

ASPECTS OF INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS

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THE expression "International Red Cross" is used to cover three distinct Red Cross organizations. In the first place there is the Committee of the International Red Cross, a body which is the guardian of the Geneva Convention and the Red Cross Emblem, but it is better known for its war-time activities. In time of war the International Red Cross Committee goes into action to provide for the welfare of prisoners of war and civilian internees, and to relieve as far as possible their mental anxiety and that of their families in the countries to which they belong. Then there is the League of Red Cross Societies, a body which is occupied with the peace-time programme of Red Cross, and which seeks to strengthen the National Red Cross Societies the world over, and the international tie which binds them together. Finally, there is the third body, which is really a combination of the other two and is known as the Joint Commission of the International Red Cross Committee and the League of Red Cross Societies. It has the task of providing relief for the civilian populations of war-ravaged countries. With regard to the International Red Cross Committee, the members of the committee are really the direct heirs of the Commission of Five who founded Red Cross.

Most of you probably know that Red Cross does not date back very far. It really found its origin at the battlefield of Solferino in 1859 with a Swiss banker, who happened to be there at a time when thousands of wounded men were groaning and dying. He was so touched by their plight that he set out then and there to render whatever assistance he possibly could, and later sought to find ways and means by which sick and wounded members of the fighting forces could receive relief immediately they fell out of action, and whereby protection could be provided for medical personnel who went to their assistance. When this Swiss banker, Henri Dunant by name, returned to Switzerland a committee of five was formed to

consider what he had in mind for the relief of war victims and for the protection of medical personnel. On the committee there was at least one legal man and two doctors. They set out to reach the governments of Europe and their success is evidenced by the signing of the Geneva Convention in the year 1864. Subsequently sixty-three nations put their signatures to that document, and that Convention provided the basis of the activities of the International Red Cross Committee during the recent great conflict.

All Red Cross organizations are concerned with two types of relief for suffering people: they seek to relieve the physical needs of the war victims, and the mental anxiety of people involved as a result of casualties. With regard to the war in Europe, the International Red Cross Committee was able to achieve some wonderful results, but with regard to the war in the Pacific they were not nearly so successful because the Japanese refused to play, that is, to allow Red Cross service in any real sense. The Committee, as to the welfare of prisoners of war and civilian internees, undertook the colossal task of receiving food, clothing, medical supplies and literature and works of learning for intellectual relief, from all the belligerent countries prepared to use Red Cross service, and then personally supervised the distribution of those things in the countries in which men were held as prisoners of war, or internees. To handle that great job the Committee set up in Switzerland twenty-one huge warehouses. I have not seen a building anywhere in Australia to compare in size with the dimensions of any one of those great buildings in Switzerland. They had branch railway lines running into all of them and had the most modern equipment for handling the vast quantities of stores. During the six years of war millions and millions of tons of supplies passed through those great buildings and through the hands of some of the four thousand employees engaged by the Committee to assist. The Committee acquired no less than three hundred railway trucks and fourteen ships and through their agency there was a steady flow of food parcels, clothing and medical supplies to the prisoners of war in Germany and Italy until the closing days of the war in Europe. In the last three or four months of that war the German system of transportation completely broke down and the ordinary method of distribution could not be continued, that is the sending of stores into Germany by rail or by sea. The R.A.F. and the American bombers in the final days of the

war in Europe completely paralysed the German transportation system. We followed Montgomery's army across the Rhine and saw most of the British and American zones in Germany, and it is no exaggeration to say that every town and city of any consequence at all could only be described accurately as a great mountain of rubble, beneath which there were thousands of unrecovered bodies. I well remember one city we entered which had a pre-war population of 100,000; it suffered one R.A.F. heavy bomber raid lasting eighteen minutes. During that time no less than 350,000 incendiary bombs descended upon it, plus a huge tonnage of high explosives, and when the fires died down there was not to be seen living accommodation for even a hundred people. In fact it was necessary for the Americans to put bulldozers in the front line to pave a way for the tanks. Streets had completely disappeared and what was once a great city was just a big heap of debris. The Rhine was littered with water craft of every description, either completely upturned or on their sides, and that characterized what one saw everywhere of the great waterways of Germany. All the railway junctions reminded us of a great ball of wool with which a kitten had been playing for a fortnight.

