

Over There, Before 1917

WWI

World War I essentially began Aug. 4, 1914, with the German army's invasion of Belgium. The United States entered the conflict on the side of the Allies (Great Britain, Belgium, France, Italy and Russia) on April 6, 1917. During the intervening 32 months, America remained neutral – but many Americans did not. Thousands volunteered for the Allied cause. What we know of these early volunteers is based on their memoirs, if they wrote of their experiences, or from accounts of journalists. Official records are meager.



Glenna Lindsley Bigelow of New Haven, Conn., did not go to war. It came to her. A 1901 graduate of Presbyterian Hospital Training School for Nurses in New York, she was employed in 1914 as a nurse caring for a prominent Belgian in his château in Liège. As a key railway center, Liège was the focal point of the German attack on Aug. 4. Rather than escaping the invaders, she stayed and aided Belgian and German wounded. Bigelow was the first American nurse caring for wounded in the war.

Gladys Winterbottom and **Madelon “Glory” Hancock** were American volunteers with the British Field Hospital during the siege and fall of Antwerp, Aug. 20 to Oct. 9, 1914. Both had married British officers. When the officers went to war, so did their wives.

Winterbottom was from Massachusetts and had no medical training. She drove a Minerva touring car back and forth between the Belgian lines and hospitals in the city, bringing in wounded. Though shells were exploding all around her, she stayed as cool as if she were driving down Commonwealth Avenue in Boston on a Sunday morning.

Hancock was from North Carolina and attended the Presbyterian Hospital school, class of 1905, but did not complete her degree. She served in Antwerp as a nurse and remained at the front throughout the war. Recognized for her bravery and service to the wounded, she was awarded 12 decorations by war's end: five from Great Britain, including the King George V Medal, given in person by the king; five from Belgium, including the Chevalier de l'Ordre de la Couronne, carrying with it the title of countess; and two from France. She was the most decorated woman of the war.

Hancock was not unique. During the period of U.S. neutrality, more than 500 American nurses crossed the Atlantic to help with the flood of wounded inundating European hospitals. Although most served in Allied hospitals, some nurses served in Germany and Austria.

Not all of the American women volunteers were trained nurses; many learned on the job. In 1915, **Mary Borden-Turner** was one of those. She was a volunteer in a hospital established in a casino outside Dunkirk. Finding the casino facility not up to her standards, she funded her own field medical hospital. As a member of the Borden family of evaporated-milk fame, she designed, paid for – with the help of her wealthy friends – and selected the staff for a mobile surgical hospital that could move closer to the front. Her hospital was one of the most effective medical facilities of the war.

With the fall of Antwerp, the Belgian army retreated westward. Swept up in the retreat was a peculiar volunteer ambulance unit. **Hector Munro**, a Scottish psychiatrist described as a scatterbrained visionary, was the founder of the volunteer ambulance corps named after him, Dr. Hector Munro's Flying Ambulance Corps. The original ambulance corps had five men and five women, all selected by Munro from more than 100 applicants.

One of the women was **Helen Hayes Gleason**, an American piano teacher. Why she made the cut is puzzling; she had no medical training. When the war began, she was in Paris studying music, but she crossed the channel into England and joined Munro's corps. Gleason had no idea what to expect. She even worried that she might faint if she saw blood. Her road-to-Damascus experience occurred just outside Ghent, where she saw her first casualties. Assigned to a convent hospital, she found that the wounded lay so packed that one literally had to step over stretchers to move about, and everywhere smelled of foul blood, malodorous medicines, the stench of trench clothes and mangled bodies. While assisting in her first operation, simply holding a lamp over a

man “with a yawning hole in his abdomen,” she became light-headed. Giving the lamp to another nurse, Gleason rushed into the courtyard and fainted. For the year she spent at the Belgian front, she never faltered again. However, the wounded always affected her more than the dead. Their writhing and moaning communicated their pain to her.

“I had no fear of dying, but I had a fear of being mangled,” Gleason wrote. “A red quiver is worse than a red calm.”

Soon after the war began, wealthy Americans residing in Paris funded a military hospital in the Parisian suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine. Housed in the Lycée Pasteur, a grand building on spacious grounds, the American Ambulance took its name from the fact that “ambulance” in wartime French meant “military hospital.” The hospital had a fleet of motor ambulances, the American Ambulance Field Service (AAFS).

