



The Daimler Motor Ambulance, The Philanthropist and The Cockatoo

By David Neely

“Presented to the Queen of Belgium by Mrs Bon of Victoria Australia” was inscribed on the side of the Daimler motor ambulance pictured above. Called motor ambulances at the time to distinguish them from horse-drawn ones, which were still very much in service during World War I. Mrs Bon may have chosen Belgium because it was considered a major victim of the war and its plight aroused enormous public sympathy. Belgian relief funds were generously subscribed and no doubt Mrs Bon supported those as well. Who was Mrs Bon? I was intrigued to find out more about her and Daimler ambulances in the war.



Mrs Bon donated the Daimler ambulance to the Belgian Army in 1915. A patriotic gesture but not unique. However, Mrs Bon’s most novel contribution was the loan in 1917 of her pet sulphur-crested cockatoo, ‘Cocky’, to cheer up returned servicemen recovering from their injuries. Encouraged by the men Cocky expanded his polite repertoire and became a cheeky celebrity.

Top: This ambulance was built by the Daimler Company, which built and delivered one thousand ambulances by September 1915. Mrs Bon arranged for it to be purchased in Britain. [Australian War Memorial H18558]

Left: Anne Fraser Bon a Scottish-born Australian pastoralist, philanthropist and advocate for Aboriginal people. This portrait taken in 1904. [Australian War Memorial P11660.001]

Motor ambulances had never been used in war. While civilian motor ambulances were in service in London and Sydney for a few years before the war, military authorities in Britain and Australia had no plans to deploy them as they started to equip their armies after the outbreak of World War I in August 1914. The British initially rejected their use despite repeated appeals from Sir Alfred Keough, Director-General of the Army Medical Services. The Australians included just two motor ambulances in the October 1914 departures as an afterthought.

It soon became distressingly obvious that the horse-drawn ambulances were unable to deal quickly with the huge number of casualties produced by the intensity of modern warfare. The urgent need for motor ambulances led to an avalanche of public support. Mrs Bon was among many individuals and patriotic organisations across Australia who responded with donations of motor ambulances. After the war Mrs Bon donated £20 each Christmas to every blinded soldier in Victoria. She was honoured in 1921 by King Leopold of Belgium for her support of his people during the war.

Mrs Bon's choice of a Daimler ambulance provides an opportunity to include here other Daimler ambulances donated during World War I. King George V headed the list presenting an ambulance – a Daimler of course in line with the Royal family's staunch patronage of the company – to the Indian Army. The first Indian Expeditionary Force landed at Marseilles on 26 October 1914 and served on the Western Front until the end of 1915. Queen Mary and the Dowager Empress of Russia also presented Daimler ambulances. These ambulances were at the Royal Mews by mid-October 1914.



