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Newsletter of the St John Ambulance
Historical Society of Australia



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**From Issue 2025/3, p. 8: A blast from the past —
Survival! Remote Area First aid (St John Ambulance
Australia Ltd, 1st edition 1991) by Alan Caust OStJ
JP(Qual.) RN (Rtd) MIAO (Aust.) (Rtd)**

It was a very hot afternoon. We were on the Barkly Highway in the NT travelling out to a major road accident. Travelling usually involved many hours driving out—and subsequently, many hours driving back to the Tennant Creek Hospital, often with critically ill or seriously injured patients on board. Insofar as we were well-trained and experienced paramedics or ‘Advanced Life Support Officers’ (a title we proudly wore), we did find these remote incidents scary and tense. The tyranny of distance sometimes cost the lives of those in our care ... and those who we simply didn’t reach in time. And remote area First Aid could have made all the difference.

I joined the St John Ambulance Service in Darwin, Northern Territory in 1978, as a nurse. In the Northern Territory, the Ambulance Service was run by the NT Department of Health. Orderlies were ‘driver’s, and Registered Nurses were ‘attendants, sitting in the rear of the Ambulance and hanging on tight. It most definitely wasn’t an ideal Ambulance Service. After Cyclone Tracy went through Darwin in 1974, the need for a dedicated and modern pre-hospital care service was clearly recognised, and St John Ambulance was awarded the ambulance contract by the government—and that Service continues today.

After completing new and advanced training (at least for those times), I eventually transferred to Tennant Creek as the third Officer appointed to their new ambulance service. It was working in and around the Tennant Creek community, that it became obvious to me (and I was far from the only one), that generally, the lay person lacked any First Aid skills and knowledge for travelling and adventuring in remote areas—in fact, most simply had never attended a basic First Aid training course.

Many years later, as an Ambulance Officer in Mount Isa, Queensland, I met a Registered Nurse from the Camooweal Health Clinic on the NT/QLD Border. She travelled hundreds of kilometres a day in her panel-van Ambulance, responsible for quite a huge district. In our chats together, she told me similar stories of the lack or limited knowledge of basic First Aid skills, specifically for isolated and remote areas.

St John Ambulance Australia is a Registered Training Organisation, teaching First Aid to the public. However, St John Ambulance was not providing First Aid training dedicated to travelling

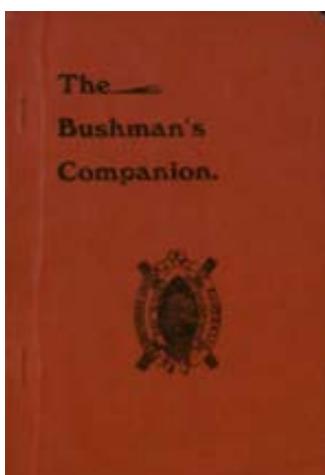


Alan Caust



in remote areas. The First Aid manuals were good for urban, city-based incidents, but there was not much instruction for response and care of injuries and illness in the isolation and heat of the Australian outback, or wilder regions of the Australian Alps during cold, snow and blizzard!

Back in the day, St John Ambulance Association's *First Aid to the Injured*—better known as the 'Little Black Book' (published in London 1879) was the First Aid manual used in Australia. This book was the basis for Rev. John Flynn's *The Bushman's Companion*, published in 1915. Flynn is a familiar figure in our Australian history—he started the Royal Flying Doctor Service. I read Flynn's *Companion*, for professional interest. It was pretty horrifying reading about some of the First Aid managements of those days, particularly the addition of (a pre-emptive) 'Service for the Burial of the Dead! But what I took away from that reading was that Flynn's *Companion* was aimed at 'Residents' and 'Travellers' in our remote Australian Outback.



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Rev. Dr John Flynn, and *The Bushman's Companion*.

I had witnessed too often over my years of work in the vast remote wilderness of the Northern Territory and Queensland, the distressing and absolute trauma caused by the death of patients, where the application of basic First Aid could have saved a life.

I was beginning to realise that the lack of First Aid management for remote areas was an inherent problem—not just in the dusty red outback, but anywhere in our vast country too far away from immediate and quick medical aid. The Royal Flying Doctor Service provides a fantastic service to our remote regions, but they, like us in the Ambulance Services, also run into the same problem. If no First Aid had been provided before the arrival of ambulance/nursing/medical aid, people often died, or died in transit to a hospital, because little had been done whilst waiting for medical care. Arrival of emergency services can take hours, as does the eventual arrival at the hospital. Too often, my fellow Officers and I commented, 'If only someone had done such-and-such, that person need not have died'. Survival depends on time, distance, and First Aid.

