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# Women at War

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Lacy Hollingsworth

Women at War

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Topical Seminar: World at War

American women contributed to the Great War in many ways. Women were nurses, volunteers, clerks; each of these jobs was helping women gain agency in their work and also helping their cry for suffrage. Some of American women's greatest contributions were on the frontline of the war in Europe. The women who were on the frontline of the war were specifically nurses and more specifically they asked to be put on the frontlines of the war. The American Red Cross organization was the best organization that gave women opportunities to volunteer to serve the United States, but the United States Military opened many doors for women as well. The Red Cross desperately needed women to volunteer their services and women desperately needed organizations like the Red Cross. Women's work in the Red Cross and the military finally enabled women to feel an agency of power for their work; they were finally realizing they could perform the same jobs and perform these jobs with the same ability as men. To understand women on the frontlines, it is important to look at individual cases and interpret these cases. The frontline is interpreted as not only in the middle of warzones, but also the frontlines within the United States. Women were using the skills and opportunities available to them; whether it was on the war front in France or behind a phone for the Navy on United States soil. Without the service of brave women on the frontlines of the Great War, many soldiers' lives would have been lost. Women were great contributors during the Great War even though they do not receive enough credit. The Great War cannot be fully studied without studying women's sacrifices and bravery.

Men were extremely reliant on women during the Great War. The war provided women with opportunities to serve their country without disrupting their gender roles. The Young Women's Christian Association, or the YWCA, was an organization during the Great War designed to give soldiers a home away from home as they waited for their deployment to Europe.

These homes were known as hostess homes. They provided homemade meals, comfortable furniture, and home decorations similar to the homes they had just left. This role gave women an opportunity to serve and an opportunity to feel useful especially if they had felt they had no other way to serve. Men particularly liked the idea of a hostess home because it never disrupted the gender roles they were afraid would be broken throughout the course of the war.<sup>1</sup> Being a hostess during the war proved to be the safest job available. As we look into more cases of women's jobs during the Great War, we begin to understand that women wanted to disrupt the gender norms.

The story of Margaret Hall is one of the most fascinating of the Great War. Hall's memoir, "Letters and Photographs from the Battle Country," is a culmination of stories from Hall's time in France as a volunteer for the American Red Cross. This was the first memoir from the Great War that included pictures actually taken from the author. It was also one of the first memoirs that showed a change in the author and who also understood this as a total war. The war was not just guns and violence; it was food portioning, home destruction, and families being torn apart.

Hall's story begins when she was forty-two years old. She was a learned woman who had a college education with degrees in History and Political Science. She was also a progressive Republican, patriot, lover of all things French, and an active supporter of the suffrage movement. Hall actively kept up with the war and patiently waited for her opportunity to serve. She came from a well to-do Bostonian family that enabled her independence through their wealth. Hall left her comfortable life to challenge her abilities, see the world, and become a part of history.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brandimarte, Cynthia. "Women On The Home Front: Hostess Houses During World War I." *Winterthur Portfolio* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2008) (2008): 201-22. Accessed November 15, 2014.

<sup>2</sup>Hall, Margaret, and Margaret R. Higonnet. *Letters and Photographs from the Battle Country: The World War I Memoir of Margaret Hall*. Xvii.

Hall was precisely the kind of woman the American Red Cross sought. She was single, financially secure, able to speak French and German, and at her age she was not likely to be promiscuous. Her first job as a Red Cross volunteer was a canteen worker. She served coffee and food, and provided cigarettes to the soldiers. This job did not satisfy Hall's desire to serve. She wanted to be put on the frontline; even though she was not a nurse, she was sure she could learn.<sup>3</sup> However, for her first assignment Hall was one out of one-hundred women chosen to serve in the American Expeditionary Force. To qualify the women had to be between the ages of thirty and fifty, willing to serve without pay, and able to pay for their own expenses while abroad. She continued to beg officials to put her on the frontlines; she would not be satisfied until her wish was fulfilled.<sup>4</sup>

Hall was finally given the opportunity to serve in a tent hospital as a nurse when the hospital was shorthanded; not exactly the frontlines, but to Hall it was more than she had been doing. She served soldiers and civilians who had been gassed, had pneumonia, or were severely wounded. Tent hospitals were the next best thing to a hospital during wartime.

