

**“Girls” in Name Only:  
A Study of American Red Cross Volunteers on the Frontlines of World War II**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Auburn University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Master of  
Arts in History

Auburn, Alabama  
August 6, 2011

Keywords: volunteer, Red Cross,  
women, World War II, Clubmobile.

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## Abstract

This thesis reviews the wartime contributions and achievements of the women who volunteered for the American Red Cross during World War II driving Clubmobiles along the frontlines in the European theatre. The work posits that the American Red Cross worked hard to establish these women as safe and non-threatening to the social norms of the time. In so doing, it allowed these women to gain access to battle and combat to an extent no American women had before. In addition, the women who filled these roles were usually strong, independent, and capable and generally much more than the “girls” the American Red Cross sought and promoted.

## Acknowledgements

This work would never have been completed without the support and belief of my family and friends. Thank you to my parents Guy and Winnie, my sister Amanda and my in-laws Jim and Linda who managed never to seem surprised when I said I thought maybe I could finish it this year. Thank you to my colleagues who kept pushing me to “just finish it already!” And mostly, thank you to my husband Jay who never thought I was crazy to go back to school for history in the first place. Thanks for never losing faith in me and taking our sweet boy J.R. to the zoo so Mommy could squeeze in a few more hours of work. I love you honey. I could not have done it without you.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review.....	1
Chapter 2: Red Cross Women – “Girls” in Name Only.....	28
Chapter 3: Training, Preparation and Daily Life on the Clubmobile.....	57
Chapter 4: Uniforms – Intent vs. Reality.....	76
Chapter 5: The Clubmobiles in Combat.....	96
Conclusion.....	134
Bibliography.....	139

## Chapter 1

### Introduction and Literature Review

World War II found American women serving in many different positions, both at the front and at home. Areas where women served included all branches of the military, as well as non-military groups such as the American Red Cross. Service with the Red Cross was distinctive, and this was particularly true for the Clubmobile women, roving teams of three women assigned to a converted truck that delivered doughnuts, coffee, and cheer to enlisted men in all the major theaters of war. These “girls” (they were called such despite the fact that most were well into their late twenties) came closer to a combat role than did women in any other position, including those in the military. Clubmobile women were, in practice, America’s first female combat troops and were able to attain this position only because of their distinct non-military definition. Unlike official military women, American Red Cross (ARC) women did not pose any substantial threat to the established understanding of gender. Therefore, they were able to engage in aspects of war other American women would never even see. Given that these women were never officially sanctioned to fight, their accomplishments were nothing short of amazing, and went far beyond “peddling coffee and doughnuts”<sup>1</sup> to provide America with a shining example of the courage, resourcefulness and skill women can provide in combat if given the chance. Clubmobile “girls” also exemplified many of the questions and

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<sup>1</sup>Harriet Pinkston Engelhardt letter to her family on March 18, 1945 Harriet Pinkston Engelhardt Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL [hereinafter Engelhardt Papers].

issues faced by all American women in the World War II era, including those regarding changing sexual roles, relationships between men and women, and women and work.

The experiences of ARC Clubmobile women are especially evident in the letters of Harriet Pinkston Englehardt, a Montgomery, Alabama native who served the ARC as a Clubmobile Staff Assistant for over a year in the European theatre of war. Englehardt not only displays the qualities that made Clubmobile women particularly suited for their jobs, but also gives significant insight into the relationship these women had with combat troops and combat itself. Her experience illustrates the unusual opportunities afforded women by service with the ARC, as well as the trails blazed by Clubmobile women in combat well before many other American women would see the battlefield. Englehardt's background, training, and experiences will be used throughout this study, along with those of other women serving in the ARC, to highlight how Clubmobile work evolved and changed perceptions of women in combat roles.

### **History of the American Red Cross**

In 1863 a Swiss philanthropist by the name of Jean Henri Dunant established the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Dunant had recently witnessed the carnage of battle firsthand during the Battle of Solferino during the 1859 Austro-Sardinian War and was appalled by the sight of suffering wounded on both sides. In response, he conceived of the ICRC, based on the recognition that, in any battle, both sides experienced casualties, so that an impartial organization should be allowed to

administer care to the wounded, regardless of affiliation.<sup>2</sup> The organization, informally called the “Red Cross” due to its symbol of a red cross on a white standard, was thus begun. In 1864, Dunant and fellow founding member Gustave Moynier, were successful in obtaining signatures from most existing European nations for the Geneva Convention Treaty, which established rules of warfare for the humane treatment of wounded and captured soldiers. The treaty was signed by Austria, Baden, Bavaria, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, Saxony, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. It was not signed, however, by the United States of America, which opted out of the treaty based on an isolationist stance adopted in an effort to keep the relatively new nation out of European political entanglements.<sup>3</sup> The Geneva Convention Treaty was the first modern attempt to mitigate the impact of war on the human beings engaged in it. In essence, the treaty stipulated that the signatories would care for all wounded and would spare medical personnel, buildings, and vehicles from attack. These would be marked with a red cross to denote their non-combatant status.<sup>4</sup> These simple tenets became the basis for the organization still in existence today.

In the United States, Dunant’s counterpart was Clara Barton, a one-time school teacher whose efforts on behalf of wounded soldiers during the Civil War earned her national and international recognition. Barton was born in 1821 on Christmas day to a middle-class Massachusetts family. She began formal education at

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<sup>2</sup> Gwendolyn C. Shealy, *A Critical History of The American Red Cross, 1882-1945: The End of Noble Humanitarianism* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 2003), 14 and 15.

<sup>3</sup>Shealy, 17.

<sup>4</sup>Shealy, 16.

the age of three and expressed the “pressing need to be useful” from early on in her life.<sup>5</sup> After teaching summer school for a period, in 1850 Barton decided to pursue her education further at the Clinton Liberal Institute in Clinton New York. From there, she went on in 1854 to become a patent worker in Washington D.C.<sup>6</sup> She left the patent office in 1857 only to return in 1861 with the outbreak of the Civil War. It was at this time that Barton began her first relief efforts as she ministered to wounded soldiers in the Baltimore area. Soon, the forceful Barton was able to convince the military leadership in the area to allow her access to the battlefield wounded. She was given wagons and drivers to help deliver her first aid and other comfort supplies.<sup>7</sup> After the war, Barton toured the U.S., speaking publicly about the atrocities she had witnessed firsthand on the battlefield and calling for change.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in 1869, her chronically poor health forced her overseas for rest and recuperation in Switzerland. There, she met Dunant and learned of his plans for the ICRC.<sup>9</sup>

Barton returned to America determined to begin an organization similar to the ICRC. However, she was unable to convince the U.S. government to participate. So, in 1881, Barton formed an independent organization and called it the American Red Cross. Unlike the ICRC in Europe, the American Red Cross (ARC) was established without any formal government endorsement.<sup>10</sup> The first test of the new organization’s emergency response capabilities came in 1881 when it responded to a

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Clara Barton: Professional Angel* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987.), 3, 11, 16.

<sup>6</sup>Pryor, 31, 56.

<sup>7</sup> Pryor, 86.

<sup>8</sup>Pryor, 148.

<sup>9</sup>Shealy, 17.

<sup>10</sup>Shealy, 18.



wildfire in Michigan. Although the role was small, it helped secure presidential support for international Red Cross involvement. Finally, in 1882 the U.S. signed the Geneva Convention Treaty.<sup>11</sup> This legitimized the ARC at the same time it allowed the U.S. government access to Barton's organization. The trend of increasing government involvement in the activities of the ARC would continue up to World War II and through to the present day.

Shortly after the Geneva Convention Treaty was signed, the ARC officially began to participate in war efforts, beginning with the Spanish American War of 1898. Barton believed that the smaller scale of the war would provide the perfect stage for the ARC's first real wartime effort, and she was proven right.<sup>12</sup> Lasting just ten weeks, and producing only 379 U.S. casualties, the Spanish-American War allowed the fledgling ARC to show what it could do on behalf of the wounded and fighting men. At home in America, the ARC role in the war was lauded by the press, and its support provided the American public, which was far removed from the battlefield, an outlet to express its sympathy for the soldiers it could not directly help.<sup>13</sup>

Following its successful involvement in the Spanish-American War, in 1900 the Senate passed a bill incorporating the ARC, and thereby allowing greater government involvement in the organization.<sup>14</sup> In 1904, after a long and bitter struggle, Barton was replaced at the head of the organization by Mabel Boardman.

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<sup>11</sup>Pryor, 210.

<sup>12</sup>Shealy, 27.

<sup>13</sup>Shealy, 33.

<sup>14</sup>Shealy, 37, 39.

Boardman, it turned out, shared a very close relationship with Secretary of War William Howard Taft. The two corresponded constantly on everything, especially presidential policy.<sup>15</sup> In 1905, Boardman changed the charter of the ARC so that the principal officer was now named by the President. The charter also stipulated that the ARC would be accountable to the War Department and would annually be audited by it. This remains true even today and cemented the ARC's status as a quasi-governmental agency that the War Department would exert considerable sway over, particularly during times of war.<sup>16</sup> The first test of this new status would come in April 1917 with the beginning of U.S. involvement in World War I.

World War I saw a massive change in the way the ARC was organized, run, and funded. Soon after the start of the war, it became clear that the current ARC organizational structure, as well funding levels, were not adequate to sustain the level of services required of it for the American war effort. As a result, the War Department formed the ARC War Council to oversee operations. This Council was made up of corporate leaders, bankers, and other businessmen who provided the capital from which ARC services were provided. These men essentially replaced the female leaders of the ARC, such as Mabel Boardman, who were relegated to subordinate roles in the organization for the duration of the war.<sup>17</sup> The change in organizational structure put in place to accommodate the war effort also had a considerable effect on the scope and size of the ARC. When the War Council relinquished control at the end of the war in February of 1919, ARC personnel had

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<sup>15</sup>Shealy, 53.

<sup>16</sup>Shealy, 54.

<sup>17</sup>Shealy, 73.

risen from 175 in April of 1917 to some 14,000. Corporate management, as well as answering to the U.S. Government, now formed the basis for nearly all its operations, a trend that would continue through World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and into the present day.<sup>18</sup>

When the U.S. joined the second world war in December of 1941, the ARC was quickly mobilized both at home and abroad to provide medical relief and morale-boosting services. Eventually, the ARC was serving in all the theaters of war including Europe, Africa, Iran, and the Pacific. At its height of service, the ARC operated over 1,800 recreation facilities and hundreds of Clubmobiles. Female volunteers were involved in every aspect of operation, including stateside training, battlefield nursing, and driving Clubmobiles. The ARC presence in the war effort was so pervasive, in fact, that a 1946 Gallup Poll showed that nearly one half of all World War II veterans had firsthand experience with the organization and its employees. There were consistent complaints from veterans about the ARC, including that the women showed favoritism to officers, that they were inefficient and ill suited to the tasks, and that the ARC women were actually selling sex.<sup>19</sup> These complaints, however, are contradicted by many of the accounts of Clubmobile women as well as those of many veterans. They do, however, represent some of the areas of most concern for Clubmobile volunteers, and will be examined more in depth throughout this study.

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<sup>18</sup>Shealy, 74.

<sup>19</sup>Shealy, 90-91.

## Clubmobile History

In 1942, Harvey Gibson was appointed Commissioner of the ARC in Great Britain. Already at this time the ARC was operating clubs for American servicemen throughout Great Britain, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland whose purpose was to give soldiers a taste of home while relieving boredom and homesickness. Originally, these clubs were the only other service the ARC planned to provide in addition to the standard hospital and field medical services. Gibson, however quickly saw the problems with clubs. First, they were only useful for men on leave, which left a significant portion of the fighting force unattended most of the time. Second, the clubs did not allow the ARC to provide service to men out in the field on maneuvers. Gibson decided that the most useful service the ARC could provide to America's fighting men would be to bring them that "taste of home" when they needed it most: in the field. He envisioned a service club on wheels and dubbed it the "Clubmobile" after the "skimobile," a name he had given to a ski lift while vacationing in New Hampshire.<sup>20</sup>

The Clubmobile operation was based on the original mission outlined by Gibson. Its mission would be to serve scattered American troops, especially those serving in isolated positions. Further, Gibson decided that the roving clubs would be staffed by American women from all parts of the country. Original plans for the Clubmobiles called for the units to show movies, stage dances and serve light refreshments (i.e. coffee and doughnuts). In order to accomplish this mission, Gibson

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<sup>20</sup> Marjorie Lee Morgan, *The Clubmobile: The ARC in the Storm, A Personal History Of and By the Clubmobilers in the European Theatre of War During World War II* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hazlett Printing and Publishing, Inc., 1982), 14.

planned that the ARC would work closely with the military to schedule routes for Clubmobiles based on where the need for supplemental recreational facilities was greatest.<sup>21</sup>

Since the Clubmobiles had limited space and resources, ARC leaders determined that they should focus on a particular food item for delivery to the troops. Second only to hamburgers, doughnuts were a favorite food among American troops and were determined to be the best option for mobile dispersal to troops. When served alongside coffee, doughnuts became a powerful tool in combating battle fatigue among enlisted men.<sup>22</sup> Once an “all-American girl” served this combination, the ARC found its silver bullet, or silver doughnut.

On October 22, 1942, the first Clubmobile rolled into service as an ARC attempt to battle homesickness among American fighting men. The first Clubmobile was dubbed the “St. Louis” and was a British Ford with a 700 watt, 10 horsepower engine. It carried a three-woman crew that began its mission in and around London, eventually expanding visits to include bases and installations further out in the countryside. By November of 1942, the women staffing the Clubmobile had already found ways to improve service and were asking to be supplied with victrolas, records, gum, candy, cigarettes, and first aid kits to better accommodate soldiers’ needs.<sup>23</sup>

In January 1943, the ARC introduced the first Green Line bus model into service. This Clubmobile was a long, converted passenger bus that accommodated the

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<sup>21</sup>Morgan, 15.

<sup>22</sup>Oscar Whitelaw Rexford, *Battlestars and Doughnuts: World War II Clubmobile Experiences of Mary Metcalfe Rexford* (St. Louis, MO: The Patrice Press, 1989), 18.

<sup>23</sup>Morgan, 17.

regular canteen functions of other models plus had room for a lounge in the back. These Green Line models, however, were difficult to drive and became easily stuck in England's narrow (and often muddy) roads.<sup>24</sup> Although a few would make it across "the pond" to participate in the continental invasion, it became clear that a more versatile and hardy vehicle would be best suited to this type of work.

In planning for the European offensive, General Dwight D. Eisenhower asked the ARC and Gibson to make Clubmobile services available to his forces as soon after the invasion as possible. Eisenhower expressed the belief that Clubmobile services were well suited to provide morale support to the highly mobile invasion force. Early in 1944, ARC leaders began implementing plans for this new mission that would require an innovative design for the trucks and the logistics of transporting and disbursing thousands of pounds of supplies. In the end, ten Clubmobile groups were planned for deployment to the continent. Each group consisted of eight Clubmobiles, one cine-mobile (a bus modified to show films), two cargo trucks to ferry supplies, two Hillman pick-up trucks and one jeep.<sup>25</sup>

The Clubmobile that would be predominantly used on the European continent consisted of a converted 6x6 GMC truck equipped in the front half with a doughnut frying machine, six coffee urns, a working sink, running water, a water heater, and a portable field cooking range.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Morgan, 18.

<sup>25</sup>Morgan, 45.

<sup>26</sup>Rexford, 20.



The photo above shows a replication GMC 6X6 Clubmobile as it was used during World War II.

The back half of the truck contained a clubroom with books, a phonograph and speaker, and folding bunks for the women to sleep on when unable to return to their base at night.<sup>27</sup> The truck had much higher clearance than previous models to cope with muddy conditions, and the sides of the trucks were modified to fold down in order to provide serving space. Each vehicle carried a fifteen-day supply of doughnuts and coffee and was staffed by three ARC women who were responsible for driving, preparing and serving the doughnuts and coffee, as well as anything else that might be needed.<sup>28</sup> Before deployment on the continent, the women staffing Clubmobiles endured a rigorous training period in England where they received instruction in driving and repairing their vehicles.<sup>29</sup>

By war's end, ARC "girls" had prepared and served an estimated 1.6 million doughnuts from these moving canteens.<sup>30</sup> It was from these roving kitchens that

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<sup>27</sup> George Korson, *At His Side: The Story of The American Red Cross Overseas in World War II* (New York, NY: Coward McCann, Inc, 1945), 267.

<sup>28</sup> Emily Yellin, *Our Mother's War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2004), 178.

<sup>29</sup>Rexford, 20.

<sup>30</sup>Yellin, 175.

many American women would experience, first hand, the horror and hardship of war as well the exhilaration of independence and almost total self reliance. In many ways, the experience of the Clubmobiler was the pinnacle for women who had long used volunteer service and organizations to enter the public world of work and men.

### **The American Red Cross Clubmobile Literature**

Scholarship specifically regarding American Red Cross (ARC) Clubmobile women is not very extensive; however several compilations about women in World War II do include some analysis. For instance, Emily Yellin dedicates a chapter to these women in her work, *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front during World War II*, when looking at the volunteer roles played by women during the war.<sup>31</sup> Olga Gruzit-Hoyt takes a similar approach in *They Also Served: American Women in World War II*.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the Clubmobile women are briefly mentioned in several histories of the American Red Cross, though not in great detail. The other genre in which ARC women are featured is that of memoirs, such as the one written about Mary Metcalfe Rexford by her husband, Oscar Whitelaw Rexford.<sup>33</sup> This document was written, many years after the war, from the viewpoint of Metcalfe Rexford based on memories, letters she wrote home, and letters from former colleagues. These memoirs provide valuable firsthand information about

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<sup>31</sup> Emily Yellin, *Our Mother's War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Olga Gruzit-Hoyt, *They Also Served: American Women in World War II* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Oscar Whitelaw Rexford, *Battlestars and Doughnuts: World War II Clubmobile Experiences of Mary Metcalfe Rexford* (St. Louis, MO: The Patrice Press, 1989).



Clubmobile life; however time dims all memories, and often softens the focus. In this regard, Harriet Engelhardt's writings during her service offer time sensitive, raw details not available in most memoirs. Due to the relative scarcity of literature about Red Cross women and their work abroad, Engelhardt's letters become even more important for the perspective they provide.

### **Volunteerism in America**

Engelhardt's service with the Red Cross carried on a long standing American tradition of volunteerism and philanthropy. Likewise, historical writing on philanthropy in America also enjoys a long tradition. Robert Bremner explores its roots in his work, *American Philanthropy*, in which he argues that in America, philanthropy and volunteer work has primarily been an avenue to personal advancement. He references Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote that America differed from older European countries in that it had no established, historical elite class. Rather, all classes in America were connected by similar ideals, the strongest being a widespread acceptance of a moral code and economic principles. This code reigned in overt displays of wealth by those with more money and encouraged thrift and generosity among all classes.<sup>34</sup> Bremner argues that the first major historical event in U.S. history to bring volunteers and financial donations was the Civil War, which saw people mobilize on both sides of the conflict as never before. This mobilization in particular affected women, who were brought into the effort as nurses and fundraisers

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<sup>34</sup> Robert H. Bremner, *American Philanthropy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 43.

at rates never before seen.<sup>35</sup> It is also directly related to the establishment of the American Red Cross as a primary volunteer organization for women.

More recently, Lawrence J. Friedman and Mark D. McGarvie edited a compilation of essays entitled *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History* which seeks to place philanthropy and charity in context as a major force in American politics and social life throughout its short history. The volume is divided into three sections, the first of which explores the early roots of philanthropy and charity in America. One overarching theory in these essays is the idea that philanthropy is a uniquely American construction that grew from its Protestant roots. In the second section of essays, the focus is largely on the growth and increasing organization of philanthropic efforts through the Industrial Revolution and past the First World War. This period saw substantial gains in wealth among industrialists who sought, through philanthropic efforts, to modernize society to better fit their ideals and aims. In the second section of essays, is one written by Kathleen McCartney that speaks specifically to the role of volunteer and charitable organizations for women during the Progressive Era. McCarthy explores how the women's roles in voluntary organizations allowed them access so they could influence the nation's welfare activities.

Finally, the third group of essays examines charity and philanthropy from 1930 to present day. Much of the focus here is on how these types of organizations helped the U.S. government reconstruct society after the Second World War and how

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<sup>35</sup>Bremner,76-77.

the large, highly organized charitable organizations were used both at home and aboard to influence civil society. Throughout the essays runs the central theme that America has witnessed an evolution from simple charitable acts performed largely by individuals to large scale philanthropic work with much broader societal change as the ultimate goal. Related to the topic discussed in this paper, the collection provides a good picture of how women's volunteer organizations, such as the Red Cross at its inception, fit into the greater picture of American philanthropy and charitable work.

Susan J. Ellis and Katherine Hines further explore volunteerism history in their book, *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers*,<sup>36</sup> in which they present volunteering in a historical perspective to try to determine what it has meant to the institution of democracy as a whole. The authors trace the evolution of American volunteerism during the American Colonial period, abolition, the Civil War and Reconstruction, Progressivism, women's suffrage, the Depression and World War II. Finally, they conclude by examining post-war volunteering, which they argue consisted mainly of protest activities.<sup>36</sup> The authors posit that because volunteering is so pervasive in American society, it often goes unrecognized and can get stereotyped as an activity performed only by certain segments of the population, namely wealthy women and seniors. ARC women readily fit into this framework of thinking, because their type of volunteer work fits comfortably into this accepted, or stereotypical, version of volunteering.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Susan Ellis, *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass Publishing, 1990), 237.

<sup>37</sup> Lawrence J. Friedman and Mark D. McGarvie, eds. *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Jason Kaufman asks the question: what impact did the late nineteenth century boom in voluntary associations have on later ones and why was there a boom in the first place? He also explores the concept of "competitive volunteerism" in which the number of volunteer organizations rapidly increased and created competition for members. Kaufman further argues that instead of representing a time of growth in volunteer organizations, the Progressive period was actually one of segregation and self-differentiation for groups already in existence.<sup>38</sup> In a more recent work about volunteer organizations, Kevin Rozario examines Red Cross solicitation techniques in his article "Delicious Horrors: Mass Culture, The Red Cross and the Appeal of Modern American Humanitarianism" in which he argues that modern humanitarianism is a product of popular culture and mass media. Through the media, the Red Cross was able to effectively connect itself to patriotism and communicate to the American public why it should care about suffering in other parts of the world.<sup>39</sup> These techniques were used to great benefit during World War II as well, when many of the women who eventually became Clubmobilers cite their first exposure to serving with the ARC as coming from print advertisements.

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<sup>38</sup> Jason Kaufman, *For the Common Good: American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc, 2002), 3,7,8.

<sup>39</sup> Kevin Rozario, "Delicious Horrors": Mass Culture, the Red Cross, and the Appeal of Modern American Humanitarianism," *American Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (September 2003): 426, 431.

## Volunteerism Among Women

Women in America have long looked to volunteer organizations as a means to move outside their prescribed realm of the home, whether for personal or altruistic reasons. If we are to apply similar motivations to why women were interested in Clubmobile and ARC work, it is important to examine writings on how this trend began and what it meant for American women. Overall, scholarship on the topic, regardless of when it was written, falls into one of three overall interpretations. The first argues that women's benevolent work, i.e., volunteer organizations focused on good works for the public benefit, was used primarily as a means of social control by the upper class to impose its specific class values on those in the lower social strata. These authors contend that this was the case both before the Civil War when these organizations began appearing in large numbers, and following the war during the Progressive Era when such organizations dramatically expanded in both number and scope of activity.<sup>40</sup> Generally, these historians concentrate on those groups organized and operated by white, upper-class, Protestant women in the Northeastern United States.

