Band of Brothers and Sisters: A Challenge of the Myth of the War Experience

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"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. For he today who sheds his blood with me shall be my brother…"[1]

These immortal words of William Shakespeare have embodied for centuries an ideology of masculine camaraderie and willingness to sacrifice oneself on the battlefield as an act of honor and fraternal duty. The late historian George Mosse analyzed this myth of taking part in the "noble" cause that is war in his 1990 study *Fallen Soldiers.* The formation of what Mosse called the "myth of the war experience" derived primarily from the experiences of men who willingly volunteered for the First World War. In his 1996 publication, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity,* Mosse elaborated further, explaining that World War I was solely a masculine war. It was the experience of soldiers, specifically male white soldiers, in combat and on the frontlines that defined memory of the war. However—as this study argues— the elements that make up the myth of the war can also derive from the experiences of the non-combative participants in the war, specifically women nurses. Although war nurses were not fighters, they also shared the patriotic drive to volunteer to serve their respective countries and were eager to take up the occupation of nursing. After waking up from their romanticized notions of the war, nurses faced the same fear of enemy bombardments as frontline soldiers. On the war front they, too, observed the horrors which advanced weaponry and trench warfare inflicted upon soldiers, and they saw the desolation of the front lines. Women, through the feminized occupation of war nursing, demonstrated and shared in the experiences of male soldiers. In other words, they too contribute to the mythology of the war. Women's involvement in the war was far from passive; this reality complicates Mosse's premise that World War I's renewal of war mythology was entirely masculine in nature.

Mosse argues that nineteenth century wars already were embedded in mythology. The myth was that wars contained this sacred sensation of camaraderie and honor, despite the mass deaths that accompany them. To Mosse, this mythology came into further fruition in World War I. He argues this myth existed during the French Revolution, but World War I brought the myth to a whole new level. Mass death is a necessary war experience, but during the Great War, the numbers of death rose to a grander scale and dimension. Twice as many men died in action or of their wounds than in the major wars that took place between 1790 and 1914.[2]

Furthermore, the mythology of the war was "constructed upon a longing for camaraderie, sense of meaning in life and personal and national regeneration."[3] Men actively volunteered for the

[1] This line is taken from William Shakespeare's *Henry V,* Saint. Crispin's Day speech, Wade Bradford, "3 Most Moving Monologues From Shakespeare's Henry V," accessed November 27, 2017, https://www.thoughtco.com/best-speeches-from-henry-v-2713258.

[2] George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.

[3] Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 16.

war effort more. Males on either side of the war in Europe and eventually the United States volunteered by the thousands to sacrifice their lives for their country and to fulfill their desires for masculinized glory. It was about duty to one's country, and, through the act of volunteering for the war, men proved their masculinity. They also believed that the war would "energize their own life and that of the nation."[4]

Because of the sheer unprecedented magnitude of World War I, the mythology of the war experience took on greater importance and new elements. New technology and new forms of warfare emerged that would remain forever in the memories of those who fought, and those memories would be passed down to future generations who would learn of the war. The Great War was a dominating muse for the people of its time, and many veterans who returned from war found themselves seeking a sense of higher purpose and closure after the atrocities and sacrifices they had witnessed. They were conflicted about the war. Should it be remembered as a moment of glory or as a moment of mayhem that should be left alone? National commissions used positive accounts of the war in commemorations. Rather than allowing the public to dwell on the war's carnage, nations made efforts to reinforce notions that the war had an honorable purpose by constructing monuments and taking on various commemoration activities for fallen soldiers.

Each of these elements produced ideologies that re-focused the memory of the war and further solidified the myth of the war experience to "mask war and to legitimize the experience of war," claimed Mosse.[5] The Great War must not be remembered solely for the introduction of trench warfare, the global mass slaughter, and unprecedented mass destruction. Instead, the mythology of the war experience revived the spiritual sense of noble sacrifice, comradery, and national duty.