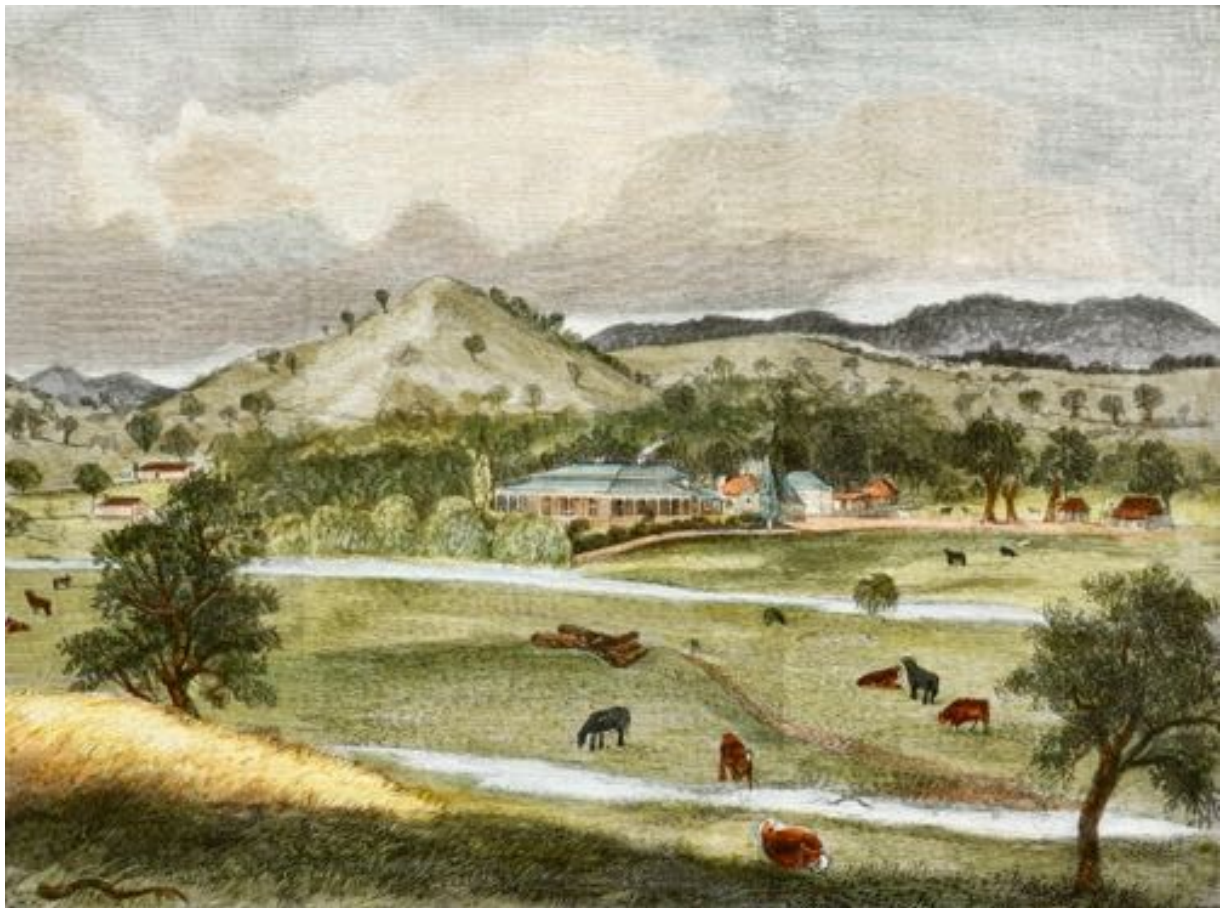
Top and top right: Daimler ambulances presented in 1914 by King George V and Queen Mary. Both inscribed "To The Indian Expeditionary Force".

Right: Daimler ambulance presented by the Dowager Empress of Russia photographed in Paris. All were finished in khaki with black wheels £450 each. [George H Frost, 'Munitions of War', courtesy of Brian Smith]



Anne Fraser Dougall (1838-1936) was born in Dunning, Perthshire, Scotland. She married John Bon a Perthshire man who was visiting his homeplace. They travelled on the 'Arcadia' and arrived in Melbourne on 14 May 1858. Anne was 21 and John 48. John Bon was already a wealthy pastoralist having bought Wappan Station on the Delatite River near Mansfield Victoria in 1845. He built Wappan Homestead circa 1853. John Bon died in 1868 and Anne Bon was determined to raise her four children and continue to run Wappan Station. Singlehanded and single-minded by all accounts she became a successful pastoralist and acquired the very considerable wealth that would fund her diverse philanthropic work.

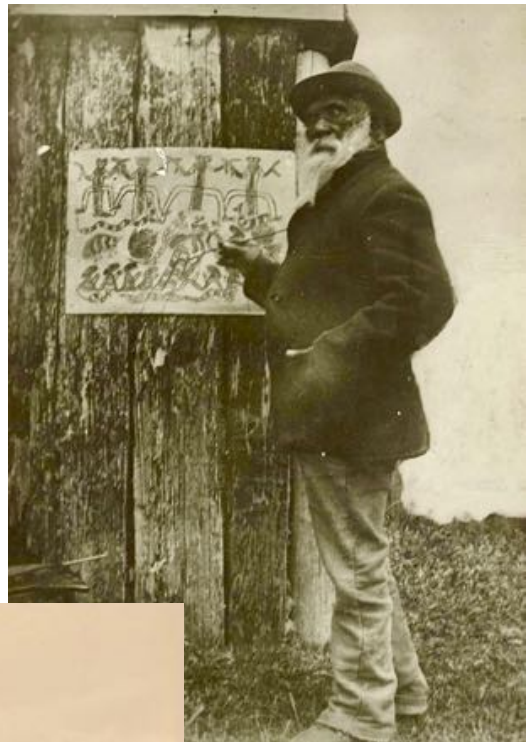
Anne Bon bought a house in Kew, Melbourne, and would regularly catch the train from Bonnie Doon Station to Melbourne to attend to business matters. Her home would later provide a refuge for the sick and needy.



