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Y GIRL

By Frances J. Gulick

"WE GOT our uniforms today. The suit is dark bluish gray with a light blue collar, hat and muffler. There is a wonderful heavy cape which is stunning, we all think."

This from Paris to the family in November of 1917. After two distracting weeks of waiting I had my uniform. What next?

"Miss Gulick, we are sending you to Gondrecourt. The worst mudhole in France."

This from the man at Y.M.C.A. headquarters and I was on my way.

My ideas as to what awaited me at Gondrecourt were vague. All of my ideas were vague. Within the past six weeks much had happened. As soon as I had learned that women were being accepted for duty overseas I had volunteered as a "canteen worker" and by pulling a string got an early sailing. I have since learned that the Y practised diplomacy to get women with the A.E.F. By "assisting in the menial work in the canteen and kitchen," we were to free men for the front. On the boat we listened to lectures about the "beneficent influences" we "wholesome American girls" were to exert upon the troops exposed to the "perils and temptations" of foreign service.

The patch of the U.S. First Division

On the train to Gondrecourt I speculated, very seriously, as to how one should go about it to exert upon troops the influences expected. I wondered if it were anything like entertaining in a dance hall in Alaska that did not sell liquor, which had been my occupation two winters before.

For the next few weeks I was too busy to wonder. On my arrival at Gondrecourt just after dark a Y man piloted me through a crooked and absolutely dark street that was quite as muddy as anything I had anticipated to a little canteen in an Adrian barracks. There were candles in the hut and blankets over the windows to keep the light from showing outside. The place was filled with soldiers. I mixed a can of chocolate and put it on a stove to boil. After supper I served the chocolate and sold cigarettes, making change in French, English and American money, until closing time at 9:30. When the dishes and pots had been washed I was shown to my billet in a French dwelling.

Two days later the Y rented a three-story building, the lower floor of which had been a café. We were two weeks cleaning the place up. Between running the old canteen and getting the new one ready there was plenty to do. Ethel Torrance and I were the only women on the staff.

The grand opening was scheduled for seven in the evening. By six the street in front was a solid bank of men. They broke the glass in the front door pushing. It was a hectic night but a successful one. I was happy. For the first time I was convinced that this work we were doing meant something to the men. The next morning Ethel Torrance and I, with our skirts pinned up like peasant women working in a field, removed the mud from the floors with hoes.

I had begun to read some meaning in the life about me which at first had presented merely a bewildering composite of faces, faces, uniforms and muddy boots. Gondrecourt was the center of the principal training area for combat troops. The troops consisted of the First Division, some Marines and miscellaneous outfits. The First Division had been in the trenches. I seem to have learned these things through the pores of my skin. No one soldier told me that much. I never had a chance to talk to one soldier that long.

The weather was cold and miserable. The men lived in barns, attics and Adrian huts. All day they maneuvered in fields of mud and ice under the eyes of French and British instructors. I think the first thing I learned to distinguish on uniforms was the colors of the hat cords—blue for infantry, red for artillery and so on. My education progressed to the chevrons of the non-commissioned officers and last of all to the insignia of the officers. Once there was a big stew to get the canteen in shape because some colonel or other was coming to inspect it. I was not particularly pleased with the idea. Couldn't a colonel find anything else to do?

Miss Frances J. Gulick, from a sketch by Edwin Earle

I was fussing with a green wood fire in a French stove when someone approached. He was an officer and all dressed up.

"Do you know how this damper works?" I asked by way of introduction.

Horrors! It was the inspecting colonel. But he knew how the damper worked and I felt better about colonels after that.

One busy day a telegram came saying that my father and mother would arrive from Paris that evening. They had come to France on missions having to do with relief work. After the first thrill of the meeting the presence of my parents in Gondrecourt gave me the queerest feeling. Never before had I realized with what imperceptible swiftness I had become a part of the military universe surrounding me. Home was incredibly remote. News of my friends with whom I had grown up seemed curiously flat and trivial. They lived in another world which had ceased to concern me a great deal.