Also apparent in the scholarship on Progressive women's organizations is the interpretation in which more attention is paid to the concept of a "woman's sphere" of influence and how this concept impacted middle-class women's self identity in relation to volunteer and benevolent activities. The term "women's sphere" refers to the Victorian concept that women and men should inhabit separate and mutually

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<sup>40</sup> Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 1.

supportive spheres in order to influence society in a constructive manner. Men were expected to inhabit the public sphere of work and politics while women inhabited the private one of home and family. These writings seek to more closely explore the shared experience of women that was believed to transcend class status and how this was used by women during the Progressive Era to both justify their activities and further their causes.<sup>41</sup> Although broader in examination of reasons behind benevolent work than the interpretation described above, this revisionist scholarship is still primarily concerned with white, Protestant women and how they were able to use the idea of a separate sphere to justify a wide range of activity outside the home. Clubmobile women, arguably, were able to merge the acceptable private sphere traditionally inhabited by women, namely the home and the kitchen, and the very public and male sphere of military service and combat. By continuing to inhabit their sphere while immersed in a male one, Clubmobile women gained access to the American public sphere never before attained.

In her 1988 article, “Separate Spheres, Female Works, Woman’s Place: the Rhetoric of Women’s History,” Linda K. Kerber traces the historical literature and its interpretation of the concept of “separate spheres” back to the coining of the phrase by Alexis de Tocqueville. She argues that the concept has been used repeatedly, although differently, by generations of historians to try to describe women’s trajectory in American history. She notes that while some historians have interpreted the concept as a way to describe how women were able to gain more autonomy over their own “sphere,” others contend that the “sphere” was used to effectively limit

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<sup>41</sup>Ginzberg, 3.

women to the home during their young and middle adult years. This prevented women from ever being able to enter the public sphere in any significant way. Kerber also writes that the concept of “separate spheres” as an ideology allowed historians to try to determine how Americans might react to a particular topic. For instance that the American public would be supportive of women teaching because this sort of care giving was in step with their prescribed sphere, but opposed women’s suffrage because it was not. Kerber asserts that the dynamics of separate spheres still exists and the metaphor remains in use because it is still a useful way for many to describe spaces that are still very much gendered. She ends with the observation that the concept is still relevant because the construction of power and authority is validated by its distance from what is feminine or considered effeminate.<sup>42</sup>

The revised analysis of women’s benevolent work is predicated on the work of Jurgen Habermas who first formulated ideas regarding public and private space; however he ignored gender. Specifically, Habermas defined public space as “the domain in social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed.” In theory, a public space is created any time private citizens come together as a group, and therefore, in principle, is open to all citizens. Further, Habermas contends that citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion.<sup>43</sup> It is no accident, Habermas concludes, that this concept is rooted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as it is derived from the specific

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<sup>42</sup> Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 9-39.

<sup>43</sup>Jurgen Habermas in Steven Seidman, ed. *Jurgen Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989), 231.

historical situation of emerging democracy.<sup>44</sup> It is also not surprising therefore, that the concept is particularly applicable to women's groups of the Progressive Era who sought to create a public space in which they could use their limited citizenship to participate in the democratic process.

Finally, a third trend in interpretation seeks to further break down and investigate the nature of women's volunteer and altruistic work.<sup>45</sup> Here, other factors regarding the women who participated, as well as the organizations themselves and causes they served, begin to take on additional weight and importance. In this literature there begins to appear a significant discussion of issues such as race, religion, regional differences, and life-cycle as they pertain to women's participation in benevolent work. Historians currently exploring these issues have not completely abandoned the more traditional or revisionist viewpoints, as seen in Lori Ginzberg's 1990 book, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States*.

In *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, Ginzberg engages in an argument which both builds on traditional thought regarding women's benevolent work and, at the same time introduces new avenues of interpretation. Ginzberg makes several arguments throughout the book, primarily that belief in women's innately moral character was central to the rhetoric of women's benevolent work prior to the Civil War. She argues that the war, however, shifted these perceptions and rhetoric towards

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<sup>44</sup>Habermas, 232.

<sup>45</sup>Ginzberg, 4.



the issue of class, in which benevolent work was connected to the preservation of the middle class through both control of and influence over those below.

Specifically, Ginzberg studies the composition, operation, governance and supporting theory of benevolent groups formed by white, upper-class, Protestant women prior to and following the Civil War. She asserts that it is important to examine these organizations because doing so can provide valuable insight into general American political history and how benevolence was primarily a tool of elite white women's politics. She contends that prior to the Civil War, rhetoric made it appear such action was not motivated by class interests but was simply the result of women seeking to fill their natural role as the moral compass of society.<sup>46</sup> Not completely in line with the traditional interpretation, Ginzberg also uses the ideas of a "women's sphere" and its impact on the formation of middle-class women's identities, to draw nuanced points about how changing rhetoric made possible a shift in the tone of women's benevolent work from one of moral imperative to class-based control.

This idea of women, particularly those of middle to upper class status, being somehow innately moral is important to understanding how the American Red Cross was able to sell the American public on its intent to install middle class, white women so closely to large groups of young, lower-class men. That this would be acceptable built on the presumption that these women, because of their class status, would be able to not only control themselves, but also the lower class men around them.

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<sup>46</sup>Ginzberg, 216.

Kathleen McCarthy shares a similar analytical basis in her chapter, “Parallel Power Structures: Women and the Voluntary Sphere,” in which she argues that women used voluntary organizations to create power structures parallel to the state. She identifies five distinct aspects of women’s efforts in the voluntary sphere, including institutional development, social reform movements, non-governmental organizations to push for political change, and canvassing for donations.<sup>47</sup> McCarthy concludes with the contention that for women and other disenfranchised minorities, philanthropy provided the means by which to cause political change. Voluntary organizations, she finds, “provided the mechanism for achieving peaceful, gradualist, and often fundamental political change” and were the “crucibles on which women reshaped popular attitudes of gender, class, domesticity, and race.”<sup>48</sup> If this theory is extrapolated to the ARC Clubmobile women discussed in this work, we see women using the volunteer tradition to access the most sacred of male domains: combat and the military.

Rebecca Edwards argues for the centrality of women to politics in her book *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era*. Writing in 1997, Edwards contends that the “angel of the home legitimized the machinery of politics, and the machine validated the angel.” These concepts of faith, family order, and woman’s sphere shaped both the limits and possibilities for women in politics of the time. Since much political debate centered

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<sup>47</sup> Kathleen McCarthy, “Parallel Power Structures: Women and the Voluntary Sphere” in *Lady Bountiful Revisited: Women, Philanthropy, and Power* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>48</sup> McCarthy, 23.

on how the state should help preserve the family, the ideology of women's moral superiority offered a rationale for their involvement in politics.<sup>49</sup> Edwards asserts that there is no evidence of a "separate women's political culture" during this time. All women, even militant suffragists, worked within the male-dominated political machinery, because this was the only possible choice. Despite recent scholarship to the contrary, Edwards argues that women's political involvement during this time should not be viewed through personal relationships, but through the dominating political structure of elections. In fact, she notes that up until the late 1890's, women sought victories, using their "moral superiority" through partisan means, because this is where power, both perceived and real, was located.<sup>50</sup> In a similar vein, the moral superiority of the women who volunteered for service with the ARC would be critical in allowing the organization to place them so close to the fighting front and within the historically male space of military action.

In her book, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, Nancy Cott explores the period of the 1920's as it pertains to the women's movement in America. Commonly, this time between the attainment of suffrage and the later feminist action has been regarded as a slow period when little advancement occurred in the movement. Cott, however, spends her time in this book disproving this theory and asserting that, in fact, the 1920's were a time in which women used voluntary interest groups to advance their levels of political and social involvement. Cott argues that since the achievement of suffrage effectively split the women's movement and made it a target

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<sup>49</sup> Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3, 4, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Edwards, 8,9.

of reactionaries, many women eschewed partisan politics and instead continued to use voluntary associations as their primary access to the public sphere. Cott tells many stories of women in her work with references to the roles played by race, class, occupation, and marital status. One of her main arguments is that while the wide variety of women's organizations at this time provided great diversity and representation, it also effectively fractured the movement and impeded unified progress. Cott also spends time in the book discussing how these movements were eventually co-opted by other interests (similar to what occurred with the American Red Cross during and after World War I) and how working women became portrayed as a common enemy between the wars, but especially during the Depression.<sup>51</sup> Many of the women serving in the ARC and on the Clubmobiles were of an age that they would have begun entering both the workforce and voluntary associations right around the period Cott writes about. As working women at this time (which most of the Clubmobile women were) got pushed further out of the job market, volunteer organizations such as the ARC provided an option for paid employment that also was an accepted form of public female involvement.

### **Women in War**

Women's roles in wartime have received significant attention from scholars in recent years, and this is particularly true for World Wars I and II. These writings generally fall into one of three categories: women's roles on the home front, volunteer service (in particular nursing), and military service in World War II.

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<sup>51</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

Some have focused attention on the writings of women in wartime roles, such as World War I field nurses. Margaret Higonnet edited a book entitled *Nurses at the Front* in which the writings of two World War I field nurses are included. These writings shed light on the roles women played on the battlefield, as well as their thoughts and feelings regarding what they saw.<sup>52</sup> Carol Acton takes analysis of women's wartime writings further in her article, "Diverting the Gaze: The Unseen Text of Women's War Writing," in which she argues that much women's war writing was about negotiating the space between their non-combatant role and the combat role of men. She contends that women writing about World War I and Vietnam, in particular, faced the task of explaining the wars to an unknowing public in Britain and the U.S. This was not so much the case for World War II, especially in Britain, where the war touched home soil. She concludes that women's war writing almost always displays conflict over what can and cannot be written, especially about the trauma and death witnessed.<sup>53</sup> This tendency is also displayed in the letters of Harriet Pinkston Englehardt and the memoirs of other women who served with the American Red Cross.

In the article, "A Base Hospital is Not a Coney Island Dance Hall," Kimberly Jensen examines U.S. military nurses during World War I and the struggles they faced within the military hierarchy because of their lack of rank or power. Jensen points out that these nurses were called on to serve their country by helping, but not

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<sup>52</sup> Margaret Higonnet, *Nurses at the front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001).

<sup>53</sup> Carol Acton, "Diverting the Gaze: The Unseen Text in Women's War Writing," *College Literature* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 54-58.

to be warriors.<sup>54</sup> The same was true of Red Cross women during World War II, as they were called on to serve the troops in combat areas but strictly admonished not to participate in any combat. Meghan Winchell looks more specifically at support roles filled by women during war in her work, “To Make the Boys Feel at Home: USO Senior Hostesses and Gendered Citizenship.” Winchell looks at the U.S. home front during World War II and examines the unpaid emotional work provided by women of the USO, particularly the senior hostesses. These women acted as caring mother figures for soldiers to lean on when their troubles became more than younger women could manage. Similar to ARC Clubmobilers, senior hostesses for the USO were often middle- to upper-class women able to work without pay. Jenson concludes that women’s unpaid labor during World War II played a crucial role in reducing costs for support services.<sup>55</sup> The women who volunteered with the ARC also offered an inexpensive source of labor to supply vital support services at the fighting front at the same time they were represented to the men what they were fighting for.

Robert Westbrook examines women’s contributions during World War II in his article “I Want a Girl Just like the Girl that Married Harry James.” Westbrook, however, takes a different angle by using pin-ups to examine wartime discourse used in convincing men to fight. Westbrook argues that pin-ups were not fantasies, but represented the wives and girlfriends men were convinced they were fighting for. This, he concludes, meant that World War II was really one of personal interests in

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<sup>54</sup> Kimberly Jenson, “A Base Hospital is Not a Coney Island Dance Hall,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 26, no. 2 (2005): 209

<sup>55</sup> Meghan K. Winchell, “‘To Make the Boys Feel at Home’: USO Senior Hostesses and Gendered Citizenship,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 25, no. 1 (2004): 190, 193, 207.

which Americans were convinced to go to war to protect the state that protected them and their families.<sup>56</sup> The similarities between the ARC “girls” and the pin ups discussed by Westbrook are striking: namely, both represented what the American men were fighting for in World War II, one in person and the other in print.

World War II represented the first time in American history that women were officially made part of the military apparatus, and many scholars have looked at this aspect of women’s wartime experiences. For instance, in her article “Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union,” D’Ann Campbell compares how women were used in combat roles in the different countries. In the case of the U.S., women were recruited from the Women’s Army Corp (WAC) and secretly tested for roles in combat, where they performed well. Unlike Britain, however, where women were used in roles closer to actual combat, U.S. recruits never saw such action despite proven success. Campbell concludes that restrictions on American women performing in combat positions were not based on observation or the results of the experiments conducted, but in political opposition at home.<sup>57</sup> Americans could not reconcile themselves to the idea of women in formal combat roles. This in no way, however, reflected the actual skills women displayed when faced with combat situations, either simulated or real like those faced by ARC women.

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<sup>56</sup> Robert B. Westbrook, “‘I Want a Girl Just Like the Girl that Married Harry James’: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II,” *American Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (April 1993): 588, 596.

<sup>57</sup> D’Ann Campbell, “Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Military History*. 57, no 2 (April 1993): 305, 312, 322.

## Chapter 2

### Red Cross Women – “Girls” in Name Only

Club work with the American Red Cross (ARC) demanded much of the women who participated and none more so than from those who ran the Clubmobiles. These women not only had to fulfill the requirements of the position as set forth by the Red Cross, but they would soon learn that the work required a set of skills and personality traits not specified in the recruiting materials.

This chapter will examine the type of woman who ran the Clubmobile operation. Their similar backgrounds (as dictated by the ARC position requirements), as well as common personality traits that made them successful candidates for the job despite not being “required” by the ARC, will also be considered. The chapter will examine how ARC position requirements translated into the actual women performing the tasks and compare these women to those who signed up to serve with the female military organizations of the time. Finally, it will seek to draw correlations among the personality types of women who volunteered for active war service, in general, and make the argument that, regardless of class status, these women shared common personality traits and views that made them choose this line of work.

In order to qualify for service in the ARC, applicants had to fulfill a host of qualifications. To begin, ARC “girls” had to be at least twenty-five years of age, and



preferably not more than thirty. They also had to be well educated, including at least two years of college education, and to have had some work experience. Additionally, applicants had to be in good physical health, display an acceptably upbeat and positive attitude and social skills. This translated into resourcefulness, bravery, and above all friendliness.<sup>1</sup> Finally, only attractive women were selected for service with the ARC. It is important to note here exactly what “attractive” meant in relation to Red Cross women. As Mary Metcalfe Rexford explains, attractive did not mean beautiful, like a movie star. Rather, ARC women were expected to portray the appearance of a “well-scrubbed, wholesome girl next door...somewhere between dowdy and glamorous.”<sup>2</sup> If pin-ups reminded American fighting men of what they were at war for, ARC “girls” were intended to serve much the same purpose.<sup>3</sup>

While the ARC did not specifically require its service applicants to be unmarried, the majority of women who participated in its effort were single. Nearly all the women selected to work on the Clubmobiles that traveled across the English Channel were unmarried as the ARC believed it too risky to send a woman with a family into combat territory. The only exceptions to this were the few women whose husbands were also serving overseas. Eleanor Bumstead Stevenson’s husband, William E. Stevenson, served as American Red Cross Delegate to Great Britain, North Africa and Italy from 1942 through the end of the war. Eleanor followed her

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<sup>1</sup> George Korson, *At His Side: The Story of The American Red Cross Overseas in World War II* (New York, NY: Coward McCann, Inc, 1945),107.

<sup>2</sup>Oscar Whitelaw Rexford, *Battlestars and Doughnuts: World War II Clubmobile Experiences of Mary Metcalfe Rexford* (St. Louis, MO: The Patrice Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Robert B. Westbrook, “‘I Want a Girl Just Like the Girl that Married Harry James’: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II,” *American Quarterly*42, no. 4 (April 1993).

husband to serve in North Africa for the duration of the war. However, women such as Eleanor were rare and the majority of those who served overseas for the Red Cross were unmarried.

The Red Cross described the ideal club service applicant as unmarried, between 25 to 35 years of age, with some college education and work experience, healthy, attractive and sociable.<sup>4</sup> The Red Cross intended these requirements to ensure participants had certain qualities that would both guarantee success in the field and conform to social norms of the time. Combined, the requirements produced applicants who were, by and large, white, middle to upper class and formally educated. How these functioned together will be explored in more detail below. This chapter will also compare the background and education of a typical ARC volunteer to that of the women who enlisted in the official women's military branches of the time to illustrate the differences between the "enlisted" options for American women during World War II.

Fundamentally, in order to serve with the American Red Cross, women had to be able to pick up and leave their homes and possibly the country. Generally, this meant those with means and who were not responsible for providing for a family. Lower and working-class women were simply not in a position to do so. In addition, the college education and professional work experience requirements immediately eliminated most working and lower-class women from consideration. Higher education for women in the 1930's and 1940's was largely reserved to the middle and

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<sup>4</sup>Oscar Whitelaw Rexford, *Battlestars and Doughnuts: World War II Clubmobile Experiences of Mary Metcalfe Rexford* (St. Louis, MO: The Patrice Press, 1989),3.

upper classes. Studies conducted in 1923 revealed that median annual income for women in private institutions at that time hovered around \$5,100 while that of women in state and public institutions was about \$3,300.<sup>5</sup> To put these income levels in context, the average household income during the 1920's was around \$1,200 annually. Comparatively speaking then, women attending higher education institutions of any kind had the resources of middle and upper class families.

Harriet Pinkston Engelhardt provides a good example of the background of many of the women working overseas with the ARC. Born August 2, 1919 in Montgomery, Alabama, Engelhardt lived there until she left for college. She attended grammar school at Margaret Booth School, an exclusive, private, all-girls school in Montgomery. Engelhardt's father, Samuel Pinkston Engelhardt, was involved in real estate and insurance before going to work for the City of Montgomery.<sup>6</sup> Her family was upper middle class, which was reflected in her choice of college and ability to travel while away at school. Engelhardt spoke both Spanish and French and was active in sports her entire life. Most notably, she was an experienced equestrian and swimmer. She cut her volunteer teeth as the Chairman of the Water Safety Council of the Montgomery County Chapter of the American Red Cross before heading off for college in Virginia.

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<sup>5</sup>Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 146.

<sup>6</sup>Karon S. Bailey, "Harriet Englehardt A Job Worth Having." *Alabama Heritage*, Summer 2000, 28.

Engelhardt attended Hollins College, a traditional all-female liberal arts college, in Roanoke, Virginia, from 1937 to 1939.<sup>7</sup> She found Hollins restrictive and boring. In April of 1938, Engelhardt wrote her family about Hollins: “I think I am going raving crazy if something doesn’t happen to wake this place up.”<sup>8</sup> She soon transferred to Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Founded in 1933, the school was a “reaction to the more traditional schools of the time” and at its core was the idea that “a strong liberal and fine arts education must happen simultaneously inside and outside the classroom.”<sup>9</sup> Students did not hold formal jobs through the college but both faculty and students worked on the farm operated by the college, constructed buildings, did maintenance work, and generally participated in the operation of the school. Engelhardt relished this self-reliance, as well as the freedom she found at Black Mountain, which did not have the type of restrictive rules and behavioral norms found at Hollins College.

Black Mountain College provided an informal, co-educational atmosphere in which students were intimately involved in planning and directing their education. It opened in 1933 with John A. Rice at the helm. Rice wanted to create a new type of college from scratch that operated on the idea that the arts were central to the experience of learning.<sup>10</sup> “By combining communal living with an informal class

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<sup>7</sup> Hollins University Official Website, [http://www.hollins.edu/about/about\\_tour.htm](http://www.hollins.edu/about/about_tour.htm), accessed December 1, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Pinkston Englehardt letter to her family on April 4, 1938, Harriet Pinkston Engelhardt Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL [hereinafter Engelhardt Papers].

<sup>9</sup> Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center website, <http://blackmountaincollege.org> , accessed May 19, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center website, <http://blackmountaincollege.org/content/view/12/52/> , accessed May 19, 2010.

structure, Black Mountain created an environment conducive to the interdisciplinary work that was to revolutionize the arts and sciences of its time.”<sup>11</sup>

While in attendance at Black Mountain College, Engelhardt studied weaving and textile design and appears to have thrived in this informal and cutting edge educational atmosphere, writing home to her parents about all she was learning and how she loved the independence required of her from the school. All members of the college community participated in its operation, including farm work, construction projects and kitchen duty.<sup>12</sup> “For the first time in my life,” wrote Engelhardt, “I really am absolutely happy at a school.”<sup>13</sup> It is not clear that her parents were as thrilled with the education Engelhardt was receiving, as she replied to them in a letter that the school had not, in fact “changed her attitude” as they believed. Engelhardt staunchly defended the school, blamed any changes entirely on herself, and told her parents to do the same.<sup>14</sup> It seems that the liberal school had affected Engelhardt’s conservative Southern upbringing and values in ways her family did not approve of.

Upon graduation from Black Mountain College, Engelhardt was offered a position as a flight attendant with Pan Am Airlines based out of New York City, but turned it down and moved back to Montgomery to work as a mechanics helper fixing planes and tanks at Maxwell Field. In October, 1943, she moved to Montreal, Canada

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<sup>11</sup> American Masters, Black Mountain College informational website, [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/black\\_mountain\\_college.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/black_mountain_college.html), accessed May 19, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center website, <http://blackmountaincollege.org/content/view/12/52/>, accessed May 19, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Harriet Pinkston Englehardt letter to her family on October 3, 1939 and October 13, 1939, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>14</sup> Harriet Pinkston Englehardt letter to her family on February 12, 1940 Engelhardt Papers.

to work with friends as a mechanic's helper for the Royal Air Force.<sup>15</sup> There, she shifted around to several jobs before landing a position as a research assistant at a university after refusing a job found for her by the Canadian Selective Service at an aircraft factory. In December of 1943, she wrote home to her family about how much she enjoyed working with the RAF, but that the next thing she was working on would be "an experience of a lifetime." Presumably, she meant the Red Cross, since she would sign up to serve a short time later.<sup>16</sup>

Other women who joined the ARC as Clubmobilers had strikingly similar backgrounds to Engelhardt. For instance, Mary Thomas Sargent, who volunteered with the ARC in the Chinese/Burma/Indian war theater, hailed from Wisconsin. Able to trace her family history back to the Mayflower, Sargent's father was a lawyer and she described her mother as a "smart woman who took learning seriously."<sup>17</sup> Prior to joining the ARC, Sargent graduated from Ripon College in 1939 and had spent time working in the advertising department of the Boston Store in Milwaukee.

Born in 1915 Betty Jane (B.J.) Olewiler hailed from Tacoma, Washington. Prior to joining the ARC in 1943 she graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in psychology in 1939 and returned to Tacoma to take a position as a typist in a loan company for several years after graduation.<sup>18</sup> In 1941 she was determined to be closer to the action and moved to San Francisco to begin work as a teletype operator for the Matson Navigation Company which owned and operated

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<sup>15</sup>Balicy, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Harriet Pinkston Englehardt letter to her family on December 2, 1943, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Thomas Sargent, *Runway Towards Orion: The True Adventure of a Red Cross Girl on a B-29 Air Based in World War II India* (Grand Rapids, MI: Triumph Press Inc., 1984), 9, 10, 12.

<sup>18</sup> B.J. Olewiler, *A Woman in a Man's War: Reflections of a Red Cross Donut Girl of World War II* (Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris, 2003), 10-14

cruise ships that traveled to Hawaii and other Pacific destinations. Olewiler communicated with the New York office to receive and confirm reservations.<sup>19</sup> Olewiler reported to work at Matson on Monday December 8, 1941 as usual, the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed. She found Matson taken over by the Navy in order to use the cruise ships as transport for troops. She was given a final paycheck and sent home that same morning.<sup>20</sup> After returning to her family in Seattle, Olewiler decided to find a way overseas. The ARC was just such an opportunity. Mary Metcalf Rexford was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri where she attended a private girl's prep school during her formative years. Upon graduation, Rexford attended Smith College in Massachusetts until after her sophomore year when the scholarship would no longer cover the cost of attendance. At this point, Rexford returned to St. Louis to work and help support her family.<sup>21</sup>

Elizabeth Richardson was born in Akron, Ohio in 1918. Her father was a business executive employed by several rubber companies that moved them around the Midwest and Northeast during Richardson's childhood. Her mother was a "proper" New Yorker who was classically educated, including three years of music school in Berlin, Germany. Richardson grew up in an affluent family who employed domestic help throughout the Depression, was staunchly Republican, and did not approve of Franklin D. Roosevelt or the New Deal.<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Richardson graduated high school in 1936 and from Downers College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1940.

