

Lady Smith-Dorrien's Hospital Bag Fund

Lady Olive Crofton Smith-Dorrien (nee Schneider), (1881-1951) was the wife of General Sir Horace Lockwood Smith-Dorrien (1858-1930). They had three sons, and two (informally) adopted daughters. Lady Smith-Dorrien was President of the Blue Cross and she was particularly involved in work to relieve the suffering of horses during WW1. She was Principal of the Royal School of Needlework (from 1932), during which time the school were responsible for the embroidery of the Queen's train, the canopy and two chairs used at the coronation of King George VI in 1937. During WW1 she was responsible for the creation of the Hospital Bag Fund, a scheme she revived when hostilities broke out again at the start of WWII.

The Lady Smith-Dorrien Hospital Bag Fund was set up when Lady Smith-Dorrien heard from a nurse of the need for somewhere to store valuables of the sick and wounded when they were admitted to hospitals and casualty clearing stationsⁱ. By 1st January 1916 the fund was registered by the Director General of Voluntary Organisations, which then estimated that 60,000 bags a month were required. At that date over 560,000 bags had already been sent to hospital ships, medical units, field hospitals both in Europe and further afield. By the end of the war it was estimated more than 5,000,000 bags had been sewn and distributed.

In 1916, a letter from the charity explained how the scheme workedⁱⁱ. Originally a casualty, on admission at the clearing station, would have his uniform removed to aid treatment. The contents of pockets were placed on the floor beside his bed or under his pillow - more often than not they ended up scattered and lost. The simple, labelled, drawstring bags provided by the charity meant that personal possessions were kept together. Not only for personal items, Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien pointed out the bags usefulness in storing the men's pay-sheets, the loss of which was a logistical nightmare for the militaryⁱⁱⁱ.

The Times newspaper regularly reported on the use of the bags which went by a variety of names including "Treasure Bags", "Blighty Bags", "Sister Susie Bags" or "Dorothy Bags", and encouraged their readers to help in their manufacture. They reported that bags were made by men and women, young, old and disabled. They reported on one elderly man (too old and infirm to fight) who, after a day of munitions work, would spend the rest of his time making bags. They reported another elderly man who made thousands of bags, cutting his fabric out on his billiard table^{iv}.

Anyone wishing to help in these appeals could apply for fabric, labels and tapes, and request a sample bag and instructions. Or volunteers could use their own suitable fabrics – some ladies used chintz curtains no longer needed after a house move, "washing them first of course"^v. The increasing cost of materials rose throughout the war so appeals were also made for funds to finance the scheme by those "who have not the time to make bags"^{vi} and they reported that all the major fabric suppliers were keeping their costs to a minimum^{vii}. For those who could not wait for instructions they were advised to make bags measuring 12 inches by 14 inches of unbleached calico or any new, strong washable fabric, adding that flowered cretonne (a strong, linen or cotton) was preferred by the wounded. On one hospital ship where plain and flowered bags were handed out, "the plain ones mysteriously disappeared through the portholes and the "losers" applied for others^{viii}. The flowered fabric was said to be "cheering after the drabness of khaki everywhere" and were a reminder of "the cushions and covers at home"^{ix}.

Each bag was labelled with a piece of glazed calico (2" by 4") sewn 2" from the bottom of the bag. Then two tapes were run in separately to create the cord to close the bag and also provide a means to hold or hang them. In 1918 the *Times* reported how "the sick are like children in their likes and dislikes, and the bad cases generally insist on having their little bag hung where they can see it and reach it easily"^x.

Even with a need for over 100,000 a month, it was reported that despite being "wonderful workers", some elderly ladies had an "inveterate love of embroidering something on each bag". One bag picked up in an ambulance car and returned to the headquarters had a "woolly black cat with red and white and blue ribbons on it"^{xi}.

