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"MISS OLGIVY FINDS HERSELF":  
AMERICAN WOMEN'S SERVICE OVERSEAS DURING WWI

by

LEISA D. MEYER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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This thesis is the end result of a lengthy process. Like all processes this one had its moments of triumph and despair; like all works this is the product of my own research and interpretation. Yet, my final vision of these women's experiences was shaped by the criticism and guidance of many women connected to the Women's History Program at the University of Wisconsin.

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Finally, I must acknowledge the women whose story this is. Those daring souls who traveled across an ocean in wartime, experienced a great adventure, and whose lives have been forgotten by history. My attempt to interpret their experiences has shown me how important Women's History is as a tool to break the silence surrounding women's lives.

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## INTRODUCTION

### SELF-SACRIFICE OR SELF-DISCOVERY?

The title of this thesis is taken from a short story by Radclyffe Hall, "Miss Olgivy Finds Herself." This story, published in 1921, is about a British woman who headed an ambulance corps in France during WWI. It speaks of courage, adventure, and excitement. It is a tale of a woman serving overseas who reveled in her freedom to be herself. Miss Olgivy "found herself" through her experiences during WWI. Her service provided her with the tools to explore her own potential. She experienced the power and responsibility of command, and the corresponding exhilaration at being accepted in that position. She also felt a sense of frustration when her service ended with the war, and she returned to a world that did not understand her experience, nor recognize her contribution. This thesis is the story of many Miss Olgivies, who, "asserting their right to serve and asserting their claim to attention,"<sup>1</sup> traveled to Europe to find themselves, and had the great adventure of their lives. They returned, after the war, and perhaps felt like Miss Olgivy, a sense of "desperate regret"<sup>2</sup> as they struggled for recognition of their experiences and achievements in a society only too willing to forget.

This thesis is about American women's service during WWI. Approximately 23,000 women from America served overseas during the World War with over one hundred different organizations of the United States or its Allies from April 1917 until the end of the war in November 1918. This number included 12,000 women who served as Army and Navy nurses, about 1000 who were members of the Signal Corps, the Quartermaster Corps, and other branches of the U.S. Army, in addition to about 10,000 women who served under the American Red Cross (ARC), the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and other volunteer organizations.<sup>3</sup> Women who served overseas were a part of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), a broad category which encompassed the entire American effort on behalf of the Allies.

A number of American women went overseas before U.S. entrance into the war. These women saw their first tours of duty in hospital units, ambulance units and as members of military auxiliaries under foreign flags.<sup>4</sup> They were not a part of the AEF, though some of them eventually found their way to American hospital units and completed their war service with U.S. personnel. Many others continued to serve in foreign units for the duration. There are no records on the numbers of women who participated overseas in this manner, but their experiences remain part of the story of women's wartime service.

War provides a unique context for women's service. The rapid mobilization of an American society intent on saving the world for democracy, was an integral part of this context. America's late entrance into WWI, in April of 1917, made this country's experience far less devastating than that of the European nations who had lived with the destruction since 1914. However, the fervor with which America launched into this global conflict, and its adamant defense of the noble ideals which Wilson postulated as justification for this involvement, had a tremendous impact on American society in general and women in particular. A labor shortage created by the demand for soldiers led to opportunities for women to experience a degree of autonomy not normally allotted to their sex in the United States and abroad.

Women's service during WWI was framed by a system of beliefs which stressed the selfless nature of women's service to others as the most important characteristic of their war effort. This ideology of womanly service can be traced back to an ideology of true womanhood which developed in the early to mid 19th century. Historian Barbara Welter describes this "cult of true womanhood," as it was "presented in the women's magazines, gift annuals, and religious titles of the 19th century." This ideology portrayed women as the "hostage of the home."<sup>5</sup> The true woman was one of the few constants in a rapidly changing society and Welter provides

four categories which describe her: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. "Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife--woman."<sup>6</sup> This ideology stressed women's position in the home as the only acceptable place for her to find both happiness and power. Though their world was changing, the women of this period were still largely dependent on marriage and the family for economic security. This fact made any challenge of the ideology of true womanhood difficult. Yet, Welter also describes forces at work in the 19th century which were to impel "woman herself to change, to play a more creative role in society."<sup>7</sup> These forces, such as industrialism, social reform, and the Civil War led to a breakdown in the ideology of true womanhood.

Despite this breakdown and the waning influence of this definition of the "perfect woman," Welter believes the stereotypes, what she calls the "mystique," of what women were and ought to be, remained, "bringing guilt and confusion in the midst of opportunity."<sup>8</sup> This "mystique" is the kernel which formed the core of the ideology of womanly service. This ideology defined women as self-sacrificing and claimed for women a unique capacity to serve others. This capacity to serve others was also linked to women's maternal and domestic responsibilities of caring for their families and husbands, above thoughts of themselves.

A major criticism of Welter's article is her reliance on prescriptive literature as source material. This emphasis depicts

women as passive victims of an ideology externally imposed upon them, rather than as actors shaping their own lives. Despite this problem, Welter's research does prove that the ideology of true womanhood reflected a pervasive societal perception of women. Similarly, the main tenets of the ideology of womanly service during WWI, self-sacrifice and selflessness, were evident in the same types of prescriptive materials. Some of the sources that helped disseminate this ideology included: recruitment literature of the military and the various volunteer agencies, official government statements concerning women's service, and post-war histories by observers of women's activities overseas. These sources reflected a pervasive cultural definition of women's service as selfless, which was accepted by the general population and in part by the women themselves.

The question which these types of sources leave unanswered is what the women themselves thought and felt. To what extent did women serving during WWI subscribe to, believe in, or collude in this ideology of womanly service, or was it simply imposed on them? Historian Nancy Cott sheds light on this question with her article on Victorian sexual ideology. Cott does not accept a simple model of an ideology created by men to serve their own interests and then imposed on women. She argues that women may participate and collude in "oppressive" ideologies to make gains for themselves otherwise impossible to achieve. Cott applied these

concepts to the Victorian ideology of passionlessness, and discusses women's participation in the creation of sexual standards, and the utility of passionlessness for women to gain social and familial power. According to Cott, women's manipulation of this ideology for their own benefit was one reason it was "quickly and widely accepted."<sup>9</sup>

The significance of Cott's argument lies in its assessment of ideology, how it is created, and sustained. Women are in some ways manipulated by oppressive ideologies, but at the same time collude in them when the ideologies can be manipulated to serve women's own interests. In a similar vein the ideology of womanly service limited its definition of women's contributions and participation in WWI to selfless service; however, simultaneously it opened a great many previously unavailable opportunities to women. Women's participation in non-traditional jobs on the homefront, as well as their unique experiences overseas were all justified by an ideology of womanly service. This made women's endeavors socially acceptable and not just tolerated but acclaimed. Women's unique capacity to serve selflessly was applauded by an American society which perceived the nurturing, caretaking role of women as a counter to the harsh reality of war. At the same time women used this ideology to justify the gains in autonomy and independence they made while overseas.

This thesis interprets women's service overseas as having two major aspects. One aspect was the incongruity between the role and motivations ascribed to women by popular opinion and official policy, and the actual role these women played in the European theater, including the feelings they had about their service. The selfless and romantic ideal of the cheerful, starched, motherly and "feminine" woman often contrasted with the rigorous, grimy duties women performed overseas. Their official mission, as described by recruiting brochures and military directives, was to make American men more comfortable in the environment of wartime Europe. These American women were to ease the suffering of the wounded and provide entertainment for the troops. They were to create a more homelike atmosphere, which would be the balm for the pain of broken bonds between soldiers and their families. Their actual jobs entailed this and more; they were responsible for establishing hospitals, running canteens, and enforcing discipline among the troops in their charge.

Official accounts of women's participation overseas failed to recognize that the environment of wartime Europe, in addition to providing opportunities for service, also provided women with an escape from the confines of civilian society and its repressive perceptions of women. The thrills and excitement, as well as the autonomy and independence women experienced overseas contrasted with the ideas that supported their actions. These women were

able to break through notions of women's physical, mental and emotional capabilities and lived a great adventure. The conflict between the gains they made for themselves and a selfless definition of their service was an important factor in their wartime experiences.

The second aspect of women's service is the conflict within the women themselves. The women described their participation in ways which were both consistent and contradictory with the ideology of womanly service. Many of them wrote of the satisfaction they felt in serving their brethren in the trenches, and several expressed their motivations for going in terms of a mission to help the men of their native land. Yet, mixed with this commentary was a sense of exhilaration, an excitement at being in the "midst of things," and a realization of the importance of their work. These two attitudes coexisted within individual women.

While it can be argued that serving selflessly is expected for men as well as women during wartime, there are major differences in the two definitions. The episodes of bravery which described male selflessness were consistent with the male image of toughness and heroism. These same incidents for women were exceptional, and demonstrated the lengths women would go to to sacrifice themselves for others. Official accounts described men's sacrifices as part of the fight for democracy for the world, while women's sacrifices were portrayed as arising from individual and romantic motives. Men's selfless service was a product of patriotism and wartime

atmosphere, while women's selfless service was merely consistent with their feminine nature. Thus, selfless service for women was inherent and framed their entire wartime participation while only composing one aspect of men's efforts.

This thesis includes five chapters. Chapter one contains a brief historiographical discussion. Chapter two addresses the historical background to the ideology of womanly service. I examine the legacy of Florence Nightingale and the doctrine of self-sacrifice and service. This doctrine was manifested in America through women's organization of, and voluntary involvement in, the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War, and the work of Clara Barton and the American Red Cross (ARC).

Chapters three and four focus on women's actual experiences in WWI. Chapter three discusses the work of nurses overseas during the war. It will examine their motivation for service, and their own feelings about their experiences. Because nurses already had a background of autonomy and economic independence created by their profession, their experiences overseas were different from other women who served. This chapter will also compare the nurses' own descriptions of their service to official and popular perceptions of women's involvement overseas, in an attempt to identify the contradiction between women's actual service and the ideology that justified their participation.

Chapter four focuses on the women of the YMCA and YWCA. It will discuss the different wartime activities of women connected with these organizations. It will also describe their feelings about their service and the opportunities it opened for them. This chapter, like chapter three, will examine the contradiction between the actual duties of these 'Y' women and the official descriptions of their participation by recruitment literature and public agencies.

Chapter five focuses on the Women's Overseas Service League (WOSL). This organization was created in the post-war period but represents a continuation of women's wartime experiences. The league, similar to male veteran organizations, was an attempt by women who had served overseas during WWI to obtain recognition for their achievements and contributions. The WOSL in the post-war period was an extension of women's experiences in Europe, capturing in microcosm the conflict and contradiction in the meaning of women's service. With this exception, this essay will not deal with the long-term impact of women's participation in the American war effort. It will not attempt to determine the implications of their service for their post-war regular civilian lives. Instead this thesis will focus solely on women's wartime service.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Radclyffe Hall, "Miss Olgivy Finds Herself," in The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (N.Y.: W.W. Norton and Co., 1985), p. 1447.

<sup>2</sup>Hall, "Miss Olgivy Finds Herself," p. 1443.

<sup>3</sup>Women's Overseas Service League brochure. Printed by National Headquarters, the Dodge Hotel, Washington D.C., 1935. The Women's Overseas Service League Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society. (In future references this collection will be referred to as the WOSL Papers).

<sup>4</sup>Harriet Stanton Blatch, The Challenging Years: The Memoirs of Harriet Stanton Blatch And Alma Lutz (N.Y.: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1940), p. 254.

<sup>5</sup>Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,," in The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective, ed. Michael Gordon (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1973), p. 372.

<sup>6</sup>Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," p. 372.

<sup>7</sup>Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," p. 386.

<sup>8</sup>Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," p. 386.

<sup>9</sup>Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," in A Heritage of Her Own, ed. Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 175.

## CHAPTER I

### THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AMERICAN WOMEN'S MOBILIZATION AND ACTIVISM DURING WWI

Little has been written on women's experiences overseas during WWI. This thesis will be, as far as I have found, the first historical work to focus solely on these particular women and their service. However, a variety of sources discuss the broader topic of women's mobilization in the U.S. during WWI.