One of the drivers was **A. Piatt Andrew**, an interesting personality to whom leadership and organization came almost naturally. He had been a member of the Harvard faculty (1900-1909), where he taught economics; Franklin D. Roosevelt was one of his students. President William Howard Taft appointed Andrew director of the U.S. Mint (1909-1910) and then assistant secretary of the U.S. Treasury (1910-1912). When Andrew and Taft’s treasury secretary could no longer work together, Taft sided with his secretary and asked for Andrew’s resignation.

Andrew left Washington and returned to his home in Gloucester, Mass., his professional career at a standstill. He wrote to Robert Bacon, president of the American military hospital in Paris, about a position with the hospital. Bacon owed Andrew a favor; Andrew had employed Bacon’s son as his personal assistant in the Treasury Department. Bacon replied that although he had no management positions open, he had something in the hospital motor pool.

After three months of driving an ambulance, moving British and Belgian wounded from hospital trains to hospitals in Dunkirk, a new position was created for Andrew, one that might better utilize his talents. He was appointed inspector-general of the AAFS, a glamorous title with little substance. However, Andrew set out to make the AAFS the largest and most significant U.S. volunteer organization in the war.

Realizing that if the AAFS remained a glorified taxi service ferrying wounded between hospitals, it would have little or no appeal to American volunteers, Andrew set out to get his ambulances to the front. Because of his previous careers in academe and government, he had friends serving at the French general military headquarters. Through them, he was able to change the rules for American ambulances. Now they could serve at the front attached to units of the French army. Of course, this stretched the concept of American neutrality pretty thin.

By early 1915, two AAFS sections were assigned to the French army, one in Alsace and the other in Lorraine along the Moselle River. For the AAFS to grow, it needed two things: money and drivers – cash to purchase, ship and repair ambulances, and recruits to drive them. Both would primarily come from the United States.

The key figure in the campaign to win the hearts and minds and open the pocketbooks of Americans was Andrew's close friend and Gloucester neighbor, **Henry Davis Sleeper**. A noted architect and interior designer, Sleeper focused his artistic talents on publicity and fundraising. Ambulance drivers, many of whom were college-educated, were encouraged by Sleeper and Andrew to publish their war experiences. Many “driver-authors” seemed to love to see their names in print. It is because of their accounts that the history of the AAFS is so well-documented. During the battle of Verdun (1916), Andrew cut ties with the American hospital at Neuilly-sur-Seine and the American Field Service (AFS) was born. Eventually there would be 2,500 AFS volunteers. Probably the only World War I volunteer organization still extant, AFS today awards scholarships promoting international student exchanges.

The American Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps (AVMAC) arrived at the front in October 1914. Organized by **Richard Norton**, an archeologist and procurer of antiquities for Boston collections, the AVMAC was the first American volunteer ambulance service to enter the war. By the end of 1916, the corps merged with the Harjes Ambulance Corps (aka Morgan-Harjes Unit) to become the Norton-Harjes Formation. However, it remained small, with probably fewer than 200 men. The writers John Dos Passos and E.E. Cummings were Norton-Harjes drivers.

In August 1914, as the German army threatened to take Paris, a group of young American men appeared at the U.S. Embassy needing legal advice from Ambassador Myron Herrick. They wanted to join the French army and wondered what effect such a decision would have on their U.S. citizenship. Herrick consulted legal texts and realized that as Americans, they could not swear allegiance to another country, and if they did so it would jeopardize their citizenship. Moreover, in joining the French army they would be required to swear allegiance to France. Herrick's answer to their predicament was the French Foreign Legion; in the Foreign Legion, one theoretically swore allegiance only to it, not to France.

If anything characterized Americans who joined the Foreign Legion, it was their variety. They had only one common denominator: the desire to fight for France. The American volunteers included prizefighters, at least one deserter, a poet, journalists, artists, adventurers of every stripe, automobile racers, professors tired of academe, less-than-successful actors, engineers and rich playboys. Some came from wealth, others did not; some were college graduates, others dropouts; some managed to at least graduate high school, and others did not. Some were black, others white. The Foreign Legion was the only military unit of World War I in which Americans of different races were comrades in arms.

The Foreign Legion was made up in part of the dregs of Europe, if not the world. Many legionnaires were hiding, or escaping, from something nefarious in their past. Drunkards, thieves and worse, yet seasoned veterans of many battles in Algeria and Morocco. For many it was their last chance, and for their future they were not optimistic. As one put it, "If you are thinking of committing suicide, it will do you no harm to try the (French Foreign) Legion first."

