THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN FIELD SERVICE AND ITS EFFECT ON AMERICAN ENGAGEMENT IN WWI, 1914 – 1917

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in
History

by
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EFFECT ON AMERICAN ENGAGEMENT IN WWI, 1914 – 1917

A Thesis

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Russell Gray Olson

Fall 2013

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family,

and the many roads we

have traveled together

✉
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the encouragement (and gentle prodding) of my parents Marcia and Paul. I am also grateful to Dr. Jeffery Livingston for providing valuable support and advice throughout the long process of research and writing. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Robert Tinkler and Dr. Robert Cottrell for their many contributions to this project.
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ABSTRACT

THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN FIELD SERVICE AND ITS EFFECT ON AMERICAN ENGAGEMENT IN WWI, 1914 – 1917

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This project examines a long misunderstood dynamic of the United States World War I narrative. For the opening three years of the war, President Wilson guided the U.S. down the path of neutrality; American citizens were expected to remain impartial in both thought and action to the great European conflict. Yet during this period, 2,500 American men volunteered for the American Field Service as warzone ambulance drivers for the French Army. Through this process the men, who were mostly upper class from prestigious universities, became fierce domestic advocates for American intervention on the side of the Allied Powers. While many historians have a vague notion of the volunteer phenomenon, the extent to which these men influenced the nation, given their prominence in the war-era media, has been remarkably overlooked.

Even among acclaimed historians there are prevalent misconceptions concerning the men, and discussions of the ambulance volunteers in broader histories of
the war commonly cite these misconception, and only these misconceptions, while
discussing the volunteers. This is unfortunate as, upon researching the ambulance
volunteers, it becomes apparent that substantial historical relevance can be found on a
number of different levels, including the historically unique phenomenon of American
men risking it all (seventeen AFS volunteers lost their lives in the war), in what was at
the time, a strictly European conflict. Additional historical significance stems from the
fact that AFS volunteers served for over three years in the war (longer than AEF forces).

While proper written histories of the volunteer are disturbingly scant, the
official archivist of the American Field Service, David Gray, has written several articles
concerning the volunteer movement during the war. The chief historical publication
consulted for this project is Arlen J. Hansen’s Gentleman Volunteers: The Story of the
American Ambulance Drivers in the First World War. While secondary sources proved
sparse, the volunteers left behind a wealth of primary-accounts concerning their service.
Men such as Julien H. Bryan, Robert Whitney Imbrie, William Yorke Stevenson and
Phillip Sydney Rice meticulously recorded their wartime experiences. Additionally, the
archives of the Harvard Crimson, Cornell Daily Sun, and the New York Times have been
invaluable.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At the outbreak of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson took a neutral stance toward the conflict. Almost immediately Wilson realized that the extent to which the U.S. would remain free of European entanglement depended upon the behavior and attitudes of private American citizens. Cognizant of this fact, just a few weeks into the war, and with the German military advancing through Belgium and northern France, President Wilson solemnly addressed the American public, plainly stating, “The United States must be neutral in fact, as well as in name, during these days that are to try men's souls. We must be impartial in thought, as well as action, must put a curb upon our sentiments, as well as upon every transaction that might be construed as a preference of one party to the struggle before another.”¹

Yet over the next three years, as Wilson attempted to retain neutrality, over 2,500 American men volunteered with the French Army as part of an ambulance organization that cultivated a fiercely pro-Allied reputation. In spite of Wilson’s appeal, the organization’s official motto was “Everything and all for France”² and one


advertisement courting new volunteers plainly stated that new recruits “above all, must be loyal to the cause of France and the allies.”

The American Field Service volunteer ambulance organization, originating as a hastily-arranged fleet of private vehicles during the first Battle of the Marne in September 1914, became the most tangible expression of American goodwill toward the wartime goals of the Allied Powers during the opening three years of World War I. Despite the organization’s humble beginnings, by the time the United States entered the war (and took control of the organization) in late 1917, the American Field Service boasted thirty-four complete ambulance sections and ten military transport units totaling 2,000 American men in service.

While the AFS was not the only volunteer ambulance service during the period, the organization unquestionably became the most prominent of the three American ambulance offerings that served the Allied Powers during the years in which the United States remained neutral. Because of the AFS’s dominant cultural and military impact, the scope of this paper will be limited to the ambulance volunteers that served in the sections of that organization. The other two volunteer offerings attracted a far lower numbers of volunteers, recruited men of many nationalities, piggybacked on the AFS’s military ties, and were directly affiliated with the Red Cross – which meant they lacked the aggressively pro-Allied stance held by AFS administrators. Additionally, the

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American Field Service was the only volunteer organization that contributed impactful numbers of men to the American Army’s ambulance service following the United States entry into the war in 1917.⁶

During the years of the American Field Service’s independent existence, from 1914 to 1917, the immediate significance of the organization can be found on two levels. The first was the extent to which the volunteers influenced the Allied war effort in Europe. American volunteers both aided injured soldiers and relieved overloaded French and British ambulance sections. Over the course of the organization’s history, AFS sections were paired with sixty-four Allied artillery divisions and most commonly the Americans were the only ambulance fleet attached to these regiments. Of the impact the organization made on his country, French Ambassador to the United States Jean Jules Jusserand remarked, “Lives saved by thousands, suffering attenuated, amputations avoided, families spared their fathers for after the war; these form only a part of the French debt toward the American Field Service.”⁷

The second immediate level of impact was that the volunteers, the majority of whom had left distinguished American universities to serve in the organization, relentlessly promoted the Allied cause during the uncertain years when many U.S. citizens adhered to Wilson’s original plea for neutrality. One direct manner in which American Field Service volunteers affected public opinion in the United States was through autobiographical accounts of their service published in American newspapers.

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and magazines. While accounts of ambulance work were frequently printed in student and small town newspapers, large publications such as the *New York Times* and *Harper’s Magazine* also commonly featured lengthy written accounts of the volunteers that brought the European war to an American readership on a personal level. Despite the relatively small number of men that served in ambulance work, American newsstands featured the work of the volunteers nearly every day. Volunteers further influenced American public opinion through letter writing (which many men requested be circulated among family, friends, and sponsors), as well as by taking part in AFS promotional tours after the men had returned to the United States.

Another crucial avenue by which the AFS influenced American attitudes toward the war was through the large number of private citizens who donated to the organization. Of wartime philanthropic organizations, the AFS ranked eighth in American donations – and each individual who donated to the strongly pro-French AFS became attached on a personal level to the war goals of the Allied Powers.

Of the domestic impact of these volunteers, the English-born novelist and World War I veteran Coningsby Dawson stated, “The report of the sacrificial courage of these pioneers had travelled to every State of the Union. Their example had stirred, shamed, and educated the Nation. It is to these knight-errants . . . that I attribute America’s eager acceptance of Calvary, when, at last, it was offered to her by her statesmen.”8 Some historians have also credited the organization with contributing in a direct manner to America’s entry into World War I. Andrew Gray wrote of the United

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States’ 1917 declaration of war, “Historians have not adequately recognized the role played by [the AFS] in leading up to it.”

While many historians consider the first three years of the war (the majority of the conflict) an exclusively European affair, the fact that 2,500 American Field Service volunteers served in Europe cannot be overlooked. AFS volunteers served at the front, experienced the highs and lows of war, and (on one occasion) even fired shells at the German Army. The American ambulance fleets were so prevalent that, in early 1917, the Times of London wrote that, in France, they “made the American language, American music, and Boston baked beans familiar.”

The primary accounts of service provide the definitive American narrative for the majority of the war. Because of a notoriously restrictive press censorship that took place during World War I (and particularly during these early years of the conflict) the accounts prove of even greater value. AFS volunteers recorded their experiences from a uniquely American perspective. The writer and AFS veteran Malcolm Cowley once observed that the “ambulance corps and the French military transport were college-extension courses for a generation of writers,” and many volunteers, believing the U.S. would never enter the conflict, wrote meticulously of their time in the war.

Yet this group of volunteers, primarily made up of upper class Northeastern Americans, has largely been overlooked by historians of the Great War. Even among

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acclaimed historians, misconceptions about the volunteers abound. The most definitive account of ambulance work has come from an English-language professor, Arlen J. Hansen, whose book Gentleman Volunteers: The Story of American Ambulance Drivers in the Great War chronicles the history of all three American ambulance organizations. Aside from a chapter in Richard Ginn’s The History of the U.S. Army Medical Service Corps and a 1951 article by Charles A. Fenton titled “Ambulance Drivers in France and Italy: 1914-1918,” proper historical accounts of the men’s service have been peculiarly scant given the ambulance driver’s cultural prominence in the opening years of the war. While groups such as the Lafayette Escadrille and American volunteers in the French Foreign Legion have received significant attention, the AFS, with a few exceptions, has become something of an historical afterthought. But with far greater numbers of volunteers serving in the AFS than in either the Lafayette Escadrille or Foreign Legion, and almost daily accounts of the ambulance work printed in American newspapers and magazines, it can be argued that, in the opening years of the Great War, the AFS had a profound effect on American public opinion toward the favor of the Allied powers.

This paper will provide a detailed and long overdue historical analysis of the organization’s history from its inception in September 1914 to the United States Army’s takeover of the ambulance and transport sections during the fall of 1917. Following that will be an analysis of the volunteers’ experiences, the effects they had on both France and the United States, and the motives that propelled the men to volunteer in what was at the time an exclusively European conflict. Why did 2,500 wealthy and educated American men risk it all (seventeen AFS volunteers lost their lives in the war) in a foreign conflict
that their nation’s president had asked them to refrain from entering?\textsuperscript{12} Why was it the French, and not the Germans, English, or another belligerent, that received the majority of these volunteers? Any analysis of American neutrality during the war must take these ambulance volunteers into consideration.

CHAPTER II

THE BEGINNING OF THE VOLUNTEER AMBULANCE SERVICE

The volunteer ambulance service, like a number of other philanthropic wartime organizations, developed as an extension of the American Ambulance Hospital in Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb northwest of Paris. For a number of years before the war, American expatriates had run a small “American hospital” in the Neuilly district, and in August 1914, with the war edging closer to Paris, the French government granted a committee of prominent American citizens the use of a large brick schoolhouse as a military hospital.\(^1\) Many of the U.S.-based philanthropic organizations of the war (including the other two American ambulance services) originated from men and women who volunteered at this hospital in the opening months of the war. In the late summer of 1914, as the German advance pushed alarmingly close to Paris, this Neuilly Hospital, in the words of eventual AFS head Abram Piatt Andrew, “naturally became a rallying centre for all Americans, who, as residents, travelers, or students, happened to be in Paris at the time, and who wanted to do something to help.”\(^2\)

Although much has been made of the post-war “lost generation” of Americans who resided in Paris following the armistice, the Paris of 1914 already had a prominent

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\(^1\) Geller, “American Field Service Archives.”

American colony of artists, students, business entrepreneurs, and medical professionals. In *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris*, historian David McCullough has chronicled the steady rise, beginning in the 1830s, of upper class American citizens living the expatriate life in the French capital, eventually assimilating into the nation’s culture and prospering economically. Many of these Americans, over time, developed a strong affinity for France and the people of the country they had grown to call home. It was only natural, then, that as their adopted homeland came under attack, many of them wished to provide assistance to the French. A medical service was a logical outlet for this desire, as both men and women could contribute to the French cause, all without sacrificing their American citizenship and while exposing themselves to (comparatively) little danger.

American medical aid for French soldiers even had an immediate historic precedent, as Parisian Americans had provided assistance for French soldiers forty years prior to World War I during the Franco-Prussian War. With Paris under siege in 1870, a band of nearly fifty American volunteers, including seven doctors, called on their medical experience in the American Civil War to establish a large tent hospital that provided treatment to injured French soldiers. The volunteer offering proved tremendously successful, with the surgeon general of the French Army at the time remarking that the American offering was superior to any of the French military hospitals in Paris.³ This 1870 hospital featured American volunteers traveling to the battle lines in horse-drawn carts and bringing injured French soldiers back to Paris for medical attention, a direct precursor to the ambulance volunteers of 1914-1917.

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Although the Neuilly Hospital of 1914 was not directly affiliated with the 1870 endeavor, the spirit of the offering was largely the same. The opening of the 1914 hospital, and the subsequent volunteer ambulance corps, was predominantly the work of American Ambassador to France Myron T. Herrick. In the early days of the war, Herrick received acclaim from the French population after remaining in Paris (unlike the French Parliament and many other foreign ambassadors) when it appeared the city would be overtaken by the unprecedented German advance. In 1915, American diplomat Eric Fisher Wood wrote that the Neuilly Hospital, and specifically the ambulance field service of the hospital, was one of Ambassador Herrick’s greatest diplomatic achievements, noting that the organization’s “efficiency, size, and rapid growth have done more to promote friendly relations between France and the United States than any other single factor.”

Notably, Herrick was not the only American diplomat responsible for developing the organization, as his immediate predecessor as ambassador to France, Robert Bacon, also played a crucial financial and political role in establishing the Neuilly Hospital. Bacon, motivated by a lifelong love for France, relished his role at the Neuilly Hospital, and even worked as an ambulance driver in the early months of the war. While Herrick was replaced as ambassador to France in late 1914, he would remain in Paris, using his social and political clout to promote the hospital and ambulance service as both expanded during the opening years of the war.

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Naturally, foreign citizens from a neutral country creating a military hospital and ambulance service in the midst of a major European conflict presented a litany of financial, bureaucratic, and political problems, and it took men and women of high political, social, and economic standing to create the organization. In the early days of the American Hospital, the ambulance corps was actually managed by Ambassador Herrick himself. Wood writes that “it was his energy which pushed it through the political and economic difficulties incident to its inception.” Bacon and Herrick’s direct and aggressive involvement in the Neuilly Hospital, in direct contrast to President Wilson’s pleas for neutrality, demonstrates both their personal allegiance toward the French and the political capital that they believed could be gained by medical aid in such a manner.

In the first months of the war, the American Hospital at Neuilly, as well as its nascent ambulance service, was run by a committee of prominent Americans. Relevant founding members of the ambulance corps included Chairman of the Transportation Committee, Laurence Benet; Chief Surgeon, Edmond Gros; and Captain of Ambulances, Wesseley Kipling. All would take a diligent and hands-on approach to the development of the ambulance field service, which from the hospital’s inception was seen as a promising and viable means of aiding the French and garnering attention for the Allied cause from citizens in the United States.

A number of very wealthy and influential women served on the hospital’s board of governors, including the wives of Robert Bacon, August Belmont, Henry P. Davison, E.H. Harriman, Myron Herrick, Junius Morgan, Whitelaw Reid, Montgomery

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8 Ibid.
Sears, W.K. Vanderbilt, Bayard Van Rensselaer, and Henry Payne Whitney. The president of this board (and a man who would play a very large role in the development and expansion of the American Field Service) was former ambassador Bacon.

The Neuilly Hospital, fueled by wealthy donors and a motivated staff of American volunteers, quickly developed into one of the top military hospitals in the vicinity of the Western Front. While the hospital aided soldiers of many nationalities (both the Allied and Central Powers), primary medical attention was given to the Allies, and the overwhelming majority of men cared for were of British or French origin. From August 1914 through August 1915, over 2,500 injured soldiers were treated at the hospital. By the end of 1915, the hospital, always expanding in these early days, featured fifty wards with a total of 575 beds.

Although the ambulance field service would eventually separate from the American Hospital at Neuilly, for the first two years of its existence the service was headquartered at and run directly from this hospital, under the supervision of the hospital’s often overbearing committees. While the name of the ambulance service would change slightly over the years, at this early stage it was officially known as “The

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9 Most of the women were part-time residents of Paris and a few, such as Anne Vanderbilt and Martha Waldron Cowdin (Bacon’s wife) remained in the city during the war.

10 Geller, “American Field Service Archives.”

11 Ibid.
American Ambulance Field Service.” The field service was also widely known among soldiers by its French title – “Service Automobile Américaine.”

In the early months of the war, lacking a viable operating structure, sufficient awareness and support in the United States, and official ties with the proper French authorities, the Neuilly Hospital struggled to provide and develop a dependable wartime ambulance service. Pressed into service, many volunteers relied on their own private automobiles, and the first two injured soldiers brought to the American Hospital at Neuilly were carried by an American woman using a private vehicle as an ambulance.

In mid-September 1914, the hospital’s makeshift fleet traveled to pick up injured soldiers from battle sites based simply on the rumor of potential ambulance runs. Indicating the experimental nature of the AFS’s early days, the Neuilly Hospital’s French chaplain recorded in October 1914, “Half our ambulances started for the North the morning before last; they were not quite certain where, but alas! Only too surely to come upon great carnage.”

Throughout the fall of 1914, the service desperately sought any automobiles that could be used as ambulances. An example of this pressing need can be found in a frantic sojourn to the north of France undertaken by AFS workers following the rumor that a few procurable cars could be secured for the organization – after a few days of

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15 Klein, *The Diary of a French Army Chaplain*

16 Ibid.
searching the region for the elusive (and perhaps non-existent) vehicles, the men returned to Paris empty-handed. During this period, the AFS was not the only organization lacking a proper ambulance fleet. At the start of the war, the French had only twenty motor ambulances – as the majority of their ambulance sections still relied upon horse-drawn carriages.

While AFS fleets would eventually be standardized using American Model T Fords, because of this lack of sufficient vehicles in the opening months of the conflict, anything that drove was deemed acceptable. However, the AFS quickly learned, along with the rest of the war powers, that uniformity was of paramount importance to an effective section of military vehicles. An ambulance crew utilizing a random assortment of European and American makes would serve only as an expensive frustration to that section’s drivers and mechanical crew. In a 1914 article printed in the *British Medical Journal*, H. Massac Buist observed of wartime automobiles in the early years of the war, “By far the greatest wastage of motor vehicles is sustained merely through multiplicity of types. Often chassis are to be found abandoned on the roads in the most extraordinary numbers for need of some little part that has failed … but a spare example of which does not happen to be available.” For the AFS, standardization of parts saved countless hours and dollars – and for a volunteer organization dependent entirely on American donations,

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uniformity was paramount if the organization hoped to have any long-term growth and stability.

Yet in the desperate early days of the AFS, ambulances were brought indiscriminately, and the result was a seemingly random collection of makes and models from all over the United States and Europe. Some of the original vehicles had even been previously used as standard city hospital service ambulances back in the United States, meaning they were far from ideal for work in a war. The difficulties provided by this haphazard array of ambulances proved countless as automobiles of the World War I era regularly featured diverse operating systems – and two vehicle makes were often directly converse to one another. Longtime AFS Inspector General Andrew wrote, “With a Ford the controls were the opposite of what some of the men were used to. Driving a Packard was the opposite.” Naturally, such an avoidable complication exasperated stressed ambulance drivers pressed by wartime circumstances into driving an unfamiliar vehicle in the most trying of battle conditions. Ambulance drivers facing roadside tire blowouts (a very common occurrence) and other mechanical issues far from their repair crews also depended on a loose familiarity with their vehicles – something a hastily put together section of Fords, Sunbeams, Packards, Fiats, Peugeots, and Daimlers could never provide the volunteer.

Historian Andrew Gray has written that French battalions desperately needed ambulance squads in the first months of the war, but “American volunteers eager to

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perform such a function were obliged to putter around in a haphazard collection of jalopies in the rear of the Allied armies." All too soon it became dramatically apparent that if the AFS were to have any sort of sustainable future (and genuine reliability to the Allies) a standardized and uniform fleet of automobiles would be a necessity.

After much discussion and debate, Neuilly Hospital administrators decided to adopt the relatively small (for a military ambulance) Ford Model T and convert the car’s body into a war ambulance when it arrived in France. A paramount advantage of the Ford model was that, owing to its comparatively small chassis, costs would be drastically cut in both buying and shipping the would-be ambulances. With lower costs, more organizations and private individuals in the United States were able to donate Ford ambulances and more Americans could drive the vehicles and serve the Allied armies in Europe. More drivers, ambulances, and donors meant greater numbers of American men and women directly and indirectly associated with the Allied cause, an underlying factor in practically all of the AFS’s policies. An additional advantage of the Ford was that the vehicles were built in the United States and it was important to the organization’s hierarchy (as one of the most visible American groups in the war) that they represented their nation as prominently as possible.

The first proper ambulance fleet secured by the AFS was made up of ten Fords shipped directly from the United States (as the overwhelming majority of ambulances used by the organization would be). This original squadron was secured

22 Gray, “The American Field Service.”

23 By the time U.S. troops officially entered the war in mid-1917, the American Field Service had imported over 1,200 of these Ford ambulances into France.
and donated by the manager of the Ford Motor Company in Paris.\textsuperscript{24} In an example of American ingenuity at its finest, when the cars arrived in France it was found that the wood from the shipping crates could be re-used to build the extended ambulance body. This method was quickly adopted as the customary procedure for building the ambulance body and was utilized throughout the existence of the organization’s history. And while this original wood crate design proved successful, the actual construction of the ambulances was always a work in progress – with many commanders of American sections writing to AFS administrators with ideas (often implemented) on how to more efficiently construct the body of a war ambulance.\textsuperscript{25}

Despite several attempts to secure monetary discounts from the Ford Motor Company, all vehicles purchased by American donors were paid for at full market price.\textsuperscript{26} Longtime head of the AFS, Abram Piatt Andrew, remarked that Henry Ford’s personal refusal to provide the organization with discounted rates originated in Ford’s “peculiar ideas of philanthropy,” which prevented him from donating to associations so directly affiliated with a belligerent power.\textsuperscript{27} The ambulances were purchased at full price in the United States, by private individual donors or organizations, and then shipped to France and assembled and standardized by AFS volunteers.\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{24} Geller, “American Field Service Archives.”
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 1, 33.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 33.
\end{flushright}
In a standard medical transport situation, the Ford ambulances used by the service could carry five passengers, which was significantly less than the more common English and French ambulances. Occasionally, this led to conflict – as some Allied officers, unfamiliar with the American Fords, insisted that the Americans carry beyond their capacity. One volunteer wrote of a “hot and bitter dispute” that occurred with an officer who had demanded that the driver carry eight injured soldiers.29 Another volunteer once wrote that because of this uncharacteristically small size, the Fords were “the subject of a thousand jokes” along the Western Front.30

The AFS overcame its first significant hurdle with plans for a uniform fleet of Fords. But establishing a tactically reliable ambulance service proved to be more challenging than the Neuilly Hospital’s administrators had expected. In the opening months of the war, the only official ambulance duty the French allowed American volunteers to conduct were “evacuation runs,” driving severely injured soldiers who were already far removed from the trenches to hospitals even farther back from the front lines. Most frequently, volunteers would drive injured soldiers from train stations and other designated depots where the injured men would be placed on the ground and then picked up and driven by ambulance services to one of a number of hospitals around Paris.31 In the later years of the war these Paris-area evacuation runs were considered the least “glamorous” of the ambulance work during the war. Even during these early months

29 The American Field Service, History of the American Field Service, vol. 1, 102. The Fords could carry as many as eight soldiers when absolutely necessary, although this would require some men to sit on the bumpers.