Hall's decision to join the war efforts was an international phenomenon. She was not the only woman of her abilities, social class, or education to become a volunteer. Women from Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and even Japan understood the war offered them a chance to change their life by having an occupation.<sup>5</sup> Hall's inspirations to join the Red Cross were the women around the world who would never get a chance to showcase their talents and worth in the war, or ever.

War time in France was more guts than glory. Part of Hall's duties was to interact with the civilians of France, or as was in France's case, the refugees. France turned into a refugee

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<sup>3</sup> Hall. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Hall. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Hall. 4.

country early in the war. In 1914, France was one of the first targeted countries by Germany making many families and individuals refugees and outcasts in their country. By the time of the Armistice in 1918, over 400, 000 French people had relocated to unoccupied southern France. Hall witnessed firsthand the somber realities of war. Her descriptions of the refugees she would help could be compared to the post-traumatic stress syndrome that is such a common prescription after involvement in a war or other traumatic events of today. The once civilians, now refugees, would return home to towns where it was impossible to see where a house once stood. Hall, and most women's, most important job was to listen to people's stories.<sup>6</sup>

Hall's busiest time during her time in France was after the Armistice in 1918 when her camp, Chalons, was suddenly flooded with prisoners of war. She described this day as "terrific." There was celebration all over Paris, but she knew her efforts were most needed at her camp. This day was so "terrific" because these men were liberated; but the sight of them was enough to make her cry. However, she had no time to cry. She was filling cups with soup, finding blankets, making beds, and trying to find anything she could to ease their pains. The Germans had opened the gates that held the prisoners and told them to go; they gave no transportation, no food, no shelter, no money, and no clothing.<sup>7</sup>

Hall was not a hero and she never claimed to be. She was a volunteer who gave everything she had to help the helpless. She was not a nurse and did not have any special skills. She was a woman who saw this war as not only an opportunity to volunteer, but also as an opportunity to prove to the world and to men that she was capable of surviving and helping during wartime. War was not only for men; it was for the strong-hearted no matter the gender. Times were beginning to change and Hall wanted to be part of the history.

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<sup>6</sup> Hall. 77-78.

<sup>7</sup> Hall. 81-82.

The joint stories of Ellen La Motte and Mary Borden are put together in the book, “Nurses at the Front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War.” These women came from completely different worlds, but when the war began their worlds collided. Their stories are put together because the women met and worked with each other on the war front during the Great War. Their memoirs differ from Hall’s because both these women worked as nurses throughout the entire course of the war.

Nursing was the easiest way for women to reach the front lines of the war. Ellen La Motte was a professional nurse with administrative experience and who specialized in tuberculosis. She felt compelled to help with the war efforts because of a cable she received from a friend in Paris. She asked if there was any work available for her in Paris. After her friend’s cable back, La Motte immediately set out for New York City to begin her journey to France. She began as a nurse in an American hospital where she felt there was a surplus of supplies and help; like Hall, she desperately yearned to help on the front and where there was a challenge. She felt like her skills could be used more effectively on the front.<sup>8</sup> La Motte struggled with the meaning of war. She continually pondered the question, “Was it not all a dead-end occupation, nursing back to health men to be patched up and returned to the trenches, or a man to be patched up, court-martialed and shot?”<sup>9</sup>

The most interesting parts of La Motte’s memoir were her comparisons of war and peace. She continually claimed that war was “cleaner” and peace was “so dirty.” War was a time where men could die in their prime and could die cleanly. They could die from a single gunshot wound and be remembered as a hero. War, La Motte said, was spectacular. Times of peace were dirty;

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<sup>8</sup>Higonnet, Margaret R. *Nurses at the Front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War*. Boston, Mass.: Northeastern University Press, 2001. ix.

