

Celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the International Red Cross

By Robert Fisher

When you think of the International Red Cross (IRC), what usually comes to mind? My first mental picture was of Red Cross Volunteers helping victims of natural and man-made disasters all around the world. But, as I began my research to create a Red Cross exhibit for FLOREX, I learned that disaster relief is only a small part of the true nature of this wonderful organization.

Let us go back to the beginning and see what events caused the IRC to come into being. It all started on a hot early morning in June 1859 in the scenic landscape near Lake Garda in Northern Italy. There, in a province called Lombardy near the sleepy town of Solferino, 150,000 French and Sardinian troops under the command of Napoleon III and King Victor Emmanuel faced 170,000 Austrian troops gathered from the far corners of the Austrian Empire, under the command of Austrian Emperor Franz Josef.

At stake was the freedom and independence of northern Italy which until then had been a possession of the Austrian Empire. At dawn, the Austrian artillery started the bombardment of the French troops who were beginning to attack their positions. As the day progressed the battle raged on a 15 mile front. The fighting was ferocious with little quarter being asked or given. Prisoners were routinely robbed and then killed. The wounded were ignored and trampled by cavalry and artillery caissons. Fighting was hand-to-hand with bayonets, sabers, broken muskets, and bare hands. After thirteen hours of this madness, the Austrians called a retreat at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. But in many places, fighting continued into the night.

Into this nightmare, arrived a Swiss businessman named Henri Dumont [Figure 1], who was on a personal errand to see Napoleon III. The French army had moved on and he was temporarily stuck in the town of Castiglione. The battlefield stretched from there to Solferino [Figure 2], 6 kilometers away. As Henri looked to the plain below the town, it was strewn with dead and wounded men and horses as far as the eye could see. Over 40,000 soldiers lay dead or wounded on that vast battlefield.



A field hospital was set up in Castiglione and 10 French military doctors attempted to care for the wounded that could be saved. The rest were taken outside to die of their wounds. Most of the wounded still lay on the

battlefield and either died or laid there without food, water or shelter for 6 days. Shocked by this scene of disaster, Henri did what he could to help. He organized civilians to nurse the wounded, carry water, prepare food. Since the French doctors would only care for French casualties, he convinced general McMahon to release captured Austrian doctors to treat the Austrian wounded.

For years afterward, he was traumatized by what he had witnessed. To purge his nightmares, he wrote a book about the battle, his experiences and suggested the creation of a neutral organization to protect and care for the wounded. His book "A Memory of Solferino" was an instant success all over Europe.

Some influential citizens of Geneva were so impressed that they formed a committee which eventually became the International Red Cross. Their first concern was the care of the wounded, burial of the dead. They met with numerous heads of state and the first Geneva Convention was established [Figure 3].



Figure 3

Later there were three more Geneva Conventions that dealt with the treatment of POWs, civilians and the neutrality of medical personnel. They also decided that the IRC would be an administrative body and that each nation should provide their own Red Cross organizations with the volunteers who would do the actual work and provide the supplies needed to support their efforts.



Figure 4

Out of the wrack and ruin of that battlefield long ago, was born the Geneva Convention which has given relief to the casualties of war, mercy for POWs, and Red Cross organizations [Figure 4] that are able to give hope and a helping hand to disaster victims.



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