Hemingway, the Red Cross, and the Great War

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Ernest Hemingway at the wheel of a Section Four ambulance (Ernest Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Library).
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Steven Florczyk

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Introduction

In chapter 4 of *Green Hills of Africa*, Ernest Hemingway describes his free associations reading Leo Tolstoy’s *Sevastopol* during a respite from hunting, noting in particular that he thought

about what a great advantage an experience of war was to a writer. It was one of the major subjects and certainly one of the hardest to write truly of and those writers who had not seen it were always very jealous and tried to make it seem unimportant, or abnormal, or a disease as a subject, while, really, it was just something quite irreplaceable that they had missed.¹

By 1935, when Hemingway first published his reflection on this “major” subject, his fame had been established in large part as a result of his literature that derived from participation in the Great War.² After *A Farewell to Arms* appeared in 1929, Malcolm Cowley commented that Hemingway “expressed, better than any other writer, the limited viewpoint of his contemporaries, of the generation which was formed by the war and which is still incompletely demobilized.”³ T. S. Matthews concurred, noting that “the description of the War, in the first part of *A Farewell to Arms*, is perhaps as good a description of war just behind the front as has been written.”⁴ Moreover, John Dos Passos indicated that Hemingway’s portrayal of the retreat from Caporetto had been likened with some of the best prose “written since there was any English language.”⁵ Indeed, Hemingway’s emerging reputation on the topic indicates his ability to transform a relatively brief experience as a noncombatant in the American Red Cross into some of the best fiction portraying World War I and its aftermath.

The extent to which Hemingway’s oeuvre deals with the Great War is impressive. Prior to *A Farewell to Arms*, he wrote on the topic in each of his preceding volumes: *Three Stories & Ten Poems* (1923), *in our time*
In Our Time (1924), The Torrents of Spring (1926), The Sun Also Rises (1926), and Men Without Women (1927). Although A Farewell to Arms came to represent the culmination of his World-War-I literary output, he continued to produce fiction related to the conflict throughout his entire career. “A Way You’ll Never Be,” published among the short stories of Winner Take Nothing (1933), for example, stands as his most direct treatment of the Italian front in the summer of 1918. Much later, Across the River and Into the Trees (1950) included another portrayal of that locale, to which Colonel Cantwell returns in 1948 to bury the memory of his previous wounding once and for all.

Hemingway’s nonfiction works have also very much relied on the war. Early articles such as “How to Be Popular in Peace Though a Slacker in War” and “A Veteran Visits Old Front, Wishes He Had Stayed Away” added to his growing reputation as a journalist as did much of his writing for the Toronto Star between 1920 and 1924. In Death in the Afternoon (1932), a treatise on bullfighting that surprised a readership expecting new fiction, Hemingway essentially introduced the book as it grew out of a fascination that originated with his tour in Italy: “The only place where you could see life and death, i.e., violent death now that the wars were over, was in the bull ring and I wanted very much to go to Spain where I could study it.” “A Natural History of the Dead,” published in the same volume, includes one of his most significant treatments of initiation into the horrors of wartime destruction.

The American Red Cross service, out of which Hemingway cultivated his reputation, has been well documented by scholars. Charles A. Fen-ton’s The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway: The Early Years (1954) includes a chapter that established many of the distinguishing features of Hemingway’s experience in Italy: his journey to war, stint with an ambulance section, enlistment with a canteen unit, and subsequent wounding on July 8, 1918. Carlos Baker’s Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story (1969) presents a thorough discussion of the Italian episode in the writer’s life from the very beginning until his tragic death in 1961. Relying greatly on descriptions from Hemingway’s letters as well as accounts by those who knew him, Baker’s volume marked the most comprehensive biographical study at the time. Indeed, A Life Story continues to serve as a crucial point of reference for the several biographies that followed: Scott Donaldson’s By Force of Will: The Life and Art of Ernest Hemingway (1977), Jeffrey Meyers’s Hemingway: A Biography (1985), Peter Griffin’s Along with Youth:
10 Although the portraits of the subject differ greatly, the scholarly record has nonetheless firmly established the Italian experience as a formative period in Hemingway’s life.

