

HISTORY OF THE Queensland Ambulance Mount Isa

The Mount Isa Ambulance was established in 1924 by Mr W.E.A. (Archie) Jones. The service was known as the Mount Isa Ambulance Transport Brigade and was not at that time affiliated with the Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade (QATB). The Ambulance building was an iron shed located near the site of the present premises. There was just sufficient room for Superintendent Jones to camp because the shed had to serve for dressings and casualties, and the lean-to beside it provided the ambulance vehicle bay.



First Superintendent W.E.A. Jones

The Centre acquired its first car in 1925. As there was no Hospital in Mount Isa, all hospital cases had to be taken to Cloncurry. Prior to the purchase of its own vehicle, the Centre had managed by hiring a car, truck or anything available, from a local resident and transporting the patient to Duchess. From Duchess, the Cloncurry QATB Centre accepted the responsibility of getting the patient to Hospital.

The decision of the local committee to affiliate with the QATB was made following a visit in 1929 by Captain E.R.B. Pike, General Secretary of the QATB Executive Committee. The first QATB Committee comprised H. Smith, E.J. Rhodda, C. Lonsdale Smith, G.T. Milthorpe, C. Leonard, J. Willis, R. Bidforce, E.A. Gairns and J.T. Gairns and J.T. Bayer. Mr Archie Jones was appointed Superintendent and Secretary and he was assisted by Honorary Bearers H. Smith, W. Splayford, W. Matthews and H.E. Taylor.



First Vehicle

The population of Mount Isa increased rapidly from 1200 to 3400 during the years 1929-30. Five years earlier the number of patients handled (including accidents and transports) for the year totalled 469. By 1930 the annual figure had increased to 2272, and it became clear that the ambulance facilities including its one-man permanent staff could no longer keep pace with the increased responsibility. The

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Committee wasted no time in planning and then erecting an Ambulance building incorporating a Superintendent's residence.

It was a proud day when, in December 1930, the new timber building was officially opened. Although unpainted, it was considered at that time to be one of the best buildings in the district. It had a septic system and running water (unlike many homes in Mount Isa at that time) but at that stage did not have electric power.



Early premises

During the 1939-40 financial year, some extensions were made to the building and a permanent bearer was appointed to assist the Superintendent. Mr Jones therefore, had operated a one-man centre for 15 years.

In March 1943, after 12 months' sick leave, Superintendent Jones continued his duties. While he was on sick leave Deputy Superintendent E.G. Locke of the Cairns Centre had acted in his stead. Late in 1943 Superintendent Jones tendered his resignation because of his failing health and was succeeded by Senior Bearer Dan Gilvarry of the Gordonvale Centre. At this time, five of the Centre's Honorary Bearers were serving overseas on War Service as were a large number of employees from Mount Isa Mines.

As the result of the war, contributions from mine employees fell by about 25 per cent while operating costs of the Centre increased. From 1942 to 1945 these circumstances caused the Committee much concern.

After so many years of more or less the same leadership, it was during the period 1939-45 (war years) that the Brigade experienced its most frequent change in management. The first Chairperson of the Committee during the early 1920s was H. Smith. He was succeeded by C. Leonard, who in turn was succeeded by T.L. Cooper who held office for the financial year 1933-34. Mr L.A. Kerr then took the chair and served as Chairperson until 1943. Mr R.A. Clarke then became Chairperson and held that post until 1956 when he became the Centre's representative on the State Executive Committee. Superintendent Gilvarry transferred to the Biloela Centre in June 1945 and Mr J.A. Lisson, a former Superintendent of the Cloncurry Centre, was appointed to the vacant position.

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With the War well behind, the year 1949 was a period of population explosion in Mount Isa. Many more people were being employed at the mines and each day brought constant new arrivals. As a result, the local Brigade was hard-pressed keeping pace with the demand for its service. The number of patients handled increased by 30 per cent over the previous year.

In order to keep pace with this exceptional expansion of the town, the Committee commenced preliminary negotiations for the erection of a more up-to-date building. In 1951 the land occupied by Brigade quarters, forming portion of the MIM Lease, was surrendered in by MIM in favour of the Brigade. The financial position that year was good. The records show that revenue had been increasing over the years culminating in 1951 with annual receipts of £5,281 with expenditure of £4,058. The following year MIM employees decided to assist the Brigade in the accumulation of sufficient funds for the proposed new building, by increasing their weekly contributions. Consequently, receipts for the year increased a further £1,500. However, the erection of the badly-needed new premises was to remain a problem for some considerable time.

In 1958 the original estimate of £14,000 had risen to £20,000. In 1954 the State Public Works Department estimated the cost of construction to be £22,000. However, due to the very generous support of MIM employees and the people of the town and district the Committee had sufficient funds in hand to meet this cost.

These were worrying times for the Committee. Apart from the building problem, new ambulance vehicles were needed urgently to cope with the increased workload. Delivery time of a vehicle was about 18 months from date of ordering, and it was difficult to procure a chassis type of vehicle to withstand local conditions.

During the 1954-55 financial year two new vehicles arrived, and these, together with increasing staff wages and architect's fees, had to be financed. Altogether the extraordinary expenditure for the year exceeded £5,000. This money of course was needed towards the cost of the proposed new building. When tenders were called for the construction of the building the previous year, one was received and this was 50 per cent higher than that estimated by the Public Works Department and the Committee's architect.

Whereas the Committee had previously thought it would be in a position to finance the cost of construction, it now appeared that a loan would be necessary. The committee was concerned that the longer the project was delayed the greater the cost of completion.

In the period 1955-56 new tenders were invited. The lowest received was from Cooke and Nye of Mount Isa and was accepted by the Committee. Building operations commenced in 1956-57 and progress was slow due to the limited resources of the contractors. Finally, the contractors were unable to complete the building because the project was beyond their means. They withdrew, leaving the Committee no alternative other than to employ tradesmen to complete the project. This was achieved under the supervision of the architect. Hence, after much trouble and delay, the new Centre was finally completed at a cost of £32,081.

The building was officially opened by Mr Hugh Millar MBE, President of the QATB State Executive Committee on 29 March 1958. Alterations and additions have been made to the building since that time.

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After 47 years of meritorious service Superintendent John Lisson retired from the Brigade early in 1963. Mr Dan Gilvarry then returned to Mount Isa to once again become Superintendent of the Centre. Superintendent Gilvarry retired in 1972 and was succeeded by Deputy Superintendent Fred Gibson of Cairns. Other officers who have served as Superintendent of the Mount Isa Centre are:

H. Weeks
C. McKay
M. Hampson

Since the establishment of ambulance services in Mount Isa the following people have filled the position of Chairperson of the Committee:

H. Smith
C. Leonard
T.L. Cooper
L.A. Kerr
R.A. Clarke
S.A. Pengelly
C.J. Nichols
A. Clay
W.H. Bentley
R.T. Clark
R.F. Manning