

The Most Thrilling Life of Her Generation:

Mary Early Holliday and the Vanguard of the First World War's Home Front

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As the autumn of 1918 swept over the war-ravaged French countryside and the American Expeditionary Force swept through German-occupied swathes of the Western Front, Hoosier Y.M.C.A. volunteer Mary Early Holliday found herself mired in mud twice. The reason for each instance and the reflection it spurred prove to be an astounding mixture of the predictable and unpredictable for a turn of the century woman in a warzone.

Thanks to the capture of German stores, including twenty-five gallon containers, Holliday was now whipping up two hundred and fifty gallons of hot chocolate daily to serve to her beloved 42nd Division.¹ She and another “Y” woman took an ambulance truck two miles from Apremont, where they were billeted, to Baulny, where a Mrs. Springer, a Salvation Army volunteer and a doughnut-producing prodigy, shared a recipe for bigger batches of the treat.² The visit went off without a hitch, but they took a wrong turn as a rosy sunset ignited the sky and planes began flying overhead, preparing for another night of bombing.³ Their truck sinking in the mud, they called to pair of officers on the roadside who were watching an air battle through binoculars—to Holliday’s delight, the men turned out to be two friends from the Red Cross and the wrong turn became a surprise reunion.⁴

As Holliday admits humorously, “In this paper all exclamation points! Well, our life presented such startling contrasts they seem necessary.”⁵ During that same stint at Apremont’s Y.M.C.A. canteen, she made an excursion towards the front with Mr. Smith, one of the “Y” directors in France, and her boots became well acquainted with sections of no man’s land left behind in the wake of recent advances: “We tramped through acres of mud. It seemed to me that my skirt was soaked with mud to the knees, but it was worth it. That walk gave me more idea of

¹ Mary Early Holliday, *Mary Early Holliday Papers, 1917-1918*, Indianapolis Historical Society, 28.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 28-29

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

a battle than anything else I saw.”⁶ Mammoth, primitive tanks lay abandoned beneath the dusky sky, canteens, mess kits, and miscellaneous other items were scattered from the retreat, and unburied German dead remained stretched and crumpled in the open, besides what—or who—could be laying in the yawning carters left by bursting shells.⁷ This sober evening beneath the open sky and the other, joyous twilight meeting with doughnut recipe in hand serve as an introduction to the complex and diverse experience which Mary Early Holliday embarked upon when she boarded the ice and snow encrusted “Niagara” in December of 1917: as a single, thirty-one year old, college educated woman from Indianapolis creating a home away from home for soldiers “over there,” Holliday inhabited a liminal space between conventional and unconventional actions for a woman at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁸

Thirty-eight typewritten, yellowed pages, threatening to tear from the legal pad that binds them, contain Holliday’s rich remembrances, spanning from her first day “on a boat where not one soul is known to me, nor I to them” to late 1918, when she crossed into Belgium, Luxembourg, and finally Germany with the triumphant American army.⁹ This unpublished memoir, colored by community, compassion, international action, and personal growth, resides in a single folder at the Indianapolis Historical Society, and its contents challenge those who might hastily brush off Holliday’s wartime duties in Europe—anything from arranging Easter bouquets, to organizing entertainments, to dishing out hundreds of servings of hot chocolate—as frivolous. Her experiences provide a unique perspective not only of the First World War but also of American womanhood. Through her reminisces, we find that one does not have to be radical to be revolutionary and one does not have to wield a weapon in order to impact a war.

⁶ Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 29.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 1. Biographical material provided by the Indianapolis Historical Society through ancestry.com records and online newspaper archives.

⁹ Ibid., 1.

At around the time Holliday slogged through the abandoned stretch of no man's land, the American 1st Army numbered over one million men.¹⁰ In the midst of the war effort, American women likewise discovered opportunities to “do their bit”: around ten thousand female nurses served in the American Expeditionary Force, the Navy opened its doors to about three hundred female reservists who filled clerical positions, and the Signal Corps recruited over two hundred French-speaking American women to serve as switch-board operators in France—the “Hello Girls.”¹¹ Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, who published her own memoir detailing Paris at the close of the First World War, served as a war correspondent for *The Republic* and was severely wounded while touring a battlefield.¹² Another Hoosier native, Helen Purviance of Huntington, served with the Salvation Army and worked, like Mrs. Springer, to serve cooked confections to the soldiers.¹³ The image of the Salvation Army “Doughnut Lassie,” with a helmet strapped on her head and a platter of pastries in her hands, became a staple of propaganda posters.¹⁴ One of Holliday's cabin-mates in the “Niagara” was going overseas to work as a stenographer, and a dramatic propaganda poster published in 1917 depicts a young woman ready to spring from her office desk, gazing at her shadow transformed to that of a soldier with his bayonet ready and heeding the call splashed above this image: “Stenographers! Washington needs you!”¹⁵