World War I occurred when the suffrage movement in America was at its peak and nearing culmination. This context informs the work of historians examining women's activities during this period. The historian William O'Neill, in Everyone Was Brave, focuses on the great expectations of feminists during WWI. He describes their hopes of reward for their wartime contributions. He cites the enormous popularity of women's mobilization especially with middle class women, NAWSA's wholehearted endorsement of Wilson, and women's assumptions that their war effort in America would parallel the tremendous contribution of European women.<sup>1</sup> He argues that these expectations were never realized because the shortage of labor during WWI never became acute, and that, as a result, the female labor force was enlarged only slightly.<sup>2</sup> Thus,

"war did not bring feminists discernibly closer to their goals. The Woman's Committee and its sister organizations in government had a symbolic value which cannot be ignored, but had no real effects on the fortunes of the women's movement, nor was the economic power of sisterhood noticeably increased."<sup>3</sup>

Eleanor Flexner, a historian of the American woman suffrage movement, sees WWI as "bringing women out of their homes into new spheres of action, and thousands more into work no longer new to them."<sup>4</sup> Flexner also describes the expectations of feminists that this work would yield great rewards:

...it also furnished them with a new, heightened moral argument: if democracy began at home, surely the most immediate application must be to those who were shouldering, and completely discharging, every kind of social responsibility, and by so doing, proving once and for all their competence to assume political responsibility as well.<sup>5</sup>

She notes that it took "four pages of small type in government publications to list those occupations in which, in varying degrees, women substituted for men in 1917 and 1918." Thus, she observes, that despite the greater and more recent influx of women into industry in WWII, the numbers in WWI were still impressive.<sup>6</sup>

Flexner argues that women's wartime mobilization had a significant impact on women's position in post-war American society. She remarks that "the enormous influx of women into

industrial work and public service greatly altered their standing in the country."<sup>7</sup> Flexner reports a rapid change, accelerated by war, during which all kinds of taboos and restrictions concerning women "dribbled away." She cites women's employment in non-traditional occupations, such as workers in blast furnaces, steel and armament plants, as evidence for this.<sup>8</sup>

Flexner and O'Neill focus on an evaluation of the long-term impact of women's wartime mobilization. They examine women's activities within the United States to provide evidence for their conclusions of the effect of women's wartime contributions on women's position in post-war American society. In addition, both works discuss the expectations of feminists that women's wartime service would yield significant rewards, including suffrage and an increase in women's status in the post-war period.

This thesis will differ from both Flexner and O'Neill by looking at women's overseas experience itself, arguing that women's experiences in the European theater were in themselves significant to the women. Though feminist organizations in the U.S. were publicly articulating their expectations of post-war reward for women's war effort, women overseas were not. This thesis will argue that women of the AEF focused on the gains they were making during the war, rather than the possibility of post-war reward.

Another important study was done by Barbara Steinson as a dissertation for the University of Michigan, on women's activism on the homefront during the World War. Her examination centers around an analysis of the ideology of the period crucial to any understanding of women's mobilization. Her thesis shows that "Women with very different purposes used traditional ideology regarding women's role to support their causes."<sup>9</sup> She links women's experiences in WWI with the justifying ideology that supported women's efforts in non-traditional fields and provided a framework in which to argue for their emancipation.

Steinson's emphasis on the diversity and degree of American women's participation in the war effort is a theme that will also be examined in this thesis, by viewing the variety of experiences of American women overseas during the war. Her point that many "women justified their wartime endeavors by declaring that they had a special relationship to war---" and her portrayal of this as based on the traditional view of women as the "nurturing, mothering, protective sex," is important to the argument of this essay.<sup>10</sup>

This essay focuses on a specific example, the ideology of womanly service. For women on the homefront, it included women's special relationship to war as a way to gain reward, but was also rooted in ideas of self-sacrifice and selflessness as virtues natural to women. Above all, this thesis explores the

relationship between the traditional ideology and women's actual experience, which Steinson does not attempt.

One more work is particularly relevant here: Phillip Kalisch and Margaret Scobey's article "Female Nurses in American Wars: Helplessness Suspended for the Duration," published in 1976. One of the issues this article addresses is the involvement of military nurses overseas during WWI. Kalisch and Scobey focus on the historical record of U.S. military nurses in combat as well as how popular opinion and official policy interpreted their role during wartime. Kalisch and Scobey write: "an evaluation of the wartime work of military nurses exposes a pervasive and unacknowledged incongruity between the often idealized perception of the nurse's role and the harsher reality of what she has been expected to do."<sup>11</sup> The authors examine official doctrine as well as popular attitudes and understanding of the military nurse's role in WWI to support their assertions.

This thesis agrees with Kalisch and Scobey that there was a contradiction between women's actual experiences and the rhetoric describing these experiences; however, the substance of this contradiction and its complexities are not fully explored by Kalish and Scobey. The incongruity the authors discuss is between the romanticization of the military nurse's role overseas and the drudgery, long hours, and hard work that it entailed. Though this

does represent one portion of the conflict, it does not touch on the contradiction between the selflessness embodied in the romantic ideal and the gains in independence and autonomy the women were experiencing. Kalisch and Scobey settle for a simple dichotomy between the grimy detail of nurses' work and the romantic idealization of nurses' role to debunk the myth of women's service overseas. This essay will differ by also discussing the women themselves and how they perceived their experiences. These women used this same rhetoric to describe their participation overseas alongside their adamant assertion of the gains they were making. This interaction of the romantic ideal and their actual daily experiences occurred within the women themselves. Kalisch and Scobey do not examine this, and thus fail to come to grips with the fact that though the romantic ideal, or the ideology of womanly service, was repressive, it also enabled women to have experiences and make gains otherwise impossible.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>William O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of American Feminism (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), p. 185.

<sup>2</sup>O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave, p. 194.

<sup>3</sup>O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave, p. 222.

<sup>4</sup>Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States (Harvard: Belknap Press, 1959), p. 288.

<sup>5</sup>Flexner, Century of Struggle, p. 289.

<sup>6</sup>Flexner, Century of Struggle, p. 288.

<sup>7</sup>Flexner, Century of Struggle, p. 189.

<sup>8</sup>Flexner, Century of Struggle, p. 294.

<sup>9</sup>Barbara J. Steinson, "Female Activism in World War I: The American Women's Peace, Suffrage, Preparedness and Relief Movements," diss. University of Michigan, 1977, p. 399.

<sup>10</sup>Steinson, "Female Activism," preface.

<sup>11</sup>Phillip A. Kalisch and Margaret Scobey, "Female Nurses in American Wars: Helplessness Suspended for the Duration," Armed Forces and Society, Vol. 9, # 2 (Winter 1983), p. 216.

## CHAPTER II

### "READY FOR SACRIFICE

ON THE ALTAR OF HUMANITY AND THEIR COUNTRY":<sup>1</sup>

#### WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN RED CROSS AND THE SANITARY COMMISSION

Service is a concept that war expands and glorifies, and serving one's country becomes the most noble occupation during periods of conflict. The concept of service for women did not include recognition or reward; rather it was their expected function and duty. The characterization of women as self-sacrificing was integral to the ideology of womanly service which framed women's participation in WWI. Prior to WWI this definition of women's service described women's activities during the Civil and Spanish-American Wars.

The Sanitary Commission was one vehicle for women's service during the Civil War. This organization was started by northern women to provide relief for some of the dreadful conditions encountered by the Yankee wounded.<sup>2</sup> The sanitary conditions for troops were atrocious, as garbage and refuse often mingled with the water supply at stationary encampments. In addition, no medical aid or facilities were available to the wounded unless they managed to reach one of the few battlefield hospitals.

Northern women formed themselves into societies and then into a national network under the aegis of the Sanitary Commission. It represented a continuation of the tradition of service exemplified by Florence Nightingale in the Crimea. Agatha Young, in her work on women of the North during the Civil War writes:

Florence Nightingale's lamp had illumined for a shocked world the inhumanity of the tradition of war which relegated the wounded soldier to the category of expended material. It remained for the women of America, and more especially, for the women of the North to take actual steps which permanently abolished that tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Florence Nightingale's influence was felt organizationally as well, as the Sanitary Commission was modeled predominantly after the British Sanitary Commission which she founded.<sup>4</sup>

One of the reasons for the rapid growth of the Sanitary Commission was the government sanction that became available shortly after its formation. This support took the form of a body of paid administrators and inspectors formed by men to supervise and control the growing volunteer force of women.<sup>5</sup> These unpaid female volunteers did much of the legwork of the organization, visiting battlefield hospitals and helping to increase the morale of the wounded. Women's work within the Sanitary Commission also included handling the wounded, setting up rehabilitation programs, and making sure hospital and relief supplies arrived in time, and to the right locations.<sup>6</sup>

These women's service as volunteers was important to the smooth functioning of the organization, but was also perceived by male administrators and the women themselves as being part of women's nature. Their gentle presence would soothe soldiers through the horrors of war. The Sanitary Reporter, the organ of the Sanitary Commission, illuminated this observation. A June, 1863 editorial read:

The mother, the wife, the sister, the daughter, the sweetheart, can all do their part in the grand labor that exalts while it saves a people. It is the glory of the Sanitary Commission, not only that it has relieved such countless cases of suffering, but that it has shown how the longing heart and eager hand of every home in the country can bring themselves to bear upon the welfare of the soldiers who are fighting for them.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, women's chief function within the male-headed organization became that of bringing a more "civilized influence to male warfare."<sup>8</sup>

The Sanitary Commission represented one of the few acceptable ways for women to serve the northern war effort. It was an arena in which women were expected to sacrifice their comforts and serve the men soldiering in the armies of the North. Contrasting with the service of women in the Sanitary Commission was the unacceptable service of women on their own. Many of these women left home individually to help in any way possible. These women showed up at hospitals, on battlefields, and at the

sides of husbands, brothers and sweethearts begging to be allowed to help.<sup>9</sup> The Sanitary Reporter described these women in very negative terms: "...the vast majority of women who find their way to the field are of those who are justly esteemed outcasts at home, and whose presence is accounted pollution."<sup>10</sup> By casting aspersions on the moral character of women who sought as individuals to help the northern cause, the Sanitary Commission defined and monitored the type of service that was acceptable for women to offer.

In contrast to the unacceptable service of individual women, the Sanitary Commission wholeheartedly endorsed the service of its own female volunteers. An editor of the Sanitary Reporter, M.E. Rout, described a Miss Fanny Courtney and her participation after the Battle of Franklin:

Her purely womanly devotion, her heartfelt sympathy, and her generous sacrifices for the relief of our wounded soldiers justly entitles her to the respect, admiration and love of every loyal American man and woman in the nation...Among our suffering soldiers, she appeared indeed as an angel of mercy...<sup>11</sup>

Miss Courtney seconds this account of her devotion in her own letter, also printed in this issue of the Sanitary Reporter. She wrote: "...I could not sleep, for I longed to go to the battlefield to alleviate suffering..."<sup>12</sup>

Paralleling the activity of the Sanitary Commission was the work of Clara Barton and the American Red Cross. Barton's group

worked along similar lines but was more individually oriented than the Sanitary Commission.<sup>13</sup> The objects of the ARC were to relieve suffering caused by war and natural disaster and to serve whenever needed in "tender and merciful" ways. Women played a crucial role in this function. Red Cross workers were to alleviate the suffering of the wounded as well as increase morale through their womanly influence and touch.<sup>14</sup>

Barton believed that service was an inherent part of women's nature,<sup>15</sup> and as the founder of the ARC her entire life was dedicated to service.<sup>16</sup> When Barton talked about women's contributions to the efforts of the Red Cross she wrote of the "gentle presence" of the women who went with "our brave boys" for the purpose of "assuaging with her soft touch the grim horrors of carnage."<sup>17</sup> Barton further addressed this theme of women's self-sacrifice when she wrote on the Spanish-American War. She exclaimed: "To the army of women, brave, generous and true, who either as auxiliaries at home, or as nurses in the field, make up that magnificent array of womanhood, ready for sacrifice on the altar of humanity and their country--no words of mine can do justice."<sup>18</sup>

Yet, Barton also recognized the individual gains women could make through their service. She realized that the adventurous side of war had a real appeal to women. She acknowledged this in a discussion of women's service: "Indeed, it seems to have become the milder romance of war, and is gradually winning its way into

the very heart of the pomp and circumstance of 'glorious' war itself."<sup>19</sup> Thus, Barton was aware that service provided opportunities for women to have experiences otherwise impossible.

Women made gains as individuals through their service during the Civil War. Historian Ellen DuBois argues that women's service during the Civil War was significant because for the first time large numbers of women recognized themselves as "public people and citizens."<sup>20</sup> While women's service helped individual women become aware of their own importance, feminist leaders claimed women's efforts during the Civil War entitled them to the reward of enfranchisement. Historian Eleanor Flexner wrote: "The women's rights leaders who had put away their cause for the duration of the Civil War believed, that when peace came, a grateful country would reward them...."<sup>21</sup> This expectation of reward was articulated publicly by feminist organizations like the National Women's Loyal League, formed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone.<sup>22</sup> However the organizations with which women served during the Civil War, such as the Red Cross and the Sanitary Commission, disseminated information emphasizing the self-sacrificing and selfless nature of women's wartime service.

