

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06985-4 - Women as Army Surgeons: Being the History of the Women's  
Hospital Corps in Paris, Wimereux and Endell Street, September 1914–October 1919

Flora Murray

Excerpt

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PART I

THE WOMEN'S HOSPITAL CORPS  
IN PARIS AND WIMEREUX

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## CHAPTER I

### ORGANISATION OF THE WOMEN'S HOSPITAL CORPS

IN August 1914 it was a popular idea that war was man's business and that everything and every one else should stand aside and let men act. But there were many persons who failed to endorse this view and who held that, though men may have been responsible for the war, the business of it concerned men and women equally. Far from standing aside and leaving men to act alone, every woman in the land accepted her duty and her responsibility, and recognised at once that if the war was to be won it must be won by the whole nation, and by the common effort of all her children.

The long years of struggle for the Enfranchisement of Women which had preceded the outbreak of war had done much to educate women in citizenship and in public duty. The militant movement had taught them discipline and organisation; it had shown them new possibilities in themselves, and had inspired them with confidence

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#### 4 WOMEN'S HOSPITAL CORPS IN PARIS

in each other. In face of the greater militancy of men, the Suffragists called a truce, and set their adherents free for service in government departments, in factories and in hospitals. Work-rooms were opened, day-nurseries established and surgical supply depots commenced their useful labours.

Women who had been trained in medicine and in surgery knew instinctively that the time had come when great and novel demands would be made upon them, and that a hitherto unlooked-for occasion for service was at their feet. It was inconceivable that in a war of such magnitude women doctors should not join in the care of the sick and wounded, but it was obvious that prejudice would stand in their way. Their training and their sympathies fitted them for such work; they knew and could trust their own capacity; but they had yet to make their opportunity.

Amongst others, Dr. Louisa Garrett Anderson and Dr. Flora Murray were determined that medical women desiring to give their services to the nation should not be excluded from military work and from the great professional opportunities naturally arising from it. An opening, therefore, had to be found for them. As militant suffragists

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they had had dealings with the Home Office, and had gained an insight into the cherished prejudices and stereotyped outlook of officials. One government department is very like another, and to have approached the War Office at that time would only have meant to court a rebuff. But it was common knowledge that the French Army was inadequately supplied with surgeons and hospitals; and they turned their attention where the need was great.

On the 12th of August these two doctors called at the French Embassy and were received by one of the secretaries in an absolutely airless room. The atmosphere was enhanced by red damask wall hangings and upholstery, and by an aroma of stale cigar smoke. In somewhat rusty French they laid before him an offer to raise and equip a surgical unit for service in France. The secretary may have been rather mystified as to their intentions; for medical women were off his horizon. Very likely he never realised that they themselves intended to go to the aid of the French wounded; but he affirmed again and again the real need of France for medical and surgical aid, for stores of all kinds and for English nurses. He begged 'Mesdames' to call upon the President of the French Red Cross in London and discuss the matter

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## 6 WOMEN'S HOSPITAL CORPS IN PARIS

with her, and, tendering with the utmost courtesy a card of introduction, he directed them to her house.

Madame Brasier de Thuy was the President of the branch of the French Red Cross known as 'L'Union des Femmes de France.' The title of her Society was attractive, and she herself combined great charm of manner with a pleasing personality. Although she was oppressed with anxiety for the safety of France and the welfare of her relations, she was working hard to raise money and necessaries for the French Red Cross.

She had few fellow-workers and no organisation to help her, and both she and Monsieur Brasier de Thuy often wrote and toiled far into the night. She received with great cordiality the offer of a fully equipped surgical unit, comprised of women doctors and trained nurses. Surgeons were a godsend and English nurses an indescribable boon. No difficulties were raised; and the offer was transmitted to the headquarters of her Society in Paris. Within a week, a formal acceptance from Paris reached Dr. Garrett Anderson, accompanied by a request that the unit might be organised at once and be ready, if required, to start on the 1st of September.

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There remained exactly twelve days of August in which to raise the funds required, find a staff and purchase the equipment and all the stores which would be needed.

The appeal for money was made privately and met with a prompt and generous response. Mrs. Garrett Anderson, M.D., Mrs. Granger and Sir Alan Anderson led the way with large donations. Miss S. A. Turle, Miss Janie Allan and other women interested in women's work sent liberal help. Letters of encouragement and further subscriptions poured in, and within a fortnight the sum of £2000 was placed to the credit of the Women's Hospital Corps, which was the name decided upon for the unit.