A record was kept of who made bags and how many – for anyone making over 1000 bags they were rewarded with a bronze badge. The badges consisted of the letters VW interlaced (standing for "voluntary worker") surmounted by a crown^{xii}. *The Times* were proud to announce that volunteers included "duchesses, busy women in the suburbs, eager school girls and the myriad workers at the surgical aid societies"^{xiii}.

If the men came home they might be seen with their bags hung from their necks "feeling they are safest there"^{xiv}. For those men who did not come home, it was these same bags still containing their treasured possessions that were returned to their family. One mother sent the fund 10s in memory of her son who had died two years previously, "in memory of a little chintz bag that meant a great deal to her". In her letter she said that her son, who "was shot through the head and never recovered consciousness" ... "having about his neck a small bag with his permanent address they sent me many little treasures, and above all a diary containing his notes since the first day of the war. This is the greatest treasure I could have, and I am sure without the little bag it would never have been sent to me."^{xv}

As well as containing letters from family and loved ones, they could also hold postcards and photos. Personal items and "trifles" were what "the fighting man will not be parted from, even when he goes over the top"^{xvi}. Archaeological digs at sites such as Frommels have discovered heart-shaped leather pouches, coins and crosses. A copy of the bible was given to every soldier as part of his kit, and could easily fit in the bag. Many would have found solace from this, at a time when a large proportion of the population were church goers. However it seems that not all put their faith in God alone, and other lucky charms popular during the First World War were "Fumsup"^{xvii} and "Touchwood" items^{xviii}, as well as miniature teddy bears about 3½" high. Another small item, that might have been put in a bag, were sachets of dried lavender. Receiving in error a box of tiny muslin lavender bags while tending the wounded of the Somme, Nurse Winifred Kenyon learnt that pinning these to the pillows of the worst cases was calming not only because it masked the stench of illness, but it was also a reminder of home.^{xix}

The Hospital Bag Fund was just one of a range of small schemes set up during WW1 – practical, morale boosting, its effects were far reaching.

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ⁱ *The Times*, 28 August 1917, p.19 (issue 41568)

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http://dgtl.kbr.be:8881//exlibris/dtl/d3_1/apache_media/L2V4bGlicmlzL2R0bC9kM18xL2FwYWNoZV9tZWRpYS8xMDk0NTM=.pdf [accessed: 12.8.15]

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Times*, 31 August 1917, p.3 (issue 41571)

^{iv} *The Times*, 31 August 1917, p.3 (issue 41571)

^v *The Times*, 31 August 1917, p.3 (issue 41571)

^{vi} *The Times*, 28 August 1917, p.9 (issue 41568)

^{vii} *The Times*, 28 November 1917, p.9 (issue 41647)

^{viii} *The Times*, 28 August 1917, p.9 (issue 41568)

^{ix} *The Times*, 28 August 1917, p.9 (issue 41568)

^x *The Times* 5 October 1918, p.4 (issue 41913)

^{xi} *The Times*, 28 August 1917, p.9 (issue 41568)

^{xii} *The Times*, 28 November 1917, p.9 (issue 41647)

^{xiii} *The Times*, 28 August 1917, p.9 (issue 41568)

^{xiv} *The Times*, 5 October 1917, p.4 (issue 41913)

^{xv} *The Times*, 28 August 1917, p.9 (issue 41568)

^{xvi} *The Times*, 28 November 1917, p.9 (issue 41647)

^{xvii} *Fumsup* was a traditional “lucky” character dating from the Victorian era, but soared in popularity during WW1 [see - <http://www.sandysvintagecharms.co.uk/charminformationfumsup.asp> for more information – accessed 12.8.15]

^{xviii} *It's a Long Way to Tipperary: British and Irish Nurses in the Great War* by Yvonne McEwan.

^{xix} From memoirs reported in *Walking Wounded* by Emily Mayhew, on Daily Mail website, 18 October 2013 [<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2466367/Thought-worse-getting-killed-trenches-A-haunting-book-lays-bare-blood-soaked-days-wounded-envied-dead.html> – accessed 12.8.2015]