

# Serving those who served their country

Shanelle Manderson traces the development of the Red Shield Services and its work during the Second World War

**I**n 1894 The Salvation Army's Naval and Military League was established to support Salvationist sailors and soldiers. It soon started to provide a broader service to the armed forces and had set up a number of naval and military homes. Several years later the Army's war-work began when the League supported British troops during the Boer War in South Africa.



Mary Murray, c1915

Within a month of the outbreak of the war a party of four, headed by Staff-Captain Mary Murray, the daughter of a military general, arrived in Cape Town. A rough canvas structure set up for soldiers on the battlefield at Estcourt camp in Natal became the first Salvation Army 'hut'. It opened in 1900, and many others were set up elsewhere later.

After ten months Mary became unwell and had to return to England. However, the foundation had been laid for the widespread service the Army would later carry out in this sphere, and in 1901 Mary was appointed secretary of the League.

By 1914 the success of the huts in providing food and shelter in the UK



led to the demand for their introduction into territory occupied by the British troops in France. Soon the Army was represented in all the big depots across the Channel. Salvation meetings were held in huts in every location. In France alone more than 20,000 soldiers sought salvation. The Army also provided motor ambulances, refreshment huts in military camps, and parcels of food and clothing for servicemen on the various fronts, as well as to prisoners of war. Some officers served as chaplains and female officers were also involved in hospital visitation.

In 1917 Commander Evangeline Booth, leader of The Salvation Army in the United States, created a National War Board to meet the needs of the American Expeditionary Forces. Salvationists were sent to Europe, including 'doughnut girls', who served food – mostly doughnuts – to soldiers and often worked in field hospitals.

During the Second World War the League became known as the Red Shield. The distinctive Salvation Army symbol appeared on the mobile canteens that provided tea, chewing gum, soap, toothpaste and sewing kits

to military personnel at camp sites, aerodromes and aircraft and barrage balloon depots. Around 425 officers, 896 paid workers and 1,250 volunteers from the UK's Red Shield Department were engaged in work around the world. The canteens arrived in occupied Europe days after the D-Day landings and closely followed the advance of Allied troops into Germany. The Red Shield also provided international hostels and clubs for servicemen.

Pat Roberts (Bedford Congress Hall) began working for the Red Shield in the 1940s.

'I was only 14 but in those days we started working from a young age,' she says. 'I was posted to King's Cross station. A lot of troops were coming home or going back to posts via the station and so they would come to the mobile canteen. I'd serve tea and the troops would have conversations with us and Salvation Army officers.'

'The terrible, sad stories were heartbreaking but the officers would listen, pray with troops and cater to them in whatever way they could.'

'One of the saddest stories I can remember was one man who was so excited to be going to visit his wife. He

later learnt she had a child with someone else and was expecting another. He was so distraught. Three or four officers tried to console him and one offered for the man to stay with him for the rest of his leave. He declined and later took his life. It was so tragic.'

Pat also recalls other tragedies caused by the war: 'It was terrible watching British Spitfires and German planes fighting above you. You could hardly see the sky at times. There were so many search lights and barrage balloons everywhere. The Blitz really was a horrible time.'

'Other British cities were less severely assaulted, but in London, the biggest bang was saved for the last,' she adds. 'Luftwaffe planes dropped more than 700 tonnes of explosives in a relentless barrage. For all those that took the worst of it, it seemed the night would never end. Thousands of fires raged through buildings and streets everywhere were devastated.'

Approximately 1,500 Londoners were killed and 2,000 seriously injured that night.

'Although it was a sad and hard time, the Army was always there. The well-known saying "Where there is a need, there is The Salvation Army" was certainly true in the war years,' adds Pat.

In many ways the Army saved Pat's life. When she was 12 years old, she and her five siblings were found in an underground shelter by Army officers and taken in after their mother had been killed in daytime air raids. They were clothed, fed and found homes until they were a little older. Although she and her siblings were separated, Pat never forgot how the Army had looked after them.

A year after leaving the folk with whom she was staying Pat found herself homeless and in the Army's Women's Social Work building in Hackney. There Major Miriam Richards took Pat under her wing. She helped her get a room in Hopetown hostel before moving her to somewhere more permanent and securing her a job at the Red Shield.

'I enjoyed everything about the job. It was a sad but lovely job because the Army was great to us. They helped put me on my feet.

'If it wasn't for the Red Shield, Major Miriam and The Salvation Army I've often wondered where I'd be today. The Army put me on the right track and I've been with the Army ever since. I have a lot to be thankful for.'



*Red Shield mobile canteen*



*Red Shield club*



*Pat (right) and friends celebrate their 90th birthdays at Bedford Congress Hall earlier this year*