



Dombasle, France

Chasing Pop's Ambulance

BY ELLEN B. CUTLER

IT WAS A GRAY, liquid morning at Squam Lake in New Hampshire in August 1995, silent except for the gentle wash of water against the shore and the occasional putt-putt of a fisherman's boat as it trolled past Hubbell's Reef.

I walked from our camp to my grandfather's cottage, Off Limits, where I had seen a box of old letters and miscellaneous items that someone found when sorting through his things. They were lying on the pine table in the porch.

Jerome Preston (*HON.*'73), my grandfather — we called him Pop — was a Francophile of epic proportions. He inherited his love of French culture and language, and most of all, the French people, from his grandmother and passed it on to many of his descendants, including me.

From March 1917 to April 1919 he was an ambulance driver in the fledgling American Ambulance Field Service during World War I, serving first as a volunteer and later under the aegis of the American Expeditionary Force. By the time he returned to his family's home in Lexington, Massachusetts, he had a deep understanding of honor, loyalty, and duty to what he might have called the cause of humanity. A fisherman and amateur watercolorist, he became an astute businessman and after he retired was greatly involved with the Massachusetts Memorial Hospitals, later the Boston University Medical Center. He also was the benefactor of uncounted smaller causes and individuals. He died in early August 1995 at the age of ninety-six.

I wish I had known him better. I wish that I had known some of the things I know now, imagined the kinds of questions that might have led me to a deeper understanding of him, his life, and his personal history, which continues to shape my family to this day.

Over the course of the year or so that followed, I transcribed the letters I found. Fascinated by this boy who bore a resemblance to my grandfather but who also seemed so different, I looked through his papers, which he had

Ellen B. Cutler (GRS'85) is an adjunct professor of art history at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore and a freelance writer.

left to BU's Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, reading the diaries in which he had noted great and small experiences.

I bought highly detailed IGN *serie verte* maps of the Reims-Verdun region and found on them most of the places he described. The tiny villages and obscure roads that crisscrossed the slick green paper became more familiar than my own neighborhood. Then on March 12, 2002, I flew to Paris with a friend to chase Pop's ambulance.



WORLD WAR I had been grinding on for almost three years when Pop left college in early 1917, the middle of his sophomore year, to volunteer for the American Ambulance Field Service. He was barely eighteen, and the United States was still officially neutral. His work as an *ambulancier* and the Croix de Guerre he received for heroism are part of family lore.

March 5, 1917: . . . Headquarters is an old-fashioned house built on an incline, so you have to go down 2 stories to get to the living quarters, yet the latter open right on the gardens, which slope down to the Seine opposite the Eiffel Tower. Our beds are placed in a large dormitory, bare and terribly cold.

AN UNGAINLY 1930s-era apartment block has replaced that eighteenth-century mansion at 21 rue Raynouard; high-rises have sprouted in the gardens by the Seine. A plaque by the entrance names the battlefields where 2,437 American volunteers "served under the French flag," and adds, "Their ambulances carried more than 400,000

wounded soldiers to safety and 127 gave their lives so that France might live."

POP'S UNIT, S.S.U. (*Section Sanitaire États-Unis*) 15, left Paris and drove via Montmirail, Châlons, and Vitry-le-François to Bar-le-Duc, then north on the Voie Sacrée to the outskirts of Verdun. As we drove, I wondered whether the flat farmlands that rolled by the windows of our blue Peugeot had also been the view from the ambulance he had named "Kentucky," in honor of its donor.

The *ambulanciers* made their first home in the village of Dombasle just west of the Meuse. Pop and three others shared an "old farmhouse, partially demolished by shells." A few nights each week were spent at one or other of the *postes de secours*. The *postes* were aid stations at Montzéviller, Esnes, and Avocourt, from which the wounded were evacuated to various hospitals.

April 17, 1917: I am writing this in a little abri [dugout] located about a mile back of the front line trenches. It is snowing outside, which is peculiar to say the least, and the dirty, sticky, yellow, thick, heavy, messy, horrible, useless, rotten mud is everywhere. If you tried to walk around outside here, you would sink in to your neck. . . . The road is terrible and my car lurched and rolled like a drunken man coming up. . . .

There is a fire burning inside and it is really very comfortable. There are several French soldiers to talk to, so I am not lonely.

We live in a half-ruined farmhouse that has several different buildings connected with it. . . . All the rest of the building except the one room I live in has been shot away on the back, which is facing the Germans. It was all done two years ago.

We wash in a trough a little way up the road, and believe me the water is cold. . . .

Don't forget to write me. Au reservoir, as they say here.