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On January 15, 1918, the First Division started back to the front. The weather was the worst of the winter. The ground was a sheet of snow and ice. A rain that began to fall at dawn turned into sleet. Under their heavy packs the infantry slipped and slid all over the roads. Artillery horses could not keep their feet.

When the last unit reeled out of sight the canteen seemed strangely quiet. More troops were coming to Gondrecourt, but these would not be of the First Division, our pioneers in France. The Twenty-sixth Infantry, the Seventh Field Artillery and the First Engineers—I had learned to bandy these names like a veteran. I was conscious of the fact that I had "served" with Regulars. I had a recruit's awe of the sergeants with their Cuban and Philippine service ribbons, and hoped they would come to the hut more than they did. But these old soldiers, famed in song and story for their ways with women, were very shy and the soul of embarrassed courtesy. In Germany, when we might have become better acquainted, they were nearly all dead.

A little while before it had never occurred to me that I might not spend the war at Gondrecourt. Now I wished to go with the First Division. But I was ordered to Paris for reassignment.

In Paris I had breakfast in bed, my hair washed, a manicure and a facial. Still under the effects of this spree I ran into Billy Schlauffler, an aviator, engaged to a girl friend of mine. I had learned that the First Division was near Toul and asked him to take me there in his plane. He bought me some tea at the Continental instead.

I went to the Y headquarters determined to try an experiment. Addressing the person in charge I asked in the most matter-of-fact way for my travel order to join the First Division—and nearly dropped dead when I got it.

Ethel Torrance and I made the trip in a truck, landing at

American soldiers in French uniforms at Field Hospital 3, Froissy, France, getting broth N. Arrowsmith filling the cups, from Y girls, Miss M.N. Arrowsmith filling the cups, supplied by Miss Gertrude S. Ely, out of a G. I. pail

Boucq, regimental headquarters of the First Engineers, where a big tent was ready for us. Boucq was on a hillside facing the front line, which was about twelve kilometers distant. We could see most of the way in the daytime and at night the flares were quite visible. The sound of artillery fire was always in our ears, and a few enemy shells fell about Boucq during our stay. Two German planes were shot down nearby. There was a good deal of raiding on the front for a quiet sector. Rather often we were awakened at night by the barrage and we knew that some of our men were dying. We were issued steel helmets and gas masks, but after a few days the helmets were only worn in rainy weather.

The shelling frightened me but I did my best to keep anyone from finding this out, and don't think anyone did. The attitude of the civil population of Boucq was helpful. Boucq was used to the war. Life flowed on in a fairly normal way. Every night there were friendly gatherings in the little wineshop over which Miss Torrance and I slept, and the school children attended their classes carrying gas masks.

I was transferred to Sanzey on another part of the line. Company A of the First Engineers was there and in a woods just in front of us was the Fifth Field with the heavy guns. The men gave me an identification tag to hang about my neck with my name, my religion and "1st U S Eng" stamped upon it. I cannot tell you the pride I took in that dog tag. I belonged to an outfit!

A Home Front Fund-Raising Badge

For the first time I began to learn the names of some of the men. A company of the Second Engineers was also in that area, and this outfit furnished me two volunteer dishwashers—Small George and Middle-Sized Ed, who measured six feet three and six one respectively. Small George (George Bell) was a telephone lineman from the Black Hills of South Dakota and a gentleman if I ever knew one. I got a letter from him after he had gone. My answer came back with "Killed in Action" in red ink on the envelope.

In April the First Division was relieved by the Twenty-sixth. Ethel Torrance and I were sent to Foug to see the artillery brigade off. Erecting a stove on the railway station platform we made tea and passed out cigarettes and chocolate bars. A man could take his choice, and to my surprise most of them took chocolate. We also gave away about a hundred pounds of Black Jack chewing gum which I had brought along under the impression that it was Black Jack chewing tobacco. Moreover I had salvaged one of those plug tobacco cutters with a handle such as you used to see in country grocery stores. Getting out my cutter I knocked open the Black Jack—and imagine my chagrin! The boys

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Y girls taking pot luck from a mess kit with doughboys at Coblenz

laughed it off as a good joke on *us girls!* I carried that tobacco cutter in my bedding roll through the war and became an expert in its proper use.