11 Other scholarship stands out for calling attention to the Red Cross service in more detail, but influential studies during the 1970s came to favor approaches that relegated the experience to Hemingway’s reading about the Italian front and the development of his literary technique. For example, in Hemingway’s First War: The Making of “A Farewell to Arms” (1976), Michael Reynolds acknowledges the Red Cross milieu as relatively minor source material for the novel, which he discusses more thoroughly in the context of historical accounts of the 1920s. Reynolds’s study, however, necessarily laid out what became the seminal argument for combating previous criticism that suggested Hemingway was only a reporter of personal exploits. Bernard Oldsey’s Hemingway’s Hidden Craft (1979) bolstered that claim, discussing the complex ways that memoir and fiction sometimes intersect but concluding that the writer’s “form of literary art demanded that he take substance from actuality, provide it with mimetic reflection, and produce his own form of combining fiction—but fiction, in these specific instances, not autobiography.” Robert W. Lewis’s article “Hemingway in Italy: Making It Up” commented further on these notions, questioning the value of interpretive exercises based on the application of biographical material while also establishing G. M. Trevelyan’s Scenes from Italy’s War (1919) as a significant influence on the writing of A Farewell to Arms. Lewis’s essay underscores the argument that Hemingway’s extensive reading inspired the composition of the novel.

13 Additional studies eventually acknowledged the Red Cross as more significant in shaping Hemingway’s complex point of view on war. Although Peter Griffin’s Along With Youth: Hemingway, the Early Years (1985) benefited from the recollections and contemporaneous letters of former ambulance driver Bill Horne, the volume also relied on Hemingway’s fiction for biographical information, a practice which diminishes its overall value. However, the first two books in Michael Reynolds’s impressive five-volume biographical study, The Young Hemingway (1986) and Hemingway: The Paris Years (1989), provide extremely helpful insights on the subject. Not only did Reynolds supply useful historical context
for Hemingway’s fiction related to the Red Cross, but his work also became recognized alongside that of Carlos Baker as essential for future inquiry into the life and literature of the famed writer. Subsequent to Reynolds, Henry Villard, another former ambulance driver, and James Nagel contributed a wealth of information in Hemingway in Love and War: The Lost Diary of Agnes von Kurowsky (1989), which provided the fullest picture yet regarding Hemingway’s service and convalescence, as well as a careful consideration of the biographical puzzle about which scholars had previously debated. Indeed, Villard’s reflections, contemporaneous documents from 1918, as well as Nagel’s essay “Hemingway and the Italian Legacy,” all make the volume an indispensable resource for the study of this phase of Ernest’s development. With the exception of Griffin’s work, the later studies of the Red Cross period reaffirmed Reynolds’s earlier argument that the fictional themes, although inspired by the events of 1918, are considerably distinct from Hemingway’s personal experience in the war.

Scholarship that has confirmed Hemingway’s supreme achievement as a literary craftsman is central to understanding the correlation between the writer’s life and work, but some of these interpretations have led to a backlash with respect to the biographical record. Indeed, arguments claiming the importance of Hemingway’s power of imagination have, perhaps sometimes unintentionally, obscured the historical circumstances out of which the literature developed in the first place. This confusion is especially apparent in studies that show too much favor toward dismissing the significance of the writer’s firsthand experience as a source for the fiction. Scholars, of course, cannot effectively argue for Hemingway’s artistry as distinct from personal reportage if the life story becomes muddled.