The women who served with the Red Cross and the Sanitary Commission during the Civil and Spanish-American Wars received little recognition. In a tribute to Red Cross nurses who served in the Spanish-American War, Franklin Hussey, a Red Cross

administrator out of Chicago, wrote an article that very eloquently illustrated these images of women's service. He spoke of the lack of recognition of the Red Cross woman's part in the war effort, but he expressed admiration for this fact. He attributed it to her "going about her duty of self-sacrifice so simply, so modestly, without even a thought or expectation that anyone would ever know or care whether she lived to come back from the death-laden fever swamp or not...."<sup>23</sup> He described her tools as "only the gentle ministrations of a woman's hand and heart..." and found it ultimately better that no reward be given for her service for "She seeks no recognition and she seeks no praise....," to do so would somehow taint her service.<sup>24</sup>

The legacy of these ideas of women's service was to be felt sharply during the next occasion for women's wartime service: WWI. The definition of women's service as selfless continued to conflict with the "romantic adventure" of war, as well as with a continued public demand by the feminist organizations for reward for women's wartime efforts.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Clara Barton, The Red Cross: A History of this Remarkable International Movement in the Interest of Humanity (N.Y.: James B. Lyon, 1898), p. 677.

<sup>2</sup> Agatha Young, The Women and The Crisis: Women of the North in the Civil War (N.Y.: McDowell and Obolensky, 1959), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Young, The Women and the Crisis, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Young, The Women and the Crisis, p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Young, The Women and the Crisis, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> Young, The Women and the Crisis, p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> Sanitary Reporter, Vol. 1, #4 (June 1, 1863), p. 12. This publication is the journal of the U.S. Sanitary Commission.

<sup>8</sup> Young, The Women and the Crisis, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> "Women With the Army--Letter From M.C. Read," Sanitary Reporter, Vol. 2, #14 (December 1, 1864).

<sup>10</sup> "Women With the Army--Letter From M.C. Read," The Sanitary Reporter, Vol. 2, #14 (December 1, 1864).

<sup>11</sup> "The Battle of Franklin--Letter From Miss Fannie Courtney," Sanitary Reporter, Vol. 2, #23 (April 15, 1864), p. 181.

<sup>12</sup> "The Battle of Franklin--Letter From Miss Fannie Courtney," Sanitary Reporter, Vol. 2, #23 (April 15, 1864), p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> Young, The Women and the Crisis, p. 191.

<sup>14</sup> Barton, The Red Cross, p. 102.

<sup>15</sup> Barton, The Red Cross, p. 438.

<sup>16</sup> Barton, The Red Cross, p. 677.

<sup>17</sup> Barton, The Red Cross, p. 677.

<sup>18</sup> Barton, The Red Cross, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Barton, The Red Cross, p. 678.

<sup>20</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America 1848-1869 (N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 181.

<sup>21</sup> Flexner, Century of Struggle, p. 145.

<sup>22</sup> Flexner, Century of Struggle, pp. 110-111.

<sup>23</sup> Barton, The Red Cross, p. 679.

<sup>24</sup> Barton, The Red Cross, p. 679.

### CHAPTER III

"ASSERTING THEIR RIGHT TO SERVE  
ASSERTING THEIR CLAIM TO ATTENTION":<sup>1</sup>  
AMERICAN NURSES OVERSEAS DURING WORLD WAR I

A majority of the women who served overseas during WWI were attached to medical units of the Army, Navy and Red Cross. By Armistice Day over 12,000 nurses had served in Belgium, England, Italy, Serbia, France and Siberia. These women served in field hospitals, troop trains, and transport ships.<sup>2</sup> Nursing as the epitome of womanly service, offered one of the most popular ways for women to serve during the war. Because of the large numbers of trained nurses available, nurses were easily mobilized and were the first women to serve overseas.

This pool of trained nurses was available during WWI because of the increasing professionalization of the nursing occupation. Nursing became a profession between the Civil War and WWI. In 1873 the first three nurses' training schools opened, and by the late 19th century there was a move from home nursing to hospital nursing.<sup>3</sup> These nurses' training schools accomplished the gradual elimination of untrained nurses and the centralization of authority under the supervision of nurses.<sup>4</sup> Between 1890 and 1920

hospital expansion provided the economic base for the establishment of hundreds of new training schools for nurses.<sup>5</sup> Most of these nurses were single women from small and medium towns and about half were high-school educated.<sup>6</sup> The individual nurses examined in this chapter were similarly predominantly single and most came from middle-class backgrounds.

Most of the nurses who served overseas were white. The question of the utilization of black nurses overseas had been the cause of prolonged discussion between the Surgeon General's office and the American Red Cross.<sup>7</sup> The National Association of Colored Women had called upon the Red Cross on many occasions to recruit and hire black nurses to serve in the European war zone.<sup>8</sup> The Red Cross answer to this call was usually in the negative "owing to the impossibility of securing proper quarters for them, it has never been the policy of the Surgeon General's office to consider the appointment of colored nurses."<sup>9</sup> Most of the black nurses who served with the Red Cross did so in the United States. Alice Dunbar Nelson estimated that only around three hundred ever made it overseas, and they were women whose "complexion disguised their racial heritage."<sup>10</sup>

For many nurses, overseas service was synonymous with military service. Military nursing became established shortly after the Spanish-American War. In September, 1898, President

William McKinley appointed the Dodge Commission to investigate the conduct of the War Department in the Spanish-American War. This commission examined a great deal of evidence that dealt with the work of female nurses. The most common testimony supported the superior ability of female nurses over male corpsmen.<sup>11</sup> Objections to using female nurses were voiced by a few army doctors who felt nurses "mothered" the patients too much. Historian Phillip Kalisch describes how these objections were handled: "However, these objections were overruled in the general appreciation of the value of trained female nurses to a war effort."<sup>12</sup> As a result of the Dodge Commission's report Congress established the Nurse Corps as an auxiliary of the Army in 1901. Seven years later in 1908, the Navy followed suit and incorporated a Nurse Corps as an auxiliary to the Navy. By the time WWI approached, the nursing services were organized and ready to go.<sup>13</sup>

The transition from civilian nursing on the homefront to military nursing overseas was eased by the ARC. The ARC did most of the recruiting for nurses during WWI. At first these nurses were assigned directly to base or field hospitals; however, as the war progressed they were assigned directly to the Army or Navy.<sup>14</sup> For example, of the 20,000 women in the Army Nurse Corps, over 80% had been recruited by the Red Cross, and 68% of the 14,000 Navy nurses had been similarly recruited.<sup>15</sup> Those Red Cross workers not directly assigned to duty with the Army or Navy were

usually part of base hospitals, organized in the United States and sent to Europe to be assembled to care for the American wounded. With them went groups of male civilian doctors, technicians and support staff, who for the war's duration were absorbed under the aegis and direction of the military.<sup>16</sup> In addition, American nurses were also sent to French army hospitals to care for American wounded.<sup>17</sup>

The large number of casualties in WWI led to a great demand for hospitals and support facilities. These facilities required a staff, and the need for nurses was consequently quite large. After the original rush of volunteers when overseas service was opened to nurses, the question remained how to draw women out of the available pool of trained nurses left in the U.S. and persuade them to serve overseas. The Red Cross used many types of recruitment literature to solve this problem. Their brochures called for women to serve their country and ease the physical and emotional distress of wounded soldiers "as only woman can." One poster contained a picture of an American doughboy covered with bandages and a nurse next to him, supporting him. The slogan read: "WHAT are YOU doing to HELP?"<sup>18</sup> Another Red Cross recruiting pitch was "American nurses for American men,"<sup>19</sup> which emphasized women serving men. Historian Phillip Kalisch describes the pictures of nurses on recruitment posters as embodying the "saintly, spiritual image of the wartime nurse. This same inspirational, angelic

aspect of nursing the wounded was seen in countless cartoons and magazine covers of the era."<sup>20</sup> In all of these recruitment posters the nurses were dressed in bright spotless white uniforms with gauzy veils.

The role of this type of propaganda in the Red Cross recruitment campaign was important. As the official recruiting agency for nurses during WWI, the Red Cross had both to appeal to women and to be acceptable to the government agencies and the general public. Thus, the definition of women's service used by the Red Cross simultaneously reflected and reinforced popular perceptions of women's participation overseas.

The German drive on the Marne in the Spring of 1918<sup>21</sup> seriously strained the capacities of the available medical facilities and renewed the clamour for more medical personnel. In response to this, nurses' training schools were set up at women's colleges such as Vassar and Wellesley.<sup>22</sup> These schools were open to college graduates only, with the intent of decreasing the time required for nursing training from four years to three.<sup>23</sup> These student nurses were used for domestic duties to release regular nurses for military duty.<sup>24</sup> The summer camps were modeled after the Plattsburgh Military Camp where college men were trained to become army reserve officers.<sup>25</sup>

These nursing camps stressed the necessity of wartime service, and portrayed the nursing profession as one especially suited for

this task. The schools' brochures described nursing as "the most vital and satisfying service which any woman can render in critical times like these...She stands side by side with the fighting forces in the first line of defense, and out of the fearful waste and havoc of war she can save numberless precious lives."<sup>26</sup> Advocates of these training schools spoke of nursing as a way for women to realize their full potential through service,<sup>27</sup> for, next to being in battle, nursing was the most direct form of participation in the war. Nursing was the "front line trench for women."<sup>28</sup>

The call to service issued to women through the "College Women's Plattsburghs," tied the definition of women's service to a very traditional definition of women themselves, based on the notion of women's selfless and self-sacrificing nature. Nursing was described by school administrators as "pre-eminently women's work,"<sup>29</sup> and the sacrifices nurses had already made overseas were important aspects of this service.

American nurses were involved in most of the stages of care available to the wounded during WWI. During the first part of the United States war effort the wounded were treated at the front by members of the regimental medical detachment who applied first aid dressings and assisted the wounded to aid stations where they were prepared for transport.<sup>30</sup> Later in the war this procedure changed, as shock teams were assembled to treat soldiers at the front.

These teams consisted of one doctor, one nurse and one orderly who were stationed at the front and would treat soldiers on the field for their wounds so they would not die from shock before they could be transported.<sup>31</sup> This was very hazardous work and observers praised the nurses' participation in these first experiments at quicker treatment of the wounded.<sup>32</sup>

After being treated at the front the wounded were taken to collecting stations or ambulances where they were transported to field hospitals. The field hospitals were about three to five miles behind the front lines and were similar to present-day Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals (MASH). These units handled emergency surgeries and served as intermediate stops for treatment before transportation to the Evacuation Hospitals. The Evacuation Hospitals were twelve to twenty miles behind the lines and provided patients with more thorough care before they were taken by train to the Base Hospitals. The Base Hospitals were permanent structures and were often located fifty miles from the fighting.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to other women who served overseas, to be discussed later, nurses had a background as trained professionals. The work they were doing overseas was a continuation of their professional service. However, their experiences in the European theater were very different from their work in hospitals in the United States. Overseas nurses treated different types of

illnesses and wounds and worked in very hazardous environments. The technology of destruction had outdistanced the healing sciences with the result that the new weaponry utilized in WWI produced psychological and physical damages the nurses had never before encountered. Historian Phillip Kalisch describes some of these consequences:

The artillery and explosive devices used in WWI produced massive, ragged wounds, highly vulnerable to infection. Shell shrapnel could cut across multiple organs in a single hit, and the rotary motion of the modern jacketed bullet reduced soft tissue to a devitalized pulp....<sup>34</sup>

In all of these injuries amputation was the first defense against infection. Because of the high-risk of infection and lack of adequate antiseptic techniques, soldiers' wounds could not be bandaged and closed quickly. Instead nurses had to irrigate the wounds with a weak chlorine solution. This procedure, called Dakin irrigation, was time consuming as well as very painful. Many of the soldiers remained unconscious through large parts of their treatment; however, the nurses saw and smelled all the results of battles.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the new explosive technology, WWI saw the advent of the use of mustard gas as a weapon. This poison gas terribly burned soldiers' eyes, skin, and lungs; it adhered to anything it touched. There were few treatments available for

gas victims and many suffered horribly. The nurses handled these types of cases on a regular basis and often burned their own hands on the gas residue still on the soldiers' clothing.<sup>36</sup> Phillip Kalisch wrote that, "No matter how thorough a nurse's training before the war, nothing could have prepared her for the violent assault on her sensibility caused by wartime nursing."<sup>37</sup>

Nursing overseas was different from nursing on the homefront not only because of the types of wounds they treated, but also because of the greater responsibility nurses had. Because of the high patient to nurse ratio, most nurses were completely in charge of their wards. Doctors were kept busy with surgeries and emergency cases, and nurses were responsible for daily treatments, some diagnoses, and hospital administration.

