


2014

World War I Volunteer Nursing

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Recommended Citation

Schmedake, Megan L.. "World War I Volunteer Nursing." *The Purdue Historian* 7, 1 (2014). <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/puhistorian/vol7/iss1/3>

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During World War I, thousands of nurses cared for millions of badly wounded soldiers, and the number of injured soldiers reached new highs every day. Many women from the United States, Great Britain, and France joined the ranks as nurses in order to support the war effort by providing care to soldiers who became victims of the warfare that broke out in Europe. Margaret Vining and Barton Hacker, authors of the 2001 article, “From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform: Women, Social Class and Military Institutions before 1920,” state that “the widening of European military service obligations throughout the nineteenth century drew increasing numbers of civilians, mostly middle- and upper-class men and women, into national voluntary aid societies, which...were taking on a distinct official military character.”¹ World War I was the springboard for a number of medical advancements, especially those in nursing. Determined to show their commitment to the war effort, many women volunteered as frontline nurses. Though some were drawn to serve because of a love for country, others were motivated by propaganda that challenged the notion of the masculine war experience. During World War I, nursing became professionalized. Women volunteered as nurses out of patriotism and because of their desire to fulfill their traditional roles as caregivers. In this capacity, women rendered war feminine as well as masculine.

The conditions of war were undesirable, yet many women contributed to the cause by placing their needs aside to aid many wounded and dying soldiers. In a memoir of her nursing experiences, Violetta Thurstan outlines that hospitals were short of supplies such as dressings, chloroform, medical supplies, and hospital linens. Similar to medical supplies, food and water sources were not plentiful.² Nurses and medical aids needed to boil water from a “green, foul

¹ Margaret Vining and Barton C. Hacker, “From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform: Women, Social Class and Military Institutions before 1920,” *Contemporary European History* Vol. 10, No. 3 (November 2001): 354-355.

² Violetta Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column* (London and New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), 37.

smelling river/stream” if they wanted clean drinking water.³ In addition, according to Thurstan, there was not much food, and they were especially short of meat and bread, with absolutely no milk or eggs to be found. But they did have an abundance of potatoes and lentils, which became important staples in their daily diet.⁴ Middle-class women who had not previously suffered from a lack of food also challenged the gendered experience of war by showing that they were capable of surviving, and at the same time effectively contributing to the war effort.

Nurses faced a shortage of supplies and a surplus of death, and many of them did not get over what they saw for a long time after the war. For example, Thurstan described how the image of young men dying stayed with her for some time after the war:

There was one poor Breton soldier, dying of septicemia, who lay in a small room off the large ward. He used to shriek to every passerby to give him drink, and no amount of water relieved his raging thirst. That voice calling incessantly night and day, ‘A Boire, â boire!’ haunted me long after he was dead.⁵

Nurses near the front lines saw disfigured men with missing limbs and gruesome infections.⁶ Victoria Holder, author of the 2004 article “From Handmaiden to Right Hand—World War I and Advancements in Medicine,” asserts that nurses “removed filthy, blood encrusted uniforms, monitored vitals, debrided, sutured and dressed wounds, and cared for the dying.”⁷ Julia Stimson, a chief nurse of the American Red Cross (ARC) in France, also described the daily experience of a nurse:

³ Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, 39.

⁴ Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, 37.

⁵ Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, 39.

⁶ Victoria L. Holder, “From Handmaiden to Right Hand—World War I and Advancements in Medicine,” *AORN Journal* Vol. 80, No. 5 (2004): 919.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The odor in the operating room was so terrible that it was all any of them could do not to be sick...no mere handling of instruments and sponges, but suturing and tying and putting in drains while the doctor takes the next piece of shell out of another place. Then, after 14 hours of this with freezing feet, to a meal of tea and bread and jam, and then off to rest if you can, in a wet bell tent in a damp bed without sheets after a wash with a cupful of water.⁸

