Written by Ellen B. Cutler

American Ambulancier in France

The people of the United States watched anxiously from the sidelines for almost three years after the onset of World War I in 1914. Thousands of Americans volunteered to help France and England in any way they could; many of them drove ambulances overseas. The French army, in particular, depended on these brave volunteers.

Jerry Preston in Paris, April 1917 with "Kentucky"

Jerome "Jerry" Preston (1898–1995) joined the American Ambulance Field Service (AAFS) as an *ambulancier*, or ambulance driver, three months before the United States entered the fray. From March 1917 to the end of the war in November 1918, in letters and diaries, he recorded his thoughts and experiences about the "war to end all wars."

Jerry Preston Sails for France

Preston left college to volunteer for the AAFS. On February 19, 1917, he set sail from New York City on the *U.S.S. Chicago*, along with a number of other young "gentlemen volunteers." He was barely eighteen years old.

The journey lasted thirteen days and took them through seas patrolled by German submarines. "Every once and a while," Jerry wrote to his parents, "the ship takes a sharp turn and we see a mine go floating past. They are probably the greatest menace of all . . . "

They dropped anchor on March 2 in a harbor on the coast and then went by bus into the city of Bordeaux. With his new friends, he crowded onto a train for the long ride to Paris and the task that lay ahead.

Discussion or Essay Questions

Why do you think some Americans (like Jerry), whose country had not entered the war yet, volunteered to go and help the British and the French? Do you think people today would do the same thing? Why or why not?

Jerry Preston and Section 15 were sent first to Verdun, which had been the site of some of the fiercest battles of the first years of the war. Find Verdun on a map of France. Can you guess why the Germans wanted to capture this city?

The American Ambulance Field Service was not the only ambulance group in the Great War. There was also the Norton-Harjes group. Do some research using the Internet or the library to learn more about this ambulance group. (Hint: Several very famous authors and poets drove ambulances for Norton-Harjes.)

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Want to Read More?

Ages 12+
Grandpa's War: The French Adventures of a World War I Ambulance Driver by Edward Greeman

Gentlemen Volunteers: The Story of the American Ambulance Drivers in the Great War by Arlen Hansen

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Online Articles

Personal Letters of a Driver at the Front
http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/memoir/Buswell/AAFS1.htm

Friends of France: The American Ambulance Field Service Described by its Members: http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/memoir/FriendsFrance/ffTC.htm#TC

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Eight of us got a compartment together on the Paris train . . . [T]wo poilus [French soldiers] and an old man and his wife got into our compartment. We . . . learned that [they] were artillery-men returning to the front . . . When we told them of our intentions, they gravely shook hands with us and with a look of real comradeship in their eyes.

The Model-T Ford Ambulance

Most of the *ambulanciers* in the AAFS drove Model-T Fords. These sturdy cars were nicknamed Tin Lizzies. They had strong frames and amazing engines. At one point, following a battle, Jerry saw an ambulance that had taken a direct hit. It looked, he remembered, like "a wreck . . . running along under its own power." Generous Americans contributed money to pay for the cars, and Jerry's ambulance was called Kentucky in honor of Mrs. Samuel Culbertson of Louisville, Ky.

Up front in the ambulance, there was a seat for the driver. A compartment built onto the back had room for either three *couchés* (soldiers lying on stretchers) or four *assis* (seated passengers). Jerry himself painted Kentucky the proper shade of slate blue and stenciled on a red cross, the identification number 509, and the words "American Ambulance Field Service." Later on, he learned how to be his own mechanic and keep the car in good working order.

Life at the Front

In April 1917, Jerry was sent to the western front near the city of Verdun. The villages and forests that filled the valley around Verdun and the Meuse River had been destroyed. When Jerry arrived, he found a frightening landscape of blasted earth, barbed wire, and blackened tree stumps.

All the *ambulanciers* spent several days a week at an aid station, or *poste de secour*, just behind the lines. Wounded soldiers were brought from the battlefields to these *postes*. From there the drivers took them to hospitals.