For the Red Cross nurses in particular, this increased responsibility went hand in hand with an increase in their authority and status. Red Cross nurses, who worked in civilian hospitals, never had their orders or authority questioned. They had the knowledge to do the job and the position to demand respect. By contrast, women in the military Nurse Corps had an ambiguous status, for they had no military rank, equal pay, or other benefits of normal military service. They lacked the authority to accomplish the tasks before them.

A hierarchical system, like the military, where status and the acceptance of orders depend on the rank of those issuing them, seriously frustrated nurses. The historian of Army Base Hospital #45 related: "They were neither officers nor privates, and this one point caused great difficulties in discipline and control...."<sup>38</sup> Army nurses demanded rank to increase their efficiency. Numerous testimonies showed that the quality of their nursing service was impaired because enlisted men who served as aides and orderlies questioned the nurses' orders and refused or delayed compliance with them.<sup>39</sup> A nurse who had been at the head of the nursing staff in a state hospital in America wrote from the front: "There is one thing the Nursing Committee needs to work for...to make for nurses the rank of Lieutenant...You see there are no officers in our nursing personnel. One of our staff says we are the hired extras! It is really a great mistake!"<sup>40</sup>

The increase in nurses' responsibility not only reinforced, but altered their experience. Military nurses recognized their difficult situation, and their experiences overseas escalated their frustration and intensified their demands for greater authority and status. By contrast, Red Cross nurses handled the increase in their authority and responsibility very effectively and began to recognize their own potentials.

The daily experience of American nurses servicing overseas was filled with both tedium and excitement, overwork and adventure. Their jobs ranged from assisting doctors, to running wards, to soothing dying soldiers. Margaret Rowland, a Wisconsin woman who served as a Red Cross nurse in France, worked at a hospital in Maily as one of three nurses for five hundred patients.<sup>41</sup> A published history of Army Base Hospital #45 presented a similar picture of seventy nurses for a 2000 bed hospital. One nurse remarked that she had "192 patients, 2 basins, 2 thermometers, and 30 mess kits."<sup>42</sup> Maude Essig, a Red Cross nurse stationed at Base Hospital #32 in Contrexeville la Vosges, described the hospital as having "Very little equipment and so many patients--everything so dirty--made me think of Florence Nightingale and her experiences in the Crimea!...."<sup>43</sup> She and her group arrived in mid-winter to find all the plumbing frozen and no accommodations.<sup>44</sup> Essig's situation had not noticeably improved by summer. The Allied drive on Chateau-Thierry in June 1918, translated into a rush of casualties and forced all hospitals to operate at capacity. Essig wrote:

Our census increases day by day, we receive and evacuate every other day. More arrive than are sent away--My floor is fairly quiet after midnight--...When they (patients) are awake they fuss considerably about treatments--Last Thursday we received a large convoy at an early morning hour--and we staid on duty until noon--17 hour

stretch--off duty until after our evening meal--These are busy nights and busier days-- ...Our patients are coming directly from the Front and they say it is terrible--...All come in awful condition--no previous care has been given to their wounds--It takes a lot of soaking to clean their wounds of dried blood, filth, dirt and lice...Four of our nurses left for the front--conditions are worse there--we do have a roof, a floor and everyone is fed after a fashion. No one works less than 12 hours in 24 and most of us do more-- I see no one but my patients....<sup>45</sup>

Although the ideal ratio was one nurse to every ten patients the records indicate this proportion was rarely maintained.<sup>46</sup>

Domestic sources failed to mention the rigorous work the nurses performed. Ida Clyde Clarke, an American woman involved with the National War Work Council on the home front, defined women's service in very specific ways. She placed at the top those women who served overseas at the front, the "nurses of the American Red Cross and the Army Medical Service who will minister to the wounded at the base hospitals in France."<sup>47</sup> These women exemplified the sacrifices women were willing to make to serve during this time of crisis. Clarke lauds the work of Red Cross women describing it as a "great voluntary effort of love and patriotism...to care for those brave men who are battling with this Goliath of vandalism and destruction..."<sup>48</sup> William Coplin, the director of the American Red Cross Base Hospital #38, also failed to mention women's actual experiences overseas and wrote

instead that, "Woman brought to the scene her overflowing heart, her flagon of mercy, her tender and skilled hand and the untiring effort to smoothe the paths over which passed the war-wrecked victim."<sup>49</sup>

The romantic ideal of the selfless, cheerful, and untiring overseas nurse contrasted with the actual experiences of physical hardship and fatigue that the nurses endured. These nurses worked impossible hours in impossible conditions. A Virginia woman who served in French and American hospitals from 1915 through the end of the war wrote: "...I'm getting awfully weary of the hospital--the mutilated faces and sceptic wounds--the smell of gangrene--the continually rushing of bedpans."<sup>50</sup> She also described working in a French hospital on the front in the middle of Forest de Hesse in October, 1917: "We have no floor at the hospital and there are about four inches of mud all over everything. The cases we are receiving have been wandering around in the Argonne Forest since the 26th of September and their condition is indescribable."<sup>51</sup> This was echoed by Marie Van Vorst, an American woman who was living in England at the outbreak of WWI, and served as a nurses' aide in France from 1916 to 1918. She wrote of being in charge of nine patients on a ward and having to feed, tidy, dress wounds, change bedpans and the constant struggle to maintain a facade of cheerfulness.<sup>52</sup> Van Vorst complained about being at the beck and

call of rehabilitating soldiers, and explained that you had to show the soldiers who was boss. She described her feelings when after a long shift a patient made a request of her: "I really was too furious for anything when that Englishman asked for jam."<sup>53</sup>

American nurses' experiences overseas contradicted the ideology which described and supported their endeavors, not only in their grimy, bloody, work, but also in the sense of adventure and excitement which these women experienced in Europe. Van Vorst's feelings are revealed in a letter to a friend: "I cannot help but think that never in all your life would you find anything as thrilling as Paris is now: although, at this moment I would not wish you here."<sup>54</sup> The woman from Virginia described her experience during the Battle of the Marne, in the village of LaFerte, as "...cooking, feeding, bandaging, consoling, vamping, kissing, writing letters and shedding a few tears, but having a great deal of fun."<sup>55</sup> She described the battle itself as accomplishing little more than "wrecking my nervous system, bumping off a few peasants and smashing a nice little French village."<sup>56</sup> Margaret Rowland described the excitement she felt at her impending journey overseas. She discussed telling her friends: "When they realized I was really going to go they were all excited and wanted to go too...."<sup>57</sup> Marie Van Vorst wrote in a similar vein: "They say that the military and Red Cross nurses are swishing around in great style in Paris and

that everyone is dying to be a nurse!"<sup>58</sup> These women undertook their journey to serve, and were enjoying themselves immensely in the process.

The evidence also suggests that some nurses recognized the incongruity between women's actual experiences as nurses and the role ascribed to them by popular opinion. For example, the portrait of the selfless nurse sacrificing all to serve, is challenged by Florence Martin, who was overseas with Base Hospital #32. She wrote:

Ever since we have been here we have had letters and letters telling us what wonderful unselfish work we are doing. We all have heard this until we are ashamed...We are getting what I wish many at home who are working quite as hard as we, could have, the privilege of being right here in the midst of things.<sup>59</sup>

Though romantic descriptions of women's service often contrasted with their actual experiences, at times it reinforced them. Margaret Rowland wrote of her "patriotic mission to serve,"<sup>60</sup> and told her parents of the need for more women to serve in this "glorious effort." She asked her parents to tell others about "...our boys crying for their mothers and entreating you not to let them die so far from home."<sup>61</sup> The Virginia woman was with a French hospital unit when she wrote of the importance of her responsibility to the men and "now and then holding a soldier's hand and telling him he would get well, when he was wheezing out a

death rattle."<sup>62</sup> Marie Van Vorst called being a nurse "...one of the noblest and most superb sacrifices there is."<sup>63</sup> She discussed women risking their lives and wrote of the many who had died in service. "Then try to realise the way the women feel over here, and also try to realise that, when you are told they are nursing the wounded, they are not doing it from any motive but one of human tenderness...."<sup>64</sup> Thus, nurses' recognition of the gains they were making through their service coexisted with their other descriptions of their experiences which stressed their motivations as being solely to help the wounded soldiers. These nurses justified their experiences overseas with the ideology of womanly service, which was based on more traditional ideas of women's motivations and capacity for service.

This conflict within the women themselves was not unique to their service overseas. Nursing in microcosm had always epitomized the contradiction between the selfless "angel of mercy" and the economic independence the profession provided to women. Historian Barbara Melosh comments on this when she asserts that arguments of women's special fitness for nursing "connected traditional domestic roles to female participation in the new category of paid labor."<sup>65</sup> Melosh argues that over the 20th century, the notion of women's special fitness for nursing lost its force but never disappeared. The majority of nurses clung to this more traditional view. Melosh believes that "by emphasizing the noble mission of

the nurse, one could reconcile a commitment to paid work with cultural expectations for womanly service."<sup>66</sup> Thus, definitions of nursing which emphasized the "angel of mercy" image helped many women justify their venture into the paid workforce. Similarly, the ideology of womanly service justified nurses' activities overseas. Both of these justifications legitimized women's efforts, but also obscured the significance of the gains they were making through their service.

While nurses' service overseas was bringing them individual gains, feminist organizations and leaders on the homefront saw women's wartime service as a way to gain reward in the post-war period. Feminist leaders like Harriet Stanton Blatch believed that, "complete service to their country in this crisis may lead women to that economic freedom which will change a political possession into political power...."<sup>67</sup>

Ida Clyde Clarke also believed that women's service was crucial to the American war effort and that the results of this service would be a change in the conditions and role of women in American society.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, the women who served overseas did not articulate expectations of post-war return, they concentrated instead on the "reward" they were receiving during the war for their service.

American nurses' experiences overseas differed in three major ways from those of other women who served in the European theater.

First, the nurses did not stress the autonomy and independence resulting from their experiences as heavily as their counterparts in other volunteer organizations. Perhaps because they had already realized economic independence through their occupation as nurses. Nursing opened opportunities for women to become economically independent and move away from their homes, as nursing compared quite favorably in terms of wages to other women's occupations.<sup>69</sup> Nurses' experiences overseas reinforced the independence and autonomy they had already partially achieved. For their counterparts in other volunteer organizations these experiences were brand new.

A second difference resulted from their experiences overseas. Nurses were generally closer to the front than other women overseas. In addition, their service entailed much closer contact with the sick and wounded, some right off the battle field. As a result they experienced much more intimately the horrors of war. This led to a third difference. Some nurses exhibited a detachment from war, coupled with a veneer of "macha" toughness. Neither of these attitudes was displayed by their counterparts in other service organizations. It is possible that these attitudes of detachment and toughness were at least indirectly related to nurses more direct experiences with the human costs of war.

This detachment from the real consequences of warfare is supported by the fact that several of the nurses enjoyed watching battles and air raids, and other physical manifestations of war. They were excited by the "thunder of guns," and other signals of conflict. This excitement is not reconciled with their job as nurses. The casualties and death which are integral parts of their environment are the direct results of the scenes they enjoyed. Margaret Rowland worked in a hospital in Mesigny about fifty miles from the front, she wrote: "We can hear the big guns every once in a while but as far as that is concerned it is not nearly as exciting as Paris. Out of eleven nights in one stretch during this second drive, while I was there we had nine raids."<sup>70</sup> The Red Cross nurse from Virginia backs this up with an account of an air raid similar to Rowland's. "Bombed us last night. Missed the bridge but hit the river. It was very thrilling."<sup>71</sup> This latter raid was not only thrilling but very costly as it resulted in damage to several medical buildings and a number of casualties.<sup>72</sup>

Margaret Rowland's letters attempted no resolution of the recurring conflict between her experiences, and the consequences of war. The excitement she felt at observing signs of battle is emphasized in an excerpt from her letters:

...we stayed in Mailly for two days to help out, working like mad all the time... the last day being quite exciting. At one

and the same time there was a Croix de Guerre decoration, a battle in the air-- German and French planes--an American boy being burned and dying in the ward. It was so exciting...<sup>73</sup>

She drew no connection between the death resulting from the aerial battle she later described as a "peach of a fight,"<sup>74</sup> and American soldiers dying in the wards. When Rowland wrote home she only briefly mentioned the various casualties she treated, but she elaborated on the accounts of battles and raids near her. When she did write of the wounded she was "serving" it was to describe in detail different wounds and types of casualties, in a manner that suggested no connection with the subject of her discourse: the wounded soldier as a person.<sup>75</sup> Rowland was able to separate herself from the horrors of war while enjoying the actions which produced them.

