



Snapshot: The Envy of All Troops

During World War I our Australian troops were well supported by the work of the Australian Comforts Fund and the Australian Red Cross. General Birdwood, commander of the Australian Army (1914–18) believed that the Australians were the envy of all troops.

Jacqueline Dinan, author

It is perhaps hardly necessary for me to tell you how enormously the work of your branch of the Red Cross is appreciated and valued by our men here. Every day that passes proves its continued value, while the gentlemen who so kindly administer it in this country never fail to show that complete self-sacrifice and devotion to duty, to which we have now become so accustomed and which results in so much real comfort for the troops.

ABOVE: Letter from Gen. Birdwood to Red Cross branch. Courtesy Red Cross.

In 1914, only nine days after the outbreak of the Great War, the Australian Red Cross was formed and launched by Lady Munro-Ferguson, the wife of the governor-general at the time. The wives of each state governor supported her initiative by forming a local committee in each capital. The Australian Red Cross provided services and relief to wounded soldiers and prisoners of war. They co-ordinated parcels, money transactions, newspapers, letters and cables. The Australian Comforts Fund administered the distribution of parcels to the troops in the trenches. When war broke out in August 1914, there were many community-based groups in each state that worked to support the troops by raising funds and gathering materials. The Comforts Fund was set up in 1916 to co-ordinate the efforts of these state-based funds. These parcels contained items such as toiletries, food, clothing and reading material. The parcels were well received by the troops, who were enduring horrendous conditions in the trenches, particularly those serving in France during the winter of 1917.

Whether they were distributed by the Red Cross or the Comforts Fund, credit for the parcels also goes to the countless numbers of women and girls at

OPPOSITE: The Red Cross Society of Biggenden, Queensland, 1918.

home who knitted balaclavas, woolen socks and scarves that lined the parcels. Businesses donated goods and personalities such as Dame Nellie Melba staged concerts to raise money for the Red Cross. Parcel drives took place in governors' residences and local town halls and the parcels were transported by horse and cart to a nearby train station or shipping dock where they awaited safe passage across the ocean to battalions of men on the other side of the world.

The following is an excerpt from *A Woman's War*, a story of women on the home front during World War I. This passage brings to life the workings of volunteers at a parcel drive in the Collingwood Town Hall:

The Town Hall is a hive of activity. I've never seen the like of it. About two hundred women, busily packing comforts parcels for the troops 'somewhere in France.' Women are criss-crossing the hall on a hundred different tasks, boot heels scraping the floor. Noise and chatter like you wouldn't believe. Agnes and I are in a group shuffling along a line of trestle tables. We're each holding a cardboard box with a pair of thick woolen socks lining it. As we inch forward, women across the tables hand us different

'comforts,' which we pack into the box. A bottle of Bovril or cod-liver oil, a cake of sand soap, a tin of condensed milk or a tin of boiled sweets, a little Christmas cake wrapped in calico, and an old copy of either the Weekly Times or the Argus or the Winner. Then we get handed a small tin of tobacco or biscuits, a cloth bandage and a chocolate bar.

At the end of the line there's an empty trestle where we spend a minute packing the items in, wrapping the perishables up in the newspaper, wedging in the tins and padding the top with another knitted item – maybe a vest or a balaclava.

With any luck the boys'll get their parcels before the European winter sets in, or at least in time for Christmas. Agnes nudges me as she slips a contraband bottle of brandy under the tins in her parcel, a small note attached by a bit of string. 'What does it say?' I ask. 'Medicinal use only,' she laughs. 'Enjoy – and share.' I'm standing right beside her, but with all the noise and voices echoing high up in the ceiling I can hardly hear her. And with Agnes, that's saying something.

We hand our parcels to the ladies at the next trestle. Sleeves rolled, they shear off lengths of brown paper and wrap the boxes methodically, binding them up with string. Lastly, they paste on a bright label – '22nd Battalion AIF, from the Collingwood District Red Cross Comforts Fund.' I reckon the men will get a kick out of that. The 22nd's mostly made up of men and boys from Collingwood or Richmond. I watch the parcels get stacked on a growing mountain at the end of the hall.

Free teacher notes on the book are available at www.dennisjones.com.au.

Sincere thanks to the Red Cross Archives Department.



ABOVE LEFT: Lady Stanley, wife of the Governor of Victoria. Courtesy Red Cross.

ABOVE RIGHT: Dame Nellie Melba.

RIGHT: List of articles sent to the Australian troops in Egypt and England, August 1914–August 1915. From Australian Red Cross Annual Reports 1915–25.

Federal Government House,

List of Articles

supplied by Red Cross local Branches in Victoria forwarded to England and Egypt from 7th August, 1914, to 7th August, 1915. Total number of cases shipped, 6748.

Bandages (cases)	223	Mufflers	21,294
Blankets	7,192	Medical & Hospital Sundries	9,268
Books (cases)	454	articles, 915 tins & packets,	
Bed Socks (pairs)	5,719	740 lbs., 7 cases, 87 bottles,	
Cholera Belts & Binders . .	12,163	including boracic, limb	
Cardigans	6,627	cushions, surgeons' gowns,	
Caps	8,475	abs. wool, etc.	