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<sup>19</sup>Olewiler, 15 and 16.

<sup>20</sup>Olewiler, 21.

<sup>21</sup>Rexford, 3.

<sup>22</sup> James H Madison, *Slinging Doughnuts for the Boys: An American Woman in World War II* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 1.

She moved home briefly with her parents after graduation, but hated it and soon moved back to Milwaukee to room with friends and take a job at Schuster's Department Store in the advertising division. By early 1944, everyone Richardson knew was headed to war. She determined she was going too and joined the ARC.<sup>23</sup>

Married with two daughters at the time she began service overseas with the ARC, Eleanor Bumstead Stevenson was somewhat unusual in this aspect of her background. However, in other areas she fit the ARC mold. Stevenson was born in 1902 and grew up primarily in New Haven, Connecticut. Her father was a Yale physicist who served in London during World War I as the scientific attaché to the American Embassy. Stevenson attended primary school at Rosemary Hall in Greenwich, Connecticut, a prestigious all-girls boarding school. She went on to earn her B.A. in English from Smith College in 1923.

Stevenson met her future husband in 1924 on a visit to England, and the two married in 1926. William Edward Stevenson was a graduate of Princeton and a Rhodes Scholar. He was made a delegate to the ARC England in 1942 and sent into service in Italy and Africa. Based on these facts, it is fair to say that Stevenson was not even middle class, as were most Clubmobilers, but rather she was distinctly upper class and privileged, which is likely part of the reason she was allowed to serve overseas despite being both a mother and wife. Eleanor followed her husband into active duty with the ARC in 1942, after leaving her two daughters in the care of her mother.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Madison, 2, 6, 7, 9.

<sup>24</sup>The William and Eleanor Stevenson papers finding aid, Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, OH.



Margaret McLeod was born February 1, 1902. She attended Oregon Agricultural College (now Oregon State University), receiving a B.S. in vocational education in 1926. For the next twenty years, McLeod traveled extensively in Europe, South America, and the Pacific; she worked in Hawaii as a secretary for Livingston Brothers, taught physical education at a high school in San Jose, California, and spent two years in Balboa, Panama, as an exchange teacher and Red Cross worker. It is not surprising that ARC volunteers shared similar backgrounds, since recruitment rules essentially ensured they would. What is significant about these backgrounds is that they helped produce women who were not only eligible for ARC volunteer work, but particularly suited to the Clubmobile function which required tenacity, maturity, and self-reliance. These backgrounds also set the ARC apart from other forms of active service for women in World War II, most notably, the Women's Army Corps (WAC).

### **The ARC vs. the WAC**

The Women's Army Corps, or WAC, was founded in 1942. Originally called the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), it was established to work "with" the Army. In 1943, the WAAC was successfully integrated into the U.S. Army and officially lost its "auxiliary" status.<sup>25</sup> The WAC's origins sprang from necessity. While most 1940s Americans were opposed to women serving in the military in any other capacity than as a nurse, the realities of wartime mobilization necessitated that every able-bodied male be available for combat duty. Therefore, women were trained

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<sup>25</sup> Judith A Bellafaire. *The Women's Army Corps: A Commemoration of World War II Service*. U.S. Center on Military History Brochure. Publication 72-1, from the World War II Commemorative Brochure series on the website. <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/wac/wac.htm> accessed July 2010.

to take over those duties necessary to war, but outside of combat. Unlike the Allies and Germany, who had lost such extensive manpower during the First World War that women were allowed much more active military roles in the Second World War, the U.S. expressly forbade women from serving in any combat position.<sup>26</sup> In the words of Oveta Culp Hobby, the first director of the WAC, every auxiliary who enlisted would be trained in a noncombatant military job and, thus, “free a man for combat.”<sup>27</sup> Throughout the war, the WAC would maintain that its women were simply filling the same supportive roles they always had in society. Not including nurses, approximately 80 percent of all WAC’s served in clerical positions while enlisted.<sup>28</sup> In reality, however, they were often filling positions formerly held by men, many of whom may not have been interested in heading out to combat. In this fundamental way, the WACs played a very different role in the war than did ARC women.

Recruitment records for the WAC reveal key similarities between its members and those who joined the ARC. Initially, officer training for the WAC attracted mostly college educated women, on average 25 years of age, who had held professional jobs.<sup>29</sup> The same was true for the ARC. In addition, some 70 percent of WAC enlisted women were single, as were nearly all ARC volunteers.<sup>30</sup> However, as the WAC organization grew, the recruit profile changed. By 1943, almost 41 percent

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<sup>26</sup> John. W. Jeffries, *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee Inc., 1996), 100.

<sup>27</sup> Bellafaire.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffries, 100.

<sup>29</sup> Bellafaire.

<sup>30</sup> Mattie E. Treadwell, Mattie E. *The Women’s Army Corps, 1945-1978* (Washington D.C.: The U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1954), 775.

of the WAC enlisted were 25 years or younger. Only 8.8 percent had graduated college, and only 16.1 percent had any college education. Most had earned a high school diploma.<sup>31</sup> Because the ARC required it for acceptance, it was staffed by women 25 years or older with at least some college experience.

Reasons for joining the two organizations, however, were similar for many women. Most recruits indicated they were enlisting or volunteering in order to do their part for the war effort and have an adventure. Generally, women enlisting for service were white, mature, single, working women who enjoyed a degree of independence.<sup>32</sup> Most of these women personally knew men being drafted and sent into combat. They believed themselves in a position to do more for the war effort than could many women, and so sought work with the WAC or ARC accordingly. Women considered all options for enlistment before selecting a specific route. In the case of many ARC volunteers, the WAC was an option to be considered, but was often not selected.<sup>33</sup> The reasons for this highlight the differences between the two service branches.

From its inception, the WAC encountered fierce resistance to the idea of women serving in the military, even in non-combat roles. Women in military uniform ran contrary to nearly all social norms of World War II America. The irony is that the ARC, with similar uniforms and deployment, met with little resistance from the public. While WAC women faced an almost constant barrage of criticism and

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<sup>31</sup>Treadwell, 775.

<sup>32</sup>Susan Zeiger, *In Uncle Sam's Service: Women Workers with the American Expeditionary Force, 1917-1919* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 26.

<sup>33</sup>Madison, 10.

suggestions about their uniforms, ARC women listened to fewer such comments. The public was consumed with details of the WAC uniform, especially items such as underwear and girdles. This was less true for the ARC women, who were less threatening in their “helper” role than were the WACs in an official military role. Therefore, the obvious display of control over their sexuality seen in uniform requirements was slightly less necessary.<sup>34</sup> This difference in reception has everything to do with the different roles filled by the two organizations, and the public’s perception of them.

The initial motto of the WAC was to “free a man for combat” by taking over non-combat jobs deemed suitable for females. These included communications, postal services, supply depot, and clerical work.<sup>35</sup> Although WACs were largely employed in what were seen as traditionally female positions, the fact remained that they were a part of the formal military and “taking” positions previously filled by men. In the public’s view, this made the WACs “mannish” and many questioned whether their real purpose was to “service” fighting men in other ways. Since ARC women were hired on the pretext of mainly serving food to fighting men, the public was slightly less suspect of their actual role.

In fact, the WAC suffered from continual moral attacks from the press and public regarding its members. Criticism ranged from allegations of more benign “un-feminine” conduct to those of open homosexuality.<sup>36</sup> Throughout 1943 rumors

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<sup>34</sup>Doris Weatherford, *American Women and World War II* (New York, NY: Facts on File, 1990), 48.

<sup>35</sup>Bellafaire.

<sup>36</sup>Emily Yellin, *Our Mother’s War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2004), 130-131.

persisted that large numbers of pregnant WACs were being returned from overseas duty, that 90 percent of all WACs were prostitutes, and that all WACs were issued condoms and were required to carry such items with them when out of barracks. All of these rumors were untrue, but so pervasive that much of the nation questioned the morals of all the enlisted women.<sup>37</sup> This perception significantly hampered recruitment efforts by the WAC into 1944, as fewer and fewer women wanted to be associated with the organization.

In some regards, the WAC organization did nothing to help suppress these types of rumors. Some women who served reported that every few weeks they were subjected to vaginal exams for sexually transmitted disease by an army doctor and nurse. All the women in the barracks were forced to lie down with their pants removed for a group exam.<sup>38</sup> Surely any reports of such activities did nothing to quell the rumors of immorality or to encourage more women to enlist.

Such perceptions were also not aided by the comments regarding WACs that were written home from men serving both overseas and stateside. Censors of military mail took a sampling of comments concerning WACs and found no instances of men advising a female to enlist. In fact, most comments were the direct opposite and informed women that enlisting with the WACs would constitute grounds for divorce or disownment. One soldier wrote:

Wife of one of the men in my company joined the Wacs. She simply wrote and told him that, tired of living off the fat of the land, she had enlisted. With no further ado, the man wrote his father's attorney to institute divorce

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<sup>37</sup> Treadwell, 202-203.

<sup>38</sup> Grace Porter Miller, *Call of Duty: A Montana Girl in World War II* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 32.

action...and is at present engaged in cutting off her allotments, changing insurance beneficiaries...<sup>39</sup>

Comments like these were common and very effective at persuading women not to enlist. Those who served reported abuse and slurs, including being called “whores,” “dykes,” and “camp followers.”<sup>40</sup> Even those with positive things to say about women serving in the military advised against enlisting. The comments reveal much about the conflicts between necessary war work and the changes taking place in gender relationships:

You ask me to tell you what I think of the Wacs and Waves with the idea of you joining in mind. Darling, that sort of puts me on the spot. If the idea of you joining were not involved, I would say that they have proven a proud, worthwhile part of our armed forces. But from the standpoint of you joining is something else again...very emphatically I do not want you to join.<sup>41</sup>

While the writer had some respect for the women who served and the work they were doing, he also clearly did not want his wife/girlfriend associated with the organization. One writer was more candid about what he believed the WACs were:

I don't want you to have a thing to do with them. Because they are the biggest houres (I hope this gets through the censor.) Lousey, boy, they are lousey, and maybe you think my blood don't boil and bubble.... God, I'd disown anybody who would join.<sup>42</sup>

ARC volunteers were called to serve in a very different role than were WACs.

While the ARC met some resistance and concern from the public regarding its volunteers, it was never at the same level as encountered by the WAC. This is because not only was volunteer service with the ARC long established (in World War

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<sup>39</sup>Treadwell, 212.

<sup>40</sup>Miller, 27.

<sup>41</sup>Treadwell, 212.

<sup>42</sup>Treadwell, 212.

I and before) but because the role of the ARC was to serve the fighting men, not work alongside them in the war effort. It maintained the traditional supportive role of women and did not as directly challenge social norms. Even the language used to describe the women who participated is telling: ARC volunteers were “girls” (despite their age) and WACs were more often referred to as “women.” Referring to ARC volunteers as “girls” helped maintain their non-threatening status and set them apart from the “women” of the WAC. ARC women did not face the same opposition since they conformed more closely to existing stereotypes of women, at least on paper.<sup>43</sup>

For ARC “girls”, their pseudo-military status caused confusion, and Harriet Englehardt noted in a letter that many French mistook them for traveling brothels.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, ARC women represented something entirely different to Americans than did the WAC. As mentioned previously, ARC women were to remind men what they were fighting for at home, and therefore the women’s morality was to be carefully protected.<sup>45</sup> For example, ARC women frequently reported that despite being surrounded by enlisted men most of the time, they were generally not bothered by them. When a man did step out of line, the women reported that his buddies usually interceded quickly to correct him, and they did not take official action. The

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<sup>43</sup>Yellin, 157.

<sup>44</sup> Englehardt letter to her family on letter to family, September 11, 1944, Engelhardt Papers

<sup>45</sup> Mary Metcalfe Rexford reports that once she arrived in New York City to await transport to England, her dormitory was guarded by military police who escorted her and other ARC women around the city.  
Rexford, 5.

same was not necessarily true for WAC women, who often faced overt sexual advances as well as harassment in regard to career advancement.<sup>46</sup>

Certainly the ARC and its volunteers faced their share of skepticism and derision. For instance, the same censor sampling of GI letters included the comment that “Any service woman – Wac, Wave, Spar, Nurse, Red Cross – isn’t respected.”<sup>47</sup> For many of the fighting men, any woman in uniform and participating in the war effort in an organized manner represented a risk. Wartime propaganda depended upon the images of the vulnerable home-maker and women as the caretakers of American ideals and normalcy.<sup>48</sup> All women in uniform contradicted these stereotypes to some extent, but by conforming more closely to established “nurturing” stereotypes, the ARC volunteers did so to a lesser degree than did the female members of the military.<sup>49</sup>

For many women seeking service during World War II, the ARC provided access without the confrontation represented by the WACs. The ARC was a long established volunteer organization operated largely by the middle and upper classes throughout its history. It was simply more socially acceptable and, for many of the women, more palatable for their families, who never would have allowed their middle to upper-class daughters to join the WAC.<sup>50</sup> ARC “volunteers” were not really such, however, in the strictest sense of the word. They were paid just as their counterparts

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<sup>46</sup> Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt, *They Also Served: American Women in World War II* (Secaucus, NY: Carol Publishing Group, 1995), 116.

<sup>47</sup>Treadwell, 212.

<sup>48</sup> Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 7.

<sup>49</sup> Yellin, 167.

<sup>50</sup>Madison, 10.



in the WAC were. Englehardt, for instance, was hired as a Staff Assistant and paid a monthly salary plus overseas maintenance. What is important to note, however, is that ARC volunteer work was likely not a career choice for most of the volunteers, unlike WAC enlistment. Rather, it was an interlude for most of the women who participated; a chance to do something exciting before settling down to the rest of their lives, as opposed to WAC women, who may have viewed enlistment as a more permanent circumstance.

Women chose service with the ARC not only because it was more socially acceptable, but also because it almost guaranteed the prospect of overseas service. In her book , *A Woman in a Man's War*, B.J. Olewiler writes that she immediately wanted to be involved in the war in some way. She initially took a job as a teletype operator in 1939, but lost this position in 1941 to military personnel when the operations were taken over by the Navy after Pearl Harbor. At this point, she began to explore options for getting overseas and considered both the WACs and the WAVES.<sup>51</sup> Neither of these options provided much chance she would serve abroad, however, so she applied and was accepted to work with the ARC.<sup>52</sup> The traditional nature of the ARC allowed the women much closer access to the actual fighting and combat, something most of the adventuresome women who ended up working as Clubmobilers desired and actively sought. Violet A. Kochendoerfer initially joined

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<sup>51</sup> The Women's Reserve of the U.S. Naval Reserve (or Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service - WAVES) was the female arm of the U.S. Navy during World War II.

<sup>52</sup>Olewiler, 14, 15. 23.

the WAACs in 1943. Shortly thereafter, she left the WAAC's to join the ARC specifically because she wanted to serve overseas.<sup>53</sup>

WAC women carried official military rank and were therefore subject to traditional military hierarchy. ARC "girls" carried only the informal rank of captain, which was granted to ensure that in case of capture they would be treated as officers if held as prisoners of war. This designation, though informal, caused problems for many ARC women who saw (and were told) that their primary place was with the enlisted men. However, the women inevitably had to accommodate the requests of officers because of their "rank," which could hurt their standing with the enlisted men. Mary Metcalf Rexford reported displeasure at having to attend functions with officers as it took them away from and risked their reputations with the enlisted men.<sup>54</sup> Harriet Engelhardt echoed these sentiments throughout her correspondence.

There is little doubt however, that volunteering for any active service during World War II was a somewhat unusual act for any woman, regardless of the branch. It took a certain uncommon independent streak for an American woman to buck the system, so to speak, and leave her home and family to serve overseas. In the case of those women who worked on the Clubmobiles, this independence along with tenacity, strength of will and a keen sense of adventure would be the magic combination for success.

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<sup>53</sup> Violet A. Kochendoerfer, *One Woman's World War II* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 3.

<sup>54</sup>Rexford, 10.

## Characteristics

In February 1944 *Life* magazine published an article about the ARC women in England. It gave the following description of volunteers: “Hand-picked for looks, education, personality and experience in recreational fields. They are hardy physically and have a sociable, friendly manner.”<sup>55</sup> Perhaps in no other area was this physical hardiness more important to ARC work than on the Clubmobiles. The daily work required women to perform tasks such as loading flour bags, carrying coffee urns, stocking the vehicles with supplies, preparing donuts and coffee in massive amounts for hours at a time, and driving large trucks through unfamiliar and ill-suited territory. All of these tasks were complicated by weather, often cold and wet. Women who did this work had to be strong and hardy. There simply was no place on the Clubmobiles for those who could not physically complete these tasks. It is true that soldiers often helped the ARC women with their work, and that help was gladly accepted. However, the fact remains that ARC Clubmobilers more often performed all the necessary tasks on their own, without male assistance.

At first glance, Harriet Pinkston Engelhardt did not appear well-suited to these tasks. At just 5’1” and weighing little more than 100 pounds, Englehardt was slight. However, she had been active and athletic all her life. Furthermore, her years at Black Mountain College had pushed her physically both in her studies of textile design and the physical labor required of her around the school grounds.<sup>56</sup> Nothing in Harriet’s letters home indicate the work was too physically demanding for her. Other women

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<sup>55</sup> “Life Visits with Red Cross Girls in England,” *Life Magazine*, February 28, 1944 , 111.

<sup>56</sup> Harriet Pinkston Englehardt letter to her family on October 3, 1939, Engelhardt Papers.

who volunteered for Clubmobile duty were described in very different physical terms, such as Elizabeth Richardson at 5'10" with a strong, athletic build from years of rowing and field hockey.<sup>57</sup> Whatever their specific characteristics, Clubmobile work required women to have strength, stamina, and overall health. Similar to men fighting in the war, these women faced daily and seasonal challenges to their health.

Everything from frostbite and trench foot in the European theatre to dysentery and malaria in the Pacific was of concern. No one escaped these issues altogether, but those who successfully served for any length of time were able to hold off the worst. Letters home often focused on the women's health, as families were certain to be concerned about this topic. Charlotte Colburn, serving on the front in France wrote home to her parents in September of 1944 that she was tired and dirty, but as healthy as ever.<sup>58</sup> Gretchen Schuler wrote to her father in December of 1944, "Thank God I was born with the strength of an ox! It is a necessary attribute over here."<sup>59</sup> Other women described the health concerns of their co-workers, such as rheumatic fever, but assured parents they themselves, were fine.<sup>60</sup> In the same letter, Schuler told her father, "I guess this life agrees with me. I am well and happy, and am now gaining back the 20 lbs. I had lost."

Women held no illusions about how difficult Clubmobile work would be.

Most knew how hard they worked in a stationary club and heard firsthand accounts of

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<sup>57</sup>Madison, 4.

<sup>58</sup>Charolotte Colburn Gasperini, letter home to family on September 14, 1944. From the annotated album *Geronimo!* Edited for the web by Jim Gasperini and available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_44.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_44.html) accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>59</sup>Gretchen Schuler to her father on December 12, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection, MC 550, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>60</sup>Rexford, 74.

life in the “field.” Margaret McLeod of Oregon wrote home in February of 1943 about her new assignment that she knew the Clubmobile will “be a strenuous life, but that is why I’m here.”<sup>61</sup> McLeod, who was in her 30s, switched back to a club from the Clubmobile after about six months. She wrote home in May of 1944 that Clubmobile service took a “terrific toll...you have to be the Amazon type and on the young side, and I am neither.”<sup>62</sup> Many women wrote home about common ailments and the toll weather took on their health and most would have strongly disagreed with the “Amazon” characterization; however it is clear that extended service with the Clubmobiles to a great extent relied on good health. Mary Thomas Sargent recalled reading an article in August of 1944 published in the magazine section of the Milwaukee Journal. It described the ideal Red Cross “girl” in the following terms:

A Red Cross girl should have poise, ingenuity, adaptability, excellent character and good health. She should be a jack of all trades, a good talker, a good listener and be prepared for disease, insects, snakes, dirt, uncomfortable living conditions and all the perils of modern war.<sup>63</sup>

Amazingly, Sargent decided to apply to the Red Cross based on this description.

One characteristic most Clubmobile volunteers appear to have had in common is their independence and desire for adventure. In all their letters and communications, these women display an independent nature that served them

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<sup>61</sup> Margaret McLeod to her mother and Olive, February 1943, Margaret McLeod papers, Mss 2960, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR.

<sup>62</sup>McLeod letter home to family May 31, 1944, Margaret McLeod papers, Mss 2960, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR.

<sup>63</sup>Sargent, 15.

particularly well in the rigors of Clubmobile work. Rosemary Norwalk wrote in her journal from the St. George Hotel in Brooklyn:

The biggest surprise to me has been the girls – almost without exception they're a cut above, and for some reason I hadn't expected that. There's not a dull one in the bunch. They're educated and interesting and motivated and, of course, because that's what the Red Cross seeks, generally outgoing and gregarious. Don't think any of us signed up just to have a good time, we wanted to do something useful."<sup>64</sup>

Engelhardt echoed these impressions when she wrote home about the woman she was rooming with in New York prior to departure for England. Engelhardt did not think the girl was going to make it in this job. She was “nice but boring.” Engelhardt told her family that, “To do this sort of thing, you've got to be able to whoop and holler, and not worry.”<sup>65</sup> This assessment for success in the ARC would be particularly true for those serving on Clubmobiles.

Examples of this independence run throughout their lives prior to service. In the case of Engelhardt, she willingly left Montgomery, Alabama to attend college at Hollins and then left Hollins for the cutting-edge experiment of Black Mountain College in North Carolina, despite family resistance to the idea. After college, Engelhardt pursued work in the very non-traditional female field of airplane mechanics. She also did not stay in Montgomery for long after graduating college, as was common for many women of the time, but instead moved to Canada on her own to pursue work.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Rosemary Norwalk, *Dearest Ones: A True World War II Love Story* (New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999), 28, 29.

<sup>65</sup> Harriet Pinkston Engelhardt letter to her family on June 23, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>66</sup> Harriet Pinkston Engelhardt letter to her family on June 23, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

Engelhardt's letters are filled with examples of her independent and adventuresome spirit. During college she traveled extensively, both on her own and with friends, and once wrote her folks about standing outside in the rain while visiting Yucatan, Mexico watching palm trees sway in a cyclone<sup>67</sup> Engelhardt was generally carefree and fearless. While living in Canada after graduation from college, she wrote home about a run-in she had with the Canadian Mounted Police, who picked her up for being a suspicious German. Engelhardt reported to her family that she simply turned herself in, "laughing the whole way." She then managed to befriend the Mounties, who sent her along with no problem.<sup>68</sup> This sense of adventure is largely what prompted Engelhardt to pursue work with the ARC and was displayed by other women in the Clubmobile service. For instance, Eleanor Bumstead Stevenson wrote that she remained stubbornly in her bed while bombs were dropping all around her while in service in Anzio. She would rather die in bed than "wet and miserable in a trench."<sup>69</sup> Accounts from other women echo this adventuresome spirit. Katherine Van Hogendorp, who was stationed at a Red Cross Club at an air base in India during the war, recounts sneaking onto a plane to ride along on a covert mission to photograph Rangoon for a future bombing mission.<sup>70</sup> This was very much against the rules, both for the military and the ARC, and both Van Hogendorp and the men risked certain

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<sup>67</sup>Harriet Pinkston Englehardt letter to her parents on August 6, 1938, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>68</sup>Harriet Pinkston Englehardt letter to her parents on December 13, 1943, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>69</sup>William E. and Eleanor B. Stevenson Papers, RG 30/219, Subgroup II, Series 5, Box 1, "I Knew Your Soldier" in the Saturday Evening Post in three installments, 21 Oct 1944, 28 Oct 1944, 4 Nov 1944, 21.

<sup>70</sup>Katherine Harris van Hogendorp, *Survival in the Land of Dysentery: The World War II Experiences of a Red Cross Worker in India* (Fredericksburg, VA: Sergeant Kirkland's Museum and Historical Society, Inc., 1998), 83.

punishment. That both parties thought it worth the risk speaks to the adventurous nature of Van Hogendorp and the respect held for her by the enlisted men.