The veneer of toughness was evident in nurses' matter-of-fact descriptions of both life-threatening situations, as well as atrocity. The nurse from Virginia described the predicament she and a friend found themselves in when they were bathing during an air raid. When faced with the choice of continuing their bath or finding shelter they "thought we might as well die comfortably than in a smelly old abri."<sup>76</sup> In one letter Rowland discussed a wounded soldier clutching a sack which he would not release. Under ether they succeeded in removing the sack from his grasp and found it

contained "...a fat, healthy, German's head." Her only comment on this was: "I wish it had been the Kaiser's. Rather an unpleasant souvenir on a warm day."<sup>77</sup>

Nurses' service overseas during WWI was unique. It differed from their counterparts' on the homefront in actual duties and responsibility, but reinforced the direction of their profession toward independence and autonomy. In addition, nurses' more intimate contact with the horrors of war led to a detachment from the realities of war and a facade of toughness which set them apart from other women serving overseas.

The ideology of womanly service which ascribed to nurses the role of selfless angels of mercy was sometimes expressed by the nurses themselves as justification for their participation overseas. This was similar to nurses using more traditional definition of their profession to justify their journey into the paid labor force. However, this ideology of womanly service also contrasted with nurses' actual participation. This contrast was apparent in their daily work as well as in their expressions of pleasure at the excitement and independence they experienced. Their experiences were complex, but indeed proved the great adventure of their lives, for, though they gave to others, they certainly gained much for themselves.

These nurses' experiences also showed women's capacity to enjoy danger and be excited by violent adventure. Their

participation overseas proved how inadequate is a feminist vision based only on women's inherent pacifism. The significance of their experiences is not pro-war but rather anti-sentimentalism. They rebelled against constrictions and in doing so demonstrated the necessity of recognizing and celebrating the diversity of women's experiences. These women also proved how unrealistic are definitions of femininity which incorporate notions of women's frailty and passivity. The experiences of nurses who worked 16 hour days and asserted their authority on wards and with patients, casts doubt on these more traditional descriptions of women's nature and potential.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Hall, "Miss Olgivy Find Herself," p. 1447.
- <sup>2</sup>Jeanne Holm, Women in the Military: The Unfinished Revolution (CA: Presidio Press, 1984), p. 12. The Surgeon General's attempt to commission women doctors to ease the shortage of qualified medical officers met with great opposition from military sources. He was advised by the Army Review Board that only persons "physically, mentally and morally qualified" could be appointed. Women were not considered physically qualified, therefore, most female doctors who served overseas did so with other nation's hospital services. See Holm, Women in the Military, p. 14.
- <sup>3</sup>Barbara Melosh, "The Physician's Hand": Work, Culture and Conflict in American Nursing (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), p. 30.
- <sup>4</sup>Melosh, "The Physician's Hand," p. 30.
- <sup>5</sup>Nancy Tomes, "Little World of Our Own: The Pennsylvania Hospital Training School for Nurses, 1895-1907," in Women and Health in America, ed. Judith W. Leavitt (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 468.
- <sup>6</sup>Tomes, "Little World of Our Own," p. 472.
- <sup>7</sup>Adah B. Thoms, R.N., Pathfinders: A History of the Progress of Colored Graduate Nurses (N.Y.: Kay Printing House, 1929), p. 155.
- <sup>8</sup>Tullia Kay Brown Hamilton, "The N.A.C.W. 1896-1920," Phd. dissertation, Emory University, 1978, p. 66.
- <sup>9</sup>Thoms, Pathfinders, p. 156.
- <sup>10</sup>Alice Dunbar Nelson, "Negro Women in War Work," Ch. XXVII, The American Negro in the World War, by Emmett J. Scott (n.p.: Emmett J. Scott, 1919), pp. 376-392. Reprinted in Black Heritage in Social Welfare, ed. Edyth L. Ross (N.Y.: Scarecrow Press, 1978), p. 378.
- <sup>11</sup>Kalisch and Scobey, "Female Nurses in American Wars," p. 217.

<sup>12</sup> Jeanne Holm, Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution (Ca: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Holm, Women in the Military, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Percy M. Ashburn, A History of the Medical Department of the U.S. Army (Boston, 1929), pp. 340-343, as cited in Alma S. Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France: The World War I Diary of Maude Frances Essig," Indiana Magazine of History, Vol. LXXXII, #1 (March, 1986), p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> The Work of the American Red Cross During the War: A Statement of Finances and Accomplishments for the Period July 1, 1917 to February 28, 1919 (Washington D.C.: American Red Cross, 1919). This is part of a limited edition of the report of the war council on the service of the American Red Cross.

<sup>16</sup> Ashburn, A History of the Medical Department of the U.S. Army, as cited in Alma S. Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Marie Cecile Chomel and Anselm Chomel, A Red Cross Chapter at Work (Indianapolis, 1920), pp. 234, 236, as cited in Alma S. Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> Phillip A. Kalisch and Beatrice J. Kalisch, The Advance of American Nursing (Boston, 1978), p. 300, as cited in Alma S. Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," p. 41.

<sup>19</sup> Chomel and Chomel, Red Cross Chapter At Work, pp. 247-249, as cited in Alma S. Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> Kalisch and Scobey, "Female Nurses in American Wars," p. 221.

<sup>21</sup> Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> Gladys Bonner Clappison, Vassar's Rainbow Division, 1918 (Iowa: Graphic Publishing Co., 1964), p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Clappison, Vassar, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Clappison, Vassar, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Clappison, Vassar, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Clappison, Vassar, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup>Clappison, Vassar, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup>Clappison, Vassar, p. 29.

<sup>29</sup>Clappison, Vassar, p. 30.

<sup>30</sup>Ashburn, A History of the Medical Department of the U.S. Army, as cited in Alma S. Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," p. 38.

<sup>31</sup>History of U.S. Army Base Hospital #45 in the Great War (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1924), p. 121.

<sup>32</sup>History of Army Base Hospital #45, p. 122.

<sup>33</sup>Ashburn, A History of the Medical Department of the U.S. Army, as cited in Alma S. Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," pp. 38-39.

<sup>34</sup>Kalisch and Scobey, "Female Nurses in American Wars," p. 219.

<sup>35</sup>Kalisch and Scobey, "Female Nurses in American Wars," p. 219.

<sup>36</sup>Kalisch and Scobey, "Female Nurses in American Wars," p. 219.

<sup>37</sup>Kalisch and Scobey, "Female Nurses in American Wars," p. 220.

<sup>38</sup>History of Army Base Hospital #45, p. 186.

<sup>39</sup>Kalisch and Scobey, "Female Nurses in American Wars," p. 220.

<sup>40</sup>Harriet Stanton Blatch, Mobilizing Woman-Power (N.Y.: The Woman's Press, 1918), p. 131. For further information on the rank of military nurses see Alma S. Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," pp. 67-68. Although the nursing profession did make great strides as a result of World War I, nurses, who were neither officers nor enlisted personnel and who were thus hampered in giving direction and instruction, were refused military rank. Not until 1947, after WWII, was permanent commissioned officer status achieved." See also Phillip A. Kalisch, "How Army Nurses Became Officers," Nursing Research, Vol. XXV, #1 (May-June, 1976), pp. 64-77.

<sup>41</sup>Letter from Margaret Rowland to her parents, May 6, 1918, Margaret Rowland Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society. This is one of a number of manuscript collections pertaining to women's service overseas during WWI. See Andrea Hinding (ed.), Women's History Sources (2 vols. N.Y.: R.R. Bowker Co., 1979), for further information on the location of other sources.

<sup>42</sup>History of Army Base Hospital #45, p. 184.

<sup>43</sup>Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," p. 51.

<sup>44</sup>Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," p. 49.

<sup>45</sup>Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," p. 56.

<sup>46</sup>Kalisch and Scobey, "Female Nurses in American Wars," p. 219.

<sup>47</sup>Clarke, American Women and the World War (N.Y.: D. Appleton and Co., 1918), p. 11.

<sup>48</sup>Clarke, American Women and the World War, p. 138.

<sup>49</sup>W.M.L. Coplin, A.R.C. Base Hospital # Thirty-Eight in the World War (Philadelphia, 1923), p. 88.

<sup>50</sup>One Woman's War, (N.Y.: The MacCauley Co., 1930), p. 111. There were many memoirs like this book published in the years following WWI. The memoirs are usually based on letters and diaries and journals kept by the women during the war.

<sup>51</sup>One Woman's War, p. 285.

<sup>52</sup>Marie Van Vorst, War Letters of an American Woman (N.Y.: John Lane Co., 1919), p. 136.

<sup>53</sup>Van Vorst, War Letters, p. 110.

<sup>54</sup>Van Vorst, War Letters, p. 136.

<sup>55</sup>One Woman's War, p. 42.

<sup>56</sup>One Woman's War, p. 47.

<sup>57</sup>Letter from Margaret Rowland to her parents May 20, 1918, Margaret Rowland Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

- <sup>58</sup> Van Vorst, War Letters, p. 54.
- <sup>59</sup> Chomel and Chomel, Red Cross Chapter at Work, p. 247, as cited in Alma S. Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France," p. 58.
- <sup>60</sup> Letter from Margaret Rowland to her parents May 20, 1918, Margaret Rowland Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>61</sup> Letter from Margaret Rowland to her father July 10, 1918, Margaret Rowland Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>62</sup> One Woman's War, p. 47.
- <sup>63</sup> Van Vorst, War Letters, p. 74.
- <sup>64</sup> Van Vorst, War Letters, p. 90.
- <sup>65</sup> Melosh, "The Physician's Hand," p. 2.
- <sup>66</sup> Melosh, "The Physician's Hand," p. 27.
- <sup>67</sup> Harriet Stanton Blatch, Mobilizing Woman-Power (N.Y.: The Woman's Press, 1918), p. 104.
- <sup>68</sup> Ida Clyde Clarke, American Women and the World War, p. 11.
- <sup>69</sup> Tomes, "Little World of Our Own," p. 474.
- <sup>70</sup> Letter from Margaret Rowland to her parents, published in the Madison Democrat, July 12, 1918, Margaret Rowland Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>71</sup> One Woman's War, p. 199.
- <sup>72</sup> One Woman's War, p. 199.
- <sup>73</sup> Letter from Margaret Rowland to her father July 10, 1918, Margaret Rowland Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>74</sup> Letter from Margaret Rowland to her father, July 10, 1918, Margaret Rowland Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>75</sup> Letter from Margaret Rowland to her father July 10, 1918, Margaret Rowland Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>76</sup> One Woman's War, p. 204.

<sup>77</sup> Letter from Margaret Rowland to her parents July 18, 1918,  
Margaret Rowland Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

## CHAPTER IV

### SERVING MEN AND SERVING WOMEN:

#### WOMEN OF THE YMCA AND YWCA

A majority of the 10,000 women who served as welfare workers overseas were with the YMCA and YWCA. (Welfare worker was a term the volunteer organizations and the women themselves used to describe their role in the European theater.) The 5145 women who were engaged in war service with the American YMCA supported the doughboys in Europe with an entertainment corps and canteens.<sup>1</sup> The canteens were established in leave areas and in areas of large troop concentration and many of the facilities moved with the troops in their charge to and from the front.

The YMCA found it necessary to employ women because of a shortage of men, as well as a desire to bring the more relaxed, homelike atmosphere women could especially provide to these American men so far from home. The YWCA by contrast, provided support for these YMCA women, other female workers overseas, and European women to aid their war efforts. It had five centers for American women in France; fourteen centers affiliated with base hospitals for nurses; and nine centers for French women.<sup>2</sup>

Both the YMCA and YWCA had long histories as service organizations. The YMCA was founded in England in 1844, at a time when great numbers of young men were leaving home, in order to provide an environment where young men could work together for their "mutual spiritual betterment." By 1851 the YMCA had branches in the United States. It provided boarding and recreation facilities as well as educational classes for young men to keep them off the path of vice. It was a Christian organization which stressed this religious orientation in its membership.<sup>3</sup>

By the late nineteenth century women's auxiliaries had developed, doing fund raising and creating a "home-like" atmosphere for the young men in the YMCA buildings.<sup>4</sup> Women's position in the YMCA was always fairly tenuous and their auxiliary status did not entitle them to membership. Women were offered larger roles in the YMCA during the Civil and Spanish-American Wars and WWI when there were fewer men available. However, at the close of each of these campaigns the YMCA redirected its energies toward men and limited the role and responsibilities of women within its organizations.<sup>5</sup>

The U.S. YWCA was founded in 1866 to meet the needs of young single women on their own in urban areas.<sup>6</sup> This organization became a sister association to the YMCA, and was similarly a Christian body dedicated to service. The YWCA's motto was "By

love serve," and its energies were directed at serving young women.<sup>7</sup> One of the founders, Mrs. Lucretia Boyd, felt one of the reasons a YWCA was needed was because men, whether or not they were Christian, had no notion of what the needs of young women in the community were. In response to this, women needed to create a permanent institution to serve these young women.<sup>8</sup> Because of its original focus on women, the YWCA was more aware of women's subordinate position in society. The purpose of the YWCA before WWI had evolved to include not only aiding young women in urban areas, but also developing strategies to change women's position in American society.

