

■ ORGANIZATIONS ■  
THAT HELP THE WORLD

THE  
**RED CROSS**  
AND THE  
**RED CRESCENT**



MICHAEL POLLARD

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RED CRESCENT**

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by MICHAEL POLLARD

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*Above: June 1990.  
Rescuers search the ruins  
of the town of Rudbar,  
Iran, looking, listening,  
and hoping for signs of  
life. This is delicate work.  
Any careless move might  
make the wreckage settle  
and cause further  
casualties.*

*Right: Working with bare  
hands and shovels,  
rescuers desperately clear  
through the rubble at  
Manjil, while a survivor  
waits for news.*





## Earthquake!

Iran, June 21, 1990. As night fell peacefully over the mountains northwest of the capital, Tehran, there was no hint of the terror to come. By half-past midnight most families in the towns and villages were asleep.

Then, at thirty-one minutes after midnight, disaster struck. Without warning, a major earthquake brought death and destruction to the mountain communities. The initial quake was followed by aftershocks. When these had subsided, nearly forty thousand people were dead, another sixty thousand were injured, and about half a million were made homeless. Many thousands more were trapped in the ruins of their homes, awaiting the arrival of rescue teams. Panic-stricken survivors fought their way out of the shattered homes into the streets, where they gathered, dazed and terrified. Some went back to their homes to rescue pets or to collect treasured possessions — only to be caught and trapped by the aftershocks.

*The Red Crescent Society mobilized ten thousand staff and volunteers to help after the earthquake in Iran in 1990. For ten days and ten nights rescue workers from all over the world searched the remains of the mountain communities. Here, a French worker uses a specially trained dog to detect any sign of life in the ruined town of Manjil.*



*In 1984 and 1985, drought hit the Sahel region of Africa. Crops failed and the people starved. Television pictures alerted the world and a massive food relief operation began. Above: Grain is distributed from a Red Cross store. Right: The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement throws huge resources into major relief efforts. Here, the ICRC's own aircraft bring food to starving children staying in a relief camp, where they are being restored to health.*



The quake had brought down telephone lines, cut electricity supplies, and blocked roads, so it was some hours before news of the disaster reached Tehran and, through Tehran, the outside world. But as soon as the extent of the damage and injuries was known, a network of national and international aid swung into action.

First on the scene were the trained rescue teams of the Red Crescent Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran, flown in by helicopter because the roads were impassable. Iran has a long history of earthquakes, and one of the main activities of its Red Crescent Society is to train volunteers in disaster preparedness and rescue techniques. But no amount of training could prepare the teams for what they were to find in the mountains on that June morning. One of the first leaders to arrive described the scene like this: “Townspople were clawing at the rubble with their bare hands, calling out to us to help them. Many were in shock and wanted to pull us to their homes.

“We were administering first aid and a lot of painkillers and selecting those who would not live if they did not fly out immediately. We could not think of the dead. We could do nothing for them and we could not spend time digging. We had to give priority to the living.”

## The world helps

Within a few days, the Red Crescent Society had mobilized a force of ten thousand staff and volunteers. They combed the ruins for survivors, carried the injured to hospitals, drove trucks bringing in food, blankets, tents, and medical supplies, and set up feeding points for the homeless. By this time, relief for the Iranian earthquake disaster had become an international operation. Reacting as it always does to human suffering anywhere in the world, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement mounted an operation that brought supplies from overseas ranging from cooking equipment to medicines and special aids for the injured.

It was ten days before the rescue teams, working



*The Red Crescent Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran was itself a victim of the 1990 earthquake when the shock undermined this office building. All the roads were impassable, so helicopters were used to transport rescue workers to those areas most affected.*

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***In 1989, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies launched thirty-nine international appeals for two and a half million victims in thirty-three countries. Nineteen of these appeals were in response to natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes.***

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*The Battle of Solferino on June 24, 1859, between French, Italian, and Austrian troops. Of three hundred thousand soldiers who fought for sixteen hours, more than one in eight were killed or wounded. Jean-Henri Dunant, a passing businessman, described it as "butchery." "Every mound, every height, every rocky crag," he wrote, "is the scene of a fight to the death; bodies lie in heaps on the hills and in the valleys."*

all day and all night from one ruined building to the next, could announce that all the survivors had been brought out and taken into care. The immediate emergency had passed, but there was now the long process of rebuilding the homes and lives of the people of the mountain communities.