Engelhardt's move to Canada after college, where she lived and worked on her own, displayed somewhat unusual independence for a woman in the 1940s. This same pattern is seen in the lives of other Clubmobile women, including Elizabeth Richardson and B.J. Olewiler, both of whom left home shortly after graduating from college to live and work in major cities on their own. By the time these women left for Europe to serve with the Red Cross, they were accustomed to being away from home and family for long periods, likely even more so than many of the men they worked with.

Like most women serving with the ARC, Engelhardt was not married. More important is the fact that Engelhardt, also similar to many of the women serving with her, did not show much interest in getting married in the near future. B.J. Olewiler wrote in her memoirs that she still did not want to marry at her time of enlistment, although her family wanted very much for her to assume her "proper" role in the family.<sup>71</sup> Rosemary Norwalk wrote that her ARC ambitions had much to do with wanting a fresh start and independence. It would enable her to let go of annoying suitors and parents who simply could not understand her decision to volunteer or the fact that she had no desire to marry anytime soon.<sup>72</sup> Mary Thomas Sargent wrote that in packing for training with the ARC, she included the towels that had already been monogrammed for her hope chest. Practicality won the day for Sargent who wrote

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<sup>71</sup>Olewiler, 12, 23.

<sup>72</sup>Norwalk, 7.



that, “it seemed silly to buy new ones when I needed so many other things.”<sup>73</sup> In general, women volunteering for any service during the war faced family resistance. That they joined anyway suggests that, for most, service was not the fulfillment of their traditional roles as mother/sister/wife, but rather that they had a strong sense of duty combined with a desire for liberation and personal freedom.<sup>74</sup>

The final traits that seem to have been absolutely necessary for success on a Clubmobile, and which the women shared, were resourcefulness, practicality and calm. Engelhardt displays, throughout her letters, possession of these traits from an early age. In all her travels and schooling, Engelhardt was able to fit into any situation that presented itself. For instance, when she transferred to Black Mountain College, she easily adapted to the new lifestyle that required of her to complete physical work she was unaccustomed to. In one letter home to her family from school, Engelhardt recounted a riding accident in which she was thrown from her horse. She reported that the horse was shaking, “all 16.3 hands of her. I should have been quaking too, but I just felt kind of emotionless about it all. Before I had a chance to think about it and get scared, I made myself get on her and take her over (the jump) again.”<sup>75</sup> This sort of control and calm would prove a critical skill for coping with the challenges constantly thrown at her when operating the Clubmobile.

The women who operated the Clubmobiles were recognized by the enlisted men for their ability to adapt and improvise.<sup>76</sup> In one example, Katherine Van

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<sup>73</sup>Sargent, 19.

<sup>74</sup>Zeiger, 49.

<sup>75</sup>Harriet Pinkston Englehardt letter to her parents on November 11, 1938, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>76</sup>Korson, 107.

Hogendorp, who was stationed at an airbase in India, recounts how she and fellow ARC women improvised a way deliver coffee and doughnuts to men waiting on the airstrip for their missions. The women devised a Clubmobile small enough to access the airstrip by using a small truck with a dump cart on the back. They named the small vehicle “Hump Happy Baby” and used it to serve the service men until it literally fell apart.<sup>77</sup> Another example of the adaptability necessary was demonstrated by B.J. Olewiler who reported that, in order to dance with the servicemen (most of whom were younger), she learned to jitterbug, a dance she felt sure she was too old for.<sup>78</sup>

The trick for these women, however, was to temper the independence and resourcefulness necessary for the job. Most had a real concern with appearing too independent or “manly” and actively sought to avoid this. Olewiler, for instance, wrote that she was careful not to perform too well on the firing range with the men, because they so loved being better at it than she.<sup>79</sup> Eleanor Bumstead Stevenson wrote that the best women for this job might be a bit of a tomboy, but could not be mannish, and had to be comfortable being vastly outnumbered by men or “the only girl on the block.”<sup>80</sup> ARC women walked a fine line between the full independence necessary to complete their work and the absolutely necessary image of traditional females in conventional roles.

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<sup>77</sup> Van Hogendorp, 62-65

<sup>78</sup>Olewiler, 73.

<sup>79</sup>Olewiler, 80.

<sup>80</sup>William E. and Eleanor B. Stevenson Papers, RG 30/219, Subgroup II, Series 5, Box 1, “I Knew Your Soldier” in the Saturday Evening Post in three installments, 21 Oct 1944, 28 Oct 1944, 4 Nov 1944, 17.

## Conclusion

By design, the ARC “girl” was different. Pre-set qualifications helped the ARC and the U.S. military ensure that enlisted men could relate to the women selected in an older sister role, which helped dampen the “camp-follower” image that was concerning to many. That the women hailed predominantly from the middle and upper classes also helped to secure their non-threatening status by playing on commonly held perceptions that the upper class could better control themselves in unusual situations. That the ARC perpetuated the idea that these women were somehow “girls” implied that they were submissive and chaste and helped ease public concerns about their work in and with the military.<sup>81</sup> There could be no perception that the ARC was pulling from the manual labor force so badly needed in the States, since most of these women would not have performed the blue-collar work necessary to the war effort. In addition, the class status gave the overall impression of “good stock” while women from a lower-class background would have invited more questions about what services they were really providing to the fighting men. The ARC followed perfectly the common rhetoric of the time that women’s wartime work was a temporary extension of patriotism and domesticity which allowed them to install women much closer to combat than even military women were permitted.<sup>82</sup>

Less intended was the type of woman the position actually attracted. Make no mistake, these were not “girls” in anything but name. Rather, these were intelligent, tough, and educated women who were often fiercely independent and in most cases

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<sup>81</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Press, 1988), 71.

<sup>82</sup> May, 71.

fit the traditional female roles of the time much less closely than their “on paper” qualifications would indicate.

## Chapter 3

### Training, Preparation, and Daily Life on the Clubmobile

The interview process for service with the American Red Cross was extensive and intense. Most of the women who wrote of their service described it as such in both memoirs and letters. The rigorous process involved written application, a medical fitness exam, and multiple reference letters. If the women made it through these screenings, several in-person interviews were conducted to determine final acceptance.<sup>1</sup> B.J. Olewiler began her selection process with an interview with a field representative in the Seattle Red Cross office. A month later, she received a letter inviting her to San Francisco for a second interview, after which the representative welcomed her to Red Cross service.<sup>2</sup> In the fall of 1944, Mary Thomas Sargent applied in writing to the ARC and was told to report to St. Louis for a personal interview. After the interview, the ARC informed her she had been accepted and that she would need to report to Washington D.C. for training.<sup>3</sup>

Once applicants cleared the interview process, they were sent an official letter offering them employment with the ARC. It is important to note that these women were not unpaid volunteers as the traditional role of female volunteerism would indicate. Rather, they were paid professionals earning both a monthly salary and maintenance benefits while they served overseas. However, they were not drafted, as

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<sup>1</sup> James Madison, *Slinging Doughnuts for the Boys: An American Woman in World War II* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>2</sup> B.J. Olewiler, *A Woman in a Man's War* (Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris Corporation, 2003), 24, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Thomas Sargent, *Runway Towards Orion: The True Adventures of a Red Cross Girl on a B-29 Air Base in World War II India* (Grand Rapids, MI: Triumph Press, 1984), 19.

were so many men, so the “volunteer” moniker stuck, and not only the public and press referred to them in this manner. Generally, the women themselves did too.

Harriet Engelhardt received a letter from the ARC in April of 1944 offering her the position of Staff Assistant. Pay was \$150 per month plus maintenance overseas.<sup>4</sup> This was the typical position held by women serving with the ARC clubs or on the Clubmobiles. Engelhardt, too, was told in her acceptance letter to report to Washington D.C. for training and deployment.

Training in Washington D.C. for the Red Cross took place at American University. It was general in nature, as none of the recruits knew at this point where they would ultimately be sent. Originally designed to last a full six weeks on the American University campus, the training was shortened to just two weeks in order to meet the increased demand for ARC women overseas.<sup>5</sup> The recruits received multiple health lectures and were warned about getting enough rest, the dangers of malaria and other general concerns.

While WAC women reported extensive training on STD’s, Red Cross training on the subject was significantly more restrained. Sargent recalled being told by a doctor to “avoid kissing anyone.”<sup>6</sup> This seems to be the extent to which she was trained on the topic, and she notes that they were just “expected” to know better and take care of themselves. Perhaps there was more specific instruction given, but it was not covered in any of the memoirs or letters included in this review.

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to “Hariett” Engelhardt dated April 17, 1944 from the ARC in Georgia, Harriet Pinkston Engelhardt Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL [hereinafter referred to as the Engelhardt Papers]. Note the ARC spelled her first name incorrectly.

<sup>5</sup>Madison, 14.

<sup>6</sup>Sargent, 23.

The women were encouraged to learn skills that would help “break the ice” with the servicemen they came into contact with. Sargent reported learning card tricks and palm reading. She also reported, however, that such techniques were largely unnecessary. All it took to engage a soldier was a kind word and question about his hometown.<sup>7</sup>

Engelhardt had a less than favorable opinion of the women trainers she met in Washington D.C. She wrote home to her family that they were “a bunch of domineering women running this show, all of whom I despise; all gym teachers. But I shall be as meek as a little lamb to them and their bossiness – even to wearing a girdle to uniform fitting. Given a little authority, women certainly know it all in no time at all.”<sup>8</sup> She did not write many specifics of her Washington, D.C. training, which leaves the impression that it was not terribly informative or helpful. Mostly she was anxious to get on with her assignment and worried about getting “stuck” at a USO club in America.<sup>9</sup>

Once training in Washington, D.C. was complete, women were sent to either coast to await travel to their final destination. For most, this meant a trip to Brooklyn, New York to await transit to the European theatre via troop carrier. Engelhardt’s travel experience was similar to that of Elizabeth Richardson, who left Brooklyn aboard the Queen Elizabeth luxury liner for a six-day trip to England. The ship was designed for 2,000 passengers but now carried 15,000 troops overseas for war,

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<sup>7</sup>Sargent, 23.

<sup>8</sup>Harriet Engelhardt letter home to her family on May 8, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>9</sup>Harriet Engelhardt letter home to her family on May 20, 1944 Engelhardt Papers.

including a number of ARC women.<sup>10</sup> The trip was crowded, busy, and overwhelming since the women were vastly outnumbered and their attentions in great demand from both enlisted men and officers.

Once the women arrived at their final service destination, the real training began. Although ARC Clubmobiles operated in all the theaters of war, most were on the European front, which is where Engelhardt and most other ARC women served and for which the most information is available. For those women destined to serve on Clubmobiles, training began immediately and centered primarily on the vehicles themselves.

The first Clubmobiles used in England were converted Green Line buses. Elizabeth Richardson drove one of these on her first assignment in Leicester, just north of London.<sup>11</sup> The buses were big, with plenty of room for the doughnut machine and other essentials. However, they were difficult to drive and prone to getting stuck in England's notorious mud. As one of the first Clubmobilers, Charlotte Colburn originally learned to drive the British made Green Line buses, a difficult task made more so by the reversed drivers position.<sup>12</sup> Due to this awkwardness, when the decision was made that Clubmobiles would follow American forces onto the continent, another vehicle was found.

The Clubmobiles ultimately used on the European continent were converted GMC 6X6 trucks. These were heavy, cumbersome and difficult to handle, but most of

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<sup>10</sup>Madison, 19.

<sup>11</sup>Madison, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Colburn Gasperini November 22, 1943 letter home to her family. From the annotated album Geronimo! Edited for the web by Jim Gasperini and available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_top.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_top.html) accessed February 28, 2011 .



the women who learned to drive them relished the task. Driving a vehicle of this size was something most of the women working for the ARC had never done. In their previous, American lives, this type of activity was usually the domain of men. The women who learned to drive and maintain these vehicles wrote frequently about the experience. Learning to drive a Clubmobile upon arrival in Ireland, B.J. Olewiler wrote that they were glad not to be driving the Greenliner because they could drive themselves. “We would not have traded our right to drive for anything. It was a precious manifestation of usefulness and independence and something more; to see a woman driving a truck was so unusual in those days, that it was always a source of conversation and amusement to the men.”<sup>13</sup>

The converted GMC 6X6 contained a doughnut fryer, coffee urns, a working sink, running water and a portable cooking range.<sup>14</sup> Driving and maintaining these vehicles on their own was a central part of training for Clubmobile women. In a letter dated November 11, 1943 to her family, Charlotte Colburn captured the excitement most women felt at being asked to participate in the Clubmobile operation. She wrote that she had been “offered the chance to go into Clubmobile work and have decided it is an opportunity I can’t afford to miss. Here in England it means this – I’ll see a good bit of the country. In my club on wheels I will meet boats, meet the planes on return

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<sup>13</sup>Olewiler, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Oscar Whitelaw Rexford, *Battlestars and Doughnuts: World War II Clubmobile Experiences of Mary Metcalfe Rexford* (St. Louis, MO: The Patrice Press, 1989), 20.

trips, travel all over to every port and base. It will be far more vital and interesting than being in the huge immense clubs in London and elsewhere.”<sup>15</sup>

Mary Metcalf Rexford wrote extensively in her memoirs about learning to drive and maintain the GMC on a special training trip to London. Rexford was singled out along with a select few women for intense training on the vehicles that would be landing on the continent. Rexford wrote of driving in London traffic and eventually even taking the trucks on the tank course used by the British in order that they would be prepared for conditions in France and Belgium. This specialized training taught the women to double clutch the vehicles in order to climb steep hills, as well as how to downshift in order to slow down without using up the brakes.<sup>16</sup> For most, this challenging type of driving was a completely new experience and one they would not have had in the States.

Those training the women on how to drive and maintain the vehicles were largely men, and for the GMC, they were American men. The women reported that their instructors generally displayed some reticence about teaching women to drive these trucks. For most it was a “distinct cross between reward and punishment” to be so near American women, but also to have to teach them a skill conventionally defined as masculine.<sup>17</sup> However, even more than driving, the men were especially reluctant to instruct the women in the maintenance of the vehicles. Olewiler wrote about the hesitation of her male trainer to show her the maintenance on the GMC but

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<sup>15</sup>Gasparini November 15, 1943 letter home to her family available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_top.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_top.html) accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>16</sup>Rexford, 20, 21.

<sup>17</sup>Olewiler, 87.

also of his grudging respect once she had mastered it.<sup>18</sup> Rexford reported that, after an entire day spent under the hood with her learning every single part, her trainer said, “in the most pitiful tone ‘I hope when I get home no one asks me what I did in the war.’”<sup>19</sup> For many of these men, teaching women to drive and maintain vehicles that were previously the exclusive domain of men was difficult and contradicted their firmly held notions of American womanhood and manhood. Once again, their unusual status of being American women doing an acceptable job (serving) allowed the Clubmobilers access to typically male military experiences.

Engelhardt did not write much about learning to drive the truck itself, but did write about her enjoyment of driving all over the English countryside. Perhaps her previous experience working as an airplane mechanic meant that this particular aspect of ARC work was not as novel or interesting to her. Instead, Engelhardt focused more on the travel and in a letter to a family friend dated July 30, 1944, wrote:

...what fun we have bounding over the countryside in an Army 6X6 truck loaded with a doughnut machine and urns of coffee! We eat with Lady Astor or out of K ration cans! We stop at pubs going and coming on our rounds. And we constantly run into people we've known other places.<sup>20</sup>

The ability to drive and maintain the GMC 6X6 trucks was critical to the success of the Clubmobile program. The opportunity to do so afforded these independent women with the freedom and adventure they craved.

The trucks were not the only essential piece of equipment the women had to operate. Another truly distinct aspect of the Clubmobile was the doughnut making

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<sup>18</sup>Olewiler, 88.

<sup>19</sup>Rexford, 21.

<sup>20</sup>Harriet Engelhardt July 30, 1944 letter to Engelhardt family friend Mr. J.M. Jenkins, Engelhardt Papers.

machines installed in each vehicle. The machines were loaned at no cost to the ARC by the Doughnut Corporation of America, which also sold the organization all the flour it needed for the duration of the war.<sup>21</sup> The machines were delicate, temperamental, and filled with hot oil. Most of the women who wrote about them did not have good things to say. Engelhardt referred to the machines as “the instrument of the Devil. First of all, it takes 3 people to keep it going; it smells to high heaven; and one has never been known to work properly.”<sup>22</sup>

Preparing the pre-made mix into dough required exact measurements and temperatures. Training instructed the women to weigh the flour and water carefully as well as to take the temperature of both. This proved undoable in the field, so most learned to judge these variables through trial and error. Once the dough was loaded into a pressurized cylinder (which B.J. Olewiler noted would blow up if not secured properly<sup>23</sup>) it was attached to the machine. Dough would drop out and form a ring in the hot oil before it was flipped over by the machine to cook on the other side. When the doughnut reached “just the right tinge of brown” the women would pluck it from the oil with tongs and serve it to the waiting troops. The whole process was highly mechanized and required attention and skill. It also left the women smelling permanently of hot grease and doughnuts, so much so that there are many references in letters and memoirs to the “Clubmobiler Perfume” of coffee and doughnut. Most eventually learned to tune out the overwhelming odor, like white noise. But Olewiler

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<sup>21</sup>Madison, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Harriet Engelhardt July 30, 1944 letter to Engelhardt family friend Mr. J.M. Jenkins, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>23</sup>Olewiler, 44.

commented that if she left for a few days, she had to “acclimate” herself to the pungent aroma all over again.<sup>24</sup>

The women received formal training in the operation of these machines, but also produced a tongue-in-cheek version which more accurately reflected the challenges of the doughnut machines.<sup>25</sup> For instance, while the women were instructed to carefully weigh the water before adding it to the doughnut mix, in fact most only did so when a supervisor was present, which was not often.<sup>26</sup>

Eventually, the ARC came to the conclusion that the doughnut machines would only be used for entertainment value, since the men enjoyed watching them operate. The ARC set up central bakeries in both England and eventually France to supply the bulk of doughnuts served. This allowed the women more time to converse with the men and ensured there were enough doughnuts available.<sup>27</sup> The coffee continued to be made fresh on the spot, since the urns were not as difficult to operate, just large, cumbersome and heavy.

There was on-the-job training, too, mostly on the sort of “intangible” skills necessary for success as a Clubmobiler. Learning to communicate and relate to what, in most cases was a different generation of men was one prominent aspect of such training. Clubmobile women were frequently called upon as dance partner for the service men, most of whom were a good ten years their junior. This meant learning current, popular dances, in particular the jitterbug. B.J. Olewiler commented that “to

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<sup>24</sup>Olewiler, 44.

<sup>25</sup> Marjorie Lee Morgan, ed., *The Clubmobile: The ARC In the Storm* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hazlett Printing and Publishing, Inc., 1982), 25.

<sup>26</sup>Madison, 46.

<sup>27</sup>Madison, 47.

uphold the honor of my country, I had to learn the jitterbug.” The teaching took some time, and was something the men enjoyed doing, taking a personal satisfaction at teaching the women.<sup>28</sup> Charlotte Colburn wrote the following home to her family in an April 4, 1944 letter.

Well, gang, you should watch my smoke, for I’m sure hep to the jive. The boys from Brooklyn are so appalled that a gall from Noo York wasn’t hep...so after a brief tryout, they decide that a little grease job is all a gal needs and now my joints are rockin’!

Colburn goes on to describe weekly dance lessons where every Friday her two instructors played the hottest record they could find while teaching her, in the middle of a circle, the latest dance moves. The result, she reported, was that “everyone has a good time and I am generally hysterical.”<sup>29</sup> While amusing and fun, learning to relate to the younger men they were serving was important for Clubmobilers who sought to brighten their spirits and remind them of home. These types of heterosexual activities were officially encouraged among the men and women, in large part as an effort to ward off homosexual activities.

For those Clubmobilers serving in parts of the world other than the European theatre, there were some elements of training that varied. For instance, Katherine Harris was stationed in India at a B-29 air base. Here, training was less about dealing with cold and wet conditions than about the extreme heat.<sup>30</sup> Mary Ferebee Howard, who was stationed in the South Pacific on the island of New Caledonia, faced similar

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<sup>28</sup>Olewiler, 75.

<sup>29</sup>Charlotte Colburn Gasperini, letter home to family dated April 4, 1944 available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/L053April4\\_44\\_1.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/L053April4_44_1.html) accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>30</sup>Katherine Harris van Hogendorp, *Survival in the Land of Dysentery: The World War II Experiences of a Red Cross Worker in India* (Fredericksburg, VA: Sergeant Kirkland’s Museum and Historical Society, Inc. 1998), 65.

challenges in making the required doughnuts and coffee but different challenges of trying to keep large groups of bored men occupied who were stationed on a small island. Howard began giving swimming lessons to combat boredom, something totally undoable in the European theatre.<sup>31</sup> Those stationed in North Africa, such as Eleanor Bumstead Stevenson, also contended with distinct issues.

Despite their reputation as “Glamour Girls,”<sup>32</sup> the Clubmobile women worked incredibly hard. They put in long hours preparing to serve and then actually serving the troops. In a letter home to her father written December 12, 1943 Gretchen Schuler described a typical day while stationed in England.

Tomorrow’s day is a good example. I shall be on the Clubmobile at 5:30 am. I will work there alone until 10, when I shall be joined by one other crew member. During the morning I shall mix about 120 lbs of flour. It is all kneaded by hand. While one batch is in the machine, I shall be getting the next ready... all the while keeping an eye cocked on the machine which can do hellish things if left alone too long! Also must take time out to stack the cooked doughnuts on trays. It really is sort of like the “one armed paper hanger with the itch”. This business goes on ‘til 2 P.M., when we go out to serve a huge camp. We should get back by five, clean the van and all the coffee urns, and be ready for a 6:30 dinner. Needless to say, I’ll be in bed with the birds.<sup>33</sup>

Often a full work “day” meant extremely irregular hours in order to serve the troops as they were staging to head out. Particularly in the shipyards of England, it was common for the Clubmobiles to work graveyard shifts in order serve men as they boarded troop ships. Mary Metcalf Rexford wrote about working from 7:00 p.m. to

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<sup>31</sup> Mary Ferebee Howard, *No Drums, No Trumpets: Red Cross Adventure* (Rocky Mount, NC: North Carolina Wesleyan Press, 1992), 12.

<sup>32</sup> Madison, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Gretchen Schuler letter to her father on December 12, 1943, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA.

8:00 a.m. on a semi-regular basis.<sup>34</sup> Many of the letters and accounts reference short sleep and long work hours. Women might get home from a shift and finish cleaning the Clubmobile at 1:30 a.m. only to have to get back out at 5:30 a.m. to start the next day.

The sheer scale of operations handled from these mobile kitchens was astounding. Janet Margaret Wood, captain of a Clubmobile in Group C, kept a detailed logbook throughout her tour of duty. In it, she provides the following breakdown:

To Prepare 1,000 Doughnuts Daily or Serve 500 Men

Flour	70 lbs.
Coffee	12 lbs.
Cigarettes	3 cartons
Gum	10 cartons
Sugar	4 lbs.
Milk	9 cans
Life Savers	11 cartons
Fat	14 lbs. <sup>35</sup>

In a typical day, the Clubmobiles might prepare and serve this much and more. While in England, the women typically served larger numbers of men, since there tended to be many in one place at a time for staging. On the Continent, as the American Army moved through France, groups of men were generally fewer in number; however they were further apart and separated by rough and unfriendly terrain. Each situation presented its own set of challenges.

Elizabeth Wiesner usually worked as a hospital secretary in North Africa. Like other ARC personnel, she sometimes believed the Clubmobiles were using

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<sup>34</sup>Rexford, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Janet Wood Log book, page 4, Janet Wood Papers (Ac. 2121) Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, New Brunswick, NJ.



supplies badly needed elsewhere. However, after volunteering for an evening serving doughnuts with a local Clubmobile team, she wrote that she was surprised how hard the work was: “of course it was fun – but it was very real work too. Not the kind of work that is measured by the number of letters written or the number of loans made, but work of the kind that is measured by intangibles.”<sup>36</sup> The three-hour shift left her weary, and impressed with the “glamour girls” who did this work every day.