Propaganda posters like this one painted a picture, literally and figuratively, of what roles women could take as citizens of a nation mobilizing for war. A Red Cross poster announced to

¹⁰ Byron Farwell, *Over There: The United States in the Great War, 1917-1918* (New York: Norton, 1999), 244.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 234, 70, 105.

¹² Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Shadow Shapes: The Journal of a Wounded Woman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920).

¹³ Liz Biro, “How a Hoosier veteran made the doughnut famous,” *Indianapolis Star*, November 10, 2014.

¹⁴ George M. Richards, “Oh, boy! That's the girl! The Salvation Army lassie--keep her on the job [graphic],” New York: The Sackett & Wilhelms Corporation, 1918, Library of Congress Online Catalog, <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3g10318/>.

¹⁵ “Stenographers! Washington needs you! / Still,” New York: Prudential Litho. Co., 1917, Library of Congress Online Catalog, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3g09932/>.

women on the home front that “You can help” with a lithograph of a calm woman knitting.¹⁶ The Y.W.C.A. printed posters declaring “For every fighter a woman worker: Back our second line of defense” above an endless parade of women outfitted for various types of work.¹⁷ Another Red Cross poster portrayed “The Comforter,” a white-clad nurse holding a baby and consoling a despairing woman as rubble smokes in the background.¹⁸ Yet another Y.W.C.A. poster hailed readers to “Back our girls over there” beneath a painting of a woman at a switchboard, soldiers parading in the windows behind her desk.¹⁹ From their own kitchens women could ration their use of wheat and meat, from their own living rooms they could knit hats and other items for soldiers overseas, and from their own pockets they could fund the army through the purchase of war bonds. For the more intrepid individuals who felt a call to directly minister to bleeding Europe, a journey “across the pond” and to the aid of refugees and the wounded was not impossible. Some of these wartime roles are familiar, others less so, but perhaps none less recognizable than the role represented on a joint Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. poster—Holliday’s role: on a snowy evening, silhouetted soldiers approach a building with warmly lit windows, beckoned to enter “His Home Over There.”²⁰

As that poster declared in text sprawled over the snow, there were “More than 2000 Such Homes for Our Boys.”²¹ In his book *Over There*, detailing American involvement in the First World War, Byron Farwell describes the Y.M.C.A. at war: “Throughout the United States and in

¹⁶ Wldayslaw Theodore Benda, "You can help," N.p., 1918, Yale University Library, Willa Cather Archive, http://cather.unl.edu/cs006_james.html.

¹⁷ Ernest Hamlin Baker, "For every fighter a woman worker [graphic] : Y.W.C.A. : Back our second line of defense," United States Printing & Lith. Co., 1918, Library of Congress Online Catalog, <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b52923/>.

¹⁸ Gordon Grant, "The comforter [graphic]," N.p., 1918, Library of Congress Online Catalog, <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3g07754/>.

¹⁹ Clarence F. Underwood, "Back our girls over there [graphic] : United War Work Campaign," N.p., 1918, Library of Congress Online Catalog, <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3g07709/>.

²⁰ Albert Herter, "His home over there--More than 2000 such homes for our boys [graphic] : United War Work Campaign, November 11th - 18th," N.p., 1918, Library of Congress Online Catalog, <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3g07922/>.

²¹ Ibid.

