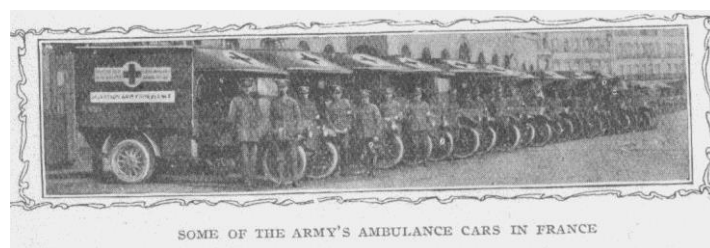


Provision of Ambulances in the First World War

by Kingsley Sampson



During the First World War, The Salvation Army provided ambulances and crews to help with the care and transport of the wounded mainly on the Western Front but also in Italy, Egypt and Russia. Unlike Australia and Canada, The Salvation Army in New Zealand did not supply actual ambulances. Rather it contributed funds to International Headquarters for the purchase of ambulances in Britain and their maintenance in Europe. The Salvation Army's ambulance brigade was frequently mentioned both in the New Zealand *War Cry* and in New Zealand papers, particularly in articles about the Salvation Army's war efforts and the need for funds to continue this work. The following is based on those reports.

Soon after the outbreak of war, General Bramwell Booth, despite being an avowed pacifist and grieving that that hostilities would pit Salvationist against Salvationist, nevertheless appealed for men and money to run an ambulance service.¹ The result was *the formation of the Salvation Army Ambulance Brigade, operating nominally under the wing of the British Red Cross. It employed its own personnel under the command of an officer carrying the rank of captain.*² All Salvation Army supplied cars were labelled 'Salvation Army Ambulance' and the drivers and their leaders all wore Salvation Army cap-bands and S's of red, yellow and blue on their epaulettes. The first commandant of the unit was Staff-Captain Aspinall.³

In a prepared statement Bramwell Booth said that the ambulance unit would consist of five Argyll cars⁴ *specially built and properly equipped ambulance motors* and that these would *operate between the firing line and the bases*. He stated that each ambulance would *[bear] the name of 'The Salvation Army'* and that they would be *manned exclusively by Salvationists*. The General also declared that *just as under our Colours all nations agree, so the Army's ambulance service will extend to the wounded soldiers of all the combatants, irrespective of nationality.*⁵ These five ambulances were dedicated at the Guildhall, London on 1 December 1914, in the presence of the Lord Mayor⁶ and were quickly put to use.

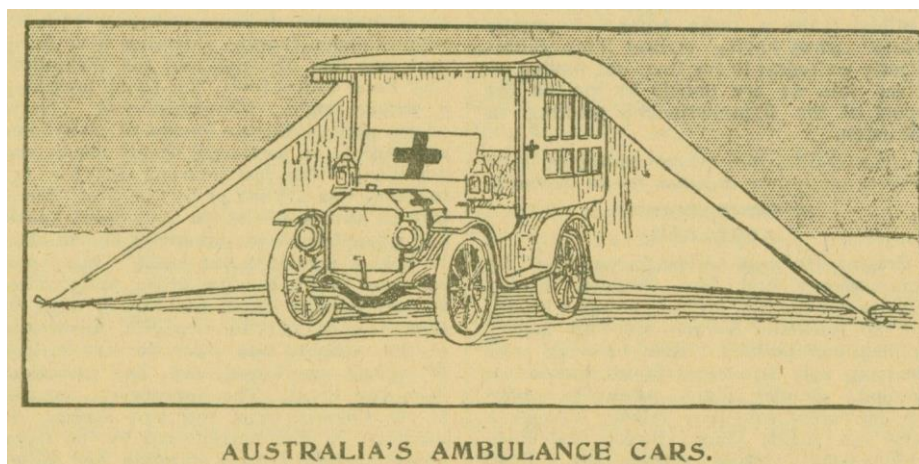
A further twenty ambulances were added in 1915 with six of these being dedicated by Queen Alexandra on 15 February 1915⁷ and named in her honour. A motor lorry was included in the unit to help with ferrying supplies.⁸ These were all *purchased and equipped out of money raised by The Army and manned entirely by Salvationists drivers*

and orderlies.⁹ A total of six ambulances were also supplied from Australia, the first four of which were dedicated during the annual congress in Melbourne in 1915 where Lady Helen Munro Ferguson accepted the gift on behalf of the Australian Government.¹⁰



The second Ambulance Unit donated by The Salvation Army and dedicated by Queen Alexandra.

The Australia-supplied ambulances were described as being *about 14ft in length and built according to the recent military specifications*. Each car was fitted with side tent curtains which [could] be unrolled and pegged to the ground, thus enabling [four] ambulances to shelter about thirty ... wounded men in case of emergency. This meant that the four Cars with side curtains down would practically form a hospital. Each Car [was] equipped with a special water tank, medical chest, and a cupboard for extra stretchers.¹¹



AUSTRALIA'S AMBULANCE CARS.