In terms of women and femininity during the war, Mosse does not provide an in-depth analysis. He merely stated that "the war, as far as the soldiers were concerned, only reinforced the appeal of traditional femininity which they idealized…in response to their longing for women and sexual imagery" [6] Mosse neglects the fact that women played an active role in the war. He claimed that women were merely passive images of sexuality rather than active contributors to the war efforts. Although he acknowledges that not all women stayed at home while the men went off to war, Mosse focuses solely on the masculine warfront experience. He did not consider the active roles women played in the war, or what women witnessed during the war could have a contribution to the mythology, specifically the war nurses. To Mosse, "Although nurses on the battlefield were praised and admired and often their courage was signaled out, their image nevertheless remained passive as angels of mercy, standing apart from the fighting."[7] The nurses' experiences, Mosse implies, could not contribute to the mythology because they were merely symbolic beings and not active participants in the war.

In his later 1996 publication of *The Image of Man,* Mosse does acknowledge that World War I represented a turning point for women, but he still maintained that "the Great War was a masculine event, despite the role it may have had in encouraging women…The men at the front saw women largely in a passive role as nurses or prostitutes."[8] Mosse dismissed the idea that women made an active contribution to the war efforts and construction of the mythology. He oversimplified the role of nurses in the war effort, and he equated the role of nurses to that of sex workers, refusing to consider that the role of women went beyond sexual beings for the men who were fighting. Again, he viewed women as symbolic entities, not vital players in the war.[9] Femininity was not a main

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[4] Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers,* 16.
[5] Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 7.
[6] Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 61.
[7] Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 61.
[8] George Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 107-108.
[9]Mosse, *The Image of Man, 108*.

character in the story of World War I; it was too overshadowed by masculinity in Mosse's interpretation. "The First World War tied nationalism and masculinity together more closely than ever before and as it did so, brought to a climax all the facts of masculinity," wrote Mosse.[10]

Offering an alternative assessment of gender in World War I, historian Susan R. Grayzel argued in her 1999 book, *Women's Identities at War*, that the Great War was an event where "gender roles and identities survived remarkably unscathed."[11] Rather than stating that the war was a turning point for either men or women, Grayzel claims that the war reinforced gender roles. To her, the point was not whether "the war was 'good' or 'bad' for women."[12] Instead, she argues that one must see World War I as having had "the largest group of adult noncombatant efforts to make sense of their and national identities at a pivotal moment of the modern era."[13] Grayzel, in this statement, advocates for a reexamination of the war, a movement away from the soldiers and combatants toward both the warfront and homefront participants of the war. She further adds that women were "central and active participants in societies mobilized for the first modern, total war."[14] Women were not merely passive in World War I; they contributed to the war experience, contrary to Mosse's argument. To Grayzel, "motherhood served as an anchor for stabilizing gender during this total war…the resilience of the gender system shaped how the war was defined and experienced."[15] It was only through assuming their feminine roles that women were able to contribute to the war.

Grayzel's article in *The Journal of Modern History*, titled "The Souls of Soldiers," addresses the war-front and home-front not as two separate spheres of the war, but as unique battles within one war: not exclusively a male soldier's war. Rather, "men and women alike are seen as proving they can "make war" by bravely risking death for the nation."[16] The Great War was a war on all fronts, and it cannot be viewed through the experiences of soldiers alone. Grayzel cites a story in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* that reported how two nurses were awarded the Croix de Guerre avec Palme after being killed in a bombing of their hospital. She notes the article's description of how nurses "heroically fell in the accomplishment of their duty."[17] Unlike Mosse, Grayzel demonstrates that masculine and gender roles were both active in World War I and establishes an understanding in which both combatants and noncombatants played vital roles in the war.

In a near identical fashion to men volunteering to become soldiers, women volunteered in the Great War by the thousands to serve their respective countries. British Nurse Violetta Thurstan recalled in her memoirs, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, that nurses both, "trained and untrained were besieging the war office to be sent to the front. Voluntary Aid Detachment members were feverishly practicing their bandaging… an endless procession of women wanting to help, anxious for adventure."[18] American nurse Elizabeth H. Ashe also shared a similar experience in her personal narrative, titled *Intimate Letters from France*, explaining how "nurses have responded splendidly. Everyone is eager for the privilege of going to the front."[19]

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[10] Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 108.

[11] Susan Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 107.

[12] Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War*, 6.

[13] Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War*, 1.

