

**Duncan & Fraser Limited, Franklin Street, Adelaide
Carriages and Motor Cars**

The Gift of a Motor Ambulance

David Neely

Duncan & Fraser, established in 1865, not only built motor ambulances in World War I but also the directors and employees of the company donated one to the war effort.

Duncan & Fraser's Ford Model T ambulance was presented to the South Australian Military Commandant, Colonel Sandford, by the State's Governor, Sir Henry Galway, at the Soldiers' Memorial Statue on North Terrace on 24 August 1915. At the ceremony Mr Duncan and Mr Spafford, the works superintendent, spoke on behalf of the directors and employees respectively. The 'Chronicle' on 28 August 1915 reported on their speeches.

"Mr. R. A. Duncan, representing the directors of Messrs. Duncan & Fraser, in asking his Excellency to present a motor ambulance to the military authorities, said he trusted that the vehicle would be the means of allaying the suffering of the brave men who met with mishaps on the battlefield. Mr. H. Spafford spoke on behalf of the employees of the firm. He said the men had quietly and unobtrusively shown their loyalty to King and country. Over 30 employees of the firm had enlisted, and some had been in the trenches for months. Those who could not go to the front were doing their little bit. They had subscribed £157 for the Belgian Relief Fund, and with the aid of the directors had raised sufficient money to pay for an ambulance. That would not be their final effort."

Top: An ambulance built by Duncan & Fraser to military specifications on a Ford Model T chassis. [State Library of South Australia B21423]

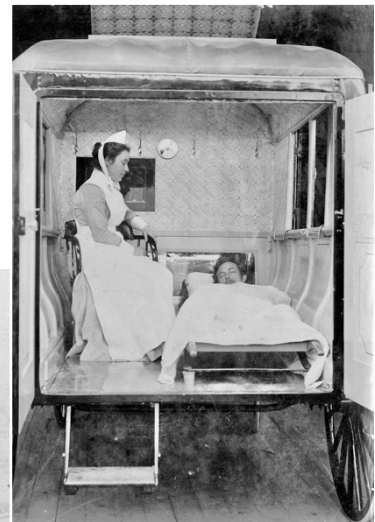


The firm addressed patient comfort in horse-drawn ambulances around 1904 and by 1912 had built a motor ambulance. The background to these developments was the subject of an article in 'The Register' on 13 August 1912, "About eight years ago Messrs. Duncan and Fraser of Adelaide realised that the iron-tyred ambulance provided by the Government for the conveyance of the sick and injured persons was not only out of date, but

the means of inflicting much unnecessary suffering upon many least able to endure it. They built an ambulance which contained all the then known improvements, the easily hung body and rubber-tyred wheels which ensured the smallest possible amount of pain and discomfort to the passenger. That vehicle has been in constant use ever since. However, the march of improvements has again rendered an advance desirable, and the firm have decided to put into commission a new carriage. Motor power is to be substituted for horses, and it is expected that this means a much easier and speedy transit will be possible. The work of manufacture is now well in hand, and the firm will provide at an early date a motor ambulance carriage which will be thoroughly up to date in every respect."

Top: *The first Duncan & Fraser carriage factory in Franklin Street, Adelaide, about 1870. [State Library of South Australia B38794]*

Right and Below: *The firm introduced rubber tyres on the wheels of a horse-drawn ambulance around 1904 to improve patient comfort. [State Library of South Australia B1403-1 and B1403-12]*