France the YMCA constructed ‘Y huts’ ... providing athletic, religious, educational, recreational, and social programs, including motion pictures, organized sports, talent contests, plays, recreational singing, and vaudeville shows as well as pool tables, pianos, and victrolas with records, offering hundreds of thousands of men from lower economic classes unprecedented access to middle-class culture.”²² Holliday writes of officers playing on the piano in her makeshift hearth and home behind the lines, of setting flowers as decoration on the writing tables, of watching track meets, of the singers, lecturers, and programs which she and other women organized and saw tour throughout the army.²³ She also indicates, as Farwell does, that her duties were directed more to the enlisted men than the officers. Her friends came from all walks of life—there were rough Montana men whose “lives had fluctuated between the cattle ranges and the barrooms of the small towns” and there were men like Larry Levingood, “a Princeton graduate and instructor ... so much of a gentleman that he never could salute properly,—he always had to bow.”²⁴ Though her first night on the “Niagara” was one of acquaintances, she would soon be a part of a community consisting of everyone from expatriates, *poilus*, refugees, French women who would sit with homesick American soldiers and speak English to them, crack-shot soldiers who would curse in front of her just to see her reaction, baby-faced men who boasted of love affairs, and men who would gladly heft weighty cans, clean counters, and or run errands all day for the “Y” women.²⁵

This provides a general indication of the kind of work Holliday would be doing with the Y.M.C.A., as well as a glimpse at the kind of life she led and the kind of people which she encountered while doing it, but all of this still does not quite get at the questions at the heart of

²² Farwell, *Over There*, 137.

²³ Holliday, *Papers, 1917-1918*, 12, 20, 16, 36.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7,10-11,12-13, 7.

the matter: what was the goal of her work, how did it affect her and those whose lives she touched, and why is her story not simply interesting but significant? The men whose morale she helped to uplift are, of course, the place to start. Holliday acknowledges on the first page of her memoir that this role in the war, new and unfamiliar to readers today, was brand new and unfamiliar to her too:

No one knew exactly what we were up against, but whatever came we were to turn our hands to anything, keep cheerful and help. There had never been women in the Y.M. huts before, so no one could tell us what jobs might come our way, but they trusted us to ‘make good’ and ‘do our bit’, and they knew the men would be glad to see us. This was very vague and all we could do was to go forward believing that we were needed and somehow wisdom would be given us.²⁶

This sense of uncertainty lingered and manifested itself in excitement and anxiety at a little New Year’s gathering she and two others still remaining in Paris cobbled together, feasting upon what remained of their supplies from the boat trip and toasting with coffee that had been cooked on a Sterno in the hotel room.²⁷ Driven by their high purpose of saving bleeding France, they still wondered where the coming year would bring them by the following December 31st—would they be surrounded by rubble or, as they little imagined but as Holliday actually experienced, would they ring in the New Year, victorious, in Germany?²⁸ They exchanged well wishes and good luck in their “extreme ignorance” and diverged on their different careers and adventures.²⁹ Holliday writes of being sent to her first assignment, Valdahon, and sitting on the train with her fellow volunteer and friend throughout, Miss Hall, both of them still dressed in their civilian

²⁶ Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

clothes: “Of course we didn’t have our uniforms – we were needed so badly [the Divisional Director] would have taken us wrapped in blankets trusting to clothe us on the way. Such was his faith and such his need.”³⁰ Holliday remarks that she often wished for more knowledge, or even to be ten women instead of just one to help to an even greater extent, but ready or not, she dug in to her new life.³¹

While “the zest of the unknown and the untried” drove her at Valdahon, as she sold dry goods from the canteen and she taught the American soldiers stationed there about French coinage (she defended it against the soldiers’ disparagement of its monetary value by pointing out its beauty), the camp fell under quarantine for measles, mumps, and scarlet fever, and she and Miss Hall were sent back to Paris—of course, not before they had both caught bronchitis.³² On sunny February 3rd, 1918, Holliday stepped out of the Ford which took her from the railroad station to the town of St. Aignen and she surveyed the old café turned “Y” hut: three doors on the street led to a reading room, the canteen, and an entertainment hall, and a red tile kitchen furnished with five charcoal burners, an old French stove, and a medieval looking courtyard in the back comprised the setting of the next seven months of Holliday’s volunteer work.³³

At St. Aignen she would support Shack, one of those rough-and-tumble Montana men, who was attempting to do some straightening up after learning of the death of his mother and the birth of his daughter back in America: “Night after night he made chocolate for us and carried heavy cans and joked with the men,—anything to keep away from the cafes” where his old friends sojourned each night for less wholesome company and entertainment.³⁴ There she spoke with Menzies, a Marine who was studying at the Signal School, who had been whisked to the

³⁰ Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

³² *Ibid.*, 7-8.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

battle at Chateau Thierry, had been wounded and sent to the hospital within an inconceivably brief three days, and had returned to them within the month.³⁵ Sitting on a pile of lumber by the canteen, he shared with Holliday and Miss Hall the harrowing details of that battle, and Holliday reflects,