More than 100 Americans joined the Foreign Legion, and for many it was suicide; nearly all were wounded and half lost their lives. One American who did not survive was the poet **Alan Seeger**; famous for his poem "I Have a Rendezvous with Death," Seeger made that rendezvous on July 4, 1916, at the Somme. His poem was published posthumously.

The Foreign Legion served as a stepping stone into the Service Aeronautique for a number of Americans. **James Bach** enlisted Aug. 24, 1914. Tired of trench life, he transferred to aviation in December. After successfully completing pilot training, he went to the front in August 1915.

On Sept. 23, 1915, Bach was piloting one of a pair of planes carrying a couple of saboteurs behind German lines. Each plane carried a saboteur in its observer's seat. They landed on a rough pasture, dropped off their passengers, but then things went bad, and Bach was captured. He spent the war in German prison camps; he was not repatriated until the war's end. He earned the double distinction of being the first American aviator to fly for the French and the first American taken prisoner in the war. He was in captivity so long that the Germans made him Herr Direktor of the Amerikanischer-Kriegsgefangenen-Klub (American POWs Club).

Another wealthy American who volunteered to fly for France was **Norman Prince**, a Harvard graduate (1908) with a law degree from the same institution in 1911. Keenly interested in the new field of aviation, Prince took flying lessons and earned his pilot's license in 1912.

Elliot Cowdin came from a wealthy American family and was also a graduate of Harvard, class of 1907. He joined the AAFS in November 1914. Cowdin applied and was accepted to flight school.

Another American aviator flying for the French at the beginning of the war was a rich playboy named **William Thaw**. A Yale dropout who learned to fly in the United States, in the summer of 1914, Thaw was piloting his own airplane on a tour of the resorts on the French Riviera. When the war began that August, he donated his plane to the French government and joined the Foreign Legion. By the end of December 1914, Thaw had transferred to aviation.

In December 1915, Thaw, Prince and Cowdin obtained leave to visit their families in America. US. press coverage of the three pilots and the public's enthusiasm for stories about these

“knights of the air” persuaded the French to pull together the American pilots then serving in various French escadrilles into one unit and reap the publicity harvest. For that reason, on April 20, 1916, the Escadrille Américaine (later renamed the Lafayette Escadrille) was officially placed on the French roster as escadrille N.124. It was a pursuit squadron. The original Escadrille Américaine pilots were Prince, Thaw, Cowden, Kiffin Rockwell, Victor Chapman, James McConnell and Bert Hall. The French commander of the squadron was Capt. Georges Thénault. A total of 38 American pilots flew in N.124, which at any time had a roster of 12 to 19 pilots.

Interest in French aviation exceeded the capacity of N.124, so American pilots were assigned to other French escadrilles. These volunteers along with those in N.124 became members of the Lafayette Flying Corps, which had a total of 269 Americans: 21 were transfers from the Foreign Legion and 115 from the various ambulances services. Flying was dangerous; nearly 25 percent of the 269 died in combat or airplane accidents.

One American pilot had previous service in both the Foreign Legion and the French army. **Eugene Bullard** was an African-American who had joined the Foreign Legion in October 1914, when he was 19. After his regiment’s disbandment due to its horrendous losses, he and many other Foreign Legion members transferred to the 170th Infantry Regiment, an attacking regiment known as Les Hirondelles de la Mort (the Swallows of Death). The 170th fought at Verdun (1916), where Bullard was wounded. For his bravery he received the Croix de Guerre, but what next? Not the infantry, because he still walked with a limp due to his wound. As with so many Americans in the Foreign Legion, Bullard was attracted to flying. While recuperating, he met the commandant of a nearby military airfield, and with his support, Bullard transferred to aviation, becoming a pilot in a pursuit squadron.

Besides serving at the front, many Americans worked behind the lines dealing with the civilian tragedy of the war. **Herbert Hoover** ran the Committee for Relief in Belgium, an organization with hundreds of American volunteers engaged in collecting, transporting and distributing food and clothing in occupied Belgium and France. The German invasion triggered a flood of refugees (women, children and elderly) entering France from the war zone. Many Americans residing in Paris, including author **Edith Wharton**, organized charities to help clothe, house and feed these displaced unfortunates. Wharton’s war charity work was truly extraordinary, and in recognition the French bestowed upon her the Chevalier de l’Ordre National de la Légion d’honneur.

It is clear that before the United States joined the war on the side of the Allies, thousands of Americans were already pushing the limits of American neutrality. However, that is only part of the story. Many Americans volunteered to aid the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary). Their history is yet to be written.

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