100 years of ambulance vehicles

NSW paramedics have witnessed first-hand the development of health transport over the past 100 years – from humble makeshift ambulances with canvas covers and homemade fittings, to today’s Volkswagen Sprinters. In Part one of a two-part special feature, we look at the first few decades of ambulance vehicles.

From the moment the ‘ambulance men’ of the Civil Ambulance and Transport Corps (CATC) took delivery of their first motorised ambulance on 27 May 1912, the service has never looked back.

In its early years, the service coped with stretchers and hand-wheeled litters, providing a long, hard slog for those attempting to reach the scene of an accident. In the first 12 months of operation, the officers travelled 711 miles (1144 km) on foot!

Transport improved with the introduction of the horse-drawn carriage in 1899–1900, and this mode of transport continued until motor vehicles began ruling the roads and the CATC felt the need to modernise.

A 26-horse power Belgian-made Minerva vehicle was identified in 1911 and moves were made for its acquisition, but disappointment struck when the service found it could not afford the financial outlay. Fortunately it was donated 12 months later by CATC Vice President Anthony Hordern, who believed in the corp’s inestimable service to the community. The vehicle was able to carry three patients in addition to the driver and ambulance attendant. According to the Sydney Morning Herald, “every device that tends to reduce friction and ensure comfort and ease for passengers who have met with an accident has been introduced”. The car was finished in a “delicate shade of grey”, and equipped with “combination electric and oil head, tail and driving lights, speedometer, mileometer, motor clock, two spare wheels and tyres, and a power-driven continuous alarm”.

The vehicle was, of course, a huge success. The CATC’s 18th annual report in 1913 said it had proved so superior that the committee decided to buy an additional motor ambulance. A 16-horse power Armstrong-Whitworth motor wagon, which cost £800, was the result, arriving at the newly-built Central Railway Station on 21 June, 1913.

The photographs printed over the following three pages show a range of makes and models of vehicles used as ambulances over the ensuing 50 years. According to ambulance vehicle historian Mike Taylor, a paramedic for 34 years before his retirement at Forbes Station in 2009, the service largely existed on donations from the community, which meant that the standard of vehicle was more a reflection of the local economy.

Mike has a proud family association with NSW Ambulance dating back to June 1935, when his father John ‘Jack’ Taylor joined, followed by five of Jack’s six sons – John (Jnr), Peter, Greg, Philip and Mike. With a combined 180 years in the service, the family experienced the upgrades in ambulance vehicles over the years first-hand.

Mike explains: “The districts, as they were, had to be self-supporting. They bought their own vehicles, paid their own staff and carried out most of their own maintenance. They did get some assistance from the government, through the Ambulance Board, but it wasn’t a lot; it didn’t go very far. Basically, with cars, except for some of the really well-to-do districts, most just bought vehicles they could afford, not necessarily what they needed or whether they met a certain standard.”

Such was the case with the Terraplane sedan ambulance which, while impressive in appearance, featured the not-so-agreeable side-loading aspect, in both single and double berth options.

“There must have been a lot of back injuries, that’s all I can say,” Mike said. “I do remember that style of car; my father had two side-loaders at Young. But he strictly had single berths; he wouldn’t have a top berth.”

Mike’s twin brother Greg, also a keen ambulance enthusiast, said the Austin Sheerline was another choice of vehicle. In the June-July 1995 edition of newsletter, The Red Beacon (produced by the Ambulance Historical Society of Australia) Greg wrote, “The Sheerline was released in Britain in 1947 and within a short time the company released a chassis for ambulance and hearse use… The ambulance chassis was imported into Australia … (but) did not sell in big numbers. With the normal four-door sedan, on which the ambulance version was based, only about 700 were imported into this country”.

Mike said once the cab chassis was purchased by the relevant district it was then fitted out as an ambulance by a body builder. FL Chivers and WS Grice, both Sydney-based, were the body builders of choice.

“My father had a 1951 Ford at Young Station which was in service for 18 years,” Mike said. “It was delivered when my twin brother and I were two years old, and in service for long enough for us to drive it to work!”

Michelle Hoctor
Media Liaison Officer
1 1895 Ashford Hand Litter
2 1899–1900 Horse Ambulance which started to operate in late 1899 and is generally thought to have remained in service until the early 1920s
3 1904 Bicycle Ambulance, Cobar
4 1910s Ambulance
5 1912 Minerva, Sydney’s first motor ambulance was a 26-horse power, four-cylinder vehicle which included a combination electric and oil head, tail and driving lights, speedometer, mileometer, motor clock, two spare wheels and tyres and a power-driven continuous alarm
6 1913 Armstrong-Whitworth
7 1916–18 Fiat, Eastern Suburbs District Ambulance
8 1918–19 Ford, Lithgow District Ambulance (photo courtesy Mike Taylor)
9 1918–1920 Model T Ford, Glen Innes Hospital Ambulance.
10 1919 Sydney Ambulance tram  11 The first Wagga Wagga car was a 1925 Hudson and the second possibly a 1926 Buick sedan (photo courtesy Mike Taylor)  12 1927 Hudson, South Sydney Branch of the Central District Ambulance;  13 1927 Hudson, Grafton District Ambulance  14 1927 Buick, Lismore District Ambulance  15 1928 Chrysler 6-cylinder;  16 1929 Hudson, Grafton District Ambulance (photo courtesy Mike Taylor)  17 1929–30 Studebaker, Wagga Wagga District Ambulance  18 1927 Essex used as a ‘children’s ambulance’ due to its small size, Rockdale Ambulance Station.
19 1935 Graham, which had a super-charged straight eight engine and “went like a scalded cat in its day,” said Mike Taylor
20 1935 Hudson-Terraplane twin berth side loading sedan, Bathurst District Ambulance (photo courtesy Mike Taylor)
21 1936 Ford, Orange District Ambulance 22 1938 Hudson, Young Station (photo courtesy Mike Taylor) 23 This is (most likely) a 1946 model Dodge 15cwt, Eastern Suburbs District, said Allan Simpson 24 1946–48 Dodge, St George-Sutherland District Ambulance 25 1964 EH Holden, Young (photo courtesy Mike Taylor) 26 1951 Austin Sheerline, Berrima District Ambulance. According to Mike Taylor, “By 1954 to ’55, Bowral had two of these cars and I understand they had two stretchers and were equipped with rescue equipment for road and industrial accidents”. 27 1951 Ford, Young (photo courtesy Peter F Taylor).

You’ll find Part 2 of this special feature in the September issue of Sirens.