Charles M. Oliver’s essay in Teaching Hemingway’s “A Farewell to Arms” (2008) serves as case in point. Oliver begins his contribution to the “Backgrounds and Context” section of the volume by overstating the conclusion reached by Reynolds:

One of the most interesting yet often misunderstood facts about Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms is that it was written not so much from personal experience as from research. The author was wounded badly while driving ambulances for the American Red Cross in support of the Italian Army, and he apparently had a love affair with a
nurse; that is more or less the extent of his personal life that went into the novel. The rest is a mix of research and imagination.\textsuperscript{14}

Oliver’s point about Hemingway’s thorough investigation of his subject in combination with powers of invention is a valid one, but he misconstrues the biographical data. As scholars have clearly established, Hemingway was wounded not while driving ambulances but as a volunteer in the canteen service. Oliver’s subsequent summary of “Hemingway’s actual experiences” is equally misleading:

He arrived in Italy on June 4, 1918; was wounded on July 8; arrived at the American hospital in Milan on July 17; spent the rest of the summer and early fall recuperating from two operations; and was discharged from the Red Cross service on January 4, 1919, leaving for home that day, barely six months after his arrival in Italy.\textsuperscript{15}

In fact, Hemingway did not enter Italy until June 7, 1918. He had arrived at the Red Cross hospital by July 14, was released from the ambulance service on November 16, and boarded a steamship bound for New York on January 4, 1919, after having stayed in Italy to receive mechanical therapy treatments for his leg.

Moreover, although it is true that Hemingway’s active duty effectively ended after the wounding on July 8, the totality of his Italian experience nonetheless turned out to be one of the most formative periods of his life. Oliver’s account not only tampers with the accuracy of the biographical record but fails to appreciate the richness of Hemingway’s adventure. Episodes from those six months suggest not only source material for \textit{A Farewell to Arms} and other fiction about Italy but many of Hemingway’s themes related to subsequent wars as well. Frederic J. Svoboda, in the “Background and Context” section of \textit{Teaching Hemingway’s “A Farewell to Arms,”} reasonably explains that students should be aware of “the novel’s importance as a reaction to the Great War.”\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, it is crucial to know exactly what Hemingway was reacting against when he began the serious endeavor of creating his fiction in the twenties.

Works such as those by Reynolds and Nagel provide excellent references suitable for following Svoboda’s suggestion, but previously unexamined materials offer even more helpful details about Hemingway’s American Red Cross service. Among these, the diary of the commanding
officer, Captain Robert W. Bates; official reports documenting the ambulance and canteen services; section newspapers published by volunteers; as well as additional contemporaneous accounts, taken in conjunction with the established biography, clarify aspects of Hemingway’s involvement that have been unclear or not entirely accurate in previous scholarship. Moreover, these records show that the author drew on his war experience as source material in ways that have not yet been fully appreciated. The documents shed light on the writer’s initial naïveté as a young volunteer and point to the ways in which he transformed that experience in his fiction according to a more sophisticated attitude toward war that he worked out in the 1920s. The shift he underwent led him to “tell the truth,” as he later called the “writer’s job,” by using complex literary techniques to portray the wartime adventures of his youth from the vantage point of the postwar era. Indeed, it was Hemingway’s brief involvement with the Red Cross that ultimately led to some of the finest American literature on the Great War.
One  *Esprit de Corps*

The story of Ernest Hemingway’s involvement in the Great War begins with the formation of volunteer ambulance services at the outbreak of hostilities in August of 1914. During the summer before Hemingway’s sophomore year in high school, Americans in charge of the hospital in the Paris suburb of Neuilly instituted a plan to provide aid for wounded soldiers on the Western front.\(^1\) As Arlen Hansen explains in *Gentleman Volunteers: The Story of the American Ambulance Drivers in the Great War, August 1914–September 1918*, the service eventually developed into three separate groups operating in France. Each one of them came to be led by influential figures: H. Herman Harjes, Senior Partner of the Morgan-Harjes Bank in Paris; Richard Norton, archeologist and son of the esteemed Harvard professor of art history, Charles Eliot Norton; and A. Piatt Andrew, a former assistant professor of economics at Harvard who went on to direct the United States Mint and later assumed the role of assistant secretary of the Treasury. The volunteers affiliated with the Harjes and Norton corps eventually merged under the sponsorship of the American Red Cross in 1917, and Andrew’s organization developed into the American Field Service, by far the most extensive group of volunteers aiding wounded soldiers in France.\(^2\)