A Y.M.C.A Volunteer
(image added)

Miss Torrance and I started serving the boys on a Saturday morning and saw the last box-car loaded with men and horses in a downpour of rain on the Monday morning following. During this time we had no sleep, though we spelled one another resting on a pile of straw in an iron hogshead that stood on the station platform.

My heart was broken again because I could not go with the division. But after staying on for the Twenty-sixth for a month I managed to scramble back with the First at Bonvillers on the Cantigny front.

This sector was active. The French heavy artillery was back of us shooting over our heads, and in front were the seventy-fives of the Sixth and Seventh Field. I messed with the officers of the Second Field Signal Battalion. Bonvillers had been rather shot up and was becoming more so. If I could get to sleep before the shelling started I usually slept through it, however, and could only judge the intensity of fire in the morning by the amount of dust shaken from the plaster onto my bedclothes. This sounds as though I had become war-hardened and brave, but it is not so. I never (*Continued on page 48*) got used to shellfire, but slept because I was dog tired.

A shell landed in the courtyard of the house our mess was in, but the mess mascot, a wild boar, escaped injury. There was a story, which I have forgotten, connected with the capture of this boar. Trying to recall it, however, brings to mind another story that I associate in memory with Cantigny. It seems that an infantry line was waiting to attack. The men were all nerves. A rabbit jumped out of the grass and scurried along the front. The men shot at the rabbit and laughed. The incident diverted their minds and they went into battle the better masters of themselves.

Of the battle of Cantigny I remember little that makes sense or fits in with the book accounts. I had been transferred to a canteen in the village of Varmaise about a mile from Bonvillers. Morning and evening I walked or bummed a ride to and fro. The noise was worse at Varmaise, several batteries of seventy-fives being quite nearby. As the daily tramp back and forth became a nuisance I finally persuaded Colonel Frazier of the First Engineers to let me sleep in the canteen, explaining that behind the piano was a fine place to spread a bed roll. That evening the Germans put several holes through my tent and one through the piano. Colonel Frazier withdrew his permission about sleeping there.

When the artillery preparation for the battle of Cantigny started they took us girls to Beauvais to sleep, bringing us back to the canteens in the morning. The second night we were again bowling along in our Ford when there was a flash and a crash and our little wagon was lifted up and set down on the other side of the road. That day a great French siege gun, elaborately camouflaged, had been put in place directly beside the road. It had fired just as we passed. The next night I decided to remain in Bonvillers, where only the Germans could blow you up and where I figured I could sleep while the other girls were commuting.

All was confusion when I got to Bonvillers. Field Hospital No. 12, one of four to which our wounded were being

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evacuated, was filled to overflowing with more than five hundred men. Orders were that we could not sleep in the town. The French residents who still clung to their homes also were sent trooping away by the sides of the roads with bundles on their backs. As the car for Beauvais had gone, Dorothy Francis, of the Bonvillers hut, two Salvation Army workers, a man and his wife, and I took our blankets and spread them under the boughs of an apple tree about a half a mile from the village.

So much for the nights. The days are a blur. As the artillery received orders to extend its arc of fire we knew that our infantry had advanced, though at what cost the long trains of wounded bore witness. We knew of counter-attacks before they were over, and awaited the outcome. The counter-attacks were beaten off. Our infantry held, then. It gathered strength and advanced once more. It halted. We heard that the engineers had gone into the battle-line to reinforce the infantry, which was true. I was conscious of a depressing sensation of futility at being so near and able to do so little. Making chocolate and putting out cigarettes seemed so little. The artillery, the signal corps, the scurrying staff people—they all seemed trivial, mere footmen to the gentry of battle, the unseen infantry up there in the din and the smoke.

When Cantigny was taken the French relieved us and the First shifted to a less strenuous part of the line in the same sector where we remained another month. We were in the line on the Fourth of July and the artillery fired a forty-eight round salvo at the Germans. A ball game was played at Varmaise within sound of German guns and on a field marked by shell-fire. About a dozen nurses came out to watch and I enjoyed seeing so many nice-looking American girls again. George Markward, one of the best providers in the Y, made the occasion memorable. He showed up with two or three cases of lemons. I got a company harnessmaker to make a lemon squeezer and an ex-bartender to mix the lemonade with water that had been carried two miles in G. I. cans. A line three hundred yards long was waiting and it did not diminish for two hours. Officers took their turns with the rest, as they always did at my canteens.

