

A story untold

Andrew Thompson looks back at the life of Joan Whittington, post-war pioneer of the British Red Cross



Joan Whittington with prisoner of war food parcels at national headquarters in 1956

Modern humanitarianism emerged from the shadow of the Second World War. It was during those next two decades that Leslie Kirkley at Oxfam and Janet Lacey at Inter-Church (later Christian) Aid transformed their organisations from local charities to international aid agencies.

Yet Oxfam and Christian Aid were following in the footsteps of the British Red Cross. As soon as peace was declared, Joan Whittington set about expanding its network of overseas branches – within six years of VE Day their number had tripled. Her two decades as Director of Overseas Branches saw her immersed in the violent upheavals of the end of Empire and the growing East-West rivalries of an emerging Cold War. As one of her colleagues recently remarked, “anyone interested in humanitarian aid knew her”. Yet strangely her story remains untold.

When interviewed on Desert Island Discs in 1970, Joan recalled wanting to be a doctor only to be told she wasn’t clever enough. The medical profession’s loss was the Red Cross’ gain. She joined in 1928 as a VAD, aged 21. War service took her from North Africa with the 8th army, where she set up a convalescent home in Tripoli, to Italy and Greece where as regional director of welfare 150 women were under her charge. After that she shuttled to and fro between field surgical units in Italy as travelling liaison officer, often under shellfire and living out of a Willys American jeep given to her by an American general which is on display at the Imperial War Museum today. By 1945 she was Regional Commander for the BRC in Italy, for which she was awarded an MBE.

By this time Joan had already demonstrated many of the qualities which won her the respect of colleagues and contributed to the reputation of the British Red Cross as one of the most influential of all National Red Cross societies. A disarming modesty, quiet efficiency and

remarkable organisational skills were key weapons in her armoury.

She forged a close working relationship with Lady Limerick, Vice-Chair of the Executive. Together, in a new age of air travel, they criss-crossed the globe. Joan’s nephew, Charles, recalls: “I was very fond of my Aunt Joan – we loved hearing about her trips to exotic places, and marvelled at the extraordinary number of Christmas cards she received from people she had helped all over the world.”

Joan and Lady Limerick extend the society’s horizons well beyond a war-torn Europe, trying to chart a future for a swathe of national Red Cross societies in newly independent African and Asian colonies. They found themselves in the midst of several bitter and bloody colonial emergencies. “We lived on fireworks and walked on hot coals”, one fellow worker recalled. They stamped their determination and dedication on the movement. Yet they were faced with moral dilemmas no less complex and demanding than those recently faced by NGOs in the Middle East – not least the blurring of lines between military intervention and humanitarian aid in counter-insurgency campaigns in Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus and Aden. Their story, one of an organisation largely and uniquely run and staffed by women, has echoes for today’s conflicts.

Awards A lifetime of ‘lovely challenges’

The dedication of a British Red Cross volunteer from Burnham-on-Sea, whose astonishing career with the charity spans seven decades, has been recognised during a quiet ceremony at her home.

Pegeen Hill MBE, 92, was awarded a 70-year badge-of-honour by Red Cross Somerset president Phil Rowe and chair of the Somerset Red Cross volunteer council in Norman Wood, in July.

Having originally signed up with the Red Cross as a VAD nurse in Bristol in 1941, Pegeen went on to represent the charity in numerous war-torn countries including newly-liberated France, Singapore, Japan, Ghana and Cyprus. In 1953, she was involved in the exchange of prisoners of war during the Korean War and in 1959 she helped secure the release of captured British servicemen in East Berlin.

After returning to the UK in 1968, Pegeen worked from the Red Cross headquarters in Taunton as county welfare officer. She was made an honorary vice-president of the Somerset branch and a life member of the Red Cross. After retiring in 1982, Pegeen continued volunteering locally, helping fundraise for the charity.

Reflecting on her amazing career, Pegeen said: “It was a question of being happy and doing something worthwhile, helping people. It was a challenge – a lovely challenge.

“I so admire the principles of the Red Cross. It was respected by everyone, everywhere. I would do anything for the Red Cross. They have been my family for so long.”

Obituaries

Dorothy Wallis died in August, aged 87.

Dorothy was an active volunteer at the Palmers Green and Southgate centre. She was a first aider throughout Enfield during the Second World War and after the war continued to carry out First Aid duties at many public events.

Dorothy was a committed and dedicated volunteer whose passion, dedication and commitment to the British Red Cross were demonstrated in many ways. With over 45 years of voluntary service to the organisation, Dorothy was awarded a Badge of Honour for devoted service in 1997.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

The original famous five

In February 1863 a temporary ‘Committee of Five’ formed in Geneva to begin organising the relief societies. The members of the Committee were: General Dufour, Gustave Moynier, Dr Appia, Dr Maunoir and Henry Dunant. The Committee of Five later became the International Committee of the Red Cross. British representatives attended the first Red Cross conference held in Geneva, which succeeded in drafting resolutions and recommendations that would be used when national relief societies were organised. By the end of 1863, the founding charter of the Red Cross was drawn up and the first society was formed in Württemberg.



Henry Dunant had also proposed that countries should adopt an international agreement that would recognise the status of medical services and of the wounded on the battlefield. In 1864, the Swiss government called a second conference which resulted in the drafting of a convention that, when ratified and agreed by governments, bound them to give humane treatment to the sick and wounded in war and protect those who cared for them. This was known as the First Geneva Convention.