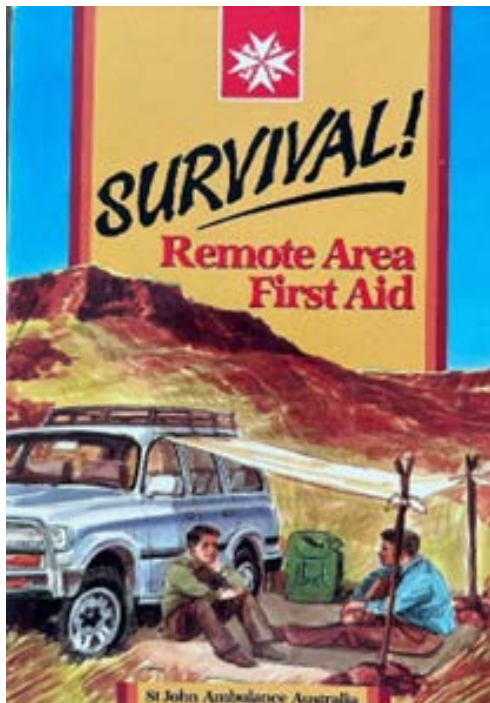
Something had to be done! And I found Flynn's *Companion* to be a fabulous inspiration. All we had to do was to expand on his approach to medical aid for remote areas, and update (obviously!) to today's current First Aid standards and practices (possibly without the addition of how to host a Funeral service!).



So, one day in 1989, I plucked up the courage to telephone the St John Ambulance National Headquarters in Canberra. I was transfer through to a lovely fellow who simply said, 'Write up a draft and send it down to me' (sadly, I can't remember his name). But I was overjoyed, and with his kind encouragement I began the draft of a text which contained modern First Aid doctrine written from my experiences as a professional nurse working in the outback. I posted my typed manuscript, *Australian Remote Area First Aid*, to National Headquarters for review.

Within the following year, the then new Director of Training, Professor John Pearn, commissioned my work, and professional editors and illustrators got to work. In 1991 *Survival! Remote Area First Aid* was published. (I wasn't allowed to call it *Australian Remote Area First Aid* as it was thought that the title would be too confusing with St John Australia's national first aid manual, *Australian First Aid*. I was very amused to see that the 2000 edition included 'Australian' in the title—just as I had initially intended!) I was absolutely delighted that Professor Pearn also recognised the link to Flynn's *Companion* that I found inspiring, because in his Foreword for *Survival!*, he wrote:

When injuries occur in remote places, they assume a significance quite different from those managed in populated areas. In no more dramatic sense can someone with basic first aid skills literally save lives ... Modern concepts of first aid combine two philosophies—the skilled self management of injuries and sudden illness on the one hand, and prevention on the other. In no circumstances are these two themes more important than in the remote areas of Australia and its offshore islands. (*Survival!* 1st edition, 1991, p. vii)



The publication of *Survival!* was a pivotal moment that marked the beginning of a new chapter in the approach to First Aid for remote Australia. Recognising the unique challenges faced by those living and travelling in isolated regions, I dedicated myself to developing resources that addressed both the urgency and the reality of long waits for professional



medical help. My aim was to empower ordinary Australians with the First Aid knowledge and confidence to take effective action in critical situations, bridging the gap between incident and rescue. I am very proud to say that many thousands of copies of *Survival!* have been printed, including new editions. Unfortunately, today *Survival!* and *Australian Remote Area First Aid* are out-of-print and very hard to find in second-hand bookshops (obviously people understand the value of the knowledge in those books, and have hang on to their copies). But fortunately, technology and broader delivery of First Aid training has given better and quicker access to those skills.

I like to believe that my reading of Flynn's work, and that one phone call has led to life-saving knowledge that we in St John Ambulance Australia have been able teach to our more adventurous fellow Australians. And without the forward-thinking and enthusiasm from the then staff at our National Office, I believe my 'new' idea would not have been achieved.

Reference

Pearn J, 2012. 'The Bushman's Companion: The Reverend John Flynn's first contributions to pre-hospital care in the Australian outback' in *St John History*, Vol. 11, pp 17–26.