IN THE CENTER of Dombasle, on the Montzéviller road, there are a pair of hewn-stone troughs, lichen-encrusted and partly filled with green-scummed water. I stopped to take pictures and a couple of residents stared at me curiously from their homes on the other side of the street. I introduced myself, and explained that my grandfather had been *un ambulancier ici à Dombasle en 1917, dans la premier guerre mondiale*.

How old, I asked them, are these troughs? Oh, they shrugged, *très anciens*, very old, they have always been





Jerome Preston (fourth from left) receiving a Croix de Guerre in April 1918. "Pop's award reads (my translation), '... Always volunteering for the most difficult evacuations, he offered on March 12 to evacuate alone the officers and cannons of a battery overcome by the effects of toxic gas, this via a violently bombarded road.'"

there. I thanked them and waved good-bye. They waved back and smiled.

THE DRIVERS were billeted for about a month on the second floor of the Château de Gouvernement in Wassy, owned by the DuPotet family. Pop became fast friends with ten-year-old Bernard DuPotet. When I was eighteen years old, I visited Bernard and his family in Paris.

From inquiries made months earlier to the Wassy Chamber of Commerce, I had discovered that Bernard's daughters Marie-Christine and Anne-Marie still own the chateau. A flurry of e-mails to Louis Commergnat, Marie-Christine's husband, had resulted in plans for a reunion. I hardly believed that I would be sleeping where Pop had slept some eighty-five years earlier.

Within a few minutes of our arrival, Marie-Christine, Annie, and I were kneeling on the floor of the *salon*, poring over Pop's old driving maps and my photocopies of his letters and diary.

It was raining steadily the next morning as we headed out for a tour of the town. We stopped for a while at the reservoir to admire the swans and mourn the scores of trees lost in the terrible winter storms of 2000. We visited

the medieval church encrusted with scaffolding, the town hall, and the site of the carnage that marked the beginning of the Wars of Religion in 1562.

June 29, 1917: Wassy is a quaint, beautiful little city. . . . Its streets are wide and shady like a New England village outside the small business area which is a tangled maze of clean, cobble stoned streets. The church is 12th Century, they say, and there is a historic spot pointed out as the beginning of the St. Bartholomew massacres. . . . Just outside the town a fairly large reservoir has been formed . . . by damming the Blaise. . . . It is a beautiful little pond with clear, clean water and if it weren't for the rows of regular, evenly-spaced poplars that stand out all over the landscape, I could easily imagine I was at the lake [Squam Lake]. In fact it is so much like it that at times it makes me terribly homesick. . . .

I COULD ALMOST hear the voices and laughter of the *ambulanciers* sharing the warren of small rooms on the upper floors, the *bonjours* and *merci, Madames* as the young men came in and out, and I could imagine the admiration of the little boy Bernard for those glamorous American strangers. By the fire in the *salon*, under the

rain-dripping trees in the garden, everywhere we went, I could feel Pop and Bernard congratulating themselves on this friendship they had made a part of our lives.

PROSNES IS a crossroad in the gently undulating flatness of Champagne. Once there had been a *poste de secours* here.

Six or seven kilometers to the southeast is the slightly larger village of Baconnes; about halfway there we stopped so I could take a picture.

November 4, 1917: Went on duty at Prosnès . . . After supper I got a hurry call to Petite Haie. As I came up out of the abri I could not see a thing; it was only after minutes that I could distinguish the faint outlines of the trees. It took me some time to find my car, stumbling over the toy railroad tracks and sloughing through the mud. It seemed impossible to go without lights. . . . There were two [wounded soldiers], both suffering from . . . leg fracture. Trying to stay on the road I missed the sharp turn outside Prosnès and took the Baconnes road. The rest of the ride was a nightmare. . . . [the] cries of the poor fellows in back, both fully conscious and aware . . . I asked the doctor if the extra 15 minutes would have made any difference. He assured me, no. Both men died at one o'clock.

AFTER I HAD booked our room at the Hotel le Renard in Châlons, I realized that Pop mentions eating here in his letters and diary. There are reproductions of vintage postcards posted in the lobby. The town center, while damaged by shellfire, is easily recognizable as the square outside the door.

December 23, 1917: My 19th birthday. Fine ride out to Bordeaux in the moonlight. Drank hot pinard [ordinary wine] with a bunch of brancardiers [stretcher-bearers] going on permission.

December 24, 1917: I noticed a body lying on a stretcher with a blanket over its face and the legs torn to pieces. He lay there — while the sun shone and tomorrow is Christmas! . . . We had a Christmas eve party with a tree and presents. Lt. Fabre said our true celebration would be in our hearts; that tonight we would think of our parents as they were thinking of us; that tonight we would pray.

I LOOKED AT the picture of my son I keep in my wallet. It's his high school graduation picture, taken just after his eighteenth birthday. At the time of this trip he was twenty years old.