The ambulance service, as James Nagel has commented, “had a literary and academic dimension that is at times astonishing.”\(^3\) Not only did the corps eventually include John Dos Passos, E. E. Cummings, Malcolm Cowley, Harry Crosby, Dashiell Hammett, and Louis Bromfield among other writers, but literary figures were also instrumental in its inception. In 1914, Henry James volunteered to write a pamphlet praising the work of Richard Norton to help enlist others in the cause. James’s essay appeared as an “open letter” in “a variety of journals in the United States,” and the esteemed novelist offered to write additional tracts to promote the service as well.\(^4\) In early 1917, prior to emerging as one of the most influential figures in the postwar Parisian literary milieu, Gertrude Stein...
volunteered to drive her Ford, nicknamed “Auntie,” to cart supplies and soldiers along the Western front. When the Red Cross developed their ambulance corps in Italy in the fall of 1917, the American Poets Committee was among the first groups to offer its support, donating fifty vehicles. Afterward, Robert W. Bates recorded an anecdote about an Austrian’s response of disbelief when, after having been captured by the Italians, the prisoner of war noticed insignia on vehicles affiliating the Red Cross workers with writers. As Bates explained, an Italian captain responded to his enemy’s surprise by assuring him that his observation was correct: “So you see,” the captain told him, “you have the entire world against you, even the American poets.” The goading comment, delivered partly in jest, nonetheless calls attention to a significant distinguishing feature of the volunteer organizations that derived major support from a wide array of writers.

The backing for ambulance services reflects important values related to the Allied cause that were instrumental in leading to Hemingway’s involvement. The men who formed the units often exhibited, as Charles Fenton has explained, “a spirit of humanitarianism” that compelled them to ameliorate the horrific conditions endured by wounded soldiers who waited for medical treatment. After Richard Norton accepted Bates for service in France, for example, the latter notified his family to say that his “ambulance dream has been realized,” explaining that

I cannot bear to sit by idly while the greatest conflict man has ever known and probably will know is devouring the world. I cannot bear to be part of this oasis of peace while the world is suffering and struggling madly about me. I have got to take some small part in it and if I cannot be of the world as well as in it my life is not worth thinking much about.