The reality, of course, is that the work was only glamorous to those not doing it. The detailed log book kept by Wood, along with details from the women’s correspondence, reveals that much of the job was backbreaking and tedious. It involved carrying and loading heavy bags of flour and urns of hot coffee, long hours with little rest, and a lot of time with one’s head stuck inside a greasy donut fryer to clean it.

In addition to these more direct duties, the women were also expected to attend social events regularly. Mary Ferebee Howard reported that they could not ignore their social duties to either enlisted men or officers despite having worked a 10 to 12 hour day.<sup>37</sup> These “social duties” made an exhausting job even more so, and those who stuck with it did so because they felt a sense of duty, as well as pride in doing as much as they could to help the war effort. In an August 9, 1944 entry to her journal, Rosemary Norwalk wrote has had:

...discovered these past days that this is without doubt the simplest work I’ve ever done, yet the most demanding physically. And the most satisfying. Am so happy to find this out, feel like shouting. Any doubts I had about leaving a

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<sup>36</sup>Elizabeth Phenix Wiesner, *Between the Lines: Overseas with the Red Cross and OSS*, (Chevy Chase, MD: Posterity Press, Inc., 1998), 27.

<sup>37</sup>Howard, 10.

career job to drive trucks and give out doughnuts and coffee and conversation disappeared the first twenty-four hours here. I'm finding I love every part of it – the physical exercise and effort (the old Girl Scout in me?), handling the big trucks, heaving the huge coffee urns around and the stacked trays of doughnuts, scrubbing the Clubmobiles out when we're finally through for the day, or night, and arriving back in the room grease-soaked and smelling of doughnuts and coffee. Tired to the bone- but satisfied.<sup>38</sup>

### **Officers and Enlisted Men: Status vs. Duty.**

One area of almost constant conflict for Clubmobile women was their relationships with officers and enlisted men. ARC women carried only the informal rank of captain, which was granted to ensure that in case of capture they would be treated as an officer if held as a prisoner of war.<sup>39</sup> This designation, though informal, caused problems for many ARC women who saw (and were told) that their primary place was with the enlisted men. However, they inevitably had to accommodate the requests of officers because of their “rank,” which could hurt their standing with the enlisted men. Both Rexford and Englehardt reported displeasure at having to attend functions with officers as it took them away from, and risked their reputations with, the enlisted men.

Official policy of the Red Cross dictated that the women were only to date officers, which meant they were obligated to attend functions with the officers. Many women, such as Elizabeth Richardson who was stationed in England for most of the war, resented the implication that they were to be “on call” for the officers.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, they were also told that their main objective was the morale of the enlisted

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<sup>38</sup> Rosemary Norwalk, *Dearest Ones: A True World War II Love Story* (New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999), 55.

<sup>39</sup>Rexford, 85.

<sup>40</sup>Madison, 54.

men. This dichotomy meant that they were forever trying to balance their duties towards the fighting men (which most viewed as their primary purpose for being there) with demands on their time from officers, who viewed them as social equals and also wanted their companionship.

A quick look at the ratio of men to women in the European theatre gives some idea of the demands placed on Clubmobilers' time. In a letter home on November 11, 1943, Charlotte Colburn described the trip to England on a troop carrier. She estimated roughly 100 women, 1,500 officers and 13,000 troops onboard.<sup>41</sup> Everyone wanted a bit of time from these "real American girls," and giving everyone adequate attention proved to be a balancing act that would continue for the duration of their service.

Most women, in their letters and other correspondence, resented the time they were forced to spend with officers. First, it was generally yet another demand on top of a heavy workload, since it usually involved dinners, parties, and dances that took place after the work day was done. Second, too much time spent in the company of officers could cause the women to "lose face" with the troops, which made their daily duties much harder. Conversely, if the women did not respond to officer invitations, their work could be made harder from that end as well. Officers controlled access to troops. If the women could not get to the troops in order to serve them, because they had angered an officer by refusing his invitations, their assignment was compromised.

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<sup>41</sup> Charlotte Colburn Gasperini in a letter home to her family on November 15, 1943 available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/L020November15\\_43.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/L020November15_43.html) accessed February 28, 2011.

Rosemary Norwalk described in her journal several incidents with the port commander of her English shipyard that did not make it into her letters home. In the first, the older “fatherly” commander took Norwalk to the bow of the boat. While holding her hand, and “giving...little pats and a serious pinch that didn’t sound like Red Cross business at all,” he asked her to help with the official entertaining duties of the port. Norwalk had to talk fast, and invented an imaginary fiancé serving in the Pacific to avoid his advances without upsetting him. In another incident, the commander offered Norwalk a gift of a compact, which she tried to politely refuse. However, upon seeing he kept a drawer full to offer as gifts, she decided to “take the easy way out and chose the least gaudy of the choices offered.”<sup>42</sup> These stories demonstrate the fine line Norwalk was forced to walk so that refusal would not jeopardize access to the port they were assigned to service, which could be easily restricted by the officers in charge.

On the other hand, there are very few, if any, reports of the enlisted men acting in such a manner. Eleanor “Bumpy” Stevenson wrote in her article, “I Knew Your Soldier,” that they had very little “wolf trouble” with the GIs who usually regarded the women as older sisters from back home; almost motherly, but not quite. Often, the GIs grew protective of the women, and Margaret McLeod recounts an episode in a letter home to her mother about several GIs wanting to “take care” of some officers who had insulted McLeod and her team.<sup>43</sup> A letter to her parents from

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<sup>42</sup>Norwalk, 81, 85.

<sup>43</sup>Margaret McLeod letter to her mother on May 29, 1943, Margaret McLeod papers, Mss 2960, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR.

Anne McKee Jack, written while she was in France camped with a forward unit, shows just how careful the GIs were around Clubmobile women.

One morning, I had gotten my pajamas off and suddenly decided I wanted a bath before dressing. I put on my raincoat and took the bucket to the mess hall and filled it. The water was just off ice cold. While I was there, the mess sergeant said I had better wear something warmer the next time. Returning to the tent, I discovered the slit in the back of [my?] raincoat went practically to my waist. Those G.I.'s are so nice – not one of them gave the slightest titter when I went forth in my revealing garb.<sup>44</sup>

While amusing, the story is also quite telling about the respect the fighting men had for these women. Even with her backside completely exposed as she walked across the entire camp, Jack was not bothered by anyone.

Most of the women did not necessarily relish the time spent with officers, but viewed it as necessary in order to complete their other work. When explaining any time spent with officers to the enlisted men, the women often employed the reason that they did so because they needed something for their operations. As Eleanor “Bumpy” Stevenson relates in her article, “I Knew Your Soldier”, this generally was not false.

I could go to a cocktail party and run into hardware, who gradually grew expansive and asked “What do you need, young lady?” Striking while the iron was malleable, I would ask for something we needed, like a generator for a doughnut machine. By the time the party broke up, I would have it all signed, sealed and virtually delivered.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Anne McKee Jack to her parents September 21, 1944 Anne McKee Jack Papers, American Red Cross Clubmobile Services Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>45</sup>Stevenson, 20. The term “hardware” referred to “brass” or the hardware worn by officers. It is the author’s interpretation here that “expansive” was used as a euphemism for “drunk.”

While not all interactions with officers might have been this direct, the women were fully aware that pleasant relations with the officers in their area would translate into troop access and supplies when they needed them.

There could also be retribution from the officers if they perceived that the women were not paying them adequate attention. B.J. Olewiler writes of the challenges involved with accommodating both the enlisted and officers. Because accommodating officer requests caused so many problems with the enlisted men, Olewiler tried at first to ignore the officers; however she angered one officer and he falsely reported her to Counter Intelligence for sending home uncensored pictures. In the end, Olewiler did what she felt was necessary to secure access to the troops and supplies. However, she “never shook the guilt I felt conversing with officers. It was sort of like collaborating with the enemy [sic]: sometimes necessary for survival, but definitely punishable.”<sup>46</sup>

Certainly many officers saw the benefits of having the Clubmobile women spend as much time as possible with the enlisted men. Margaret McLeod wrote home about the compliments she received from one such commanding officer. He told her how happy the troops were to see her team and that he was pleased to see that they ate and talked with the GIs and did not cater to the officers.<sup>47</sup>

In his work about Elisabeth Richardson, James Madison makes the argument that the policy requiring ARC women to date exclusively officers matched their own self-interest, in most cases. Officers were usually more socially compatible with the

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<sup>46</sup>Olewiler, 67-69, 72.

<sup>47</sup> McLeod papers, letter to mother and Olive dated June 19, 1943, Margaret McLeod papers, Mss 2960, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR.

Clubmobile women than were the majority of the enlisted men. They were older, like the women, better educated, generally of the same or similar ethnic backgrounds and commonly had a more stable career path.<sup>48</sup> Richardson herself wrote home of attending both G.I. and officer dances and indicated that she preferred the latter, which were more “civilized” and not quite as “rough,” but she also took her job seriously and resented the idea that they were to be “on-call” for the officers’ amusement.<sup>49</sup>

While Madison’s point is well taken for those women seeking a companion or marriage partner, review of these women’s personalities and intentions in the previous chapter would indicate that most were not, at least at this time, so inclined. Rather, by their own accounts, these women were focused on the job at hand and, to the extent it was required, spent time with officers but preferred to be “in the trenches” with their boys. As the women moved from England into the French war zone, their identities would become increasingly linked with the combat troops they were there to serve.

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<sup>48</sup>Madison, 53, 54.

<sup>49</sup>Madison, 54, 55.

## Chapter 4:

### Uniforms - Intent vs. Reality

Uniforms, and clothing in general, were a critical aspect of the Clubmobilers' lives. It was a constant topic of conversation in both letters home and memoirs. On the surface, these discussions could be interpreted as superficially pertaining to comfort or fashion. However, the topic reveals some deeper issues surrounding women of this period, women in uniform, and, in particular, the women of the Clubmobiles. Uniforms and clothing signified status, allegiance, and self-identification.

During the formation of the Women's Auxiliary Corps (WAC), developing uniforms for the women who served was one of the most daunting and time consuming tasks faced by the founders. Providing matching clothing for women was an issue never before tackled by the Army, and it turned out to be extremely difficult. Securing the material, producing the garments, and selecting styles that would best fit a myriad of body shapes was something of a logistical nightmare. Combined with an American public whose interest in what the WAC women wore bordered on obsessive, this became arguably the most challenging task faced by the organization.<sup>1</sup> The leaders of the American Red Cross (ARC) faced similar problems in outfitting the thousands of American women who volunteered for service during World War II. Although they were not working on quite the same scale as the WAC, and did not

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<sup>1</sup> Mattie E. Treadwell, Mattie E. *The Women's Army Corps, 1945-1978* (Washington D.C.: The U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1954), 36-39.



receive as much public scrutiny, ARC uniforms were still of paramount importance to the overall success of the ARC in its wartime efforts, particularly as they pertained to women serving in forward combat areas.

The original issue uniform for ARC women consisted of a winter and summer outfit. The winter uniform included a skirt and single-breasted dark blue/grey wool jacket along with a wool overcoat. The summer uniform had the same skirt and jacket, but in a lighter weight fabric. Below are pictures of the winter and summer uniforms as they were issued to ARC Clubmobile recruits.



Original ARC Clubmobile uniforms. Running clockwise from the top, right: the summer uniform, the winter overcoat, and the winter uniform (close-up of the hat and full-length). Photos provided courtesy of Katy Goebel.

There were numerous other required elements to the uniform that women had to furnish themselves including blouses, dress pumps, a hat and stockings. The requirements were so specific as to list the exact undergarments women should take, as well as the quantity (according to the packing list, four girdles would be adequate for one year).<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Norwalk wrote to her parents in June of 1944 that “we’re given one set of summer and winter Class A uniforms, paid for by the Red Cross, and must have them fitted, but we pay for a long list of required equipment. It specifies exactly how many white blouses, socks, cotton underpants, and cotton gloves we need.”<sup>2</sup> Unlike the WAC, the ARC was able to avoid the issue of producing well-fitted uniforms by having the volunteers pay for their own alterations before they were dispatched to their assignments.

As related in their letters and memoirs, most of the women were excited to receive the new uniforms. In the same letter cited above, Norwalk also told her parents that she:

. . . had my uniform fitting today – was issued summer and winter uniforms, trench type raincoat, heavy topcoat with removable red lining. We all love the summer uniform as its really good-looking, of light slate blue Palm Beach material – classy! Work with an overseas cap and red ARC cross, white blouse closed at neck and red ARC cross and on our uniforms a bronze ARC insignia on each lapel and an American Red Cross shoulder patch on our left shoulder. The uniform makes us feel jaunty!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Violet A. Kochendoerfer, *One Woman’s World War II* (Lexington KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 35.

<sup>2</sup>Rosemary Norwalk, *Dearest Ones: A True World War II Love Story* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999), 12.

<sup>3</sup>Norwalk, 12.

The full uniform included other gear such as a musette bag (a heavy canvas and leather bag with carrying straps) a gas mask, canteen, and pistol belt (although no pistol was included.)<sup>4</sup> There were different uniforms for different localities. For instance, the ARC produced a tropical weight dress of seersucker material for those women destined for duty in the Pacific (see picture below).<sup>5</sup> Distribution lines for uniforms were less than ideal, however, as Charlotte Colburn reported receiving the tropical outfit just prior to her deployment in Great Britain.<sup>6</sup>



Original ARC Clubmobile tropical weight, seersucker uniform. Photo provided courtesy of Katy Goebel.

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<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Phenix Wiesner, *Between the Lines: Overseas with the Red Cross and OSS* (Chevy Chase, MD: Posterity Press, Inc., 1998), 6.

<sup>5</sup>Mary Ferebee Howard, *No Drums, No Trumpets: Red Cross Adventure* (Rocky Mount, NC: North Carolina Wesleyan Press, 1992), 8.

<sup>6</sup>Charlotte Colburn Gasperini, November 22, 1943 letter home to her family. From the annotated album *Geronimo!* Edited for the web by Jim Gasperini and available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_top.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_top.html) accessed February 28, 2011.

Rosemary Norwalk wrote home to her family about how her new uniform immediately made her stand out. Enlisted men instantly thought she was a nurse and asked her for an aspirin. Her first ride on a train in uniform had Norwalk chatting the entire time with the GIs sharing the train.<sup>7</sup> This experience exemplifies perhaps the foremost intention of uniforms for these women: to set them apart and identify them with a specific group, the ARC. Women were instructed that, once in uniform, they represented the ARC at all times. Conversely, the uniform confirmed for the women that they were officially a part of the organization, and indicated their right to represent the ARC.

This, in a nutshell, is what uniforms (particularly military) are intended to do: eliminate the individual and create a cohesive group identity. As Ruth P. Rubenstein writes in *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture*, uniforms are required attire that gives the image of authority. When “a person’s attire is identical in style and detail, expectations for roles and performance are explicit.”<sup>8</sup> By connecting the women to the Red Cross via their daily and constant appearance, the organization was able to exert control over behavior. By agreeing to wear a uniform, the women indicated their acceptance of the guidelines and goals of the organization.

Maintaining a “moral” image of every participant was of paramount importance to the ARC, since without the appearance of strictly controlled women, it would never have been successful at installing women so close to the fighting action. Like the WAC, the ARC faced intense public scrutiny of its uniform choices for

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<sup>7</sup>Norwalk, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth P. Rubenstein, *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 83-84.

women. One way to ease public fears was to maintain the notion that the women's appearance would be completely controlled and monitored. For instance, Violet Kochendoerfer included in her memoirs a replication of the "required" packing list handed out by the ARC. This list instructed the women on absolutely every clothing item they needed to pack for one year's service, including panties, girdles, and sanitary napkins.<sup>9</sup> Margaret McLeod wrote home to her mother in January of 1943 that much of her training in Washington D.C. had been spent either obtaining the uniform and all its required elements or else listening to lectures from the ARC about how they needed to wear the uniform. Instructions included keeping coats buttoned at all times and which white gloves they should wear for dress occasions with officers.<sup>10</sup> Clothing theorists Dani Cavallro and Alexandra Warwick suggest that by employing such strict and exact uniform requirements, organizations can attempt to make women more "docile through clothing, in particular uniforms which prevent the individual from establishing an identity, and remind the wearer of the institution."<sup>11</sup> Initially, at least, the ARC uniforms accomplished this task. As women were put into the field and forced to adapt their clothing to both combat and environmental conditions, these controls became less effective, but also less necessary.

The final image that the ARC sought to maintain and display with its uniforms for women was that of femininity. While it was extremely important to create garments with the purpose and appearance of military uniforms, it was also critical

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<sup>9</sup>Kochendoerfer, 34-35.

<sup>10</sup>Margaret McLeod letter home to her mother in January 1943, Margaret McLeod papers, Mss 2960, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR.

<sup>11</sup>Dani Cavallaro and Alexandra Warwick, *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and Body in the Series: Dress, Body, Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 75.

that the clothing maintained traditional visions and expectations of the ideal American woman. The ARC was successful in placing women so close to the fighting front to serve men because it worked extremely hard to maintain the women as a “non-threat” to the social and sexual norms<sup>12</sup> of the time. The visual codes sent by the uniforms were a powerful means of defining women’s sexuality in an acceptable manner. The ARC uniforms had to walk a fine line. Too masculine a uniform might open the women up to suspicions of lesbianism. Conversely, too feminine and frilly a uniform and the women would be viewed as predatory and loose.<sup>13</sup>

The excerpt below, from an article entitled “How a Woman Should Wear a Uniform” from the August 1942 edition of *Good Housekeeping*, is a perfect illustration of the fine line uniforms, and the women who wore them, had to walk to maintain femininity while still appearing unthreatening. The following list is a compilation of the conflicting instructions contained in the article.

1. Don’t wear a short “mannish” haircut, but also don’t keep it too long.
2. Don’t go without any make-up, but do look “finished as well as well-scrubbed” and “use any make-up required to get the fresh, pretty, mind-on-the-job appearance you should have.”
3. Don’t smoke or drink while in uniform. Don’t “swagger or stride along in masculine fashion.”
4. Don’t wear “frivolous shoes with high heels, open toes, open heels” as this would be “too feminine.”
5. Don’t wear a uniform in a nightclub, cocktail lounge, or at a bar as this may appear threatening.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The term “sexual norms” as used here refers to commonly held opinions among the American public that women should present a feminine appearance, play a supportive role to men, and maintain an acceptable distance from political and public involvement.

<sup>13</sup>Philomena Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2002), 38.

<sup>14</sup>Nancy Walker, ed. *Women’s Magazines, 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 1998), 35-37.

The article posited that, while women in uniform were a wartime reality, all possible steps should be taken to minimize their threat to American men and traditional gender roles. The ARC and its uniforms exemplify this dilemma. In order for its women to be taken seriously enough to help maintain the morale of men fighting on the front, they had to appear sufficiently docile and feminine so as not to threaten traditional expectations of American women.

Original issue uniforms fulfilled this requirement well, right up until the moment the women, especially those on the Clubmobiles, had to actually work in them. Particularly for those women serving in England and on the continent in Clubmobiles, the assigned ARC uniforms turned out to be completely impractical for the work. Almost immediately upon arrival in England, most of the women's letters were filled with references to the inadequacy of the uniforms and requests for additional clothing. First, the uniforms were in no way warm enough for the very cold British, French, and Belgian winters. The wool was too lightweight and unsuited to the damp, cold, and mud. In March of 1943, Margaret McLeod wrote home to her mother, "It really makes me ill when I think of the money they spent on useless uniforms for us in Washington." McLeod wrote to a friend around the same time that her Washington D.C. issued uniform was "frightfully inadequate" for the cold of England. Luckily, the practical and well-traveled McLeod had clearly packed some items not specified on the ARC list. She also wrote, "you laughed at my woolen snuggies – you should see my woolen shirt – yes with sleeves – and I am envied by



other girls.”<sup>15</sup> While her long underwear was a helpful addition, it did not really make the uniforms functional.

The uniforms were not well suited to England, in general, but they were a particular issue for the women working on the Clubmobiles. Within one month of the first Clubmobile going into service, the team was requesting uniform changes. Requests included smocks to cover up and protect them from flying hot oil, long pants, fur lined boots, and waterproof trench coats.<sup>16</sup> The impracticality of skirts became quickly obvious once the women were in the field. There simply was no modest way to “get down!” during air raid drills when wearing 2-inch heels, hose and a skirt.<sup>17</sup>

In response to these concerns, the ARC did change the basic uniform to better suit the needs of Clubmobilers. Shortly after implementation of the program, women serving on Clubmobiles were issued a “battledress” uniform based on those worn by British soldiers. The uniform was British-made from Royal Air Force (RAF) dark blue heavy weight wool. The single-breasted fly-front jacket with lapel and convertible collar had two pleated patch pockets with scalloped flaps. The waistband of the pants was closed with a metal buckle on the left side. Below are several pictures of an original Clubmobile uniform.

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<sup>15</sup>McLeod letter to her mother on March 13, 1943 and February 2, 1943 Margaret McLeod papers, Mss 2960, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR.

<sup>16</sup>Marjorie Lee Morgan, ed., *The Clubmobile: The ARC In the Storm* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hazlett Printing and Publishing, Inc., 1982), 17.

<sup>17</sup>Morgan, 39.



Original ARC Clubmobile “battledress” uniform. Running clockwise from the top right: the full-length uniform, the pants, side-view of the hat and insignia, and close-up of the jacket. Photos provided courtesy of Katy Goebel.

Most women reported that, while perhaps not perfect, the new uniform did suit Clubmobile work better than the original. Rosemary Norwalk liked her battledress uniform better and Charlotte Colburn wrote home happily to her parents about receiving both her new uniform and a warmer coat.<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Richardson joked with her friend at home about the trials of uniforms in the ARC, writing, “The Red Cross has presented us with British-issue battledress of the RAF. Blue, complete with hat ala Helen Hokinson. This, added to our summer issue, winter issue, and various hats – all of different weights, colors, and materials make the Red Cross the most un-uniformed bunch in captivity.”<sup>2</sup>

The uniforms, as discussed above, were clearly intended by the Red Cross to exert a certain amount of control over the morality of the women wearing them. The original issue uniforms were designed to restrain the women and keep in place accepted social norms, as seen in the lack of a pant, as well as high heels, gloves, and girdle requirements. For many women, the reality was that the uniforms were something of liberation. B.J. Olewiler described how her ARC uniform allowed her to approach strange men without the fear of appearing “forward” or “fast” and Olewiler felt this was a new and welcome liberty for her and other ARC volunteers.<sup>3</sup> By readily identifying the women with an accepted and non-threatening group, the

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<sup>1</sup>Norwalk, 45. Charlotte Colburn letter home to parents on December 11, 1943 available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_top.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_top.html) accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> James Madison, *Slinging Doughnuts for the Boys: An American Woman in World War II* (Bloomington, IN:Indiana University Press, 2007), 49. The footnote to this letter on page 271 of Madison’s book states that Helen Hokinson cartoons in the New Yorker satirized society matrons and their fashion.

<sup>3</sup> B.J. Olewiler, *A Woman in a Man’s War: Reflections of a Red Cross Donut Girl of World War II* (Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris,2003), 33.

uniforms allowed them to behave in a manner which would never have been acceptable in their civilian lives.

ARC “brass” also ran into the contradiction of trying to exert very specific controls through clothing on women who, as discussed in Chapter 2, had been chosen because they were independent and strong willed. Harriet Engelhardt provided a perfect example of this contradiction in her letter home to her family which described her sentiments about the girdle requirement: “I shall buy a cheap one and throw it overboard when I sail.”<sup>4</sup> The ARC did not count on the fiercely independent nature of its recruits when contemplating how best to preserve their morality. Engelhardt had no intention of wearing that garment, official issue or not.

