



American  
Red Cross

# World War II and the American Red Cross

The American Red Cross involvement in World War II preceded the entrance of the United States into the conflict. When hostilities began in Europe in 1939, the Red Cross became the chief provider of relief supplies for the civilian victims of conflict distributed by the Geneva-based International Red Cross Committee. In February 1941, the Red Cross responded to a request by the U.S. government to begin a Blood Donor Service to produce lifesaving plasma for the armed forces in anticipation of America's entry into the war. After the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the Red Cross quickly mobilized a volunteer and staff force to fulfill the mandates of its 1905 congressional charter requiring that the organization "furnish volunteer aid to the sick and wounded of armies in time of war" and to "act in matters of voluntary relief and in accord with the military and naval authorities as a medium of communication between the people of the United States of America and their Army and Navy."

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# Overview

At home, millions of volunteers provided comfort and aid to members of the armed forces and their families, served in hospitals suffering from severe shortages of medical staff, produced emergency supplies for war victims, collected scrap, ran victory gardens, and maintained training programs in home nutrition, first aid, and water safety. Overseas, Red Cross workers served as field directors providing compassionate support for the troops they accompanied, operated clubs and clubmobiles for the armed forces, and were attached to military hospitals, hospital ships, and hospital trains.

At the peak of Red Cross wartime activity in 1945, 7.5 million volunteers along with 39,000 paid staff provided service to the military. Throughout the war years, the Red Cross served 16 million military personnel, including one million combat casualties. By the time World War II ended in September 1945, the American public had contributed over \$784 million in support of the American Red Cross. Nearly every family in America contained a member who had either served as a Red Cross volunteer, made contributions of money or blood, or was a recipient of Red Cross services.

## American Red Cross War-related Services

On the home front and behind the battle lines overseas, volunteers and paid, professional staff provided services in these categories:

- **Services to the Armed Forces (SAF)** comprised of the Military and Naval Welfare Service, the Home Service, the Camp and Hospital Council Service, and, at the end of the war, Service to Veterans Hospitals.
- **Volunteer Special Services**, a group of domestic programs carried on by volunteers through local Red Cross chapters.
- **Specialized War-time Services**, such as the Blood Donor Program, Prisoners of War relief, civil defense, and foreign aid to civilian war victims overseas.
- **War-related aspects of ongoing Red Cross services**, including Nursing, First Aid and Water Safety, Junior Red Cross, and College Red Cross Units.

These services are described in this booklet. Excerpts from the 1944 Red Cross Annual Report accompany some descriptions to convey a contemporary impression of the human dimensions of this extraordinary period in American Red Cross history.

## War's End

The war's conclusion hardly signaled the end to Red Cross activities in service to the military and the victims of war. Indeed, Red Cross workers swept across Europe alongside the victorious Allied troops and they accompanied occupation troops as they entered Japan. They improvised services for the liberated prisoners of war and civilian internees. They stood by restless troops waiting to return home. On the domestic scene, they gave comfort and guidance to thousands of returning servicemen and women at ports and train stations and at chapters on every step of their way home. Many others provided services to the sick and wounded who were evacuated to the United States, as the Red Cross prepared for a long-range peacetime program of service to veterans in hospitals.

*Veterans coming in increasing numbers to their hometown chapters were asking: What does the GI Bill of Rights mean to me? Am I entitled to other government benefits? Who can answer my questions about insurance, medical care, veterans' hospitals? Home Service workers were prepared with up-to-date answers to all such questions and many more.*



## During Wartime the Red Cross Stays on Duty at Home

Natural disasters at home occurred throughout the war years and the Red Cross did not waver from providing its customary services to the American public. For the period 1939-1946, 959,000 Americans received disaster relief, including those affected by the Coconut Grove fire in Boston that killed 492, the circus fire in Hartford, Connecticut that killed 168, and 1940 and 1944 hurricanes that struck the Eastern seaboard, killing a total of 96 on shore and 344 at sea. In addition to disaster services, the Red Cross supplied nurses to combat the polio epidemic that lasted into the 1950s and continued to train thousands of citizens in such vital areas as first aid, water safety, nutrition, and home nursing.