Here again, international help was directed through the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to back up the efforts of Iran's own Red Crescent Society. Among the most urgently needed items were water purification systems, portable generators to provide power for the temporary camps and emergency hospitals, and medical equipment, such as kidney machines and blood transfusion kits. Warm, weatherproof housing would be needed to see the surviving families through the cold mountain winter. People all over the world responded to the plight of the Iranians and gave practical help through the national appeals launched by the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

The Iranian earthquake was only one of more than twenty natural disasters worldwide in 1990 that called on the resources of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. In the same year, the movement organized aid for the victims of war and civil war in three continents. Altogether, 1990 saw the launch of no fewer than forty international appeals aimed at helping four and a half million victims of natural and man-made disasters.

Meanwhile, far away from the places that were attracting the headlines, the everyday work of the movement, involving one hundred million members and volunteer workers throughout the world, went on. This work has one single aim: the relief of human suffering wherever it occurs.

## **An international network**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is the largest organization in the world devoted to the care of people in all kinds of circumstances where they may need help. Where there is human suffering, the movement does not

recognize boundaries, different races, or differences in religious beliefs. In a world of calamities brought about by hostile environments and the inhumane actions of peoples to each other, the work of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is a cause for hope. It is a practical expression of the belief that we all share one world and that what happens to any of us is the responsibility of all.

## How it began

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's efforts to save humankind from suffering and distress began in the most unlikely place — on a battlefield. The story started over one hundred and thirty years ago.

In the summer of 1859, French and Austrian troops fought a battle near the village of Solferino in northern Italy. War is never anything other than cruel, but in those days battles were fought with unrelieved savagery. Soldiers often killed any prisoners they took to steal their belongings. The wounded often had either to look after themselves or were left to rot and die. There were few doctors or nurses to attend them, and there was nowhere to move them for treatment.

As for the survivors, they had to find their own way home, and anyone trying to help them was likely to be attacked. The dead were often left unburied and there was no way of letting their families know what had happened. Once soldiers had fought their battles, whether they had survived or died, been wounded or taken prisoner, they were forgotten

*Troops went into the Battle of Solferino almost drugged with the excitement of war. "It seemed," said one French soldier, "as if the wind was carrying us forward. The smell of powder, the noise of the guns, drums beating and bugles sounding, it all puts life into you and stirs you up!" But for many, this mood was short-lived. Thirty thousand men, as Jean-Henri Dunant reported, ended the day "lying helpless on the naked ground in their own blood."*



by their commanders and often by their comrades.

The Battle of Solferino raged for the sixteen hours of daylight one long June day. By the time it was over, with the Austrian army in retreat, thirty thousand men — one in ten of those taking part — were dead and another ten thousand were wounded. The suffering of the wounded and the battle-shocked survivors was terrible. Food was in short supply and drinking water was polluted. There were no dressings or bandages. Disease soon began to spread, not only among the soldiers, but also among the people of the Solferino district.

### An observer at the front

Yet this was how battles had been fought for thousands of years. But at Solferino there was an observer of the aftermath of the battle who had never seen the results of war at firsthand before, and who was horrified to find out how much suffering is involved. He was Jean-Henri Dunant, a thirty-year-old Swiss citizen who, on a business trip to meet with Emperor Napoleon III, had arrived accidentally at the end of the battle.