AS THE WAR entered its final phase, Pop's entries became terser. The front, which had scarcely moved more than a few kilometers in that sector for the best part of four years, began to wriggle and thrash like an embattled snake.

November 8, 1918: Everything is so unsettled in our life now—a-days. . . . We've moved bag and baggage on an average of every few days during the past month and a half, besides doing our regular work. . . . For us it means lots of night driving, for the most part in the rain, and long weary evacuations of sometimes fifty miles. . . . Bad as all this is, it is magnified ten times for the infantryman. . . .

All this peace talk is very bad for the morale. No one wants to be killed by one of the last shells fired. . . .

NEITHER THE LETTERS nor the diary describe the announcement of the armistice and the experience of the cease-fire.

WE HAD ONLY three weeks in France.

There are so many places we did not go. We did not follow Pop to London, Nice, or Monaco, or to St. Malo, where in the days following the armistice he had fallen in love with an Anglo-Polish girl named Zosia. Nor did we pursue him to Belgium and Germany, where his unit was sent in the months between the end of the war and his demobilization in March 1919.

But I will go back and look for him there.



Identity Crisis



"I'm very interested in gaps, places where I break off and there's white space; those are the places the reader has to fill in or the story cannot continue," says Vyvyan Loh (CAS'89, MED'93). Photograph by Vernon Doucette

BY NATALIE JACOBSON MCCrackEN

VYVYANE LOH (CAS'89, MED'93) grew up in Singapore; her first novel, 2004's *Breaking the Tongue*, is set there during World War II. Claude Lin has been raised to avidly ape the colonial English in all things and to despise his own heritage; he has not been allowed to learn Chinese. Now so tortured and mutilated by the invading Japanese that he has lost a coherent sense of his identity, whatever that might be, he can narrate events he has not known, his accounts sometimes accurate, sometimes colored by his upbringing. The fragmented scenes and their apparently random order convey Singapore's culturally fragmented society and its disintegration as the city falls to the Japanese. *Breaking the Tongue* was reissued this spring in paperback. Loh is practicing medicine part-time and writing her second novel.

Did planning for the book start with the characters or the history?

I STARTED with various ideas in mind, not just the ones specifically about history, but also about the structure of the book and how history and a book are assembled, how events can be manipulated.

How much historical research did you have to do?

ESSENTIALLY I did a lot of reading and rereading of two books by historian Peter Elphick, *Odd Man Out: The Story of a Singapore Traitor* [written with Michael Smith] and *Singapore, the Pregnable Fortress*. And I had a book primarily of photographs of Singapore during the war and the Japanese occupation. I spent a lot of time just looking at them and imagining myself in that time and place. It also gave me a lot of ideas of what Singapore looked like then, the clothes people were wearing, what the transportation system was like, things like that.

Did your reading tell you much about the social history, the ethnic and class distinctions?

THAT WASN'T specifically mentioned, but I grew up in Singapore with a lot of those issues, and I think they're still big issues there today.

And how much did you think about exposition to inform American readers about both the events and the social setting?

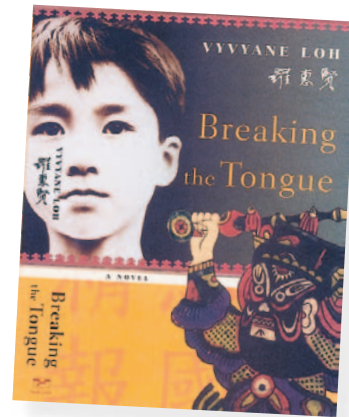
I DON'T LIKE dumbing down just so the reader will get it; I think that's very presumptuous of the writer. There's

nothing wrong with having the reader work a little, maybe look something up. The whole point of reading is that it enlarges your world.

One cultural thing readers have brought up is Claude's sexlessness. They've wanted something to happen between him and Ling-li. But I felt strongly that he was true to his time and place and culture. And then last year there was an article in the *New York Times* about how often people in various countries had sex and Singapore came in second to last. So I felt vindicated.

With our emphasis on diversity, maintaining individual cultures and languages, it's very striking to an American reader that as a part of educating Claude to move up socially and professionally, his father forbids him to learn Chinese. Is that something else that's still true in Singapore?

TO AN EXTENT. In school, children are required to study a second language, and generally if you're Chinese it



Is the rise of book groups encouraging readers to take that active part?

I LIKE going to book groups, to be involved with readers at that level, and I've noticed that in book groups a lot of people plunge into discussion of a specific character or a specific voice. That's to be expected since American novels tend to be plot- or character-driven; it's hard to find an American novel of ideas. Maybe that's

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will be Mandarin. We spoke mostly English at home and I certainly had a hard time with Chinese; it would always drag my grades down. Some of my friends resented having to learn Chinese because they saw it as a backward language and English as the language of the future, especially in science and technology, which Singapore reveres. When I finally came here I realized what a privilege learning Chinese had been. To my surprise, a lot of Chinese were struggling as adults, desperate to learn it.