At the center of a *poste* was an *abri*, or shelter. An abri could be the cellar of a house or a concrete-and-steel structure. Jerry wrote to his youngest brother about the abri at one *poste*.

It is snowing . . . and the dirty, sticky, yellow, thick, heavy, messy, horrible, useless, rotten mud is everywhere. If you tried to walk around here you would sink in to your neck . . . There is a fire burning inside and . . . several French soldiers to talk to, so I am not lonely.

Dangers lurked even in the safety of the camps.

I was sitting in my car outside the abri reading, when I heard a loud explosion . . . [A] soldier . . . working in the ruins opposite me, [was] blown full six feet . . . into the road . . . He had dropped a piece of tile on an old, unexploded grenade, and set it off.

Saving Lives

Ambulanciers were there to save lives, and Jerry carried countless wounded soldiers to hospitals. No matter how many men he helped, however, Jerry always remembered the ones he lost.

After supper I got a hurry call . . . As I came up out of the abri, I could not see a thing . . . It seemed impossible to go without lights and even now I can't imagine how I did it… [T]here were two blessés grave (severely wounded) suffering from leg fracture. Trying to stay on the road I missed the sharp turn outside Prosnes and took the Baconnes road. The rest of the ride was a nightmare . . . 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.

A Vacation From the Front

Every few months, each ambulance unit was sent away from the front *en repos*, for a rest. While *en repos*, the ambulance drivers could almost imagine that they were truly on vacation. In June 1917, Jerry's group was sent *en repos* to the little town of Wassy. The *ambulanciers* lived in the second floor rooms of the Château de Gouvernement. The chateau was a large and very old home belonging to the Dupotet family. While there, Jerry became friends with ten-year-old Bernard Dupotet, and they remained friends for the rest of their lives. Jerry loved the town of Wassy. He and his friends played soccer on the local fields, explored twisting streets, and swam in a nearby pond where they could, he said, "forget our troubles."

New Weapons, New Dangers

One of the most awful weapons used in World War I was chemical poison, such as mustard gas. The *ambulanciers* were given gas masks, but the enemy constantly invented new poisons that made old masks useless. During one battle, Jerry carried dozens of *intoxiqués*, soldiers overcome by gas. These gas weapons were dangerous even to the army using them. In May 1918, a small group of French soldiers trained in the use of a new gas were ordered to begin an attack. The soldiers argued that the winds were too tricky, too likely to change, but finally they followed their orders.

The winds did change, and the attack was a disaster. Of the forty-two soldiers carried in ambulances, twenty-seven died at the hospital. Fifty-four more men died in the trenches from the gas. Jerry carried dozens of them in his ambulance and wrote in his diary, "What a frightful thing to be responsible for all this."

The End of the War

As the Germans were pushed slowly back in the late summer of 1918, it seemed that misery for the French only deepened.

October 12 – The Germans have retreated . . . The retreat was well prepared, villages burned, telephone poles cut down, bridges blown up and ammunition dumps destroyed. The sky is hazy with the smoke . . . Hundreds of civilians are flocking into [our camp] carrying small bundles. Tears streamed down their faces as they told their pitiful stories.

On November 8, he described his feelings to his parents: "No one wants to be killed by one of the last shells fired… It seems absolutely certain now that by the time you get this letter the war will be over." And indeed, the war was soon over; all the guns went quiet on November 11, 1918.

Jerry stayed in France until April 1919. In comparison to his departure for France, his return was quiet. He sent a telegram to his father with the details of his return.

Arrive South Station 5:30 Saturday. Will expect car. Would prefer meeting you all at home. Loads of love. Jerome.*

About the author
Ellen B. Cutler teaches art history in Baltimore, Md. In 2002, she traveled to France to visit the villages and battlefields her grandfather described in his letters and diaries.

**South Station is one of two large train stations in Boston, Massachusetts*