## Red Cross Wartime Statistics at a Glance

Over the course of the war years, 86 Red Cross workers—52 women and 34 men—lost their lives as the result of their wartime service. These and other summary statistics are given in the table below.

Total contributions received during war years.....	\$784,992,995
Greatest number of chapters (1943 and 1944).....	3,757
Greatest number of adult members (1945).....	36,645,333
Greatest number of Junior Red Cross members (1945).....	19,905,400
Greatest number of volunteers (1945).....	7,500,700
Greatest number of paid staff (1945).....	39,032
Number of Red Cross certified nurses in service with the military.....	71,000
Number of service personnel receiving Red Cross aid.....	16,113,000
Messages made between servicemen and families.....	42,000,000
Families aided by the Home Service.....	1,700,000
Tons of supplies shipped overseas.....	300,460
Pints of blood collected for military use.....	13,400,000
Number of blood donors.....	6,600,000
Number of foreign countries in which Red Cross operated.....	more than 50
American Red Cross war casualties—male.....	34
American Red Cross war casualties—female.....	52

# WWII Services to the Armed Forces (SAF)

## Military and Naval Welfare Service

American Red Cross workers provided assistance to all servicemen and women wherever they were stationed or deployed at home and overseas. Services were also extended, with limitations, to some civilian groups, such as the merchant marines, civilian pilots in the Army Transport Command, and to the armed forces of the Allies when they were in the United States or serving with the U.S. military. Military and Naval Welfare Service was basically of three kinds: Camp, Club, and Hospital.

**Camp Service** was conducted by field directors and assistant field directors assigned to, and often living with, the armed forces. Their services included:

- Giving counsel and guidance to servicemen and women.
- Providing a means of communication between members of the armed forces and their families at home.
- Securing reports on family conditions at home and other matters of concern to servicemen and women and to military authorities.
- Making available financial assistance in the form of loans and grants to meet emergency needs.
- Distributing comfort articles and other supplies as needed.

By 1945, the number of field directors and assistant field directors providing camp service peaked at 3,520, almost equally divided between those serving at domestic and overseas installations.

*[The field director's] desk may have been in one of the 139 Red Cross headquarters office buildings; it may have been a box in a tent. . . . on D-day of June 6, 1944, Red Cross field men trained for the job accompanied assault troops onto the beachheads of Normandy in order to offer their services in time of greatest probable need.*

**Club Service** was made available at the request of the U.S. government to able-bodied members of the armed forces serving overseas, while recreational services for the military at home remained, as it had been, limited to hospitals. Overseas the Red Cross staffed and supplied permanent service clubs, travelling clubmobiles, and other recreational facilities that stretched literally around the world. At its peak, the Red Cross operated nearly 2,000 recreational service facilities abroad, staffed by 5,000 Red Cross workers and approximately 140,000, mostly local, volunteers.

Service clubs ranged from large facilities in major cities, often hotels, to small facilities in towns and villages in both the European and Pacific theaters of war. The large clubs offered not only meals and recreational activities but also overnight accommodations and such amenities as barbershops and laundries. Probably the most famous of these was the huge Rainbow Corner Club in London whose doors never shut and where up to 60,000 meals could be served in a single 24-hour period. The smaller clubs provided food and sometimes recreation but not overnight facilities and were usually located in outlying areas close to American military camps. Many were called Donut Dugouts, while those serving sailors were known as Fleet Clubs and airmen went to Aeroclubs. The Red Cross also operated rest homes in some usually rural and tranquil locations overseas for service personnel needing respite from the pressures of war. The homes provided sleeping accommodations, dining room service, and a variety of recreational pursuits for the servicemen who were assigned there by the military authorities.

*[In] London, Cairo, and Melbourne the clubs were spacious, luxurious; in New Guinea the clubs were grass huts; in Iceland they were [corrugated iron and concrete] huts.*



March, 1945. France. As the coffee and doughnut line thins out, American Red Cross girl Grace Smith has a moment to answer the inevitable "Where are you from back home?"