In those days, with the British and American forces closing in from the west, and the Russians closing in from the east, the Germans moved prisoners of war from one side of their country to the other, and finally towards the south. Some of our men were marched about 1,200 miles during their last fourteen weeks in Germany. The International Red Cross Committee knew of conditions prevailing in Germany at the time, and without even waiting to consult the Allied Forces approached the German High Command and said, "What are you going to do about these marching thousands? They will die of starvation if left to a few ounces of black bread and water daily." The High Command replied, "We cannot do anything; we are unable to maintain supplies even for our own defence forces." "Well," said the Swiss, "we have acquired six hundred motor trucks; will you allow us to take food and medical supplies through to the marching columns?" The Germans replied, "We are not prepared to allow so many foreigners in our country in its hours of greatest peril." The Committee then said, "You have plenty of prisoners of war; send them down to the border and we will give them the trucks and they can drive them to the men on the march and to the remaining camps." The German High

Command was agreeable to this and sent down Allied prisoners of war to receive the trucks from the Swiss, laden with stores for the men being moved from one side of Germany to the other. These vehicles became known all over Germany as the "White Angels from Switzerland", because they did succeed in succouring hundreds of thousands of men during those critical days towards the conclusion of the war in Europe.

One of the things which amazed us when we came to investigate the work of the Committee at Geneva was the very careful supervision exercised by the Committee in making sure that everything that was sent to them for distribution reached the prisoners it was intended to benefit. They saw parcels right into the hands of the men of confidence in the prison camps and saw that they actually reached the prisoners of war. The success of their work became very apparent to us as we met the hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war coming out of Germany. They went out of their way to say that but for the Red Cross parcels they would have perished. The truth of that is best demonstrated by reference to Russian prisoners of war. Russia did not avail itself of Red Cross service, and liberated Australian soldiers told very pathetic and tragic stories of the fate of Russian prisoners who came into their camps. The Germans gave them practically nothing, issuing them with only a few ounces of bread daily. It was a common sight to see two half dead Russian soldiers dragging the dead body of a former colleague to the ration counter to draw the meagre allowance for him as well as their own. At one camp some six hundred Russians were brought in, and within a week there were only eighty survivors.

The Committee, in addition to sending food parcels, clothing and medical equipment, made an effort to attend to the intellectual needs of prisoners of war, and arrangements were made whereby men could study or pass the time with recreational reading. In addition to providing for the physical needs of prisoners of war, the Committee also undertook the colossal task of providing relief from mental anxiety, something very common to prisoners of war, and more especially to the members of their families back in the lands where they belonged. Just to give you some idea of the extent of mental anxiety created during the last great war, the International Committee during the six years received not less than 47 million inquiries for missing or unaccounted for people. There is in Europe today

a type of mental anxiety which can never be relieved. That is traceable to the innovation of the Germans in regard to concentration camps. The Germans did not trouble to keep records of their victims and in discussing with the commanding officer of the Belsen concentration camp some of his problems, he told me that one of the greatest was to establish the identity of the victims they found in the camp when he and a small advance party of doctors and orderlies entered that dreadful place.