This experience shook many women who did not expect to see or deal with such conditions; many had never seen the amount of blood and infection that they were exposed to as nurses, let alone the sight of a nude male figure. Susan Kingsley Kent, author of the book *Making Peace: the reconstruction of gender in interwar Britain* (1993), explains that “through contact with men’s bodies in the course of their nursing duties, the authors became accustomed to and then appreciative of male physicality.”⁹ Elizabeth Ashe, a nurse with ARC Children’s Bureau in France, was one of the nurses who had never before seen the injuries that she saw when she first arrived at the Abbey where she was stationed:

When we first went into the Abbey, the sight of files of maimed and lame men coming in overcame me so I thought I should leave, but they finally were seated, and were forgotten in the beauty of the service. One poor fellow who was legless was brought in on the back of a man-- it is all too dreadful.¹⁰

Men and women went through extensive training in order to become nurses, but Kristy Harris, author of the 2008 article “In the 'Grey Battalion': Launceston General Hospital Nurses on Active Service in World War I,” states that “lengthy standard procedures learnt during training disappeared in the face of the pressure of work.”¹¹ In addition, nurses were expected to

⁸ Holder, “From Handmaiden to Right Hand,” 919-920.

⁹ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: the reconstruction of gender in interwar Britain* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 68.

¹⁰ Elizabeth H. Ashe, *Intimate Letters From France: And Extracts From the Diary of Elizabeth Ashe, 1917-1919* (San Francisco: Bruce Brough Press, 1931), 12.

¹¹ Kristy Harris, “In the 'Grey Battalion': Launceston General Hospital Nurses on Active Service in World War I,” *Health and History* Vol. 10, No. 1 (2008): 28.

perform new treatments such as “resuscitating patients to keep them alive...with rehydration and treatment for shock.”¹² Nurses were also chiefly responsible for post-operative procedures. Harris explains that “in this pre-antibiotic era, their powers of observation and their use of initiative in the war environment meant that many men owed them their lives.”¹³ Similarly, Isabel Stewart argues that “it must be remembered that the World War broke out suddenly, and even in Great Britain, where professional nursing was relatively well established, there was no choice but to throw in large numbers of untrained and semi-trained workers to dilute the personnel.”¹⁴ However, after many untrained nurses joined, there was a push to keep only those who had been trained sufficiently in special schools.¹⁵

In discussing the daily experience of a nurse, it is important to analyze why some women wished to join the war effort as nurses in spite of hardships. In “From Handmaiden to Right Hand,” Victoria Holder describes the reasons why many women chose to volunteer as nurses. According to Holder, “they served because they wanted to do their part as caregivers.”¹⁶ For example, Elizabeth Ashe wrote in her journal, “We cannot tear ourselves from the exciting events around us. Every little while the sirens blow which means shells are flying and we are warned to get under cover, when the tocsin sounds to seek the cellar.”¹⁷ Holder contends that nurses “put themselves at risk for disease and injury, like any soldier, but they did not have the assistance of a weapon to defend themselves.”¹⁸ Women were drawn to volunteer nursing because of the excitement, but also because of their desire to provide care to wounded and dying men. Additionally, women were drawn to the war effort because of their patriotism to their

¹²Harris, “In the ‘Grey Battalion,’” 29.

¹³ Harris, “In the ‘Grey Battalion,’” 32.

¹⁴ Isabel M. Stewart, “Nursing Preparedness: Some Lessons from World War I,” *The American Journal of Nursing* Vol. 41, No. 7 (July 1941): 807.

¹⁵ Stewart, “Nursing Preparedness,” 804-815.

¹⁶ Holder, “From Handmaiden to Right Hand,” 919.

¹⁷ Ashe, *Intimate Letters From France*, 21.

¹⁸ Holder, “From Handmaiden to Right Hand,” 919.

country. Margaret Vining and Barton Hacker explain that “by the middle of the century, particularly in Britain and the United States, ideals of womanhood and women’s unique nurturing and civilizing qualities supported claims for equality and civil rights, laying the groundwork for expanded military roles for women.”¹⁹ Many middle-class women became volunteer nurses because they were used to caring for others. However, many developed an enthusiasm for volunteer nursing, and began to challenge the notion that the war experience was primarily masculine.