*Below: Napoleon III surveys the battlefield of Solferino — from a safe distance. The French and their allies had at their disposal 150,000 men and 400 artillery pieces. Facing them were 170,000 Austrian troops with 500 heavy guns.*



Many other people of Dunant's age and background would merely have turned away in despair, but Dunant forced himself to walk among the dead. "Bodies of men and horses covered the battlefield," he remembered later. "Corpses were strewn over roads, ditches, ravines, thickets and fields; the approaches of Solferino were literally thick with dead.... Some of the soldiers who lay dead had a calm expression, those who had been killed outright. But many were disfigured by the torments of the death-struggle, their limbs stiffened, their bodies blotched with ghastly spots, their hands clawing at the ground, their eyes staring wildly...."

But it was the suffering of the wounded that affected Dunant most: "With faces black with the flies that swarmed about their wounds, men gazed around them, wild-eyed and helpless.... There was one poor man, completely disfigured, with a broken jaw and his swollen tongue hanging out of his mouth. I moistened his dry lips and hardened tongue, took a handful of lint and dipped it in the bucket they were carrying behind me, and squeezed the water from the improvised sponge into the deformed opening that had been his mouth."

Faced with so much suffering, one person could do little, but Dunant set about organizing the women



*Jean-Henri Dunant followed Napoleon to Italy to plead for concessions for his business. But the suffering he saw led him to neglect his business affairs and fight for the wounded.*





*Above: An Afghan miniature, used as a poster. In 1863 and 1864, Jean-Henri Dunant became a familiar figure in the world's government offices as he drummed up interest in the forthcoming diplomatic conference which was to sign the first Geneva Convention. His persistence paid off, and sixteen nations went to the conference.*

*Right: Out of Dunant's horror at the chaos and suffering of the Battle of Solferino came the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. However, Dunant's devotion to the movement cost him dearly: At the age of thirty-nine he was bankrupt and he lost his position in the Red Cross.*

of the nearby town of Castiglione to give the wounded food and drink and to wash and dress their wounds. The town's small boys fetched and carried water and ran other errands. Castiglione's churches were turned into hospitals.

## After the battle

When, at last, the dead had been buried and the more seriously wounded were transferred to hospitals in Milan and other cities, Jean-Henri Dunant had time to reflect on what he had seen.

Two things struck him. The first was the sheer ugliness of war: the noise, the destruction, the death, the brutality. He noted how quickly the false hopes of glory that soldiers took into battle vanished when the fighting was over. It seemed exciting to go to war — but the excitement soon deteriorated into horror, bloodshed, and pain. The second impression Dunant gained was of the willingness of volunteers to help *if there was someone to organize them and show them what to do.*

When Jean-Henri Dunant returned to Switzerland, his haunting memories of Solferino went with him. He poured them out three years later in a book, *A Memory of Solferino*, describing what he had seen and putting forward ideas for making the consequences of war less horrifying.

These ideas included training teams of volunteers in each country for medical service in wartime, the planning in advance of food, water, and medical supplies for the wounded, the provision of ambulances, and arrangements to let the families of dead and wounded soldiers know what had happened



to them. The wounded on the battlefield, and people who were looking after them, should be regarded as neutral, whichever side they came from, and therefore safe from attack by either side.

Dunant's ideas caught the attention of four of Geneva's leading citizens who were already involved in charity work for the poor and needy. Early in 1863 these four, with Dunant, formed a "Committee of Five" that they named the International Committee for Relief to the Wounded. It was the beginning of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

### Across frontiers

From the start, it was clear that if there was to be a plan to help the wounded in battle, the plan must be accepted internationally. There would be no point in having an agreement if only one country taking part in a war had signed it. So the first action of the Committee of Five was to call an international conference to discuss the plan.