30 Ibid., 97.

31 Ibid., 183.
there was a strong desire among AFS volunteers to branch out into more productive and demanding avenues of ambulance service.

Outside of the Paris-area evacuation runs, the early days of the AFS largely consisted of a trial and error approach of attempting to land spontaneous (and almost random) assignments to transport injured Allied soldiers to nearby hospitals. In November 1914, independent of direction from the French Army, American volunteers regularly headed out from the Neuilly Hospital toward battle sites and scouted locations where any potential ambulance runs could prove feasible.32 Misadventures and setbacks abounded, and the Americans were commonly sent to regions that needed no ambulance workers.33 If the organization hoped to have any measurable effect on the French medical service it would need to develop official ties with the French military.

The first significant progress toward such an affiliation, as well as a truly effective method of aiding injured Allied soldiers, came in November 1914 when small American squads were formed of five ambulances apiece. Most significantly, the squads were placed by, and subject to, the orders of the French government.34 In practice, these volunteers evacuated injured soldiers, already far removed from the trenches, from sorting stations, to hospitals or train stations even farther back from the lines.

This early ambulance service was largely superfluous as the evacuation of critically injured soldiers from these sorting stations was already sufficiently

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33 Ibid., 191.
administered by large French truck ambulances, which were better suited for the mass transport of injured soldiers far from the front lines.35 The ragtag squads of small Model T’s, while an amicable gesture, were not of much practical use to the French.36 Longtime AFS officer (and eventual second in command) Stephen Galatti reflected that, at the time, “those in charge of [these squads] despaired of their ever accomplishing anything.”37

Despite the enthusiasm and best intentions of the American volunteers, their hodgepodge assortment of donated vehicles and disorganized units did little to impress a French military authority struggling to hold off the German advance. In fact, at the close of 1914 the French informed the Neuilly Hospital that its ambulance units would not be considered for any further work near the front lines. This meant that at the beginning of 1915 the American Hospital at Neuilly’s ambulance service (outside of the evacuation runs in Paris) consisted of just three small squads serving far from the front lines and partaking in unglamorous train station evacuation runs with the British Expeditionary Force.38

36 Andrew, *Letters Written Home*.
38 Gray, “The American Field Service.”
CHAPTER III

THE GROWTH AND EXPANSION OF
THE FIELD SERVICE

In December 1914, Abram Piatt Andrew, a man fresh off a political loss in an Essex County, Massachusetts, Republican congressional primary, began taking lessons in driving a Model T Ford with hopes of serving with the AFS in France. At forty-one years of age, Andrew was free from any familial obligations that may have kept a similarly qualified man comfortably home in the United States.

Andrew had originally written Robert Bacon requesting a management position at the Neuilly Hospital, as Bacon owed Andrew a favor for employing Bacon’s son as an assistant while working in the United States Treasury Department. Andrew’s history with Bacon was not enough to secure him a position in the hospital’s overcrowded management, and Bacon suggested that Andrew offer his services as a volunteer ambulance driver. Andrew, who originally planned to serve for just a few short months, quickly agreed to Bacon’s suggestion, although he had only a vague idea of what the work would entail. On the voyage across the Atlantic he dismissively wrote a friend, “Who knows . . . we may spend the winter carting the groceries from Paris to Neuilly.” Instead, Andrew would go on to dramatically change the nature and direction of the AFS.

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1 Gray, “The American Field Service.”
2 Ibid.
After serving for three months as a common ambulance driver, Andrew was promoted by Bacon and given the title he would keep until the organization was taken over by the United States Army in 1917 – “Inspector General of the American Field Service.” Bacon created the position specifically for Andrew, and his decision to promote the man (to an entirely new position) after such a short time reflected his confidence in Andrew’s capabilities, a disillusion with the hospital’s committees, and perhaps, his indebtedness to Andrew for previously employing his son.3 In his first months as general inspector, Andrew traveled between the few active ambulance squadrons and inspected the work of the American crews. Given his position, no one was more aware of the negligible impact the AFS was having on the armies of the Allied Powers, and Andrew would be the man to change that. 4

For a number of reasons, Andrew was the right man to finally develop a feasible model for the field service to aid the French military. As a student he had studied in both France and Germany and was fluent in both nations’ languages. After graduating from Princeton in 1893, Andrew pursued further education at Harvard, where he eventually became an assistant professor of economics. In 1909 Andrew left Harvard to serve in Washington, where he was quickly appointed director of the United States Mint and in 1910 he became assistant secretary of the United States Treasury.5 Holding such a resume, he had a number of important social and political connections in both Paris and Washington, which paid dividends for the growth of the AFS. Significantly for the 

3 Gray, “The American Field Service.”
4 Andrew, Letters Written Home.
5 Geller, “American Field Service Archives.”
organization’s expansion, his personal contacts among influential Frenchmen included Jean Jules Jusserand, the French ambassador to the United States (a former tennis partner), and several high-ranking friends on the staffs of French generals Joseph Joffre and Ferdinand Foch.\(^6\)

In early 1915, after only a few months as inspector general of the American Field Service, Andrew developed a plan to organize American ambulance sections for direct service with French front line army divisions, serving in the exact same capacity as French military ambulances.\(^7\) To gain access to the proper authorities, Andrew relied on two old friends working under General Joffre. The first was André Tardieu,\(^8\) who had been a guest lecturer at Harvard when Andrew taught at the university, and the second was Gabriel Puaux, a man Andrew had befriended while studying in Germany. Through these personal channels Andrew became acquainted with Joffre’s primary advisor on all military transportation issues, Commandant Aimé Doumenc. The agreeable Doumenc, impressed with Andrew’s grand vision and cognizant of the potential for such front line assistance, suggested a trial approach for a full and proper American volunteer ambulance section serving alongside a French artillery division.

This provisional section of American volunteers, unprecedented in 20\(^{th}\) century warfare, was to be placed under the watchful eye of French Commandant de Montravel – the head of military transportation in the east of France.\(^9\)

\(^6\) Andrew, *Letters Written Home*.


\(^8\) André Tardieu would go on to serve three times as Prime Minister of France, beginning in 1929.

\(^9\) Gray, “The American Field Service.”
Montravel would later remark that upon first meeting Andrew he had expected that the latter would merely express a desire to resume the unglamorous back-of-the-lines work that had been curtailed at the end of 1914. Instead, Andrew convinced the commandant to allow a conventional French style section of Americans to serve along the front.

Commandant de Montravel’s groundbreaking arrangement with Andrew meant that American volunteers would no longer be relegated to back-of-the-line evacuation runs. This monumental policy shift was particularly consequential as the French Army’s official regulations had, not surprisingly, forbidden unattached foreigners from serving anywhere near the front lines. It was Andrew, through his ambition and personal connections, who guided the AFS through this great barrier – allowing this essential new avenue for legitimacy and growth for his organization. In a joint statement in the AFS’s 1916 publication, *Friends of France: The Field Service of the American Ambulance Described by its Members*, the commanders of the collective AFS sections wrote of Andrew: “It was through the confidence placed in him by the French military authorities that the small American squads . . . were allowed to take positions of trust at the front.”

While his personal connections certainly helped, Andrew’s accomplishment in gaining access (even on a trial basis) to the French lines must not be overlooked. In the closing months of 1914, the French had proven very resistant to the idea of allowing Americans anywhere near the front lines. One principal reason was a fear that German spies of American origin would infiltrate the organization and use their position to gather

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10 Gray, “The American Field Service.”

intelligence on the French. Perhaps the fears were not unfounded, as in 1914 German-Americans alone made up nearly nine percent of the U.S. population.\textsuperscript{12} Andrew also needed to address French skepticism toward the quality of service that Americans, the majority of whom had no military training or war experience, could provide their forces.\textsuperscript{13} How would American volunteers with no formal allegiance to the French respond to the horrors of modern warfare? Could such men be depended upon with the lives of French soldiers?

In order to combat these fears Andrew emphasized to French authorities that only men of the highest personal integrity and capability would be used in his organization.

Despite having been in France for only a few months, Andrew was confident in the character of the men who were volunteering for the ambulance service – particularly so as the majority of them at the time were Harvard graduates, a number of whom had even been his students.\textsuperscript{14} In one letter to his parents he wrote of the men he chose for Commandant de Montravel’s trial ambulance section, “What thoroughbred gentlemen they all were.”\textsuperscript{15} Another principal argument used by Andrew was that, for every American man serving in ambulance work, an equivalent number of Frenchmen

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\textsuperscript{12} Spencer C. Tucker, ed., \textit{The Encyclopedia of World War I: A Political, Social, And Military History} (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 471.

\textsuperscript{13} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 1, 62.

\textsuperscript{14} Geller, “American Field Service Archives.”

\textsuperscript{15} Andrew, \textit{Letters Written Home}.
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could be released to serve their country in other wartime services, or to return to their homes where they could be of use on farms or in factories.\textsuperscript{16}

The final selling point to the French was based on the Alsace region, where the initial AFS trial section was proposed to make ambulance runs. The small mountainous region, the easternmost in all of France, had historically passed back-and-forth between France and Germany, with the Germans having captured Alsace during the War of 1870, and the French recapturing the territory in the early months of World War I. Andrew contended that it would frustrate the Germans to know that Americans were serving in a region that formerly belonged to them, and furthermore the presence of the Americans would bring international publicity to the fact that the French had actually captured some German territory.\textsuperscript{17}

One crucial factor that allowed the inexperienced Americans to serve in the warzone was that the AFS, in conforming to the ambulance services of the French Army, fundamentally differed from the ambulance services that had traditionally been used by the United States Army. The battlegrounds in France, in contrast to those the U.S. Army had faced in the Philippines or Mexico, were frequently very close to towns with established hospitals and a reliable network of roads or railroads, which facilitated efficient transportation to take an injured man to a dressing-station or hospital. The fundamental objective of a French (or AFS) ambulance was to take the injured soldiers to medical care, not to provide it. This was different from the American Army ambulances

\textsuperscript{16} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 1, 69.

\textsuperscript{17} Andrew, \textit{Letters Written Home}. Andrew would later use the Alsace service as a selling point for prospective volunteers, proudly touting in the Harvard Crimson that the AFS was the only ambulance service in the famous region.
of the time, which owing to the wartime conditions in foreign countries, would often have to transport injured men long distances before reaching a hospital, and therefore provided medical care en route. In the U.S. Army, circa 1915, the ambulances were a part of the medical corps, while in the French Army ambulances were considered part of the automobile service. The French system allowed for American volunteers with no medical training or war experience to serve as ambulance personnel, while this would have been impossible under the American system during World War I. An injured soldier’s best chance for survival in the Great War depended solely on how quickly and comfortably he could be taken to waiting medical care, and AFS volunteers prided themselves in how efficiently they could accomplish that.

On April 5, 1915, a group of sixteen American men with twelve Ford ambulances arrived in the Vosges region, just west of Alsace. This original AFS trial section was made up entirely of college graduates; the aforementioned “thoroughbred gentlemen” had been handpicked by Andrew from the existing AFS crews. Before they departed to the Alsace, Andrew dramatically told the men that the future of (what was quickly becoming) his organization depended on how well they performed.\(^\text{18}\) Andrew’s agreement with the French was that the trial section would serve under Commandant de Montravel’s supervision in the Vosges, and if the Americans performed well, de Montravel would secure Commandant Doumenc’s permission to allow the men to serve permanently in the Alsace.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{18}\) Andrew, *Letters Written Home*.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
Upon de Montravel’s decision to allow the ambulances to serve with the French in an official military capacity, the section was organized with such alacrity and efficiency that de Montravel surprisingly allowed the trial AFS section to serve at the Alsace front much sooner than Andrew, or any of the volunteers, had expected. Under the watchful (and approving) eyes of supervising French officers, the first proper American ambulance section was moved progressively closer to the front lines each day.

In Alsace, the ambulance teams were stationed in a small valley town on the western side of the Vosges mountain range. To make their runs, the drivers of this section traversed east over the mountain range, before dropping into a valley where they picked up wounded soldiers at assorted dressing-stations in the region. French soldiers that were carried by AFS volunteers had been injured in mountain battles further to the east and were brought down to the valley medical-stations by Frenchman pushing two-wheeled carts.20 Upon picking up the injured soldiers (known by French and Americans as *blesses*), the Americans returned over the mountain range and back to sorting-stations and hospitals – a run taking roughly an hour’s time. Immediately upon starting work in the Alsace, this trial American ambulance division carried around 1,000 injured men per week.21

As the organizational structure and discipline of the AFS volunteers continued to impress French officials, the well-cushioned Fords proved particularly popular with injured soldiers on the steep, rough, and crowded mountain roads. One American driver writing to Andrew from the trial division stated of his experience in Alsace: “The unique

20 Andrew, *Letters Written Home*.
21 Ibid.
spring suspension and light body construction make our cars the most comfortable for the wounded of all the types in service.”

The men of the trial division and their Fords so impressed the French that after just two weeks Commandant de Montravel appealed for a second American section as soon as the men and vehicles could be procured. Andrew, elated to receive the request, provided the men from an already existing back-of-the-line AFS unit, and French authorities decided that the second proper section would be sent to the nearby Lorraine region in northern France. The volunteers of this second proper section were thrilled to finally be able to serve the French, as, under the previous back-of-the-line structure, they had been “fretting day after day in ... idleness.” The second section spent only two days under de Montravel’s personal oversight before he cleared them to serve on the Lorraine front – an indication of de Montravel’s growing comfort and confidence in the American men.

In Lorraine, the work carried out by this second section consisted of what would become typical AFS work – driving injured soldiers from the immediate dressing stations located on the third-line of French trenches, to aid stations or hospitals located between one and ten miles behind the lines. Commonly ambulance squads made their runs under the cover of nightfall and, particularly in these first months, AFS volunteers

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22 Andrew, *Letters Written Home*.


24 Andrew, *Letters Written Home*.

25 Ibid.

26 Andrew, *Letters Written Home*. 
often required a French orderly to accompany them due to a high frequency of accidents, often made more problematic because many of the Americans spoke no French. These orderlies also led the way on starless nights –to escape detection the ambulances did not use headlights as they neared the trenches. Immediately, this second section in Lorraine carried over 1,000 injured soldiers a week.\textsuperscript{27}

With the Americans in Alsace and Lorraine proving their worth, and freeing up French ambulance sections for work in more active sectors of the front, a third American ambulance division was requested by the French and placed in the Dunkirk region of northern France. This placement also allowed the volunteers to aid French forces in nearby Belgium. Thus, by the early summer of 1915, the AFS, a volunteer organization that had begun the year with no official ties to the French military, had three proper ambulance sections working in direct military service with the French Army.

\textsuperscript{27} Andrew, \textit{Letters Written Home}. 
CHAPTER IV

GRADUAL GROWTH AND THE SPLIT
FROM NEUILLY HOSPITAL

Under Andrew’s 1915 agreement with the French, the AFS served in an equal capacity to French ambulance sections. Each AFS section would be made up of between twenty-five and thirty-five American volunteers sharing twenty Ford Model T ambulances.\(^1\) Between two and four French soldiers were assigned to every AFS section, including one officer to facilitate all ambulance work and lodgings.\(^2\) French soldiers serving an AFS section commonly translated orders, cooked and conducted various odd jobs.\(^3\) The French routinely billeted with the Americans, and as Andrew wrote, “French and American members were comrades, sharing the same life, working for the same cause, taking equal pride in their joint accomplishment.”\(^4\)

Under the arrangement that Andrew secured, American volunteers received the same general provisions that French *poilus* (common soldiers) received. An ordinary AFS contract with the French ran for six months, after which the Americans could either reenlist or return to the United States. French authorities granted volunteers leaves set at

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\(^1\) The American Field Service, *History of the American Field Service*, vol. 1, 33.

\(^2\) Many of the French commanding officers, by design, had a familiarity with English language and American culture and commonly had previously lived in the United States.


\(^4\) Ibid., 25.
seven days every three months of service, with an additional fourteen day break after nine months of service.5

The contract Andrew secured required American volunteers to pay for their AFS uniforms (which resembled the British Army’s) as well as travel expenses to and from France.6 The French Army agreed to pay the men the equivalent of five American cents per day, provide meals, and supply gasoline, oil, and tires to the AFS.7 Andrew’s organization furnished all vehicles, paid the lodging of the volunteers as they arrived in France, and compensated the men an additional two francs per day as a supplement to their French military pay.8

Alleviating the demands of the espionage-wary French, prospective American volunteers provided letters of reference from six prominent members of their community “testifying to their character and unquestioned loyalty to the Allied cause.”9 One veteran wrote in the Cornell Daily Sun that potential recruits should secure these letters from “five or six persons of standing, such as physicians, lawyers, professors, or businessmen who will vouch for their American citizenship, their reliability, sobriety, industry, and amenability to discipline.”10 French concerns of spy infiltration were further assuaged by

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6 Frederick Palmer, America in France, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1919), 69.
7 Ibid., 26.
8 Ibid.
a policy requiring volunteers to provide an American birth certificate as well as a guarantee of non-German parentage.\textsuperscript{11}

Another French demand required all American volunteers provide a valid driver’s license prior to serving in the AFS.\textsuperscript{12} This was important because the degree to which new recruits were trained in ambulance driving varied widely and often depended on how severe the need was for men to serve in existing sections at the front. In some periods of the organization’s history it was not uncommon for a newly-arrived volunteer to travel directly to an AFS section with no formal training whatsoever. Yet Andrew had to pass a driving examination with a demanding French official, and in the later years of the AFS’s existence all volunteers had to pass a complicated driving course before they could leave for the front.\textsuperscript{13}

In matching the French structure, an AFS section would customarily be assigned to a specific French artillery division, following the soldiers to the front and staying until the division left the trenches to take leave. The matching of AFS sections with one particular artillery division allowed the men to develop a personal camaraderie with the French regiment to which they were attached.\textsuperscript{14} However, American ambulance sections regularly were moved from one division to the next, often with little advance notice, based on the decisions of French officers who recognized the adaptability of the organization. AFS sections could be moved between multiple French divisions, serving in

\textsuperscript{11} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 1, 48.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 48.

\textsuperscript{13} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 2, 487.

\textsuperscript{14} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 1, 326.
one place for only a short period of time. Generally, when an AFS section transferred to a new location along the front, the volunteers took the place of an existing French, English, or American ambulance section. In the later days of the AFS’s history (and always in active sectors such as Verdun), volunteer sections would even be placed within a larger assortment of ambulance sections – providing service to multiple French and British Army divisions.

Beginning with Andrew’s promotion to field inspector of the AFS, the organization gradually undertook a structural change that led to its eventual separation from the Neuilly Hospital. Even as early as March 1915, the AFS had a distinct group of volunteers in comparison to those who worked within the walls of the hospital. To this point AFS driver Regis Post wrote to his mother that the hospital was “a sort of starting point,” but that the AFS “operated entirely independently of the real American Hospital which runs . . . six blocks away.”

In the early months of the war AFS volunteers were largely made up of university graduates of an older median age than found in later years. In Behind the Wheel of a War Ambulance, Robert Whitney Imbrie wrote, perhaps with a touch of hyperbole, of the eclectic brigade that made up his early 1915 AFS section:

There was an ex-cowboy from Buffalo Bill’s Congress of Rough Riders, big game hunters – one of the most famous in the world was at one time on Section 1’s roster – a former 4th Cavalryman, a professional Portuguese revolutionist, a driver of

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16 Ibid., 426.
18 Geller, “American Field Service Archives.”
racing cars, a Legionary who had fought in Senegal, an all-American football center, two professional jockeys, one of whom had carried the Kaiser’s colors, an Alaskan sweep-stakes dog driver, a Rhodes man, Yale, Harvard, and Princeton men, a prospector from New Mexico, the author of a ‘best seller’ – you would recognize his name in an instant if I were to give it – a New York undertaker, a Harvard professor of dead languages, a Maine lumberjack; a hardy, reckless, restless crowd, – they faced life fearlessly and death indifferently.19

Andrew also was impressed with the diverse nature of the squad he served with during his first weeks in France, proudly delineating a similar list of occupations, before summarizing that “some are millionaires, some paupers.”20

As many volunteers served only the required minimum of six months before returning to the United States, some sections experienced considerable turnover. In the early months of the organization (before college men began arriving for the service in large numbers) fresh volunteers arriving in Paris quietly worked their way to their assigned section. Imbrie wrote of unassumingly driving to the front with one other American, “an Oxford man,” and a French lieutenant, who led them directly to their section.21 Once they had arrived, new volunteers were entirely dependent on the veteran members of their sections to learn the practices of life as an ambulance driver in the Great War.22 Novice volunteers were often thrown right into the fire; Henry Sheahan recalled that during his first week of service the French were in the midst of an extensive attack and his section’s cars “averaged runs of two hundred miles a day, over roads chewed to

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20 Andrew, *Letters Written Home*.

21 Imbrie, *Behind the Wheel*, 5.

pieces, and through very difficult traffic.”23 Aspirant volunteers learned on the job, adjusting to incredibly demanding circumstances with each new day.

In an indication of the French Army’s satisfaction with both the work and growth potential of the AFS, in July 1915 Andrew was assigned a French sergeant to serve as his personal aide – the duc de Clermont-Tonnere, a man from a prominent French family, who facilitated travel and communications with French transportation officers.24 By October 1915 the AFS had over one hundred (primarily American) ambulance drivers in active service.25 Growth was slow but gradual, and in November 1915 the organization added a fourth division, closing the year with four complete sections, each made up of twenty ambulances.26

With a few notable exceptions (dependent on location), all AFS sections followed the same general structure as their French counterparts. Soldiers injured along the trenches were carried back to dressing stations (almost always located along the third-line of trenches) by French stretcher-bearers known as brancardiers who were generally men of retirement age called into service. In a letter home, one volunteer described them as “grimy, ragged, little, oldish men, sad-faced and tired.”27 Yet most AFS volunteers developed camaraderie with the brancardiers, who often helped them load injured soldiers into the Model T.


24 Andrew, *Letters Written Home*.


At the third-line medical stations, known by Americans and Frenchmen as *poste de secours* [first aid posts], injured soldiers received preliminary first aid care and had their wounds dressed by doctors. These medical stations were made from any available building in the appropriate vicinity of the third-line trenches and were most commonly converted from old barns.\(^{28}\) When there were no adaptable buildings available, or when all structures had been destroyed (as was often the case), French engineers constructed underground dugouts to serve as aid stations.\(^{29}\) These *poste de secours* were located within 600 yards of the German line – and thus were frequently under shellfire.\(^{30}\) One *poste*, nicknamed by the Americans “Berlin,” was only 200 yards from the German trenches.\(^{31}\)

At a *poste de secour* injured soldiers were divided into two groups based on the severity of their injuries – those who could ride in the ambulance while sitting (which would allow five to be carried in a Ford), and the critically injured men who needed to lie down (in which case the Ford could accommodate only three).\(^{32}\) Making regular runs to the *postes* and picking up injured soldiers, known as an “evacuation run,” was the most common form of ambulance duty. Depending on the activity level at the front, picking up injured men was frequently the most stressful part of an *ambulancier’s* day – and those occasions when wounded soldiers were ready and waiting to be quickly loaded into a

\(^{28}\) Imbrie, *Behind the Wheel*, 97.