Later additions to the fleet included six ambulances purchased and equipped by the Canadian territory in 1916¹² and twelve Ford ambulances in 1918 from The Salvation Army in the United States of America.¹³ At the direction of the Czar, the Canadian ambulances bore his name and that of the Czarina and were used for wounded Russian soldiers.¹⁴

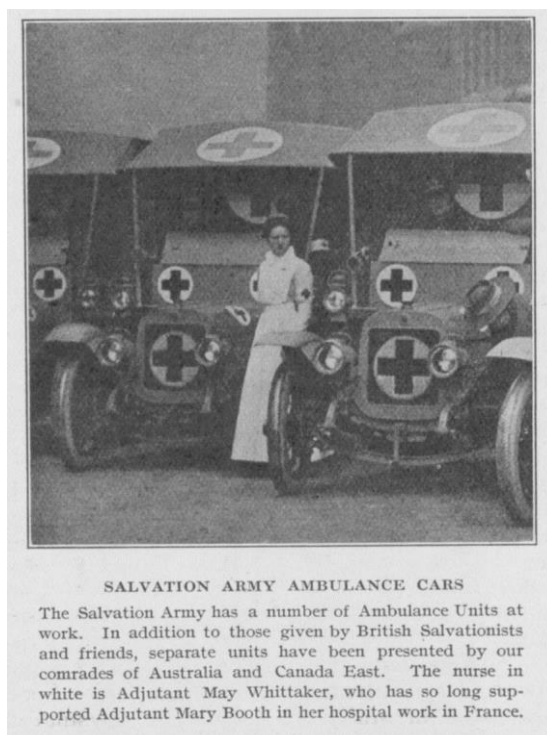
The number of ambulances in service increased as the war progressed - 15 in 1915, 27 in 1916, 60 in 1917, 70 in 1918.¹⁵ In April 1918 a letter from General Booth to the

British Red Cross spoke of a £2,000 donation for the Red Cross to supply the Salvation Army unit with as many additional ambulances as the amount would cover.¹⁶

Likewise the number of wounded servicemen transported mounted as the war continued – from 50,000 by July 1916 to over 150,000 by November 1917.¹⁷ In one month alone (September 1916), eight thousand people were assisted by Salvation Army ambulance teams.¹⁸

Apart from the American ambulances, money for these and subsequent ambulances came from donations received in Great Britain and other countries of the British Empire. For instance, the New Zealand *War Cry* of 9 January 1915 announced the opening of a War Emergency and Relief Fund with a target of £10,000, some of which was to be applied to the provision of the first ambulances.¹⁹ Donations for this appeal were quickly forthcoming and by the end of January almost £4,000 had been given.²⁰

In mid-1915 The Salvation Army in New Zealand offered to provide two ambulances but the New Zealand defence authorities thought there were sufficient ambulances at the front for the time being and suggested that the Army would be better helping to raise funds for base hospitals.²¹ Later in December 1917 the New Zealand *War Cry* announced a patriotic appeal with a target of £35,000 of which £5,000 was to be used for the provision of six additional motor ambulances and their maintenance in France.²²



In support of this on-going fundraising for the Salvation Army's war effort, senior officers including Commissioner H.C. Hodder (Territorial Commander 1914-1919) gave regular lectures and newspaper interviews throughout the war. In these they described The Salvation Army's national and international social work, including its war efforts

plus its repatriation work once hostilities had ended. The Salvation Army's ambulance brigade was always mentioned in these presentations.²³

Writing in 1915 the then Captain Bramwell Taylor described some of the conditions under which the ambulance units worked.

*We are working between Field and Clearing Hospitals, and are within the sound of the big guns. We have, however, become accustomed to their roar, and when our turn comes can sleep peacefully through it all. The life is hard but ... [we] have become adept at making a very comfortable bed out of truss of straw, a couple of blankets, and a knapsack. Our toilet has to be done in the open, and about every other morning, we get a rain bath – the only kind of bath we do get. Hot water is at a premium. All we see is that used for cooking.*²⁴

Later in the same article he described one journey with wounded soldiers. *The Unit was instructed to carry wounded soldiers from a certain Field Hospital to a Base hospital thirty-six miles distant. The journey had to be done at night Rain descended in torrents; pot-holes six, seven, eight and ten inches deep lined the roadway, and the mud was in parts twelve inches deep: ... [the road] was as slippery as an ice-field, and only by the greatest efforts were we able to deliver our tragic freight safely at the Hospital.*²⁵



