

# Military Hospitals

The West Highlands has had a long association with military forces and the large fort at Fort William would probably have had some formal medical facility. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during both world wars, large parts of the Highlands were used for military training and this was particularly the case for Lochaber.

## World War 1

In 1909, the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) movement was established and, during World War 1, VAD Convalescent Hospitals for military personnel were set up and run by the Scottish Red Cross. Many towns had a VAD Hospital usually in large houses which were loaned by their owners and run by the local Red Cross branch. VAD nurses were volunteers who were partially trained<sup>i</sup> and VAD hospitals had at least one fully trained nurse with a commandant<sup>ii</sup> in overall charge. Patients were military personnel who were convalescent or suffering from non-life-threatening injuries. Red Cross VAD hospitals generally closed once the war was over.

There was also local wartime support for hospitals outwith the area. The Ralston Hospital near Paisley had a 'Fort William bed' supported by donations e.g. from the St Andrews church in Fort William and the Mallaig and Morar Nursing Association supported a bed in Bellahouston Military Hospital, Glasgow.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> In 1915 a VAD nurse seems to have filled in for the Fort William district nurse.

<sup>ii</sup> The commandant was in overall charge of the hospital but the nurse and local doctor, who normally gave free treatment, dealt with medical aspects.

## Fort Augustus Abbey VAD Hospital



In November 1914, the Fort Augustus branch of the Scottish Red Cross, under the chair of Mrs Ellice of Invergarry, opened a VAD hospital in Fort Augustus Abbey. The commandant was Miss Graham. It seems to have received its first patients, Belgian soldiers, around February 1915 and, following their departure, Gordon Highlanders were accommodated. However, the branch requested that preference be given to the local regiment, the Cameron Highlanders and, by mid-1915, the casualties were entirely from that regiment.<sup>i</sup> The hospital could accommodate 50 patients and it had usually at least 30. By May 1917, it had treated over 400 casualties.<sup>2</sup>

The photo above shows the hospital patients and staff and is likely to be from late 1914 or early 1915 given that the patients resemble Belgians more than regular Scottish soldiers. From her uniform, the lady front left is likely to be the nurse in charge.

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<sup>i</sup> Later, there seems to have been soldiers from all different regiments.

VAD hospitals were financed by a combination of government grants and charity donations. Much of the furniture, bedding and equipment was donated or loaned by the local community and each area had depots to receive the large amounts of such donations regularly made. There was continual fund raising including fetes and concerts. Every other week in the press, Mrs Ellice acknowledged several donations of food and household supplies (including 24 rabbits and two cartloads of turnips in December 1916). Donations also came from War Work Parties, both local, the Spean Bridge one gave 40 pairs of socks and 6 shirts in August 1916, and from further afield such as Pollockshields and Folkstone.<sup>3</sup>

The hospital closed in 1918.

## Lochiel Arms Hotel, Banavie, Fort William



In 1917, the Lochiel Arms Hotel at Banavie was given, rent free, by Lochiel as a Red Cross Hospital for convalescent officers and it had its first detachment by August.<sup>4</sup> Lochiel also donated the furniture but charged a sum to cover depreciation.<sup>5</sup> Like the Abbey Hospital, it acknowledged weekly, in the local press, donations of food, household goods and items to entertain the officers. The Scottish Red Cross apparently spent over £2000 on it up until the end of 1917 which seems very high for the short time.<sup>6</sup> Like the Abbey Hospital, it was staffed by volunteers with a fully trained nurse in charge. Nurse Annie Borthwick was appointed in late 1917<sup>7</sup> and Nurse Locke was appointed in mid-1918.<sup>8</sup> Reports in 1917 suggest around 70 officers were accommodated and those nearing recovery were reported as shooting stags and catching salmon. The officers gave several fund raising concerts in aid of local charities as well as printing a news sheet, *The Banavie Observer*. The hospital seems to have closed in April 1919 when a leaving card with 30 officer's names was left. By then it was being advertised again as the Lochiel Arms Hotel.<sup>9</sup>

**World War 2** again saw the Lochaber area as a military training area. Inverailort Castle was taken over as a special training centre and nearby Glenshian Lodge became a field hospital.<sup>10</sup> Further south, Alltshellach House (now a hotel) in North Ballachulish became a commando hospital. Nearby Dunbeg House was used as the nurses' residence.<sup>11</sup>

Glencoe House (see separate file) and Creagdhu House, Onich (now Lord of the Loch Hotel) were taken over as military convalescent hospitals. However, it became clear that there was insufficient demand for two facilities. At Creagdhu, staff quarters were cramped apparently because the commandant used a substantial part of the house for her own accommodation. The house lacked storage space and had no central heating. By April 1941, it had never exceeded six patients and, in June, it was put on a care and maintenance basis.<sup>i</sup> Patients were transferred to Glencoe Hospital and the staff transferred to the new EMS Hospital at Raigmore, Inverness which was just being completed. The staff included Miss Macmillan, Raigmore's newly appointed first matron.<sup>12</sup>

In Kinlochleven during World War 1 there was a large camp for POWs<sup>ii</sup> who worked on building access roads to the village which, until then, still communicated mainly by sea. The large camp had its own hospital. During World War 2, workers who stayed in hostels or lodgings at Kinlochleven could use Glencoe Hospital, except for surgical cases which were treated at the Belford Hospital or in Glasgow.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> It was retained for emergency use but never required.

<sup>ii</sup> Dr Lachlan Grant was its Medical Officer (Caledonian Medical Journal October 1916)

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Oban Times 21 October 1916, 10 November 1917
- <sup>2</sup> Inverness Courier 3 September 1917 p2: Oban Times 5 May 1917
- <sup>3</sup> Oban Times courtesy of Jean Cameron
- <sup>4</sup> Picture courtesy of Aberdeen University
- <sup>5</sup> Oban Times 11 August 1917: Letter 24 December 1917 from Charles Mackenzie, Lochiel Estates Highland Archive Service
- <sup>6</sup> Red Cross 1917 Accounts quoted in the Oban Times 6 April 1918
- <sup>7</sup> British Journal of Nursing 10 November 1917
- <sup>8</sup> British Journal of Nursing 17 August 1918
- <sup>9</sup> Oban Times 22 September 1917, 3 November 1917, 10 November 1917, 8 December 1917: Great War Forum website
- <sup>10</sup> Miers Mary, *The Western Seaboard* 2008
- <sup>11</sup> Highland Historic Environmental Record
- <sup>12</sup> Letter from Dr Russell Martin in Glencoe Maternity Hospital File National Records of Scotland
- <sup>13</sup> Gregor M and Crichton R *From Croft to Factory* Edinburgh 1946