Mary Thomas Sargent was assigned a pair of khaki bloomers with elastic at the knee as part of her uniform. She wrote that she planned to throw them overboard once they set sail from New York, but that she settled for a trashcan because she did not want the troops to see them flying by.<sup>5</sup> While amusing, this little tale also reveals something about the attitudes of these women. Like Engelhardt, Sargent was not going to wear the ridiculous bloomers, but was still too modest to be comfortable with all the enlisted men on the ship seeing them. These were independent women and the attitude of mature modesty made much of what the ARC was trying to accomplish through its strict uniform codes largely unnecessary.

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<sup>4</sup>Harriet Engelhardt to her family, May 20, 1944, Harriet Pinkston Engelhardt Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL [hereinafter the Engelhardt Papers].

<sup>5</sup> Mary Thomas Sargent, *Runway Towards Orion: The True Adventures of a Red Cross Girl on a B-29 Air Base in World War II India* (Grand Rapids: Triumph Press, Inc., 1984), 25.

The women serving in the ARC were under stern instructions to wear their uniforms at all times when on duty. However, in the performance of their jobs, the women found that the enlisted men really preferred to see American women in civilian clothing. These men saw uniforms all the time while in service overseas, and they longed for the “normality” of American women in civilian clothing. On a deeper level, seeing women in civilian clothing reinforced for the men accepted social norms and expectations. Reinforcing these ideas with ARC women maintained their non-threatening status.

Clubmobile women commented frequently about their desire to wear civilian clothing and the men’s reactions to seeing them in it. Many asked family to send dresses for dances and officer dinners.<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Colburn wrote to her family on several occasions describing having worn civilian clothes to events (summer dresses and formal wear) and how much the “boys” enjoyed seeing them.<sup>7</sup> Since the objective of ARC work was to raise morale among enlisted men, and civilian clothing seemed to do so, the women took this aspect of their work seriously. Margaret McLeod wrote home to her family in July of 1943 that she had been foolish not to bring any civilian clothing. She told her family she should have packed the exact opposite of what the ARC had told her to.<sup>8</sup>

Not only were the commissioned garments almost entirely inappropriate to the climate and work, there were also simply too many items given the frequent travel

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<sup>6</sup>Oscar Whitelaw Rexford, *Battlestars and Doughnuts: World War II Clubmobile Experiences of Mary Metcalfe Rexford* (St. Louis: The Patrice Press, 1989), 16.

<sup>7</sup>Charlotte Colburn Gasperini, 1 June 1944 and 1 January 1944 letters home to her family available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_top.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_top.html) accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>8</sup>Margaret McLeod letter to her mother in July 1943, Margaret McLeod papers, Mss 2960, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR.

required of Clubmobile workers. Harriet Engelhardt wrote home to her parents that she did not want them to send anything else to her. She was already “tossing” items she had brought because there was just too much to carry on the road.<sup>9</sup> With only limited space for personal effects, Clubmobilers learned to carry only essential items, and this did not include white dress shoes and gloves.

Since the ARC simply could not enforce the strict controls over civilian clothing that it could with uniforms, it tried very hard to stop women from wearing anything not official issue. The uniforms were a critical aspect of maintaining the idea that these women were not only not a threat, but frankly that they were not “camp followers” and prostitutes, a common misconception in both Europe and America. Mary Metcalf Rexford described wearing a red dress with cut-out work at the neck to see a movie with some enlisted men while she was stationed in France. The men loved seeing civilian clothes again, but very soon after she wore the outfit, a directive came down from “brass” stating that ARC women were never to be out of uniform.<sup>10</sup>

These expectations from ARC management at times conflicted with what the women felt their assignment was, as well as other instructions about always maintaining a “feminine” appearance. Most of the women took this seriously. Charlotte Colburn, for example, wrote home in September of 1944 from the front lines in France that she was determined to keep clean and presentable, even if it meant shampooing her hair in a helmet (which it often did).<sup>11</sup> Engelhardt wrote home

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<sup>9</sup>Engelhardt letter home to her family on July 21, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>10</sup>Rexford, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Colburn Gasperini, September 28, 1944 letter home to her family available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_top.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_top.html) accessed February 28, 2011.

on September 6, 1944 that “one no longer thinks anything of going 3 days without changing clothes, but even so we get along – we just put a lovely fur jacket over top.”<sup>12</sup> The women were also well aware that the morale of the men they were serving depended a great deal on their presentation. Eleanor Bumstead Stevenson wrote of her attire that it was usually a mix of feminine touches where possible and anything she could find to keep warm. This could backfire with the men, however, as she recalled once wearing an ARC uniform and GI leggings and boots for warmth under her skirt. Upon seeing her, the GIs complained about leggings on the first pair of female American legs they had seen in months.<sup>13</sup> Walking the fine line between utility and femininity was a difficult task.

While the uniforms were successful in forming a cohesive group identity for the women and the ARC, they also had the unintended consequence of assisting the women who wore them in identifying themselves with the fighting men and military. Elizabeth Wiesner reported that when she first put on her ARC uniform and walked by the guards at the White House in Washington D.C., they would mistake her for a military officer of some sort and salute her. Wiesner enjoyed her mistaken identity and walked by “quite often and quite unnecessarily.”<sup>14</sup> Once women were in full uniform, those not familiar with the ARC could easily mistake them for members of the military, which many women were amenable to. In the field, however, the Clubmobile women spent most of their time with the enlisted men. As the uniforms

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<sup>12</sup>Engelhardt letter home to her family on September 6, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>13</sup>William E. and Eleanor B. Stevenson Papers, RG 30/219, Subgroup II, Series 5, Box 1, “I Knew Your Soldier” in the Saturday Evening Post in three installments, 21 Oct 1944, 28 Oct 1944, 4 Nov 1944, 11.

<sup>14</sup>Wiesner, 5.

changed from necessity in order to accommodate their work, to some degree, so did the women's perceptions of themselves change from being ARC "girls" to being one of the troops.

Elizabeth Wiesner wrote home to her family within days of her arrival at the front in North Africa that her uniform had changed to a men's shirt and field jacket, men's pants (Wiesner noted that keeping the fly closed on these was an issue), wool socks and men's boots. Once these changes were made she was:

. . . simply in heaven. And all my lovely uniforms they issued me in Washington are in my blanket roll to make it more comfortable to sleep on! And all my shoes, including those lovely white ones we bought, Mother, are in the bottom of my barracks bag.<sup>15</sup>

Wiesner had begun a transformation that many of the Clubmobile women would undergo. The reality of their situation was that once in the field, they were often operating in the same combat conditions as the men they were serving. As they altered clothing in recognition of this fact, they also altered their own interpretations of who they were. Shortly upon arrival in England, Margaret McLeod wrote to her family that she had seen an ARC girl in the field wearing GI issue boots. She noted that they looked good for dealing with the mud and planned to get herself a pair soon.<sup>16</sup> Gretchen Schuler wrote home to her family about acquiring GI boots that she loved and wearing sweatshirts as long underwear with her GI coveralls.<sup>17</sup> In a similar

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<sup>15</sup>Wiesner, 9.

<sup>16</sup>Margaret McLeod letter home to her mother in July 1943, Margaret McLeod papers 1942-2946, Mss 2960, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR .

<sup>17</sup>Gretchen Schuler letters to her family on September 9, 1944 and September 16, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA [hereinafter the American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection].



vein, Mary Metcalf Rexford wrote of being thrilled to receive a GI replacement field jacket because it was so much warmer than her own ARC issued jacket.<sup>18</sup>

Many of the uniform changes were practical in nature, but the women also described more superficial changes that were centered on their identification with certain groups of soldiers. Mary Metcalf Rexford noted in her memoirs:

There didn't seem to be any regulation prohibiting our wearing Army Field jackets on which we had sewn the patches or insignias of many of the units we had served from the time we had landed. What a topic of conversations they were for the GIs, as they were to some extent a visual portrayal of our mission and activities.<sup>19</sup>

The badges had significance as both a conversation piece that allowed the women to readily connect with men and a means of charting their experiences in the field. B.J. Olewiler described covering their jackets with medals and colorful insignias of the different divisions her truck had served.<sup>20</sup> Some women, such as Bertha Koopman of Clubmobile Group G completely covered their jackets with the insignia, to the point that soldiers liked to have their picture taken with her.<sup>21</sup> Charlotte Colburn described to her family her new assignment serving paratroopers in England:

From now on my letters to you will probably be devoted to them individually and collectively but all I can say now is that they are a marvelous gang of wonderful boys and men – the paratroopers are all volunteers. These boys have seen action – plenty of it in both Africa and Italy and I'm so proud to be with them. We wear their insignia on our battle dresses – have paratrooper boots too – and everyday serve thousands working much more hard than I have before.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Rexford, 104.

<sup>19</sup>Rexford, 132.

<sup>20</sup>Olewiler, 138.

<sup>21</sup>Morgan, 166.

<sup>22</sup>Charlotte Colburn, March 27, 1944 letter home to her family available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_top.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_top.html) accessed February 28, 2011.

Colburn expressed here a common feeling among Clubmobile women that they had “adopted” a specific group of fighting men. In identifying this group as her own, Colburn also began altering her appearance to be more akin to theirs in order to identify herself as one of them. This self-identification became even stronger as the women moved into France behind the advancing American troops.

Gretchen Schuler perhaps best described the double-sided impact of uniforms for Clubmobile women. Schuler was in France by July of 1944, very shortly after the first waves of American troops had secured the coast. By August 22, 1944 Schuler wrote home about how the uniforms of the ARC women had changed to incorporate GI issue boots, leggings, coveralls, and helmets for both safety and comfort as they moved through the French countryside. “The French people are amazed at us, and for awhile thought we were women soldiers! I sometimes wonder myself just what we are!”<sup>23</sup> They surely must have looked the part. By Valentine’s Day 1945 Schuler wrote her family that she was concerned about wearing real clothes after so much time spent in combat boots and battle fatigues.<sup>24</sup> By this point in her “tour” Schuler had identified closely enough with the uniform and status to be unsure about how she would return to normal life and clothing after the war.

Although the issued uniforms were intended to force the women to identify with the Red Cross even while serving in the field, modifications made to the uniforms, either practical or ornamental, increased the Clubmobilers’ association of

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<sup>23</sup>Gretchen Schuler to her family, August 22, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

<sup>24</sup>Gretchen Schuler to her family, February 14, 1945, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

themselves as part of the combat force. By rejecting many of the elements and requirements surrounding the ARC uniform, the women also, to some degree, rejected the organization itself and the strictly proscribed role they were expected to play in it and the war effort. Uniforms were simply an outward manifestation of a deeper held feeling many of these women demonstrated: namely, that through their actions, proximity, and experiences they began to view themselves much more like combat troops than ARC “girls.”

## Chapter 5:

### The Clubmobilers in Combat

Whatever their official “non-combatant” status, the reality reflected in the letters, journals, and memoirs of Clubmobile women is that, as a group, they came closer to combat than any other American women during World War II. It is true that Red Cross nurses were, as they had been in previous wars, very close to the front in order that they might attend to the wounded. However, most were located at hospital tents situated a “safe” distance from the front. In general, the nurses were not tasked with the job of driving from position to position to visit men. In contrast, this is precisely what the Clubmobilers were sent to do. Because of this assignment, and because the ARC was so successful at establishing the women as a “non-threat” to the social norms of the time, Clubmobile women moved directly behind the invasion forces across Continental Europe.

#### **In the Thick of It**

Usually, the Clubmobilers were only a day or two behind the infantry as it marched through France, Germany, and Belgium. They saw battle and siege wreckage firsthand. They trailed the invasion troops so quickly as to be considered by the local populations part of the military. They were caught in the middle of the few retreats that occurred, such as at the Battle of the Bulge in December of 1944. They followed so close on the heels of the first troops into the concentration camps that they witnessed the full horror before any remediation had occurred. They suffered

from many of the same afflictions as front-line combat troops, including fatigue, depression, disillusionment with the war effort, and physical ailments such as trench-foot. And like the men they traveled with, they became more than troops. They became liberators and aid workers to the thousands of starving, displaced persons left in the wake of Nazi defeat.

The first Clubmobiles were unloaded at Utah beach on July 16, 1944, just ten days after the initial D-Day invasion. Groups would continue to arrive through August. Harriet Engelhardt landed on Utah beach on August 18 with Clubmobile Group H. On August 27, she wrote home to her family about her trip over the English Channel and first few days on the continent. She reported she was “sleeping in bedrolls, sometimes in the mud, sometimes under an apple tree, and sometimes in a trailer on top of gasoline cans...we are close enough to the front now to watch the shelling from our bedrolls and hear the boom.” From this distance it was “a crazy, crazy war, so near yet so far away as far as so many of us are concerned.”<sup>1</sup> This distant observation would change as Engelhardt moved further into France and closer to the action. In October 1944, Engelhardt wrote family friends about going to the front in order to serve the soldiers. “I think it permissible to say that we are near the front and our work takes us to it.”<sup>2</sup> Engelhardt could not say much more because of Army censors, but did report that she had flown along on observation flights over hostile territory.

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<sup>1</sup>Harriet Engelhardt to her family, August 8, 1944, Harriet Pinkston Engelhardt Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL [hereinafter Engelhardt Papers].

<sup>2</sup>Harriet Engelhardt to the Morris family, October 25, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

Mary Metcalf Rexford was part of Group A and landed on Utah beach on July 18, 1944. Driving her crew's Clubmobile named President Lincoln (and nicknamed "Abe" by the women) Rexford was one of the very first American women to enter the continent, even among Clubmobilers. Rexford and her crew were usually quite close to the fighting front, and she describes one instance in which they were warned by the commander in charge of their area to remain on alert all night. The Nazis were mounting a counter attack and it was not clear the lines would hold. If the Nazis pushed back another two miles, the Clubmobilers would need to pick up and leave without any equipment.<sup>3</sup> Rexford also reported that, at times, her unit would get out ahead of the big guns and have to double back to safety. They often saw artillery fire on German towns with just the help of a pair of binoculars. She described parachute bombs exploding close enough to their quarters that some of the women were knocked off their cots by the explosion. She noted that the soldiers were always surprised to see them in towns taken as recently as the day before.<sup>4</sup>

Charlotte Colburn was assigned to Clubmobile Group K and landed on the continent on August 13, 1944. She wrote home to her family in September that she was serving troops right on the front across the river from the German armies.<sup>5</sup> B.J. Olewiler served in the same Clubmobile Group H with Engelhardt. Shortly upon arrival in France, Olewiler described an event in which their Clubmobile "Cedar Rapids" was caught in strafing fire from German planes. Unusual for that day, the

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<sup>3</sup>Oscar Whitelaw Rexford, *Battlestars and Doughnuts: World War II Clubmobile Experiences of Mary Metcalfe Rexford* (St. Louis, MO: The Patrice Press, 1989), 45.

<sup>4</sup>Rexford, 105, 109, 122.

<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Colburn Gasperini to her family on September 14, 1944, from the annotated album *Geronimo!*, edited for the web by Jim Gasperini and available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_top.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_top.html), accessed February 28, 2011.

crew had a young G.I. driver at the wheel. As the fire began, they all moved to leave the vehicle and spread out so they would not present a concentrated target. The young driver left ahead of Olewiler, but turned to look back and she:

...caught an expression on this lad's face that I shall never forget – two emotions so visibly competed for supremacy. Should he run for safety, or must he help us out? I gave him a push, which freed him and he was off like a deer. I was laughing so hard inside as I rolled into a ditch that I almost forgot to be scared.

Not only were these women caught in the middle of active combat, they were often as new to it as their “protectors.”

Gretchen Schuler of Massachusetts was the captain of Clubmobile Group F, which landed in France on July 31, 1944. Just a little over a week later, Schuler was writing her family that she was driving around the front scouting for locations to take the Clubmobiles. She describes being in areas occupied by German forces just the day before and told her family, “as the front moves up, we go too. We are closest to the front of any ARC unit at the moment.”<sup>6</sup>

More harrowing was the letter Schuler sent to her family on December 29, 1944 in which she recounted Group F's retreat with the rest of the army during the Battle of the Bulge. When the break in the lines came, she and the other women at their base camp had two hours to pack all their personal items and equipment. This included items for the crews who were out on rounds serving soldiers at the time the orders came. “Being good soldiers, we got all the mobile equipment lines up and

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<sup>6</sup> Gretchen Schuler to her family, August 9, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA [hereinafter American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection].

headed west on the hard road first.”<sup>7</sup> Conditions during the pull-back were harsh and cold with little food or rest. “At night the Jerries were overhead, and bombs landed nearby. But our luck held.” Prior to this, Schuler had not revealed any details about her location in Belgium to her family, insisting only in prior letters that they were safe and well enough back from the fighting.

Schuler was also very concerned about the crews who had been split off from the main Group F during the pull back. Of the eight total Clubmobiles in Group F, only four were present at base in Bastogne, Belgium when they began moving back. The other four vehicles, and their crews, had been out on field assignment and were split off from the main convoy. Luckily, all were safe and would make their way back to the main group over the next few days. One of Group F’s extra drivers was caught in the city when the Germans moved in and had to run out through machine gun fire with a few soldiers just ahead of the oncoming German tanks.<sup>8</sup> During one of the only major counter-offensive attacks by the German army in the re-taking of France and Belgium, a group of Red Cross volunteers was nearly as close to the action as the combat troops fighting to maintain the front.

The proximity to fighting and combat did not change as the conflict wore on. Engelhardt wrote to her brother in March of 1945 (just shy of VE Day on May 8,

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<sup>7</sup>Schuler to her family, December 29, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

<sup>8</sup> Marjorie Lee Morgan, ed., *The Clubmobile: The ARC In the Storm* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hazlett Printing and Publishing, Inc., 1982), 150.



1945) that she was “peddling doughnuts” within M1 range of the enemy and driving from “gun to gun through mine fields and over roads that are no longer roads.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Just One of the Boys**

As discussed in the previous chapter, with the invasion of the European continent, the Clubmobile women generally seemed to identify even more closely with the troops and fighting men than they had previously done in England. Making the same trek across the channel as all the post-invasion troops and watching their Army-issue, combat-ready vehicles unloaded on the French coast along with all the heavy artillery and other military hardware only served to reinforce this perception. Olewiler noted as they were unloading the Group H Clubmobiles in France that someone noticed there were no red crosses on the top of the vehicles such as adorned Red Cross ambulances, even though they were technically “non-combatants.” This just meant that “they can shoot at us, but we can’t shoot back. Hah.Hah.”<sup>10</sup>

Most of the time, the Clubmobiles traveled the same roads used by the American military as they moved into newly liberated areas. In a February 1945 letter home, Engelhardt wrote, “The war was so near that the smoke screens still hung in the air and the traffic was appalling – Americans going one way, German prisoners the other. So silly, this war – the Germans got all dressed up to wait for the

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<sup>9</sup>Engelhardt to her brother Sam, March 11, 1945 and March 18, 1945, Engelhardt Papers. M1 range refers to the distance at which the commonly issued M1 rifle was accurate, somewhere between 200 and 400 meters.

<sup>10</sup>B.J. Olewiler, *A Woman in a Man’s War: Reflections of a Red Cross Donut Girl of World War II* (Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris Press, 2003), 103.

Americans to come get them.”<sup>11</sup> Later, in March of 1945 Engelhardt revealed in a letter home to her brother that she believed herself to be “somewhat” in the armed forces. She goes on to tell her brother that he should not be upset about old women at the store giving him a hard time about not being in uniform. He was needed there for when the soldiers come home.<sup>12</sup> This conversation demonstrates an unusual shift in typical gender roles for the time, with the well-traveled and soldier sister giving advice to her older stateside brother on how to treat the returning troops. Reading between the lines, it also indicates that Engelhardt felt she would be one of the returning soldiers in need of care.

The women were often quite forward about where their allegiance was. In December 1944 Gretchen Schuler notified her family that she had been offered an important position with the ARC based out of Paris. She had turned it down, however, because “I am still a ‘field-soldier’ at heart, and I’ll stick with Group F as long as they’ll have me.”<sup>13</sup> Upon return from leave taken in May of 1945, Engelhardt expressed similar feelings when she wrote home to her family about how much she disliked the new troops at the rear of the army and could not wait to catch up with “her group” of fighting men out near the front.<sup>14</sup> The longer the women spent at the front with the troops, and the more intense the combat they witnessed and experienced, the stronger their association with the troops became. As an unknown member of Group E put it:

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<sup>11</sup>Engelhardt to her family February 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>12</sup>Engelhardt to her brother Sam, February and March 18, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>13</sup>Schuler to her family, December 29, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

<sup>14</sup>Engelhardt to her family, March 8, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

It's going on a year now, and we're plodding along unbewildered, disillusioned and of an indeterminate breed – part civilian, thoroughly GI, military when it's convenient and official, and strictly combat. Never in uniform, never out of uniform. Just Red Cross girls, whatever that may mean. I just know that we were the first Red Cross over here and we went through Normandy like the Army went through it – fast and in the field. We hit Paris and loved it, like a GI.<sup>15</sup>

The women also displayed feelings reminiscent of those experienced by troops in combat. For instance, many of the women described a deep sense of pride and duty to their jobs and their boys. Engelhardt wrote to her brother that she was “seeing the world at government expense, but I’m enjoying it the more because I sincerely work from time to time. What we do seems little enough, but it helps...I daresay there isn’t an ARC girl here (with us at any rate) who would be anywhere else.”<sup>16</sup> Giselle Simon, an ARC worker stationed in Belgium wrote home, “God, I’m lucky. And how damn proud I am of my outfit. You couldn’t drag me away with a \$50,000 bribe. We’re all together a small army of Americans sticking it out as all of you back at home would do if you were here. Sticking it out in the hell of Belgium today and able to smile and laugh (in between alerts) and crack jokes.”<sup>17</sup>

None of this should be interpreted to suggest that these women had an inflated opinion of themselves. They very much respected the fighting men and other war workers around them. In the March letter referenced above, Engelhardt also described her respect for medical personnel: “I feel terribly ashamed of peddling doughnuts every time I see a C47 go over; there’s a flight nurse on that plane who is responsible

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<sup>15</sup>Morgan, 120.

<sup>16</sup>Engelhardt to her brother Sam, March 18, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>17</sup>Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, *We're in This War Too: World War II Letters From American Women in Uniform* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), 258.

more than the pilot even, for the lives of 24 desperately injured men – she will work constantly from France or Germany, over the ocean, until those men are in a hospital in the States.”<sup>18</sup> Engelhardt was clearly impressed by these nurses, even more so than the pilots flying the planes.

B.J. Olewiler was stationed very near the Belgian border during the Battle of the Bulge and recalls being in a hospital, watching the nurses and doctors work tirelessly while she felt completely useless because she could not even comfort a soldier lest she get in the way.<sup>19</sup> These women clearly felt a strong bond with the men they were serving and pride at doing what others could not to support them in combat. Gretchen Schuler wrote her family:

We are lucky to be here, though, and I often wish all American women could have this experience. We see the boys just before they leave to take various spots, we see them when they have been relieved for a few hours. They come out dirty, tired and unshaven. But they are always happy and tickled to see American girls.<sup>20</sup>

Their jobs were not all action, however, and like the troops they were serving, there were long periods when nothing happened and the women grew restless and bored. This began in England when the first Clubmobile groups were preparing to leave for the Continent after D-Day. The Army had the ARC on alert for days and Mary Metcalf Rexford recalled getting extremely bored waiting for notice to come that they were leaving. Just like the troops, these women trained for deployment and were anxious to begin their “real work.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Engelhardt to her brother Sam, March 18, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>19</sup>Olewiler, 150.

<sup>20</sup>Schuler to her family, September 16, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

<sup>21</sup>Rexford, 31.

B.J. Olewiler also recalled the monotony of everyday life on the front. It often felt like they were just waiting for something to happen, seeing the same people and driving the same roads day after day.<sup>22</sup> As time wore on, the women became accustomed to frequent moves and even looked forward to them. Engelhardt repeated this theme in many of her letters. In October 1944, she wrote to family friends: “a cock crows, a mess-kit rattles, a church bell’s chimes carries over the hillsides. It will be good to be on the move again.” In November of 1945, Engelhardt wrote: “Fortunately, we are on the move again – we’re such old troopers by now that we grow restless very easily.”<sup>23</sup> Old habits die hard, and even after the fighting was done, Engelhardt was not able to settle into one spot for very long.

