100 years of Red Cross donated to NSW State Library

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Australian Red Cross is donating 100 years of its NSW archive to the State Library of NSW, providing an extraordinary record of a global organisation that was practically launched in Australia with a pair of hand-made knitted socks, it was announced today.

According to NSW State Librarian & Chief Executive, Alex Byrne: “Red Cross has been on the front of almost every significant event in recent history starting with the First World War to more recent natural disasters – so this significant archive, dating from 1914 to 2014, is an invaluable addition to the State Library’s rich collections relating to life in Australia.”

The archive tells the story of Red Cross’ humanitarian work, its volunteers, supporters and the people it has helped across NSW through some 7,400 photographs, over 500 boxes of manuscripts, posters and memorabilia, 40 framed pictures and Red Cross publications.

In August 1914 – soon after the outbreak of the First World War – Red Cross was formally established in Australia. The desire to assist the war effort was so strong that by November 1914, 88 urban branches and 249 country branches of Red Cross had opened up across NSW. Groups of volunteers (mostly women) knitted socks, rolled bandages and prepared comfort parcels to send to the troops.

Australian Red Cross Executive Director NSW Jody Broun says, ”That selfless desire to help those in need has taken Red Cross volunteers to all corners of Australia during times of conflict and disaster.

“The archive also documents our important day-to-day work; like supporting isolated older people, helping families who are doing it tough, and providing assistance to people who have crossed the globe in search of a safe home,” she says.

“Over the next two years we’ll be transferring 100 years of our NSW division archives to the State Library of NSW where they will be preserved, gradually digitised and made available to students, historians and members of the public,” says Ms Broun.

Australian Red Cross historian and Chair of History at Flinders University, Professor Melanie Oppenheimer says that she has been waiting 30 years for this moment.

“Few people realise the depth and breadth of this extraordinary humanitarian organisation over time,” says Professor Oppenheimer. “I am thrilled that through this generous donation to the State Library, this priceless collection of Australia’s pre-eminent charitable organisation will be preserved for future generations.”
To celebrate this significant donation to the State Library, a small selection of unique items from the Red Cross archive will go on display in the Library’s Amaze Gallery from 12 August to 12 September 2016, including: a 1914 collection tin, a pattern for the red cape worn by girls in the junior Red Cross, a WWI photo album featuring the Anzac Buffet and Spanish Influenza Epidemic and a trauma teddy and knitting pattern.

Red Cross in Australia – brief history
On 13 August 1914, nine days after the outbreak of World War 1, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, wife of the Governor-General, formed a Branch of the British Red Cross at Government House Melbourne. Lady Munro-Ferguson had been a member of the British Red Cross in Fife Scotland and was familiar with the role the organisation performed in Britain. She called on the wives of the Governors in each Australian state to form a local committee in each capital city, which they readily agreed to do. Red Cross was thus formally established in Australia. Very quickly, Red Cross became the premier wartime voluntary charity, especially appealing to Australian women across the nation.

Melanie Oppenheimer and Jody Broun are available for interviews.

For publicity images, interviews and more information, please contact:
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