[14] Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War*, 7.

[15] Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War*, 10.

[16] Susan Grayzel, "The Souls of Soldiers": Civilians under Fire in First World War France," *The Journal of Modern History* 78, no. 3 (2006): 617.

[17] Grayzel, "The Souls of Soldiers": Civilians under Fire in the First World War France," 617.

[18] Violetta Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column With the Red Cross on the Western and Eastern Fronts During the First World War* (New York: Leonaur 1919), 39.

[19] Elizabeth H. Ashe, *Intimate Letters From France: and Extracts from the Diary of Elizabeth Ashe, 19 17-1919* (San Francisco: Bruce Brough Press, 1931), 77.

Scholar Victoria Holder's article "From Handmaiden to Right Hand" described how these women wished to serve "because they wanted to do their part as caregivers."[20] Women were taking up arms as nurses, they sought service on the front and contributed to the Great War, just as men desired to be soldiers on the front. The majority of these women came from Great Britain, France, and the United States. At the beginning of the 1900s, Britain and France had already included nurses into their military systems, and at the start of the war, nurses were ready and willing to help in the war effort. Initially, the numbers of British military volunteer nurses were only in the hundreds, but by the time of the Armistice about 23,000 women served as nurses; France ended up with 63,000 Red Cross volunteers, and the American Nurses Corps had 21,000.[21]

Historians Margaret Vining and Barton Hacker explain in their article, "From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform," that "by the middle of the century, particularly in Britain and the United States, ideals of womanhood and women's unique nurturing and civilizing qualities supported claims for equality and civil rights, laying the groundwork for expanded military roles for women."[22] Historian Neil M. Heyman also explores this idea of the desire to volunteer further in his book *Daily Life of World War I*. Women becoming nurses led to the "best chance of any woman to approach the fighting line and share the experiences of the combat soldier."[23] Women too were drawn to enlist and volunteer for the war because they shared in patriotism and a desire to serve their country. The war was not merely a man's experience, but also a shared experience, with women and their femininity and desire to volunteer for the war effort also contributing to the mythology of the war. Furthermore, women took on an active role and were not merely passive in the war effort.

By 1917 the majority of nurses were on the front lines, and they were faced with the harsh realities of war. In her monograph, *American Women in World War I*, historian Lettie Gavin discusses how the nurse's experiences quickly challenged the romantic impulses that drove them to volunteer for service:

> Popular illustrations depicted a pretty young woman wearing a crisp white uniform emblazoned with a scarlet cross, a halo cap and flowing veil…Nothing in this popular fantasy could have prepared the nurse for the reality: lice-infested, mud-crusted uniforms, bloody bandages, gaping shrapnel wounds, hideously infected fractures, mustard gas burns...shrieks of pain, trauma from exposure, fatigue and emotional collapse…[24]

Although noncombatants, nurses on the front faced the same fears of being bombed by the enemy and the horrors of the warfront as the soldiers they were aiding. Nurse Ashe shared her fear of the bombings. "We cannot tear ourselves from the exciting events around us. Every little while the sirens blow which means shells are flying and we are warned to get undercover," she recalled.[25] Relating to the mythology of the war, nurses too witnessed the new technologies, and they too described how its impact not only modernized war, but also it shaped memory for those involved in it. American Nurse Helen Fairchild described in a letter to her mother a mass bombardment at Base Hospital No. 10 LeTreport France on Aug 21, 1917. "It is…hard for me to write. We were

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[20] Neil Hayman, Daily *Life During World War I* (Westport, Connecticut: The Greenwood Press, 2002), 119-120.

[21] Heyman, *Daily Life During World War I*, 120.

[22] Barton C. Hacker and Margaret Vining, "From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform: Women, Social Class and Military Institutions before 1920," *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 3 (2001): 355.

[23] Heyman, *Daily Life of World War I*, 119.

[24] Lettie Gavin, *American Women in World War I: They Also Served* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado Press, 1999), 43.