An engraving depicting Wappan Station and the homestead circa 1887. [Antique Print & Map Room]

Anne Bon was a fiery advocate and formidable adversary in championing the interest of Aborigines. She was the only woman on the board appointed by the Victorian government in 1882 to enquire into the conditions and management of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, established in 1863 near the Victorian town of Healesville. The board met twelve times and examined 69 witnesses, of whom 48 were white and 21 black. The report and the verbatim evidence from the witnesses is available online from the State Library of Victoria – a fascinating read. One witness was William Barak (1824-1903), who was the last chief of the Yarra Yarra tribe. He belonged to the Wurundjeri people. Their country lay along the Yarra and Plenty Rivers. He is now recognized as an important indigenous leader of the 19th century. He lived on the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station and with others made representations to the 1882 enquiry seeking a new management with which they were convinced they could make the Station self-sufficient.

Right: *“William Barak (pictured here drawing a corroboree in 1902) is remembered throughout Australia as a symbol of Indigenous resistance to colonisation and spokesperson for oppressed cultures. He also left an enduring artistic legacy, highly prized works of art tell the story of Australia’s indigenous Kulin people, before, during and after the arrival of white European colonisers. It’s a story Barak knew well, because he lived it.” – Joy Wandin Murphy. [Image: Johannes Heyer, photographer, State Library of Victoria H91.258]*



Below: *A general view of the Aboriginal Mission Station Coranderrk in 1880 during the time of William Barak and Anne Bon. [Fred Kruger, photographer, State Library of Victoria.]*



Below: The submission presented by William Barak and residents of Coranderrk Station to the 1882 Board of Enquiry appointed to enquire into and report upon the present condition and management of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station. [State Library of Victoria]

The following documents were handed in to the Board :—

“ SIR,

“ Coranderrk Station, November 16th 1881.

“ We want the Board and the Inspector, Captain Page, to be no longer over us. We want only one man here, and that is Mr. John Green, and the station to be under the Chief Secretary ; then we will show the country that the station could self-support itself.

“ These are the names of those that wish this to be done.

“ Wm. Barak, X	Alick Campbell, X	Ellen Richard, X	Edith Brangy,
Thos. Mickie, X	Thos. Dunolly,	Harriett, X	Mary Ann McClennan,
Dick Richard, X	Alfred Davis,	Annie Hamilton, X	Bella Lee,
Thos. Avoca, X	Willie Parker,	Mary, X	Alice Grant,
Thos. Gilman, X	Willie Hamilton, X	Jessie Dunolly,	Thomas Dick,
Johanny Terriek, X	Johanny Charles,	Louisa Hunter, X	William Edmond
Lankey, X	Jomima Wandon,	Dinah Hunter,	Alexander Briggs,
Spider, X	Emma Campbell, X	Caroline Morgan, X	Abel Terriek,
M. Simpson,	Jenny Campbell,	Maggie Harmony	Finniemore Jackson,
H. Harmony,	Lizzie Charles, X	Lizzie Davis	Joseph Hunter
Alfred Morgan,	Eliza Mickie, X	Metild Simpson, X	Johon Patterson.”
Robert Wandon,	Roy, X		

Anne Bon’s friendship with Barak spanned 40 years. They shared the grief of having lost a child. She donated the headstone on Barak’s grave. Wappan Station gave sanctuary to members of the Taumgerong tribe from the middle of the nineteenth century when large numbers were welcomed by the Bons to gather and take part in traditional ceremonies. At times 500 would be camped on the property. Later they were always welcome at Anne Bon’s home in Kew when they needed to be in the city.

After the enquiry she wrote in a letter to the Chief Secretary of Victoria to plead that the residents of Coranderrk be allowed to remain as it was proposed that they be removed much further away, saying “We have robbed them of their beautiful colony, deprived them of their hunting grounds and fishing grounds and given then in return our vices and diseases which are rapidly doing their work. They are neither paupers, lunatics, nor criminals – then why treat them as such? They possess far more intellect than they get credit for and the greatest crime of which they have been guilty is having been the original owners of the soil.” She signed her letters to newspapers, “Annie F Bon”.