This amount was enough to purchase the equipment, defray the preliminary expenses and leave a working balance in hand.

At that time the authorities in Paris had not decided where the Corps was to be located; it was thought that it might be established in a château near Belfort, where it would have to be self-dependent; and this possibility had to be taken into account when making purchases. Comprehensive lists of drugs, stores and hospital equipment were drawn up with a view to all emergencies. Many kinds of serum were included,

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with cases of invalid foods and chloroform, chests of tea, clothing, blankets, camp bedsteads, enamel ware and a full set of surgical instruments. Altogether, £1000 was spent on the equipment, which afterwards proved to be adequate for the needs of both the hospitals managed by the Corps.

Offers of service were gladly accepted from Dr. Gertrude Gazdar, Dr. Hazel Cuthbert and Dr. Grace Judge. Many applications were considered from nurses and from girls anxious to go out as supernumeraries or orderlies; and the staff was rapidly completed. It was decided to include a few male nurses, and in order to find suitable men recourse was had to the St. John's Ambulance Association, at St. John's Gate, Clerkenwell.

In these early days every public office probably presented an air of chaos, and 'The Gate' was no exception. In the central hall a swarm of people circulated without ceasing through a maze of chairs and tables; loud crashes of falling furniture, due to the entanglement of umbrellas and draperies, punctuated the incessant conversations. Every one was friendly, anxious to help and willing to work, but the confusion and noise of voices had a bewildering effect.



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ORDERLY HODGSON IN THE UNIFORM  
OF THE WOMEN'S HOSPITAL CORPS

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*(Photo, Stuart)*

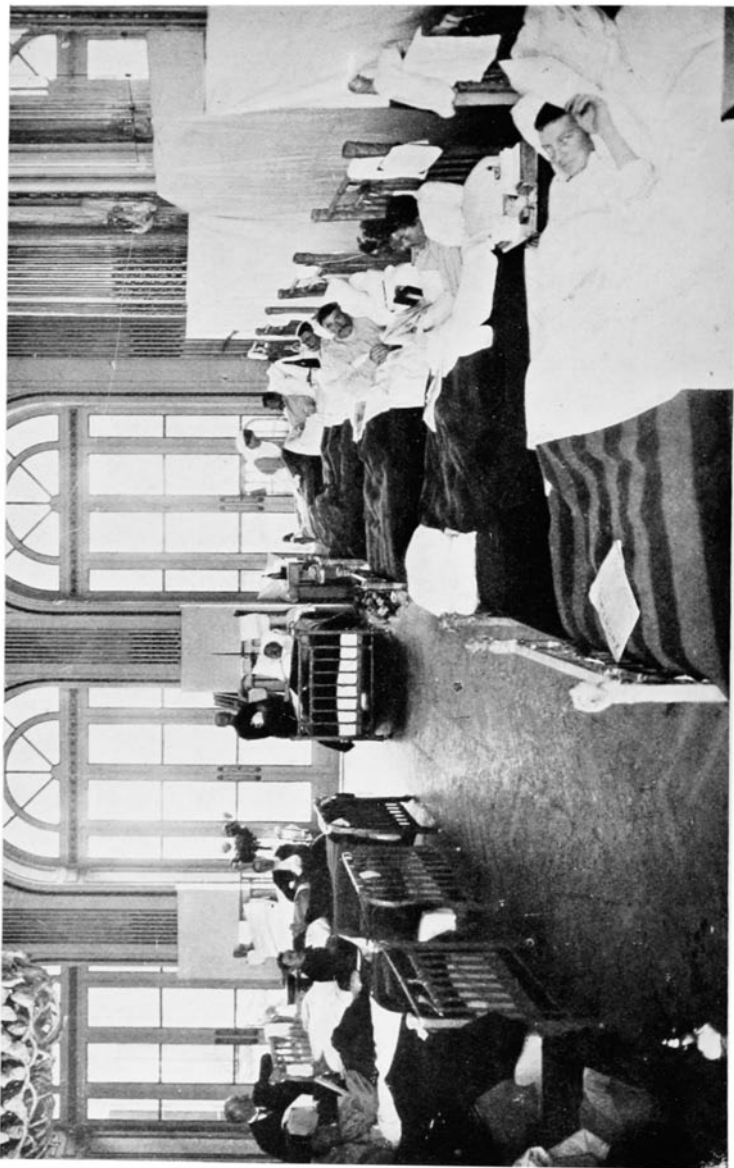
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A WARD IN THE HÔTEL CLARIDGE

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