[25] Ashe, *Intimate Letters From France,* 21.

bombarded by the Germans four nights ago…Bombs landed on a cook shack…The cook's leg came through the roof of the tent next door and the guy-ropes of Dr. Packard's tent were decorated with his entrails," she wrote. In addition to what she witnessed happen to the men at her location, her fellow nurses were also gravely injured by the bombardment of German troops. "The nurse who came up here with me had a frightful time…a piece of shrapnel came through our tent and penetrated her eye; another piece struck her cheek."[26] Nurse Fairchild's first-hand account of the attack on her camp makes clear that women nurses hardly were passive in the war and that they faced advanced weaponry attacks from the enemy while on active duty.

Nurse Violetta Thurstan described in her writings how a soldier's death lingered in her memory while she was working on the front lines:

> There was one poor Breton soldier, dying of septicemia, who lay in a small room off the large ward. He used to shriek to every passerby to give him drink, and no amount of water relieved his raging thirst. That voice calling incessantly night and day, 'A Boire, â boire!' haunted me long after he was dead.[27]

In her description, Thurstan implied that, like a soldier, she experienced the equivalent of post-traumatic stress disorder on the frontlines after having witnessed the death of a soldier. Her words make clear that nurses of the Great War were not only active witnesses to its destruction but also contributed to its literature and the creation of memory.

Despite the carnage, nurses still contributed to the mythology of the war by continuing their duties. Historian Victoria Holder shows in her article, "From Handmaiden to Right Hand," that nurses still carried out their duty and "put themselves at risk for disease and injury like any soldier, but they did not have the assistance of a weapon to defend themselves."[28] During battle, nurses tended to "the rush" of convoys of wounded soldiers coming from the battlefield and needed to treat hundreds of men.

Moreover, in terms of sharing the dangers of attacks from the enemy, nurses also witnessed the horrors of death from on the lines, not just those inflicted by the enemy. Ellen La Motte recalled an incident where a soldier attempted to take his own life to escape the war. "He fired a revolver up through the roof of his mouth, but he made a mess of it. The ball tore out his left eye, and then lodged somewhere under his skull," she recalled.[29] However, despite having witnessed this gruesome act, La Motte, based on her journal entry, displayed a militant mentality. Describing the suicide in her dairy, she explains, "He was a deserter, and discipline had to be maintained. Since he had failed in the job, his life must be saved…until he was well enough to be stood up against a wall and shot. This is War."[30] La Motte in this entry, despite having witnessed a soldier's attempted suicide, still took pride that she was in the service as a military nurse. She displayed no grief for the soldier's actions. She, like a soldier, was filled with a sense of honor and duty, and even in the face of this horrid event, La Motte carried on her responsibilities as a war nurse. Later, in her writing, she described the sense of pride she felt for being a nurse of the Great War. She recalled a moment when she saw soldiers nursed "back to health, to a point which they could again shoulder eighty pounds of marching kit…It was a pleasure to nurse such as these. It called forth one's skill and one's

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[26] Helen Fairchild, *Philadelphia to Flanders* (Grantville, PA: Printed Privately, 1917), 150.

[27] Violetta Thurstan *Field Hospital and Flying Column* (London and New York, 1919), 39.

[28] Victoria Holder, "From Handmaiden to Right Hand -- World War I and Advancements in Medicine...Sixth in an Ongoing Series about the History of Perioperative Nursing," *AORN Journal 80* (5): 919.

[29] Ellen N. La Motte *The Backwash of War (*New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1934), 3.

[30] La Motte, *The Backwash of War,* 6.

humanity."[31] La Motte, was proud of her work as a nurse and found a sense of joy in her part in the war. She helped the soldiers continue their fight and made an active contribution to the war effort.

In terms of commemoration, some nurses were remembered for their bravery on the front and for the sacrifices they made to carry on and defend the cause of their country. One nurse worthy of mention was British nurse Edith Cavell. Prior to the war, Cavell was the matron of the Berkendael Medical Institute in Brussels, Belgium. During Germany's occupation of Belgium, Cavell joined the Red Cross. The Berkendeal where she worked was also converted into a hospital that offered care to soldiers of various nationalities.[32] Cavell, was a member of an underground group in Brussels that aided French, Belgian, and British soldiers escape from German capture during the early months of the war. Eventually, Cavell and 70 of her companions were seized by German troops in 1915. She and one other were the only two executed. Christine Hallett noted in her book *Celebrating Nurses* that Cavell "condemned herself by the totally honest responses she gave to her German interrogators."[33] As the story suggests, Cavell, even in the hands of the enemy, did not lose her dignity and refused to allow herself to be intimidated by the enemies of her country.