In order to serve multiple sites, particularly in isolated areas, the Red Cross introduced clubmobiles in Great Britain in 1942 and later deployed some to the continent. They were converted half-ton trucks and single-deck buses acquired from a former London bus company. Each operated by three American Red Cross women and a local driver, they were equipped for making and serving coffee and doughnuts and for distributing newspapers, chewing gum, and other small items. Some were equipped with phonographs and loudspeakers to provide music for the troops. A few were outfitted with movie projectors and became known as cinemobiles.

June 1944. Normandy, France. The Daniel Boone was the first American Red Cross clubmobile to land in Normandy, France, following D-Day and saw action all the way through Austria.



## Home Service

All American Red Cross chapters provided Home Service for the benefit of families of service members. In many cases, Home Service workers maintained close touch with Camp and Hospital Service field directors as information moved back and forth between military installations and home communities. Home Service responsibilities included:

- Consultation and guidance in personal and family problems.
- Communication between service personnel and family members.
- Information and help with government regulations, pensions, and other benefits.
- Financial assistance, in the form of loans and grants based on need.
- Furnishing the armed forces with reports to aid military authorities in making discharge and furlough decisions.

During the war years, the Home Service handled almost 18 million cases, participated in 42 million communications between troops and families, and provided over \$38 million in financial assistance.



### **Camp and Hospital Council Service**

The Red Cross formed councils that met emergency and supplemental needs for equipment, supplies, and services at domestic army and navy installations by coordinating the resources of local communities and other organizations. Military authorities made emergency needs known to field directors who called on local councils for help, with first priority going to hospitals. Councils provided a wide range of items, everything from garden implements and musical instruments to furniture and room furnishings, books, magazines, and newspapers. They also arranged ward parties, held art exhibits, and booked movie and theatrical presentations. By 1944, 2,204 chapters were participating in 181 councils that provided service to 4,096 army and navy stations and hospitals.

### **Service in Veterans Hospitals**

Red Cross service to hospitalized veterans began during World War I with both professional and volunteer workers providing recreational and casework services. Starting in 1931, the professionals were withdrawn and volunteers alone offered recreational services. In August 1945, the Red Cross began its Service in Veterans Hospitals (SVH) to meet the needs of a growing number of Veterans Administration hospitals and an expanding patient load. SVH returned paid workers to the hospitals mainly to guide an increasing number of volunteers in providing patients with a diversified set of services, everything from recreational programs to Gray Ladies running errands for veterans and Nurse's Aides making beds and feeding patients. Paid staff continued to serve in veterans' hospitals until 1952 when they were again withdrawn.

## World War II Volunteer Special Services

Most chapter activities related to the war were organized into 11 Volunteer Corps. To indicate their relative size, the number of volunteers in each during the peak fiscal year of nationwide volunteer participation is given in parentheses.

**Administration Corps** provided administrative support and direction to the programs of the other corps in the Volunteer Special Services. (Administration Corps volunteers numbered 21,347 in 1942-43.)

**Arts and Skills Corps** began in 1944 as a means for rehabilitation by giving patients an opportunity to do creative and constructive work under the direction of artists and craftsmen. At its peak, the Corps offered instruction in arts and crafts to the war-injured in 105 domestic hospitals (6,645 volunteers in 1945-46).

**Braille Corps** transcribed books and periodicals for use by the blind. As a national program, the Braille Corps began in the 1920s but ceased operations in 1942 due to technological and commercial advances in transcription that rendered it less essential (3,714 volunteers in 1941-42).

**Canteen Corps** served snacks and meals at docks, airports, railroad stations, military posts, and at Red Cross blood donor centers, childcare centers, and schools, mostly in the United States. Over the course of the war 163 million cups of coffee, 254 million doughnuts, and 121 million meals were served by the Canteen Corps, working at ports of embarkation and debarkation, they were last to see the soldiers go and the first to welcome them home (105,571 volunteers in 1942-43).



**Home Service Corps**, the chapter-based, volunteer component of the SAF Home Service, provided care to the families of U.S. service personnel as described in the section above on Service to the Armed Forces (16,033 volunteers in 1943-44).

