GENTLEMAN VOLUNTEERS
American Volunteer Ambulance Drivers in WWI

"The gentleman who signed the boys up was a New York lawyer and he talked about their being gentleman volunteers and behaving like gentleman and being a credit to the cause of the Allies and the American flag and civilization that the brave French soldiers had been fighting for so many years in the trenches."

John Dos Passos

This post card pictures the first ten ambulances of the American hospital in Paris. Mrs. William Vanderbilt donated money for the ambulances. Mr. Harold White, manager of the Ford Motor Company in France, arranged for shipment of the ten Model-T chassis. Mr. E. Christie, a Ford Motor Company employee, mailed the post card on 11/24/14, to his mother in Norway.

This is the story of American volunteer ambulance drivers who served in France and Italy before the United States entry into WWI on April 6, 1917. Almost immediately after war broke out in August 1914, young Americans began volunteering for ambulance duty in Europe. The majority of the volunteers came from Ivy League universities and Eastern prep schools. According to the American Field Service (AFS) WWI history, of the 2,500 drivers who served in the AFS: 348 came from Harvard; 202 from Yale; 187 from Princeton and 122 from Cornell. As war progressed the volunteer units grew steadily. By the time the U.S. Army took over the volunteer organizations in October 1917, over 3,500 Americans had served as drivers in 43 volunteer ambulance stations. The major exhibit headings are:

I. American Hospital—Neuilly-sur-Seine
II. American Field Ambulance with the Belgium Army—Frances Colby
III. Harjes Formation—H. Herman Harjes
IV. American Volunteer Motor-Ambulance Corps—Richard Norton
V. American Ambulance Field Service - Piatt Andrew
VI. Militarizing the Gentleman Volunteers
VII. American Red Cross Ambulance Service—Italy
Card mailed by an American hospital volunteer on 12/14/14. “There is no chance for the war to end within 9 months. It will last over a year yet. France is determined & confident. The wounds are terrible.”

Use of the British Military Post office (APO 5 Paris)

Most of the American war activities in France that preceded the United States entry into the war can trace their start to the American hospital in Neuilly-sur-Seine. For some years before the war members of the American colony in Paris maintained a small semi philanthropic hospital in the Paris suburb of Neuilly. At the outbreak of hostilities the hospital became the rallying center for the American colony to become involved in the French war effort. The facility was turned into an ambulance (the French used ambulance to designate a Military Hospital) for blessé (wounded) French soldiers. In late August of 1914 the French government offered the Americans the use of the larger Lycee Pasteur facility six blocks from their original location. The offer was gladly accepted and by early October the hospital had 238 patients.
An attempt to use a military free frank before it was recognized by the US postal system. Congress did not authorize free franking privileges until October 1917. British censorship markings.

Mail to England. Free frank recognized by the British Post Office.
American Hospital - Neuilly-sur-Seine
American Ambulance Corps

American Hospital - American Ambulance Corps: The first 10 ambulances of the American Hospital were modified Ford Model T cars built and donated by the Ford Motor company's French assembly plant. By December 1916, the hospital had 35 ambulances. A major financial backer for the build up of the ambulance fleet was Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt.

French Support Personnel for the American Ambulance Corps: While the drivers and money for the Ambulance Corps came from America, the French provided maintenance and other logistical support. This card, written in French and mailed to Mr. E. Christie, came from a French member of the American Ambulance Corps. Mr. Christie was an employee of Ford Motor Co. of France. Ford provided the chassis for many of the ambulances in the Corps. Possibly Mr. Christie was the Ford Motor contact with the American Ambulance Corps.
In 1914 and early 1915, a number of local hospitals and civic institions were converted into military hospitals. Anyone setting up a hospital or clinic needed their own ambulance corps to bring “blesses” to them. On February 1 1915, Mrs. Harry P. Whitney opened a 250 bed hospital in a converted Juilly, France sixteenth-century seminary. However the hospital had no means to bring in patients when first opened. The problem was corrected after Mrs. Whitney and the American Hospital Board in Paris (Mrs. Whitney was a board member) arranged for ambulances from the American Neuilly hospital to serve her hospital.
Frances Colby began his ambulance driving career with the American Hospital in the Fall of 1914. When the American hospital began to de-emphasize its transportation service, Colby went to Belgium in November 1914, to form his own ambulance group to serve what was left of the Belgium Army fighting in France. Both letters were posted in Dunkirk at British Army APO S10.
In October 1914, H. Herman Harjes, a senior partner of the Morgan-Harjes Bank in Paris, and his wife, a American Hospital board member, established a mobile hospital unit complete with its own ambulance service. In February 1915, the hospital unit was closed and the operation became strictly an ambulance service (Section 5). Later in the war the unit joined with the Richard Norton Ambulance Corps. At the time this letter was written Section 5 was part of the Norton organization.
Section Sanitaire (Etats)-Unis (S.S.U.) 7
Section 7 was the first unit organized by Richard Norton during October 1914. During December 1916 Section 7 was attached to the French 21st Division.

