



American  
Red Cross

# World War I and the American Red Cross

Europe was thrown into conflict in June 1914. At the beginning of the war, the American Red Cross was a small organization still in the process of developing its identity and programs. When the United States declared war against Germany on April 6, 1917, the organization began a period of extraordinary growth. By the time the war ended in November 1918, the Red Cross had become a major national humanitarian organization with strong leadership, a huge membership base, universal recognition, and a broad and distinguished record of service. Here are some of the highlights of that remarkable period in Red Cross history.

## Historical Summary

Within weeks of the outbreak of war, the American Red Cross dispatched a ship to Europe loaded with medical personnel and supplies. Named the SS Red Cross, it was better known as “The Mercy Ship.” It carried 170 surgeons and nurses who were being sent to Europe to provide medical relief to combat casualties on both sides of the war. This was consistent with the articles of the Geneva Conventions and the principles of the Red Cross Movement that called for strict observance of neutrality and impartiality. Additional personnel and supplies followed but the Red Cross ended this effort after little more than a year, primarily because of lack of sufficient funding.



When the United States declared war against Germany, the American Red Cross found itself embarking on the journey that would transform it almost overnight into the large and important influential organization it is today. As the public’s patriotic spirits soared in the early days of the war, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, as honorary chairman of the Red Cross, urged his fellow citizens to put their energies to work helping the Red Cross meet the needs of the thousands of young men joining the Allied forces on the battlefields of Europe.

In those early days, Red Cross national headquarters reeled under the demands of the national war effort. Communities flooded the headquarters with requests to establish local chapters. Needs grew much faster than the infrastructures to support them and the situation was described as “chaotic.” In May 1917, President Wilson appointed a War Council to direct the Red Cross and selected Henry

P. Davison, a successful New York banker, as the council’s volunteer chairman.

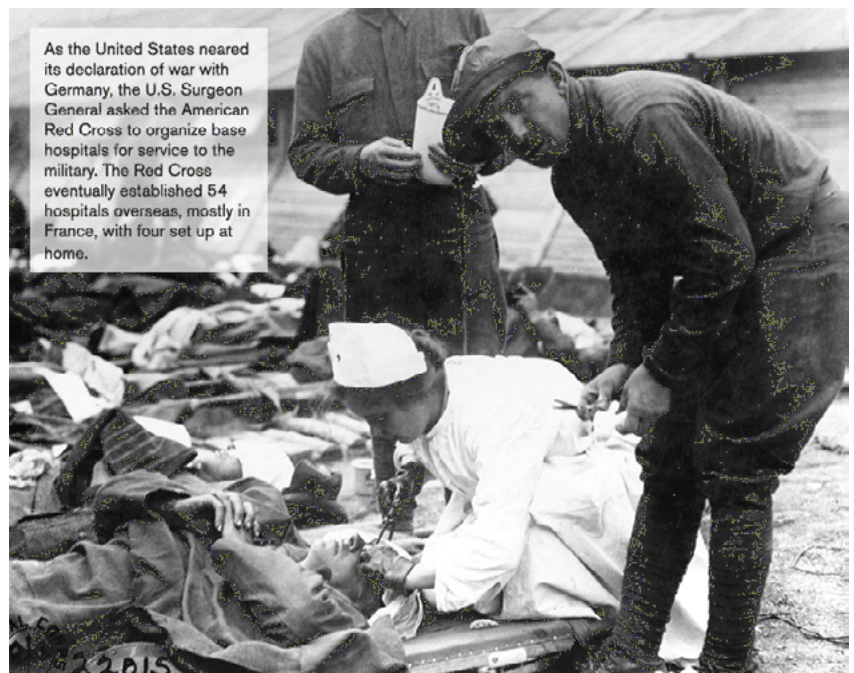
Under Davison’s leadership, the Red Cross accomplished the growth necessary to meet the challenges of a world war. Prominent volunteers from the banking and business communities took up key leadership positions. The organization mobilized some 8 million volunteers who were assigned to service corps at Red Cross chapters (see list below). By the war’s end, nearly one-third of the U.S. population was either a donor to the Red Cross or serving as a volunteer. In all, 20 million adults and 11 million youth claimed membership in the American Red Cross and more than 8 million adults were volunteer workers.

The Red Cross created a complex organizational structure to fulfill its mission, consisting of boards, committees, offices, departments, and bureaus. In terms of the war effort, its functions fell into four categories.

1. Service to the American Armed Forces.
2. Service to Allied military forces, particularly the French.
3. Limited service to American and Allied prisoners of war.
4. Service to civilian victims of war, with an emphasis on the children of Europe.

Once the United States entered the war, specialized Red Cross corps provided many services to American and Allied armed forces. Service to POWs consisted mostly of supplying food and comfort items to the International Committee of the Red Cross for distribution in prison camps. The Red Cross sent 11 commissions to Europe to assess needs for and administer its services to U.S. and Allied military forces and civilian war victims. The first commission, consisting of nine Americans who arrived in Paris on June 12, 1917, covered all of Europe. Later, commissions were sent to individual countries and regions impacted by the war, including France, Great Britain, Italy and the Balkan States.