Although some nurses did not receive compensation, they were nonetheless an invaluable resource to wounded men. Nurses were needed on every front, ready to help care for the soldiers, and many felt inclined to join the volunteer ranks of the Red Cross, the Voluntary Aid Detachments, or various other volunteer nursing organizations. Ashe, overwhelmed with the need for nurses wrote, “I am afraid my heart and thoughts are more with our men these days...We simply can’t keep up with the demands on us. I am desperate for nurses.”²⁰ Some women did not have any experience in nursing, but hoped to contribute in some way because of the lack of trained nurses. Jennifer Casavant Telford, in her article titled “The American nursing shortage during World War I: the debate over the use of nurses' aides,” states that “the heightened needs of the time for nursing staff greatly outweighed the number of available nurses.”²¹ The need for nurses significantly altered the level of training that nurses had to obtain. Mabel A. Barron, a Registered Nurse (R.N.), explained that “a great number of our nurses are going into the Army and Navy, and our subsidiary group is going into industrial work. Hospitals need help. These carefully selected and trained women are answering a definite need in our

¹⁹ Vining and Hacker, “From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform,” 355.

²⁰ Ashe, *Intimate Letters From France*, 60.

²¹ Jennifer Casavant Telford, “The American nursing shortage during World War I: the debate over the use of nurses' aides,” *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* Vol. 27, No. 1 (Spring 2010): 95.

institution.”²² For example, Mary King Waddington, a nurse, wrote in her war diary about one peasant girl who wished to become a nurse. Waddington wrote that the girl said “there must be something I can do as I am young and strong. I can scrub floors, make beds, lift heavy things, [and] run messages.”²³

Women who became nurses were not exempt from having romanticized notions of the war experience before they joined. In her book, *Making Peace*, Kent argues that women, like men, were blinded by the seemingly exciting adventures that volunteering as nurses in World War I would provide them. Kent states that “at the beginning of the war, women at home who were eager to do their bit at the front visualized a great chivalric adventure, just as their brothers had. Soon afterward, however, exultation gave way to sober reflection as this war’s realities sank in.”²⁴ For example, Ashe wrote in her diary that “everyone is eager for the privilege of going to the front.”²⁵ Many women had to justify their inclination to become nurses, and Kent states that “Vera Brittain justified her decision to take up nursing to her parents by explaining that ‘not being a man and able to go to the front, I wanted to do the next best thing.’”²⁶

Propaganda and publicity from various nursing organizations also convinced women to join volunteer nursing. In her 1996 article, “French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I,” Margaret Darrow explains that the Red Cross had a hand in recruiting women for volunteer nursing. The propaganda associated with the Red Cross “portrayed nursing as naturally feminine.”²⁷ Darrow explains that nursing was “promoted as women’s wartime service” and “envisioned as feminine devotion, nationalized, militarized, and

²² Mabel A. Barron, “Our ARC Volunteer Nurse’s Aides,” *The American Journal of Nursing* Vol. 42, No. 7 (July 1942): 795.

²³ Mary King Waddington, *My War Diary* (New York: C. Scribner’s sons, 1917).

²⁴ Kent, *Making Peace*, 51.

²⁵ Ashe, *Intimate Letters From France*, 77.

²⁶ Kent, *Making Peace*, 54.