\(^{29}\) The American Field Service, *History of the American Field Service*, vol. 1, 460.

\(^{30}\) Imbrie, *Behind the Wheel*, 34.


Ford were welcomed by wearisome American volunteers. However, it was not unusual for stressed drivers to wait at a poste for extended periods as wounds were redressed and newly-injured men arrived at a medical station. In one account of an AFS visit to a poste published in *Harper’s Magazine*, John Masefield wrote of the American volunteers waiting in a dugout poste for prolonged lengths – even sleeping in a corner as doctors finished dressing the wounds of injured men.

In less active regions of the front, American sections frequently followed a consistent routine where they waited at postes as injured men arrived. One AFS volunteer wrote of this efficient method: “The American section established a service on the spot, so that the waiting was done by the driver of the ambulance and not the wounded. The effect of this service was immediate in winning confidence and liking, of which the members of the Section were justly proud.” At such quiet sectors of the front Americans particularly enjoyed their visits to the third-line postes, as they were granted the special privilege of eating with French officers, a perquisite not extended to them anywhere else and one that was appreciated, as it allowed them greater rations of food.

Another form of service AFS sections routinely conducted was what was called “bureau duty.” This encompassed emergency calls from anywhere in the vicinity of the surrounding region where a section was stationed (including the front), comparable to the work done by a typical hospital ambulance in a city. It was known as bureau duty

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because the men on call were stationed with their Fords at the main office, or “bureau,” and would respond to emergency calls as they were made.37

At the poste de secours, or upon being assigned a bureau run, American volunteers were instructed as to where to take the injured soldiers. Most frequently, injured men were brought back from the postes to an injury-sorting station, usually located around ten miles from the front and known as a poste de triage.38 Depending on the severity of their injuries, blesses also could be taken beyond the poste de triage to various hospitals (usually located twenty-five to thirty miles from the front) or directly to a railway station where they would be sent to infirmaries even further from the front.39

When their corresponding French division was not involved in a major offensive or defensive maneuver, AFS volunteers would customarily know two weeks ahead of time the scheduled runs for their section.40 However, during times of heavy combat, prearranged assignments were ignored, and volunteers were pressed into continuous work, with “all pretense of a schedule abandoned.”41 On such occasions the Americans could be worked to the limits of human endurance. It was not unheard of for a volunteer to work upward of forty hours with only two hours sleep, all while driving over 180 miles with just a few short breaks for food.42 Many sections standard service was

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37 Imbrie, Behind the Wheel, 35.
39 Ibid., 6.
40 Imbrie, Behind the Wheel, 33.
41 Ibid., 97.
forty-eight hours of duty followed by twenty-four hours off. One AFS volunteer remarked of the toll his section’s schedule took: “Twenty-four hours on and twenty-four hours off is a strenuous schedule when it lasts over a month.” Pressed into such a physically taxing service, falling asleep at the wheel was a constant, and very real, danger. And Imbrie wrote that in his section, “on several occasions, it occurred that a driver, overcome with weariness, fell asleep at the wheel to be awakened by his car’s crashing into a wall or ditch.”

By April 1916, the AFS touted 165 ambulances in operation, and the American volunteers had carried over 125,000 injured soldiers. In early 1916 want of vehicles, not men to volunteer, hampered the continued growth of the organization. Prospective ambulance drivers, often fresh from the United States and eager to serve, all too commonly had to wait extended periods of time in Paris, unloading trains of injured soldiers and bringing them to the American Hospital at Neuilly. Many AFS recruits, fed up with an inability to serve in a more active and glamorous line of work (as they had been led to believe the AFS would provide), left for other opportunities to serve the French, such as the Lafayette Escadrille or the French Foreign Legion. In the beginning of 1916, an assignment to the prized third-line sections depended on seniority, and the volunteers who had spent several tedious months unloading soldiers at the Neuilly


Hospital were the first to be called to the coveted AFS sections serving directly with the French Army.47

Much of an AFS section’s potential for success and practical use to a French division depended on the corresponding French officers to whom the Americans were assigned. A welcoming and amenable commanding officer made all the difference for the American sections, while units overseen by skeptical French commanders could hamper a section and leave it idling with diminished assignments, or even none at all. Conversely, senior officers in the French military played a crucial role in the development of the AFS and these officers often aided new American sections by placing them with French divisions that were known to be particularly welcoming to American drivers. Successful navigation of the complicated environment of the French military bureaucracy, usually accomplished by Andrew, was a critical aspect of the AFS’s success and expansion.

The organization’s direct contact with the French Grand Quartier General (general headquarters) was through Commandant Doumenc. In addition to overseeing the AFS, Doumenc was in charge of all the automobile services and road movements of the French Army.48 As AFS second-in-command Stephen Galatti wrote, Doumenc stressed “the continual development of the AFS. They wanted always more and more sections of ambulances for the French front. . .. It was evident that Commandant Doumenc appreciated early the possibility of reinforcing his service by American volunteers.”49

47 Stevenson, At the Front, 17.
49 Ibid.
As the AFS depended primarily on donations from private-citizens domestic fundraising was a crucial necessity for the organization’s continued existence and hopes for expansion. American funding was secured by Andrew’s Massachusetts neighbor Henry D. Sleeper, who served as the United States representative for the organization. Sleeper, an interior decorator from a wealthy family, was a close associate of Andrews and another prominent member of their Massachusetts social circle.²⁵⁰ From the organization’s early days, Sleeper was able to capture the attention of a multitude of wealthy and prominent private American citizens. Early in the organization’s history, Edward J. de Coppet, a banker from New York, and James J. Storrow of Boston both agreed to provide a sum of 1,000 dollars a month to purchase ambulances and support the continued growth of the organization.²⁵¹

Another significant donation was made by a prominent American diplomat living in Paris during the war. In June 1916, Robert Woods Bliss and his wife Mildred anonymously paid for a full section of twenty-five ambulances (this would be the AFS’s sixth section in service).²⁵² At the time of the donation Bliss served as the counselor of the American Embassy in Paris; such direct American aid to a pro-French organization was in direct contrast with President Wilson’s pleas for neutrality – and likely the reason the donation was kept anonymous until after the armistice.


²⁵² Ibid., 485-486.
Propelled by Andrew’s far-reaching visions of a large and domestically influential ambulance service, Sleeper led an aggressive national fundraising campaign. This often took the form of cross-country tours showcasing the work of the volunteers through film before culminating with a former-volunteer speaking about his experiences in the war. The ultimate goal was to recruit local committees which could continue to promote the AFS long after the tour had moved on to another next city. Over the course of the AFS’s history such committees were formed in over one hundred towns and at thirty-three different universities.53

Through the influence of Anne Vanderbilt, beginning in the summer of 1915, the AFS established a working relationship with another large wartime humanitarian organization, the American Fund for French Wounded. In return for delivering American-donated gifts for injured French soldiers, Andrew secured access to the mailing lists of the American Fund for French Wounded’s previously-established local committees. As these citizens were already sympathetic to the French cause, Andrew and Sleeper gained further financial support through this partnership.54

When such local committees purchased an ambulance for the AFS the group frequently chose to have the vehicle decorated with a name or phrase representing their organization. Volunteer William Yorke Stevenson’s Ford ambulance stated in bold letters on the side: “Presented by the Young Girls of San Francisco.”55 Another full ambulance

section was donated in its entirety and marked with the name “New York Cotton
Exchange." The ambulance section donated by Robert Woods Bliss was inscribed with
the message: “Aux soldats de France, Deux Américains Reconnaissants [To the soldiers
of France, two grateful Americans].” Julien Bryan jokingly remarked of the inscription
on his ambulance (which read “Schenectady Ambulance”): “It was very kind of the
people in Schenectady to donate the machine, but it is certainly a terrible pet name for an
automobile to have.”

In July 1916, the AFS ambulance service officially separated from the
American Hospital at Neuilly and became an independent organization. Several long-
term factors contributed to the decision to separate from the hospital. From its inception,
the hospital’s managerial hierarchy, by the very nature of the organization’s structure,
had displayed a preferential bias toward the Neuilly Hospital as the primary avenue of
American aid in France. Andrew’s ambulance service functioned merely as an extension
of the greater hospital body. In fact, the full potential of the ambulance fleet was never
completely recognized (much less pursued) under the Neuilly Hospital committee. AFS
archivist Larry Geller writes of the logical antecedent of this disconnect: “Considering
the fact that the American hospital was run on a daily basis by physicians and nurses, and
with one single department constituted by rotating units from prestigious medical schools

59 Gray, “The American Field Service.”
in the United States, the Transportation Department was of secondary importance to the hospital’s leadership.\textsuperscript{60}

Additionally, under the American Hospital at Neuilly’s stewardship, the management of the AFS had been handled by a committee of dubious capabilities. Historian Andrew Gray remarked that up until 1916, those in AFS managerial positions “were ensconced in large ground floor offices in the main building of the Lycee Pasteur and rarely soiled their hands with axle grease.”\textsuperscript{61} Although officially overseen by a large transportation committee, many AFS administrative decisions had been delegated to the self-proclaimed “Captain of Automobiles,” A.W. Kipling, a man whom Andrew and many volunteers despised. Furthermore, Andrew did not share the same goals for the ambulance service as the chief surgeon of the hospital, Dr. Edmond Gros, who was a main political force behind the hospital’s governing body.\textsuperscript{62} As such, Andrew developed a natural resentment for a structure where he had all the military connections and a field service with great potential for American fundraising and recruitment, yet was dependent on the hospital and its transportation committee for revenue and final approval of his grand aspirations.

This issue of funding greatly contributed to the eventual independence of the AFS from the Neuilly Hospital. While under the hospital’s oversight, the AFS had been dependent on the organization for the majority of its bankroll, and as the field service was just one department of many in the expansive hospital, Andrew’s plans for an ever-
growing AFS were frequently overlooked. Andrew wrote with frustration in 1915, “The trouble here is that things are done by retail and without much foresight. As soon as we have exactly the number of cars and men needed at the moment, somebody on the Committee writes or cables … that we have all we need. We ought to handle things on a larger scale, and have a reserve on hand of at least ten to fifteen cars. We ought to be prepared long in advance for the great Armageddon that is surely coming.”\textsuperscript{63} Evidence of this lack of forethought can be found in the long waits that newly-recruited volunteers were forced to endure in Paris. The French were eager for American sections and Andrew secured the men to provide them, but as long as AFS recruits waited long months in Paris for new ambulances or openings in the existing third-line sections, the growth of the organization was hampered. As Larry Geller wrote of the dynamic that had developed: “The American Ambulance Field Service, being a private organization whose initial funding under the American Hospital was meager in view of Andrew’s ambition to serve the French more efficiently and more directly, had need of a much broader base of financial support and recruitment than the hospital was willing to provide.”\textsuperscript{64}

Even before the separation, Andrew initiated a far-reaching domestic fundraising effort that put his ambulance fleet in direct competition for funds with the Neuilly Hospital. With his own grand plans for a large-scale (and politically influential in the United States) organization, the AFS soon became a major recipient of donations in the competitive battle for funding from private American citizens and organizations. This ongoing struggle for American revenue contributed to the critical break in relations

\textsuperscript{63} Gray, “The American Field Service.”

\textsuperscript{64} Geller, “American Field Service Archives.”
between Andrew and the staff at the Neuilly Hospital.\footnote{Gray, “The American Field Service.”} This was especially the case because as the AFS continued to recruit increasing numbers of American university students, the ambulance organization secured further prominence in American media. The heightened attention in newspapers and magazines led to a sharp increase in American donations, a development that worked to the detriment of the Neuilly Hospital.

Geller argues that, above all else, the primary factor that led to the AFS break from the Neuilly Hospital was “a personality clash” centering on Andrew’s inability to work productively with specific members of the hospital’s transportation committee.\footnote{Geller, “American Field Service Archives.”} Geller writes that, in particular, George Washington Loppe and “Captain of Ambulances” Arthur W. Kipling were men whom Andrew saw as “social imposters and administrative incompetents.”\footnote{Ibid.} In particular, when the extramarital affairs of Loppe’s wife Clara, as well as his eventual physical assault on her, made the American newspapers, it cast an unseemly shadow over the service Andrew had been struggling to expand.\footnote{Clara Loppe, an American socialite, had gained American celebrity as “Lady Tobacco” for her work coordinating donations of American cigarettes for French soldiers. Her marriage to Loppe had deteriorated when she discovered he had hidden his predominately German heritage from her before they were married (indicative of the mindset held by some Americans during the war). To Andrew’s disgust George Loppe was arrested after beating Clara and her daughter with the butt of a pistol and a carpenter’s chisel. “Loppes Talk of Divorce,” \textit{New York Times}, May 18, 1916.} In May 1916, many newspapers, while directly associating Loppe with the Neuilly Hospital, reported in brutal description the details of his arrest after assaulting his wife and stepdaughter.\footnote{Ibid.} As Loppe was widely identified as one of the central figures behind the
entire Neuilly Hospital organization, Andrew rightly saw this as an unnecessary embarrassment for himself and his ambulance fleets.

Perhaps another man may have acquiesced to the Neuilly Hospital committee, but Andrew, motivated by a love for France and a firm belief in what had become his ambulance service, was driven to propel his organization to a further level of assistance for the Allies. Longtime AFS second-in-command, Stephen Galatti, remarked of Andrew’s leadership during the schism from the Neuilly Hospital,

It wasn’t smooth sailing by any means. Half the story was the jealousy, the clash of wills. If Andrew had catered to everyone, the service would have collapsed. There were all kinds of Americans associated with the war work, and many only to be fashionable or for some personal gain . . . . But Andrew had his vision, always. And he wouldn’t let anything stop him.70

The establishment of an official working relationship with the French military, perhaps Andrew’s greatest achievement as field inspector, both contributed to the jealousies that splintered the ambulance fleet from the hospital, and also provided him with the necessary confidence to make the bold move for independence from the Neuilly Hospital. Particularly in the months immediately preceding the AFS’s independence, the organization’s five volunteer sections serving gallantly in the fierce opening of the Battle of Verdun brought much acclaim to Andrew.71 Volunteers in these sections often published reports of their experiences in major American newspapers, overshadowing the important, but less newsworthy, work of the hospital. Throughout the course of the fighting at Verdun, AFS sections served with over sixty different French Army

70 Gray, “The American Field Service.”

71 Fought between February and December of 1916, the Battle of Verdun was the largest and longest-lasting Franco-German battle of World War I. The conflict quickly became the most notorious of the war’s campaigns and after ten months of battle the combined causality figures totaled over 700,000.
Andrew Gray wrote that, following the AFS’s early 1916 performance in Verdun, “It was difficult for anyone to regard the service as a mere auxiliary to the hospital.” The widespread military praise of the ambulance service, and the resulting positive American press, did much to provide Andrew the courage to finally leave the restrictive confines of the Neuilly Hospital.

Aside from Andrew himself, Anne Vanderbilt did more than any other person to secure the organization’s independence from the Neuilly Hospital. Vanderbilt was the wife of William K. Vanderbilt and arguably (in a social and financial sense) the most important American woman in Europe during the war. Given the rarefied makeup of the Neuilly Hospital it should come as little surprise that she was one of the dominant figures behind the hospital organization. Of Vanderbilt, Andrew admiringly wrote, “[She has] a man’s intelligence and force and a woman’s grace and charm.” While contemplating a split from the Neuilly Hospital Andrew was lent encouragement by Vanderbilt, who assured him she would support an independent AFS financially. Galatti wrote of her work for the AFS, “It was she who made our independence possible, and opened the way for our direct assistance to France, unchecked by red-tape and limited only by the number of men and cars that could be procured from America.”

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72 Geller, “American Field Service Archives.”

73 Gray, “The American Field Service.”

74 Ibid.

75 Geller, “American Field Service Archives.”

If the AFS was to secure its independence, Andrew needed a suitable property to serve as his revamped organization’s headquarters. Again, Anne Vanderbilt facilitated the AFS’s growth, and in the summer of 1916, through her unparalleled social connections, she secured a palatial estate in Paris, which served as the central headquarters for the AFS until the organization’s eventual takeover by the United States Army in late 1917. The property included over five acres of forest, gardens, lawns, “the largest grove of chestnuts in Paris,” and a prominent view of the Eiffel Tower. Most importantly, the expansive property featured a dormitory that held over 300 men, and the property’s acreage allowed room for hundreds of Ford ambulances to be assembled after their arrival from the United States.

Significantly for Andrew (and the type of American he wished to recruit), the estate at 21 rue Raynouard was steeped in the romantic legend of “old Paris.” The famous natural springs on the property had been visited by the likes of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Honoré de Balzac, Voltaire, and much to the delight of many an AFS volunteer, Benjamin Franklin. In many ways the grounds were an extension of the academic allure the organization attempted to cultivate. An American university student, motivated to join the service by a love for France and Enlightenment ideals (as many of them were), could not help but be seduced by the organization’s headquarters, steeped in romanticism as it was.


78 Ibid., 477.

With the new property secured, and Vanderbilt supporting the organization financially, the AFS severed all ties with the Neuilly Hospital. At the time of this split the AFS had over 200 cars in service – five times as many as one year prior.  

80 The ambulance fleet that Andrew had led for a little over a year became an independent body and the organization would never again be restrained by the greater hospital. The future of the AFS now rested squarely on the back of Andrew.

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CHAPTER V

THE BALKANS

Of note for the organization’s growth and popularity in the American press were the two AFS sections sent to the Balkans. At the request of French general headquarters, these sections were sent to help Allied troops in Greece, Serbia, Macedonia, and Albania in autumn 1916.¹ Partially because of the positive reputation AFS volunteers had earned serving in Verdun, the organization secured an opportunity to serve alongside the French in southern Europe.² An additional factor for the request was the impressive performance of Ford ambulances in Alsace and other mountainous regions in France, as the roads in the Balkans were consistently rougher and less-traveled than ambulance routes in France.³

The men of the two sections that served in the Balkans were hand-picked from each of the ten existing AFS sections, based on their experience and reputation within the organization.⁴ The Americans sailed as full sections from France to Greece and even served official watch duty on the ships, keeping an eye out for German submarines.

² Ibid., 36.
³ Ibid., 280.
⁴ Imbrie, Behind the Wheel, 134.
Charles Baird, Jr. wrote of sailing to the Balkans, “It was strange, to say the least, to see an *ambulancier* pacing the bridge along with the captain.”\(^5\)

The volunteers found the terrain in the Balkans to be distinct from anything they had known in France. Upon first arriving, the dreary landscape proved dishearteningly monotonous for many of the men, and the roads were nowhere near the standards to which they were accustomed in France. Of advancing into the Albanian countryside Robert Whitney Imbrie wrote, “Up to this time our way could at least lay claim to the name ‘road,’ but now even an attorney, working on a percentage basis, could establish no such identity for the straggling gully through which we struggled.”\(^6\) Indeed, automobiles had previously never been driven over much of the region and many routes were previously used only by horse-drawn wagons.

Concerning the attention the ambulance convoys received as they traveled deeper into the region, Donald C. Armour wrote, “The people may have seen autos before, but they hadn’t seen them enough to satisfy their curiosity; so they would drop everything as they worked in near-by fields and rush to the road to watch us pass.”\(^7\) In some Balkan towns, the ambulances needed to be escorted by French or regional military troops to clear the way through an astonished civilian population. As Imbrie remarked of the attention his ambulance received in one Albanian city, “An elephant pulling a baby-carriage up Fifth Avenue, would excite no greater wonder.”\(^8\)

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\(^6\) Ibid., 347.

\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Ibid.
One thrill of serving in the peregrine Balkans was the excitement of leaving France and the Western Front. In the Balkans the Allies were most commonly fighting Austrians, Bulgarians, Turks, or local outlaws. The new allies included large numbers of Russian, Serbian, Italian, and French colonial soldiers. Imbrie observed in *Behind the Wheel of a War Ambulance* of his section’s Albanian service:

Albania presented a unique situation, unparalleled at this time on any front. There were no trenches, in fact no sharply defined line between the opposing forces. The fighting consisted largely of cavalry skirmishes between the *Chasseurs d’Afrique* [“Huntsman of Africa” – a light cavalry corps] upon our side, mounted *Comitaje* on the other. These bandits were not regular troops but outlaws accoutered and supported by the Austrians. The difficult nature of the country and the absence of roads had prevented both sides from bringing up artillery . . . so that the fighting was of the open kind unknown on other fronts since the first days of the war.⁹

Volunteer Frank Taylor wrote of the battles, “They had an old-style way of fighting down there in the Balkans. Trenches were not very practical except in a few of the valleys, for the warfare was from peak to peak.”¹⁰ The open style of fighting harkened back to wars of the 19th century and this facet held considerable appeal for many volunteers. Burnet Wohlford appreciated the old-fashioned style of warfare, and wrote, “The whole business makes quite a refreshing piece of news after all the scientific and precisely manipulated warfare of the Western Front.”¹¹ One man excitedly observed that because of the absence of trenches, the *ambulanciers* would often conduct their runs in plain sight of enemy forces. Artillery troops of the Central Powers generally would not

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¹¹ Ibid., 39.
intentionally fire upon the ambulance men; however, as in France, shelling and enemy airplanes provided a constant danger for ambulance men.\textsuperscript{12}

Unique to the Balkans, some sections were fractured into small groupings of ambulances, or even single ambulance units, serving various Allied battalions.\textsuperscript{13} Despite the lack of active warfare, one section, in a precautionary move, was even called into Greece to work with a French provisional division.\textsuperscript{14} J. Marquand Walker was transferred from his full AFS section and attached to an infantry regiment as the sole ambulance volunteer. From the Balkans he wrote AFS headquarters, describing the unexpected circumstances in which he found himself, “I am over another mountain range and ‘busted down.’ I am living in a little mountain village with the Colonel, who has just become a general, and his staff. Until I get some spare parts, which will probably be a week at least, I shall have to stay here, for I am about a hundred miles from anywhere.”\textsuperscript{15}

One section, stationed in the Macedonian city of Monastir, made daily journeys beyond the walls of the city to recover injured soldiers. Because of the lack of automobiles in the region, establishing runs to aid stations often required the volunteers to put in a considerable amount of work, building and maintaining roads and even constructing bridges.\textsuperscript{16} Further compounding matters, many cities in the region featured roadways fundamentally different in arrangement than in the United States or Western

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\textsuperscript{13} Imbrie, \textit{Behind the Wheel}, 193.
\textsuperscript{14} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 1, 382.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 369.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 242.
\end{flushright}
Europe, and a number of men complained of severe disorientation when navigating these city streets.\textsuperscript{17}

On a cultural plane, the Balkans proved even more alien than France for the volunteers. James W. Harle wrote, in an account typical of a Balkan volunteer’s impression of the region, “They all seem more like animals than human beings, as they never smile and look so much alike. The only life and merriment is confined to the small boys who do about what American kids do. They are at the stage where they throw their hats and caps in front of our cars just as boys used to do at home.”\textsuperscript{18} Yet particularly in larger cities, American volunteers proved very popular among local populations. Imbrie observed of Albanians, “When they learned we were Americans, they were delighted. The news quickly spread, and as we walked through the streets, the people crowded around us, shaking hands and inviting us to take tea.”\textsuperscript{19}

Volunteers were especially fascinated with the religious practices of the Balkans, particularly when it came to the Muslim faith. A number of Americans excitedly relayed, in diaries or letters home, the fact that their section used a mosque as a sorting-station.\textsuperscript{20} The rooms where the men billeted also could serve this interest, as Hamilton Lillie wrote, “There is a knot-hole in the door between our room and that of the Turks, and it is usually occupied by an eye – either belonging to us or to one of the natives ….