While the major focus was on the war effort, the Red Cross also provided services to civilians at home. Mostly this took the form of nursing activities and emergency response to natural disasters. In late 1918, however, the Red Cross met a major challenge on the home front. Fostered by wartime conditions, an influenza pandemic hit the United States and most of the rest of the world. It claimed an estimated 22 million lives worldwide and U.S. deaths were believed to reach



500,000. The Red Cross worked as an active auxiliary of the U.S. Public Health Service providing nurses and motor corps members, in particular, to assist the sick and dying until the pandemic died out in 1919.

Four months after the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, the War Council disbanded and leadership of the Red Cross reverted to its Central Committee, which had run the organization since it received its congressional charter in 1905. Chairman Davison shifted his attention to the formation

of the League of Red Cross Societies, the worldwide umbrella organization of individual national societies now known as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

By the early 1920s, the Red Cross had completed most of its work overseas and withdrew its commissions and most of its workers from foreign service. It also closed American Red Cross overseas chapters that had been formed by Americans living abroad. The American Junior Red Cross, however, continued to support educational and recreational programs for European youth through a Children's Fund it had initiated right after the war. At home, the Red Cross continued to provide hospital, recreational and rehabilitative services to veterans for many years.

As the result of their wartime activities, 400 American Red Cross workers lost their lives from 1914-1921, including 296 nurses.





## Red Cross Military Service Corps

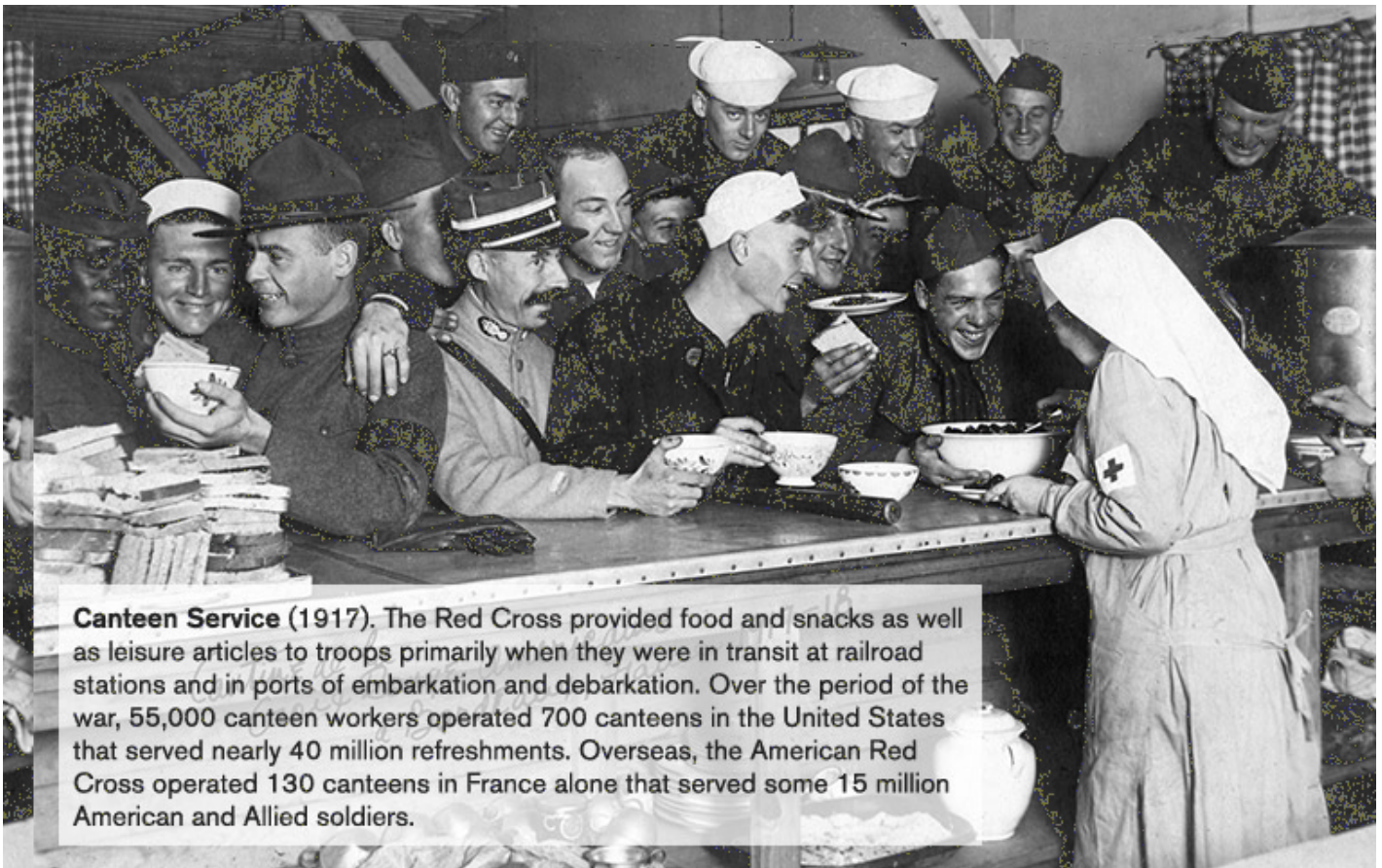
Among the most prominent services the Red Cross provided to the military during the war were the following:

**Home Service** (1917). Through its chapter-based Home Service, the Red Cross provided aid to the families of service personnel. This included providing communication between troops and their families, financial aid, and information and guidance regarding such things as government assistance programs and military regulations. By the end of the war, the Red Cross estimated that 50,000 volunteers in 3,620 chapters serving 10,000 American communities had assisted 500,000 dependent families.

**Production Corps** (1917). This chapter-based service was responsible for the production of garments, surgical dressings and other medical supplies, comfort kits, and additional items for the benefit of American and Allied soldiers and sailors and destitute civilians in war-torn countries. Eight million volunteers, with help from Junior Red Cross members, produced over 372 million relief articles during the war years with a value of nearly \$94 million.

**Camp Service** (established in 1917). Field directors and their assistants provided supplementary supplies, such as clothing and comfort items, and recreational and welfare services, everything from movies and refreshments to communications and financial aid to military personnel. At home, Camp Service operated in 400 military camps, hospitals and other installations. It maintained 250 buildings of its own, including convalescent houses, nurses' houses, headquarters, warehouses, and garages. Overseas the Camp Service operated in 25 countries providing services to American and Allied servicemen. Through its Camp Service, the Red Cross helped practically every soldier, sailor, and marine in the service of the United States.





**Canteen Service (1917).** The Red Cross provided food and snacks as well as leisure articles to troops primarily when they were in transit at railroad stations and in ports of embarkation and debarkation. Over the period of the war, 55,000 canteen workers operated 700 canteens in the United States that served nearly 40 million refreshments. Overseas, the American Red Cross operated 130 canteens in France alone that served some 15 million American and Allied soldiers.

**Nursing Service (1909).** Already established as an important branch of the Red Cross before the war, the Nursing Service greatly expanded with the coming of hostilities. Its principal task became to provide trained nurses for the U.S. Army and Navy. The Service enrolled 23,822 Red Cross nurses during the war. Of these, 19,931 were assigned to active duty with the Army, Navy, U.S. Public Health Service, and the Red Cross overseas. The Red Cross also enrolled and trained nurses' aides to help make up for the shortage of nurses on the home front due to the war effort. Many Red Cross nurses and nurses' aides were enlisted in the battle against the influenza pandemic of 1918.

**Hospital Service (1916).** Many of the Red Cross nurses and well over 2,000 nurse's aides, physicians, and dietitians served in military and veterans hospitals. The Hospital Service also secured trained medical and psychiatric social workers to help veterans with recoveries and to assist them make the adjustment back to civilian life that many found difficult to accomplish.

**Hospital and Recreation Corps (1918).** This Corps began at the Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C. where women volunteers acted as hostesses and provided recreational services to patients, most of whom were war veterans. The women wore gray dresses and veils as uniforms



and the soldiers affectionately called them “the gray ladies,” the name by which they became officially known after World War II. During World War I, the service quickly spread beyond Walter Reed to both military and civilian hospitals throughout the United States.

**Motor Service** (1917). The Red Cross Motor Service provided transportation support to canteens, military hospitals, and camps, and was involved in the campaign against the influenza outbreak of 1918. The Service consisted almost entirely of women volunteers, most of whom used their own cars. Many enrolled in auto mechanics classes in order to be able to make repairs on their cars whenever needed. By war’s end, there were over 12,000 Motor Corps workers who had clocked a total of more than 3.5 million miles of service on America’s roads.

## Red Cross World War I Statistics at a Glance

	1914	1918
Number of chapters	107	3,864
Number of adult members	16,708	20,390,173
Number of Junior Red Cross members	n/a	11,418,385
Number of volunteer workers	n/a	8,100,000
Number of paid staff	25	12,300
Total contributions received (money and materials)		\$400,000,000
Number of Red Cross nurses enrolled for service with military		23,822
Number of service personnel receiving Red Cross aid		4,735,000
Families aided by the Home Service		500,000
Tons of relief supplies shipped overseas		101,000
Number of foreign countries in which Red Cross operated		25
American Red Cross war casualties—male		70
American Red Cross war casualties—female		330

For more information on this and other topics in American Red Cross history, see the following publications:

*Henry P. Davison, The American Red Cross in the Great War. New York: Macmillan, 1919.*

*Foster Rhea Dulles, The American Red Cross. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950.*

*A general history of the American Red Cross from its beginnings to mid-century. Out of print but in most libraries.*

*Patrick F. Gilbo, The American Red Cross: The First Century. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.*

*An illustrated history of the first century of the American Red Cross, 1881-1981. Also out of print but in most libraries.*