Before her execution, Cavell's last words were, "But this I would say standing before God and Eternity; I realize that patriotism is not enough-I must have no hatred or bitterness toward anyone."[34] British allied forces utilized Cavell's death as war propaganda material to encourage more aid for the war effort. Cavell's story demonstrated that stories of bravery and selfless sacrifice for the duty of their country was not solely a masculine affair for soldiers on the field, but can be told through the stories of the non-combatant nurses of the Great War. British propaganda's use of her story also exemplifies that men were not the only ones being recognized in the Great War's memory of commemoration. The story of her bravery suggests that honor and duty are not solely a masculine experience. Cavell was far more than a passive character in the war. Through her role as war nurse, she performed her obligations with dignity and died for her country. Stories like Cavell's and the testimonies of nurses also contribute to the mythology of the war experience. Cavell's death shaped memory of the war, even generations after the war.

Like men fighting overseas, duty for the war nurses did not simply end on November 11, 1918, Armistice Day. Most nurses overseas were still assisting with sick and wounded soldiers several months after the end of the war, and it was several months before they were able to demobilize and return to their homes. In some cases, groups of women had decided to stay in their assigned area and continue with their duties with the Red Cross. In the years following the war, nurses were commemorated in the United States for their efforts. On April 24, 1919, New York City hosted a Nurses' Day and parade of nurses with the Red Cross. President Woodrow Wilson's daughter Eleanor Wilson McAdoo was in attendance. On this day, the nurses were also to receive insurance benefits like the veterans of the war. McAdoo stated that "We have worked in the comfort and safety of our homes while they have faced danger and death to save the men we love."[35]

In the years after the war, the Red Cross in New York hosted additional memorial events for nurses. May 16, 1922, marked the third annual tribute to honor the memory of Florence Nightingale (founder of modern nursing) and to honor 300 nurses who had lost their lives in World War I.

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[31] La Motte, *The Backwash of War,* 7.

[32] Ginny A. Roth and Elizabeth Fee, "A Soldier's Hero: Edith Cavell (1865-1915)," *American Journal Of Public Health* 100, no. 10: 1865-1866.

[33] Christine Hallet, *Celebrating Nurses: A Visual History* (Barbican, London: Fil Rouge Press Ltd, 2010), 132.

[34] Hallet, *Celebrating Nurses: A Visual History*, 133.

[35] "Mrs. M'Adoo Lauds Women in the War: President's Daughter Speaking for Loan, Praises Heroism of Red Cross Nurses," *The New York Times,* April 24, 1919.

Three thousand nurses in uniform attended a church service at St. John the Divine.[36] An additional event the following year had four thousand nurses in attendance.[37] In many ways, nurses received the same heroic commemoration as soldiers of The Great War. The fallen men and women were both honored by the general public, and both genders contributed to the mythology of the war.

The Great War lives up to its title as being a massive war that engulfed both combatants and noncombatants, both male and female. The demand for volunteers encompassed all citizens, both men and women. Both soldiers and nurses witnessed the full extent of war's brutality, from its advanced weaponry, to the desolation of living in the trenches, to having to withstand bombardments from the enemy. Men and women not only wrote of the terrors and destruction they witnessed, but both genders were inspired by their unique roles in the war and continued to share a sense of honor and nobleness. Both genders played a vital role in the Great War's narrative and both contributed respectively to the war's beginning and end. The mythology of the war experience relates not only to males. The Great War had immense impact on all those who were participants in its story. Every gender contributed to the mythology of the war.

[36] "3,000 Nurses Honor Their Dead in War: March in Uniform to Nave of Cathedral of St. John the Divine Memorial," *New York Times,* May 16, 1927.

[37] "Nurses Spread Over the World: Their Forthcoming Tribute to Florence Nightingale and the Congress at Montreal Emphasize the Progress of Their Profession," *New York Times*, May 12, 1929.