\textsuperscript{17} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 1, 181.
\textsuperscript{18} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 2, 22.
\textsuperscript{19} Imbrie, \textit{Behind the Wheel}, 201.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 180-181.
There is an older daughter, too, who is supposed never to be seen by any man outside her family; but we sometimes see her through the knot-hole.”

The political situation in the region proved especially intriguing to the volunteers, as the Balkans during World War I was a hotbed for revolution and ethnic revolt. Imbrie disdainfully complained of the revolutions that disrupted his “ambulance section, “At this time there was in progress one of those incomprehensible revolutions, without which no Macedonian or Central American is happy. No man knew what it was all about, but there were great marching and countermarchings and, as one of the revolutionary camps was near ours …. We fervently hoped that the revolution would suffer a speedy suppression and its participants meet a just retribution.”

Another volunteer dismissively viewed the revolutions, as “more or less comic-opera stuff.”

In the midst of this political turmoil a new threat emerged for ambulance drivers – groups of revolutionaries and bandits who raided convoys to steal supplies. In response to the attacks, and contrary to AFS policy in France, many volunteers carried automatic .32 caliber pistols to protect themselves from roaming rebels and bandits.

Upon traveling into northern Greece, one entire ambulance section was armed as a precaution against political royalists. J. Marquand Walker, who had separated from an AFS section and was serving with a small French regiment in the Balkans, wrote to his

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24 Ibid., 197.
25 Ibid., 372.
parents, “I am now armed with a carbine, a revolver, and one hundred and twenty rounds of ammunition, to protect myself from brigands along the road. Can you imagine anything more dime-novelly? The Colonel of the regiment was quite upset when he found that I was not armed and immediately gave orders to arm me to the teeth.”

While serving in Albania, all AFS volunteers were required to carry revolvers, as a soldier without a weapon in the region was subject to arrest.

The presence of volunteers in the Balkans served as a validation of the work the AFS was doing in Northern Europe. The official request for American sections reflected confidence in both the men and vehicles of the AFS. In the Balkans, Americans were exposed to a unique culture to which volunteers naturally had various reactions. In addition to culture, the terrain and style of fighting in the region were divergent from anything in France. The final historical significance of service in the Balkans was that it brought greater media attention to the work of the organization, not just in France, but throughout the continent.

CHAPTER VI

AN INCREASE IN VOLUNTEERS

In early 1917, as President Wilson and the United States government inched closer to entering the war, interest in the AFS, particularly among American university students, reached a fever pitch. Up until 1917, the AFS had grown at the pace of roughly four twenty-five-man sections added per year. However, in the spring of 1917 the organization began to grow at the pace of, roughly, a new section added every month.\(^1\) As veterans of the AFS returned to their universities, the men frequently wrote of their experiences in student newspapers, calling upon their classmates to volunteer for the AFS. And as the organization had flooded newspapers for years with accounts of volunteer service, many collegiate Americans already possessed a familiarity and comfort with the organization. Another primary reason for the sudden expansion of the organization was the resumption of German submarine warfare in February 1917, which turned the tide on many college campuses firmly toward the side of the Allies.\(^2\) The increase in volunteers was further inflamed by what began to seem as an inevitable declaration of war against Germany – many young men wished to enter the conflict as

\(^1\) The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service} vol. 2, 499. Sections in the spring of 1917 also featured upward of forty men.

quickly as possible. One student volunteer who entered the AFS in the spring of 1917 typified this mentality, remarking, “I would rather be a ‘went’ than a ‘sent.’”3

Although men continued to join the AFS as individuals, one common manner to volunteer in early 1917 was as a large group, frequently as one complete ambulance section from a particular location or university. The first of what would prove to be many of these whole sections sailed to France from California’s Stanford University in January 1917.4 The Stanford unit was also the first large-scale group of volunteers to travel to France from the West Coast of the United States, and the men were widely celebrated because of that fact and its implications with regard to the progressively far-reaching appeal of the AFS.5

While the Stanford section met significant fanfare, the men were just one of dozens of full sections of students sailing under a university’s name throughout late 1916 and early 1917. While such sections were not official representatives of their universities, the units were organized on campuses by private groups, fraternities, politically-motivated professors, or returning students who had served in the AFS. These students and faculty relied upon university and alumni newspapers to recruit members and secure donations, and often used campus buildings for meetings or fundraising events. At distinguished universities, such as Harvard, the AFS commonly secured a permanent on-campus office, used for recruiting and promotion.6 And while most sections that joined

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4 The American Field Service, History of the American Field Service, vol. 1, 47.


the AFS in 1917 represented a particular university, the method of large-scale enlistment was not limited to college students, as one full AFS section sailing to France in spring 1917 consisted of non-students who christened themselves the “New York City Club.”

Many universities adopted lenient academic policies toward men who chose to volunteer for the AFS, further encouraging the early 1917 convergence of young men on France. At Harvard, official protocol permitted volunteers who exchanged a schoolbook for the keys to a Model T to continue the second part of their coursework the following year. In March 1917, Cornell’s faculty passed a resolution to graduate seniors in good academic standing who wished to leave school for the AFS. Other American universities, including Princeton, Dartmouth, and Stanford, passed similar resolutions guaranteeing academic rights to students who left school to join the AFS.

With unprecedented numbers of volunteers arriving in France, the AFS branched out toward new avenues of growth. In the spring of 1917, at the request of French authorities, Andrew diverted 800 men who had signed up for ambulance work into artillery transport sections. To Andrew’s benefit, the transfer of men alleviated pressure on the AFS, as the organization’s administrators had been unprepared for the sudden arrival of such high volumes of men and lacked a sufficient supply of ambulances.

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10 The American Field Service, *History of the American Field Service*, vol. 1, 51. Naturally, some longstanding AFS volunteers resented the “snobbery” that unprecedented numbers of university men brought to the organization. Imbrie wrote that by 1917 the unique characters that had made the AFS feel like a fraternal organization had mostly disappeared, and new recruits became prototypical, lacking the uniqueness of their trailblazing predecessors.
for the newcomers to drive. The transfer required the men to drive large munitions trucks to and from the French lines, a duty known by French and Americans as *camion* (truck) service. Transporting supplies in a *camion* convoy was in sharp contrast to the humanitarian spirit of driving injured soldiers to receive medical aid. Transport work could be perceived only as direct military assistance to the French, and many American parents and university presidents who had encouraged the young men to join the AFS for benevolent reasons were dismayed to find that they had been diverted into such a directly militaristic line of duty.\(^{11}\)

On April 6, 1917, Congress approved the request President Wilson had made four days prior, and the United States officially declared war on Germany. Immediately following the U.S. declaration of war, students, eager to support the Allied cause, continued to volunteer for the AFS in ever-growing numbers. On May 19, 192 men sailed to France to join the service, 203 went the following week, and 165 followed on June 2.\(^{12}\) In May and June 1917 the organization reached the peak of its existence – in one three-day span during this period over 500 men arrived at the AFS’s Paris headquarters.\(^{13}\)

To say the AFS became overwhelmed by the sudden influx of men in the spring of 1917 would be an understatement. Any study of the organization is incomplete without stressing the severe lack of preparation in anticipating the large numbers of Americans who volunteered in the wake of the American declaration of war. The sudden rush of volunteers so outpaced incoming ambulance donations that many eager-to-serve

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American sections lacked vehicles to drive. With such an overwhelming convergence of volunteers in France, some of the hastily organized units never actually made it into service and many discouraged men quit the organization. In June 1917, William Gorham Rice Jr. wrote of sixty frustrated AFS prospects, unwilling to join the *camion* transportation service they had not left the United States to join, who abandoned the AFS for the seemingly more active pastures of the Norton-Harjes ambulance service or the Neuilly Hospital’s Paris ambulance service.

The United States’ declaration of war brought much uncertainty to the volunteers and the future of the organization. But for several months following the pronouncement, standard operations proceeded unimpeded. Throughout the spring of 1917 Andrew fought valiantly to secure the greatest potential placement for his organization, and its men, within the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). Andrew attempted to play for the highest stakes, keeping as much control of the organization while it remained an independent entity that continued to serve with the French Army.

Andrew’s proposal gained tangible support during spring 1917 when General Joffre, on a tour of the U.S., officially requested that American authorities allow the ambulance service to continue. However, United States Army General John J. Pershing and Army Surgeon General William C. Gorgas expressed negligible interest in the AFS as an independent organization. The men eventually decided that the United States Army

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would establish its own ambulance service as part of the U.S. Army medical branch (unlike the French system). Over the fall of 1917, the AFS was to be officially transferred away from Andrew and merged into the United States Army Ambulance Service.

With the future of the AFS in jeopardy, many longtime members believed that their unique experience and knowledge of conditions in the European war made them appealing candidates for the coveted officers’ positions being offered in the U.S. Army. Wartime journalist Frederick Palmer wrote of the prevalence of this ambition among AFS men, “All wanted to go into the army as commissioned officers, which was not an uncommon desire among the youth of America at this time.”\(^\text{18}\) However, outside of the AFS men staying in the sections transferred to the U.S. Army, and despite the attempts of Andrew, veterans of the organization received none of the preferential treatment that one might expect to have been accorded them given their valuable wartime experience. William Yorke Stevenson wrote of his colleagues attempting to enlist in the U.S. military, “They all report the same impossibility in Paris to get into the army.”\(^\text{19}\)

In June 1917, AFS volunteer Longshaw R. Porritt wrote to the editor of the *New York Times* elucidating both the peculiar standing many of the men found themselves in, and their desire to contribute to the war effort in a more direct manner than with the U.S. Army ambulance service:

> We can, of course, remain here and when at last American troops do arrive we will be trained for nothing more useful than *ambulanciers*. We can go back to the United States and enlist, entailing the unnecessary cost and danger of two ocean passages, and losing much valuable time both waiting to get into our American service and also, when in, waiting to get back to the front again. Incidentally, we

\(^\text{18}\) Palmer, *America in France*, 70.

\(^\text{19}\) Stevenson, *From “Poilu” to “Yank,”* 101-102.
would probably find that we arrived in America too late to get in for the officers’
training corps and would have to be satisfied with positions in the ranks . . . I see in
America they are training young college men for officers’ positions – there is no
better material anywhere in the world to make officers for the American Army than
can be at present found over here, fighting in France. Yet nothing is being done to
utilize it.20

While veterans of the AFS believed they deserved to be expedited into AEF
officers’ training corps, Palmer argued in 1919 that, despite the ambulance drivers’
familiarity with battle conditions, they lacked the distinct skill set and experience that
was required to serve as an officer. He wrote that, specifically, “Instruction in ambulance
driving did not include familiarity with the orders necessary to take a platoon of infantry
out of its billets, march it to a field and put it through a morning’s drill.”21

Many young American ambulance drivers who had impulsively left their
universities following the U.S. declaration of war discovered that they could not break
their six-month contracts with the French Army and that they must wait until their
commitments had concluded before returning home to enlist in the AEF.22 As a result of
this policy, in the early summer of 1917, both the AFS and the Norton-Harjes volunteer
ambulance service experienced increased numbers of men abandoning the service, with
the Norton-Harjes volunteers quitting “en masse.”23 Palmer wrote of the unfortunate
predicament the men found themselves in:

It was a sad anomaly that most of them would have fared better in their ambitions to
serve in our army if they had remained at home instead of making their Odyssey

21 Palmer, America in France, 70.
23 Stevenson, From “Poilu” to “Yank,” 185.
abroad, where their gallant service was one of the factors of material expression of our sympathy with the Allies in the days when we were officially neutral.24

In late 1917 there were still around 300 of these unattached “idlers” loitering about Paris in their AFS uniforms, many of them continuing to receive money from their families in America who believed the men remained in volunteer service with the French. In November of that year 200 of the men were rounded up by American military authorities and informed they would either have to enlist in a branch of American service or return to the United States.25 Palmer wrote of these late 1917 idlers,

The time came when a youth appearing in the streets of Paris in the old ambulancier’s uniform was accosted by a military policeman and told to report to the Provost Marshal’s office . . . . Thus, the uniform familiar to Parisians for two years disappeared from the streets; and the association’s reputation for the work they had done was not subject to any reflection due to unrepresentative idlers.26

Beginning in September 1917, and continuing throughout the fall of the year, both AFS branches (ambulance and transport) were officially transferred to the United States Army. The final section to leave 21 rue Raynouard under the traditional structure of Andrew’s organization departed on August 16, 1917.27 Late-enlisting volunteers who had sailed for France in the early summer of 1917 did not make it into service until the AFS was an official part of the United States Army.28 At the time the U.S. Army takeover began, the AFS touted 1,200 men in ambulance work and 800 in its transport sections.29

24 Palmer, America in France, 71.
26 Palmer, America in France, 71.
28 Ibid., 365.
Throughout the fall of 1917, thirty-one distinct AFS sections and 1,220 ambulances were officially incorporated into the United States Army.30

All AFS volunteers, throughout fall 1917, were visited by U.S. Army recruiters and offered the opportunity to stay on as *ambulanciers* with their current section. A selling point (used by army recruiters) for men to remain in ambulance duty was that Andrew would stay on as an active contributor to the ambulance corps as a U.S. Army major. And while Andrew was given the rank of major, Galatti was made a captain. Under the new arrangement, many AFS sections continued their direct service with the French Army. Often during the course of the turnover period, the ambulance work of these sections was not disrupted during the transition from AFS to AEF. Officially, the AFS began the process of merging with the United States Army Ambulance Corps in September 1917.31

During the turnover period, the organization lost a number of its established volunteers, and some sections were hit particularly hard as members left for other branches of service or returned to the United States. Many longstanding members, uncomfortable with new policies that the U.S. Army turnover would entail, decided to pursue other outlets for their service.32 In total 150 men who had volunteered for the AFS went on to serve in French artillery or aviation, and 48 veterans of the ambulance service proceeded to serve with the British Army.33


31 Gray, “The American Field Service.”


Field service member Ewen MacIntyre, Jr. stated that when the rumors of the U.S. Army takeover reached his section, the majority of the volunteers considered it a “sad affair,” as they had appreciated the familiar conventions of the service as an independent body, and believed these would be lost in the regimented atmosphere of the United States Army.34 James Seymour wrote of his section and those volunteers who decided to leave the ambulance service, “The service terms of most of the men were at an end; the ways of other services seemed to lead more strenuous, more invitingly precarious along the course of war, and they beckoned the spirits of the old Section.”35 One man observed that within one week of his section returning to France from the Balkans the men were enrolled in eight different branches of service.36 Despite men leaving for other avenues of Allied service, around fifty percent of ambulance volunteers stayed on with their sections following the United States Army takeover.37

Over the course of fall 1917, AFS sections were formally transferred into the U.S. Army. Each unit handed over marked the gradual closing of the organization as an independent body. Section leader William Yorke Stevenson reported that his section saw nine new men arrive during the U.S. Army turnover, and despite some changes, the spirit of the unit remained roughly the same.38 Although the characteristics of men remained uniform (earnest young Americans), new army guidelines upset many ambulance drivers

36 Ibid., 235.
37 Hansen, Gentlemen Volunteers, 154.
38 Stevenson, From “Poilu” to “Yank,” 201.
who had become spoiled by the fairly loose and unstructured AFS regulations. In the pre-1917 years of the organization, many volunteers compared their AFS sections to fraternal clubs and this conceptualization soon became thoroughly eradicated under the AEF structure.\textsuperscript{39}

On January 1, 1918, after a several month process, the AFS was wholly and permanently incorporated into the United States Army. The AFS had set the unique precedent of serving French Army divisions and under the AEF this arrangement would actually be expanded. By the war’s conclusion, the number of American ambulance sections serving directly with the French numbered eighty-one and the amount of transport sections had increased to twenty-four.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} Rice, \textit{An American Crusader}, 37.

\textsuperscript{40} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 1, 274.
CHAPTER VII

REASONS FOR JOINING THE AMERICAN FIELD SERVICE

What compelled the men to take the risky passage across the Atlantic and serve in what was the most violent warzone the world had ever known? Why were college students so likely to leave the classroom and risk their lives on foreign soil? As World War I-era journalist Frederick Palmer surmised, most of the reasons for serving in Europe stemmed from two simple factors: 1) a youthful pursuit of adventure, and 2) an ideological desire to aid France.¹

One commonly cited explanation for the creation and expansion of the AFS was based around the idea of repaying France for the military aid that nation had lent the United States during the Revolutionary War. This rationale was especially commonplace within the administration of the organization, and was not as commonly espoused by regular volunteers. Ambassador Herrick, a driving force behind the AFS, advocated this viewpoint, remarking that the volunteers were “paying for all Americans a small installment on the great debt of gratitude that we have owed the French people since the very beginning of our national life.”² In the 1916 edition of Friends of France, Andrew, referencing this notion of payback, wrote that the United States directly owed France for

¹ Palmer, America in France, 70.
its independence from Britain and that nothing “Americans have done for France during these last hard years of trial can be thought of – without embarrassment – in relation with what Frenchmen did for us in those unforgettable years of our peril from 1777 to 1781.”

Encouraged by a “Lafayette-frenzy,” the concept of repaying France for its Revolutionary War assistance swept the United States during the early years of World War I. Pro-Allied Americans rightly identified the Lafayette narrative as a powerful propaganda tool that could be used to sway their neutral countrymen, and American’s newfound reverence for Lafayette took on various forms in the opening years of the European conflict. This unprecedented reverence for Lafayette can be found in the actions of a group of wealthy Americans, who in 1916 purchased Lafayette’s birthplace in the province of Auvergne with plans of making it into “a French Mount Vernon,” celebrating France and America’s shared history. In September 1916, the city of New York celebrated (notably for only the second time) the 159th anniversary of Lafayette’s birth. During the ceremony, the French Ambassador to the United States, Jean Jules Jusserand, proclaimed that American volunteers in France were “obeying the same impulses” that had led Lafayette to assist America during the Revolutionary War. New York Superintendent of Education, Dr. John H. Finley, also compared the volunteers to the famous French general, proclaiming, “When one has read … of the suffering of our

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4 The Marquis de Lafayette (most commonly known simply as Lafayette) was a French general who had served under George Washington during the Revolutionary War. In addition to serving in the war, Lafayette successfully lobbied the French monarch to send additional French troops to aid the American revolt against the British.

young men, and especially college men, in France, in trench and ambulance corps, one cannot doubt that the spirit of Lafayette is among our youth.”

Pro-war Americans recognized Lafayette’s story as a political symbol that could promote sympathy for the French nation. But many, especially within the administrative hierarchy of the AFS, truly embraced their role as the Lafayettes of their time, and notable French citizens regularly encouraged this belief. French Ambassador Jusserand wrote to Andrew that his American ambulance volunteers reaffirmed “the old friendship that was established in the days of the War of Independence.” General Joffre echoed these sentiments, exclaiming that because of the American volunteers “that ancient friendship dating from the days of Washington, Lafayette and Rochambeau … has become stronger.” That such comparisons had an impact on Andrew is confirmed in his remarks that the main object of his organization was to show “the people of France that we believe in them and in the justice of their cause, that we still remember what they did for us in the darkest hour of our own history.” While the concept of repaying the Revolutionary War debt to France was most commonly embraced by administrators within the organization, at least one ambulance volunteer credited the historical debt as his personal catalyst for serving in the organization.

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7 Andrew, Letters Written Home.

8 “Joffre Declares for Lincoln’s Way,” New York Times, June 8, 1916. Rochambeau was another French general who served with the United States in the American Revolutionary War.

9 The American Field Service, Friends of France, 152.

10 Stevenson, At the Front, v.
But a reverence for Lafayette, or notions of paying back Revolutionary War aid, were not the primary incentives that propelled most young men to leave behind their (often privileged) lives in the United States. To begin with, an unwavering love for France brought many American volunteers to serve in the volunteer organization. AFS volunteer Franklin D.W. Glazier reflected that the bond that united his entire volunteer section – from their first day together – had been a deep love for France.\textsuperscript{11} When first leaving for Paris, Andrew wrote to his parents that he was “headed for the land I love next to my own.”\textsuperscript{12} Many men viewed the opportunity to serve the French Army in the beloved country’s time of need proved a dream come true.\textsuperscript{13}

Romantic notions of war as something masculine and liberating further contributed to a number of men’s desire to leave for France. Such notions held particular prevalence among social elites and intellectuals in the American Northeast, where the “old guard” of traditional American culture held considerable influence. In his book, \textit{The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time}, historian Henry Farnham May writes, “The earliest and most consistent supporters of the Allies were the beleaguered defenders of nineteenth-century tradition, and particularly the professional custodians of culture. Nearly all the leading men of letters, the college presidents, the old-line publishers, the editors of standard magazines . . . knew where they stood from the start.”\textsuperscript{14} May writes of this elder-guard of American culture, “Instead of

\textsuperscript{11} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 1, 139.
\textsuperscript{12} Andrew, \textit{Letters Written Home}.
\textsuperscript{13} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 2, 111.
seeing the war as the doom of their culture, they believed it would bring about its revival: the war was a severe but necessary lesson in moral idealism.”

In *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, historian David M. Kennedy examines the role that these elder “custodians of culture” played in encouraging America’s youth to volunteer in the pre-1917 days of the war. Kennedy writes, “Among the images they urged the young to regard reverently was that of war as an adventurous and romantic undertaking, a liberating release from the stultifying conventions of civilized society.” Writing specifically of the volunteer ambulance organization’s strong appeal to youths of privilege, Kennedy states, “Venerable custodians of traditional culture spoke as if with a single voice; war was glorious, adventurous; it was manhood’s destiny, a strenuous and virile antidote to the effete routine of modern life . . .. It was, in short, the nation’s most carefully cultivated youths, the privileged recipients of the finest education, steeped in the values of the genteel tradition, who most believed the archaic doctrines about war’s noble and heroic possibilities.”