You may be interested to hear just a little about Belsen in passing. On 12th April of last year the Chief of Staff of the 1st German Army communicated with the Chief of Staff of the 8th British Corps, the corps commanding the attack in the Belsen area, and stated a dreadful state of affairs existed in the camp and asked the British to take over. The following day a truce was drawn up and a neutral area proclaimed, and on 15th April a small advance party of British doctors and assistants entered Belsen. The sight which confronted them beggared description. There were 50,000 prisoners in the camp, 10,000 dead, and the remaining 40,000 could only be described as living dead, because after months of semi-starvation they had been without food and water for seven days. The Commanding Officer told me that at the very beginning the medical treatment consisted of intra-nasal drips and intravenous injections, because the victims were too weak to take food and water in the normal way. Every one of those 40,000 people had to be de-loused and otherwise cleansed and put into clean clothing and carried on stretchers a distance of between 100 and 200 yards to the German barracks which adjoined the concentration camp, and which Kramer and his cronies were forced by the British to clean up and turn into a hospital. There were no vehicles available to assist in the moving of so many people and it required detachment from the attacking forces of the British of not less than thirty units to handle this situation. The action of the British Command in detaching so many units which they could ill afford to spare from the attack demonstrated the great humanity of the British people, especially when it is realized that 60 per cent of the people at Belsen were German nationals. Now the problem of identifying these people was very great, and linguists had to be summoned from the British Intelligence Corps, but in five weeks every person in the Belsen horror camp had been hospitalized and documented, and on 21st May there was a very pleasant sight for those of them who

could walk, for on that day the huts which made up that dreadful concentration camp were levelled to the ground by fire.

A great deal has been published about the horrors of Belsen, and the position has not been exaggerated in any way at all. On the contrary, I would say that the worst features of Belsen have been mercifully withheld from the general public. While the horrors have been emphasized again and again, very little has been said about the wonderful fight waged by the British doctors and their assistants which led to the saving of about 27,000 victims of German depravity. Amidst the death, squalor and insanity of Belsen, they provided the one bright spot.

To get back to the problem of mental anxiety, millions of people perished in concentration camps, and their families will never know just what happened. What a family can go through was brought home vividly to us in Holland. One day whilst travelling from Utrecht to Amsterdam our truck was hailed by a Boy Scout, who asked us to give a lift to a lad from the Dachau concentration camp. This lad's feet and legs were covered with sores as a result of his having become vermin-infested shortly after he had entered the camp. When we lifted him into our truck we found he could speak a little English, and he told me his story. He was a medical student at the Amsterdam University and fifteen months previously, while returning home, he was seized on the pavement by the Gestapo, flung into a truck and taken straight to the Dachau concentration camp. He was not allowed to communicate with his people in any way, and they could only guess as to his fate. We took him to his home and when the truck pulled up outside his home his mother happened to be looking through the window. We lifted him out and she rushed out on to the roadway and embraced her son for what seemed an eternity. His sister then appeared, screamed, and then hurried round the street corner, returning a minute or two later with a tottering old man, the father of the lad. He embraced his boy, and then they invited us inside, but we decided they should be left alone to enjoy their reunion. We went back a couple of nights later and all their relatives and friends were gathered together to rejoice in the return of a son they had counted as dead. In France, Belgium and Holland we were told the worst feature of the German occupation was the knock of the Gestapo, which always occurred about 6 o'clock in the morning, when there was

less likelihood of protest, for it meant that someone would be taken away, never to be heard of again.

The Committee handled this problem as far as it could and did succeed in bringing relief from mental anxiety to countless millions of people the world over. When Germany was overrun it was a daily sight to see thousands of people of all ages straggling down the highways headed for the countries to which they belonged. The Committee sought to provide transport for these people to get them back to Holland, Belgium, France and to other countries. There were 30 million people taken from the occupied countries to Germany to work in factories, in fields and in the mines. When we left Germany there were somewhere between seven and eight millions of them, known as "displaced persons", who were not prepared to return to their countries, and were providing a great problem to the occupying forces.