²⁷ Margaret H. Darrow, “French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I,” *The American Historical Review* Vol. 101, No. 1 (February 1996): 88.

even combat ready, but still held back from the masculine, military war experience.”²⁸ Darrow also states that “prior to the Red Cross’s successful publicity campaigns, nursing was not popularly imagined as patriotic-- it was never even considered feminine.”²⁹ Some women who stayed at home and were surrounded by propaganda began to reconsider their choice not to volunteer as nurses. Kent contends that “one way to alleviate the anguish and anxiety brought about by experiencing war from a distance, and to bridge the chasm that was opening up between those at home and those at the front was to immerse oneself in the war effort, to expose oneself to the dangers and horrors of the war that men at the front were undergoing.”³⁰

The feminization of nursing was a way to convince women that they should join volunteer nursing organizations to contribute to the war effort. Darrow argues that “Red Cross promoters cast volunteer nursing as a national service for women to parallel military service for men.”³¹ If they did join, it seemed, they would contribute their naturally nurturing qualities to boost the morale of wounded and dying men in an attempt to curb the total number of losses in the war, as well as send these men back into battle to increase the number of fighting men. Elizabeth Ashe wrote that “what the YMCA says is needed more than anything else with our boys is women’s good influence, carefully selected women to run canteens and really mother them.”³² In addition, volunteer nursing created a prestigious new social realm. If women became nurses, according to Darrow, they were at the top of the social competition.³³ This is exemplified in a statement by Elizabeth Ashe, in which she wrote that “uniforms open doors to us everywhere.”³⁴

²⁸ Darrow, “French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I,” 88.

²⁹ Darrow, “French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I,” 86.

³⁰ Kent, *Making Peace*, 54.

³¹ Darrow, “French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I,” 86.

³² Ashe, *Intimate Letters From France*, 19.

³³ Darrow, “French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I,” 95.

³⁴ Ashe, *Intimate Letters From France*, 20.

Uniforms were as essential in distinguishing different types of nurses as they were in establishing nurses as a legitimate part of the military service. Vining and Hacker explain that uniforms were essential in changing the way that men and women alike viewed women's roles in society and in military operations. Vining and Hacker contend that "uniforms, civilian as well as military, testified to women's wartime patriotism and loyalty."³⁵ The uniforms that women wore during their military experience allowed some to reconceptualize their roles, as well as changed the way that males viewed women's contribution to the war effort. Wearing uniforms solidified and legitimized the professionalization of nursing and Red Cross workers began to wear them to prove their role in the war effort.³⁶ In addition, Vining and Hacker contend that uniforms distinguished the middle-class nurses from the lower-class nurses.³⁷ By wearing uniforms, which had previously been primarily a male practice, women challenged the gendered expectations of war. Vining and Hacker also state that:

If their work under wartime conditions did not differ radically from the centuries-old tradition and other forms of caregiving, the considerable force they now brought to military support work raised to a new level the debate over the proper role of women in a modern democratic society. And whether member of the armed forces, employee, civilian volunteer, they all wore uniforms.³⁸

By wearing uniforms, nurses were seen in a new light. They performed alongside men and contributed a significant amount to the war effort. Uniforms opened doors to them because men believed that they were capable of caring and nurturing the wounded and dying men that inhabited hospitals. Volunteer nurses experienced the same conditions as male doctors and

³⁵ Vining and Hacker, "From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform," 369.

³⁶ Vining and Hacker, "From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform," 357.

³⁷ Vining and Hacker, "From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform," 355-357.

³⁸ Vining and Hacker, "From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform," 362.

surgical staffs, allowing them to enter into a new social realm where they were trusted to perform necessary tasks by their male superiors in the field.

Women's roles in the war effort were reexamined by men and women alike as women were exposed to the same conditions as men. Women were not perceived as being as capable as men, especially in the context of war, which was primarily a masculine setting. Margaret Darrow states that "within the nineteenth century myth of masculine war experience, there was no place for women. Since war was to be a contest of masculinity, women would have no direct role-- in fact, there should be no feminine war experience at all."³⁹ Women were able to assert their new roles in the military and challenge traditional roles that they had held for many years. And, in the midst of women's suffrage, although interrupted by World War I, women used volunteer nursing to remind "government officials and male voters of the gap between women's legal rights and the responsibilities as citizens they had willingly accepted and effectively fulfilled during the war."⁴⁰ According to Vining and Hacker, "the movement for female suffrage played a large part in turn-of-the-century women's organizations in Europe, as well as the United States."⁴¹ However, in regard to the myth of the masculine war experience, Julia Stimson, after outlining the typical day of a nurse, wrote in her diary that no "one need ever tell me that women can't do as much, stand as much, and be as brave as men."⁴² Additionally, women were exposed to new aspects of men while caring for them. Kent explains that:

Women at the front...saw not the mutilation of women by men but the mutilation of men by weapons of mass destruction produced by industrial societies. Their familiarity with what men suffered led them to think of the male species not as some barbaric, destructive creature who could not control his most violent

³⁹ Darrow, "French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I," 84.