In his 1915 article, “Recantation of a Pacifist,” the novelist Robert Herrick captured these sentiments of war as something heroic. Herrick, espousing the beliefs of a traditional “custodian of culture,” wrote to a *New Republic* readership, “We should be honest enough to recognize that for many human beings, perhaps a majority . . . a violent death is by no means the worst event in life. It may be the happiest if the individual feels

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17 Ibid., 180.
that the sacrifice of his existence will help others to realize a better life.”¹⁸ For Herrick, who had just returned from Europe where he saw the destruction firsthand, nothing else “[pressed] the cup of human experience so full of realization and understanding as battle and death.”¹⁹ In a sentiment that no doubt struck a chord with many young volunteers, Herrick, playing the role of May’s custodian of traditional culture to a tee, expressed a belief that France had the “cleanest record” of all the belligerent powers, before stating, “It is only the weakling who finds nothing worth fighting about. Whoever cares greatly will give all, even life.”²⁰ One can imagine a prospective young volunteer reading and falling under the spell of Herrick’s words.²¹

One archetype “custodian of culture” who played a direct role in encouraging young men to volunteer was former President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt wrote the introduction to one 1915 account of AFS work published in the weekly New York publication The Outlook, and, only after lamenting the nation’s lack of “manliness,” directly appealed for college-aged youths to volunteer in Andrew’s service.²² On several occasions Roosevelt publicly endorsed the AFS, and often repeated the assertion that “there is not an American worth calling such, who is not under a heavy debt of obligation to these boys for what they have done.”²³ As a war hero and former U.S. President,

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¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ In fact, one AFS volunteer who was no doubt motivated by Herrick’s rhetoric was his son Philip, who volunteered for the AFS in 1917.


Roosevelt’s words carried significant weight. Particularly in denigrating America’s collective masculinity, Roosevelt struck a chord with those youths who were drawn to the AFS by a longing for adventure. As Kennedy wrote of Roosevelt’s potential for influence, “What American had not heard the account of the old Rough Rider waving his hat and charging up San Juan Hill, gleefully projecting an image of battle as a king of pleasingly dangerous gentlemen’s sport?”

Roosevelt’s lofty pro-war verbosity was matched in a January 1917 editorial in the *Cornell Daily Sun*. The student newspaper, in promoting the creation of a full Cornell unit of AFS volunteers, declared:

> We cannot overlook the fact that the men of America are, in one respect, losing much that the men of Europe are gaining . . . . It so occurs that the young man of America has not been called upon to sacrifice himself; but there has come a challenge which every college man of this county should at least consider; it is an appeal for ambulance drivers which has already resulted in taking hundreds of men from American colleges and universities to the front.

Such on-campus endorsements of the AFS became commonplace during the pre-1917 years of the war. Historian Arlen Hansen has written of elder “custodians of culture” on university campuses and the influence they held for young ambulance volunteers:

> Some, such as Professor Martin Sampson of Cornell, actually helped organize (as well as inspire) a unit of volunteers. Other professors, Charles Townsend Copeland of Harvard, for example, openly encouraged their students (Waldo Peirce and Harry Sheahan, for example) . . . . Administrators got involved as well. Prep-school headmasters such as Stearns at Philips Academy, department heads such as Christian Gauss at Princeton, and college presidents such as George D. Olds at

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24 Kennedy, *Over Here*, 179.

Amherst granted permission for their students to leave school without penalty and with readmission unimpeded.26

In *Historians on the Home Front: American Propagandists for the Great War*, George T. Blakey writes of the strong pro-Allied sentiments that took hold on many university campuses during the pre-1917 years of the war.27 In March 1917, the *Cornell Daily Sun* printed a list of university faculty who belonged to a Cornell-based AFS fundraising and recruitment committee that included fifty Cornell professors and seven deans.28 At Harvard, Professor William Roscoe Thayer fervently promoted the Allied cause, writing after the war, “I deemed it the duty of every one of us . . . who recognized our national contribution to Freedom, to force the United States to join the Allies.”29 Thayer, who publicly endorsed the AFS at Harvard and introduced Andrew during one fundraising speech at the university, remarked in January 1917, “Until we recover our national self-respect, until we realize that as Americans we have many sacred ideals which it is our duty to fight for and to die for, we shall never rank again among the great nations of the world. I make no specious claim to neutrality. Only a moral eunuch could be neutral in the sense implied by the malefic dictum of the President of the United States.”30 Likely influenced by the pro-war rhetoric of the period, Phillip Sydney Rice

26 Hansen, *Gentlemen Volunteers*, 53.


30 “French Films in Union Open to University,” *Harvard Crimson*, November 1, 1916; Thayer, *Volleys*, 48. Not surprisingly in the face of such rhetoric, the strongly pro-German American newspaper, The Fatherland, editorialized in May 1915 that Harvard University was “furnishing intellectually munitions of war to the British.”
plainly boasted that he and another volunteer, a Harvard man, bonded over their dislike of “white-corpseled pacifists.”

One Harvard graduate who would exercise considerable influence on AFS volunteers was the American poet Alan Seeger. Seeger, who was in Paris when the war broke out, promptly joined the French Foreign Legion, where he wrote a prolific amount of poetry celebrating France and the volunteer movement in general. Even before he was killed by German machine gun fire in July 1916, his writings found a wide audience in the United States, particularly among university students. Many prospective volunteers viewed the AFS as a “safe” mode of putting the ideals espoused by Seeger into practice and ambulance volunteers often carried his writings with them as they traveled across France. The AFS’s 1916 edition of *Friends of France* remarked of Seeger’s influential prose, “But nothing that any of us has seen is more inspired than the verses which poured from the heart and mind of a young American in the French Foreign Legion here in France. His name is Alan Seeger.”

In 1916, a poem celebrating American volunteers who served with the French was read aloud at a ceremony at the Lafayette-Washington statue in Paris. One can picture the words, glorifying the selflessness of volunteers, influencing prospective American youths. In “Ode in Memory of the American Volunteers Fallen for France,” Seeger wrote:

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Yet, sought they neither recompense or praise
Nor to be mentioned in another breath
Than their blue-coated comrades whose great days
It was their pride to share, ay! share even to death.
Nay, rather, France, to you they rendered thanks
(Seeing they came for honor, not for gain),
Who, opening to them your glorious ranks,
Gave them that grand occasion to excel,
That chance to live the life most free from stain
And that rare privilege of dying well.  

Another fundamental catalyst that motivated men to volunteer, and an impetus that was especially prevalent among university students, was a desire to aid the democratic French against the autocratic Germans. Following the death of volunteer Richard Hall, his father, a professor at the University of Michigan, plainly told the New York Times, “My son joined the French forces because he believed that in doing so he was giving some service to the cause of Democracy.” The organization’s head of fundraising in the United States, Henry D. Sleeper, remarked that many volunteers went to France in an attempt “to save … the principles of Democracy for the whole world.”

When examining the impulse that propelled the men to volunteer, one must also take into consideration the romantic allure that Europe, particularly in wartime, held for idealistic young American men. From its earliest days, the AFS strongly appealed to upper class students from prominent universities. In the summer of 1916, the English poet John Masefield called the AFS volunteers “the very pick and flower of American

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34 The American Field Service, Friends of France, 231.
36 The American Field Service, Friends of France, 334.
youth.” These college-educated men saw the world, and the war, through a unique erudite lens. Rats in the barracks “sounded like Charlie Chaplin in a tin-can factory.” Trees pruned in a certain manner made one man “think of masterpieces of Japanese art.” The traffic on a road was so frequent it would only be a matter of time until the road was “worn into little ridges, much like the waves in Florentine paintings.” The air in one section was “champagne-like.” And a shell going overhead passed by “with all the airs of manifest destiny.”

Much of their lives had been spent in academic pursuits, studying historical topics such as Charlemagne, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Era, and the Franco-Prussian War. The AFS presented an exhilarating opportunity to experience the next great European historical event firsthand. To an extent, their very presence was an historical event in itself. In a 1915 Boston Globe article lauding the AFS Henry Rood wrote, with a touch of American exceptionalism, “Nothing like it is known elsewhere in all the world; nothing like it ever was seen anywhere else at any time.”

The unique academic appeal of the organization was emphasized in a 1915 article by Preston Lockwood intending to recruit new volunteers. Lockwood observed, “Nowhere else can one study, in history’s most famous borderland, both war and one of

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38 Ibid., 251.

39 Ibid., 227.

40 Ibid., 243.

41 Ibid., 289.

42 Ibid., 417.

those problems in nationality which bring about wars.\textsuperscript{44} Indeed, the war provided a unique experience to see such sites as a crumbling statue of Napoleon looking out over a ravaged and completely deserted Verdun.\textsuperscript{45} A mountain summit in Alsace provided one man views of “the famous cities of Mulhouse and Colmar, the shadowy boundary of the Black Forest and the snow-topped mountains of Switzerland.”\textsuperscript{46} How else could young Americans, before the United States entered the war, participate in such a momentous event?

Unique encounters with old-world Europe naturally provided a great interest to the university men serving in the AFS. An enriching experience for many (one they were only too eager to point out in letters and diaries) occurred when volunteers came across ancient roads dating back to the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{47} The AFS provided young American men an opportunity to truly experience France. Charles Law Watkins wrote,

\begin{quote}
We are not far from one of the quaintest and oldest towns in France, full of houses and monuments dating from 100 to 1500, and offering endless material for little sight-seeing expeditions. The name of ‘American Touring Club,’ which has been given us, is not half the joke it would appear to be.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

The eagerness with which the volunteers embraced such excursions seems to indicate that, at least for some of the men, the opportunity to experience Europe firsthand was a part of their reason for volunteering.\textsuperscript{49}

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\textsuperscript{44} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 1, 282.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 281.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 155, 480.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 468.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 490.
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This is confirmed by some of the men’s displeasure, depending on where they were stationed, when unable to experience the old-world France they had expected to find. In a letter, indicative of at least one reason that propelled him to volunteer, James W.D. Seymour lamented a France that was not what he had hoped to experience. Seymour bemoaned, “For how can I feel I know anything of France when all I’ve seen of it is spattered with war-built houses, split and seared with old trenches or practice ones, cut by new ammunition roads and tracks, and overrun with uniforms? French people? Why, all there are are old, old, old bent people, or children – or soldiers.”

By the later years of the organization’s three-and-a-half year existence, many volunteers were intrigued to visit locations that they had been reading about for years in American newspapers. Indicative of this influence, when one AFS unit was stationed near Verdun for repairs in January 1917, the entire section took advantage of their proximity to the famous city, visiting it almost like tourists. On another occasion Robert Whitney Imbrie wrote that upon hearing rumors his section was to be stationed in the famous city, the men celebrated “as though it were some summer resort toward which [they] were headed.” Many volunteers unmistakably wanted to be a part of the action, and before the U.S. declaration of war, the AFS was the easiest way to experience the war.

Many students, or their encouraging families back in the United States, were drawn to AFS service because of its intrinsic humanitarian appeal. Although the organization was fiercely pro-French, ambulance drivers carried injured soldiers of all

52 Ibid., 182.
nationalities (including Germans), and this aspect held a genuine appeal for university students reared on humanist ideals. In one *Cornell Daily Sun* article promoting the AFS, E.I. Tinkham underscored the benevolent nature of the organization. Of his AFS section, Tinkham wrote, “We may have started out with many reasons for joining . . . but after carrying the first load of wounded back from the front there is only one reason that holds us – it is to help these men.” In another *Sun* column, in which Tinkham announced his desire to create a full Cornell section for the AFS, he again celebrated the benevolent nature of the organization, writing to his classmates that ambulance work allowed “a man to bear a part in relieving some of the vast amount of human suffering of the present day.” In a separate *Sun* editorial endorsing the organization, the writer, channeling May’s “custodian of culture” role, remarked that those who volunteered for the AFS were “subjected to all the benefits to be derived from war without experiencing the baser motives which must actuate the soldier himself.”

Further appeal for young American men can be found in the very structure of the AFS, as the organization provided a large fraternal organization to which volunteers could feel a sense of usefulness and belonging. In a letter to his parents, volunteer James W.D. Seymour exemplified this facet, writing, “I feel now that I am of more service than I have ever been . . . in my life.” Andrew wrote that despite one’s inclination to look to the past for life’s happiest days, “I am sure that for me life has never been so full of

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interest and real happiness as at present.” The AFS united like-minded American men amid surroundings that typically worked to affirm their worldview and strengthen their commitment to the Allied cause. Under the volunteer structure, the men felt that they belonged to a truly unique organization and a sense of kinship among fellow-volunteers flourished.

Perhaps the most frequent imputes that brought men to France was the potential for unparalleled adventure. In his examination of the role American university students played in the war, historian Charles F. Thwing argues that the fundamental catalyst that drove college students to Europe was the pursuit of a transcendent experience. Thwing contends that it was “a yearning for life” that drove many American youths to risk their lives on a foreign soil. Concerning a pursuit of adventure, May writes of the ambulance drivers, “A group of enthusiastic adolescents was finding its way straight from college, or even high school, into the French or Italian ambulance corps. Some of these were as idealistic about the war as their elders expected them to be, but many were interested in experience rather than in a cause.”

The AFS provided a unique opportunity for adventurous American men to experience life, stripped of modern conventions and amenities, at its most raw. Of his reasons for enlisting in the AFS, Bryan wrote, “I went over, as did so many of the others,

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57 Andrew, *Letters Written Home*.


with the object of seeing war at first hand and of getting some excitement.”60 Imbrie wrote of the men who were lured to France by the potential for once-in-a-lifetime experiences, “At the outbreak of war the restless ones of the earth flocked to France, drawn there by prospect of adventure and a desire to sit in the game.”61 To this point Clarence J. Griffin, one of Imbrie’s “restless ones” reflected, “To spend one’s youth in this great war is a privilege, not a sacrifice, and who would live to old age and miss such a chance? Come what may, I am content, for I have for once been to the heart of things, have watched the world at work and play, seen the inner shrine, as it were.”62

A large number of volunteers, unsure of what role their government would take toward the conflict, understandably presumed the AFS might be their one chance to participate in the defining event of their generation. Henry Sheahan enthusiastically wrote to one fellow volunteer, “When more Americans realize their lost opportunity, there will be many regrets, but you and I will be content.”63

Indeed, the Great War provided the volunteers, especially young men who came directly from American universities, a life they could never fathom back in the United States. Confirming that a sense of adventure drew many men across the Atlantic, Charles R. Codman, Jr. wrote, “It is an exhilarating feeling to be actually taking part in the greatest battle of history, in a front-row seat, so to speak.”64 And Donald Fairchild

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Bigelow wrote of one simple benefit volunteering in the AFS provided, “It is a great privilege simply to be here as we are, rather than be home and, so far as activity goes, out of the thing that counts.”

The novelty of being under fire, under one’s own volition, exhilarated many AFS volunteers. In a journal entry, Jerome Preston boastfully professed, “The great organization known as the German Army should have bothered to fire upon me . . . . I feel very important.” Many new arrivals in Europe were eager to experience the war, and Bryan wrote, with a dash of naiveté, of one fellow volunteer’s brush with danger, “On his way out a [shell] landed in the middle of the road just in front of him, and a great piece of steel tore through the top of his car not ten inches from his head . . . . Every one is envious and wishes that it had happened to him – at least they say so.”

For the men who could handle it, driving into the midst of fierce battles provided an exhilaration that everyday life in America could never equal. Stevenson wrote of one volunteer who left a section, only to almost immediately re-enlist in the AFS, “He returned to Chicago and tells the same old story of not being able to stand the banalities at home.” When he himself left the AFS for a short period, Stevenson wrote, “Life seems so banal after one has been a part, however humble, of history in the making.”

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67 Ibid., 56.
68 Stevenson, At the Front, 245.
69 Ibid., 6.
their departure, as the next “big push” always seemed to be just around the corner. With regards to a potential homecoming, Leslie Buswell remarked, “I doubt more and more whether I can actually break away! The only possibility of real contentment now for any one who cares for France or England is to stay until their just cause is victorious.” One volunteer, after ignoring several inquiries from his wife as to when he would return to the United States, curtly replied to her in French, “Aprés la guerre [After the war].” After the men had experienced so much with the French, it was difficult to break away, with the outcome of the war still undetermined.

Ethnic factors also contributed to at least one man’s desire to volunteer for the AFS. When New York lawyer Harry Hollinshed was injured driving an ambulance, his sister told the New York Times that, as their parents were from England, Hollinshed believed that it was his duty to aid the Allies.

Perhaps Andrew best encapsulated several of the most common reasons for joining the AFS in a December 1914 letter first informing his parents of his desire to serve as an ambulance driver. He wrote, “I must go over to France for a few months. There are many reasons for doing so, the possibility of, having even an infinitesimal part in one of the greatest events in all history – the possibility of being of some service in the midst of so much distress – the interest of witnessing some of the scenes in this greatest

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70 Stevenson, At the Front, 216.


72 Stevenson, At the Front, 141.

and gravest of spectacles – and above all the chance of doing the little all that one can for France."  

74 Andrew, “Letters Written Home.”
CHAPTER VIII

WARTIME EXPERIENCES

Above all else in the war, AFS volunteers were ambulance drivers, and it was most frequently from behind the wheel of a Ford Model T that they experienced the Great War. These American men, often with only a few years of driving experience in the United States, were thrust directly into some of the most demanding circumstances imaginable. An examination of their firsthand accounts, while underscoring the duties of the AFS, also provides a valuable insight into the everyday nature of World War I.

Even before Abram Piatt Andrew was appointed field inspector of the AFS, the Neuilly Hospital wisely determined that it would uniformly adopt the Ford Model T as the backbone of its ambulance fleet. In addition to the logistical, financial, and political advantages of purchasing the smaller Ford ambulances, the Model T provided several important practical advantages for drivers in the field. One of the central benefits of a lighter Ford chassis was that in periods of heavy rain, the resulting streams and mud pits across dirt roads did not hamper the American vehicles to the extent that they affected the far heavier British and French ambulances. In fact, because of this component, AFS sections would often take over evacuation routes when heavy rains prevented French ambulances from making their runs.¹

The light weight of the Fords also allowed American drivers (and the injured men carried in the rear) comparatively smooth rides on roads commonly marked by deep shell holes. These impact sites, which could be several feet deep, had often been haphazardly filled in with loose soil, rocks and logs, making heavy ambulances susceptible to becoming bogged down, especially when rains had turned the soil to mud. Model T’s could access aid stations that the heavier French ambulances simply could not reach and opening up further ambulance routes proved to be a regular occurrence for AFS sections and their Fords. In these ways, Model Ts reduced the time it took for critically injured soldiers to receive proper medical care and also saved energy for the French stretcher-bearers who carried injured soldiers from the trenches to aid stations.2

Another advantage of the smaller Ford ambulances was the ease with which they could be picked up and carried by as few as three soldiers.3 William Carey Sanger Jr. was one of several volunteers who recollected that, upon arriving at a stretch of road left impassable by thick mud, a dozen accommodating French soldiers matter-of-factly picked up his vehicle and moved it past the mud pit to a more manageable stretch of road.4 Volunteers stuck in the snow banks of mountainous regions also depended on soldiers to lift their Fords back onto the road.5 On numerous occasions, Allied soldiers were placed directly along steep hills in order to push the Fords toward the crest of the

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3 Ginn, The History of the U.S. Army Medical, 40.
5 Ibid., 310-311.
While the undersized Fords certainly had their disadvantages, the simplicity with which the vehicles could be moved by soldiers proved to be a valuable wartime luxury.

Concerning disadvantages, the most regular criticism of the Fords was that due to the small size of the vehicles, AFS sections were unable to match the carrying capacity of Allied crews using larger, and more traditional, ambulance bodies. The head of the other major American ambulance service, Richard Norton, once publically criticized the small Ford ambulances used by the AFS in an article featured in the *New York Times*. Norton announced that, upon replacing one of his units in Verdun, an AFS section was unable to match the workload his men had established. Norton claimed that this occurrence was a proof of what . . . should be clearly understood. For such work as we were doing these Ford cars were not adapted. By the simplest mathematics one could show that, granted if there was any heavy work, such as we had to attend to, a convoy made up only of Ford cars was utterly incapable of handing it.7

Another principal advantage of the Ford was that the vehicle’s light weight and significant spring support provided what was widely recognized as a more comfortable ride for critically injured soldiers. Even when dry, a shell-ravaged country road or rocky city street could make for a rough and bumpy ride. The light Model Ts, while not completely alleviating the issue, provided a smoother ride than many of their larger and more cumbersome, European counterparts. One AFS volunteer proudly boasted that in highly-active sectors, where American crews frequently worked in tandem

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with French or British ambulances, injured men routinely asked to be carried in the smooth-riding American Ford.  

The critical final advantage of the Model T was that, given the tight turning radius and comparatively small size, the vehicles could move in and out of the long transportation, ambulance, and troop convoys that typically led to-and-from the trenches. Rather than remaining fixed in the queue (as policy required of European ambulances), the agile Fords received permission to make passes and maneuver through long convoys, resulting in a faster transport of injured soldiers.  

A 1916 article in the *London Daily Telegraph* praised this factor, stating:

> Hundreds of lives would have been lost had it not been for the sections of the American Field Service stationed at Verdun. Equipped with small, light, speedy cars, capable of going almost anywhere and everywhere that the heavy French auto-ambulances could not go, the ‘rush’ surgical cases were given to these American drivers. They were not given a place in the endless chain, but were allowed to dart into the intervening space of sixty feet maintained between the cars, and then make their way forward as best they could. When an open field offered, they left the road entirely, and, driving across, would come back into line when they could go no farther and await another chance for getting ahead. They were able to bring the wounded down from Verdun often twice as fast as those who came in the regular ambulances. 

AFS driver Joshua G.B. Campbell celebrated this distinguishing characteristic, “The advantage of our little cars over the bigger and heavier ambulances was demonstrated many times. On narrow roads, with a ditch on each side, choked with troops, ammunition wagons, and vehicles of all sorts moving in both directions … the

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10 Ibid., 36.
little cars would squeeze through somehow."11 One AFS volunteer remarked that, passing through the dense convoys, he often drove with his right hand on the wheel while his left hand continuously honked the horn.12 Of proceeding through such congested traffic, Alwyn Inness-Brown wrote, “One French phrase will always remain in the vocabulary of the American ambulance drivers even if every other word of the language be forgotten. It is ‘à droite, à droite [to right, to right]’ which has saved men and machines many times.”13

Many AFS volunteers justified risky driving with a reference to the French wartime philosophy that captured the heart of many American volunteers, “C’est la guerre” meaning, “That’s war, it cannot be helped.” If the severity of the injured soldier in the back of an ambulance required the driver to dangerously pass a large munitions truck around a blind corner – C’est la guerre.14

Under such challenging automotive circumstances, both minor and major accidents were naturally a reoccurring affair. Concerning minor collisions, Ernest R. Schoen wrote:

When an ambulance dashed out from behind some convoy and took a chance in the darkness and dust, it never knew what it was going to meet . . . . If there were horses on the right-hand side of the road, you could push them into the ditch and make this hole, and, incidentally, be glad you could not understand the language of the driver . . . . In the midst of all this, perhaps you might lose a mudguard, dent a fender, or smash a lamp, but that was just a part of the game.15

14 Ibid., 304.
At times close-quarter driving resulted in more severe pileups. Tracy J. Putnam wrote of a fellow AFS volunteer, perhaps inspired by the *C’est la guerre* philosophy, causing one such accident, “Moore appeared in the evening much excited. He had knocked a *camion* from Hill 408 into the river at Urbes! He had followed it some way, trying to pass, but it would not move over. At that, he attempted to squeeze past. The hub of his front wheel wedged in under the hub of the truck’s wheel, and upset its steering so that its momentum carried it off the road.”