**Hospital and Recreation Corps** (later known as the Gray Lady Corps) provided a variety of hostess and recreational services in over 1,000 military and veterans' hospitals throughout the United States. Services included writing letters, reading to patients, tutoring, running shopping errands, and serving in hospital recreation rooms and at information desks (49,882 volunteers in 1944-45).

*To understand [the Gray Ladies] duties was to see them in homey relation to what they meant to the lonely patient who wanted to talk; to the restless patient who wanted to play cards; to the disabled patient who could not write his letters . . . to men who were invariably homesick in a hospital far from their families.*





December 1941. Washington, DC. The first group of Red Cross Nurses' Aides for civilian defense graduates in the Nation's Capital.

**Motor Corps** consisted almost entirely of women who clocked over 61 million miles answering nine million calls to transport the sick and wounded, deliver supplies, and take volunteers and nurses to and from their posts. Most drove their own cars and many completed training in auto mechanics in order to be able to make automotive repairs on their own (44,668 volunteers in 1942-43).

**Production Corps**, by far the largest of the Volunteer Special Services, made and repaired 64 million pieces of clothing, prepared over 2.5 billion surgical dressings, and assembled over 30 million comfort kits and other articles for use by the U.S. military, the Allies, and civilian victims of the war (3,500,000 volunteers in 1942-43).

**Staff Assistance Corps** provided various forms of office and administrative support in chapters, hospitals, and other sites of Red Cross activities (128,214 volunteers in 1943-44).

**Volunteer Dietitian's Aide Corps** eased the serious shortage of help in dietary departments of an annual average of 260 military and civilian hospitals (7,730 volunteers in 1944-45).

**Volunteer Nurse's Aide Corps** members provided vital assistance to overburdened nurses in 2,500 civilian and military hospitals (110,170 volunteers in 1944-45).

## World War II Specialized War-time Services

**War Funds.** In November of 1939 and 1940, the Red Cross conducted its 22nd and 23rd annual membership and fundraising drives, called the Roll Call. Both emphasized the need for a strong response to support the Red Cross in its war relief efforts in Europe. In mid-1940, the Red Cross conducted a special Foreign Relief Fund drive for the same purpose. Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Red Cross announced a War Fund campaign similar to what it had done when the United States entered World War I. The goal of this 1941-1942 campaign was to raise \$50 million but the public responded by donating more than \$66 million. Rather than go back to the public with another appeal in November 1942, the Red Cross cancelled that year's Roll Call. Instead, President Franklin Roosevelt, the honorary chairman of the Red Cross, proclaimed the whole month of March 1943 as "Red Cross Month," with a fundraising goal of \$125 million, the largest amount ever asked for in one campaign by any American organization. Again, the response was overwhelming. By June 1943, donations reached nearly \$146 million. Roosevelt called it the "greatest single crusade of mercy in all of history." This success caused the Red Cross to repeat the March drive during the rest of the war years and to make it the focus of its membership and fund-raising efforts ever since.



**Blood Donor Services.** The first war-related blood collection by the American Red Cross was the "Plasma for Britain" project that ran from August 1940 to January 1941. It was meant to correct a temporary shortage of plasma in Britain due to heavy casualties on the battlefield and from German air raids on British cities. The project was a collaborative effort between Red Cross chapters in metropolitan New York and the Blood

Transfusion Betterment Association, an independent agency also located there. The Red Cross solicited donations and shipped the plasma to Britain; the Betterment Association collected and processed the blood into liquid plasma under the direction of the African-American blood specialist, Dr. Charles R. Drew. In all, the project collected about 15,000 pints of blood and shipped 5,500 liters of plasma to Britain.



1941. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At the request of the Army and Navy, the American Red Cross is collecting thousands of units of dry plasma as part of the national defense effort.