⁴⁰ Vining and Hacker, "From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform," 371.

⁴¹ Vining and Hacker, "From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform," 362.

⁴² Holder, "From Handmaiden to Right Hand," 920.

instincts, but as a hurt, pathetic, vulnerable, patient, childlike victim of circumstances far beyond his control.⁴³

Instead of the masculine image that they saw before the war, women were surrounded by men who were injured, maimed, and incapable of caring for themselves. Many women who joined the ranks as nurses did not expect to see this image of men, and it changed the way that they viewed soldiers. This new image of men contributed to the notion that military men and women were essentially equal due to new images of males and females experienced by each gender.

Some women who did not volunteer as nurses were skeptical of women's motives to become nurses. Darrow states that "although commemorators trivialized female munitions workers by calling them 'munitionettes,' many worried that they were, in fact, war profiteers, working not for their own country's defense, but for the scandalously high wages, which then were wasted on luxuries."⁴⁴ Some women at home contended that women who became nurses did so in order to be closer to men.⁴⁵ However, volunteer nurses began to realize that men were quite similar to them. Kent states that "women at the front, unlike women at home, did not equate masculinity with brutality, aggression, and destruction. Rather, they perceived men as very much like children, or indeed, like themselves."⁴⁶ Contrary to the claim that women did not join nursing for selfless reasons, Ashe stated, "I have never seen harder working or more sincere people than are here in the Red Cross, and they are directed by men of a high order of intelligence."⁴⁷

The profession of nursing went through many changes during World War I. Nursing was "supposed to be a vocation, and required special training, and not all women were able to do the

⁴³ Kent, *Making Peace*, 72.

⁴⁴ Darrow, "French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I," 82.

⁴⁵ Darrow, "French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I," 89.

⁴⁶ Kent, *Making Peace*, 67.

⁴⁷ Ashe, *Intimate Letters From France*, 56.

work.”⁴⁸ Prior to the war, nursing was not projected to be so crucial to the war effort. According to Holder’s “From Handmaiden to Right Hand,” “nursing, which was born from the need during the Crimean and Civil War in the mid-1800s, had taken its first step towards professionalism by improving educational requirements and training, and creating acceptance and respect for women in the profession.” In 1914, 2,500 Voluntary Aid Detachment units started across Great Britain. There were 74,000 volunteers, two-thirds of whom were women.⁴⁹ Ashe, referring to her superiors in the nursing field, wrote in her diary that “they frankly say our mission is a new one to them all; they have no instructions to give—we have to work it all out.”⁵⁰

Mary Frances Billington, another nurse, explained the evolution of military nursing, saying, “the nursing profession owes much to Queen Alexandria-- she paid much attention to it, organized a small committee [Queen Alexandria’s Imperial Military Nursing Service] who entirely reorganized the military nursing system in the light of experience gained in South Africa.”⁵¹ According to Billington, the first step of professionalizing nursing was giving it greater status and respect in society. The Chief Matron of nursing would be given an office in the war office “which regarded her importance as an officer in the service.”⁵² Vining and Hacker assert that by “shedding its veneer of neutrality, the Red Cross now became an arm of the United States government, closely allied to, if not exactly under the orders of, the war department.”⁵³ Nurses were expected to have a good understanding of procedure and also able to follow orders by chief nurses and medical officers. Stewart states that “the importance of discipline,

⁴⁸ Darrow, “French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I,” 87.