The relief of the division began on July 6th after seventy-two days in the line on that front. Our casualties had been 4.928, or every fifth man.

At Beauvais we halted for rest and replacements. This tranquil life lasted four days when the division was ordered back to the front to oppose the last great German drive. We Y girls were hustled to Paris for safe-keeping. "How I hate this hot town," I wrote to my mother on July 17th, "with no work to do and knowing how much we could be doing if they would let us stay with the boys."

Paris had its compensations, of course. "It is fine to get on real clothes and have all the baths you want. Yesterday I had three." Real clothes were the civvies I had in my trunk at the Hôtel Metropole. It was forbidden to wear them, naturally. One night another girl and I went to the Folies Bergère. Between acts we were seated at one of the little tables in the foyer when an American M. P. approached us.

"You ladies don't want to sit there," he said.

From another letter home: "You may laugh when I tell you that one of the main things to watch for at present is that the men don't like us too well. They seem to fall in love so easily over here."

One night at dinner time Ethel Torrance and I were suddenly ordered to a hospital for emergency duty. I do not recall the number of the hospital or exactly where it was, but I think we got there by taking a taxi from the end of the Métro line. I was shown to a tent and told to cut the men's bandages off. About twenty men were lying about, bloody and dirty. The sight made me sick and I don't know what I should have done but for a voice that piped up as brightly as you please:

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Y Girl

"Why, there's the girl who sewed on my first service stripe!"

I selected a fellow with a bandaged knee. That seemed an easy one to start on. I asked him how one cut off a bandage. He did not know. The scissors trembled in my hands, but somehow I got the field dressing off. All night I cut bandages, washed men's faces and took care of men coming out of ether. I had never seen a person come out of ether before and have never seen one since. I had to hold some of them down. It was a terrible night.

I got to bed at ten o'clock the following morning. At ten-thirty I was awakened and at noon was in a truck with four other girls bound for the First Division. We reached the First's sector at dark and were *(Continued on page 50)* dropped off at different places. I do not know the name of the smashed little town where they deposited me, but I think it was near Armoy-Villiers. In any event it was in the path of the Sixteenth Infantry's march out of the line.

Never have I seen such men. They looked like sleep-walkers. They seemed to walk on, not because they cared to or because it mattered whether they walked or stopped but because they had somehow got going and might as well walk as anything. They had been six days in battle. All that was left of the Second Battalion was commanded by a sergeant.

A field stove, tea, cakes and cigarettes were dumped off with me. I filled canteen cups with tea until three in the morning, when someone showed me to a room in a house with a roof and told me to get some sleep. I thought I should never sleep again. I keep seeing those men. I wanted to cry, but couldn't cry. I was afraid to be alone, and am almost too ashamed of it to tell what I did. I pushed a bureau against the door. And slept.

When I awoke troops were still coming from the line. A mess sergeant asked if he could use my stove. His kitchen was lost. He had coffee. We boiled it in my tea cans and I helped to serve coffee until eleven that night. The men would fall out and sit on the ground while they drank their coffee. Their clothing was in tatters and I made what emergency repairs one woman could. While sewing on one man's blouse I noticed a boy cutting buttons from his own blouse with a bayonet. A few moments later he asked if, please, miss, I would sew one of them on. He seemed to want to talk, but there was very little I could find to say. Afterward, in the endless crowds and files of men, I sometimes caught myself searching for that boy's face. But I never saw it again.

There were many faces I should not see again. In the fortnight I had been away the division had lost 234 officers and 7,083 men. But Soissons had been taken and the Germans were in retreat.

After a few days' rest and without replacements the division was transported by rail to the rear of the lines near Toul. I was put to driving a Ford truck. My camionette was a veteran. It had no windshield and in dry weather the dust would blind you and in wet weather the rain stung your face. The fenders were wired up to keep them from flopping on the tires. I coaxed the spark plugs to life with hairpins. (What if it had been a bobbed-hair war?) There were no lamps, of course.

