Royal Australian Army Medical Corps (RAAMC)

Pre-Federation – British Medical Support to the Australian Colonies

A detachment of the Royal Marine Light Infantry arrived with the first fleet at Sydney Cove in 1788. It is amongst these infantrymen that the proud history of the RAAMC begins. A part of this light infantry was a medical team of five Medical Officers under the supervision of principal surgeon John White.

With the arrival of the second fleet in 1790, came a further group of colonists and the newly founded New South Wales Corps that replaced the Marine detachment. Their Regimental Surgeon was John Harris, who took up his station at Parramatta in 1791. He has the distinction of being the first Army Medical Officer in the Colony.

Following the return to the United Kingdom of the New South Wales Corps in 1810, small British garrisons, often of only Company strength, were stationed in Sydney. Naturally other leading settlements also had the garrisons detached to their area. Their own surgeons or assistants, along with a small medical establishment, generally accompanied each detachment. The function of the surgeons was mainly attendance of official personnel and superintendents of public hospitals.

Pre-Federation – Local Medical Support to the Australian Colonies

In 1803 even though the rum traffic was rife, and the New South Wales Corps was still in power, the need to recruit local volunteers was apparent. Consequently the Loyal Sydney and Parramatta Association was raised. Medical facilities were included with this association, and others similar to it, over the next 60 years.

In Victoria in 1854, the Melbourne Volunteer Rifle Regiment, later to be known as the Victorian Volunteer Artillery Regiment, was established with a strength of approximately 2000 men, and in 1860 when the Regular British Garrison was ordered to New Zealand, it was replaced by these volunteers. These volunteer units were mainly Artillery and Infantry, and following the British pattern included medical personnel in their establishments. Thus in 1870 when a regular force was enrolled in New South Wales, it boasted a medical staff of one staff surgeon, five surgeons and eleven assistant surgeons. Likewise in other colonies, Medical Officers were recruited for part time duties.

The regular force that was enrolled in NSW in 1870 consisted of one Battery and two Companies of Artillery, and in 1871 Dr W.J. Bedford was appointed Staff Surgeon to this unit, becoming the first regular Australian Army Medical Officer in the defence forces of the colony.

The first hallmark in the history of the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC) came in 1885 when a contingent of 700 volunteers was raised in NSW to embark for South Africa and the Sudan Campaign. Among these 700 men was an Ambulance Corps numbering 34 personnel. It included three Medical Officers. In command of this corps was Staff Surgeon W.D.C. Williams, holding the relative rank of Major. His other two surgeons holding the relative rank of Captain were Surgeons Glanville and Proudfoot. This section boasted entire self containment, with equipment such as five ambulance wagons, two store carts, a water cart, and 26 horses.

Under the guidance and enthusiasm of Staff Surgeon Williams the Medical Services in NSW grew dramatically, and on his recommendation to the Commandant of that state, in 1888 both Officers and Other Ranks were incorporated into the one organisation – The New South Wales Medical Staff Corps. This Corps consisted of one Principal Medical Officer, four surgeons, and 63 Other Ranks. The following year in 1889 Staff Surgeon Williams was appointed officially as the Principal Medical Officer and promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

In 1891, from the ranks of the NSW Medical Staff Corps, a Permanent Staff Corps was recruited to act as a small cadre to perform administrative and instructional duties.

The years between 1899 and 1902 brought about some very significant changes within the Corps. The South African War broke out in 1899 and as a consequence each Australian Colony raised and equipped several contingents for the campaign.

A total of four contingents embarked for overseas, and in all, the medical support consisted of 30 Medical Officers, 338 Other Ranks, 265 horses, 16 ambulance wagons and 46 transport carts. This enabled the detachment to supply stretcher bearers and fully manned and equipped Field Hospitals.

The medical facilities came under the control of the Principal Medical Officer of the British Forces, who was continuously impressed with their mobility and how good and practical its equipment was.

Lord Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces sent a letter of thanks to the NSW Government. This letter indicated that the units served with great distinction and courage.
On the 24 July 1900 at Veredfort, the first Australian Victoria Cross was awarded. It was presented to Captain N.R. Howse who went out under fire, and picked up a wounded man and carried him to a place of shelter.

**Post Federation Medical Support**

During the Boer War in 1901 a single Commonwealth or Federal Government was inaugurated. Colonel Williams who was then the Commander of the Medical Detachments in South Africa, was recalled to Australia to organise the Medical Corps. In 1902 he organised and dispatched to South Africa the final Medical Contingent. It comprised representatives from each state of the Commonwealth. General Routine Order No. 115 of 21 July 1902 published an extract of the Commonwealth of Australia Gazette No. 34 which provisionally appointed Colonel William Daniel Campbell Williams CB to be Director General of Medical Services effective 1 April 1902.

General Routine Order No. 123 of 30 July 1902 promulgated that “the existing Medical Services of the various states should be organised on one similar basis and should be reconstructed and organised so as to form one Corps, the Australian Army Medical Corps, to take effect on and from 1 July 1902”.