How many men are maimed for life by just such a three days and how little we comprehend the change in them. Not only the change a wound makes, but also the change in their souls, in their way of dealing with life, in their valuations is beyond our comprehension. Menzies tries to bridge this gulf for us so that we may understand a little more why the men coming back from the front have that look in their eyes.³⁶

While Holliday never came closer to battle than the thrilling hum in the night air of a bombardment a few miles away and a wayward shell shooting overhead on one of her expeditions, this ability to empathize and extend compassion towards soldiers, whether they be struggling under the weight of homesickness, the haunting impact of battle, or physical illness or injury, was essential to her role in France.³⁷ St. Aignen was nicknamed “Saint Agony,” since it was a classification station which sent men fresh from America and men fresh from the hospital to their fates: were they to go to the front, to some other duty, to go back home?³⁸ A shoulder to lean on and a hand to hold were important to the soldiers in this uncertain time. Another Y.M.C.A. poster depicted a woman in the signature “Y” uniform—black blouse and skirt with a black cape—sitting on a hospital bed and adjusting the blankets for the occupant, a pale man with a bandage wrapped about his head.³⁹ Holliday writes of trips to the hospitals with armfuls

³⁵ Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-24, 29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁹ Edgar Wright, "The Y.M.C.A. service for relatives of dangerously wounded [graphic]," N.p., 1915, Library of Congress Online Catalog, <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3g11227/>.

of magazines, and when she and all of the French women in the town put their heads together to create buttonhole Easter bouquets for all of the men, gathering blossoms from persistent gardens flourishing even in wartime, she made sure to take flowers to the hospital so “that no American soldier in town might be overlooked that day.”⁴⁰

One of the most compelling instances of the comfort which Holliday provided, simply by her presence, arose during the St. Mihiel Drive, a major American offensive at the close of the war. She and another “Y” woman were on a vehicle loaded with supplies bound towards the front when they were caught in a traffic jam. The intermittent staff cars, regiments of infantry, and trucks they shared the road with began to come in both directions, and they inched forward yard by yard, passing the abandoned carcasses of horses laying by the roadsides and “beginning to pollute the air.” After an impromptu meal with one of the regiments of soldiers, a doctor who had joined the travelers asked Holliday and her companions if they would be open to accompanying him on a daunting mission. Because of red tape, two deceased American soldiers who should have been buried a few days earlier still needed to be identified and taken care of, and because this “was the first such experience the doctor had had and he was nervous” he asked them to join him.⁴¹ Of all of the men milling about on that crammed road, orderlies and soldiers and male volunteers, the doctor approached Holliday and her friends. He had been intimidated, and so he had called for their sympathy and moral support more than for the necessity of another set of hands. What he needed was another set of strong hearts. Eventually Holliday would be serving soldiers in a demolished town, and talking with the men, they would tell her that they

⁴⁰ Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 20, 16.

⁴¹ Ibid., 25.

were glad to see the “Y” women so close to danger, for “If we were there, -- well, they were all right then.”⁴²

Holliday’s memoir conjures for us an image of a determined woman working throughout the day to balance the books, to secure lemons for lemonade and recipes for doughnuts, to decorate and beautify the canteen, to provide entertainment with singers and intellectual stimulation with lecturers, and to spread good cheer even to the hospital beds of the wounded.⁴³ This picture, despite the unusual settings which often surrounded it, fits into the housekeeping, homemaking mission of a traditional set of values for women during this time period. At the beginning of the twentieth century the idea of the domestic sphere was still present, the idea of a woman’s role in comfort and cheer, morality and morale, religion and hearth and home, and so it is no doubt that Holliday, as she created a warm, home away from home space for the troops in her canteen, distributed magazines in the hospitals, dished out hot chocolate, and provided a source of community and compassion for the men far from home, performed a role well within comfortable convention. Holliday herself declares early in the memoir that “the Y.M. women were a symbol of the womanhood of America and if you squeezed their hands, you were really thinking of some one else [sic]. If you told them drink was your curse you just wanted their help in place of those you loved to carry you by the café door.”⁴⁴ When Holliday leaves St. Aignen with the American Expeditionary Force as it pushed the Germans back, she writes of Lois, another “Y” woman, being the aunt to one of the men they were served in the 117th Ammunition Train, and she explains that she “was accepted as a sort of under aunt, too”—she, like other

⁴² Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 26.