In leaving the work of the Committee I just want to quote a few figures to give you some idea of the enormity of their task. In attending to the needs of prisoners of war alone, they had 168,000 British and Commonwealth prisoners in Germany, and almost as many Americans; the numbers of French, Belgian and Dutch prisoners, of course, ran into millions, and the same can be said of men drawn from the Balkan countries. You may be interested to learn where the money came from to provide these wonderful facilities for the receiving and distributing of relief. It came chiefly from the Swiss people. The population is only four millions, and in addition to carrying out this vast work of relief Switzerland took two and a half times the number of refugees into her country that England took during the six years of war. I feel that the world owes Switzerland a debt of gratitude for its humanitarian work that it can never repay.

Before leaving the work of the Committee I desire to say a little concerning the Far East. When Japan entered the war there were certain Swiss citizens in Tokyo and other great cities of that nation, and they agreed to act as delegates for the International Red Cross Committee. For three and a half years they waited upon the Japanese military authorities and repeatedly pleaded with them to allow Red Cross service just as the Germans had allowed it in their country. They met with little or no success, but the story of their persistence provides an epic. At Geneva we were privileged to read their communications with the Japanese authorities and to learn something of the great efforts made by the delegates to get the Japanese into a

reasonable frame of mind. In the early days of their attempts the Japanese appeared simply to procrastinate. They said, with regard to food parcels and communications between prisoners and their families, "The idea is an excellent one but the time is not opportune." Later on they became evasive and finally violent, for the Swiss delegates frequently had their faces slapped and were thrown down the stairs. However, notwithstanding such insults and indignities, they were at the cessation of fighting in the Pacific still trying to get the Japanese to allow some sort of Red Cross service, however limited. One shipment of stores got through via Vladivostock, but when the Japanese prison camps were overrun later it was found that the Japanese had never distributed one item of the relief stores; they had hidden them in the camps and kept them from the prisoners of war for whom they were intended. The same sort of behaviour prevailed in regard to inquiries to relieve the mental anxieties of relatives. Their failure to give news of the fate of members of the 2/22 Battalion who were taken prisoners at Rabaul provides a good example of their apathy. After months of patient enquiry the Committee sent a cable entreating the authorities to give news of the battalion and in polite terms said news of the unit was singularly lacking. The Japanese replied by saying, "You seem to distrust us, and even appear suspicious of our intentions, and unless you apologize forthwith we will terminate all the concessions (very few indeed) you now enjoy." The work of the Committee in the Pacific was very determined but almost fruitless.

Regarding the second international Red Cross organization, the League of Red Cross Societies, representatives from various National Societies, forty-three in all, gathered at Geneva last October to discuss the peace-time programme of Red Cross with a view to strengthening the national Red Cross bodies in every country where they exist, and of strengthening the international link between them, also to see if amendments of the Geneva Convention would be necessary to enable Red Cross to face up to what we now describe as the Atomic Age. That meeting was the preliminary to meetings which are to be held next month at Oxford, in the first place, and then a little later at Geneva. The Australian Red Cross Society was represented at the preliminary meeting in October by Lady Owen of New South Wales, and Dr. Newman Morris is to represent the Society at the coming meeting. It is felt that as a result of experience gained during

the last war the Convention needs to be modernized, and perhaps fresh provisions included to cope with the new methods of warfare, of which we had but a little taste in the concluding days of the recent conflict.

The third international body, the Joint Relief Commission, a combination of the other two, is now faced with an even greater task of providing relief than that which confronted the International Red Cross Committee during the six years of war—the task of providing relief for the starving millions of Europe, acting of course in conjunction with UNRRA. We were in Holland shortly after the liberation of the north by the Canadian Army. You will recollect that the north of Holland was occupied almost for twelve months after the south was liberated, and during that time the inhabitants were given just enough to live on, and that was all. We saw children with arms and legs like broomsticks, and I shall never forget the first home I entered in Amsterdam. The people were about to commence their evening meal, which consisted of a plate of watercress and nothing else. In answer to inquiries, they said they had not seen bread for weeks, potatoes for over a year, and milk, butter, eggs and cheese—things for which that country was famous in pre-war days—for about eighteen months.

