also opened in most large towns in Britain. Many were decorated for distinguished service.

### **Special service**

In February 1915 the War Office proposed that volunteers could help at Military Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) hospitals. These had previously been staffed exclusively by army nurses and orderlies from the RAMC. The first request from military hospitals for these "special service" VADs in England came early in 1915 and from France in May of the same year. These were quickly followed by demands from Malta and Egypt.

### **General service**

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 roles such as dispensers, clerks, cooks and storekeepers.

### **Overseas service**

VADs were sent abroad during both world wars to countries such as France, Italy and Russia. 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, local Red Cross working parties formed across the country with the co-operation of their surrounding villages. They organised the supply of hospital clothing including socks, shirts, blankets and belts for soldiers. They also made essential hospital equipment such as bandages, splints, swabs and clothing. Work depots were established in every major town to collate and despatch clothing from the working parties.

### **Air raid duty**

VADs undertook air raid duty in London. The emblem of the Red Cross seemed to inspire a certain feeling of confidence in the crowds which gathered in the underground railway stations and other shelters. Armed with a respirator the VADs performed first aid.

### **Rest stations**

At railway stations, VADs provided food and other supplies for soldiers arriving by ambulance train whilst they waited to be transported to local hospitals or travel onto another destination.

### **Transport**

The first ever motorised ambulances to transport wounded people were used in WW1. *The Times* appealed for ambulance funds in October 1914 raising enough for us to buy 512 vehicles within three weeks.

Male detachments were almost entirely in charge of transporting sick and wounded soldiers from ambulance trains or ships to local hospitals. They also ferried patients between hospitals.

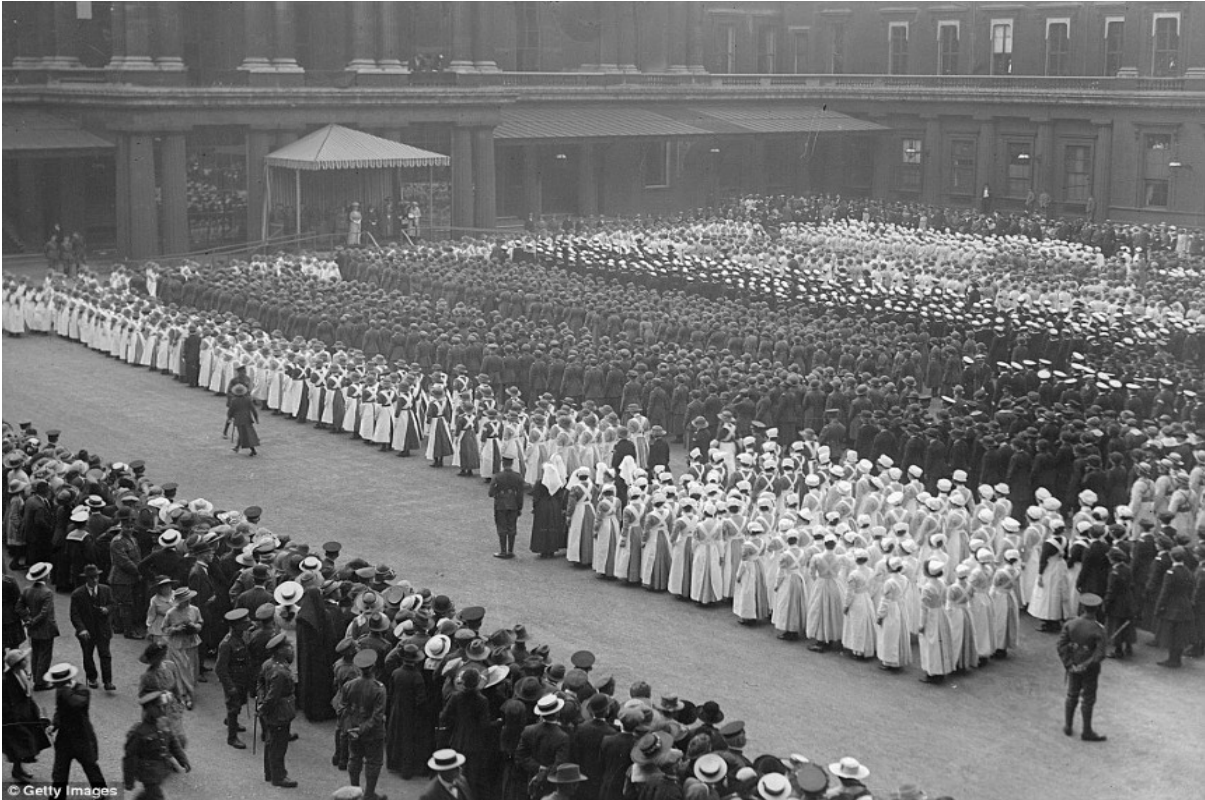
Male volunteers were also frequently sent to France to work as ambulance drivers, often coming under fire as they transported men away from the Front. Three hospital trains in France carried 461,844 patients throughout the war. Hospital ships and barges were also used to transport patients.

### **Women during the war: female volunteers**

The war saw women entering the workforce in all sorts of different roles, ranging from medics and farmers to teachers and bus conductors. Many women worked as VADs. As the number of injured servicemen rose, a call was made for women to join the medical profession. Medical degrees were opened up to women for the first time.

### **Famous volunteers**

Famous women who volunteered for the Red Cross during the war included Agatha Christie – served as a VAD nurse at a hospital in Torquay. She said it was “one of the most rewarding professions that anyone can follow”.



Impressive: Women war workers, including the distinctively white-capped and aproned VAD nurses, parade outside Buckingham Palace in 1918



Pioneering: Members of the Women's Royal Air Force arrive at Buckingham Palace, London, to attend a party for war workers in 1919



Man's work? Members of the Women's Fire Brigade with their Chief Officer photographed in their uniforms beside an extinguished fire in March 1919.