Bates, like many other volunteers, was inspired by the writings of Leslie Buswell, a driver from France whose publications during the war served to characterize ambulance work as “grandly” altruistic and in vital need of support from ambitious philanthropists. Despite later cynicism expressed by some writers toward the units, the contemporaneous documents overwhelmingly show, as Fenton has discussed, that “the vast majority of volunteers sustained throughout the war and into the peace a firm belief in the validity and necessity of their conduct.” Hemingway
later came to identify with similar ideals as he became involved with the
Red Cross in Italy.
Fenton’s emphasis on the selflessness associated with ambulance
driving is well-founded, but volunteers were also undoubtedly inspired
by the opportunity for thrill-seeking. In addition to expressing his desire
to offer assistance abroad, for example, A. Piatt Andrew, well before he
took charge of the largest outfit serving on the Western front, wrote his
parents about an opportunity to haul wounded men, telling them about
“the possibility of having even an infinitesimal part in one of the great-
est events in all history” as well as the chance for “witnessing some of
the gravest scenes in this gravest of spectacles.”12 Malcolm Cowley, who
served as camion driver in Andrew’s Field Service, noted that many col-
lege students volunteered “feeling certain that it would bear us into new
adventures.”13 Although his account of the experience in Exile’s Return: A
Literary Odyssey of the 1920s is steeped in postwar disillusionment, Cow-
ley was, like several others, “eager to get into action.”14 Stories relating
the daring work undertaken by drivers, such as those published in The
Harvard Volunteers in Europe (1916), motivated potential recruits as much
as the testimonials describing the work as a chance to perform acts of
good will.15
Even so, when Hemingway began exploring possibilities for involve-
ment in the Great War in the fall of 1917, the ambulance service in France
was not an option. Several months after the United States declared war
on Germany on April 6, 1917, the units that operated along the Western
front were militarized.16 Because of his defective vision, he was ineligi-
ble for enlistment according to army regulations; moreover, he was too
young to join an armed force without parental consent, which his father
and mother were unwilling to provide.17 At the same time he began his
assignment as cub reporter for the Kansas City Star in October, however,
front-page headlines reported the disastrous outcome of the Battle of
Caporetto that led to the need for a new corps of ambulance drivers on
the Italian front.18
Beginning on October 24, 1917, a week after Hemingway arrived for
work at the Kansas City Star, the changing conditions in Italy commanded
the world’s attention. German and Austrian soldiers broke through the
lines on the Isonzo River, and soon the enemy was in control of a sig-
nificant amount of territory in the vicinity of the Bainsizza Plateau. “It
is Italy’s Verdun,” one article announced.19 The ensuing retreat of Italian
soldiers developed into a wholesale evacuation of the region. Italy’s third and second armies were separated, and the Austrians who occupied the breach employed a “cunning device.” Similar to the sequence of events that leads to suspicion of Frederic Henry as an enemy infiltrator in *A Farewell to Arms*, soldiers were dressed in Italian uniforms so as to permit them to spread out over the country or mingle with the Italian forces on both sides of the gap. The Austrians thus garbed were enabled to advance unopposed and then opened fire with machine guns on retreating parties. Some of the Austrians were smuggled forward in motor lorries and then turned against the westward-moving forces.

Refugees dispersed through points south, and estimates indicated that the population in Rome had increased by one million as a result of the displaced people from towns above the Piave River, where the Italians finally hindered the enemy’s advance. By November 10, the newspaper had published a map of Italy’s new front. General Luigi Cadorna had been replaced by General Armando Diaz, and British and French troops arrived to help reinforce the new positions. The Piave was expected to be the site of the next major battle of the war. At the end of November, an article reported that the threat was still a grave one, but German forces were digging in for the winter. Over the next several months, Italy continued to suffer from the aftermath of the tremendous defeat, and the Allies were required to plot a new course of action for the coming year.

By the first week of November, Italian officials petitioned the United States to declare war on Austria-Hungary, asking Americans to lend the “greatest service to Italy and to the cause of the Entente during the critical events of the present time.” Officials grew increasingly concerned that the Central Powers might achieve continued success in Italy, gaining a significant advantage over the Allies. Maps were printed in the *Kansas City Star* indicating that if the Piave line did not hold in the coming battles of 1918, the enemy might advance to Vicenza and eventually the Po River, a position that would enable them to conquer the entire northern region. Meanwhile, Austria had been showering the countryside with “peace bombs,” propagandistic leaflets suggesting that Italy was a mere pawn, disregarded by the United States and controlled by the interests of Great Britain and France. Using a phrase that Hemingway
later employed about protagonists who renounce their commitment to war, the newspaper reported that the tracts encouraged Italian soldiers to declare a “separate peace,” a tactic that had also been employed with Belgium and Russia. The Central Powers were attempting to capitalize on internal strife within enemy states by debilitating them to the point of complete failure, leading those countries to negotiate their own truces independent of the Allied Cause. Such an agreement in Italy, war strategists feared, would allow Germany to concentrate forces more effectively on the Western front.25

