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# Hermanus Red Cross needs you!

Writer  
**Hedda Mitterer**

The battle of Solferino, fought in northern Italy on 24 June 1859, has been described as “a decisive episode in the struggle for Italian unification and also a pivotal moment in the evolution of modern humanitarianism”. It was this bloodbath that led to the birth of the Red Cross.

Starting around 03:00 in the morning, the battle of Solferino raged for 15 hours, leaving thousands of soldiers slaughtered and wounded. The medical services of the armies were overwhelmed; there was a shortage of food and water, and transportation for the wounded.

A young Swiss man named Henry Dunant, who happened to be in the area on business, tried his best to care for the wounded and dying soldiers in a nearby church, helped by local women volunteers. They treated the men equally, regardless of what side they had fought on, inspiring the women to coin the phrase *tutti fratelli* (all brothers).

**Birth of the Red Cross**  
Profoundly affected by the soldiers’ suffering and the many deaths that could have been avoided, Dunant self-published a vivid account of the aftermath of the battle in 1862, called *A Memory of Solferino*, which was translated into many languages and led to a conference in 1863.

This produced two proposals: that voluntary relief societies be created in every country, during times of peace, with trained personnel to be available in times of war to aid all wounded; and also that a convention between states should provide a legal basis for the protection of military hospitals and medical personnel. The first proposal was to lead to the creation of the Red Cross; the second to the Geneva Convention.

In 1901, Henry Dunant was awarded the first-ever Nobel Peace Prize for what was described as the “supreme humanitarian achievement of the 19th century”. By the end of 1914, an initial team of 10 Red Cross committee members had grown to 1 200 volunteers and paid staff, who sifted through thousands of requests for information about civilians who had gone missing in the chaos of World War I. Further Nobel prizes were awarded in 1917 and 1944, as a tribute to the Red Cross’s humanitarian activities during the

two World Wars.

**A global movement**  
The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), as it is known today, is the world’s largest humanitarian network, made up of 192 Red Cross national societies, present in nearly every country in the world and bringing together almost 15 million volunteers.

The humanitarian activities by Red Cross in each country range from monitoring and providing support for refugees and detainees separated from their families in areas of armed conflict, to saving lives by providing emergency relief for natural disasters, developing new social welfare initiatives, building community resilience, and simply caring for the vulnerable in society.

By striving to prevent and alleviate human suffering through its various projects, including water, sanitation, education, healthcare and food relief, the IFRC contributes to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world.

**The Red Cross in South Africa**  
The South African Red Cross Society (SARCS) was formed in 1913 as a voluntary aid society with the objectives to promote instruction and award certificates for proficiency in first-aid, home-nursing, hygiene and sanitation; to organise voluntary service among certificated men and women for rendering efficient help when and where necessary; and to carry out relief work for the injured, sick and wounded, in peace and war.

Hermanus Red Cross has been in existence since 1957, operating under the national SARCS based in Johannesburg, and within the aegis of the Western Cape Provincial Red Cross headquarters in Wynberg, Cape Town.

**Hermanus Red Cross**  
Angela Heslop, chairperson of Hermanus Red Cross since 2015, has a background in nursing and settled in Hermanus from the UK in 1995. Not only has she been involved with Hermanus Red Cross for the past 21 years since joining as a volunteer, she has also served on the board of Camphill Farm and the Enlighten Education Trust, and as the chair of the Hermanus Hospital Board and the Hermanus History Society. In 2012, she won the Mayoral Award for Woman of the Year for her dedication to the needs of the community.



**Angela Heslop, chairperson of Hermanus Red Cross, in front of their premises in Aberdeen Street.**  
PHOTO: Hedda Mitterer

Angela and her team have initiated and overseen multiple projects over the past seven years. Each Red Cross branch or station in South Africa applies the international organisation’s Mission in a way that best suits its own situation on the ground, and in Hermanus/Overstrand, the focus is on first-aid and home-based care training, disaster management, rental of medical aids and equipment (at a nominal fee), welfare feeding schemes and project funding. Their premises in Aberdeen Street (next to the SANTA bookshop), has a reception, a well-equipped classroom, and a store room for medical equipment and dry food ingredients.

**Disaster Relief: Being prepared**  
“We react to disasters but not enough is being done to prepare for disasters,” says Angela. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck in 2020, Hermanus Red Cross was tasked by the SARCS with supporting a disaster management plan in collaboration with the Overstrand Municipality’s Disaster Management Services. This resulted in food relief efforts on an unprecedented scale which required nothing less than a whole society approach which included registered organisations, community groups, faith-based organisations and caring residents.

“This is where Hermanus civilians voluntarily

stepped up in ways we can be proud of and on which, with leadership and vision, we can build. It reflects just as starkly, however, lessons for our future about political and municipal leadership and vision in times of crisis,” says Angela.

**Getting involved**  
“But it’s not only wars or pandemics that qualify as ‘disasters’. We need to be ready to respond to ongoing disasters that occur even in ‘normal’ times, such as droughts, floods, fires, social conflict and unemployment, with the serious outcome of poverty and hunger,” says Angela. “In order to do this we need to re-energise the organisation and address the need for bigger premises, more fundraising, and additional staff, skills and resources.

“Most of all, we need a roadmap to drive Hermanus Red Cross forward in servicing the needs of our local communities. There is much work to be done!”

Hermanus Red Cross is in the process of developing a revised vision for the future, through a consultative process, and a new planning document will be made available soon. For more information, visit [www.hermanusredcross.co.za](http://www.hermanusredcross.co.za) or contact Angela Heslop on 072 609 8655 if you’d like to get involved.