At the beginning of United States involvement in WWI the National War Work Council had refused to send women welfare workers overseas.<sup>9</sup> Finally, on August 3, 1917, William Sloane, Chairman of the National War Work Council, ". . . in compliance with the continued request from representatives abroad,"<sup>10</sup> endorsed sending selected American women for work in the canteens of the YMCA buildings for the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). After this initial concession, women were allowed to serve overseas with all volunteer organizations. As rumors of overseas canteen duty for women spread across the United States, applications poured into the YMCA offices at the rate of 1200 per week.<sup>11</sup>

The YMCA's official reason for bringing women into service work overseas was to free as many men as possible for military service.<sup>12</sup> Yet, much of its literature used for recruitment emphasized the importance of having a "womanly" influence around the soldiers. ". . . It is believed no single contribution to the work of upbuilding the morale of the army was important or fruitful than that of women workers in the 'Y' huts."<sup>13</sup> General Pershing saluted the 'Y' workers for their loyalty and energy and "patriotic devotion." He felt that their work ". . . appealing as it did to the higher type of womanhood, exerted an influence upon our men of untold value. . . ." <sup>14</sup>

The daily duties of women with the YMCA varied, depending on which of two major service categories they operated in. One was staffing and administering the canteen facilities, which provided supplemental food or sometimes complete meals to moving troops, in addition to articles such as cigarettes and candy.<sup>15</sup> Also, many canteens made available libraries and recreation facilities to both sick and well troops enroute to, and from, points of embarkation. Most were equipped with restrooms and reading rooms, showers, baths and other "comforts of home." The daily routine of a canteen worker included making hot chocolate and doughnuts; building fires; washing hundreds of cups and saucers; and decorating the "little huts" to give them a homelike quality.<sup>16</sup> Sara Buck, a 'Y' woman

stationed in Toul, wrote of her daily jobs: "Last Saturday I made 750 doughnuts, quite an undertaking considering the fact that I have never made doughnuts before in my life, but it is quite surprising what one can do when one must."<sup>17</sup>

The second major type of service offered by the YMCA was entertainment for the troops. For example, Ada Alice Tuttle, a 'Y' worker from Wisconsin, was a member of the YMCA entertainment corps and toured hospitals and camps with groups of performers, often giving nine performances in a week.<sup>18</sup> The living conditions were poor and the lack of heat in many accommodations made them downright uncomfortable. In addition, there were constant problems with water and food. Tuttle felt the most hazardous part of her work was not her proximity to the fighting, but the "awful shape" of the transportation they used and the recklessness of the drivers who took her to and from her destinations.<sup>19</sup>

Published accounts of these 'Y' women's service overseas stressed the sacrifices of comfort and sometimes life that they made to serve "their" men.<sup>20</sup> The canteen workers moved with their troops almost to the front lines; they worked in field hospitals; they talked with the men, danced with them and "demonstrated their courage and fortitude in every situation."<sup>21</sup> Ella Wheeler Wilcox wrote her sister of the incessant cannonading at the front, barely ten miles away from her canteen.<sup>22</sup> In keeping with this theme of self-sacrifice, much was made of the 'Y' women who

received distinctions for bravery. The experience of 'Y' women like Frances Gulik, who was cited for courage and devotion to duty during the occupation of Verneau, and Getrude Ely, who received the Croix de Guerre, underlined the selfless nature of women's service.<sup>23</sup>

Such incidents of heroism and bravery were commonplace for men and consistent with the masculine image. Whereas, for women they were exceptional and demonstrated how far women would go to sacrifice themselves for others. Though men were also expected to serve selflessly, they were fighting for a noble cause, and this was just one aspect of their war effort. Official accounts of women's war service described their entire effort as one of self-sacrifice and stressed selflessness as inherent to women.

The definition of these women's service as selfless in many cases contradicted their own descriptions of their work. Ella Wheeler Wilcox journeyed to France as part of the YMCA entertainment corps. She wrote of her experience:

...it is a tremendous experience, to be here at this great and awful era of the world's history. I am glad I came.  
...I shall be glad to the last that I came. I cannot imagine what I could be doing in America now to find distraction. I could not be happy there, and here I have the excitement of being in the heart of things....<sup>24</sup>

Her representation of her experience overseas, and her sense of excitement at observing the war and this period of history, contrasted with a published report of her experience which parroted popular conceptions of women's service. The excerpt read:

...When she left America for France in February of last year, she was inspired by the supreme motive which moved so many American women to make that hazardous voyage. That is, she desired to do all she could to help cheer the wounded and soothe the dying soldiers of her native land....<sup>25</sup>

Another example of this contradiction is seen through Ada Alice Tuttle, who perceived the significance of her experiences overseas as much more than simply a service to her country, and related the benefits she reaped from this involvement in the following passage:

To say that this work of ours was a great opportunity for which we are grateful to our respective organizations, is to be merely bromidic. It is like announcing to a friend, that it is a nice day.... Whatever we may have done, I think we all agree we have got a great deal for ourselves. Our sense of proportion as to the values of life underwent a change. We gained vastly in perception. Queer things happened to our viewpoints, and we should not wish them changed back again. One of the great joys we had was the freedom and democracy of the life...I mean as it affected us women.... Even within the limits of the army, we women knew in many respects a freedom which many of us had never known before and never shall again....<sup>26</sup>

The conflict between an ideology of selfless service and the gains women were making overseas is also evident within the women themselves. Ada Alice Tuttle and Ella Wheeler Wilcox described one of the rewards they received from their experiences as the satisfaction of serving others and helping the boys in the trenches. This theme is expressed in the same letters that both women discussed the gains in freedom and autonomy they experienced.<sup>27</sup> 'Y' worker Sara Buck supported this when she wrote:

...there are many places in 'Y' work much more desirable from the standpoint of personal comfort but none where there are such big returns in personal satisfaction than right here in a filthy mud hole like Ribeau Court....To go to bed at night feeling that you make a place like this more liveable for hundreds of men that day more than pays for every effort you have made.<sup>28</sup>

This theme of serving others with no thought of self coexists with women's reports of the excitement they experienced and the independence they gained through their service. Thus, YMCA women also used the ideology of womanly service to support their participation overseas.

The experience of black 'Y' workers, and their struggle with the meaning of the concept of service for themselves, was different from that of whites. For black women the idea of service and serving others was affected by its connotations of servitude. For many black women the question of who was benefitting from their

labors was of supreme importance. Alice Dunbar Nelson described this conflict: "If she joined relief organizations such as that of the Red Cross and the 'Y', and worked with them, would she be assured that her handiwork would reach black hands...or should she be great-hearted and give her service simply for the sake of giving, not caring who was to be benefitted?"<sup>29</sup> This dilemma remained for black women throughout WWI, yet, for the most part, according to Alice Nelson, "they offered their services and gave them freely, in whatsoever form was most pleasing to the local organization of white women."<sup>30</sup>

WWI was seen by many Blacks as offering the opportunity to gain respect from others for their race, and increase their status in American society. Black men hoped to get this from the military, and black women from their war work. Despite these expectations, it was not until June of 1918 that black women were finally granted the authorization to serve in national service organizations.<sup>31</sup> Because opportunities for service were limited for black women, the number who served overseas was relatively small. Yet, their experiences are important to an understanding of the meaning of the concept of service for all women.

Black women serving overseas with the YMCA encountered the same harrassment and discrimination which followed black troops from the United States. Addie Hunton and Kathryn Johnson, two

black women 'Y' workers, wrote of the racism which was prevalent during their service. "...The service of colored women welfare workers was more or less clouded at all times with that biting and stinging thing which is ever shadowing us in our own country."<sup>32</sup> These feelings were reinforced by segregated 'Y' canteens and huts and on occasion no facilities for Blacks at all.<sup>33</sup> These women were in Europe to help ease the burdens of the American soldier. How difficult this must have been for black women, who often did not have access to the facilities and support their white counterparts had at their disposal. Thus, black women's duties as 'Y' workers to upgrade the morale among the troops were often hindered by the everpresent "color line." "Time and time again it was borne upon the inner consciousness of the women of the race that though the various organizations for war relief were doing all that was humanly possible for the soldiers of both races, they were inadequate for all the needs of the Negro soldier...."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the prejudice they experienced, the service of black women overseas was freeing in some ways. The gains they made and opportunities they experienced were framed in the context of service. Addie Hunton described 'Y' work as "the greatest opportunity for service that we had ever known...for the privilege of serving in this capacity we shall ever be grateful and not only for the privilege of service but for the privilege of contact with

a wonderful people."<sup>35</sup> France was less racist than the United States and Hunton described the racial consciousness and strength gained in France which "could not have been gained in a half century of normal living in America."<sup>36</sup> Black women struggled to define their experiences overseas in a way which was meaningful for themselves and their race. Black women's recognition of the benefits to be gained through their service grew out of their experiences in the United States. Because of the inferior position of black women and Blacks in general in American society, service had a different meaning for black women than for white women. Black women's service was intended to be the vehicle for improving their position as black women in America, as well as the status of Blacks.<sup>37</sup>

White women's organizations in the United States also expected post-war rewards in return for their service. These rewards included suffrage and a corresponding increase in women's status in American society. However, for the majority of individual women who served overseas the benefits they gained from their service occurred during the war. These benefits took the form of autonomy and independence which women like Ada Alice Tuttle had "never known before and never shall again," and often centered around positions of authority and power available to women within the different service organizations. These ably-handled responsibilities demonstrated women's potential to themselves and others, and underlined the denial of similar opportunities in peacetime American society.

As the war progressed women gained positions with more responsibility and authority within the YMCA. For example, they composed a large percentage of the leadership of YMCA canteens. The increase in women's responsibility within the YMCA is evident in a letter from Sara Buck, who was stationed in Ahrweiler, Germany: "A girl from NYC and myself had charge of the work there which consisted of a theater, wet canteen, dry canteen, and reading room, also a small officers club...."<sup>38</sup> This increase in responsibility led to a corresponding increase in status as 'Y' women assumed the time-honored title of "secretary" instead of "canteen worker." This reflected a position equal to, and sometimes above, that of their male co-workers. This trend led to an increase in the number of women assuming hut leadership and being placed in charge of canteen operations.<sup>39</sup> Mary Ross Hall addressed this issue in her history of women with the YMCA: "... in some ways the war worked to the advantage of the status of American women. They gained in prestige, in opportunities for expression through work, and in freedom from artificial restraints."<sup>40</sup>

The YMCA administrators did not view this development with the same delight as the women involved. Women's positions of authority in the YMCA were a product of expedience. By the end of the war the YMCA had sufficient numbers of men at their disposal to remove women from leadership roles. The YMCA issued a

directive in late 1918 that hut leadership should be based on sex and should always be male.<sup>41</sup> It justified this move by claiming that, though women would make great leaders, their small numbers demanded that their service to the soldiers be rendered in more personal and social ways rather than administrative.<sup>42</sup> This move to remove women from positions of authority within the YMCA was reflective of the readjustments soon to come with the Armistice and these women's return to American society.

In contrast to the YMCA's emphasis on serving men, the YWCA's purpose was to aid and serve women. This different objective was reflected in a different structure, and the leadership positions which were "temporary only" for women in the YMCA, were permanent features in the YWCA. The YWCA was administered and run entirely by women, thus the YWCA, by definition, had a much more woman-centered tone and intent.<sup>43</sup> This woman-centeredness was manifested in its efforts both in the United States and in Europe to improve conditions for women, whether they were in French villages, field hospitals or in the labor force at home. One YWCA worker wrote: "America lauds her women in France, but rarely asks how they fare. The Y.W.C.A. protects and comforts them."<sup>44</sup>

The YWCA provided services for American women similar to YMCA services for American men. It established social and recreation centers for women of the AEF, which resembled the canteens already

described, and gave American women a place to "get away."<sup>45</sup> The YWCA also offered French classes for nurses and other welfare workers to make it easier for them to adjust to their surroundings.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, the YWCA provided services for all nationalities living or serving overseas. It provided invaluable assistance to French women who worked in the beleaguered war industry of France by offering child care services. It also held daily classes for older children and English classes at night, which many women took advantage of.<sup>47</sup> Unlike other volunteer organizations, which focused specifically on Americans overseas, the YWCA attempted to aid women overseas of all backgrounds. Its goal was to empower women and one of the gains to women serving in its ranks was the expanded horizons and eye opening experience of working together with European women as well as American.

