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# American Women with the A. E. F.

*By Henrietta Roelofs*

ONE needs to manage a hotel to understand human nature. One of the early guests at the Y. W. C. A. hotel in Paris, a famous woman novelist, beloved because of the kindly sympathy found in her stories, wished the privilege of tasting each dessert before deciding which she would take, and if none suited it seemed quite square to her to send all back to the kitchen and ask that the price of the dessert be deducted from her bill.

As different units arrived, uniformed and under orders, interest passed over individuals, even those with reputations at home, and centered on the groups. The Smith College unit, bright, capable, well set-up college girls, the hotel staff welcomed with joy.

A unit of women doctors followed, whose sole job at the moment was to live up to the high brown leather boots, short khaki skirt and man's gray army shirt and service cap. One admired by contrast those soft-eyed, quiet, though alert and skilful women in this group, who by sheer radiance of spirit emerged triumphant over the melancholy uniform, and were honored both as women and physicians.

Then came the nurses on permission or in transit; the bright red lining to their capes making up for the hat, which, although bent at a new angle by every one of the many thousand nurses, never seemed to assume a becoming shape. After trying in vain to satisfy the few but insistent individuals who considered it 'positively indecent' not to have a private bath even in tubless France, who could not in an emergency even in war time share a room with her closest friend because of her nervous temperament, one turned with relief to the nurses, who declared heartily that they longed to share a room with one, two or even three others, and who enthusiastically said that the comforting steam heat was perfectly heavenly. Brave, self-forgetful, cheery, insatiable in the desire to see Paris before going back to the isolation of hospital life, they renewed one's belief in wholesome, fine-spirited, generous American womanhood.

The great excitement came when certain army officers appeared at the headquarters of the Y. W. C. A. and announced that the army was bringing over a new type of women's unit. Could we house them in our hotel, at least temporarily, until they were assigned to their posts throughout France? Our curiosity ran riot. What would these young

women be—the swaggering, mannish type, with the abbreviated skirt, rakish caps, or the sedate middle-aged, safe feminist? I confess we waited with a good deal of trepidation for that first unit of Signal Corps women.

The captain in charge took his responsibility seriously. No effort had been spared in gathering information regarding women in the English army, and in discussing with wise counsellors the system of rules and regulations. When the Y. W. C. A. consented to house the unit and all succeeding units in any part of France the captain's brow became a little more tranquil, but not quite did it assume the placidity of the perfectly assured. No heir of a royal house was awaited with more anxiety. Every day the captain or his lieutenants came to luncheon at the hotel or came to the headquarters office to discuss hours of retiring, receiving callers, social relationships with officers and enlisted men, attitude toward the French people, and, in fact, every detail of life, eating, sleeping, clothing, studying, working, resting, playing. Quite unconsciously for the most part we entered into a secret league with these few army officials to vindicate to the army the value of bringing over American women and also at the same time to exhibit to the French people a proof that wage earning women of America rank first in the world in manners, workmanship and womanly charm. As far as system and plan could go everything was perfect. But systems are not infallible when young women are the determining factor.

I was not in the hotel when the unit arrived. The first day they were spending in conference in the large drawing room of the hotel. Signal Corps experts explained the work, and so momentous was the occasion, this bringing over of women to work with the army, and so fraught with grave possibilities that each speaker in turn succumbed to the temptation to point a moral lesson. All of us, for I had been asked to speak on the relation between the French and the Americans, made a futile effort to disguise our anxiety, but we were so in earnest we might equally well have said outright, 'The reputation of the American army and American womanhood is at stake in a strange country; won't you please be good?'

My first exclamation on entering the room where the women were assembled was, 'Oh, how good looking!' The feminine mind, and I imagine the masculine also, will understand the weight which was lifted from my heart. People unconsciously

try to live up to their clothes. The first bugbear was annihilated. Pretty, modest, navy blue uniforms with a little white showing at the neck, skirts not too long, but not too short, blue sailor hats. Fairly radiant with eagerness were the bright young faces showing a sympathetic response to every appeal made. One must speak before an audience of young French girls to know the joy of perfect response, and this audience of supposedly American girls was at least largely French in origin and thoroughly French in spirit. They had come to France to help win the war; the army could count on them not to fail.

Going into the office and lobby, I found the same enthusiasm regarding our new unit, so well mannered and courteous, so jolly and likable. Even the two or three bobbed-haired members did not strike one as eccentric, but merely attractive and business-like in their boyishness. Had someone suggested that the college units might not find it congenial to live under the same roof with telephone operators? The operators were themselves college women—many of them! The powers-that-be had chosen the group wisely, a goodly proportion chosen because of professional experience, others without experience but with the training, education and character and adaptability that produce skill quickly, all speaking French fluently. Other Signal Corps have followed that first. All have proved themselves worthy of the reputation made in the beginning. Officially billeted by the Signal Corps in houses and hotels leased by the Y. W. C. A., these young women have the opportunity of creating a home atmosphere in France. Ideals of patriotism and hard work are perfectly compatible with good times, and if one

should count the number of young officers appearing at the door of the Signal Corps Women's Clubs one could say that the telephonists and telegraphers are the most popular women in France.

Hardly had the Signal Corps women been accepted as a fact when rumors were afloat that the army was considering women stenographers. One was reminded of the old story of Adam, who was caught in the dilemma of finding it impossible to live with the woman God had provided him, but equally impossible to live without her. Having lived through the trials of French stenographers for English dictation, I knew that every general down to every lieutenant, while outwardly declaring that the army had no intention of bringing American women to France, was inwardly cursing his present hard luck and declaring that for him personally a skilled American woman stenographer was essential if he was to do good work. The first outward concession was to arrange with England for a contingent of W. A. A. C.'s to come, the distance being much shorter from England than from America. However, no Y. W. C. A. secretary was surprised when a cable was sent to Washington by an order of General Pershing, asking for fifty expert women stenographers, to be chosen by the Y. W. C. A.

The army has been more or less timid in assuming the responsibility of having American women mixed up in the army organization. Now that the shock is over, what more sensible course is there to pursue than to release the men for the fighting line and put in their places women, especially when, putting boasting aside, they can undoubtedly do the work better?



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Meet me for tea at the Hotel Petrograd!

Mary Dingman standing at left