While the division was in reserve I got in two days' practice at daylight driving. Then we moved up, relieving a Moroccan outfit. Fortunately the sector was quiet, with nothing but raids and patrols and a little artillery work.

My tour of duty now was divided between day and night driving. In the daytime vehicles were permitted as far as Division Headquarters at Saizerais. This part of the work was easy. But each evening, leaving Toul about five, so as to pass Saizerais just at dark, I had a route to work that took me as far as the remains of the villages of St. Jacques and Mamey, both within a kilometer of No Man's Land. Gertrude Ely, attached to the Eighteenth Infantry, had the hut

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at Mamey. I think she saw more war than any other American woman. I transported supplies and the Paris papers, talked to the personnel of the various huts, carried their complaints and wants back to the base at Toul and tried to fulfill them on my trip next night. After eight months of dish-washing this seemed like a lady's occupation. A night's run averaged fifty miles.

Driving without lights over shell-torn and occasionally shelled roads made one's eyes and ears rather sharp. These roads, absolutely empty during the day, were sinister rivers of motion at night. Trucks, staff cars, files of troops and an occasional horse-drawn gun streamed by in both directions. Dispatch riders on solo motorcycles flashed past like the wind. It was a sort of unwritten rule that a driver should carry a lighted cigarette. This saved many a smash up. Practically always I had company on my runs—soldiers going in or out on pass—and I always asked them to smoke.

There was zest to this life. Twice by an unguarded farm road I made my way around Saizerais and drove to Mamey to take a look at the front line by daylight. The officer who sent me back the second time made it clear that the experiment was not to be repeated. My short career as a driver is the high spot of my war. which otherwise was mainly dirt and drudgery. I got so that I knew the turns in the road that led across the narrow bridge over the moat at Toul as well by night as I did by day. It was a real thrill to pick up an infantryman at Mamey, where machine guns clattered and the flares bloomed over No Man's Land, and see him grab the edge of the seat as I shot over the Toul bridge. My only mishap occurred when I hit a tree and shook up some entertainers who had just arrived from the States.

On the morning of August 15th, when I came in from my run, I was handed a cablegram announcing the death of my father. A week later I sailed for home.

A Y.M.C.A. Dugout in France

I planned to be back in France in a month but this was not to be managed. The Y sent me on a speaking tour and it was only by using A. E. F. methods that I was able to return at all. The Division was in Germany and I went there, landing at Coblenz one midnight in December. A Knights of Columbus man, awakened by my efforts to find a billet, dressed and gave me his bed. The next day on the streets of Coblenz I saw a First Engineers truck and climbed in. That night truck and I were in Wirges, the engineer headquarters, with a hundred pounds of sugar and other Y supplies obtained in Coblenz by technically improper means. The day after that the officers provided canteen headquarters and I reported to the Y authorities that I was on the job with "my" regiment.

I was in Wirges seven months, and like everyone else connected with the welfare organizations worked like the devil and was able really to do some of the things we had tried to do in France. Dances, athletic events, a horse show, banquets, a celebration of the first anniversary of Soissons and excursions along the Rhine helped to speed the clock and the calendar. All this afforded an opportunity to get acquainted with the Army.

Much was accomplished, yet this life lacked something. So many one knew in the driving rush of battle days, and would like to have known better, were gone. The division was more than one hundred percent replacement. In some

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infantry companies of two hundred and fifty men, ten or fifteen, perhaps, had been at Gondrecourt.

I left Germany at the end of July, 1919, arriving home in August a little ahead of the division. Although I had been formally released from the service of the Y, when the division paraded in New York on September 10th I was invited to march with it, and did so, wearing full uniform, including white gloves purchased especially for the occasion. General Pershing led us.

On September 17th the wartime First fell in for the last time to parade in Washington. Five girls marched with the column—the same five who had ridden from Paris on that unforgettable July afternoon to meet the men coming out of the line after Soissons—Gertrude Ely, Ethel Torrance, Mary Arrowsmith, Marjorie Skelding and myself. With my white gloves in my kit I took a train home feeling that something of me would belong forever to the First Division.

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