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Abstract

In the days immediately following the First World War a group of women from The Oaks and Camden volunteered at Waley Nerve Hospital at Mowbray Park as part of the activities of the Camden and The Oaks Voluntary Aid Detachments.

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Voluntary aids at the nerve hospital

By Ian Willis

In the days immediately following the First World War a group of women from The Oaks and Camden volunteered at Waley Nerve Hospital at Mowbray Park as part of the activities of the Camden and The Oaks Voluntary Aid Detachments.

Waley was a farm hospital with about 60 acres under cultivation and the main house supplied with vegetables, eggs, milk and butter from the farms 21 cows and 26 pigs. Mowbray Park had been the country retreat of Sir Frederick and Lady Waley.

Sir Frederick Waley (1860-1933) was a prominent Sydney businessman with interests in the Bellambi colliery in the Illawarra. Amongst other philanthropic interests he was an executive member of the New South Wales division of the Red Cross and in 1919 his wife presented Mowbray Park and 180 acres (73 ha), to the Commonwealth Government as a "permanent home for shell-shocked and permanently incapacitated sailors and soldiers".

Most patients at Waley Hospital stayed at the home between one and three months with some up to 80 months for those suffering from neurasthenia or hysteria. It was reported that "the quiet, regular life, under good discipline, with a regular work period each day, is the best way of endeavouring to fit these men for occupation again". Activities were general farm work with the purpose of returning the men "to their own occupation". The farm committee was chaired by Major-General GM Macarthur Onslow.

In 1918 the Camden and The Oaks Red Cross branches established Voluntary Aid Detachments in response to the imminent opening of the Waley Hospital. The first commandant of the Camden VAD was Mary McIntosh from Cobbitty.

In 1919 amongst the Waley volunteers there were six from The Oaks VAD and by 1921 this had increased to 10, with a further 10 from the Camden VAD, who included VAs Mary McIntosh, Miss Hall and Miss Gardiner. The Camden VAs put in 117 days in 1921 and a further 116 days in 1922 at the hospital. By 1923 the Camden VAD numbered 13 VAs, with one voluntary aid from Narellan Red Cross, and they collectively worked 65 days. The voluntary aids regularly supplied treats for the patients, which were reportedly appreciated by the men. Voluntary aid Stella Furner collected and dispatched a box of cakes on the first Thursday of each month to the patients, while others supplied cakes on a monthly basis 1920-22. Camden bakers Stuckey Bros acted as collection point to the community to donate cakes. At Christmas time the Camden aids distributed cakes, sweets and cigarettes to the patients and took them on picnics near Camden. By 1924 the number of voluntary aids had dropped to only a 'few' making monthly visits to the patients.

Apart from hospital duty at Waley, Red Cross fundraising was considered an important part of the role of aids and in 1921 the VAs, under Mary McIntosh, took charge of 'Matrons' Day and held a stall in Sydney for the After-care Department of the Red Cross.



Red Cross dining room and kitchen at Mowbray Park.

The Oaks VAD operated until 1922 and Camden VAD was put on the reserve list in 1924, when there was general downturn in voluntary aid numbers.

The idea of first forming a local Voluntary Aid Detachment was first considered by the Camden Red Cross in 1914, immediately after the branch was formed. Training in first aid started immediately and weekly classes were held on Wednesday nights at the Camden School of Arts starting Wednesday, August 26, 1914. Forty-five members of the Camden Red Cross enrolled with tuition provided by local medical practitioner Dr West, and then examined in October by Dr Mawson from Campbelltown. Unfortunately a detachment was not formed at the time.

Originally Voluntary Aid Detachments were a British innovation and historian Melanie Oppenheimer has traced their beginnings back to 1882 when "nurses were trained by the British Aid Society and St John Ambulance" to serve in hospitals and hospital ships and later served in the Boer War. Voluntary Aid Detachments were introduced to Australian



Red Cross hand over. Photos courtesy of Mowbray Park and The Oaks Historical Society

when the Red Cross was established in 1914 by Lady Helen Munro Ferguson.

Over time the Voluntary Aid Detachments became a highly visible part of the Red Cross movement in the Camden district and the rest of Australia, and came to represent the romance and mythology that developed around Red Cross work. Voluntary aid detachments in the Camden district were re-formed in 1939 and members undertook voluntary work at the Gilbulla Red Cross Hospital at Menangle, Camden District Hospital and the RAAF Base Hospital at Camden Airfield.

The Camden Historical Society

meets for lively discussions and guest speakers on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30pm at the Camden Museum on John Street Camden. Interested persons and new members are most welcome. For further information call John on 4655 9210.

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