Above: William Barak’s grave includes the inscription, “This stone is the gift of Anne Fraser Bon”. [Internet]

Anne Bon's philanthropic activity went beyond her practical advocacy for the Indigenous community and support for the war effort. She made donations to the Austin Hospital where she served on the ladies' committee. A devout Presbyterian, she gave substantial donations to the Presbyterian churches in Mansfield and Bonnie Doon as well as the Salvation Army. She established a school for Chinese children in Melbourne. She hosted patients from state mental institutions at Wappan Station so they could enjoy the comforts of family life. An altogether amazing person. Her Cocky though was amazing in his own right.

Cocky was hatched at Wappan Station in 1878. He was a great favourite with the staff and patients at No. 1 Rest Home, Melbourne. The bird was a good talker, "Show your pass" and "Go on, you're a German" were obviously taught to it by digger comrades. Anne Bon lent him to the home in late 1917. Cocky added to his polite vocabulary when coached by the soldiers with more picturesque phrases as well as some German words. Whenever nurses were asked about the phrases he mimicked they refused outright to repeat them! He was there for one or two years before one of the soldiers trained him to sit on his shoulder while he went for long walks. Fearing the bird might fly off, Anne Bon took him back. Cocky died in 1925 aged 47 but that was not the end of his story. He was promptly dispatched in a blue velvet-lined case to a taxidermist at the Museum of Victoria and Anne Bon then donated him to the Australian War Memorial. Cocky remains in the Memorial's collection.



Left: Cocky (1878-1925) "Show your pass" on duty as a mascot at No. 1 Rest Home in Melbourne. [Australian War Memorial H04150]



Right: Cocky is now in the Australian War Memorial's collection and is currently in storage [as at April 2023]. [Australian War Memorial]

Finally, there was one other donation that Anne Bon made relating to World War I. It was a German heavy trench mortar presented to Anne Bon by the British Government at the request of Lord Novar, a fellow Scot and Governor-General of Australia from 1914 to 1920. In turn Anne Bon presented the mortar to the residents of Bonnie Doon in May 1922.

Originally the German heavy trench mortar was placed in front of the unveiled War Memorial. It was moved to where it stands today in 1955 when Sugarloaf Reservoir was enlarged to become Lake Eildon, and the town moved to avoid being submerged.



Above and Inset: The German heavy trench mortar donated by Anne Bon and the inscription. [Waymarking.com]

Wappan Station was compulsorily acquired in the 1920s pending the building of Sugarloaf Dam. Anne Bon spent the last six of her 99 years residing at the Windsor Hotel in Melbourne. Her estate was valued at £68,547 – back in the days of World War I it would have bought close to 150 ambulances! Her philanthropic work continued in her will. Subject to a life interest, Anne Bon's estate was bequeathed to the Austin Hospital, the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital and St Andrew's Presbyterian Hospital.



Above: An Australian body was built for this Daimler ambulance presented by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of New South Wales. The motor body builder is not identified but was probably a firm in Sydney where the photograph was taken. The construction is the same as an ambulance body built by the Adelaide firm of Duncan & Fraser. It is likely both were constructed to the requirements specified by the military authorities. This image is from the State Library of South Australia [B56727] but appears to be reproduced from a photograph by Crown Studios, Sydney, held in the Sydney Powerhouse Collection of the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, see below.

Below: Two views of The Woman's Christian Temperance Union of New South Wales Daimler ambulance from the Powerhouse Collection. [2008/231/1-20 and 2008/231/1-21]