At the headquarters of the Joint Commission we saw a chart kept by that organization for the purpose of showing at a glance the needs of every country in Europe where Red Cross delegates were operating and the urgency with which those needs should be met. We expected to see Holland relatively high up on the list, but found Holland well down on the list, for the suffering in the mid and eastern European countries and the Balkans was worse than anything experienced by Greece in its darkest days. We read reports and saw photographs which revealed startling conditions in those countries. In Albania last year the infant mortality rate had risen to 40 per cent; the mothers, themselves suffering from malnutrition and starvation, could not feed the newly-born. In many of the Balkan provinces the incidence of tuberculosis had risen to 80 per cent; in Bosnia, a province of Jugoslavia, there were in August of last year 13,000 war orphans who were without food, shelter and clothing. The medical reports disclosed that there were diseases amongst them which the doctors had not previously encountered, except in textbooks. Their diet consisted of the bark, leaves and roots of trees and water. In the same province five men and women

dragged each plough while the sixth held the beam because all the beasts of burden were taken from the occupied countries by the Germans when they withdrew. These people tilled the soil at night because they had not a stitch of clothing. We gathered from a summary of the reports something which is now common knowledge throughout the world, that there were 200 million people on the verge of starvation. The Joint Commission is now faced with the great task of working, along with UNRRA, to prevent millions of human beings from perishing from starvation, and disease following malnutrition. As you probably know, UNRRA does not operate in all countries; it is an organization set up to operate in Allied countries. And so the Joint Commission is faced with the task of doing all it can not only as an auxiliary in countries where UNRRA is operating but, as the chief organization for relief, in numerous other countries where UNRRA is not present. In addition to its general relief work the Commission is providing medical teams; several were operating amongst the millions of displaced persons I have already referred to, and because of the number of teams provided by the Joint Commission and their effectiveness the numerous plagues which have broken out amongst these homeless people have so far been kept down, and the world has not been swept with epidemics. Australia, through the Australian Red Cross, assisted by the Commonwealth Government in providing transportation and other facilities, has been able to send several shipments of stores to the Joint Commission as an Australian contribution to the relief of the perishing millions of the Old World.

Now, gentlemen, I wish to conclude this address, this rather sketchy account of the work of the three organizations which make up International Red Cross, with a reference to the people who are directing their activities from Switzerland. As you probably expect, there are medical men and lawyers at the head and they are setting an example to the world by their spirit of self-denial and personal sacrifice. Six years they have given of their time, their energy and their money in providing relief for war victims, and notwithstanding their war weariness it is their intention to carry on indefinitely as long as the need exists. The President is Professor Max Huber, a distinguished jurist, and former President of the International Court of Justice at the Hague. Although seventy years of age, he is very alert and a man of amazing vision, and has already commenced

to plan Red Cross service in what I have referred to as the Atomic Age. His remark to us as we were about to leave Geneva was "We must be realistic about human wickedness, but we must not be appalled by it. Our motto for the future should not be one of despair, but one of work; we must seek to do the best we can in the circumstances and never give up hope." He felt that if the leaders of the nations of the world were as aggressive for peace as they have been for victory there would be some hope for humanity after all. We were impressed by the neutrality of these people; they did the same for the nations who were our enemies as they did for us, and our nationals. What impressed us more than anything else was their great humanity. In discussing individual problems, problems which concerned, perhaps, one family, out of the millions they were concerned with, they never lost the personal touch, and showed a real and personal concern for those affected. Finally, it was most comforting to observe their very high degree of efficiency. The Swiss are great business people, very orderly in every way, and magnificently efficient in performing a work of trusteeship for other people.

I feel, gentlemen, that if only we had more men of the calibre of those controlling these International Red Cross bodies in high places the world over there could yet be that era of peace for which every nation is so earnestly seeking.