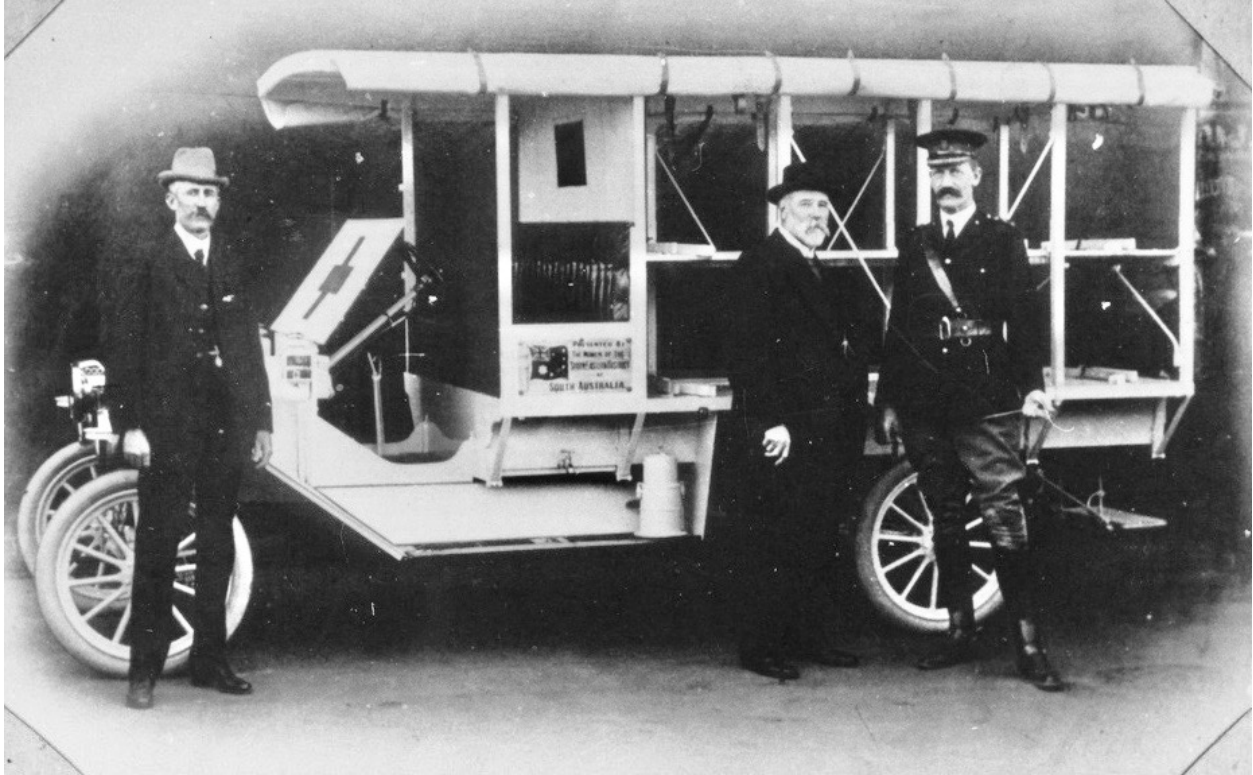


Above: The catalogue photograph of Duncan & Fraser's horse-drawn ambulance around 1904 featuring rubber tyres on the wheels. [State Library of South Australia, B1403-11]

Prior to the war civilian ambulances were typically funded by public subscriptions. This approach continued with the wave of patriotism that swept the British Empire when motor ambulances were donated by individuals, groups and organisations.

Duncan & Fraser built two ambulances for the Women's Patriot League South Eastern District at Mount Gambier in 1915 on Ford Model T chassis. The firm had the Ford agency in South Australia and Broken Hill.

The 'Border Watch' reported on 8 May 1915, "A representation of the Australian flag in the top left-hand corner and the words, "Presented by the women of the South-Eastern district of South Australia", are the inscriptions on brass plates attached to the two Ford motor ambulances." It continued, "Both ambulances are finished in white, and are strongly but lightly built. The red Geneva cross is conspicuously painted on the driver's screen, and on the two sides and top, which are of canvas and can be readily rolled up. Four stretchers are provided in each, with a tip-up seat for the attendant. They are ready for immediate service, and are provided with spare parts and tyres. Great importance has been attached to the lighting equipment. There are three headlights. The middle one is lighted by acetylene gas, and those on either side by electricity, while the two oil lamps are placed just in front of the driver's seat."