Was language as part of self-identity something you wanted your readers to think about?

I JUST WANTED them to start thinking about identity, who they are and how much identity is shaped by language. I also wanted them to think about history and that it's malleable, constructed of narratives that can be warped and manipulated. I wanted the text itself to allow them to work their way into those questions, so I kept changing the order of the scenes. And I'm very interested in gaps, places where I break off and there's white space; those are the places the reader has to fill in or the story cannot continue. A book is not complete without the reader.

because this is such an individualistic country. Also, people seem suspicious of ideas and of intellectualism. When I came here one thing that fascinated me talking to college students is that the popular people, the celebrities, are the athletes and the beautiful people; if you are too intelligent or studious, that is actually a negative.

Does that reflect a difference in cultures and education systems?

BASED ON what I experienced, in Asia there is a certain need to conform and also a need for excellence according to a model. I think that's good to a point: you have to have the basics. I think American education stresses play before students have a full grasp of the fundamentals.

Are your American readers looking past the characters and plot to see structure and ideas the way you hoped?

YES. After I do a reading or talk, people ask about the structure, and that tells me I made them stop and think. Many people have come up to me and said, “I had to work really hard to read your book.” And I tell them, “Great, I had to work really hard to write it.”

A Voice for the Children

COM Professor's Documentary Shows the Effects of AIDS on Infected Youth in Uganda



Prossy (left) and Kizza are two of the children featured in the film.

Photographs courtesy of Sam Kauffmann

BY JESSICA ULLIAN

SIX-YEAR-OLD Kizza's arms and legs are covered with itchy sores, and he scratches constantly while answering questions for the camera. He doesn't go to school, he says, because he is often sick. His guardians call him names. He contracted HIV from his mother at birth, but was told just last year that he had the disease — known locally as "Slim."

"What would you want the world to know about Slim?" an off-camera voice asks.

"That it hurts," he says quietly.

Kizza is one of seven Ugandan children interviewed in *Living with Slim: Kids Talk About HIV/AIDS*, a short documentary film by Sam Kauffmann, a College of Communication associate professor. More than 84,000 Ugandan children are estimated to have HIV or AIDS, according to UNICEF. But Kauffmann knew that to fully explain the problem to an American audience, it was better to tell the stories of just a few.

Living with Slim, which won a special commendation from the Boston Society of Film Critics in December, is the product of a Fulbright Lecture and Research Award

that sent Kauffmann — whose film topics have ranged from fatherhood to forced busing in Boston — to Uganda to teach. He arrived in the country in December 2003, three months before beginning his classes at Makerere University in Kampala, so he could make a film. Knowing of the effect AIDS has had on Ugandan society, he says, "it seemed important to do something about that, the greatest scourge."

The concept is simple, borrowed from one of Kauffmann's earlier films: each child interviewed answers the same questions about his or her health, family, friendships, and hopes. Working with doctors and AIDS counselors at the government-run Mulago Hospital, Kauffmann initially interviewed about thirty children, all of whom had contracted HIV at birth. The seven depicted in the film were chosen because they represented a wide range of society and told some of the more compelling stories.

Stella, thirteen, says her friends and family won't play with her because they are afraid of catching the disease. Dianah, fourteen, says her brothers often don't leave any food for her when they eat. John, thirteen, cries as he explains that people tell him his mother is to blame for his illness, that she did something bad.

Twelve-year-old Eva has not told anyone she is HIV-positive because she has seen how badly others with AIDS are treated. "I know if I tell anyone, they're going to hate me. They will think I'm immoral," she says in the film. "I have to lie to everyone, and I hate lying. It's against my religion, and it's against me."

Kauffmann filmed each child separately, then went to their homes to get footage of their daily routines. "It's a very simple film," he says. "They're talking to you. There's no narrator, no one getting in the way of you listening to the children. That's where its power comes from."

After the first screening in Uganda, the Ugandan Ministry of Health purchased 400 copies to show at prenatal clinics around the country to help convince pregnant women testing positive for HIV to take a drug that reduces the chance of mother-to-child transmission.

The process was exciting for the children, who all participated eagerly. Their futures are uncertain, Kauffmann says, and while all of them know what they want to be when they grow up — a doctor, a lawyer, and a tailor are among their choices — not all of them will grow up. At least one, Dianah, has died.

"I think some of them really felt it was their legacy," Kauffmann says of *Living with Slim*, "a chance for them to extend their life forever." ♦