In January 1941, U.S. military authorities asked the American Red Cross to organize a Blood Donor Service to meet the anticipated needs of the American armed forces should the United States enter the war. In response, the Red Cross hired Drew to establish and supervise a model blood collection program with the specific goal of processing blood into dried plasma on a large scale. Drew accomplished this over several months in early 1941. By the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Red Cross operated ten blood donor centers in the Eastern United States. Eventually that number grew to 35 centers located across the country, supplemented by an additional 63 mobile units. At its peak, the program involved a paid staff of 2,285 doctors, nurses, and technicians, plus an estimated 25,000 volunteers. The Red Cross expended nearly \$16 million on the Service which ended on September 15, 1945 after collecting 13.4 million pints of blood from 6.6 million donors. This wartime effort became the model for the civilian blood program that the Red Cross began in 1948.

**“Six thousand units of plasma went ashore at Tarawa [and] 4,000 of them came back in the veins of wounded marines. At least half of the seriously wounded owe their lives to plasma.”**

*– Captain French R. Moore, Navy doctor in the Pacific*

**Prisoners of War Relief.** The nearly 1.4 million U.S. and Allied prisoners of war in Germany and elsewhere were among the most grateful beneficiaries of Red Cross services during the war. Many of them returned home alive because of the more than 27 million parcels prepared and shipped by the American Red Cross to the International Committee of the Red Cross for distribution in the prison camps. Some 13,500 volunteers assembled the packages in packing centers in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and St. Louis. Most were food packages of a uniform size (10"x10"x4.5") and weight (11 pounds) that contained such nonperishable items as prunes, raisins, liver pate, coffee, corned beef, sugar, dried milk, oleomargarine, biscuits, orange concentrate, cheese, canned salmon or tuna fish, chocolate bars, cigarettes, and soap. Other packages consisted of medical supplies, clothing, toilet articles, and seeds and gardening materials. Prisoners regularly received packages in the European camps but not in the Pacific theater due to the lack of Japanese cooperation.



This photo was taken in 1943 at the opening of the American Red Cross prisoners-of-war packing center in New York City. Nine chapters in the Metropolitan Area supplied volunteers to run two shifts daily.

From 1943 until the end of the war, the Red Cross published a Prisoners of War Bulletin for a domestic readership consisting of next of kin, Red Cross chapters, workers engaged in POW relief, and other interested parties. It reported on the treatment of American prisoners and the measures being taken to give them aid and comfort. For a short time the Red Cross also published Red Cross News, in collaboration with the U.S. Office of War Information. It was a 12-page monthly tabloid for distribution by the International Committee of the Red Cross to American prisoners of war and civilian internees in Europe and the Far East. Later, the Office of War Information took over sole responsibility for this publication.

*. . . during the past fiscal year eight Red Cross ships, carrying exclusively prisoner of war and other Red Cross relief supplies, made 19 round trips between this country and European ports without mishap. These ships sailed singly—without convoy—along a designated route, with lights blazing at night upon their Red Cross markings.*

**Aid to Rescued Seamen and Evacuees.** Some Red Cross chapters in coastal areas of the United States provided aid to seamen and passengers of vessels attacked by the enemy as well as evacuees from islands and foreign countries who were transported to these shores. Chapters on the West Coast and in New York Harbor, in particular, met such groups at the ports and distributed emergency clothing, rations, and first aid kits.