Above: One of the two ambulances built by Duncan & Fraser donated by the Mount Gambier Women's Patriotic League in May 1916. It was presented by John Livingston, M.H.R. for Baker, pictured in the centre, to Colonel Godfrey Irving, Commandant of the 4th Military District of South Australia. The gentleman on the left is not identified, perhaps a representative of the company. The centre acetylene gas light is just visible on the far left. [State Library of South Australia B21422]

The Hon Secretary of the Mount Gambier Women's Patriotic League, Miss Bertha M French, explained how the local orders came about as recorded in the "Border Watch" on 16 June 1915, "It was decided to purchase two Ford motor ambulances, and the order was given to Messrs. Duncan and Fraser, of Adelaide, through their local manager here. It was originally intended to cable the money home [England – author], but at the time the selection was being made, the English Government had commandeered most of the output in the motor trade, so that we were unable to avail ourselves of any advantage in this respect. In consequence of the same restrictions, Adelaide orders had been entrusted to local firms, and cars had been successfully built under military supervision. Such being the case, we had no hesitation in doing the same, as it was of great importance to get them away as soon as possible. Messrs. Duncan and Fraser executed the order in less than a month, and on May 4 they were formally handed over to the Defence Department by Mr. Livingston, M.H.R., who kindly made a special journey to Adelaide for the purpose." The presentation took place outside the premises of Duncan & Fraser." The Military Commandant acknowledged the generous gifts of the motor ambulances with sincere thanks, "For service at the front. Trusting they will help to alleviate some of the suffering of our brave troops."

Duncan & Fraser also built ambulances for The Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows. The first was presented to the military authorities by the South Australian Governor, Sir Henry Galway, on 2 August 1915 at the Soldiers' Memorial Statue on North Terrace. The ambulance, which cost £324, had attached to its side a brass plate bearing the inscription "Presented by the Manchester Unity Oddfellows, South Australia, 2nd August, 1915." The second was presented on 29 October 1915 with a similar brass plaque.



Above: The first Duncan & Fraser ambulance for The Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows was presented to the military authorities by the South Australian Governor, Sir Henry Galway, on 2 August 1915 at the Soldiers' Memorial Statue on North Terrace. Sir Henry is centre left with the walking stick. [State Library of South Australia B 17792]

The Clare and District Motor Ambulance Fund commissioned Duncan & Fraser in July 1915 to supply two Ford motor ambulances and a travelling kitchen. The total cost was £877/3/6. The 'Northern Argus' reported on 20 August 1915 that the Fund met on 15 August 1915 and finalized the inscription to be fixed on the brass plates of the ambulances and kitchen. It was resolved to ask the governor to present the ambulances and kitchen to the military authorities on 25 August 1915 in Adelaide.



Above: One of the Duncan & Fraser ambulances donated by the Clare and District Motor Ambulance Fund. Pictured here at the Keswick Barracks, South Australia, prior to it being shipped to the western front. [State Library of South Australia B34606]



Above: Horse-drawn vehicles worked alongside motorised vehicles in World War I. Duncan & Fraser built these general service wagons for the Australian Army in 1915. [Wikimedia Commons]

In August 1915 Duncan & Fraser, “Completed an order for five Ford cars for the Commonwealth military authorities. The vehicles are for the use of the commandants of each of the Australian States.”, reported the Adelaide ‘Observer’ on 21 August 1915. They were finished “in a tasteful fawn colour, with relieving gold lines.”

When Duncan & Fraser built a motor ambulance in 1912, they could not have known that in three short years they would be building motor ambulances for patriotic citizens to donate them for the 1914-1918 war. Indeed, the directors and employees would donate a motor ambulance themselves.

Acknowledgements: Trove, David C Chantrell, ‘Duncan & Fraser Ltd: Legacies Left Untold’, State Library of South Australia – 2023.