One poignant story from the front was printed twice and may be indicative of many such incidents. On Christmas Day 1914 a Salvation Army ambulance picked up a badly wounded man from an aid station and began to transport him. He was very weak but revealed that he had joked with his comrades that if he was injured, he would like to *fall into the hands of The Salvation Army*. Now he was pleasantly surprised to see this had happened. He was concerned for his wife and children and anxious that their Christmas Day would be spoiled if they learned of his condition that day. He asked the Salvationist to tell his wife and children that he died as a true British soldier and then requested that

the Salvationist pray with him. This the Salvationist did. He knelt in the car, prayed with the man, commended him to God and waited with him as he passed away.²⁶

This suggests that more overtly spiritual work was not neglected by The Salvation Army ambulance units. Brigadier Mary Murray reported one such event early in the war. *On Sunday night, we had a singing service in the Garage. The big guns were booming and so on. We starting singing 'Though your sins be as scarlet,' and one or two fellows joined us; the crowd gradually grew until we must have had between thirty or forty drivers joining in.*²⁷

A later report by Lieut-Colonel Haines said that *as far as occasion offers the ambulance drivers take part in salvation meetings and [other gatherings nearby] and that the men can not only sing and play, but they pray, and their lives exercise an influence for righteousness.* Haines declared that *many a soldier has found peace with his God, and has taken up new life again with new hope and faith through having been brought into contact with the members of what we proudly call "Our Unit."*²⁸

A brass band made up of Salvation Army ambulance personnel was also formed under the leadership of Adjutant Bramwell Taylor, a staff bandsman. *When in base at Boulogne, the band was available for programmes on Sundays in base camps over a wide area.*²⁹ Pressure of duties meant it was not always able to function but a report in 1918 told of a meeting at St. Martin Camp, France led by the band where 25 seekers were recorded.³⁰ On the last Christmas of its existence, it played to audiences with a total of 30,000 men.³¹



The work of The Salvation Army's ambulance brigade was highly regarded by the authorities. The Honourable Arthur Stanley, Chairman, British Red Cross acknowledged *the good work of The Salvation Army Cars* and said that the Red Cross valued the

Salvation army cars but also *the men who are sent with them, who have a marked influence for good upon all with whom they come in contact*.³² In 1917 a high military authority described The Salvation Army's ambulance section in France as *the most up-to-date and the best equipped*³³ while the Governor-General, the Earl of Liverpool speaking at a Wellington meeting in 1918, said that *he had heard nothing but praise for the work done by the Army's ambulances*.³⁴

So it was that during the First World War, The Salvation Army expressed its over-riding concern for the whole person through the provision of ambulances, the care of wounded servicemen and an alertness to spiritual opportunities as they arose. The Army was able to do this because of strong public appreciation for its work and the resulting financial support.

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¹ Williams, H. *An Army Needs An Ambulance Corps*. Salvation Books, London, 2009. p44.

² Williams, H. *An Army Needs An Ambulance Corps*. Salvation Books, London, 2009. p44.

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⁴ (Nelson) Colonist, 27 January 1915, p2.

⁵ New Zealand *War Cry* (hereafter NZWC), 9 January 1915, p8.

⁶ Coutts, F. *The Better Fight*. Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1973. p26.

⁷ NZWC, 1 May 1915, p3; Coutts, F. *The Better Fight*. Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1973. p27. One report suggest there were seven 'Queen Alexandra' ambulances but this may have been a simple reporting error. See Hawera & Normanby Star, 6 August 1915, p4

⁸ NZWC, 31 July 1915, p5.

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- ⁹ NZWC, 18 September 1915, p3.
- ¹⁰ NZWC, 25 December 1915, p8.
- ¹¹ NZWC, 21 August 1915, p3.
- ¹² NZWC, 23 December 1916, p11
- ¹³ NZWC, 13 July 1918, p3.
- ¹⁴ Coutts, F. *The Better Fight*. Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1973. p27.
- ¹⁵ Auckland Star, 17 September 1915, p8; Ashburton Guardian, 7 September 1916, p2; Poverty Bay Herald, 14 December 1917, p5; Wairarapa Daily Times, 28 October 1918, p4.
- ¹⁶ NZWC, 6 April 1918, p4.
- ¹⁷ Auckland Star, 9 October 1916, p2; Dominion, 14 November 1917, p7.
- ¹⁸ NZWC, 14 October 1916, p.5.
- ¹⁹ NZWC, 9 January 1915, p8.
- ²⁰ NZWC, 30 January 1915, p8.
- ²¹ Hawera & Normanby Star, 15 June 1915, p4; also Evening Post, 22 May 1915, p9.
- ²² NZWC, 1 December 1917, p1; Auckland Star, 2 July 1918, p2.
- ²³ For examples of these, see Auckland Star, 17 September 1915, p8; North Otago Times, 9 June 1916, p4; (Nelson) Colonist, 20 June 1917, p2; Timaru Herald, 16 October 1917, p3; Oamaru Mail, 18 June 1918, p6; New Zealand Herald, 2 June 1919, p6.
- ²⁴ NZWC, 6 March 1915, p7.
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