Their constant exposure to all aspects of war, including the horrors, eventually toughened these women just as it did the combat troops. Out of necessity, they became hardened to the sights and atrocities of warfare. On September 16, 1944 Gretchen Schuler wrote to her family of “how casual it has all come to be to us. The other night a crew arrived back and I asked what had been cooking in their area. They said: ‘Oh, we were up real close to day. The bombers came over and strafed and bombed the enemy where we could see them. It was a good day, but nothing really happened.’”<sup>24</sup> Schuler was amazed at how quickly these events became mundane and normal. Later, in a February 1945 letter home, she wrote that:

Yesterday two of the girls were sitting on the front steps eating crackers and cheese and watching the GI’s load Jerrie stiffs onto a truck in the field below

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<sup>22</sup>Olewiler, 160.

<sup>23</sup>Engelhardt letter to the Morris family October 25, 1944 and to her family November 26, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>24</sup>Schuler to her family, September 16, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

the house. All of a sudden it dawned on the girls how nonchalant they were about the whole scene. Gad, we are all so sick of seeing dead Jerries and dead animals that I guess we have built up a defense to it all.<sup>25</sup>

In order to cope with what they were seeing, just like the combat troops, these women built mental defenses to protect themselves. It was necessary and common in the world they were living in. Although they recognized the need for this cold, distant attitude, they were well aware that what they were seeing was truly horrific. B.J. Olewiler described driving behind a graves registration vehicle carrying a load of American corpses which “were uncovered because they were frozen stiff, and they bounced up and down like wooden logs.” It “became the symbol of what I was feeling: that these corpses might as well have been frozen fish; that we had all gotten so inured we paid little attention and cared less.” When she noted as much to her companions, they responded by asking her what else could they do; there was a job to be done. Olewiler could only agree and keep moving.<sup>26</sup>

The need to work through things that would, in another life, be cause for emotion, was a common refrain in letters of ARC Clubmobile women. Mary Metcalf Rexford recalled that, soon upon arriving in France, the crew of the President Lincoln was serving men in a heavily mined area. Rexford watched a “boy get blown up by a mine while eating his doughnut and coffee.” She was disturbed, but just kept working. There were other men to serve.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most telling example of the hard shell these women had to adopt is seen through an event that occurred in Clubmobile Group H and is recounted by

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<sup>25</sup>Schuler to her family, February 11, 1945, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

<sup>26</sup>Olewiler, 156.

<sup>27</sup>Rexford, 54.

both Harriet Engelhardt and B.J. Olewiler. In August of 1945, Portia Miller (part of the three women crew of the Cedar Rapids Clubmobile) was killed after she was crushed beneath the wheels of her truck. Another woman named Barbara was driving at the time and Olewiler, the third member of the team, was away. Miller's hat flew out of the window and she jumped out to get it. The driver backed up to fetch Miller, who had slipped on the wet leaves. Before Barbara could stop the huge vehicle, Miller was under the wheels with her pelvis crushed. She held on for five days, but eventually succumbed to her injuries.<sup>28</sup>

Harriet Engelhardt was particularly shaken by Miller's death and wrote home to her family about it.

Portia Miller, with a fine background, fine education, and all the energy and personality and healthy mental outlook that anyone has ever known was, by accident, killed. Her best friend ran over her. Needless to say, we are all heartbroken.... We have known much of death this past year, and we treat its coming as sensibly as we know how.... There was a simple ceremony held in the protestant church in Starnberg followed by what would amount to a cocktail party at our living quarters... Portia, as many men we've known, is dead. It is for Barbara that we all must do something... We all had a few drinks and drove back to work.<sup>29</sup>

Engelhardt was plainly upset by the events and her letters after this time displayed a growing disillusionment with the war and the ARC. As sad as she was, though, she takes a very workman-like approach to the tragedy. In war, one cannot grieve too long. There are survivors to take care of and work to be done. Engelhardt's heartbreak is evident, but so too is her strength and resolve. Her commitment was to her fellow troops, both those she served and the women she served with.

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<sup>28</sup>Olewiler, 177-178.

<sup>29</sup>Engelhardt letter to her family August 26, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

## Combat Relationships

This status as women traveling with the American army was generally a source of confusion for the local populations. As the women rode into liberated areas alongside the Army, they were greeted by the locals as heroes, and as part of the Army. On August 27, 1944 Harriet Engelhardt described to her family her arrival in Chartres, France: “Oh such shouting and clapping and weeping and sheer exultation...”vive l’Amerique” and much clasping of hands and kissing of babies and cheeks.” Later Engelhardt reported that there were “millions, actually millions of displaced persons – many Poles, Czechs, French, Russians, and God-knows-what, all tattered, and glad to see us.”<sup>30</sup>

Gretchen Schuler wrote that the French seemed to sincerely love the Americans and take the Clubmobile women as part of the Army. However, they were never quite sure in what capacity the Clubmobile women served. In the same letter, Schuler reported that “one Frenchwoman said: The American Army treats their “wives” better than the Germans did. You are allowed to even bring your kitchens along! Isn’t that something? I guess we are thought to be “camp followers”....woo hoo mother will like that angle!”<sup>31</sup> Engelhardt also wrote to her brother Sam that the French were convinced they must be travelling brothels and they were constantly

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<sup>30</sup> Engelhardt letters to her family, August 27, 1944 and to her brother Sam on April 13 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>31</sup>Schuler to her father, August 24, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.



trying to convince the locals they were only “cuisine dans la voiture” or roughly translated, “working in the car.”<sup>32</sup>

At times, however, the language barrier and oddity of their situation was just too much to try to explain. Mary Metcalf Rexford described one incident where the women of Group A were setting up their own camp shortly after arriving in France. They were watched the entire time by an old, confused French farmer. Eventually, he asked them “Are you for all the troops?” One of the women spoke French and tried several times to explain their role. Finally, out of sheer exhaustion, she simply said, in perfect French, “For Americans Only!” which seemed to satisfy the farmer.<sup>33</sup>

Generally, the women seemed to find these situations humorous. They knew full well how unusual they appeared to the local population and were confident enough in their roles to not let these perceptions seriously bother them. Schuler wrote home for her family not to worry, the “Continental Spirit” had not yet affected anyone in her group.<sup>34</sup>

These women also developed deep relationships with the people they shared the battlefield with, both men and women. They identified strongly with the male combat troops and considered themselves part of a select fraternity. Gretchen Schuler wrote in several of her letters home her desire to really talk things through with her father, a World War I veteran and colonel in the Army. She was sure only he, of her family, could really understand the conditions and what they were doing on the

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<sup>32</sup>Engelhardt letters to her family, September 11, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>33</sup>Rexford, 52.

<sup>34</sup>Schuler to her father, August 24, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection. The term “Continental Spirit” as used by Schuler referred to commonly held American belief that Europeans, in particular those that lived on the main continent, behaved with questionable and “loose” morals in regard to sexual and personal behavior.

Belgium front. She wrote that “He would understand what we are up against. This life is a world all its own.”<sup>35</sup> Combat was something discussed with one who had been there, and Schuler now regarded herself a part of this group along with her father.

The nature of the women’s relationships with the men was different on the Continent than ever would have been the case back home. B.J. Olewiler discusses a close friendship she developed with a soldier named Jack. He was married and had a wife in the States, which normally would have prevented any type of relationship with Olewiler. However, under the circumstances of combat, they were free to become friends without the appearance of impropriety. Olewiler was close friends with Jack in part because they both knew that no one at home would ever really understand what they had seen and been through in the war.<sup>36</sup>

Like troops who face battle together, the crews and Groups of Clubmobile women developed deep, lasting relationships very quickly under the strain of combat. They had to depend on each other extensively, and this formed bonds much more quickly than might have occurred under normal circumstances. Gretchen Schuler was Captain of Clubmobile Group F and took her position very seriously. She wrote to her family about how much she loved the women in her Group and how she could not stand the possibility they might be split up and sent to different locations. “I am horribly attached to them all. They are afraid I may be pulled out for another job, and I am scared they will too.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Schuler to her father, September 16, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

<sup>36</sup>Olewiler, 132, 133.

<sup>37</sup>Schuler to her family September 19, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

During the retreat of American forces in the Battle of the Bulge that took place in December of 1944 (and in which Group F was caught), Schuler's commitment to the women of her crew was evident. She did not divulge this in her letters home, but her later recounting of the story reveals that Schuler took her role as commanding officer of the women very seriously. The trucks were split up at the time the retreat was ordered. Once she had those at base packed to go, Schuler began driving among the retreating troops all along the front in her small Hillman jeep nicknamed "Fetchin' Gretchen" to try and locate the missing Clubmobiles and their crews. At great personal risk to herself, Schuler was determined to try and track down the women she felt she was responsible for.<sup>38</sup> Nearly all the women express in their letters and memoirs the opinion that their particular group is the best of all the Clubmobile groups serving.<sup>39</sup> These types of bonds are essential for good field combat units, as men must trust each other with their lives. That the Clubmobile women formed very similar relationships with their crews speaks to the "in-the-field" nature of their work during World War II.

The women also had close relationships with the Clubmobiles themselves. Like the pilots who logged hundreds of flight hours in their bombers, the Clubmobile women often came to think of their GMC trucks more as traveling companions than pieces of equipment. In designing the GMC 6X6 trucks for deployment on the Continent, the ARC assumed they would face combat conditions. As such, the trucks became the women's trusted "combat buddies" which they regarded as old friends.

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<sup>38</sup>Morgan, 151.

<sup>39</sup>Rexford, 155. Harriet Engelhardt also expressed this sentiment about Group H in several of her letters.

Mary Metcalf Rexford's crewmate wrote a letter to their truck "Abe" while on sick leave away from the front. She wrote to "Abe" that she was:

...willing to overlook all those spilt coffee urns and trays of doughnuts – even the time you threw the coffee ladle on my head, because I think you're pretty fine with the First Army A and 49<sup>th</sup> Brigade insignia and always remember during the Normandy Campaign you led every Clubmobile on the continent in doughnut production...P.S. when I get home I'll telephone your family at General Motors and tell them I knew you.<sup>40</sup>

Also akin to the fighter pilots of World War II, the Clubmobile women often decorated their vehicles with artwork and insignia from the troops they served.<sup>41</sup>

Many of the Clubmobiles sported hand painted maps of the continental United States so the women could easily reference where they were from for the enlisted men.<sup>42</sup>

Rexford had deep feelings for Abe, and was thrilled when he got a complete overhaul and new paint job. She wrote of him that "no vehicle had ever withstood the beating or was required to cover the type of roads and terrain that he was. He never complained and not once failed to deliver us safely. To me, "Abe" was the unsung hero, [if] there was to be one, of Group A."<sup>43</sup> These trucks were truly part of the team, and the women who drove them knew they could not have done their jobs without them.

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<sup>40</sup>Rexford, 77.

<sup>41</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Press, 1988), 69.

<sup>42</sup>Olewiler, 138.

<sup>43</sup>Rexford, 155.

## **Battlefield Training and Actions**

The ARC Clubmobile women were clearly not part of the official Army; however, they took part in an astounding amount of actual combat activities. In some cases, the women used their position to gain access to training usually restricted to only male GIs. B.J. Olewiler, while stationed in England, convinced the local commanding officer to allow her and her crewmate to participate in the Battle Indoctrination Course with live ammunition fire. Usually, the women just served doughnuts and coffee to the men after they had completed the course, but this time the commanding officer agreed that the women could first complete the course and then serve the men. Olewiler and her companion dressed in GI gear including fatigues, helmets and boots. Once out of the car, they looked exactly like the men. Because of this, the women were given an unusual glimpse into a completely male world. Olewiler reported complete shock at the language being used and the men relieving themselves in plain sight all around her. Even in extreme conditions, the men never behaved in this manner around the Clubmobile women. Olewiler and her companion completed the live ammunition course on their bellies and ran back to serve coffee and doughnuts before most of the men knew they had even been there. For Olewiler, the experience was shocking but exhilarating and she continued to seek out more opportunities for “real” warfare training.<sup>44</sup>

In some situations, there was acknowledgement from the ARC that the women were being placed in very dangerous situations and should be able to defend

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<sup>44</sup> Olewiler, 81 – 83.

themselves. For instance, Katherine von Hogendorp was stationed with the ARC at a B-29 bomber base in India for two years. While she was there in 1944, Gandhi conducted a protracted hunger strike from which it was feared he might die. There was great concern that should he die, the lives of Americans and British would be in danger.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, ARC personnel were issued a .45 caliber revolver and trained in its use. They were required to carry the weapon holstered at all times during this period. None of the women serving in the European theatre relate similar stories of official sanction and training with weapons; however, many took this matter into their own hands.

One of the most common side activities of active warfare is looting. As an invading army moved through new territory, goods are taken either from necessity or as a signal of dominance. The American Army in World War II was no different, and the women of the Clubmobiles participated right alongside the troops. Although looting was strictly prohibited by the ARC, and most women did not actively take things of their own volition, most did receive goods procured by the troops in this manner. Letters are filled with recounting of things taken from either the departing German army or the inhabitants. Harriet Engelhardt wrote in September 1944, “What a silly war! All of us going to work in fur coats (robbed them from a German warehouse), drinking cognac and Champagne instead of water.”<sup>46</sup> Around the same time, Charlotte Colburn wrote home to her family of the Clubmobile group

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<sup>45</sup> Katherine Harris van Hogendorp, *Survival in the Land of Dysentery: The World War II Experiences of a Red Cross Worker in India* (Fredericksburg, VA: Sergeant Kirkland’s Museum and Historical Society, Inc., 1998), 89.

<sup>46</sup> Engelhardt to her family September 9, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

scrounging at a French farm house for wine, butter and onions in exchange for candy and cigarettes.<sup>47</sup> Like the troops they were traveling with, the Clubmobile women subsisted on Army issue food and equipment which could only be supplemented with items from the local population. At times, a trade was made to secure these items, but sometimes they were just taken.

One notable form of “loot” many of the women received was firearms. Harriet Engelhardt wrote to friends and family about receiving various firearms from the troops moving just ahead of her group. Engelhardt was an avid sportswoman who enjoyed firearms and target practice. Once the men around her became aware of this, they made something of a game in finding her various pistols for her collection. In September she wrote to family about the “daintiest little Finnish pistol” she was given by a sergeant. Engelhardt told her family that, as a non-combatant, she was not supposed to carry the weapon, but she did not care. She was going to keep it anyway.<sup>48</sup> By November, Engelhardt had amassed quite a collection and bragged to her friend Theresa:

You’d laugh to see my gun collection – one 25 revolver, two 25 automatics, and one 38 revolver, plus a tremendous pistol good for nothing but wearing to masquerades as Pistol Packin’ Mama. The men get so many guns and pistols that they give them to us.<sup>49</sup>

Engelhardt was not the only Clubmobile woman to report receiving firearms as gifts, or who carried them with her. Both Charlotte Colburn and B.J. Olewiler had

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<sup>47</sup>Charlotte Colburn Gasperini letter to her family, September 1, 1944, From the annotated album *Geronimo!* available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_top.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_top.html), accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>48</sup>Engelhardt letter to her family, September 11, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>49</sup>Engelhardt to her friend Theresa Bernstein on November 26, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

similar stories.<sup>50</sup> Whether the women kept the weapons loaded is not always apparent (although Engelhardt indicated she had some ammunition on hand), but they did report that the guns offered a sense of extra protection as they were out and about on their own in sometimes hostile territory. Gretchen Schuler wrote in April of 1945 (while she was well into Germany) that “Last night shots rang out in town. I didn’t investigate. But plenty of firing took place...for awhile I thought seriously of putting a shell in the chamber of my captured P-38!”<sup>51</sup> These were not women afraid to defend themselves and many, such as Engelhardt and Schuler, had significant experience with weapons.

One unusual practice that sometimes occurred on the European continent was the “Loot Shower” described by Mary Metcalf Rexford. As women left Clubmobile service to get married (which a few did), they were often thrown a shower by the other women. Gifts were supplied entirely from looted goods. Rexford described one shower where the bride-to-be received a pilfered copy of “Mein Kampf” in the white bridal edition that was given to new brides in the Third Reich.<sup>52</sup> The Loot Shower provides a distinctively female interpretation of a traditional combat activity that only Clubmobile women participated in.

Some of the women also wrote of actively firing the guns on the battle field, and this experience reinforced their perceptions of themselves as combat troops. Charlotte Colburn wrote to family in September of 1944 that she had pulled the lanyard and fired a live shell from a 155mm Howitzer gun. She told her family they

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<sup>50</sup>Colburn in letter to her family dated November 30, 1944 and Olewiler, 138.

<sup>51</sup>Schuler letter to family April 2, 1945, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

<sup>52</sup>Rexford, 110.



could “put me down as a classified artillery man!” now.<sup>53</sup> Mary Metcalf Rexford recalled being allowed to fire a 90mm gun 6-7 times when she was out serving an isolated gun position. Although she was not in the thick of action, she did fire live ammunition at enemy lines. Rexford reported that “it was thrilling to feel you were actually ‘participating’ in the fighting.”<sup>54</sup>

Harriet Engelhardt also participated in fighting at this level. In a February 1945 letter to her brother Sam, Engelhardt wrote candidly that “I can pull the lanyards on field pieces to kill men: I can shoot at men with a rifle – I’ve done it.”<sup>55</sup> It’s easy to trivialize these experiences as the men letting the women “play” at being a soldier, but they are more than that. Clubmobile women did things on the battlefield, and firing the huge guns is the perfect example, that were impossible for other women to engage in. The Clubmobile women, with their unthreatening mission and persona were able to gain access never before granted on the battlefield to American women. The fact that they were capable of firing a loaded gun in the direction of enemy troops did signal something significant to the male troops. Namely, women could be competent combat companions given the opportunity. Perceptions may not have changed overnight, but there is no mistaking these incidents as an important first step.

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<sup>53</sup>Colburn Gasperini to her family, September 28, 1944, from the annotated album *Geronimo!* available at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_top.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_top.html), accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>54</sup>Rexford, 46.

<sup>55</sup>Engelhardt to her brother in February 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

## Downtime at the Front

Despite busy schedules and the exhaustion that accompanied their work, the Clubmobile women took their recreation and free time seriously. Recreation on the continent differed from England in several important ways. First, it was generally much less organized than in England, since life on the front did not provide much opportunity for formal dances and dinners. Also, “pubbing” as it occurred in England was not really an option on the front in France and Germany. There is one aspect of most recreation that remained the same, however, and that was the consumption of alcohol. On the Continent especially, since entertainment options were limited, most of the accounts include alcohol in nearly every activity. Charlotte Colburn wrote to her family from the front on September 28, 1944 that:

Socially there is little we can do...so we usually sit around, play bridge and poker, talk a lot about home, the past and the progress of the war. The cocktails are generally excellent and never fear I never have too many (that is to save you from bothering to write me a lecture on said subject.)<sup>56</sup>

Alcohol was available in greater abundance in France than England and many women wrote home about the ease of obtaining cognac and Champagne. Harriet Engelhardt (who was surprisingly frank with her family about the situation) wrote that the “soldier mess was serving Champagne instead of coffee. Champagne is as casual as beer here (I also have a handy pocket size cork screw for cognac and vin rouge). It all tastes so much better than the Army chlorinated water.”<sup>57</sup> Gretchen Schuler wrote home to her family and described digging corks out of Champagne

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<sup>56</sup> Charlotte Colburn Gasperini in a letter to her family dated September 28, 1944, available on the web at [http://www.clubmobile.org/letters\\_top.html](http://www.clubmobile.org/letters_top.html), accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> Engelhardt letter to family September 11, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

bottles with mess-kit knives.<sup>58</sup> Most of the women were tickled at the availability of what to an American was such a rare commodity and took full advantage of the situation.

Fellow Clubmobiler Eve Christenson reported that champagne “flowed in the dining room with fried potatoes cold beets and stew...it goes without saying that for once in our lives we freely experimented with its taste and potency.”<sup>59</sup> This remark illustrates the fact that many of these women, who hailed from upper-class backgrounds, may have encountered alcohol back home, but did not consume it in near the same manner or quantity as they did once serving on the front. In her book *Love on the Rocks: Men, Women, and Alcohol in Post World War II America*, Lori Rotskoff notes that the acceptability of drinking after prohibition ran generally along class lines. A common assumption was that the middle to upper classes could exercise moderation and good behavior around alcohol while the lower classes could not.<sup>60</sup> The result is that while many women did consume alcohol to some extent, the women who served with the Clubmobiles and in the ARC would likely have only done so in a very controlled setting and manner. It would have hurt their social standing and reputation to drink too often or too much. Therefore, when they first encountered the type of battlefield consumption seen on the front, most were not accustomed to it.

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<sup>58</sup>Schuler letter to family August 9, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

<sup>59</sup>Morgan, 125.

<sup>60</sup> Lori Rotskoff, *Love on the Rocks: Men, Women, and Alcohol in Post-World War II America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 37, 57.

The common American perception of class status being equal to control and temperance also helps explain why ARC women were trusted with the allotted officer ration of liquor (while the enlisted men they were serving were not). Despite overwhelming concerns about maintaining these women's image of propriety at the front, the ARC and the Army allowed them a good sized liquor ration each month. This clearly reflected the perception that they could be trusted with such a privilege because of their "good breeding."

Alcohol consumption was a long standing reality in the military where it was considered vital to bonding among the fighting men, who all came from different backgrounds and circumstances. "Dry" proponents did argue against liquor for the military during World War II, but military leaders insisted that such a policy would never work. Not only did alcohol provide a means of group bonding, but the lack of it would have severely damaged morale. Such a ban would also have been nearly impossible to enforce since liquor was readily available throughout Europe and the Pacific theatres.<sup>61</sup> Engelhardt demonstrates this fact even for ARC women as she describes in one letter a woman named Marilyn Watson who drove the supply truck for Clubmobile Group H. "Though she doesn't drink at all, (she) has a nose for liquor like a blood hound – and brings it all to us."<sup>62</sup> Booze among combat troops was simply a fact of life and Army brass could either waste time and morale trying to prevent it or embrace it as a way to draw the men (and women) together.

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<sup>61</sup>Rotskoff, 48.

<sup>62</sup>Engelhardt to her family August 27, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

A vital part of the morale boost that liquor provided men was to allow them to escape, for a few moments, the harsh realities they faced in combat every day. The women of the Clubmobiles, who also faced many of these realities, needed the same escape. Normalization of social drinking occurred for women mostly during the 1930's and 1940's with the popularity of cocktail parties, but the idea of drinking as a predominantly male activity was still common at the onset of World War II.<sup>63</sup> Most of the women serving on the Clubmobiles could not be said to have had extensive drinking experience, but definitely participated once under Continental conditions.

Harriet Engelhardt described the recreation and parties more candidly than any other woman considered in this discussion. Unlike many of the women who tried very hard to assure their families they were behaving properly and not imbibing too much, Engelhardt was particularly blunt with her family and friends about the activities she participated in at the front. She was also very open about her frustrations and the escape liquor provided for both her and the fighting men. In October of 1944, Engelhardt wrote in a letter to a friend that at the end of a long day, they would:

...settle down to champagne in a little hut made of ammunition boxes. A party can be in a tent, a monastery, a school, a railway station, barn or in a truck. Somebody has always been saving a bottle, or knows a French family. Or has access to a base of supplies...we work, party and travel rather furiously.<sup>64</sup>

Later in a letter to her brother Sam, Engelhardt described with delight the Halloween party she attended that year at which they "had a keg of beer, our liquor rations, and a record player. Only enlisted men of the Tank Destroyers were allowed.

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<sup>63</sup>Rotskoff, 59.

