

NATIONAL RED CROSS
AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES

60 years of Red Cross in New Zealand

by Carol Duncan

During the year 1991, the New Zealand Red Cross Society has been celebrating 60 years of alleviating human suffering, both within New Zealand and overseas.

Like so many other Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the New Zealand Red Cross was born of New Zealand's desire to assist victims of war. After the outbreak of the First World War, the Red Cross thus began in New Zealand as a branch of the British Red Cross.

During the First World War, New Zealand Red Cross branches concerned themselves mainly with work for the sick and wounded of the New Zealand and Allied armies, and those who had fallen into enemy hands. Activities included making bandages, equipping hospitals and offering first-aid and nursing training to volunteers. Upon completion of their first-aid and nursing training, many volunteers travelled overseas as voluntary aides to work in hospitals and hospital ships caring for the war wounded.

After the war, branches began to assess their role in New Zealand society. Some members felt that when the war was over so would be the work of the Red Cross in New Zealand. However, others were of the view that there would be other work for the Red Cross to do.

Those with the latter view proved right. By the time news of the Armistice on 11 November 1918 reached New Zealand, members and volunteers from the New Zealand Red Cross were treating thousands of people infected with the flu as Red Cross volunteers turned their hands to communal cooking and laundering, caring for children, home nursing, hospital help and delivering food and medicines.

By the end of that year the worst of the epidemic seemed to be over and volunteers then focused their attention on wounded soldiers, who had been trickling home since the end of the war and who were still in need of medical

care. Convalescent homes were opened by many Red Cross branches as Red Cross volunteers continued their efforts on the soldiers' behalf.

By the beginning of the 1920s, Red Cross volunteers had begun to get involved in peacetime activities. Programmes included an auxiliary service for junior members, the promotion of health and a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) - Red Cross trainees certified in home nursing standing by in readiness for emergency work

In 1931 the preparedness of the VADs and the usefulness of the Society's other relief activities were tested when an earthquake causing extensive damage hit central New Zealand. The Red Cross dispatched medical supplies to the scene, registered the homeless, found them shelter, and distributed food and relief supplies. The New Zealand Red Cross worked well and efficiently in this disaster and proved itself to be a highly developed disaster relief organization.

Ties were severed with the British Red Cross when the New Zealand Red Cross became an independent National Society in its own right. This led to its recognition by the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1931 and in 1932 it became a member of the then League of Red Cross Societies.

It was only a few years after its admission into the League that the New Zealand Red Cross was for the first time called upon to provide medical personnel and supplies overseas. The Society was asked to assist the people of China during the country's invasion. Many New Zealanders volunteered and Red Cross members set about raising the necessary funds.

In the years 1931-45, the Society worked to establish itself with trained volunteers in order to continue to give assistance and relief to people in the community. Many branches were of a relatively small size with few members. Of these, many had worked for the Red Cross since 1918. However, communities cried out for the services of the Red Cross, especially during the depression years, and the New Zealand Red Cross grew to meet the challenge.

In 1939, when the Second World War broke out, volunteers once again took on the responsibility of helping to care for the sick and wounded. Besides the traditional activities of bandage rolling and first-aid training, Red Cross parcels were also prepared. These parcels included emergency rations such as cheese, coffee, milk, butter and chocolate. Many who survived the Second World War have said that if it were not for these Red Cross parcels they might not have pulled through.

After the war, volunteers were kept busy providing food and relief items for displaced people in Europe and Great Britain. Refugees were welcomed to New Zealand and Red Cross volunteers assisted in their resettlement, finding suitable accommodation and equipping each house with all the things necessary to make it a home.

Once again the New Zealand Red Cross had to turn its attention to peacetime activities and assess its role in New Zealand society. Disaster preparedness, community services and youth programmes were developed further, along with programmes to support the work of the International Movement. These activities have formed the core of New Zealand Red Cross Society activities through the last four decades and into the 1990s.

Ever since the 1960s the New Zealand Red Cross has established itself as a major donor to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies by providing highly trained medical and relief personnel to work in Red Cross and Red Crescent operations throughout the world. Raising funds for international appeals is another highly developed priority. The Society also began looking more closely at assisting New Zealand's neighbouring Pacific island countries, working to help them develop strong National Societies of their own.

Although some of the activities taken on by the Red Cross through its early history are no longer needed, Red Cross responsibilities have not changed. In the foreseeable future there will still be human suffering resulting from natural disasters and conflicts. In this year, our 60th, the Society's activities fall within six major programmes: international humanitarian law, youth programmes, health and community services, emergency preparedness, international services and development and disaster relief. Members and volunteers continue to commit themselves to alleviating human suffering, both within New Zealand and overseas, thus enabling the Society to live up to its motto: *Always Needed — Always There.*¹

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¹ The author wishes to acknowledge information obtained from *The Geneva Connection*, by Meryl Lowrie and published by The New Zealand Red Cross Society Incorporated.