<sup>9</sup> *Nurses at the Front*. 9.

dying during peacetime meant suffering and brokenness.<sup>10</sup> La Motte understood what most did not. She understood that war was destructive and real. She wanted her memoir, more than anything, to reach Americans to help them understand that war should not be glorified and peace should not be taken for granted.<sup>11</sup>

Mary Borden was a Vassar graduate who married an Englishman. She was not the type of woman anybody would expect to volunteer her time, efforts, or money to the war. She was a renaissance woman who aspired to be a writer, she was a mother, she fashion-forward, and she was a regular hostess for parties in London. Borden signed up with the French Red Cross in 1914 with no previous nursing experience and no hesitation. She was first assigned to a typhoid hospital outside Dunkirk that was the opposite of La Motte's first hospital experience. This hospital needed feeding cups, urinals, and bedpans. Within months of arriving in France, Borden recognized the need for more frontline surgical units, especially in the Belgian zone.<sup>12</sup>

Borden's memoir, "The Forbidden Zone," was her personal account of the realism of war. The introduction of her memoir is extremely frank and straight forward. She writes that her accounts of descriptions of the war have not been "invented" and that any attempt from her to reduce the war to less than it actually was would "falsify" her war experience.<sup>13</sup> Like La Motte, she too struggled with the hard debate of letting a man live to only die again. Her first experience with this was a man who had attempted to commit suicide and who had failed. The doctors were trying to explain to her that the man could possibly live and they were going to try everything they could to ensure he lived. After the doctors explained this to her, they went on to explain he would be court-martialed; this meaning he ultimately would be brought back to life to die again,

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<sup>10</sup> Nurses at the Front. 50.

<sup>11</sup> Nurses at the Front. 51.

<sup>12</sup> Nurses at the Front. Ix.

<sup>13</sup> Nurses at the Front. 79.



or in this case executed. Borden screamed and begged the doctors to let him die so that he would not suffer again. The doctors ignored her pleas. They strapped him to the table and put a mask over his face while he murmured the name, “Rosa.” He had a successful surgery and was recovering well the next day. Borden had hoped he would not survive through the night because all through the hospital it was known he had been brought to life to die again. The doctors were doing their job and the Army had to do theirs.<sup>14</sup>

La Motte and Borden’s accounts of the war are eerily similar. Both accounts provide readers with memoirs never read before; the war through the eyes of women on the frontlines. La Motte and Borden both made their aspirations of this war known. They had desires for personal gains. The suffrage movement was well underway and both realized the roles they could play in this. If they could somehow prove to their male peers that they were capable of dealing with death, destruction, and pain the same way as men then they could return home with men’s respect. The women wanted to return home with national liberation; like Hall, they were serving not only for personal gain, but also for the women who would never get the opportunity to serve. For the first time, La Motte and Borden had control over the meaning of their work. They were at the frontlines of the war and understood this could be the beginning of agency of power in their work forever.<sup>15</sup>

Lettie Gavin’s book, “American Women in World War I: They Also Served,” is a collection of memoirs and stories from over 40,000 American women who served in some way during the war. Gavin looks at the different departments during war time like the Navy, Marines, Army, Hello Girls, and physicians. The Navy desperately needed every man available to go to sea, but with the massive amounts of paperwork getting every available man proved to be a

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<sup>14</sup> Nurses at the Front. 122-23.

<sup>15</sup> Nurses at the Front. Ix.

challenge. To answer this challenge, Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels shocked the entire country by indicating there was no law prohibiting the use of women as Navy clerks. The Navy's problem had been solved and thousands of women were signing up for the job; only two-hundred women were actually selected for these positions. The women in the Navy were the "pioneers" of war time jobs within the United States. Men were able to be released for combat while women did the paperwork. The Navy's use of women during the war paved the way for later jobs with similar tasks, like the secretarial jobs we see open later in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>16</sup>

The United States Marine Corp was not as eager to enlist women as clerks. The Corps did not allow women to enlist with them until four months before the war ended. As the United States began to become more involved in the war efforts, particularly in France, more men were needed for battle instead of paperwork. Even though the Marines desperately needed all their men freed for battle, they only hired three-hundred and five women. Women from all over were applying for these positions. Women like Minnie Arthur were strongly discouraged to apply for the job from recruiters themselves, but applied and received the position anyway. Other women, like Pearl Chandley Oagley, saw the Marines as an opportunity to put women's real strengths into use; she believed they could effectively move towards peace by talking rather than with shooting.<sup>17</sup>