John M. Grierson wrote dismissively of those French who were less tolerant of the American ambulances and their special privileges in backlogged convoys (as the above *camion* driver seems to have been). Providing insight into the dynamics of the French military hierarchy, as well as the nature of crowded wartime roads, Grierson humorously bemoaned, “[There] is a jam on the road, and somebody yells out to you, ‘For God’s sake, pull your wheel over,’ and asks, ‘Why in the name of hell’s bells don’t you keep on your side of the road?’ you don’t get mad, for you know *c’est la guerre!* But the fellows who come in for the butt end of this sort of language are the outriders on the artillery *caissons* [two-wheeled ammunition carts] who rake off your lamps, and the fat cooks of the soup-kitchens, who will not move over.”

Particularly for those ambulance crews serving in the mountains of Alsace, heavy snowfall presented yet another hazard for drivers to confront. Luke C. Doyle wrote of one incident where his Ford lost control going down a steep snow-covered hill. The

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account demonstrates the nearly impossible conditions the volunteers could be required to confront:

The roads had been broken and beaten down by munition wagons and were like a sheet of ice. I started down without chains, when the car, though all my brakes were on, began to slide slowly down the road. It even slid toward the edge of the ravine until the two front wheels went over; but there, fortunately, it stopped, and I got it back on the road again . . . . Then a big wagon with four horses came behind me down the hill, which was so slippery at this spot that the horses began to slide down on their haunches, and the driver, even with brakes on, could not stop them. The horses came on faster, and faster, slid into the rear of my car, pushed it along for about six feet, and then nothing could stop it. It, too, started down the road going faster and faster. I yelled to the wounded to jump. They understood my poor French and piled out just in time, for the car ran across the road and plunged down into the ravine.18

Despite some public misconceptions, American ambulances frequently operated under heavy shellfire. Commonly, the French placed their own batteries (a favorite target of German shellfire) directly alongside ambulance routes or near the medical stations to which volunteers made their runs.19 Especially on active fronts, specific locations along ambulance routes were notorious for having their distances ranged by German artillery and, accordingly, drivers accelerated as they passed these commonly hit locations.20 At Verdun, these ranged locations took on names such as “Dip of Death,” “Hell’s Half Acre,” and “Dead Man’s Turn.”21 Of these sectors, C.S. Forbes wrote, “There are two or three spots along the road which are particularly marked, and

21 Ginn, The History of the U.S. Army Medical, 41.
you can bet your boots that when we approach these places we put on full speed ahead as far as the shell holes in the road will allow.”

While under shellfire it was not uncommon for frightened stretcher-bound passengers, injured and on their way to a field hospital, to panic and jump out of the ambulances in order to take cover in roadside shelters. William Yorke Stevenson wrote of one man in his section whose load of injured men abandoned him during a heavy bombardment, “[He] had to go up and down a line of dugouts shouting: ‘Oosong mes blesses! Oosong mes blesses!’ for half an hour the other night, before he finally corralled them and proceeded on his way.”

At times, anxious drivers with a blesse-packed ambulance found that a route they had recently taken was left impassable by a fresh shell-barrage. Heavy bombardments could completely ravage an ambulance route, with one volunteer comparing the damage to that of “an enlarged photograph of the mountains on the moon.” Only after hastily filling the holes with nearby soil, logs, and rocks could the driver, with his injured passengers, proceed. On active fronts, drivers could expect to patch the roads several times in a single night. When pressing circumstances required ambulances to be packed over-capacity, shell holes that had been rashly filled with loose


24 Stevenson, From “Poilu” to “Yank,” 167.


27 Ibid., 186.
soil could prove impassable because of the added weight upon the vehicle. When working alone, a rough span of road could require a driver to unload the injured men from his ambulance, drive over the offending stretch of road, and then walk back and carry the men to his ambulance.

While Ford ambulances may have provided a more comfortable ride than their European counterparts, the vehicles were far from perfect, particularly on heavily-hit areas of a road. Edward A. Weeks remarked that upon once riding in the back of a Ford, he “had a chance to witness the tortures endured by the poor devils who were bounced about in a very gruesome manner.” And Julien Bryan wrote of riding in the back of a Model T on the war-ravaged roads of France, “The jar was terrific. Sometimes it shook my body all over.”

For many ambulance drivers working torturously long hours, often in the dead of night, the most pressing concern was not a German shell, but rather the seductive lure of sleep. To combat this danger, the drivers relied upon black coffee and strong French cigarettes to keep them stimulated through the long and physically draining hours of service. Despite these substances and particularly toward the end of a section’s shift at

29 Ibid., 424.
the front, fatigue took its toll and collisions saw a considerable increase. James W. Harle wrote of the lure of sleep while driving, and his methods of combating this danger:

We are often so fatigued with the strain and monotony of this unceasing grind that we fall asleep at the wheel, and run off the road . . . Before I run past a dangerous stretch of road I stop my car, bathe my face in cold water, get down, and run up and down the road several times to convince myself that I am well awake. This fatigue of constant driving acts like a narcotic on me. The mind becomes dull, and, though fully aware that I am going off the road, I am indifferent as to what follows. In this state of mind shadows along the road assume queer shapes and one is likely to see animals, men, and wagons that really do not exist.

Further compounding matters volunteers was the frequency, owing to proximity to German trenches and the nature of the war, with which the men were required to make their runs at night. The war powers conducted many offensive maneuvers under the cover of darkness, requiring ambulances to respond to emergency calls in the dark of night. For an ambulance to drive toward the trenches with headlights beaming would serve as a far too tempting invitation for German bullets and shells, thus when making night routes the men almost always drove without headlights. Night driving was made even more difficult by the dominant presence of ammunition convoys on the crowded roads, as they too relied upon the cover of nightfall to make their front line deliveries.

Of driving to Verdun at night, William M. Barber remarked, “I could not see an inch of the road, while all the time passing on both sides of me were great streams of infantry, cavalry, carts, and trucks; consequently many were the collisions and scrapings that night. We were never allowed to use our horns, and would press on desperately until,
hitting some one, we would back up, get out of the mess, and start on again.”

On particularly dark nights, drivers might have to step out of their cars and feel their way ahead on foot in order to avoid losing their route. Some sections worked in tandem on starless nights, with a small crew of AFS volunteers leaning out the window or walking ahead of the ambulance to lead the way. William Gorham Rice wrote of one AFS volunteer, helping a driver in such a manner, who was badly injured after being pinned against an abandoned French vehicle on one pitch-black night.

Becoming disoriented or lost amidst their dreary and unvaried surroundings was an inevitable problem faced by the volunteers. Imbrie wrote of driving several miles off his scheduled run, and, because of unfamiliarity with the French language, responding to the queries of bewildered French sentries with only a hopeless, “France.”

William M. Barber provided a detailed chronicle of losing his route one stressful night near Verdun. The story is reflective of a number of the problems faced by American volunteers serving in a foreign land:

Lost in the dead of night between Verdun and the trenches, my ambulance full of wounded men! I was desperate. I drove my car back and forth, in and out, in great confusion of mind, into all sorts of places. Failing to find the right way, I at last gave up in despair and decided to wait until it began to grow a little lighter, although I knew that this would be a dangerous thing to do. Then I thought of the poor fellows in my car and decided I must devise some way of getting them back. It at last occurred to me, if I could discover the railroad station in Verdun, I could, since I knew the location of that place, find my way into the road I usually took. This I decided to do even though it was quite a distance out of the way; and after inquiring of several men who didn’t seem to understand what I was trying to get at,

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36 Ibid., 453.
37 Rice, Jr. and Brown, “With the Ambulance Service (Part II),” 16.
I got one of the less injured soldiers in my ambulance to get information in French from one of them and in turn direct me how to go. In this way, although I was side-tracked several times, I made my way towards the railroad station. Before reaching it, however, I came by accident, upon the old familiar road and made my way straight to our poste. When I arrived there I was in a state of nervous exhaustion.  

The physical condition of the injured men being transported was a constant consideration for American volunteers. Before deporting from a poste, some drivers would pass around cigarettes to the men in an attempt to keep them calm and quiet for the ride. Such tactics were not always successful, and critically injured men often presented an additional stress to the already anxious ambulance drivers. Charles Baird Jr. wrote of what his section coined “humming-birds” – those injured men who would not keep quiet. Of these blesses he wrote, “I don’t like ‘humming-birds,’ for you feel, when you are carrying them, that you hit more bumps than you really do.” Julien Bryan remarked of a mortally wounded soldier he carried, “He almost drove me crazy with his shrieking and yells of, ‘For God’s sake, stop!’ And several times when I happened to hit, accidentally, a shell-hole or a log, he actually rose up in his agony and pounded with his bare fists up on the wall of the ambulance.” J. Halcott provided a final sobering image of what became of such helpless cases when they arrived at the hospital: “The man is carried out and lies, with others like himself, apart from human interest, till death claims him.”

40 Ibid., 240.
41 Ibid.
CHAPTER IX

REACTIONS TO DANGER

For young Americans unaccustomed to scenes of horrific violence, whether they were prepared or not, life in the AFS provided a gruesome awakening to the peril and cruelties presented by 20th century warfare. An examination of firsthand accounts indicates that, despite some contemporary misconceptions, the ambulance volunteers faced substantial danger in the Great War.

The most frequent hazard faced by ambulance drivers was undoubtedly the threat of German artillery. Some in the United States incorrectly believed that the large Red Cross emblem painted on the hood and sides of ambulances prevented volunteers from being fired upon. However, indiscriminate German shelling was always a danger. Some shells could be launched from upwards of twenty-two miles – and a Red Cross emblem was obviously insignificant from such a great length. While most shells were not sent from such a range, artillery fired from a distance of just a few miles presented the exact same danger to an ambulance driver as to a common soldier. Additionally, the very nature of ambulance work often required the volunteers to enter areas that were under heavy bombardment – and not surprisingly, ambulance work had some of the highest casualty figures in the war.2

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1 Stevenson, *At the Front*, 251.

Due to the nature of ambulance work, visits to third-line aid stations routinely needed to be made under heavy artillery fire, and only the most extreme cases required scheduled runs to be postponed because of a heavy shelling. During a formidable bombardment, panicked French soldiers occasionally looked to the ambulances as a direct vessel to safety. Charles Amsden wrote of French soldiers during one particularly heavy stretch of shellfire, “Several knelt directly in our path, beseeching us to take them to a place of safety. Men even jumped up on the steps of the ambulances from which we forcibly dislodged them.”

Robert Whitney Imbrie, who believed that shellfire became exponentially more terrifying as the men were exposed to it, remarked, “There is something ‘disturbing’ about shellfire which is not conducive to abstract or analytical thought.” Greenville T. Keogh wrote of one of those times when a severe shelling actually did postpone the scheduled ambulance runs, “We spent the whole day in an [underground shelter], and I never spent such an hour and a half in all my life. We did not know at what minute a shell would hit our dugout and smash it to pieces.”

Although there was some internal debate on the matter, several volunteers reported with certainty that they had been intentionally targeted by the Central Powers. William Yorke Stevenson wrote that, as a general practice, the Germans did not purposely fire upon volunteers, but, “if an ambulance happens to be in the way or in line

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3 The American Field Service, History of the American Field Service, vol. 1, 387. The Hague Convention had mandated that only the wounded, sick, or deceased could be carried in military ambulances. Although not all volunteers followed this rule, Julien Bryan relayed several occasions where he carried healthy French soldiers back from the front.

4 Ibid., 37.

5 Ibid., 460.
with something they are after, they don’t pay any attention to it one way or the other." Stevenson believed that the German’s eagerness to use lethal force against them, S.C. Doolittle sarcastically remarked that the Red Cross emblem painted on the roof of his ambulance, “affects the Boche [disparaging term for a German soldier] like a red rag does a Bull.” Julien Bryan observed that the Germans “deliberately” fired upon his section’s ambulances. Even Stevenson conceded that he was personally certain of two instances where Germans had deliberately fired upon AFS volunteers, including one American who was shot by a German sniper. Regardless of German intentions, the medical stations the men visited came under routine fire “despite the huge red crosses on the buildings and the grounds.”

Because their work generally brought the volunteers no further than the third-line of trenches, it was not often that ambulance drivers were exposed to direct machine gun fire, but it did occur. Grenville T. Keogh wrote of crouching in a French dugout and watching heavy machine gunfire methodically pass overhead. On one trip to the first-line of trenches, Julien Bryan reported that a drunken French soldier briefly ran into what was termed “No Man’s Land” and banged rocks together so that his American visitor could hear the rattle of German machine guns.

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6 Stevenson, *At the Front*, 160-161.
9 Stevenson, *At the Front*, 239.
On numerous occasions, American volunteers worked in the midst of gas attacks launched by belligerent forces. The men had no choice but to drive with a cumbersome mask strapped to their heads; on a dark night, this could make their mission nearly impossible. Edward I. Tinkham wrote of serving in Verdun during such an attack: “One has to breathe through a little bag affair packed with layers of cloth and chemicals! The eyes are also protected with tight-fitting isinglass, which mists over and makes driving difficult.”13 During particularly severe gas attacks, horses used to carry supplies frequently broke loose, running frantically in the roads and creating yet another hazard for drivers.14

AFS reactions to German gas attacks were naturally varied. In early 1915, one unprepared volunteer, upon being gassed, immediately left his unit in a panic and returned directly to the Neuilly Hospital.15 Another major gas attack left six AFS volunteers in a hospital and affected half the unit to the point that the entire section was rendered temporarily inoperable.16 Edward A. Weeks reported that after being gassed any strange smells sent his section running “like fiends.”17 Another troublesome side effect of being gassed was that, even after several weeks, the taste of liquor and cigarettes (two favorites of the volunteers) were almost unbearable.18

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15 Andrew, Letters Written Home.
18 Ibid., 336.
The men of the ambulance service were often exposed to almost unspeakable scenes of carnage. Naturally, AFS volunteers had a wide range of reactions to such unimaginable horror and bloodshed. For a number of men, the trauma of war was overwhelming on their nerves. Stevenson, a section chief, wrote that after a tense few weeks the sound of passing airplanes unnerved several of his men, and he had no choice but to allow them to remain, heavily medicated, in their bunkhouse.19 Further compounding matters for some sections was the extraordinary youth of many of the volunteers. Seventeen-year-old Julien Bryan wrote of approaching the trenches in his Model T: “I experienced the same, shivery feeling here which one often has at home, before getting up to make a speech in school.”20

For some volunteers, the horrors of 20th century warfare proved to be more than they had ever wished to experience. Men who had been lured to France by the humanitarian notion of driving an ambulance in the war were often unprepared for the gruesome reality of serving wounded men in a genuine warzone; the AFS exposed them to a life they had never wanted. Shortly before he was killed in action, Harmon B. Craig wrote in his journal, “How I hate the sight of this place. It is all so cruel and relentless – the wrecked houses, the torn-up roads, and the huge shell-holes, some of the older ones half filled with stagnant water . . . . It is a scene of sickening desolation.”21

In particular, the contrast of the privileged lives a number of men had left behind was difficult for some men to bear. The son of the mayor of New York lasted a  

19 Stevenson, From “Poilu” to “Yank,” 77.  
20 Bryan, Ambulance 464, 44.  
little over a month in his AFS section before he had to return to America.  

Henry Sheahan somberly wrote, “This cheerless life is acid to any one with memories of an old, beloved New England hearth and close family ties and friendships . . .. How lonely my old house must be when the winter storms surge round it at midnight.”

In the face of life-threatening danger a number of volunteers naturally turned to religion for an alleviation of their fears. Upon coming under heavy shellfire during an ambulance run, one man remarked that he prayed for the first time in his life. Waldo Peirce, in writing to a Harvard professor, said of incoming shell-fire, “For they whine, the bastards, they whine to tell you of their coming, and give the flesh a moment to goose itself in, and damned pagans like some of us to find a religion.”

Leslie Buswell was one of a number of volunteers who adopted a fatalist outlook to the war and large numbers of men attempted to resign themselves to whatever destiny the war held for them. Henry Sheahan, wrote of this widely-held philosophy, “The soldier finds his salvation in the belief that nothing will happen to him until his hour comes, and the logical corollary of this belief – that it does no good to worry – is his rock of ages.”

Exposure to such harrowing levels of combat naturally left many volunteers callous to their ghastly surroundings. After several months in the AFS, Andrew wrote

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22 Stevenson, *At the Front*, 252.


that he found himself becoming accustomed to the brutality of war, “Scenes that a year ago I could not have witnessed without being sick and feeling faint, I find myself now regarding with only a pathetic interest.” While new volunteers commonly delighted upon being fired at for the first time, this mindset generally did not prevail. It was one thing to put on an air of masculine indifference to occasional shell-bombardment on quiet sectors of the front, but for AFS sections serving in places like Verdun the reality of the war could not be ignored. After serving at an active poste, William B. Seabrook wrote of the men in his section, “Those of us who used to laugh at danger have stopped laughing . . . . We don’t come back any longer and tell each other with excited interest how close to our car this or that shell burst – it is sufficient that we come back.”

28 Andrew, Letters Written Home.

CHAPTER X

AMERICAN EXPERIENCES WITH

THE FRENCH

Living alongside French soldiers further consolidated the volunteers’ partnership with the French and Allied Powers. Rather than remaining isolated from the Europeans, the volunteers commonly bonded with their continental hosts on a deeply personal level. In the opening years of the war, American volunteers served with the French on largely equal terms. As they returned to the United States many volunteers saw the French as their brothers and the Allied cause as their own.

AFS volunteer and novelist Henry Sydnor Harrison wrote of French soldiers and the impression they made on their American allies, “We came to know these youths very well – the gallant and charming poilus who have so long carried the Western Front up on their shoulders. We sincerely admired them; and on them largely were formed our opinions of France . . . and of war.”¹

William M. Barber, an American who subsequently enlisted with a French artillery division, wrote of the French soldiers, “I have noticed that French soldiers everywhere are most eager to talk and make friends with us Americans, and they are the most sympathetic, appreciative, and generous people I have ever known. They often run across the street just to shake hands with us or say a word or two, and invite us to have a

¹ The American Field Service, History of the American Field Service, vol. 1, 84.
A full section of twenty-five to forty ambulance men often made a significant cultural impression while stationed in small French villages. American volunteers, sleeping in the homes of French hosts, or living independently in small villages, frequently interacted and bonded with French citizens on a level beyond their war duties. Depending on the region in which a section was stationed, the men at times could seek billeting in local apartments, living almost as Frenchmen amid a town’s population. In an indication of the amiable relationship the men developed with villagers, Seabrook wrote, “The people of Dungy remembered us and seemed to be glad to see us again – especially the little woman who still makes ‘café chaud a toute heure’ [hot coffee at all hours]. We brought her a dozen glasses, which she needed, and some shirts from Paris for her little boy.”

The volunteers also delighted when given the opportunity to fraternize with local women. Many of the men had favorite waitresses at local cafes, and the appearance of the Americans, with their entertaining attempts at speaking French, frequently set the

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3 Andrew, *Letters Written Home*.
flattered women into fits of laughter. Tracy J. Putnam, in a typical account, wrote, “I took a call to Thillot with Fenton. We stopped at Saint-Maurice to pay our respects to all the pretty girls.” Stevenson wrote of the men in his section, “The boys have lots of fun with the peasants. They dance with the girls, and jolly them in great style. We had a regular party last night.” The French women also seem to have enjoyed the company of the foreign volunteers, as on more than one occasion the women of a village decorated American Fords with flowers as the men prepared to depart for another region.

Concerning the prospect of American relations with French women, one California town’s newspaper jestingly speculated in its humor section, “What are all these American ambulance drivers going to do after the war? ‘Oh, I wouldn't be surprised to see some of them stay over there and push perambulators.’” In fact, by the close of the war around a dozen AFS veterans had married French or Belgian women.

Concerning American men and non-urban French women during World War I, historian Craig Gibson writes, “Rural people lived a proper life, more reluctant to allow their young women to be courted by Americans. In almost every case, a marriage would

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7 Ibid., 186.
8 Ibid., 258.
lead to a move to the United States. Such a departure would be discouraged in rural regions.”

Illustrating this point, Stevenson wrote of one rural woman his section encountered: “Considering that her father beats her if she talks to us, she ran a big chance doing my clothes, and it was certainly sporting of her. Her old man knows he can’t lick us, so he beats her instead, and it naturally keeps us from chatting with her except when he is away.”

Young American volunteers, like their Allied counterparts, took full advantage of what downtime they were permitted, and a popular diversion from the stress and horrors of war was athletic competitions. For WWI-era American men, this most often took the form of the national pastime – baseball. American volunteers from all backgrounds united over the game and seemed to take a certain pride in playing “their” game on old-world soil. American men frequently completed nine innings in front of bemused audiences of Allied soldiers and officers. Imbrie wrote, “Our scrub games attracted an enormous amount of attention and created great speculation and interest. At times the gallery exceeded a thousand poilus and a score or more of officers. Once or twice an officer joined in, holding his hands wide apart, and when a hot grounder burned his palms a great shout of joy would rise from the spectators.”

MacDougall took pride in the way the Americans played the game, writing of the impressed French spectators, “They rather marveled at the distance the Americans could throw the ball, and were quite


12 Stevenson, At the Front, 160.


14 Imbrie, Behind the Wheel, 112.
unable to imitate us.”\(^{15}\) The extreme contrast of a game of baseball with the violent surroundings was not lost on the players, as Jerome Preston noted: “It is certainly a queer contrast – a quiet game of catch in the road here, while just over the hill the batteries are banging away.”\(^{16}\)

These baseball games also provided a means for American ambulance men from different sections, and even the different volunteer services, to keep in contact throughout the Great War. The different sections would often challenge one another and one AFS section enjoyed a small rivalry with a Norton-Harjes Red Cross ambulance crew.\(^{17}\) Potential rivals were also found among British soldiers who were recruited to play the game as new challengers for the Americans.\(^{18}\)

In 1916, one baseball game was featured in the pages of the *New York Times*, a newspaper that regularly covered the ambulance work of AFS sections. Four teams representing AFS sections and one team from a Norton-Harjes ambulance squad had, during their downtime, conducted a tournament to crown the baseball champion of the Verdun region. The final match, which featured AFS section 11 and the Norton-Harjes team, was covered in humorously descriptive detail in the *Times* article. To the likely delight of the paper’s readership, notable occurrences of the game included a left field foul ball that needed to be recovered from a barbed wire entanglement, a German airplane that was shot down mid-game and the Norton-Harjes team leaving to return to


\(^{16}\) Ibid., 111-112.

