

VOLUNTARY AID DETACHMENTS

by **Win Davson**

Mrs Win Davson is a Society member and has played a leading role in arts and theatre in Queensland for four decades. She was heavily involved in theatre during the war, fund raising in support of the allied cause.

During World War II it was decided that Voluntary Aid Detachments should become part of the Army with a Chief Controller, appointed by the Central Council and Controllers appointed by each State Council, plus commandants in charge of detachments and other necessary officers.

The Joint State Council formed in Queensland first met in 1928. Its efforts to organise Detachments had very limited success, however, until the outbreak of World War II.¹ A Joint State Council was formed in each state in 1940 with a Joint Central Council for Australia. Lady Wilson was Chief Commandant and Colonel A.H. Marks chairman of the Queensland Council formed in 1940. The other members were R.A.N. Lt. Commander N. Pixley representing the Order of St. John, R.A.A.F. Flying Officer J. Barclay, R.A.A. Colonel G.W. Macartney and Captain E.R.B. Pike. Miss Edith Wassell M.B.E. was Hon. Secretary, later replaced by Mrs Dorothy Davidson with State Controller Colonel A.H. Marks.²

One of the first detachments formed early in 1939 was Wynnum (Q121) with Mrs Jean Turley as Commandant; she later represented the War Widow's Guild at the 1965 visit to Gallipoli by ex-servicemen. I was a member (as Win O'Neill).

Known as V.A.D.'s, we wore an attractive Wedgewood blue uniform which we purchased ourselves, with white collar and buttons, a Red Cross on the dress pocket, metal "V.A.D. Australia" shoulder badges, a blue cloth hat with narrow navy band with badge, blue long-sleeved self-same jacket, grey lyle stockings, lace-up navy low heeled shoes and gloves, and a white organza veil with a red cross in front when on duty in hospitals.

My complete V.A.D. uniform was later displayed on a model in the "Women in war-time" display for the Captain Cook Bi-Centenary Celebration in the City Hall in April 1970.

To become a V.A.D. one had to gain First Aid and Home Nursing Certificates and fifty hours nursing experience in a hospital. Our

Wynnum detachment trained at the Mater Hospital. We took pulses, temperatures and respirations, washed patients, made beds, emptied and scaled bed pans, sterilized instruments, cleaned cupboards and washed dishes.

Mary Douglas of the Red Cross Brisbane Detachment trained at Fermoy Private Hospital and helped at Montrose Crippled Children's Home and Ellendene Hospital. Eleanor, Valmay and Margaret Coey were Girl Guide V.A.D.'s. Some others were Evelyn Varrie (Brisbane Methodist Girl Comrades); Jesse Baillie (Presbyterians); and Veronica Cox who disliked cooking and later became an officer with Lady Blamey on the Atherton Tableland. Noela Box of Pittsworth remembers her first hospital morning — with a dead patient. "I was fair game for all the worst jobs. I cleaned out cupboards, mopped floors, and scrubbed toilets and baths with steel wool and kerosene."

On 28 February 1940 volunteers were called and entered the Army as Voluntary Aids, thus relieving men for service in the field. By 1941 there were 61 V.A.D. Detachments in Queensland with 2341 members. The name for these enlisted personnel was changed to Australian Army Medical Women's Service (A.A.M.W.S.) on 16 December 1942. This allowed women without any previous First Aid or Nursing training to enlist and serve in a variety of fields. An Assistant Controller was appointed in each state, Miss Mollie Walker was the first appointed in Queensland, followed by Major Mrs Marjorie Roche when she was transferred to Army Headquarters in Melbourne.³

The blue uniforms so cherished by Voluntary Aids were not issued to those on full-time service who were given khaki uniforms. They were, however, allowed to wear their own blue uniforms while they were serviceable.

Assistant Commandant of Q121 at Wynnum was Miss Kath Clarke and Quartermaster Amy Lamond who recollected attending a thyroid case at the Mater, just returned from Theatre:

I was very busy until I was suddenly aware of a cold experience coming from my toes. By the time it reached my waist I muttered to the nurse that all was not well... I stumbled outside and flopped on to a stool just as the Senior Nun swept by. With a glare she snapped 'Is this all you have to do, Nurse?'

Our detachment attended church parades, marches, saw service at First Aid Posts and R.A.P., attended gas warfare and social disease lectures, arranged monthly dances for Lytton Fort at the R.S.L. Hall, had Field Days and attended some dances at the Fort. We collected for the Red Cross Prisoners of War; my area was Tingalpa Road and it bore a plaque "This Street supports a P.O.W."

I did duty at the V.A.D. Club with Patricia Pell and we were hostesses at the Lady Bowen Hostel for dances, and attended the Welcome Home for Prisoners of War with the families seated on the lawns at Albert Park. I remember going to Archerfield Aerodrome Wednesday afternoons and making sandwiches with two Red Cross Ladies which we served with tea, chocolate and cigarettes to P.O.W.'s flying to Sydney. I made up time by working Saturday mornings at my Commonwealth job.

At the end of October 1941, 200 enlisted V.A.D.'s ("Bluebells") went to the Middle East, among them Thelma Linane, Jessie Stewart and Faye Clarke. Just before this, 20 V.A.D.'s sailed aboard the *Wanganella* for Ceylon and return to Australia in December 1942.5 Original A.G.H. girls from the Middle East joined the A.A.M.W.S. (not from choice!) and served in New Guinea and Morotai. Faye Clarke recalls treating emaciated P.O.W.'s from Changi, one "weighed 42 pounds and I used to carry him in my arms into the sun to try to dry his ulcerated limbs."

Three V.A.D.'s who served in the Middle East and New Guinea, Marjorie Walker, Nada Johnston and Joan Wilson, were chosen to join M.V. *Duntroun* arriving in Singapore on 16 September 1945 to nurse 8th Division P.O.W. troops.

On 13 May 1965 the Minister for the Army advised that Voluntary Aids would no longer be used by the Services.

NOTES

1. *History of Voluntary Aid Detachments of Queensland 1939-1946*, Brisbane, William Brooks, 1946.
2. "Women in Wartime", p7 in *Our First Two Hundred Years*, Captain Cook Bicentenary Celebrations, Queensland Women's Committee, 1970.
3. *ibid* p6 & p8.
4. Letter from Mrs Amy Edgell n e Lamond to Win Davson July 1992.
5. Letter from Mrs Thelma Isabel n e Linnane, Ashgrove to Win Davson 22 July 1992; *Vetaffairs* December 1991 p7.