Army Nurses are the most celebrated of the women involved with the Great War. The nurses had never been in war conditions with patients in as bad shape as the soldiers and civilians they encountered. Army Nurses gave the best care to the men as possible, and the best care the Army had known to this point in history. Although they gave the soldiers the best care possible, women did not receive pay, status, or equal benefits as men until 1944. Being a nurse

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<sup>16</sup>Gavin, Lettie. *American Women in World War I: They Also Served*. Niwot, Colo.: University Press of Colorado, 1997. 1-16.

<sup>17</sup>Gavin. 25-37.

during wartime was the closest thing to employment equality women had seen. Without women working tirelessly as nurses on the war front, doctors would not have been successful to save soldiers and soldiers would not have received the care necessary in such a fragile state.<sup>18</sup>

Hello Girls in the Army Signal Corps are exactly what the name implies; they say “hello!” Hello Girls who could speak French were sent overseas to France as telephone operators. This was not a new job for women. In the United States, almost all telephone operators were women. The Army was now just asking these women’s to take their jobs overseas.<sup>19</sup> General John J. Pershing gave these women credit for their efforts saying “the women who go into the service will do as much to help win the war as the men in khaki.” This one of the first times a commander, let only a man, gave women the credit for their services. Hello Girls were not always sent to sit behind a switchboard. Once the women were in France, many of them were sent out to be interpreters for important military issues. Even after the war, Pershing continued to be proud of his decision to enlist women to travel to France to be Hello Girls praising them for their work.<sup>20</sup>

Women physicians in the Great War had the most controversial roles in the war. The United States Army Medical Departments refused to allow women physician to work alongside their male counterparts. Still, women were determined to use their skills and education to help in the war. Many women enlisted in the French Army and other French organizations to use their skills as physicians. Prior to the war, women physicians were only allowed to serve other women and children. Women saw this as an opportunity to show their skills and prove themselves among their male colleagues. Alongside American male doctors, women doctors were put on the

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<sup>18</sup> Gavin. 43-66.

<sup>19</sup>Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation. "World War I: Women and the War." History & Collections. [http://www.womensmemorial.org/H&C/History/wwi\(war\).html](http://www.womensmemorial.org/H&C/History/wwi(war).html) (accessed October 27, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Gavin. 77-94.

sideline. Women like Dr. Anne Tjomsland went into the war expecting to perform life-saving surgeries while earning respect among her male doctors. When she arrived overseas she learned that just because she was in a different country did not mean she would encounter different views. She was only allowed to observe operations at first. However, as time went on and the need for more able hands was apparent, she was allowed her own cases and surgeries. Eventually she was even invited to drink beer with the male physicians after a long day.<sup>21</sup>

When the men were called to combat in the Great War, over a million women stepped up and started performing the jobs once held by men. Women were doing the same jobs men had left and were doing them as effectively. Their pay, however, did not reflect this. Women were paid less than half of what men would have been paid. When the war was over the factory and other wage jobs were given back to the men returning home from the war, essentially reversing all the progress they had thought they were making.<sup>22</sup>

As the war ended and soldiers and volunteers returned home, women expected to return home and be given the same praise as the soldiers who had served. The women who had stayed home and maintained the home front expected to be able to keep the jobs they had worked so hard for. Women's expectations did not match the realities of the end of the war. Even though they did receive the right to vote in 1920, the gender roles still remained the same. It is hard to say that women worked so hard to only receive the right to vote. Their sacrifices and work was not for nothing; their sacrifices opened the door for future jobs and opportunities. Although the opportunities were not equal to men, they were still opportunities they did not have prior to the war. Without the sacrifice of women during the Great War, it is clear the United States would not have been near as successful as it was with women.

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<sup>21</sup> Gavin. 157-173.

<sup>22</sup>BBC. "iWonder." BBC News. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z9bf9j6> (accessed October 25, 2014).

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