

Reflections of a Distant War

By Gabrielle Griswold, Promotion de 1944

Since this year marks the 100th anniversary of America's entry into World War I, I am currently involved with one commemoration of that war, due to take place at the University of Delaware this fall. The event will consist of an exhibition combining WWI stories with some of the clothing and wardrobe accessories of that era.

One of the uniforms on view will be that worn by Gabrielle Allard Raszewska, my Francophile mother, when, at the age of 25, she sailed to France in March 1917 to help the Allied war effort as a member of a *women's* division of the YMCA. After serving approximately eighteen months abroad, she would not return home until August 1919.

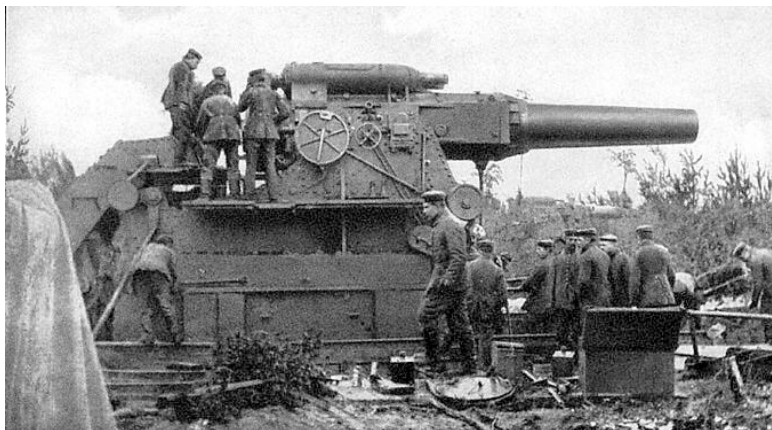


Gabrielle Allard Raszewska

As my mother's memoirs record, she was assigned to the Y's Hut Equipment Department, headquartered in Paris, where her job was to help supply YMCA "huts" in U.S. leave areas across France, where American troops withdrew briefly for respite and relief from active duty at the front. Equipped with kitchens, these huts were meant to be as comforting as possible, serving snacks, soups and soft drinks, and providing

American books, games, newspapers, cigarettes, as well as stationery for writing letters home. Finding these materials in a France that had already been at war for three years was never an easy task.

During her time in Paris, my mother experienced periodic bombardments by the huge German cannon known as Big Bertha, and some of modern warfare's earliest air-raids, blackouts, and aerial bombings of civilians.



"Big Bertha"

After the battle of Château-Thierry, her office decided in some instances to take “hut” comforts to American troops on the move, especially those coming straight from the trenches. So, a group of her co-workers equipped a half-ton truck and struck out for the war zone. During those treks, my mother and her colleagues (two other Y women and a male driver) witnessed scenes of incredible destruction, disemboweled buildings, villages in rubble, caravans of dead bodies; came perilously close to enemy fire; narrowly escaped bombardment; wore gas masks whenever necessary, and were sometimes shelled; dealt with automotive breakdowns; slept outdoors in shell holes; ate whatever came to hand; and experienced the ecstatic incredulity of American soldiers trudging off the battlefield when they looked up, speechless with joy, to see real, live American women waiting by the roadside to dispense soup, hot chocolate, cigarettes, and writing-paper.

When in due course my mother’s truck returned to Paris, it was with the idea of designing a more efficient vehicle for future trips even closer to the front, and she sat down at the drawing-board to sketch out her ideas. While a prototype truck was in process of construction, she and her team spent their time delivering supplies to re-equip Y huts.

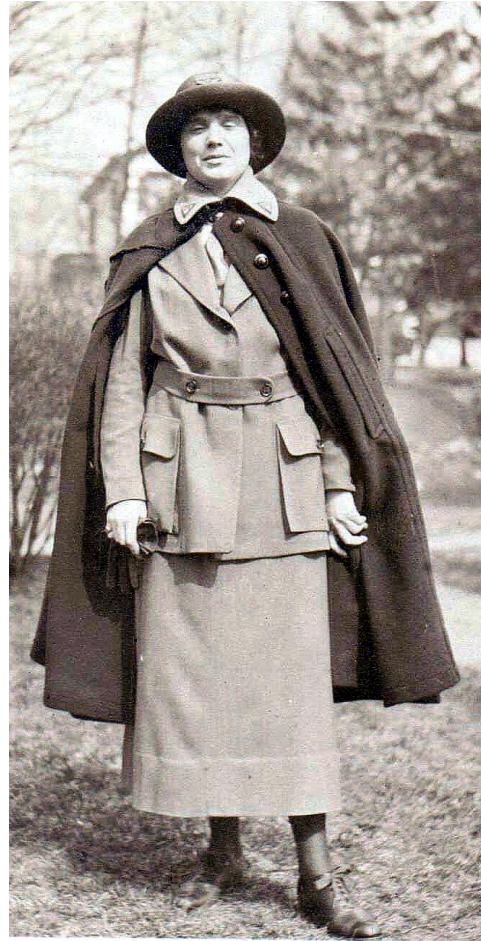
When rumors of an armistice began to circulate, few at first believed them. But on 11 November 1918 an armistice was duly signed, the war ended, and all Paris turned out into the streets to celebrate the cessation of hostilities.



Now that rolling canteen kitchens would no longer be needed for service at the front, Y teams headed out through France with a mission to collect whatever equipment could be salvaged and, if still useable, distributed to needy local French organizations. This work continued well into the new year of 1919. Château-Thierry, Verdun, Reims and other towns Y workers passed through were scenes of utter desolation. Only when they reached the south of France did conditions begin to approach normalcy, and food and accommodations become readily available as Riviera hotels gradually started to reopen. Ultimately their recovery mission ended, and, after a return to Paris, my mother took ship back to the United States in late summer 1919.

For all eighteen months of her service, my mother wore the two-piece YMCA uniform I have carefully preserved through all these years and will be lending to the University of Delaware's upcoming exhibition. Made of a heavy, durable, virtually indestructible grey wool gabardine, it is intact except that its tie, belt, hat and cape are missing, and two tiny moth holes perforate its jacket. I will also be providing the insignia she wore on that uniform, the official bracelet identifying her as a member of the American Expeditionary Forces, a piece of shrapnel she brought home from the war and a few other mementos, plus some photographs she took, of gun emplacements on the Place de la Concorde, of French colonial troops in Paris, and of herself and colleagues dispensing creature comforts to troops emerging from the battlefield at Fère-en-Tardenois.

Ceremonies at the university in which I will take part include the exhibition's formal and informal openings, preceded this summer by discussion groups for the benefit of students in certain university classes, in which I will join on some auditorium stage where participants will be miked and interviewed about the stories behind the exhibits we will be providing.



Gabrielle Allard Raszewska in full YMCA uniform

My mother's story was unusual in an era when relatively few American women went overseas in wartime, and no women's military forces as yet existed. The YMCA unit in which she served was perhaps a sort of forerunner of those women's units which later arose during World War II, just as did the U.S.O., which in that earlier time did not exist either.

What charms me most about the commemoration planned by the University of Delaware, in which her WWI uniform will prominently figure, is that I know how pleased my mother would have been to learn that the uniform is still extant, is still intact, and once again will see the light of day to serve another useful purpose.

Note: The writer of this piece was one of the Lycée's earliest students, and for several years her mother taught English at the Lycée.

More photos from Gabrielle's collection



Place de la Concorde: Gun Emplacements



Fère-en-Tardenois