⁴³ Ibid., 19-20, Holliday provides a general sketch of what a day in St. Aignen working for the “Y” looked like, from breakfast and early morning chores like balancing the books, to trips to the hospital with magazines, to stealing a little time to write letters or go on an outing, to a trip in one of the “Y” Fords into town for lemons, jam, sugar, and utensils, to 10 P.M., when she would close the canteen doors.

⁴⁴Ibid., 2.

women serving overseas, became a kind of surrogate family in the stead of mothers, aunts, sisters, wives, and sweethearts who were still on the home front.⁴⁵

Holliday and her fellow female volunteers served as the vanguard of the home front—the home front that could actually be present on the battle front. This is an essential role: in the midst of the intense inhumanity which teemed throughout the First World War, the compassion and community which the “Y” women provided was a light in the dark. The domestic sphere is a space in which both men and women rest, recuperate, and find moral support and comfort, and it is a gendered space—even Holliday herself needed to retreat to the homes of some of her French friends, writing, “What a relief it was to escape from the throng of men, men, men, always around us to their feminine society.”⁴⁶ But Holliday, even as she played into gender expectations for her time, played out of them too: the completion of her duties went beyond the makeshift domestic sphere of the canteen, and at St. Aignen she would begin a transformation from her life before the war to a new understanding of herself and her place in the world. A particular, humorous anecdote of the many wonderful jokes and memories she shares serves as a fitting bridge.⁴⁷

St. Aignen was a picturesque location and was not without its tourist attractions. The old chateau, whose tower greeted Holliday as she first entered the town that bright February day, had a stunning spiral staircase and the cathedral boasted of a crypt with mural paintings from the eleventh and fifteenth centuries.⁴⁸ On one of the many Sunday afternoons which the “Y” women reserved for some sight-seeing, “the whole room rose up” when Holliday’s trip to these locations

⁴⁵ Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 30.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 14-15, Holliday takes the time to share some humor, even in wartime—from Mr. Snelling, a truck driver who had an affinity for baby goats which the whole village came to dote on and who was always hiding some dog or other, to a little mock rivalry between a colonel and an orderly over Miss Chamberlain, one of the entertainers, who swept into a waltz with the orderly as the big band practiced one morning.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

was announced, and she found that by the time she had reached the cathedral, she had a following of over sixty men! She had to split them all up, sending one group to the bell tower, one to the nave, and one to the crypt of the cathedral. Holliday recalls, “For weeks afterward the men laughed about Miss Holliday’s regiment.”⁴⁹ Although this was a playful proclamation, later on Holliday would become fiercely proud of the 42nd Division, which she served through their invasion of Germany. She declared that the “42nd [Division] was mine. I loved it, I was jealous for its honor. The army meant more to me than the ‘Y.’”⁵⁰ She wanted to stand beside the men, she served a prominent role in leading them, in jest for a town tour and in all seriousness for moral support and sympathy, and she felt herself a vital part of the group.

A change is notable in Holliday, in her convictions and her vision of herself in the war. At the beginning of her journey, her friend Mac brings her to the ship she boards for France.⁵¹ Upon arrival in Europe, Holliday writes about how the Indiana men saw her through the hectic process of customs, passport check, health inspection, baggage claim, et cetera.⁵² There is a reliance upon others, particularly men, as Holliday forges her way towards her Y.M.C.A. work. She describes her trepidation at Valdahon when she refers to the intimidating sergeant who visited her and Miss Hall each evening: “He scared us,” Holliday recalls, “we felt so green—until one evening he drew out a letter from home that he had to share with us, and from then we looked forward to his visits.”⁵³ Once they saw him entering into their own element, the makeshift domestic sphere of their canteen, they can relax and feel competent.

This timidity does not remain long. Holliday’s greenness would indeed wear off, to the point that she shocked herself with her certainty and conviction. As the front continued to move

⁴⁹ Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 8.

forward, gaining successes in the field, she recalls the possibility that she and other “Y” women would not move forward with their assignments, “We were to be sent from the Divisional area. This I could not stand. I asked to be allowed to join Lois and the ammunition train. If ever we were needed, I felt we were needed then when the Division was going into battle ... The Division, our glorious Rainbow Division! Leave it? Never voluntarily.”⁵⁴ She not only felt this certainty, she acted upon it. Holliday raised her voice to challenge those choosing her direction for her: “We fight disgustingly to go with the Division. I am ashamed now when I think of my angry passions and the scenes I made...”⁵⁵ Although she might admit some embarrassment, she would not have had it any other way—even with the hardships which her dedication brought her.