Despite the YWCA's dedication to serving and improving their position it also sometimes justified its efforts overseas in less challenging ways. The YWCA journal, the Association Monthly, broadcast the message that "The women and the girls who are most effective in the work which the Y.W.C.A. is doing in connection with the war are those who keep and show their true womanhood most steadily among duties new in form but old and unchangeable in spirit."<sup>48</sup> Its recruiting literature emphasized the "larger and

better" service women could offer.<sup>49</sup> This was also stressed in the official purpose of the YWCA. Its goal during WWI was not just to serve women, but through its service to women, to increase the efficiency of their service to men.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the YWCA also used the idea of women's service to others (men) to support its work in the European theater.

While the YWCA used a conservative justification for its efforts, its actual goals were much more radical. The YWCA represented women's efforts as central, not peripheral, and consequently transcended more limited views of women's contributions. The YWCA was the only organization overseas which publicly articulated the changes it expected women's wartime service to make in their position in the post-war world. Its program for women included: the eight hour day; one day's rest in seven; minimum wage; equal pay for equal work; a place for women on labor's program; and collective bargaining as represented in trade unionism for women.<sup>51</sup> One YWCA worker wrote: "Women have become economically independent through their earnings. Their social demands are finding a voice. Their minds are grappling with common problems....Women are thinking, and thinking collectively. They will demand collectively."<sup>52</sup>

Another YWCA worker asked, "Is there any reason why the things that we can do, and men cannot, should be worse paid and less esteemed than those other things which men can do, and women have

shown that they can also do? We must demand a recognition in dollar value and in status, of the fact that women and women's work are as necessary to the world as men's...."<sup>53</sup> These women of the YWCA looked ahead optimistically to the entire world becoming woman's sphere!<sup>54</sup>

The YWCA affirmed the importance of women's participation during WWI, especially overseas, and more importantly, altered women's own perceptions of their service. The ideology of womanly service which demanded service to others and service to men was challenged by YWCA women overseas who were ready to serve themselves and other women. In support of this Mabel Potter Dagget, a YWCA worker overseas wrote:

This is a very strange world that the great war has made for us. Most of all, it is an entirely new world for women... not the least startling feature of this new point of view is the new importance of herself. Hitherto, women's duty, as it was quite universally pointed out to her, was a duty that was owed to others. By all inheritance and custom in that world of yesterday, she was particularly trained to looking after the comfort of her man... For in the man's world in which we then lived, he was the center-piece of the social structure. Woman was the minor and subordinate figure...She was not taught to think of herself...preferment of others has been so long lauded as a paramount feminine virtue, that it's really difficult for women as a sex to grasp the idea that they owe anything to themselves. But that idea is here...Those with the historic habit of looking after everybody else are now going to be invited to turn their attention to looking after women as a class....<sup>55</sup>

Unlike their counterparts in the YMCA who concentrated on their war experiences as an incidence, women of the YWCA who served overseas had great hopes for the important role women would have in the rebuilding of the post-war world. These women felt, as one YWCA worker put it, "It will not be possible for us to return to the world as we knew it before the war."<sup>56</sup> The women of the YWCA recognized their potential and the limitations placed on it because they were women. They felt their wartime service would change this.

The YMCA and the YWCA were both service organizations which provided women the possibility of traveling overseas. Both made available to women opportunities of independence and self-realization. Yet, the YMCA was dedicated to serving men, while the YWCA served women. This crucial difference altered the way the women in each organization perceived their own contributions. Women serving with the YMCA viewed their service and the resulting increase in their status as temporary, while women serving with the YWCA saw it as an additional step in the direction they had been moving before the war toward a permanent improvement in women's position in American society. The YWCA women believed women's contributions during WWI would help create a new world and a larger more important role for women in it.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Mary Ross Hall and Helen Firman Sweet, Women in the YMCA Record (N.Y.: Associated Press, 1947), p. 72.
- <sup>2</sup>"What Did the 'Y' Do?", The Association Monthly, Vol. 12, #9 (September, 1918), p. 316. The Association Monthly is the journal of the YWCA.
- <sup>3</sup>Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 3.
- <sup>4</sup>Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 16.
- <sup>5</sup>Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 74.
- <sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Wilson, Fifty Years of Association Work Among Young Women (N.Y.: National Board of YMCA of United States of America, 1916), p. 32, see also Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 39.
- <sup>7</sup>Wilson, Fifty Years of Association Work, p. 333.
- <sup>8</sup>Wilson, Fifty Years of Association Work, pp. 29, 31.
- <sup>9</sup>Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 73.
- <sup>10</sup>Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 73.
- <sup>11</sup>Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 74.
- <sup>12</sup>Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 74.
- <sup>13</sup>Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 76.
- <sup>14</sup>Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 78.
- <sup>15</sup>The Work of the American Red Cross During the War, p. 56.
- <sup>16</sup>Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 74.
- <sup>17</sup>"A Woman 'Y' Worker's Experiences," in Historical Fragments in the Wisconsin Magazine of History, Vol. 3, #2 (December, 1919), p. 44. A letter from Sara E. Buck, a YMCA worker stationed with the 352nd Infantry of the 88th Division at Ribeaucourt, France, to Mrs. Nelson A. Weel of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, April 23, 1919.

- <sup>18</sup> Letter from Ada Alice Tuttle from Paris to her Aunt, December 5, 1918, Ada Alice Tuttle Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>19</sup> A Speech written by Ada Alice Tuttle telling of her service overseas during WWI, circa 1920, Ada Alice Tuttle Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>20</sup> Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, pp. 76-78.
- <sup>21</sup> Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 73.
- <sup>22</sup> Letter from Ella Wheeler Wilcox to her sister, April 22, 1918, Ella Wheeler Wilcox Letters, 1917-1918, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>23</sup> Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 78.
- <sup>24</sup> Letter from Ella Wheeler Wilcox to her brother, March 29, 1918, Ella Wheeler Wilcox Letters, 1917-1918, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>25</sup> Clipping from Publisher's Circular, November 9, 1919, Ella Wheeler Wilcox Letters, 1917-1918, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>26</sup> A speech written by Ada Alice Tuttle telling of her service overseas during WWI, circa 1920, Ada Alice Tuttle Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>27</sup> Letter from Ada Alice Tuttle from Paris to her Aunt, December 5, 1918, Ada Alice Tuttle Papers. Also Letter from Ella Wheeler Wilcox to her brother, March 29, 1918, Ella Wheeler Wilcox Letters, 1917-1918.
- <sup>28</sup> "A Woman 'Y' Worker's Experiences," in Historical Fragments in the Wisconsin Magazine of History, p. 243.
- <sup>29</sup> Alice Dunbar Nelson, "Negro Women in War Work," p. 376. For complete cite see endnotes for Chapter III. For information on black men's role in the military during WWI see Gerald W. Patton, War and Race: The Black Officer in the American Military, 1915-1941 (Ct: Greenwood Press, 1981) and Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri, The Unknown Soldier: Black American Troops in WWI (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974).
- <sup>30</sup> Alice Dunbar Nelson, "Negro Women in War Work," p. 377.

- <sup>31</sup> Alice Dunbar Nelson, "Negro Women in War Wor," p. 387.
- <sup>32</sup> Addie W. Hunton and Kathryn M. Johnson, Two Colored Women with the A.E.F. (Brooklyn: Eagle Press, 1920), p. 23.
- <sup>33</sup> Hunton and Johnson, Two Colored Women, p. 23.
- <sup>34</sup> Alice Dunbar Nelson, "Negro Women in War Work," p. 390.
- <sup>35</sup> Hunton and Johnson, Two Colored Women, pp. 22-23.
- <sup>36</sup> Hunton and Johnson, Two Colored Women, p. 157.
- <sup>37</sup> Susan Smith, "The Black Women's Club Movement: Self-Improvement and Sisterhood, 1890-1915," M.A. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1986. My interpretation of black women's service overseas owes a great deal to this work and is influenced by the ideas contained in Susan Smith's thesis.
- <sup>38</sup> "A Woman 'Y' Worker's Experiences," in Historical Fragments in the Wisconsin Magazine of History, p. 242.
- <sup>39</sup> Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 77.
- <sup>40</sup> Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 83.
- <sup>41</sup> Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 77.
- <sup>42</sup> Hall and Sweet, YMCA Record, p. 77.
- <sup>43</sup> Mabel Potter Dagget, "The New Woman of a New World," The Association Monthly, Vol. 12, #11 (November, 1918), p. 402.
- <sup>44</sup> Anna Steele Richardson, "The YWCA in France," The Association Monthly, Vol. 12, #10 (October, 1918), p. 386.
- <sup>45</sup> "What Did the 'Y' Do?," The Association Monthly, p. 316.
- <sup>46</sup> "Army Nurses and the YWCA," Margaret Shove Morriss, The Association Monthly, Vol. 13, #8 (August, 1919), pp. 338-339.
- <sup>47</sup> "War Stories," The Association Monthly, Vol. 12, #10 (October, 1918), p. 376. See also Henrietta Roberts, "The Military Value of the Association in France," The Association Monthly, Vol. 12, #9 (September, 1918), pp. 314-317.

- 48 "What Did the 'Y' Do?," The Association Monthly, p. 316.
- 49 Grace Coppock, "Have You a Proxy Overseas?," The Association Monthly, Vol. 12, #9 (September, 1918), p. 340.
- 50 Anna Steele Richardson, "The YWCA in France," p. 386.
- 51 Mabel Potter Dagget, "The New Woman of a New World," p. 402.
- 52 "When the World is Safe," The Association Monthly, Vol. 12, #11 (November, 1918), p. 408.
- 53 Frances E. Dawson, "Cinderella No Longer," The Association Monthly, Vol. 13, #1 (January, 1919), p. 17.
- 54 Mabel Potter Dagget, "The New Woman of a New World," p. 402.
- 55 Mabel Potter Dagget, "The New Woman of a New World," p. 401.
- 56 Frances E. Dawson, "Cinderella No Longer," p. 17.

## CHAPTER V

### "STANDING FIRM UNDER FIRE...THE FIRE OF DESPERATE REGRET":<sup>1</sup>

#### THE WOMEN OF THE WOMEN'S OVERSEAS SERVICE LEAGUE

The Armistice signaling the end of the World War was signed on November 11, 1918.<sup>2</sup> The "war to end all wars" had drawn to a close, and as the guns fell silent, the great adventure of many women's lives was officially over. Though women's service overseas had been important to the American war effort, in the immediate post-war period it seemed likely that their contributions would be "lost in the dust of antiquity."<sup>3</sup> The trend in American society to return to pre-war normality, with the corresponding pressure put on women by government agencies, employers and volunteer organizations themselves, to return to traditional roles, threatened to rob women's experiences overseas of all significance. The cessation of hostilities in Europe marked the beginning of a new struggle for the American women who had served there, a struggle for recognition of their contributions.

American women's battle for public awareness of their achievements was complicated by the nature of the argument used to justify women's involvement during the war. An ideology of

womanly service, based on women's selfless nature and unique capacity to serve, supported women's efforts during wartime. It provided an avenue of escape from the repressive attitudes toward women prevalent in American society, but became the argument for women's return to the home in the post-war period. In other words, adherence to traditional definitions of womanhood, which had made women's independence acceptable during WWI, made this same independence and autonomy intolerable in the post-war period.

In response several women who had served overseas founded the Women's Overseas Service League (WOSL) in Philadelphia in May, 1921.<sup>4</sup> These women formed the WOSL to unite women who had served in Europe with the AEF. The league was open to "any woman who served overseas for the success of the Allied cause during any part of the World War between August 1, 1914 and January 1, 1920...."<sup>5</sup> The WOSL consisted of nine corps areas, corresponding to the Army Corps Areas as designated by the War Department, and from its inception spread rapidly.<sup>6</sup> By 1928 it had fifty-five units in twenty-six states and in Cuba and Paris, France, and approximately 4000 members.<sup>7</sup>

The WOSL was similar to male veteran organizations that were in existence after WWI. Both operated to bring members together and to preserve the experiences unique to those who served during the war. This task, for the women's organization, was complicated

by the necessity of gaining public recognition of their service, which for male veterans was a given. The WOSL served as a forum for developing strategies to achieve this recognition as well as a place where women who served could acknowledge their shared experience and similar history.