⁴⁹ Holder, “From Handmaiden to Right Hand,” 657.

⁵⁰ Ashe, *Intimate Letters From France*, 8.

⁵¹ Mary Frances Billington, *The Red Cross in War: Woman’s Part in the Relief of Suffering* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1914): 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Vining and Hacker, “From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform,” 365.

knowledge, and skill was constantly emphasized in the recruiting of student nurses.”⁵⁴ In this regard, women were challenged in the same way as men, which also contributed to women’s belief that they should be granted citizenship and suffrage for their assistances in the war effort.

Medical advancements allowed nursing to thrive in ways that it previously had not. New injuries due to advancing weaponry called for new medical treatments and advancements in anesthesia, infection control, and surgery.⁵⁵ In addition, Holder contends that “necessity forced the surgical and nursing fields to adapt quickly throughout the war.”⁵⁶ Casualty clearing stations were used to treat the worst of injuries due to gas attacks, shrapnel, bullets, and bombs.⁵⁷ Nurses and doctors developed a system known as the “triage,” which they used to sort injuries and their expected outcomes. The triage was made up of three categories: those who required immediate treatment, those who could be sent to a rear-line hospital, and those who were going to die and were to be sent to a moribund ward.⁵⁸

This system proved effective, as organization in the hospitals created less chaos and allowed for soldiers to obtain necessary treatment after they were wounded. But the hospital’s success also depended on equipment, staffing, and its proximity to the battlefield.⁵⁹ In addition to creating surgical tents and casualty clearing stations to better care for wounded soldiers, all soldiers were issued a packet of emergency field dressings so that they could attempt to care for themselves until they made it to these specialized stations.⁶⁰ Nurses learned new medical practices alongside doctors, which aligned nursing with medicine as a profession.

⁵⁴ Stewart, “Nursing Preparedness: Some Lessons from World War I,” 809.

⁵⁵ Holder, “From Handmaiden to Right Hand,” 913.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Holder, “From Handmaiden to Right Hand,” 917.

⁵⁸ Holder, “From Handmaiden to Right Hand,” 913.

⁵⁹ Holder, “From Handmaiden to Right Hand,” 914.

⁶⁰ Holder, “From Handmaiden to Right Hand,” 913.

Because women became more involved in the processes of new medical treatments, they were believed, by men and each other, to be more capable of working with war surgeons and doctors in everyday tasks throughout the war. This contributed to the reconceptualization of war as a feminine setting as well as a masculine setting. Female nurses proved that they were just as capable of caring for wounded and dying men as men were, and that their contribution to the war effort was just as necessary and important as that of men. Additionally, many women believed that they would gain full citizenship after men realized how important their military contribution had been to the war effort. Vining and Hacker argue that war “encouraged some national suffrage leaders to believe that they might win the franchise in turn for supporting the war efforts of their respective nations...they fully expected their assumptions of duties of citizenship in wartime ultimately to result in their winning the rights of citizenship.”⁶¹ Mabel A Barron, R.N. stated that nurses’ “interest, enthusiasm, and the quality of their work show that they are making a great contribution to the total war effort.”⁶²

Women felt inclined to participate in the military effort due to their traditional roles as caretakers, but also because of their national pride. Vining and Hacker state that “nationalism and patriotism colored many women’s groups engaged in voluntary philanthropic and social work, instilling women with a sense of duty to society and nation.”⁶³ When women joined the war effort, they did not know what conditions they were going to experience. But many believed that they needed to contribute something to the war effort in order to achieve full citizenship, and to fulfill their desire and perceived obligation to exhibit their patriotism. Many women were affected by the gruesome conditions of war and the maimed bodies that were strewn about at all times, but were willing to contribute to the war effort in hopes of challenging existing notions of

⁶¹ Vining and Hacker, “From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform,” 360.

⁶² Barron, “Our ARC Nurse’s Aids,” 795.

⁶³ Vining and Hacker, “From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform,” 359.

the masculine war experience, as well as to progress further in the movement for women's suffrage.

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