Despite needing to get water from the town pump and cleaning her teeth “there along with the boys,” they “all joked and laughed when the water almost froze [them].”⁵⁶ Despite living with Lois in a box car where tar dripped down from the ceiling and stuck for weeks to their bodies and their clothes, she persisted in being thankful for the little stove which provided blissful heat.⁵⁷ Despite being so sick with the flu that she writes she “could do nothing but sit by a stove all afternoon” and “did not dare to undress at night for fear that I could not get my clothes on again,” she recalls crossing into the Belgian frontier and feeling the ache in her heart at seeing the ruins, hearing the tales of suffering, and visiting the squares where civilian brutality occurred at the hands of the German occupiers.⁵⁸ She continued to make hot chocolate out in the damp air, despite her weakened condition.⁵⁹ She crossed into Germany with the American army.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 30.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

Holliday knew where she wanted to be, where she was meant to be and needed, and she went there, despite the initial qualms from those around her.

The words jump from the page: “The phrase on every ones [sic] lips was ‘It’s a great life, if you don’t weaken.’ I hated that word ‘weaken.’ Of course we won’t weaken; we’er [sic] going to win the war.”⁶¹ The bright determination blazing from this declaration could have come from the mind of soldier, scribbled in a front-line diary, or from a politician’s personal notes, taken down between telegrams, but no—this refusal to back down in the midst of making a difference and working to win a war came from Holliday. She stakes a subtle but significant claim in these few lines. She did not say “our boys are going to win the war” or “our men back home and on the front lines are going to win the war.” She said “we.” And she deserves to be included in “we.”

At the close of her memoir, Holliday writes of her return to Indiana and her reflection in the wake of her war work,

How unsatisfactory our life had been; how much was wanting; if just this and that had been different, how entirely different would have been our life. And yet as I walked in the Welcome Home Parade and I reviewed my sixteen months in my mind and marshalled my poignant memories before me, I knew that I would do it all over again even if I had to live each unsatisfactory day over just as I did live it. Carried along that day by the joy and enthusiasm of the occasion I knew we had to win the war and if I had had any part in achieving that end my time was well spent and I can be satisfied.⁶²

She would do it all again. Even if a modern audience might begin to consider pouring hot chocolate a frivolity, an unsatisfactory detail in comparison to so many other, grander gestures, it

⁶¹ Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 19.

⁶² Ibid., 37.

would do well to remember Holliday's walk from Apremont to the front: this war was full of drudgeries, of flooded trenches to be pumped dry, of stringing barbed wire and fighting over a few yards of cratered, muddy land. Despite the drudgery, despite the less than radical realities, revolutionary things happen. While Mary Early Holliday did walk in line with conventional duties, her role in the war defined by what she could offer socially to the soldiers as a woman, her fulfillment of her work was unconventional. She traversed mud, she braved cold and heat, she exerted herself to serve more men than she possibly could—at one point she reckons four women trying to cater to two thousand seven hundred soldiers—and through it all she gives very little time for fear or doubt.⁶³ She even joked at one point that she was more afraid of her pro-German landlord than any threat from enemy lines, and when a shell did fly overhead and she did feel fear, it was mixed with indignation at the inhumane and impersonal nature of this war, that this misdirected mortar might kill her from miles and miles away.⁶⁴ Holliday inhabited a transitional space between the American woman of the nineteenth century and the American woman of the twentieth. She represented the home front on the battle front, and, in all seriousness, hot chocolate can prove to be a powerful weapon of good.