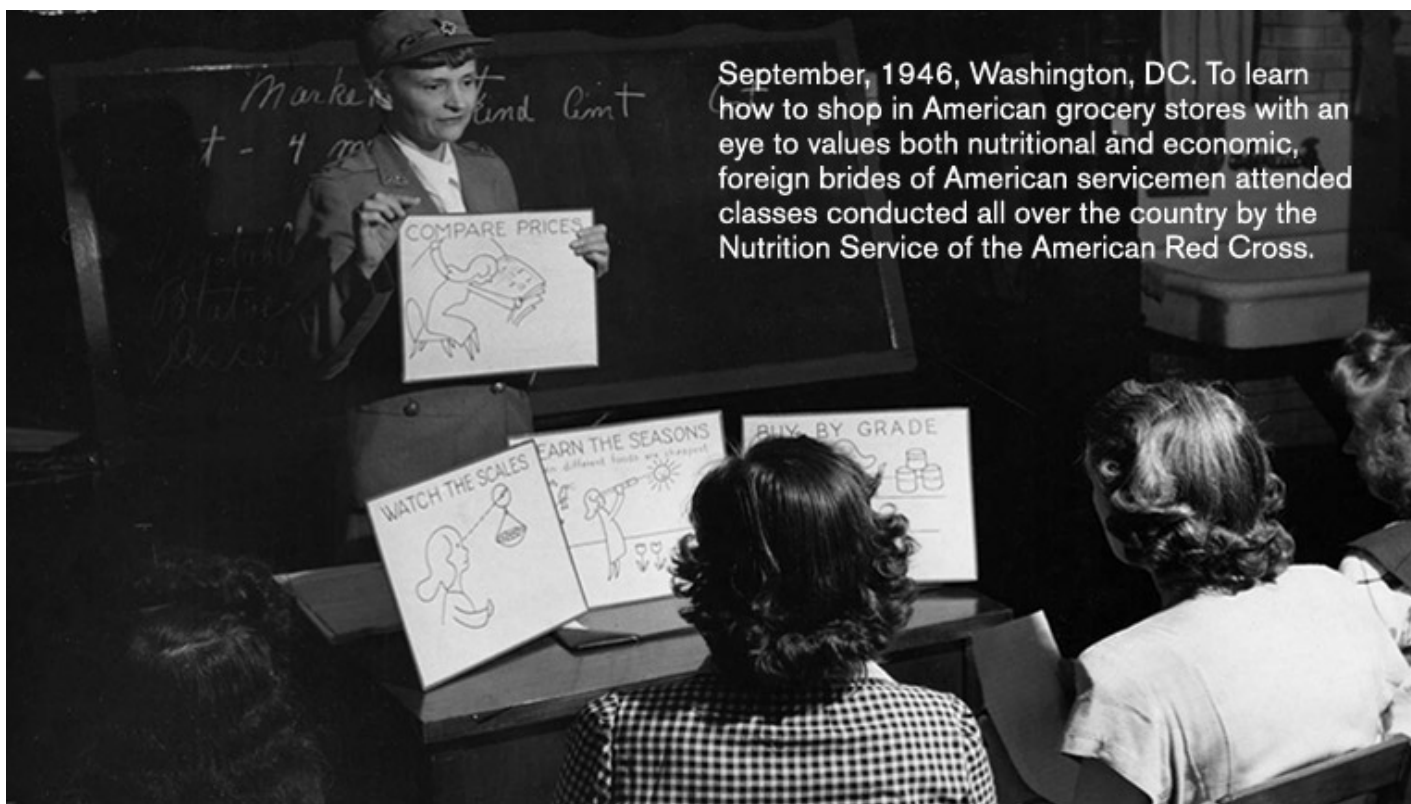
**Civilian War Aid.** The Red Cross, in cooperation with various federal agencies, introduced a domestic Civilian War Aid program in 1941 to be ready with relief for the civilian population in case of enemy attack. The height of its preparations came in 1943-1944, when the Red Cross prepared 49,700 shelters in communities thought susceptible to attack. The organization was ready to accommodate more than 4.6 million refugees and feed at least 13.2 million people daily. An estimated 1 million Red Cross volunteers received training for Civilian War Aid.

**Civilian War Relief.** Over the course of the war and its immediate aftermath, the American Red Cross provided relief to over 75 million civilians in war-devastated countries, 27 million of whom were children. Assistance included financial aid, food, clothing, medical and sanitary supplies, ambulance and automotive equipment, and transportation services. At war's end, the Red Cross distributed 9 million surplus POW packages to displaced persons. The total worth of this aid exceeded \$152 million.



**War Brides.** Over the course of the war, approximately 65,000 women married American soldiers and sailors. As hostilities wound down, these women, many with children, sought transport to new homes in the United States. In cooperation with the U.S. military and the State Department, the Red Cross provided care for these women and their children at assembly centers overseas and took steps to prepare them for life in the United States. Red Cross workers accompanied them on their sea voyages to America, met them at ports, and provided an array of services, some lasting for years, through local Red Cross chapters at their final points of destination. In all, the military outfitted 20 ships for this operation which provided transport for nearly 50,000 brides from Great Britain, 7,000 from France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, and 8,000 from Australia and New Zealand.

