

**BRITAIN'S CIVILIAN  
VOLUNTEERS: AUTHORIZED  
STORY OF BRITISH VOLUNTARY  
AID DETACHMENT WORK IN THE  
GREAT WAR**

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Britain's Civilian Volunteers: Authorized Story of British Voluntary Aid Detachment Work in the Great War by Thekla Bowser

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The Voluntary Aid Detachments have taken up every conceivable task in war relief work. The soldiers of every fighting nation at one place or another have been ministered to by these bands of self-sacrificing men and women.

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# BRITAIN'S CIVILIAN VOLUNTEERS

AUTHORIZED STORY OF BRITISH VOLUNTARY  
AID DETACHMENT WORK IN THE  
GREAT WAR

BY

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Serving Sister of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem



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## FOREWORD

**H**ISTORY must needs record with what splendid devotion the women of the warring nations, nobles and peasants, rich and poor, shoulder to shoulder, like members of one stricken family, have united in their endeavour to relieve suffering humanity.

The war has clearly demonstrated that whilst women have been eager and willing to use the greatest gift which God has bestowed upon them—the desire to render service—such service only reached its maximum of efficiency in organised effort.

I fear that any attempt on my part to do justice to one of the finest examples of organised effort—the Voluntary Aid Detachments—must needs be inadequate, partly because there was never a period when publicity was so little sought and when so much that was fine and generous was done so quietly. But those of us who have taken any active part in the service of the Red Cross know that wherever the task was hardest and the danger greatest there was always to be found a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachments not only willing but thoroughly prepared to carry out her allotted duties.

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These trained bands of women established before the war in every town, nay, practically in every village, of Great Britain were one of our greatest national assets and of practical use to our Allies.

When it became necessary to staff the small hospitals tucked away in the hills of Britain or to provide orderlies to face the horrible, indescribable conditions existing in a Serbian typhus hospital, the preference was given in every instance to the women of the Voluntary Aid Detachments. We knew that whilst acquiring a good general working knowledge each member had specialised in some branch of the Red Cross work and that she had been required to use her best endeavours to keep herself in perfect physical condition. Not only were the women skilled and healthy, but they had learned the value of obedience to orders. It was that very discipline which prepared them to face the monotony of home service, to confront the dangers abroad, and even, when called on, to sacrifice their lives.

Madge Neill Fraser, the golf champion, was one of the first women of the Voluntary Aid Detachments to lay down her life with the Scottish Women's Hospitals in Serbia.

In a tobacco factory at Nish—where one thousand Serbian typhus patients were crammed into rooms less than twelve feet high, with only slits in the walls for ventilation, straw on the stone



floor, on which the men flung themselves down in their filthy uniforms, whilst on stone benches around they sat in a state of torpor waiting, just waiting, for one of their comrades to die that they might take his place—two of the women went of their own free will and died endeavouring to save the life of a stricken comrade, Dr. Elizabeth Ross. When the news of their deaths reached England in fifteen days 500 members of the Voluntary Aid Detachments volunteered to replace them.

It required not only courage but physical strength when, during the Roumanian retreat, the women patched up a bridge under fire and brought across it over one hundred ambulances laden with helpless men. Not so spectacular, but equally creditable, was the action of those women, trained to economy, who, following in the rear of the retreating Roumanian troops, gathered up and piled on to their transport wagons the food that had been abandoned, so that later, coming on a band of starving soldiers, they were prepared to feed them.

No less brave, certainly as useful, are those women who day after day cook, sew and scrub. Theirs is the quiet heroism of carrying out a tedious daily task, finding consolation in the realisation that their labour forms part of a perfect whole, a thoroughly well organised institution under whose care human wrecks are rebuilt and sent forth clothed, comforted and healed.

Not only have the Voluntary Aid Detachments rendered splendid service to the Armies; they have also taken into their tender care the civilians and refugees. There must be thousands of Belgian and Serbian women who know that they owe their own and their children's lives to these capable and devoted women.

I have been asked whether I believe it possible for the women of America to found a Society similar in its objects and organisation to the Voluntary Aid Detachments. I answer, without hesitation, that, building on the basis of our experience, the American women will not only equal but probably surpass the work we have accomplished.

On my mission of mercy across this great Continent, from North to South and East to West, I have found that in most instances my success was due to the eager and efficient co-operation of the women in each city. I have been more than favorably impressed by the splendid working systems of the Civic Federations, the Women's Clubs, the great colleges and girls' schools in this land. If the women of America would turn their genius for organization to the support of the National League for Woman's Service, within six months there would be existing in every city, town and village a band of skilled women prepared to face and deal with any local disaster or national crisis.

I feel certain that as members of a great democratic nation the American women realise that it

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is a duty to train to serve the community as a whole. Whilst to those who willingly shoulder new responsibilities there will come the perfect happiness that alone is found in service and the knowledge that

"The riches of a commonwealth  
Are clear strong minds and hearts of health,  
And more to her than gold or gain  
The cunning hand and cultured brain."

KATHLEEN BURKE.

Santa Barbara, California, March 26, 1917.