\(^{17}\) The American Field Service, *History of the American Field Service*, vol. 1, 237.

ambulance duty after the seventh inning (and winning the game 17-6). Such articles further personalized the organization for an American public that was frequently updated with accounts of the volunteers’ service in France.

While baseball was the most common game for volunteers to play, when circumstances or opportunity dictated, the men joined Allied soldiers for many other athletic competitions. Some sections contributed men to the rugby teams of their larger French division and competed against other French regiments. One entertainment production for Allied soldiers featured an AFS volunteer boxing against a French soldier. And volunteers frequently joined French officers for hunting expeditions.

It was not uncommon for American men or their French counterparts to become injured in these contests. During one soccer game, following a violent collision between a French sergeant major and an overly aggressive AFS volunteer (resulting in a 2-month leave of absence for the French officer), an entire French division was banned from playing any sports with the Americans.

The greater historical significance of these athletic contests is that American volunteers developed further emotional connections with Allied soldiers. Regardless of the reasons that the Americans had volunteered, such activities further cemented their

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22 Stevenson, *At the Front*, 156.


personal bonds with the French. To this point, Stevenson wrote of the emotional pain he felt while transporting severely wounded soldiers he had played soccer with just a few days prior. Experiences such as this assured that, as the volunteers wrote letters home or returned to the United States, their sympathies were strongly \( \text{and personally} \) on the side of their Allied companions.

Volunteers further established personal camaraderie through celebrations of French and American national holidays. For Americans, national holidays such as Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July provided meaningful opportunities to share traditions and bond with the French on an intimate level. French soldiers eagerly took advantage of holidays as opportunities to celebrate, allowing them, albeit temporarily, a reprieve from a grueling life in the trenches. Americans relished these opportunities to partake in various French national celebrations and entertainment productions.

One uplifting experience for AFS volunteers was the periodic meeting of high-ranking members of the French military. This further developed their relationship with the French and, when relayed in letters to the United States, also served to impress this association upon family and friends back in the United States. Stevenson wrote of one meeting with a French general: “We were introduced to the General individually; and, after his speech, some of the older men were invited into the chateau to drink the health of France and the United States.”

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25 Stevenson, \textit{At the Frontr}, 167.


27 Ibid., 179.
university after such encounters would have trouble finding his personal sympathies anywhere but firmly on the side of the Allied Powers.

When AFS drivers were killed in battle, as seventeen were between 1915 and 1917, French generals often paid their respects at funerals, frequently contributing speeches acknowledging the deceased volunteer’s sacrifice. William Gorham Rice Jr. wrote of an American funeral where a French general decorated two American coffins with military citations before remarking, “But as soon as your United States understood that the enemies of humanity could be subdued and confounded only by strength of arms, without waiting the coming of your American Forces, they offered to my country, as you all did, gentlemen, their youth, their heart, their blood.”

On occasion, dependent upon circumstances, the men could develop personal relationships with high-level members of the French military. Most commonly, Americans were able to befriend French officers at third-line medical stations, where they were granted the privilege of eating with the high-ranking men. Of this dynamic, Carleton Burr wrote, “I am received by all French officers as a fellow-officer. Only today, for example, I lunched with a colonel, a captain, and two lieutenants . . .. You can imagine the interesting bits I gleaned from their conversation.” On another occasion, Bryan wrote of eating with French officers who requested female American pen pals, a common practice among French soldiers who called the American women their 

*Marraines.*

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29 Ibid., 493.

Through such relationships, AFS volunteers were frequently exposed to military intelligence that other neutrals would never be made aware of, further establishing the mutual trust between AFS volunteers and the French military. Upon touring French artillery batteries Leslie Buswell commented in a letter home, “And you must realize by that how completely we foreigners are trusted; for could the Germans but know where these guns are, few of our friends would live to see France win the war.”

Tracy J. Putnam jestingly remarked after having drinks with an inebriated French liaison officer, “If I had been a spy I could have had all his papers.”

Due to the natural buildup of men and supplies before an offensive maneuver, even the most unobservant of volunteers could not help but recognize indications of a pending Allied attack. Imbrie wrote that before such maneuvers, whenever AFS volunteers conversed with French soldiers, “no matter how the conversation started, it was sure to come around to the one, great, all-important subject – the attack.” That the men, as volunteers, were so often exposed to classified information once more underscores the level of trust the French felt toward the Americans.

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33 The American Field Service, *History of the American Field Service*, vol. 1, 139.
34 Ibid., 141.
CHAPTER XI

COMMON PROBLEMS

As has been noted, much of an AFS section’s potential for success depended on the French officers overseeing the ambulance unit. A scheduled transfer from one French division to another could have jarring repercussions concerning the way Americans were treated and the responsibilities granted to sections.\(^1\) An obstinate or doubtful French commander could severely limit the assignments a section received in even the most active of regions. On one occasion, the failure to get permission from an authoritative French doctor before billeting in an abandoned building created much disfavor for an AFS section.\(^2\) Stevenson wrote of another section’s commanding French lieutenant, “He himself stayed back here and let us handle the advance stuff. Then he’d undertake to give all sorts of conflicting orders, to which, however, we paid not the slightest attention, but kept on doing our own job – and doing it well, too.”\(^3\) For the most part, however, AFS sections maintained positive affiliations with supervising French authorities, as American section chiefs knew that such relations held a direct correlation to the number of assignments their section would receive.

\(^1\) Stevenson, *At the Front*, 156.

\(^2\) Stevenson, *From “Poilu” to “Yank.”* 125.

\(^3\) Ibid., 150.
Over the course of the AFS’s history, periodic charges arose that the organization had been infiltrated by German spies. Given both the consistency that AFS volunteers were exposed to French military intelligence, as well as the substantial German-American population in the United States, it seems only natural that such rumors would emerge. The New York Times alluded to the regular prevalence of such speculation; however, the paper’s British correspondent deduced that, because of the rigid application process of the organization, it was unlikely that German sympathizers would have made it into ambulance service. Whether or not a pro-German American could get through the application process is debatable, however, the main significance is that such rumors existed. The spy infiltration possibility is lent further support by the existence, on one sector of the front, of an intercepted German message giving special instructions not to fire at a specific poste where the AFS was servicing.

Rumblings of spy infiltration aside, the American volunteers encountered additional misconceptions regarding the nature of their service from the French public. Walter Kerr Rainsford wrote of one occasion: “The old man who used to open the railway gate for me at Dombasle would shake his head and say that we ought to be up at Verdun, and once a soldier beside him told him that we were neutrals and not supposed to be sent under fire. I heard that suggestion several times made, and one of our men used to carry in his pocket a photograph of poor Hall’s car to refute it.” Some criticism came from American citizens, as on his trip across the Atlantic Stevenson encountered a

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6 Ibid., 316. Richard Hall was the first AFS volunteer killed in France.
woman boorishly criticizing the AFS. Echoing one of the more prevalent critiques of American philanthropic aid in France, the woman remarked that the ambulance men volunteered only for “notoriety’s sake.”

Although volunteers in the AFS, by and large, demonstrated appropriate behavior, it should come as little surprise that American misconduct complicated matters for their French hosts. A more harmless, and perhaps understandable, example of this can be found in the desire of some ambulance men, particularly those serving behind-the-lines in quiet sectors, to visit the first-line trenches. While some men did, in fact, go through the official process of securing a pass to visit the front line, in the later years of the organization’s history this practice was officially forbidden by French authorities. Volunteer Henry Wharton wrote in December 1916 that front line visits were banned because of fears of spy infiltration and “the proneness of men who have seen only a few months of service to tell their experiences to the wrong persons.”

Despite French regulations, throughout the organization’s history, many volunteers decided to make unofficial explorations of the front. Imbrie humorously wrote of one such unauthorized trip, with three fellow ambulance men loaded into his Ford, “[we passed] through miles of winding, connecting *boyaux* [trenches] until we lost all sense of direction. We really had no right to go up to the line, but we met with no opposition, all the soldiers we met greeting us with friendly camaraderie and the officers responding to our salutes with a *bonjour*. We found the front line disappointingly

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7 Stevenson, *At the Fron*, 12.


quiet.”10 On one calm sector of the front, two AFS volunteers seized the opportunity to yell across the lines, engaging in a brief conversation with a German soldier.11

At times, it was the misdeeds of the French that served as a detrimental influence on the American volunteers. Joshua G.B. Campbell wrote of two French doctors who guided him to a war-ravaged village where the men looted artifacts from abandoned buildings. He wrote of the pillaging in a church: “The two doctors proceeded to help themselves to the carvings over some confessional booths, while I rummaged around with the best of them and found a pewter collection plate, an old Dutch prayer-book and some little waxen images. The whole proceedings seemed to me a trifle unscrupulous.”12

For a few Americans, the lure of genuine combat proved too great a temptation and this yearning led some AFS volunteers to court further trouble. Stevenson wrote that he and another AFS volunteer once attempted to use the unexploded grenades a French regiment had practiced with during a drill.13 Alden Bradford Sherry recounted an incident where a young volunteer was severely injured while trying to re-use unexploded grenades in such a manner.14 In Julien Bryan’s section one man secured fifty pounds of unexploded grenades, which he kept hidden underneath his bed.15 Rarely, yet

11 Bryan, Ambulance 464, 131.
13 Ibid., 168.
15 Bryan, Ambulance 464, 53.
to the obvious delight of AFS volunteers, the men were actually permitted to join the French in machine gun and hand grenade practice.¹⁶

On at least one occasion, an AFS section chief, while visiting a French artillery battery, was allowed to fire upon German lines. Stevenson wrote of this extraordinary occurrence that transpired in September 1916, “I slipped down to the ‘75’ battery last night with an artillery corporal, and he let me pull the string. I hope I landed a couple. Anyway, it is some satisfaction to have handed the ‘Germs’ one, for all they’ve ‘wished’ on us.”¹⁷

Unable to handle the demands of life in the AFS, many volunteers were either sent home or quit on their own accord. In his diary Section Chief Stevenson remarked that he fired one man because of several accumulating factors, including keeping an unkempt ambulance, minor rule violations, and “shamming sickness when it is his turn to work.”¹⁸ Other common reasons for sending men back to the United States included overt alcoholism, fighting, disrespecting an AFS section’s French lieutenant, and taking unapproved leaves to nearby cities.¹⁹ American section chiefs or French lieutenants could (and periodically would) have insubordinate volunteers put in French military jails for short periods of time.²⁰

¹⁷ Stevenson, At the Front, 202.
¹⁸ Stevenson, From “Poilu” to “Yank,” 83.
¹⁹ Ibid., 12, 25, 55.
²⁰ Stevenson, At the Front, 136.
Particularly with college-aged volunteers, a clash of cultures could negatively affect relations between French and American members of a section; this disconnect was often exacerbated by American jokes or pranks. After describing the Americans proclivity to prank one another, Robert A. Donaldson concluded, “It is the humorous streak in the Americans which the Continental cannot understand.”21 In his journal Stevenson lamented, “I spend my time smoothing over alleged insults which were never meant.”22

Many Americans, contrary to the wishes of the French, displayed a proclivity toward securing artifacts of the war as souvenirs. Particularly prized by American volunteers (as well as French soldiers) were items that had originated behind German lines. And as ambulance drivers, Americans often found themselves in the first position to secure coveted souvenirs from injured German soldiers. Typifying this practice, Harmon B. Craig wrote in a personal journal, “Several of my wounded were Boches and I found a little comfort in managing to get from them a steel helmet and a couple of buttons as souvenirs.”23

In Stevenson’s section, one man exhibited an obsessive preoccupation for souvenir collecting.24 On one occasion, the man aroused the wrath of the ambulance section’s French lieutenant after he carried back to the chateau where the men were

22 Ibid., 180.
23 Ibid., 265.
24 Stevenson, At the Front, 210.
billeted an enormous barrel of a “75” battery and set it up on the front lawn. Naturally, it would have only been a matter of time until German balloons or airplanes spotted the barrel, likely resulting in a barrage of shells landing upon the section’s sleeping quarters.

Although souvenir gathering was a common avocation for American volunteers, the French forbade many articles from being brought back into the civilian world. In some American sections, supervising French lieutenants made intermittent inspections and confiscated – to the dismay of American volunteers – whatever war contraband they discovered. When Stevenson attempted to circumvent this process by mailing his war souvenirs to an address in Paris (after being tipped off by a friendly French lieutenant about a forthcoming inspection), he was dismayed to discover that Parisian authorities had confiscated his entire collection, including “dozens of different kinds of shells, shrapnel … and a complete set of Boche casques [German helmets].” Yet some men were able to get away with their loot, and Julien Bryan returned to America with 260 pounds of war souvenirs.

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26 Stevenson, *At the Front*, 213.
27 Ibid., 244.
CHAPTER XII

THE AMERICAN FIELD SERVICE’S EFFECT ON FRANCE

During the AFS’s three-and-a-half year existence, the primary impact the organization had on France was in supplementing the nation’s ambulance sections. The AFS directly permitted thousands of Frenchmen to leave ambulance work to serve in artillery regiments, or to return home to work on farms or factories in support of the war effort. Additionally, the organization’s presence served to demonstrate to many French citizens that large numbers of Americans supported the Allies, during a time when President Wilson and the United States government adhered to a strict policy of neutrality.

With an abundance of primarily upper class American volunteers, the French quickly realized the potential for the AFS as an effective propaganda outlet in the United States. Here were men, many with considerable familial and political influence in the United States, risking their lives to serve the Allies. From the French perspective the large and influential organization, aside from supplementing their ambulance sections, also promoted positive foreign relations with the United States, the greatest potential ally they could still hope to secure. Referring to American participation in the war, and specifically the ambulance men, General Joffre remarked in 1916 that the volunteers
“snow the strong sentiment of your countrymen in behalf of the Allies’ cause, which is the cause of right and justice.”

Given this potential, it should come as no surprise that the AFS received active encouragement from French citizens of high social and political standing. In May 1915, still relatively early in the war, French officials and private citizens held a large ceremony of thanks for United States volunteers from various wartime organizations. The event was attended by a number of prominent French writers and artists, AFS officials, members of the French cabinet, and the President of France, Raymond Poincaré.

Speeches made by French and American dignitaries were translated into both languages and published in an elaborate book edited by former ambassador William Sharp and French historian Gabriel Hanotaux. Throughout the first years of the war similar social functions, given by upper class Parisians, further encouraged volunteer American aid. Ceremonies such as this reflect the eagerness of France to embrace the United States through organizations such as the AFS, with hopes of securing a more dynamic wartime alliance.

Over the course of the AFS’s history, many high-ranking French officials wrote to Andrew in support of the work the American volunteers had done. An officer on General Joffre’s staff once remarked, “The American Field Service is the finest flower of the magnificent wreath offered by the great America to her little Latin sister. Those, who like you and your friends have consecrated themselves entirely to our cause, up to and

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2 Andrew, Letters Written Home.
including the supreme sacrifice, deserve more than our gratitude. We cannot think of them in the future as other than our own.4

Further acclaim came from the very top of the French government, as in November 1915 when President Poincaré extended an official declaration of praise, through a New York Times reporter, to the people of the United States. The Times columnist, after referencing France’s shared history with the United States, called Poincaré’s words a “message of thanks from the distinguished President of the French Republic to those Americans, who not being neutral find it easier to be grateful.” The French president remarked,

I have a great admiration . . . for the effectiveness with which Americans have shown their sympathy with France. They have sent doctors, nurses, and volunteers to drive the ambulances to carry the wounded . . . . The American colony in Paris has shown a friendship that we greatly appreciate.5

Just as American intellectuals came to embrace the ambulance service, their French counterparts also lauded the work of the volunteers. In a speech to one newly-created AFS section first embarking to the front, esteemed French historian Gabriel Hanotaux declared, “Friends of France! Your every act, your every heartbeat of the past two years gives the proof! You have left everything to live among us, to share our sorrows and our joys, to aid our soldiers at the risk of your own lives. Like our Joan of Arc you have felt ‘the great pity that there is in this country of France.’”6 Additional support for the AFS came from Émile Legouis, the head of the English department at the

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University of Paris, whose letter published in the *Cornell Daily Sun* exclaimed of the ambulance volunteers, “Such examples of willing self-sacrifice from those who are not nationally concerned in the war are our highest comfort and encouragement. They cheer us when we feel worn and dispirited; they illuminate the long dark ways that stretch before us.”

Individual French soldiers recurrently expressed to the Americans a genuine appreciation for the work administered by the volunteers. Stevenson wrote of carrying one injured soldier who, upon arrival at a hospital, took the opportunity to somberly inform him that “the soldiers of France would not forget the debt they owed us.”

Outside of artillery ranks, French military workers exposed to the work of the volunteers (such as sentries and stretcher-bearers) often expressed deep gratitude to the men. And Keith Vosburg wrote of being “orated at” by one French nun who stressed how “beloved” the volunteers were by the French population.

In some regions the work done by Americans was of such higher quality than their French counterparts that it was impossible for the Allies not to take notice of the American volunteers. Robert A. Donaldson wrote in his journal of an attack when the French head doctor became “disgusted” with French *ambulanciers* and telephoned that they should no longer be sent as long as there were Americans about to make the runs.

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9 Ibid. 211.


11 Ibid., 421.
It is worth noting that French ambulance sections were frequently comprised of older men, as well as those unfit for artillery service. It should not, then, be too surprising that enthusiastic young Americans made such a comparatively positive impression in certain sectors of the Front.\textsuperscript{12}

Additional praise for the AFS emanated from higher-ranking French officers. James R. McConnell wrote that a French captain once thanked him, remarking to McConnell, “no matter how much the town was being shelled, our little field ambulances could be seen slipping down the streets, past corners, or across the square on their way to and from the \textit{postes de secours} back of the trenches.”\textsuperscript{13} Commandant Mallet, the French officer in command of all American sections, remarked in an address on October 6, 1917:

Volunteers of the American Field Service! The American Field Service has existed for almost three years, and had been doing wonderful work on our front for months when practically no American believed that his own country might ever be involved in this war. The whole organization has proved a great benefit to the French Army, and its promoters would be justified in recalling their work with pride. Hundreds of motor ambulances have been busy in the hottest sectors of our front. Thousands and thousands of wounded have been brought back from the fiercest battles that the world’s history has ever recorded to find proper care and get back their health …. Be assured that I and all the Frenchmen who know something of the work you have done will always think gratefully of you and of the American Field Service which brought you to this country.\textsuperscript{14}

Frederick Palmer, a well-known war correspondent who worked on the British front, spoke highly of the AFS and “considered the work of this corps beyond praise.” Palmer relayed the Allied reaction to the AFS volunteers in a column in the \textit{New York Times}, stating, “I have heard it spoken of along the front, particularly at Verdun in terms

\textsuperscript{12} Palmer, \textit{America in France}, 246.

\textsuperscript{13} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 1, 205.

\textsuperscript{14} The American Field Service, \textit{History of the American Field Service}, vol. 2, 535.
of the warmest eulogy.” Palmer added, likely to the gratification of Andrew, “Every soldier helped by this corps is an ambassador between France and America, cementing the friendship between the two great republics . . .. The American Ambulance Service Corps has today 750,000 wounded men of France chanting its praise taken to an American hospital in an American car. On their lips I heard constantly the word ‘America.’” Palmer argued that at the time there was, in fact, no better way to keep the friendship between the United States and France alive than the volunteer ambulance service.

Significant for the effect the AFS was having on France, in early 1916, a New York Times reporter asked fifty men on the streets of Paris their opinion of the United States in order to gauge the French national mindset of the neutral-minded country. One French light infantry soldier replied:

The Americans are the finest people in the world. I have been wounded twice – the first time slightly on the Marne, where I lay for eighteen hours on the battlefield and suffered horribly when I was taken in a cart to a dressing station. The second time was in the Vosges a month ago. I was shot through the body. An hour later I was on the operating table seven kilometers from the front, having been taken there by two young Americans in a Ford ambulance over a shell-swept road. Neither man hurried nor showed the least sign of nervousness. If that is what the Americans are like, God help Germany if they declare war.

Notably, two of the fifty surveyed by the reporter “admired America unqualifiedly because their relatives were well-treated by the Neuilly ambulance corps.” While by no

16 Ibid.
18 Ibid. In February of 1916, the AFS was still officially affiliated with the Neuilly Hospital.
means colossal numbers, if the AFS had such a personal impact on 4% of the French population, the organization was certainly a success.

At a time when many French citizens were puzzled by President Woodrow Wilson’s neutral stance towards the European conflict, the AFS left a positive imprint on French public opinion toward the United States. Concerning this aspect of his service, Andrew wrote, “Whatever the political impressions the French civilian may have gathered in regard to us as a nation . . . the French soldier, living or dying, has no finer evidence of the spirit of our countrymen.”

The AFS left the tangible impression with the French that, although the U.S. government was not supporting their country, many American citizens firmly backed the Allies. La Baronne Huard, wife of a famous French painter, told an American audience that the AFS was “the chief evidence to the poilus that the people of the United States are in sympathy with the French.” And the British newspaper, the Observer, reflected the attitude held by many Frenchmen who were familiar with the AFS when it called a published account of AFS service “an anti-dote” for “those who have been impatient at the attitude of official America.”

While there should be no question that the United States would have entered the war regardless of the AFS’s existence, the organization clearly had a tangible effect on France during the opening three years of the conflict, carrying injured soldiers and thus relieving over 2,000 Frenchmen to serve their nation via other avenues of service.

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19 Andrew, Letters Written Home.
Additionally, the AFS kept alive among many French citizens the hope that the United States would one day join the Allies and showed the French that, despite President Wilson’s neutrality, many Americans supported their nation and wished to join the war effort against the Central Powers. Following the war, French Commandant Mallet wrote to Andrew, “I feel every day more deeply now that the victory is won, that your boys were the first pioneers of their country in this war, and I shall strive all my life to make France attentive to this fact and grateful for their work.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE AMERICAN FIELD SERVICE’S EFFECT ON THE UNITED STATES

From the time Abram Piatt Andrew took control of the AFS, the organization’s underlining motive was to direct public opinion in the United States toward the Allied cause. In fact, following the war’s conclusion, Andrew wrote that holding equal importance to all of the more direct accomplishments of his ambulance volunteers in the war (including the humanitarian aid they lent) had been the AFS’s “exertion of an ever-increasing influence on American thought and sympathy in favor of France and the Allied cause.”

The nature of wartime ambulance work – carrying injured and dying French soldiers, stationed in close proximity to the French (often billeting among soldiers or local families), and directly observing the Allied war machine in motion – resulted in American volunteers instinctively developing a deep affinity for the French. AFS volunteer John R. Fisher, who characterized French soldiers as “terribly brave and unbeatable,” noted of his American section, “There isn’t the rawest, most provincial driver in our work who hasn’t expressed the most unqualified admiration for the French poilus.” Transportation driver Frederick W. Kurth wrote of this special relationship,

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2 Ibid., 246.
We have been as one, for both sides have adapted themselves to the ways of the other – and it is well so, when two beings are fighting for the same cause . . .. Now we see the truth of the statement that has often been made: ‘Every man has two countries: his own, and France.’