**Victory Book Campaigns.** The American Red Cross participated in Victory Book Campaigns in 1942 and 1943 in collaboration with the United Service Organizations (USO) and the American Library Association. These campaigns collected over 16 million books, magazines, and newspapers to meet a great need of servicemen for reading materials from home.



## War-Related Aspects of Ongoing Red Cross Services

**First Aid and Water Safety.** Soon after the war began, military authorities asked the Red Cross to offer first aid and water safety training for the armed forces, teaching men how to save lives and swim under battle conditions. Red Cross instructors taught sailors how to swim in water covered with burning fuel as might occur after a ship was torpedoed. They trained airmen to take care of themselves if forced to land on water and trained soldiers to swim carrying a full pack. In the later part of the war, the Red Cross introduced “convalescent swimming” to help rehabilitate men disabled by wounds and amputations or those suffering from battle fatigue. The Red Cross also offered first aid courses to the military. In all, the Red Cross issued 568,000 first aid and water safety certificates to members of the armed forces during the war years.



May 1942. Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Life Saving instructors hit the water with full uniform and equipment, minus guns, for a practice swim.

**Nursing Service.** During World War I, the Red Cross recruited nurses for service in the military, with some serving the armed forces directly as Red Cross nurses. During World War II, the Red Cross recruited nurses, enrolled them in the Red Cross Nursing Service, and certified those qualified to serve the military in the Army and Navy Nurses Corps. During the period 1939-1946, the Red Cross Nursing Service enrolled 212,000 nurses and certified half of them to the military. Of these, 71,000 actually served, representing a total of over 90 percent of all the nurses in service to the military during the war at home and overseas.

On the home front, Red Cross nurses undertook extended responsibilities due to the shortage of physicians and nursing staff caused by the war and outbreaks of communicable diseases fostered by the close quarters of military camps and congested metropolitan areas.

*... eight men [were] forced down in the South Pacific. One of the eight was injured and three others in their excitement shed their clothes. The remaining four used their functional swimming self-rescue methods and by inflating their uniforms were able to keep themselves and their companions afloat until they were rescued 26 hours later.*



1947. Louisville, Kentucky. Steady! A young Junior Red Cross member at the McFerran School in Louisville, Kentucky concentrating on threading a needle, used to make stuffed toys for children overseas.

**Junior Red Cross.** The membership of youth more than doubled over the war years and peaked at nearly 20 million members in 1945, a remarkable figure that represented 75 percent of the total school population. Juniors participated in the war effort by producing comfort items and clothing for the military, preparing gift boxes for children overseas, assisting with regular chapter activities, and becoming active in war-related programs, such as Victory Book collections and the operation of Victory Gardens. Juniors also made contributions to the National Children’s Fund that had been established after World War I to meet the emergency needs of children everywhere and which provided vital aid to children overseas in the aftermath of World War II.

**College Red Cross Units.** The extension of Red Cross chapter activities to college campuses occurred in 1942 and resulted in the participation of 187 institutions in Red Cross war-related and regular chapter activities. College students contributed to war fund campaigns, provided many hours of volunteer service, and enrolled in many Red Cross training courses.

## More Information

For more information about the American Red Cross during World War II see the following publications, all of which are out of print but available in most libraries:

*Foster Rhea Dulles, The American Red Cross: A History. NY: Harper and Brothers, 1950.*

*A general history the American Red Cross from its beginnings to 1950.*

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

*An illustrated history of the first century of the American Red Cross, 1881-1981.*

*Charles Hurd, The Compact History of the American Red Cross. NY: Hawthorn Books, 1959.*

*George Korson, At His Side: The Story of the American Red Cross Overseas in World War II. NY: Coward-McCann, 1945.*

*Contact American Red Cross Historical Programs for more information about American Red Cross history.*