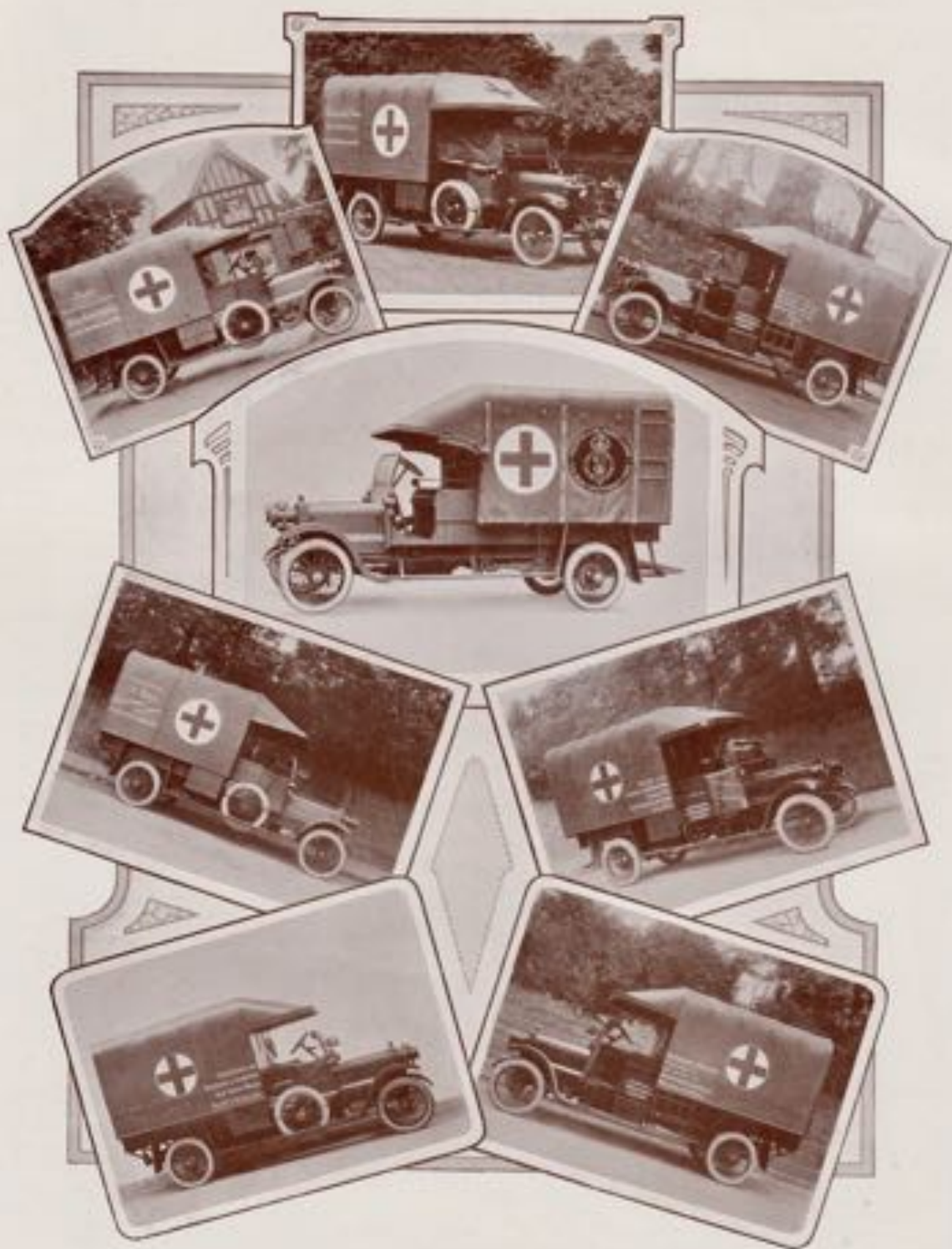




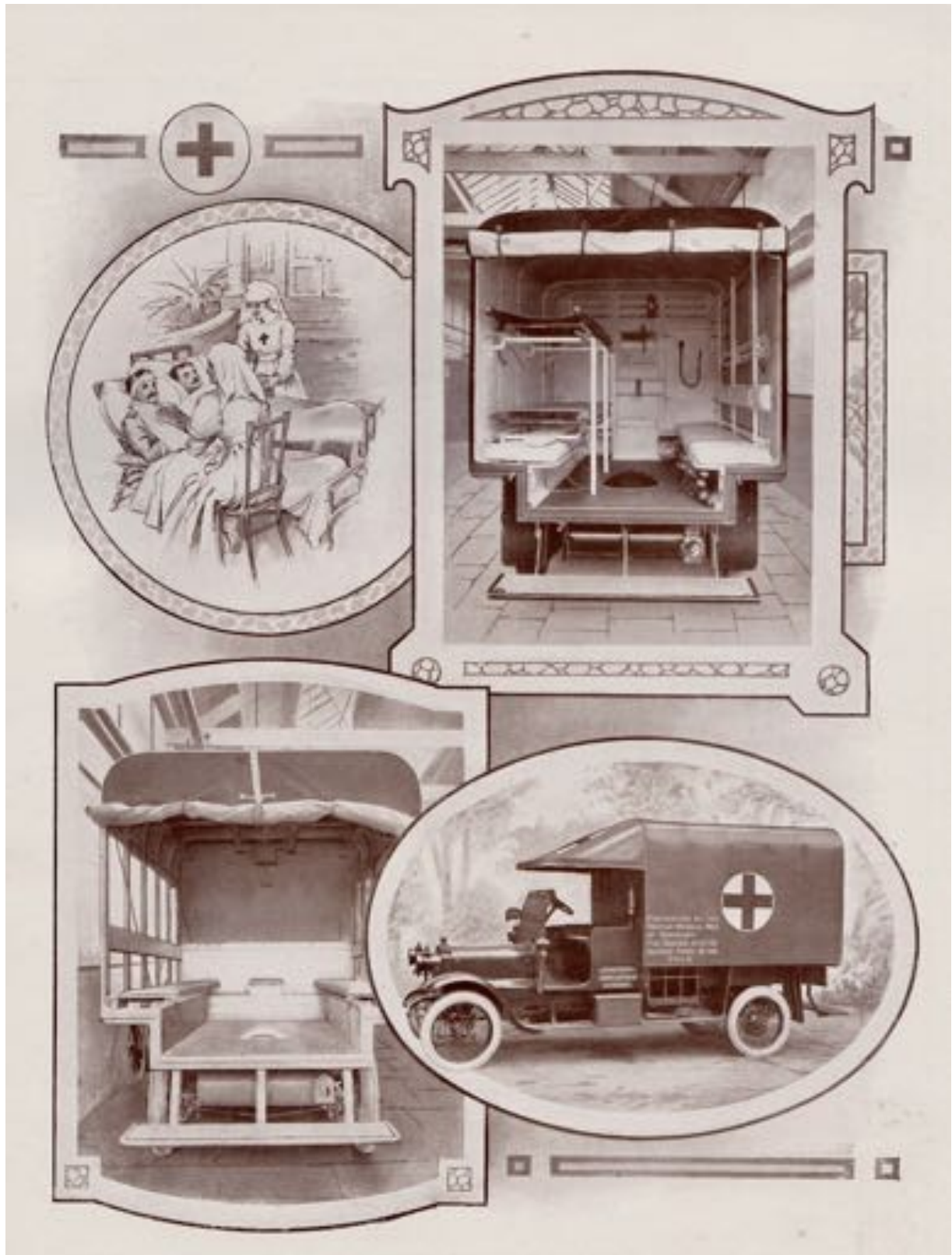
Above: A 1910 15 h.p. Daimler ambulance of the Australian Army Medical Corps. It is most likely the body was built in Australia. [Australian War Memorial PO2869.003]

Below: A Daimler ambulance built by the Daimler Company and purchased by the Agent General in London for the War Office. The inscription reads, "The Gascoyne Ambulance Presented by the People of the Gascoyne Electorate Western Australia." [Northern Times (Carnarvon WA) 5 August 1916] **Note:** This ambulance is in the bottom right-hand corner of the photograph on the next page and bottom left is another donated from Australia. [George H Frost, 'Munitions of War', courtesy of Brian Smith]





His Majesty the King's Presentation Ambulance and others



Above: The interior arrangements of the early and later types of Daimler ambulances. [George H Frost, 'Munitions of War', courtesy of Brian Smith]



Above: A Daimler in Dr Hector Munro's motor ambulance corps, which was started in August 1914. Munro was one of the directors of the Medico-Psychological Clinic in London. The mission of the private corps was to move wounded troops from the battlefields to hospitals in Flanders. [Internet]

Below: A Daimler in service with the British Red Cross. [Imperial War Museums Q 70484]





Above: A Daimler ambulance in the background, military number A.24097, with two stretcher bearers carrying a badly wounded Australian soldier, his left leg in plaster. Stretcher bearers were nicknamed “body snatchers” by their digger mates! [Australian War Memorial EZ0065]



Above: A British Red Cross convoy of Daimler ambulances lined up with military precision as might be expected. [Imperial War Museums Q 33435]



Above: A damaged Daimler ambulance in 1917. [Imperial War Museums Q 29525]

Acknowledgements: Assistance from Tom Clark and Brian Smith; Trove; The Australian Women's Register; Heather Matthew, 'The Widow of Wappan', a biography of Anne Bon; Joanna Cruickshank and Patricia Grimshaw, 'Indigenous Land Loss, Justice and Race: Anne Bon and the Contradictions of Settler Humanitarianism'; Elizabeth Pike, 'An Aboriginal Voice Crying in the Wilderness' the Story of Barak; Brian E Smith, 'Royal Daimlers'.