General Routine Order No. 269 on 23 November 1903 published an extract of the Commonwealth of Australia Gazette No. 65 which stated “The whole Commonwealth or Federal Government was inaugurated of the existing Army Medical Services of each State and will be dealt with as one Corps, and will be styled the Australian Army Medical Corps to take effect on and from 1 July 1903”.

At this time the Permanent Medical Services consisted of small army cadres posted to Militia units for care of the permanent forces, maintenance of vehicles and equipment and training of personnel.

From this it is obvious that the Militia and volunteer forces provided the bulk of medical support, to the extent that by 1914 at the outbreak of World War I, the medical services numbered as follows:

a. Permanent Force - four AAMC Officers and 29 Other Ranks; and
b. Militia and Citizen Forces - 183 AAMC Officers and 1649 Other Ranks.

This was largely brought on by the introduction of Universal Military Training in 1911.

Since the commencement of World War I, the AAMC has provided support for every action in which Australia has been committed.

The Corps served with great distinction, courage and conviction during World War I:

a. 1915 - Gallipoli;
b. 1916-1918 - Palestine and Syria ; and
c. 1916-1918 - France and Belgium.

In the campaign at Gallipoli the most well known of individual acts of heroism occurred.

Private John “Simpson” Kirkpatrick used a donkey to carry wounded soldiers from the battlefield to the beaches for treatment and evacuation. He worked untiringly, and in appalling conditions without regard for his own safety. He was killed in the performance of his duty on 19 May 1915. The Second Australian Imperial Force was raised for service in World War II. The medical units as part of this force served with great dedication and success in places such as: Greece, Crete, Syria, Malaya, Middle East and Papua New Guinea.

The Corps has provided medical support in all theatres since the end of World War II serving in:

a. 1950 – 53 - Korea;
b. 1957 - 59 - The Malayan Emergency;
c. 1965 - 66 - The Indonesian Confrontation; and
d. 1966 - 72 - South Vietnam.

Since the Vietnam War RAAMC personnel have served in: Rhodesia, Namibia, The Gulf War, Northern Iraq, Sinai, Western Sahara, Somalia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Mozambique, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and East Timor.

**The Corps Badge**

The basic plate of the Corps badge is the eight-pointed Star of the Order of the Garter. This is derived from the pattern of the Shako or Helmet Plate that was universally adopted by the British Army in 1822. The
reason for its adoption is obscure, but with various alterations it remained the basic plate for almost all Infantry Regiments and some services, including Medical, until 1914.

In 1888, a badge similar to our present badge identified the NSW Medical Staff Corps. The badge consisted of the base plate that was the eight-pointed Star of the Order of the Garter surrounded by a laurel wreath. The wreath implies a symbol of excellence. It stems from ancient Greek times when champions were crowned with a wreath for their achievements. The badge was crested with the St Edward’s Crown. The central feature of the badge was a cut out cross-backed by a piece of scarlet facing cloth. On the scroll at the base were the words “Medical Staff Corps”.

After Federation and the formation of the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC), the badge remained basically the same except that the title “Australian Army Medical Corps” appeared in a circle surrounding the Red Cross. The Imperial Crown and the motto “Paulatim” was inscribed on the scroll that replaced the St Edward’s Crown.

In 1917 a new badge was introduced. This was an oxidised seven pointed star with the Rod of Aesculopius (Staff and Serpent), as the central feature. The Staff and Serpent were taken from olden times when these symbols represented magician or healer. The scroll at the base of the badge was inscribed “AAMC”, and the motto “Paulatim” had been removed.

In 1929, the present badge was introduced again with the motto “Paulatim”. The only variations since 1930 have been the addition of “Royal” to the title in 1948 and the Imperial Crown replacing the St Edward’s Crown after the coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

The Corps Motto

Surgeon-General Colonel W.D.C. Williams is the man credited with bestowing the Corps Motto on the Australian Army Medical Corps.

As the Principal Medical Officer of the New South Wales Medical Staff Corps, LTCOL W.D.C. Williams first introduced the motto “Paulatim” during an address to the United Services Institute in 1893 in which he stated:

“Regimental traditions are the sheet anchor of that national pride which encourages a soldier to look to his own regiment or service as second to none under arms - and when we consider the slow growth of the Medical Services, not only in the Colonies, but all over the world, springing from seed sown on none too favourable ground, badly cared for in their early growth, occasionally pruned to such an extent so as to cut them down all together, may I suggest a motto which conveys in one word the life history and growth of the Medical Services and could most fittingly be adopted. I give you Paulatim - little by little”.

RAAMC Flag

On 28 Mar 51 approval was sought to adopt the RAMC Flag as the RAAMC Flag.

Approval was granted 7 March 52.

The RAAMC Flag comprises three horizontal stripes of equal width made of the three Corps Colours:

- Dull Cherry - top;
- Blue - in the centre; and
- Old Gold - at the bottom.

The selection of the three Corps Colours are based on:

- Dull Cherry - This colour is common to all Armies as the facing for Medical personnel uniforms; probably because it resembles dried blood.
- Blue - This was the colour of the OR’s uniform of the Medical Staff Corps at the time of the formation of the RAMC (1898).
- Old Gold - This colour denotes Royal.