Speech

Address By

His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd)

On the occasion of

Launch of 'The Power of Humanity—100 years of Australian Red Cross'

Government House, Canberra
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I am very pleased, in what is my first act as patron of Australian Red Cross, to host this important event for one of Australia’s most cherished charitable organisations.

Just last week I was in Glasgow and attended a commemoration ceremony to mark 100 years since the start of the Great War. It was a poignant and solemn occasion.

It was certainly very special that a century on from the declaration of war, people from all over the world would gather to honour the memory of those lost.

It was a testament to how the brutality and horror of those four years have echoed down the ages.

And it was a demonstration of how we are still affected by this period of time—how we live today with its legacy.

We demonstrate the enduring nature of this legacy again today.

However, this time we are able to focus on the positive. Because sometimes the very worst in circumstances can bring out the very best in people.

And that is how the Red Cross began in Australia, just nine days after the start of the First World War.

Though most of us realise our national branch of the Red Cross was borne out of the trials and tribulations of the Great War, that it happened so soon after war was declared is truly remarkable.

It is a testament to the desire of ordinary Australians to do their part to contribute to the war effort—to support the soldiers, to raise money, to bring people together.

It also shows how the fundamental humanitarian principles of the Red Cross—people helping people—have always been able to attract and inspire people to action.

After just four months, the Australian Red Cross had 88 city and 249 country branches in New South Wales alone.

By the end of the war four years later, Red Cross volunteers numbered in their hundreds of thousands, and the Australian Red Cross would go on to become the largest charitable organisation in the nation.

Thus began a compassionate movement of duty, devotion and selflessness so strong that one hundred years later the Australian Red Cross is still a beacon of hope, a source of comfort and trusted base of assistance to people right across our nation.

In wartime, you raised money, provided information, and offered assistance to the sick, wounded, maimed. In times of peace, you focused—as you still do—on social welfare, national emergencies, natural disasters, the blood service and first aid programs.
In 1943, Edith Grieve designed a Red Cross poster that said it perfectly.

Alongside the Red Cross symbol were the words, ‘Hope for all mankind. In war and peace’.

I have great personal admiration for the women and men of the Australian Red Cross.

I have witnessed your care and devotion in both war and peace. Here at home—after Cyclone Tracey and Cyclone Larry—and overseas—in Vietnam and East Timor—I worked alongside the Australian Red Cross.

I know the difference you make.

I have seen how much faith Australians have in your organisation.

I can think of no better way to mark the centenary of the Australian Red Cross than by paying tribute to the women and men who for one hundred years have devoted themselves to helping others.

To share the story of those people whose collective effort has demonstrated ‘The power of humanity’—a fitting title of the book we are gathered today to celebrate.

Melanie Oppenheimer, a Professor of History at Flinders University, has devoted years to researching Red Cross and writing this book.

And we are fortunate she has—it is an uplifting and inspiring account of generations of Australians, people from all walks of life, who have generously devoted themselves to Red Cross and its humanitarian values.

I congratulate Professor Oppenheimer for her significant efforts in producing this absorbing account of how in changing times, the Red Cross has endured.

How over the past century the Australian Red Cross has modernised and adapted, embraced change and technology.

Yet in doing so, has stayed true and maintained those fundamental values that were at the heart of the organisation a century ago—selflessness, compassion, care, and service to our nation.

Australians know that when they face their darkest times, Red Cross will be there—because they always have been.

It is now my great pleasure to officially launch Professor Melanie Oppenheimer’s ‘The Power of Humanity—100 years of Australian Red Cross’.

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