Joseph H. Eastman remarked that his service with the French “altered [his view] regarding the war’s obligations.” Julien Bryan admitted that he was one of a number of men who were drawn to France by a desire for adventure, but after serving alongside the French and witnessing cruelties perpetrated by the Germans, “our point of view was altered, and we were ashamed of our primary object in offering our services.”

In particular, many young volunteers left the AFS, and returned to the United States, with a genuine hatred for the German people. Germany became “Bocheland.” Prisoners that looked sullen appeared “like true Boches.” Volunteers deemed the stealing of materials “typically German.” Leslie Buswell remarked that a dying German soldier was “a Boche – the race that has made Europe a living hell.” The bombing of a hospital became “another addition to the long brutality list drawn up against the Germans.”

Upon observing a group of German prisoners of war, Walter Kerr Rainsford remarked, “a more pitiful, undersized, weak-chested, and woe-begone set of human derelicts I hope

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8 Ibid., 89.
9 Buswell, *Ambulance No. 10*, 56.
never to see again in uniform.”  

Upon noticing German graffiti written on a wall, Donald Fairchild Bigelow wrote, “Let us hope it won’t be so very long before the whole rotten Germanic idea will be as effectively blotted out by the Allies.” And it was deemed that the German people had established a “reputation for cruelty and rapacity which shall be his and the heritage of his children for generations to come.”

Following the war, Andrew remarked that AFS volunteers, in stark contrast to Wilson’s 1914 appeal for neutrality “in thought and action,” were

busily writing and agitating in terms that were not neutral, and were sending to their families and friends throughout the Union, to their home papers, to their college publications, and to American weeklies and magazines the great story of France and her prodigious sacrifice.

Andrew wrote that it was through

personal and published letters, by articles, by books, by lectures, by photograph and cinematography . . . [and] by the organization of committees in almost every college and university and in nearly every city and town in the United States” that the AFS organization grew, demonstrating that much of the work carried out by Andrew and the AFS was done to encourage “a deeper and more active interest in American participation.

In a late 1916 letter to the Times of London, lambasting the lack of active British propaganda in the United States, American diplomat Eric Fisher Wood recommended that England mimic the model used by the French and AFS. In describing the French propaganda model in the United States he wrote:

13 Imbrie, Behind the Wheel, 87.
15 Ibid., 9.
It has been written to a great extent by American soldiers in the French Army, each of whom is an endorsement of France. The presence of every American participant is widely advertised by the French. He is decorated whenever there is the least occasion for so doing. He is encouraged to write of his experiences. Articles and books by American soldiers of France are published by the score. Alan Seeger’s poetry of the Foreign Legion . . . Robert Herrick, one of our best novelists, joined the American Ambulance with the avowed purpose of writing a series of books as a participant. I myself was permitted to write the “Note Book of an Attaché” without ever submitting it to the French Censor. There are only 500 Americans in the French Armies, yet we hear about them in the States every day. The newspapers are full of their doings; every item of news from them is justly considered as an endorsement of France. In consequence of France’s shrewdly managed publicity America is whole heartedly pro-French.16

Assistant Attorney General of the United States Charles Warren, charged with enforcing American neutrality laws during World War I, testified to the effect the volunteers had on U.S. public opinion. In a 1934 article for Foreign Affairs, he cited his own experiences during World War I and argued in favor of greater restrictions to prevent the U.S. from being drawn into a second European war. Warren exclaimed that to thwart American public opinion from again leaning toward one of the belligerents in a future European war, the United States should make it illegal for its citizens to serve with foreign armies, as the AFS volunteers had done over the first three years of the conflict.17

The AFS promotional system was designed so that the volunteers themselves, through letter writing and small-scale promotional activities when they returned to the United States, served to spread Allied propaganda. After all the men had experienced, and as graciously as they were frequently treated by the French, how could they not? As Andrew wrote in Friends of France, “It would have been a betrayal of their own action if

they had not wished others to follow their example.”18 In his book *With the American Ambulance in France*, Neuilly Hospital doctor James R. Judd argued that the domestic efforts of the volunteers, along with the moral support the men provided France, equaled any of the humanitarian efforts of the organization.19 Citing the ambulance drivers specifically, Judd wrote, “On returning to America [they have] been an ardent proselyte, burning with a sense of righteousness of the cause of the Allies and eager for the United States to take her proper place in the struggle.”20

An early 1916 memo to Andrew from the French War Department, thanking him for his organization, remarked of the process,

I know and value highly the very active part that you and your friends have taken in the propaganda carried on in America... I know, in particular, of your efforts to arrive at a manifestation of the sympathy of your fellow citizens for our gallant soldiers, by effective and practical cooperation in the work of the French Sanitary Service.21

Perhaps the chief method that Andrew employed to promote the Allied cause and his AFS service was to rely on American university men to advocate on behalf of the organization, primarily through letter writing or word-of-mouth when they returned to the United States. In fact, the very structure of the AFS system (volunteer recruits who commonly served only six months before returning to the United States) served as an ideal method for spreading Allied propaganda. As Andrew wrote of the strategy,

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18 The American Field Service, *History of the American Field Service*, vol. 1, 64.
20 Ibid. Upon his return to the United States, Judd, righteousness abounding, spent several months in the Northeast raising money for ambulance donations.
By thus enlisting the cooperation of young men from universities throughout the country, a way would be opened of establishing what might develop into a potent and active influence for the Allied Cause, not through the ordinary channel of printed or spoken propaganda, but by virtue of the daily contact which these men would have with the French Army in action, where there could be no foundation for any conviction but truth.22

And of course, such young men, under lethal fire from the Central Powers and serving directly alongside the French, would be personally inclined to embrace the Allies concept of “truth.”

Particularly at prestigious universities, the AFS became a prevailing topic of interest among students. Stevenson wrote of the process of promoting “truth” at American colleges,

Whole universities had their attention directed toward the questions involved in the war by the fact that their graduates had gone into the melee, and through their letters these became unconscious propagandists of the truth and the greatness of the cause. When the boys won distinction, their alma mater, their home town, the newspapers of the various localities burst into acclaim.23

The pages of student and alumni newspapers, from 1915 to 1917, also featured extensive coverage of the AFS and those who volunteered for the organization. The adventures of the self-appointed “Harvard Club of Alsace Reconquise” widely played out in the pages of the Harvard Alumni Bulletin, with the men regularly sending first-hand accounts of their ambulance work.24

Many universities entered into unofficial competition over their affiliation with the AFS. In 1915, the *Harvard Crimson* featured an article announcing that AFS

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23 Stevenson, *From “Poilu” to “Yank,”* xvii.

donations would be taken during halftime of the Harvard-Yale football game. A Harvard-affiliated AFS veteran remarked,

Since already several of our motor-ambulances carry upon their sides the names of their donors . . . it would be not only a welcome addition to the service but a gratification to us at home and at the front if a few more cars bearing the name of Harvard could be sent out in that great and merciful work.25

One 1917 article in the Cornell Daily Sun, after listing the accomplishments of Harvard students in the AFS (including carrying over 700,000 wounded), shamefully observed that “Cornell has done less than the other large universities . . . in the American Ambulance Field Service work.”26

AFS associates frequently used university buildings to recruit new members. Typically, a student who had finished serving with the ambulance corps, as well as university faculty in favor of the Allied cause, spearheaded such on-campus recruiting committees. A characteristic example of this occurred at Cornell University in early 1917, when, after being introduced by a well-known professor, AFS volunteers spoke about their experiences in the war in front of 1,500 students.27

At Harvard, veterans of the service hoping to acquire recruits and donations secured an on-campus office where prospective volunteers were met on a daily basis.28

Cornell students launched an effort which saw each fraternal organization send an AFS

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25 “Collection will be taken at Harvard-Yale Game,” Harvard Crimson, November 13, 1915. In this instance $5,300 was raised for the AFS.


27 “$1,800 Subscribed to Joint Ambulance Unit,” Cornell Daily Sun, March 20, 1917.

volunteer to France.29 Students at Cornell also embraced the AFS, and the Allied cause, through fundraising events such as costume balls, theater performances, and pageants.30 One war-themed theater production at Cornell was promoted on the guarantee that each ticket purchased made possible “a trip from the field service station to the firing line in France, and return with the wounded soldiers.”31 Such pageantry tied all attending members into the Allied cause before the United States declared war on Germany.

Women, frequently of high social standing, also played a crucial role in many AFS fundraising efforts. One full section of Harvard volunteers saw its fundraising led by Mrs. Henry B. Duryea, whose efforts paid for all the Ford ambulances the volunteers were to use in France.32 At Cornell, a campus women’s group established a “Calendar Fund” to organize AFS fundraising. The Cornell Daily Sun wrote of the women’s plan, “Fifty-two ladies were chosen to represent the weeks of the year, and each of these picked seven to represent the days in that week.”33 Naturally, such an effort, centered on the AFS, encouraged the personal sympathies of massive numbers of students.

Andrew put further university attention on the war by utilizing student newspapers to announce new volunteer openings within the AFS, often sending articles promoting the organization to Ivy League papers.34 Student papers regularly reported on

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notable happenings involving AFS volunteers who were either students or alumni of the university. In particular, a flowery account an individual’s AFS service commonly accompanied any reports that a student or alumni had received a war citation.

American volunteers receiving prestigious French war medals further magnified the attention the AFS received in American media, and the French military, aware of this press, took advantage of the free publicity, commonly awarding undeserving American men with prestigious medals. The AFS, as an organization, received decorations from the French Army on nineteen separate occasions and more than 250 individual American volunteers received the Croix de Guerre, Légion d’Honneur, or Médaille Militaire French military citations. Frederick Palmer, with regard to the ambulance men, wrote of this dynamic, “Their work had been widely exploited; the Croix de Guerre they had won were the tokens of their heroism.” Stevenson wrote of a conversation he had with a French officer concerning the relatively high number of American ambulance men who received French war medals in comparison to more deserving French soldiers. He wrote that the officer told him American men were disproportionately cited because, as individuals, they were each and every one a small but vital factor in bringing America into the struggle. Every time a man volunteered, he carried with him the hopes and sympathies of all his relatives and friends; and as the Ambulance grew, so did the pro-Ally sentiment grow, by leaps and bounds, in the United States.

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38 Palmer, America in France, 69.
The practice of medal inflation appears to have been the official French Army policy. On one occasion, the French commander of an AFS section, upon withdrawal from the front, arbitrarily received four *Croix de Guerre* medals to be given to *any* Americans of his choosing. When a section operated under a significant German bombardment, typically, the French would indiscriminately offer citations, not based on the actions of individuals, but because of the nature of volunteer service and the attention it would create in the United States. In a statement, Bigelow touched on the pride, as well as the mixed emotions, of receiving a citation under such a dynamic: “We have been cited! While it’s pleasant to have been in a cited section . . . we all feel that the pleasure had much better be not too obvious to others. It wasn’t deserved, if put on the same basis that the French *poilus* are for their reward.”

Whether or not the medals were deserved in comparison to the service of the soldiers of France, many Americans were genuinely honored to receive a *Croix de Guerre*, and, as per French design, the medals further served to ignite in the men a dedication to France and the Allied cause. Louis G. Caldwell, an American who later served in a French artillery unit, remarked of the ceremony he attended after being rewarded a *Croix de Guerre*, “Never had we realized so strongly the bond of a common cause which linked us to those thousands of onlooking Frenchmen. There were tears in many eyes.”

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Volunteers also promoted their organization, and the French cause, through a number of autobiographical books. The first publication covering the AFS to find a wide audience was Eric Fisher Wood’s *Notebook of an Attaché: Seven Months in the War Zone*, released in 1915. The book focused primarily on Wood’s diplomatic adventures in France and Germany, but is notable for the month the author spent in the ambulance service of the Neuilly Hospital. Aside from describing some of the structural problems of the service’s early days, Wood promoted the notion of ambulance service to an American readership. Concerning the prospect of volunteering, Wood wrote, “There is in general such a lack of adequate service for the wounded that to work with the Ambulance Corps and thus contribute one’s mite of helpfulness is almost a duty for any American who can spare even a few weeks of time.”

Another pre-1917 literary offering was the AFS’s official release in the fall of 1916, *Friends of France: The Field Service of the American Ambulance Described by Its Members*. The publication featured a collection of firsthand (and pro-French) accounts of life as an ambulance volunteer. An August 1916 advertisement in the *New York Times* noted of the book, “Read the story of the finest thing America has done in the War told by the boys who are daily facing death on behalf of humanity.” *Friends of France* closed with a direct two-page appeal for donations and volunteers for the service. The book was especially welcome for an American audience starved for English language publications of the war. An early 1918 volume of the *Architectural Record* lamented the

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lack of such books on American shelves and advised its readers to find a copy of the “tremendously interesting” *Friends of France.*

Also released in 1916 was the first full autobiographical work of life as an AFS volunteer: *Ambulance No. 10: Personal Letters from the Front.* The publication consisted of a collection of letters written by Leslie Buswell as he served in a volunteer section during the early days of the AFS. As can be expected, the book promoted the French and the AFS in the most laudatory fashion. An advertisement for the book in the *New York Times* (using a technique that other AFS autobiographies relied upon) promoted the “adventure” of the story.

One final pre-1917 publication promoting the AFS was *The Harvard Volunteers in Europe: Personal Records of Experience in Military, Ambulance, and Hospital Service.* The book, similar in structure to the AFS’s official publications, featured first-hand accounts from Harvard students and alumni who served in various branches as part of the war effort. As more Harvard-affiliated men volunteered for the AFS than any other relief agency, the work of the AFS volunteers received extensive coverage throughout the publication.

The accounts of AFS volunteers and their adventures in the war frequently made it into the pages of American newspapers and journals, from small town newspapers to larger publications such as *Harper’s Weekly* and the *New York Times.*

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47 Howe, *The Harvard Volunteers,* 84.
*Boston Globe* commonly provided AFS volunteers with a public outlet to share their experiences in the war.\(^48\) And in small-town newspapers, exaggerated tales of service in the great European war became commonplace. AFS volunteer Lansing Warren admitted that because of his service he had received a lot of “cheap publicity in the home-town papers.”\(^49\) Concerning the practice, Imbrie wrote in the introduction to his book *Behind the Wheel of a War Ambulance*, “Lest those who have read the bombastic accounts of American journals be misled, let it be stated: the men of the American Ambulance have not conducted the Great War nor been its sole participants.”\(^50\)

Andrew himself was a frequent contributor to his hometown newspaper, the *Boston Herald*, using his authority as AFS inspector general to pontificate in several editorials on the position of America in the war. In an April 1915 editorial, he criticized the American media’s penchant to portray France as one of the lesser European powers, “almost like Austria, Belgium or Serbia.” Andrew went on to remark emphatically:

> Our sympathies as Americans, believing in democratic government, detesting militarism, and mindful of what France has done for us, ought to be wholly with France in this struggle against a medieval monarchy opposed in every way to our own historical ideals. I believe that they are so, but I also am confident that we should have been more actively on the side of France if it had been brought home to us by our press how much this is France’s war.\(^51\)

Not coincidentally, Andrew’s AFS organization, and the men returning home from its ranks, played a considerable role in publicizing just how much it was France’s war. Volunteers frequently gave positive accounts of French soldiers to American

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\(^50\) Imbrie, *Behind the Wheel*, xi.

\(^51\) Andrew, *Letters Written Home*. 
newspapers. One man told a reporter from the *New York Times*, “The French are marvelous. They all know that they’ve got the Germans whipped. I’ve seen men shot to pieces who shouted: ‘We’ve got them; we’re top dog now,’ literally with their last breath.”

In June 1915 Andrew again wrote an editorial for the *Boston Herald* promoting France and strongly denouncing Germany and its supporters. Notably, the editor prefaced Andrew’s editorial by stating, “Such a letter from an earnest and high-minded man deserves careful reading. We commend Dr. Andrew’s letter, in spite of our strong disinclination to inflame public feeling at this particular time.” Once again, Andrew delivered a harsh criticism of American foreign policy, writing,

> We have behaved as if our souls were dead and the ideals of the founders of our government were extinct. We have behaved like a soft-bodied man, who, seeing a ruffian beating and kicking and spitting in the face of a woman on the street, looks on for hours with indifference.

Other significant AFS milestones commonly played out in the press, bringing attention to the organization and the Allied cause. When Anne Vanderbilt, “the guardian angel of the American Ambulance field service,” spent several days touring the front with Andrew it made the front page of the *New York Times* in an article complimentary of the organization. And even large papers such as the *New York Times* regularly reported on American volunteers receiving medals. The American media reported on the volunteer

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52 “Americans at work under Verdun shells,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1916.

53 Andrew *Letters Written Home*.


phenomenon to such an extent that one writer for the *Boston Globe* pondered whether the AFS men “are attracting more attention than has ever been bestowed upon an equal body of American youth of corresponding years.”

Evidence that this prevalence of AFS reports in American newspapers had an effect on the public can be found in a letter published in the *New York Times* in April 1916. An elderly woman, Frances Randolph Peaslee, wrote that she intended to create her own volunteer ambulance service. The letter to the paper’s editor, long-winded and written with an endearing naiveté, stated, “I beg to say as an act of practical American preparedness for war I will equip, maintain, and run one ambulance, the only conditions of my service being that it shall be within the limits of New York City.” Peaslee further stated that, although she had never owned a vehicle in her life, she had experience driving automobiles and was making arrangements to familiarize herself with vehicles (mechanically, in order to make repairs), and that she was making additional preparations to secure a chauffeur’s license.

Two days later Peaslee was the subject of a detailed article in the *Times*. The writer described Peaslee as “a gentlewoman of the sort that tradition tells us existed in America a few generations ago, who has gray in her hair and remembers at least a little of the Civil War.” Indicative of the influence AFS descriptions of the service had in the United States, Peaslee remarked of ambulance work,

“You have sometimes to drive over rough roads . . . and you have to go near the fighting lines. It takes courage, nerve, and physical strength, but I am blessed with all

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three.” Sincere in her plans, Peaslee stated that she had recently spent time familiarizing herself with “the soul of the machine [an ambulance],” and that her plans called for “one assistant, and I hope to have a woman if I can find one. I think women are gentler than men and quicker to see what can be done in an emergency.”

A fundamental avenue in which American citizens became invested in the Allied cause was through donations to the AFS. Not surprisingly, given where their financial interests lay, by the close of 1916 members of the New York Stock Exchange were giving an average of $1,000 dollars a day to the AFS. In a July 1916 *New York Times* article celebrating donations to war-related charities, the AFS ranked eighth in revenue, having received $800,000 in its two years of existence. At the close of 1917, one analysis of New England’s war-related donations showed the AFS as the fifth most common charity recipient, raking in $384,000 from the region.

Volunteers also influenced public opinion through ongoing letter-writing efforts as they served in Europe. In a move that was prevalent among volunteers, and representative of the AFS’s broader propaganda model, many ambulance drivers asked their correspondents to circulate letters among friends and relatives. Some pro-allied organizations encouraged their members to correspond with ambulance volunteers, even if they did not know the men personally. S.C. Doolittle wrote, concerning this practice,

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60 “New England has given over $20,000,000 for war charities,” *Boston Globe*, December 2, 1917.

that the men in his division routinely received letters from “a lot of girls we never heard of who write to us faithfully from small towns in the States.”

Andrew, through American representative Henry D. Sleeper, deployed various promotional tours across the United States to gain attention and funds for the AFS. Most commonly, these tours featured a film of the ambulance volunteers in action, followed by lectures by veterans of the service. A *New York Times* review of the film accompanying the presentation stated of its contents:

>The pictures . . . show more clearly than has previously been done America’s contribution to the great war . . . . They are revealed dashing to the front from the base hospitals when a hurried call comes; carrying the wounded on curious two-wheel carts from the fighting zone back to the safer ground where the ambulances have been left; loading and unloading the men; and picking their way with the charges through villages which the enemy is still bombarding. One interesting scene shows a French General thanking the men individually.

At a New York showing of the film, Theodore Roosevelt personally delivered a supportive introduction, stating of the AFS volunteers,

>We should not only support them in the work they are doing, but should aid them in the extension of that work. Any one who has had any part, direct or indirect, in that work has been rendering a great service, and I am very proud that one of my blood should have helped in rendering service, and I want to bespeak for our people all the support that we can give them.

The movie featured subtitles displaying the writings of AFS volunteers, corresponding to the work the men were doing on the screen. After debuting at several marquee locations in the Northeast, AFS administrators brought the film on a cross-country tour. Occasionally, and most commonly in the American West, protesters in

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support of the Central Powers interrupted these lectures. Sleeper wrote of being showered with hissing and boos after the showing of the film in Montana, where citizens had previously attempted to prevent the lecture from taking place.65

A primary catalyst that propelled Andrew to develop the AFS was his desire to influence American public opinion and bring the United States into the European conflict. The most common manner of volunteering in the AFS (six months in France before returning to the United States) perfectly lent itself to the grassroots propaganda method encouraged by the French. Large numbers of young American volunteers were able to have a significant effect on their universities and local communities. On a greater scale, a number of volunteers wrote inspirational accounts of their experiences in nationally-published autobiographies or in large-circulation newspapers such as the New York Times. Finally, the AFS as an organization restlessly promoted itself through official speaking tours, a film release, and a written publication which collected the writings of a large number of volunteers.

CHAPTER XIV

CONCLUSION

From its creation in 1914 to its takeover by the United States in late 1917 the American Field Service played an active and historically relevant role in World War I. Significantly, American volunteers both contributed meaningfully to the Allied war effort and promoted the Allied cause to the American public. Elite American youth were especially prone to leave behind their universities and experience the European conflict firsthand. Through promotional activities and accounts of their service printed in magazines and newspapers, these young men had a tangible effect on the way U.S. citizens perceived the conflict. Fundraising activities and the large number of donations the AFS received from private citizens spread Allied goodwill on a personal level across the United States.

First-hand accounts of life in the AFS provide historians an invaluable resource pertaining to The Great War. AFS volunteers served in Europe for a longer period of time than American Expeditionary Forces and the primary accounts of the ambulance drivers create an important narrative for what was the majority of the conflict. While most American reports were heavily censored during the opening years of the war, AFS volunteers were unobstructed and recorded their experiences for publication in the United States. The volunteers’ primary accounts provide the definitive American resource for the bulk of the conflict.
While the United States would have entered the war regardless of the AFS’s existence, the organization should be more than a historical footnote. Over 2,500 men volunteered (with seventeen losing their lives) for a conflict toward which President Wilson had requested his citizens remain neutral. Beginning in 1914 large numbers of America’s youth, propelled by idealism and the pursuit of adventure left the comfort of their (mostly) privileged lives to serve in a European conflict. Such significant numbers of volunteers willfully entering a foreign conflict is unique in American history and the phenomenon deserves appropriate recognition.
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