<sup>64</sup>Engelhardt to family friends on October 25, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

For the second time in my life I jitterbugged...All terribly crazy and lots of fun.”<sup>65</sup>

About a month later, however, Engelhardt’s letter home to her family at Christmas had a very different tone as she described spending the holiday serving:

...the inevitable doughnuts and coffee... it was a madhouse – all of us tired, cold, and eventually tying one on with soldier help. Wildly flinging batter and grease and cognac about...people don’t get gloomy or sentimental or thoughtful about Christmas or peace on earth or good will to men when they’re drunk and noisy. Sometimes that is good. And so we ripped along ‘til 430 or 5. A crazy, not too merry Christmas. Apple trees lacey with snow, the air clear taunt and cold. The war has reality now, and we build fires in stoves that don’t keep us very warm. May the new year be better. H.<sup>66</sup>

By Christmas it was cold and the war was beginning to drag. Engelhardt was keenly aware of the escape provided by alcohol in this case for the men, and her own dark mood shows through as well. Gretchen Schuler wrote a letter home the same Christmas of 1944 and described the punch “concocted” by Clubmobile Group F as they waited for everyone to reunite after the Battle of the Bulge. It involved 3 ½ quarts of gin, some lemon juice from their K-rations, and 3 quarts of Champagne.<sup>67</sup> The punch turned out extremely strong but she noted that everyone partook.

Most of the women did not report actually getting drunk very often, but it did happen. Engelhardt wrote in April of 1945 that the cognac was making her ramble a bit more than usual and in the same letter also reported that “at this moment, there’s a wonderful drunken brawl in the hall – the gals can’t get rid of the Brass. Too bad I wasn’t in on the breakage of glass and general fracas – I usually am.”<sup>68</sup> Rosemary Norwalk described one night where her whole party, including her fiancé, got a bit

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<sup>65</sup>Engelhardt to her brother Sam November 26, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>66</sup>Engelhardt to her family December 27, 1944, Engelhardt Papers. The phrase “tying one on” refers to getting drunk in this context.

<sup>67</sup>Schuler letter to family December 29, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

<sup>68</sup>Engelhardt to her family April 14, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

drunk. Her fiancé ended up running a military police barricade and had to talk fast to get them all out of trouble.<sup>69</sup> Unlike Engelhardt, however, Norwalk related this incident in her private journal and not in a letter home. Whatever their level of consumption, the reality was that women and men alike were stressed from the demands and uncertainty of combat. Alcohol has historically been a release for men in combat, and the fact that these women partook in it signifies their need for release from the same pressures.

In the same way alcohol provided a means for the enlisted men to bond with one another, it also provided a means for the Clubmobile women to break down walls and connect with the enlisted men they were instructed to serve. One can argue that drinking with the troops was really part of the Clubmobilers' job description since they were sent to entertain and raise morale. Alcohol was such a key component of recreation at the front that the Clubmobile women could not have effectively performed their job without participating on at least some level. Engelhardt's description above of the Halloween party (in which the liquor rations were shared with enlisted men) is an excellent example of this theory at work. Mary Thomas Sargent recalls passing her bottles of liquor around to the men so they could add some to their Cokes.<sup>70</sup> Katherine von Hogendorp, while stationed in India, would attend parties every few weeks with the men at the outposts that involved drinking potent

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<sup>69</sup>Rosemary Norwalk, *Dearest Ones: A True World War II Love Story* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999), 202.

<sup>70</sup>Mary Thomas Sargent, *Runway Towards Orion: The True Adventures of a Red Cross Girl on a B-29 Air Base in World War II India* (Grand Rapids, MI: Triumph Press, 1984), 148

locally brewed rum with crossbones and skull on the label.<sup>71</sup> Far away from their mothers, wives, and sisters, GIs formed new social bonds among fellow draftees. That ARC Clubmobile women were part of this experience is yet another example of their special relationship with the combat troops.

### **The Clubmobile as Humanitarian Aid Worker**

Many of the Clubmobile women displayed a certain amount of contempt for the German people as they made their way out of France and Belgium and began to occupy Germany. In September, Gretchen Schuler wrote her family that it appeared to her Germany would fight right to the finish. “She’ll be committing race suicide [sic], if she isn’t careful. Personally I don’t mind her doing that. From what I’ve seen here, there is no place in the world for live Germans.”<sup>72</sup> Similar to the troops who had experienced significant loss at the hands of the German army, Schuler regarded Germans as an adversary. Harriet Engelhardt expressed dismay at the good condition of the German people and land. “People here are far from starving, far from destitute. The fields are in good order and living appears normal. I, for one and like many others, do not understand it.”<sup>73</sup> Schuler echoed these sentiments, noting that the German people were “well dressed and look well fed. They should be after what they stole from the French and Belgians.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Von Hogendorp, 71.

<sup>72</sup>Schuler to her family, September 8, 1944, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.

<sup>73</sup>Engelhardt letter to her family January 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>74</sup>Schuler to her family, March 17, 1945, American Red Cross, Clubmobile Service Collection.



Understanding for the German people did not grow as the women moved further into Germany. Harriet Engelhardt wrote in April 1945 that she was “sorry German towns are not as flat as the Normandy towns. Ignorance no longer has my pity or my mercy in the support of the policy that has been active here.”<sup>75</sup> This type of indignation was common among the women, most of whom could not accept the fact that the bulk of the German population claimed to be unaware of Nazi policy and military actions. The women were also not above tweaking the noses of the German population in retribution. Rosemary Norwalk described a scene with her crewmate Lil (a Jewish ARC Clubmobiler who hailed from Brooklyn) who was ordering local residents of a German town in Yiddish. She reported to Norwalk that it “was much more effective at getting things done. Call it my revenge, a little reminder of the horrors they allowed to happen in their country.”<sup>76</sup>

Although most of the women held firmly to the belief that the German people were not innocent, B.J. Olewiler described her conflicting emotions while taking over the home of an elderly German woman. Usually, these women were surprised to see other women taking over their home and would plead before they left for Olewiler to take care of the plants or pets. Olewiler was always torn between pity for people she knew must not be inherently evil, and the fresh memories of the dead American servicemen she had just left behind.<sup>77</sup> Being part of the invasion force was not easy, and being one of very few American women involved only made it less so.

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<sup>75</sup>Engelhardt letter to her family, April 13, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>76</sup>Norwalk, 236.

<sup>77</sup>Olewiler, 163.

The role of ARC Clubmobile women changed, just as it did for the troops, as they moved through France and encountered the surrender of Germany on the other side. “It is far pleasanter to liberate than to conquer” wrote Harriet Engelhardt upon moving into Germany, and other women seemed to share this sentiment.<sup>78</sup> B.J. Olewiler recounted taking over a French chateau with the Clubmobiles and feeling a little guilty “as we stood down there and looked up at the chateau, with its beautifully landscaped lawns arising away from a romantic little pond, it seemed made for better than heavy boots and dual tires.”<sup>79</sup> Harriet Engelhardt expressed disgust at what occupying forces did to the homes they took over:

When we leave this house, I shall never return. I do not want to see what GI living will do to it. No matter to whom it belongs, I will try to keep beautiful things beautiful. Destruction of books and vases does not avenge dead friends...I cannot watch “conquerors” pour red wine on the carpets of this house. (That) it’s a Kraut house is no criterion for me. I make a very bad conqueror, I am afraid.<sup>80</sup>

Like the combat troops, their roles changed as they began to try and help the millions of displaced persons left in Germany by the Nazis. Violet Kochendoerfer, an ARC worker who moved into the Ludwigslust area of Germany with the American forces wrote that “the thought of doing our Red Cross bit by serving coffee and donuts to our well-fed GI’s seemed almost sacrilegious” in the face of all the starving, displaced persons from the prison and work camps nearby. Kochendoerfer saw that the Army was not yet in a position to provide aid to all these people, so she set up an emergency soup kitchen with the help of two other ARC women and a few GI

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<sup>78</sup>Engelhardt letter to her family March 25, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>79</sup>Olewiler, 127.

<sup>80</sup>Engelhardt to her family February 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

volunteers using German warehouse stores. Trying to control the mob of hungry and desperate people was nearly impossible, but they did and ultimately, three ARC “girls” managed to do what the occupying American force so far had not been able to. Once the kitchen was established, Kochendoerfer and her team continued to feed the displaced population until they could be sorted by nationality and sent to nearby camps for transport home.<sup>81</sup>

As the women moved into Germany they began to encounter the same sights faced by the troops just days or hours before. They were horrified by the concentration camps and the plight of all the Nazi prisoners. Harriet Engelhardt wrote home to her family to believe what they were hearing about the camps, as they were every bit as terrible as reported.

Americans have seen a brutality which they could not fathom, so horrible that no one can believe it, and on such a scale that insanity as a criterion is groundless....When German efficiency turns to sadism the result is in such horrible proportions that it is hardly real except for the remaining bones and skulls.<sup>82</sup>

B.J. Olewiler, serving with Engelhardt’s Group H, had the opportunity to see the camp at Dachau but upon advice from a GI, turned it down. She wrote her parents “I probably would not have followed this advice a year ago. I would just have gone anyway. But now I have seen enough, and have no desire to go looking for more horrors.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Violet A. Kochendoerfer, *One Woman’s World War II* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 104.

<sup>82</sup> Engelhardt, letters to family on April 13, 1945 and friends on April 14, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>83</sup> Olewiler, 164.

Violet Kochendoerfer visited the prison work camp four miles outside of Ludwigslust. She described her repulsion at the double stacked cages with chicken wire and stepping over what she thought was a corpse only to see it move an arm. Afterward, Kochendoerfer and a GI visited a camp of Polish women POWs to take them soap and cigarettes and watched the women fight over the things they brought. Before leaving, the GIs opened the gate between the Polish women and some German citizens who had been brought to bury the dead. The Polish women, “almost instinctively, it seemed, streamed out and tackled German women, throwing some to the ground, taking their coats, shoes, stockings, and whatever they could” while the German men stood by watching.<sup>84</sup> More than any other Americans outside the Army, and certainly more than any other American women, the Clubmobilers witnessed the horrors of World War II as they unfolded.

### **Battle Fatigue Sets In**

Just like the men who worked alongside them in Germany, the ARC women suffered from exhaustion, both mental and physical. Combat conditions took a tremendous toll in a short amount of time. Upon arrival in France in August of 1944, Harriet Engelhardt’s letters to her family were upbeat as she described the trip across the English Channel as sundrenched and “dreamy.” By Christmas of that same year, just four months later, Engelhardt (as discussed earlier) was tired of the “inevitable doughnuts and coffee” and her poetic descriptions are much more subdued and sad.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>Kochendoerfer, 101, 102, 103.

<sup>85</sup>Engelhardt letters to her family on August 27 and December 27, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

Mary Metcalf Rexford also discussed the mental fatigue faced by the women and wrote that at times it was extremely hard to be pleasant and laugh and talk after seeing horrible things all day long.<sup>86</sup> In her journal, Rosemary Norwalk wrote that in between the high spots:

...the horror of Dachau, the lingering Nazi attitudes of most of the people, their fear of and obedience to orders after years of living in the Third Reich, the whole enigma of this ruined country make it hard for me to keep giving everyone that sincere Red Cross smile. So often I feel like weeping. Once in a while I do.<sup>87</sup>

As she moved into 1945, Engelhardt continued to experience battle fatigue and seemed to include herself in her description to her brother of the men on the front. “Worst of all, they’re tired – dog tired, bored, and misplaced as human beings.”<sup>88</sup> She also began to display a strong sense of disillusionment as the year wore on. In April, she wrote about how unimpressed she was with the new, spoiled Air Corps boys who did not know war like the tank and infantry men she served at the front. In May she wrote home about how sad she was from the sights at the forced labor camp in Ebensee and how excited she would be to see Europe in peacetime.<sup>89</sup>

By September 1945, Engelhardt was stationed in southwest Germany but ready to get home. “I cannot stand the sight of doughnuts another minute, nor can I listen to the prattle of the GI replacements who’ve been so little in combat that he [sic] gives cigarettes and chocolate to the Germans. They forgive and forget too

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<sup>86</sup>Rexford, 84.

<sup>87</sup>Norwalk, 247.

<sup>88</sup>Engelhardt letter to her brother Sam March 18, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>89</sup>Engelhardt letters to her family on May 15, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

easily, these dumb Americans.”<sup>90</sup> She wrote her family not to send any packages as she was “tearing Europe and the Red Cross apart to get back before Christmas.”<sup>91</sup> By October of 1945, Engelhardt was beginning to openly voice her disgust with the war, the ARC, and the new “replacement” units of men who had come in.

Perhaps it is humane to “occupy” the way these rooky outfits do it, but it is not a pleasant feeling to see the Germans calling the Americans fools. And they are, you know...I hate to think I got trench foot supporting such a stupid policy for such a stupid people. Americans are strong only in number, certainly not in intelligence or integrity...with the ARC, my spirit is killed and gone.

Rosemary Norwalk shared similar feelings about the replacement troops, although she was a bit softer than Engelhardt in her descriptions of them. She wrote in January 1945 to her family:

The replacement troops, individually, are mostly sweet boys of nineteen or twenty-one, just adolescents cut loose from home for the first time, drinking themselves to death on cognac, each one with his German “laundress.” So many of them are drunk when they should be sober, mean when they could be understanding, soft when they should be firm. They haven’t the vaguest notion of the importance of their actions.<sup>92</sup>

These women displayed a common sentiment among those who faced the battles first: that those who came later did not fully understand what had been done and did not appreciate the work of the front-line troops. This is, of course, inevitable, but with as much battle as they had seen, many Clubmobile women simply found it impossible to serve the new, rookie troops with the same sense of purpose they had for the invasion

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<sup>90</sup>Engelhardt letter to her family on September 10, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>91</sup> Engelhardt letters to her family April 26, 1945, May 29, 1945 and September 27, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>92</sup>Norwalk, 235.

forces. On October 11, 1945, Engelhardt was ready to go home, or at least to quit the Red Cross and see Europe on her own, as she wrote her family:

My time on the continent is almost 13 months now. It has been a woolly 13 months – a lot of good a lot of bad. The war is over, and so is the mobile doughnut business...Europe now is entirely too fascinating to be cluttered up with greasy soggy doughnuts...I hate to fall down on my job. But my job is done — why not bury Clubmobiling while it still has some self respect.<sup>93</sup>

### **A Hesitant Homecoming**

One final area in which the women of the Clubmobiles were similar to combat troops was in their concern about how they would fit into regular life once they returned home. These feelings surfaced early on. Harriet Engelhardt in August of 1944, when she was still in England, wrote to her friend Dorothy, “We will be such a noisy rowdy crowd of girls when we get back to the States that even without our uniforms we’ll be spotted immediately as Doughnut Gals.”<sup>94</sup> A letter written later in 1944 by Giselle Simon to her family expresses the same sentiments:

You’ll find me much changed when I get back, not physically except that I’ll be much slimmer but rather mentally, to have seen what my eyes have seen; destruction and devastation far above and beyond the scope of your comprehension; casualties and survivors; hunger and privation, naturally have left a deep impression on my mind. I know I shall never forget it. We shall return a strange lot who will need every ounce of understanding you are capable of giving us.<sup>95</sup>

These same words could just as easily have been written by a male combat soldier. In a similar vein, B.J. Olewiler expressed concern that all their compassion would be gone by the time they got home. She identified with the soldier who told her

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<sup>93</sup>Engelhardt to her family on October 11, 1945, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>94</sup>Engelhardt letter to her friend Dorothy on August 8, 1944, Engelhardt Papers.

<sup>95</sup>Litoff, 257.

he was worried he would find it impossible, after seeing the carnage of war, to show any sympathy to his wife if she cut her hand.<sup>96</sup> Mary Metcalf Rexford also wrote of her concerns about coming home after a two-year “tour of duty.” She wondered what job she could find since “the only thing I would be qualified for now was either driving a truck or doing some kind of heavy hauling.”<sup>97</sup> These were clearly not options for her once she returned to civilian life in America. It was hard for these women to imagine life after the war, just as it was for the troops they served with.

The women also had trouble relating to other women who had not served in the same forward position as they had. B.J. Olewiler recounts her experience on leave in England at a Red Cross club after serving at the front for many months. The women working there peppered her with questions for several hours, but simply were not satisfied with her answers. They did not want to know that, yes, American GIs were looting just like any other conquering force or that food was pretty terrible when it was Army K-rations. “By the end of the luncheon they didn’t want to hear any more of my answers to their questions. And for the rest of my stay there I feigned complete exhaustion or battle fatigue and gained the solitude, which is what I really wanted.”<sup>98</sup> Similar to other combat troops, Olewiler felt a deep disconnect from those who had not experienced what she had. These ARC Club women only wanted to hear that the war effort was just and fair and that all Americans were heroes. They were not prepared for reality.

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<sup>96</sup>Olewiler, 157.

<sup>97</sup>Rexford, 131.

<sup>98</sup>Olewiler, 168.



Once the women were stateside, they found the adjustment difficult at times. Upon returning home, Mary Ferebee Howard expressed contempt for civilians who had in no way been affected by the war. She listened to two little ladies talking to each other, and “one of them said to the other, ‘My dear, I do think we should make some effort to help our fighting men.’ The other one replied, ‘So you think we should turn the light off on the front porch at night?’”<sup>99</sup> Howard was less than impressed with their effort, and while her reaction was perhaps a little harsh, it reflects how she felt about “civilians” who had not been in the war. Katherine von Hogendorp was advised by ARC doctors to call home and prepare her family for the fact that she was a different person. In addition to the less obvious internal changes, she had lost considerable weight due to several bouts with tropical illness. Instead of the big party they had planned, her family met her at the train station with just a few close friends.

An unknown author from Group E expressed the change in Clubmobile women from ARC volunteer to combat soldier most eloquently in the passage below:

If civilians think we’ve changed, it’s merely that we’ve grown beyond their understanding. They haven’t been here. They haven’t “had it”. Fighting never made any GI bloodthirsty yet, not after he was finished with the battle. They kill because the Germans are rats and because they have to kill or be killed. That’s all brother.<sup>100</sup>

The writer clearly considers herself non-civilian and one of the troops. She understands what the GIs have been through because she has been there and “had it.”

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<sup>99</sup>Mary Ferebee Howard, *No Drums, No Trumpets: Red Cross Adventure* (Rocky Mount, NC: North Carolina Wesleyan Press, 1992), 70 and 71.

<sup>100</sup>Morgan, 120.

## Conclusion

At the end of her assignment in Europe, Harriet Engelhardt was stationed in south-central Germany near the city of Donauworth. She had put in with the ARC for release and wrote her family on September 10, 1945 that she was tentatively scheduled to go home on November 1. In the meantime, she opened a “Doughnut Dugout” in a bombed out beer hall and continued to go out to serve troops in the surrounding area. She had met two fellow riding enthusiasts, named Chink (a cavalry Major in the U.S. Army) and Bill (a former Polish Olympic rider), and the three spent every free moment possible at a local stable riding the Hungarian-bred horses they had commandeered. By this point, riding was the only thing keeping Engelhardt going, as she was through with doughnuts and ready to leave the ARC. The combat portion of the war was done, and it was to serve these men that Harriet had joined the ARC. She had no interest in boosting the morale of replacement units whom she did not feel needed or deserved such attention.

On October 26, 1945 after filing the final paperwork that would send her home, Harriet Engelhardt was killed in a Jeep accident. She was driving from Munich back to Donauworth (something she took great pride in because of her very slight stature) and lost control of the vehicle during a nasty rainstorm. Her companion survived with serious injuries, but Engelhardt was killed on impact. She was set to return home in less than a week. Engelhardt’s letters to her family and friends portray

a smart, independent, articulate and sometimes brash woman. Thankfully, because Engelhardt was so open and candid with her family about her thoughts and experiences, she left a more complete record of what Clubmobile life was really like for these women than is available in memoirs written many years after the experiences.

The women of the Clubmobiles came closer to combat and were more akin to the troops than any other women during World War II. They faced nearly the same dangers on a daily basis and many died as a result of their service. Harriet Engelhardt's death is one of many ARC casualties, including Elizabeth Richardson who was killed while flying out of France on her way to leave in 1945.<sup>1</sup> Death was a constant threat for these women, no matter how they tried to downplay it in their letters home. It is true these women were not actually killed by an enemy bullet or bomb, nor was Portia Miller whose death was described earlier in this work. However, their proximity to the war and the difficult circumstances under which they were working (i.e. a war-torn European continent only recently liberated) were critical factors in all their untimely deaths. Without their work as Clubmobilers, it is not unreasonable to assume that all of these women would have lived much longer lives.

One need look no further than the number of ARC volunteers killed in World War II to see how closely they were involved in the war. The U.S. armed forces during World Wars I and II combined included over 20 million men and women,

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<sup>1</sup> James Madison, *Slinging Doughnuts for the Boys: An American Woman in World War II* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 245.

500,000 of whom were killed. This equates to approximately 3 in every 1,000 killed. In contrast stands the ARC, which had 51,600 men and women serving in the combined wars and lost 280 of its personnel. This equates to a much higher ratio of 5 killed for every 1,000 serving. Far fewer served in the ARC than the military, obviously, but they were killed at a higher rate.<sup>2</sup> ARC women, in particular, were in more danger during World War II than were male ARC workers largely because they spent so much time close to and on the fighting front. Of the 86 ARC personnel lost in World War II, 52 (or 60%) were women.<sup>3</sup> The women of the ARC, and especially those of the Clubmobiles, were close enough to actual combat as to significantly increase the likelihood they would be killed or injured.

The U.S. Army recognized the Clubmobile women and their contribution to the war effort on the front in ways the ARC never did and would not allow. For instance, both Eleanor and William Stevenson were awarded the Army's Bronze Star Medal in 1945 for the work they had done to set up Clubmobile and other recreational services for troops in the North Africa and Italian war arenas.<sup>4</sup> Mary Metcalf Rexford recalled in her memoirs that she and the other members of Clubmobile Group A were notified in 1945 that the Army had awarded all of them 5 battle stars to wear on their European Theatre of Operations service ribbons. Because the women had been serving for more than 30 days in the designated geographical region where the major conflicts occurred, they were eligible for recognition just like all military and other

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Hurd, *The Compact History of the American Red Cross* (New York, NY: 1959), 246.

<sup>3</sup>Hurd, 247.

<sup>4</sup> Oberlin College Archives,

<http://www.oberlin.edu/archive/holdings/finding/RG30/SG219/biography.html> accessed January 15, 2011.

personnel. Immediately, the ARC notified the women that they could not wear the Army stars (which the men would have immediately recognized.) Instead, the ARC gave them silver stars to wear, which had no significance to the enlisted men, and little to the Clubmobile women.<sup>5</sup> The ARC's insistence on maintaining that these women were in no way "military" extended even to revoking earned recognition from the Army itself. The ARC knew to allow the medals might jeopardize the very status that allowed these women to be placed so close to military action.

Ironically, the only reason ARC women were able to get as close to the front and as involved in the combat as they did is that the ARC worked so diligently to establish and maintain their non-threatening status. The organization was successful in battling the "camp follower" image by creating a mother/sister image for women serving overseas. These were safe and even sanctified roles that allowed both the "right" kind of middle to upper-class white women to enlist and allowed them direct access to the troops.<sup>6</sup> American Red Cross "girls" were living symbols of the bounty, home and peace that the U.S. Army was told it was fighting for.<sup>7</sup> The Clubmobile women, however, became more than this. They came to be considered by many of the troops as one of their own--if not fully combat brothers, then at least part of the family.

The paradox of the Clubmobile women is that even though the ARC specifically set out to create a "girl" to send overseas for morale work, they designed

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<sup>5</sup>Oscar Whitelaw Rexford, *Battlestars and Doughnuts: World War II Clubmobile Experiences of Mary Metcalfe Rexford*(St. Louis, MO: The Patrice Press, 1989), 132.

<sup>6</sup>Susan Zeiger, *In Uncle Sam's Service: Women Workers with the U.S. Expeditionary Force, 1917-1919* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 58.

<sup>7</sup>Philomena Goodman, *Women, Sexuality, and War* (New York, NY: Palgrave Press, 2002), 128.

the position so that it attracted older, unmarried, independent women who were drawn to the adventure and immediate nature of combat work. The ARC inadvertently developed a position that appealed to American women who were best suited for combat work and conditions. Namely, they were intelligent, tough, independent and resourceful. These women, sent to do a job that at first glance appeared to be a glorified ice cream girl, showed more clearly than any other female group involved in World War II just how much women could provide to the war effort in a direct support role. Their success in this capacity can be seen as an important first step to convincing both the military and the American public what women were capable of in combat situations.

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