Section SSU 62 (12/17/16)
During September 1917 Section 62 was attached to the French 4th Division.

Richard Norton received his Ph.D. in archeology from Harvard in 1892. He later served as Director of American School of Classical Studies in Rome from 1899 to 1907. At the start of the war Norton was living in London. He became energized to form a volunteer ambulance unit for work on the Western Front by the horror stories he heard on the lack of care for the wounded.

In 1914, Richard Norton organized the American Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps with the help of the British Red Cross (or in spite of it), St. John Ambulance Association and later the American Red Cross. At first the vehicles were donated by wealthy Americans resident in England, followed rapidly by additional money from the United States. By October 1914, Norton had fifteen cars. The units served primarily with the British Army in Western France. When the United States entered the war in April 1917, the corps had more than 100 ambulances.
London Office. Served as a fund raising and recruitment focal point for the Norton Corps.
SSU 1 (11/8/15) At the time of this post card was written Section 1 was working in the Flanders sector. The writer Mr. K.E. Cunningham graduated form M.I.T. and served in the Army Engineering Corps. After the U.S. entered the war.

SSU 4 (5/17/17) Mail to Foreign Countries—French Congo, Africa Mail to from volunteers to foreign countries other than France and England is scarce. The writer Mr. Leon Buckler graduated from Harvard and later joined the U.S. Army Ambulance Service (USAAS).

The American Field Service (AFS) was organized by A. Piatt Andrew. In 1914 Andrew sailed for France after quitting his post as a member of the U.S. Monetary Commission, and for the next two months drove a French ambulance in the Flanders and Dunkirk sector. In April 1915, he convinced the French Government to allow him to organize an American volunteer ambulance service directly attached to the French Army.

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S.S.U. 3 (5/7/16) Section 3 transfer to Salonica in October 1916. The section served in the Balkans until 10/17 when it returned to France and was assimilated in the U.S. Army.

S.S.U. 10 (8/7/17) Section 10 never served in France. After the Section was organized it was sent to Salonica in Dec of 1916. Until 10/17 the Section served with the 76th Division in Albania and then returned to France and assimilation into the U.S. Army.

S.S.U. 3 and 10 each served in the Balkans with the French Army of the Orient. Mail to and from section members was sent through Marseilles, France (note the return address on the S.S.U. 3 card.)
In the Spring of 1917, the AFS was requested to help fill vacancies in the French Motor Transport Service. Responding to the French request, the AFS provided more than 800 volunteers (14 truck sections) to carry ammunition and supplies to the front lines. Each section had a “T.M.U.” number that stood for “Transport material Unit.”
Forwarded Mail  This short paid letter was originally addressed to Mr. Harold Wiswall at AFS Paris Hq., 21 Rue Raynouard, Paris. At AFS Hq. a forwarding hand stamp was applied to send the letter to S.S.U. 30.

Motion Picture Committee  At its U.S. headquarters in New York City, the AFS evidently used film of their Western Front operation to support their fund raising and recruitment work.
Frederick W. Kurth, Harvard University. Kurth served in T.M.U. 23 four months before his transfer to the U.S. Army.

During the autumn of 1917, the Ambulance and Camion sections were incorporated into United States Army Ambulance Service (U.S.A.A.S.) and United States Army Transport Service, American Mission with the French Army.
After the United States entered the war the American Red Cross formed a volunteer ambulance service in Italy. The first units to go were “picked and seasoned men,” recruited and selected for the ARC by the Transportation Committee of the American Military Hospital in Neuilly, from ambulance volunteers in France who refused militarization. Section 1 arrived in Milan on December 6, 1917, and on the 18th left for the front. The other two sections followed shortly thereafter. In June 1918, a new section of stateside volunteers (Hemingway's Section 4) was operating in the field.