The WOSL was a service organization. This commitment to service was the way in which women in the league continued to take active roles on the community and national level after the war. As Martha Wood, the National Chairman of the Service Committee stated: "Always bear in mind that we went overseas to serve, we did serve, and we should continue to serve where the opportunity presents itself."<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Taubles, the National Vice-President, supported this attitude and wrote: "We exist and shall exist for service until our generation has vanished from the earth. Humanity is our concern, suffering is our call to action, and service is our answer."<sup>9</sup> The WOSL pointed to the service of many of its members in various local and national relief agencies as further evidence of their commitment to service and women of the WOSL justified their activities by pointing out the continuity of their actions with their involvement overseas. They used the idea of women's unique capacity to serve to support their activism and to insure their continued roles as leaders in their communities. The league's argument was that because women were more peaceful and moral than

men, women's influence in society and government was necessary to maintain a balance. This influence could be manifested through service. Therefore, as women who had first hand, seen the horrors of war, their input in decision-making was vital to insure a permanent peace.<sup>10</sup>

If service to others was the slogan of the WOSL, its real emphasis was different: service to self. The WOSL can be viewed as a large self-help organization, whose major goal was to address the needs of its membership. The league found one of its first opportunities for service in providing aid to AEF women who were ill or in need of financial assistance.<sup>11</sup> The majority of women who served overseas were not eligible for regular government benefits.<sup>12</sup> None of the volunteer organizations that sent women to Europe, such as the YMCA or the Red Cross, made any provisions for their workers after the war. The women of the WOSL established relief funds based on dues and donations to provide aid for their sisters in need.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to assisting women financially, the WOSL also campaigned actively for legislation which would grant these women government benefits. It lobbied for bills which would provide government hospitalization privileges to all overseas workers, not just Army and Navy nurses.<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, it successfully supported legislation initiated by its legislative committees,

which guaranteed some women domiciliary care in Soldier's Homes. Soldier's Homes were established to provide medical care and living space to male veterans of United States wars who were disabled or otherwise unable to care for themselves. On March 26, 1928, President Coolidge signed the WOSL bill into law. This bill gave military nurses and women who served with the Army, Navy and Marines, the privilege of domiciliary care in Soldier's Homes, as well as all the rights and benefits enjoyed by men in such homes. This legislation prevented any woman from being deprived of her right to reside in these national facilities and "that all such women who are living in them at present or who go to them in the future, are safe from now on if they desire to remain in such homes."<sup>15</sup>

One of the WOSL's most important legislative efforts was an attempt to make women who served with the military overseas during WWI eligible for benefits under the Veterans Act of 1924. The bill itself was necessary because many women of the Signal Corps, the Quartermaster Corps, and other branches of the military were not entitled to government benefits because their discharges, instead of being "honorable discharges from military service" as required by law, had been declared to be discharges from civilian service attached to the Army. The new bill, (H.R. 17347), introduced on behalf of the WOSL by Congressman Goss (of Connecticut), declared

that all women citizens of the United States, taken from the United States by the government, who served overseas as employees of the War Department during WWI, would be considered to have been enlisted into active service in the military forces of the United States. In addition, any discharge, except one of misconduct, would be considered "honorable from military service."<sup>16</sup> The passage of this bill in 1932, represented the culmination of the WOSL's efforts to have women's service overseas considered equal to that of men.

One of the most important purposes of the WOSL was making public the significance of its members' participation during the war. Passing legislation which aided its cause was one tactic used by the league. Another equally important part of the organization was its Historical Committee. This committee's function was to collect data concerning the war service of women who served overseas, members and non-members of the league.<sup>17</sup>

An intensely important part of this history were the symbols which represented these women's moments of autonomy and accomplishment. One of the most significant symbols was the uniform worn by women who served overseas. The WOSL's by-laws specified that uniforms should be worn at all times by women representing the league in any capacity. These uniforms further would be the same as the ones worn by the women while in service overseas.<sup>18</sup> The WOSL

service pin was another symbol, to be worn by all members. It was a bronze replica of a grave marker, representing women who died in service; a constant reminder to all, of the significance of women's service during the war.<sup>19</sup>

Rituals were also important. The WOSL held Memorial Services with the American Legion to recall women's efforts, sacrifices and loss of life overseas. The ritual included reading a list of names of those women who had lost their lives overseas and saying:

Friends and comrades--we are here met together to honor the memory of a departed comrade who heard and answered the call to service of God and Country in the Great War. Hers not to bear arms in the agony of conflict, she yet faced to the full and unflinching her portion of risks and perils overseas and gave to the upholding of American ideals the full measure of devotion. In reverent memory whereof I now on behalf of the WOSL place this emblem of our comradeship on her grave.<sup>20</sup>

These reminders to themselves and others of their contributions during the war supported the feelings of many women in the league that "war made a place for us near the war zone, and we in turn, made our own place in the history of the war."<sup>21</sup>

The work of the WOSL in retaining the importance of its members' experiences was hindered by a nation more than willing to forget. This national policy of ignoring women's contributions overseas, was aided by the poor records on women's service. One general remarked: "The mules were listed but the women were not."<sup>22</sup>

As Radcliffe Hall wrote of her Miss Olgivy, "Wars come and wars go but the world does not change: it will always forget an indebtedness which it thinks it expedient not to remember."<sup>23</sup>

The doughboys returned after WWI with their battles behind them. For American women who served overseas the struggle was just beginning. These women, who were the second army behind the men at the front, united to do battle for their right to articulate and preserve the significance of their service. The WOSL was a female support network which enabled women to challenge societal perceptions of themselves and their service. This network was based on the shared experiences of women who were involved overseas with the AEF. Their participation, and the freedom they shared with other women in the European theater, opened new possibilities and potentials for themselves, as individuals, which they were unwilling to relinquish once the war was ended.

Yet, the WOSL also represents the conclusion of a rather tragic story. These women returned from the great adventure of their lives to find that American society and women's position in it had changed very little. They watched the doughboy get a resounding welcome, while their experiences went largely unrecognized. Maude Essig, a WWI nurse wrote: "It was not the happiest of days--our first Sunday back in the U.S.A.--but we expected too much."<sup>24</sup> Whether these expectations included a public recognition of the importance of women's involvement overseas or a belief that

women would play a more important role in post-war society, mattered little, since neither one of these expectations were met. The WOSL became women's attempt to salvage the significance of their wartime participation. However, the WOSL also symbolized the lack of lasting gains for women, because it encouraged them to look backward to the war for the definition that gave them dignity, instead of forward to the present and future and a different role for women in American society.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Hall, "Miss Olgivy Finds Herself," p. 1443.
- <sup>2</sup>Edward M. Coffman, The War to End All Wars (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 353.
- <sup>3</sup>Eunice Dessez, The First Enlisted Women: 1917-1918 (Philadelphia: Dorrance and Co., 1955), p. 81.
- <sup>4</sup>Women's Overseas Service League Constitution, May, 1921, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>5</sup>WOSL Constitution, May, 1921, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>6</sup>WOSL By-Laws, Article 1 Section 5, May, 1921, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>7</sup>Newsletter from National Headquarters, Dodge Hotel, Washington D.C., 1935, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>8</sup>Correspondence from Martha Wood to Regional Service Committees of the WOSL, January, 1932, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>9</sup>Mrs. Taubles address to the WOSL National Convention, May, 1930, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>10</sup>Radio Broadcast given by Mrs. Edith Nourse Rogers on behalf of the WOSL over the NBC Blue Network, February 27, 1937, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>11</sup>WOSL brochure describing the activities of the league, first printed March 1924, revised and reprinted each year through 1940, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>12</sup>WOSL Constitution, May, 1921, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- <sup>13</sup>WOSL By-Laws, Article 8 Section 1(b), May, 1921, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>14</sup>Newsletter from National Headquarters, Dodge Hotel, Washington D.C., 1935, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>15</sup>Issue of "Carry-On!," the news journal of the WOSL, Vol. VIII, #1 (February, 1928) WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>16</sup>"To All Units," A dispatch from National Headquarters Correspondence-Legislation Committee, March 9, 1931, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>17</sup>WOSL By-Laws, Article 8 Section 1(b), May, 1921, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>18</sup>WOSL By-Laws, Article 8 Section 1 (c), May, 1921, revised at 13th Annual Convention July 2-11, 1933, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>19</sup>WOSL By-Laws, Article 8 Section 1 (d), May, 1921, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>20</sup>Manual of the WOSL, November, 1931, pp. 24-25, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>21</sup>Proceedings of the WOSL Historical Committee, March, 1928, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>22</sup>Letter from Frances Silbaugh of the WOSL National Headquarters to Mrs. Taubles, National President, April 21, 1931, WOSL Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>23</sup>Hall, "Miss Olgivy Finds Herself," p. 1447.

<sup>24</sup>Alma S. Woolley, "A Hoosier Nurse in France: The World War I Diary of Maude Frances Essig," Indiana Magazine of History, Vol. LXXXII, #1 (March, 1986), p. 66.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis is the story of American women's service overseas during WWI. It examines the nurses and welfare workers who supported American troops in this first global conflict. WWI was the "war to end all wars," a time when nations unleashed mighty destructive powers that resulted in millions of casualties, (an entire generation of young men were wiped out) and turned the beautiful European countryside into a twisted ruin. American women arrived in 1917 in the midst of this devastation. They came, not as "angels of mercy," but as pioneers who demonstrated to all women's capabilities in fields thought too difficult. By enduring physical hardship and successfully fulfilling their responsibilities, they challenged the definition of women as frail, emotionally unstable and passive. Their actions helped redefine what women could do and achieve.

The ideology of womanly service, which framed women's participation overseas, described their service as selfless. This romantic ideal contradicted the actual duties women performed and the gains they were making. This ideology supported women's efforts overseas, but obscured the significance of their achievements. For example, it described women as sacrificing

comforts and endangering themselves to serve men, but masked the fact that women's responsibilities and duties in the European theater were transcending peacetime limitations of their capabilities.

At times women used ideology to support their endeavors. This was evident in nurses before the war and the women of the WOSL in the post-war period. Many nurses clung to the "angel of mercy" image of their profession to justify their economic independence and position in the paid labor force. The women of the WOSL continued to use service to others as a slogan justifying their action in the public sphere working for legislation to gain recognition for women's service overseas. Similarly, despite American women's description of what they were gaining from their service overseas, they insisted their motivations were solely to help their brethren in the trenches. Women's conflicting description of their service overseas was an important factor in their wartime experience.

While feminists on the homefront were demanding reward for women's wartime service most women overseas viewed their experience as an isolated incident, and did not articulate expectations of post-war reward for their participation. The exception to this generalization were the women of the YWCA. In many ways the YWCA was a feminist organization. It recognized the inferior position of women in society and attempted to rectify that problem. The women

of the YWCA expected women's status to change as a result of their war efforts.

The WOSL, like the YWCA, focused on women. It tried to gain recognition for women's service overseas, but it did not have a program for changing women's position in society. Its goals were very specific and were tied to women's past experience. The WOSL attempted to get legislation passed to gain women veteran status, and in other ways aid women who had served overseas, and who were not eligible for government benefits. The WOSL also tried to make the public aware of the importance of women's participation on foreign shores in the U.S. war effort. These goals were not aimed at changing women's present or future role in American society.

The question remains, what did the women themselves gain from their experiences overseas? Their letters and journals are filled with references to the new freedom and autonomy they experienced. Their journey to Europe was an adventure, with the thrill of danger and excitement. Despite the ideology of womanly service, the duties they were expected to perform overseas were rigorous, hazardous and challenging. These women met this challenge and came away with a great deal for themselves. Sara Buck, a 'Y' worker, wrote that you would be surprised what "you can do when you have to...."<sup>1</sup> These women surprised themselves and those around them by handling their responsibilities very effectively.

The contemporary feminist movement is helping women to acknowledge and accept their own value; it is helping women believe in their own self-worth. Self-esteem and self-respect are not things our society values highly in women. The significance of women's experience overseas in WWI, as it showed them exactly what their capabilities were, and in doing so, for that brief period of time, removed the limitations from their individual potentials. These women broke out of the closet of stereotypic femininity, and the self-realization their participation led to was very valuable.

This thesis began with a description of a fictional account by Radclyffe Hall, of a British women's ambulance unit in France during WWI. Hall wrote very eloquently on the opportunities wartime service opened for women. Perhaps it is simpler to return to her words to express the meaning of women's service overseas. As she wrote, it enabled them to find themselves. Women's experiences overseas during WWI were significant in and of themselves. Rather than focusing on what impact, if any, these women made on American society, evaluating women's experience on its own internal merits is an equally important method of analyzing women's mobilization during the First World War.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>"A Woman 'Y' Worker's Experiences," in Historical Fragments in the Wisconsin Magazine of History, Vol. 3, #2 (December, 1919), p. 44. A letter from Sara E. Buck, a YMCA worker stationed with the 352nd Infantry of the 88th Division at Ribeaucourt, France, to Mrs. Nelson A. Week of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, April 23, 1919.

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