When Holliday returned home, she remained transformed and found herself and her world shaped anew by her experiences overseas. The drive which pushed her through the ups and downs of wartime France continued to pulse within her. She opens her memoir with these stunning lines:

So vivid was our life in the A.E.F. a little stretch of Indiana road suddenly recalls a French road in the Argonne and a long line of German prisoners is passing me. I can hear their tread. I can see their faces,-- this isn't memory, this is too poignant, this is the very

⁶³ Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 23.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 24, 29.

warp and woof of life. I hate to recall days made endurable by a high hope, a noble purpose, and work, work, work at high pressure. It is all too vital to be picturesque and entertaining. It is too fluid to be set down on paper – and yet I must try.⁶⁵

She continuously expresses her inability to make the people she knew live before her readers, to make the world she lived in move for her audience. Despite this, she captures compassionate and sensitive portraits of those she meets within a few brief lines, and recalls, for example, the vastly varied experiences of two “Y” volunteers and ship-mates from the “Niagara”: of Miss Hall she wrote, “I never knew anyone to move so quickly nor to work so hard. How lazy I have felt beside her! And her spirit! When we would be half dead she could still jolly the men along and raise and laugh to cheer the gloomiest crowd,” and, when she later encountered another “Y” volunteer, she wrote “Miss Smaley ... looked older and more tired and told of her Foyer being shelled and of her work with the poilus and of that one dear lad who died in her arms before they could get him to the hospital. Her losses have been great. May her joys be greater.”⁶⁶ She writes with humor as well as delicacy when she calls to memory certain soldiers. Her portrayals of the feminine communities which she could flee to for moral support of her own in the midst of waves of male soldiers, orderlies, and officers, and of the families which welcomed her are equally tender, appreciative, and considerate.⁶⁷ Holliday reveals the diverse community which gathered together in the midst of a world war.

When she writes of her first trip to Paris, overwhelmed by the warmth of the train car because she had put on as many heavy layers as she could in preparation for the cold she was told to expect, she and the other volunteers turned to the frost-coated window-panes and

⁶⁵ Holliday, Papers, 1917-1918, 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 3, 5.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 11.

“scrape[d] holes in the ice to see out.”⁶⁸ She learned later the French word for mistletoe, which hung in huge knots from the trees that they passed by on the rails, and she writes, “Mistletoe is made over, is re-created for me from that ride to Paris.”⁶⁹ Before Mac brought her to the “Niagara” for her journey overseas, that Indiana road was just a road. That road, that mug of hot chocolate, that bouquet of flowers, that mistletoe will never be just what it was again. Her present became animated by the past in which she was active in a world-changing endeavor, one she counted herself a vital part of. She herself will never be the same. In the final words of her memoir she proclaims, “Unsatisfactory and futile as it may appear in detail, as a whole it is a life that many have envied me for it was very real and very stirring. It was a life peculiar to a certain age and place and circumstance. I have lived the most thrilling life of my generation.”⁷⁰

Unfortunately, while others envied Holliday’s exciting narrative of the war years as she shared it in private circles and public ones—according to the Indianapolis Historical Society, Holliday returned to Indianapolis and gave talks about her year abroad—her story and the stories of countless other women who served in various capacities have fallen to the wayside. In the immediate aftermath of the war, men returned to the factories and many women returned to their homes. The struggle of the “Hello Girls” is representative of the women in uniform after the First World War: while they “assumed they were in the Army Signal Corps ... They discovered that they were not only when they were discharged and informed that they had been merely employees and were ineligible for the status and benefits of veterans.”⁷¹ It took sixty years and a campaign by one of the last remaining “Hello Girls” before the army gave “honorable

⁶⁸ Holliday, *Papers, 1917-1918.*, 4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

⁷¹ Farwell, *Over There*, 307.

discharges, war medals, and veteran's benefits to the few survivors."⁷² Beyond this kind of formal recognition, the stories of women like Holliday, the Hello Girls, Helen Purviance and the Salvation Army lassies, and even the nurses who served in the war, almost three hundred of them perishing but the army leaving it up to the Red Cross to uniform and equip them, deserve to be heard.⁷³ This is not only because they broaden our understanding of war as we know it, but also because they demonstrate a side of war and the world we do not recognize. While Holliday's second trip with Mr. Smith at Apremont conjured more familiar images of the First World War, her first trip to receive Mrs. Springer's doughnut recipe was also an essential part of life for the American men and women "over there." It tells us something about the values of the day, about the opportunities for women at the beginning of the twentieth century, and about what war could mean for and how a war could change not just a man but also a woman. Holliday's participation in the war made an impact on the soldiers who were fighting it and on herself as well, and learning of it enriches our understanding of what the First World War was for the world, for humanity, for American women in the years just before they finally got the vote, and for this particular woman from Indianapolis who took a leap of faith "across the pond."

When Mary Early Holliday swore that she would not weaken, she urged us to remember that it was not "they" who won the war. It was "we."



⁷² Farwell, *Over There*, 307.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 234.

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