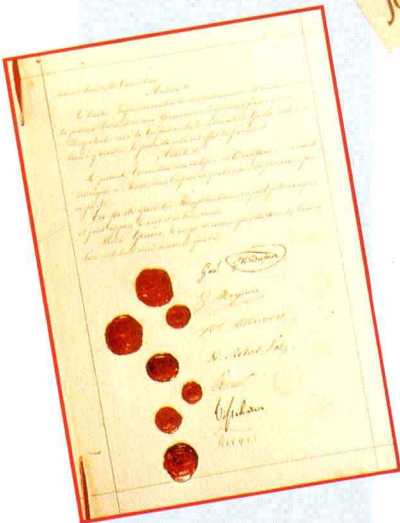
This in itself was a new idea. There had been international conferences before, but their purpose had been to divide up countries among the victors in war. No one had ever called nations together to discuss ideas for lessening human suffering.



*Above: General Guillaume-Henri Dufour was one of the members of the "Committee of Five" formed in Geneva. Then in his seventies, he had had a distinguished military career, so he was able to speak with authority on the suffering that the Red Cross Movement hoped to alleviate.*



Right: Dunant's book, *A Memory of Solferino*, was first published in 1862. It was translated into many different languages, and, since its first appearance, has never been out of print. Below: The first Geneva Convention



Right: The signing ceremony at Geneva's town hall. When it was the British delegate's turn to sign, he needed an official seal. General Dufour cut a button from the diplomat's military tunic and said, "There...you have the arms of Her Majesty."



The conference met in Geneva in October 1863, and representatives from sixteen countries attended. A detailed plan for the treatment of wounded soldiers was drawn up for the representatives to take back to their own governments for discussion. The movement, led by the Committee of Five, also adopted a red cross on a white background as its symbol. This was to be used on war ambulances, military hospitals, and the

uniforms of army medical staff, as well as by volunteers, as a sign that they were neutral and not to be attacked. It now became known as the Red Cross Movement.

The following year, at a second conference in Geneva, twelve countries signed the world's first international agreement on the conduct of war. This agreement was called the first Geneva Convention. It laid down ten rules, or articles, for the treatment of the wounded on the battlefield, based on the plan drawn up the year before. The signatories were all European and all Christian countries. These countries had either already set up societies within their countries, known as National Societies, to train volunteers or were planning to do so. Each National Society organized its services in relation to its country's needs. Later, the twelve were joined by others — but the Red Cross Movement still had to spread beyond Christian Europe.

## The doubters

Not everyone welcomed the Geneva Convention. To many people, it seemed strange to suggest that wars should be fought according to rules, as if they were games. Surely, they said, war represented the complete absence of rules, except one: the strongest side won. How could there be laws of war? It would be better, some people argued, to work for the end of all wars. Then the question of how to treat the wounded would not arise.

No one doubted that the end of war would be an admirable aim, but the founders of the Red Cross were realistic enough to see that, although this might be achieved one day, it was a long way off. Meanwhile, the horrors of war would continue, but at least some of the suffering could be relieved.

The peacemakers were not the only people who were uneasy about the Geneva Convention. Many senior army officers had their doubts, too. Some suspected that the Red Cross symbol might be used by spies as a cover to enable them to penetrate enemy lines, or to protect military buildings, such as arms stores, or fake “ambulances” full of troops



*The really brilliant stroke in the creation of the Red Cross was the adoption of a simple emblem that could be stitched together or painted easily, even in the heat of the battlefield: the Swiss flag reversed. This was the very first Red Cross banner — the first appearance of a symbol that was to become universally recognized and respected.*



Right: The International Committee of the Red Cross is based in Geneva. It is responsible for questions relating to the Geneva Conventions as well as spreading knowledge of humanitarian law. It supervises the exchange of prisoners of war. Here, an ICRC delegate briefs observers on the rules of war laid down by the four Geneva Conventions.



Right: The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (originally called the League of Red Cross Societies) coordinates health care and relief work. In a disaster, it acts as an intermediary between the affected area and the world's National Societies wishing to offer help. Here, food relief goes through the International Federation on its way to China.



Right: There are National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies in virtually every country of the world. They undertake a variety of work, including first aid and disaster training, health care, disease prevention, and, in many countries, the operation of emergency services. This team of trained Mexican Red Cross workers is giving aid at the scene of an air crash.

