

The Stars and Stripes

February 14, 1919

6,000 S.S.U. MEN THREADS OF KHAKI IN HORIZON BLUE

Ambulance Service Soldiers
Saw Few Yanks Before
Last July

90 PER CENT DECORATED

Cock of Verdun Now Adorns
Shoulders of Drivers Who
Rushed Wounded to Safety

There are 6,000 soldiers in one lost legion of the A.E.F.—6,000 soldiers who wear khaki uniforms with black-eagled buttons, bronze collar ornaments, golden service stripes and all; and yet for the greater part of 18 months on the Western front seldom met the hundreds of thousands of other American soldiers in France. They were woven into the whole French Army—threads of khaki running through the great blue fighting garment of France.

Officially they were the United States Army Ambulance Service with the French Army. To the poilu and the doughboy they were S.S.U. units. They transported more than half a million wounded French soldiers.

This group of 6,000 men—90 per cent of them from colleges in the States—was the direct result of a request from Marshal Joffre at the moment the United States entered the war, a request that enough American ambulance drivers to care for 100 French divisions be sent to France as soon as possible.

The first units arrived in France in June, 1917, and the whole contingent followed in a few months. The men coming from the States were joined by that other large group of American ambulance drivers which had been serving without pay all through the war with the French Army, many of them having started with their own cars in the first Battle of the Marne in 1914. The French Army, whose own ambulance service had been weakened by more than three years' casualties, absorbed the whole S.S.U. service, and its men were carrying back wounded under shell fire within a short time after they first stepped on French soil—the first American soldiers to see action.

Ambulance Service

Assigned to American Division

All through the hard French fighting of 1917 the 6,000 American ambulance drivers kept steadily at work in every sector of the French front. It was not until March, 1918, that the first sections of this service found themselves helping in battles with the fighting regiments of their own Army.

But with the intermingling of the Armies, when Château-Thierry leaped into American history, when the whole region between the Marne and the Aisne became an American battlefield, the S.S.U. made a new glorious name for itself. Many of the units were assigned to American divisions, although the greater majority of the ambulance drivers continued with the French.

Indicating the character of their service is the fact that more than 80 per cent of the S.S.U. men have been awarded decorations—not only the Croix de Guerre and the D.S.C., but the French Medaille Militaire, the fourragere and, in the case of one officer, the Legion of Honor. The Italian war cross is another Western front decoration, won by services performed with the slate-gray ranks over the Alps by a contingent which spent six months in Italy.

Because of its methods of operation, the S.S.U. experienced constant hazards, even more than those which fall to every ambulance service. Using light Ford ambulances, the S.S.U. drivers went far into the front of operations, often beyond the postes de secours, to the aid of men who had fallen and had not yet received first aid.

Through Shell Fire and Gas

The French theory of attending to wounded calls for their transportation to hospitals in the safe zones as rapidly as possible, fighting zone medical stations giving only emergency treatment and evacuating swiftly. So the S.S.U. men were not called upon often to give first aid.

Theirs was the specialist's task—to haul the wounded from the front under any circumstances, through shell fire and gas often. So it happened that this service had unusually heavy casualties. Direct hits of ambulances by shells were frequent. A recent incomplete list showed 300 men killed and wounded.

With the other American soldiers in France wearing shoulder insignias, the S.S.U. chose one for itself that symbolizes its attachment to the French. Its shoulder patch shows the Cock of Verdun—the famous fighting rooster—superimposed in white on a background of maroon. And while they are busy sewing on shoulder patches the S.S.U. men are thinking of going home. The high French command has promised that all the units probably would be released by the beginning of summer.