These concerns proved influential in the findings of the American Senate Foreign Relations Committee as its members weighed potential strategies for the coming months. Their report, printed on the front page of the Kansas City Star, announced that “as a result of this situation, the Allies have rushed aid to Italy, and the United States is sending ships, money and supplies, and will probably send troops, who will be facing and making war on Austrian soldiers.”26 The following day, December 7, the United States issued a formal declaration of war on Austria-Hungary. Thomas Nelson Page, American ambassador to Italy, promised an enthusiastic crowd, who gathered at the U.S. embassy in Rome, that “it is to Italy, lover and champion of liberty, in her hour of distress, that my people come as one man, pledging every resource for her relief; and be sure we will not stop until we have won.”27 Although members of the Allied Cause had not yet agreed upon a specific timetable for the commitment of armed forces in Italy, even the promise of troops carrying the Stars and Stripes into the region had increased optimism throughout the war-torn country.

Headlines announced news of the disastrous circumstances during the retreat from the Isonzo River, while at the same time feature articles in the Kansas City Star romanticized the Italian front. Burris Jenkins, a local minister who had spent time in Europe, published a series of essays describing the theater of operations as “the most dramatic, the most spectacular battle line in Europe.”28 Unlike the topography of the Western front, “the Alps lift the whole line up and hang it in festoons over their shoulders. You can look down upon the evening’s guns, watch their fire, trace their projectiles, hear and see them fall and explode.”29 Indeed, the mountainous combat zone seemed “hung like a picture on the wall.”30 According to one article, King Victor Emmanuel III made frequent visits to the “common man” in the trenches, and the transports full of soldiers
motoring to the lines resounded with song, details that would also appear in *A Farewell to Arms* minus the exuberance of Jenkins’s account. Another report describes a field hospital under the able command of an exemplary and high-spirited surgeon overseeing the wounded, bloody, and bandaged that are well-served by British Red Cross workers, who “lend a hand to brothers in arms.” Perhaps “America can lend a hand” too, he suggests. The “most romantic of the battle fronts,” Jenkins maintained, “here war retains something of its old glamour.” Steve Paul writes that Hemingway could have been “primed by” these remarks, not only as they might have inspired him to enlist but also because the writings suggest an influence on later portrayals of landscapes in his fiction. Hemingway never referred to the articles as an inspiration, but the features nonetheless demonstrate how idealized accounts about the emerging significance of the Italian front served to promote U.S. involvement in aiding her distressed ally. Publicity asserting the validity of that cause was a major factor resulting in Ernest’s involvement with the American Red Cross.

Three months before the Battle of Caporetto, Americans had already initiated a plan for aid to Italy. Henry P. Davison, chairman of the Red Cross War Council, dispatched a temporary commission in late July of 1917 under the direction of George F. Baker Jr. vice president of the First National Bank. Baker’s group included philanthropic businessmen, experts in health-related professions, and, according to the *Red Cross Bulletin*, “one of the leading authorities in this country on Italy,” Harvard professor Chandler R. Post. Their mission was “to investigate conditions” and report “how activity can best be utilized to meet needs of the suffering soldiers and the civilian population of Italy.” After a tour of several cities and the frontline trenches, the men returned to the United States on October 2.

As Charles Bakewell recalls in *The Story of the American Red Cross in Italy*, the report they carried on their journey back to Washington proved to be “out of date almost before their vessel landed.” As “the very fate of the allies hung in the balance,” according to Bakewell, organizers hurriedly revised their strategy in response to the conditions that developed in late October. Italian-sponsored relief societies allocated resources in the aftermath of the retreat, but local agencies proved inadequate. Ambassador Page communicated with Paris and Washington to procure more help, and by early November, the American Red Cross
began the emergency organization of a full-scale relief effort that came to have a significant presence in Italy not only through the end of the war but also for several months thereafter.38

Initial support focused on hospitals and aid to refugees, but when workers at the transportation headquarters in Paris learned of the need for relief, they made plans to send the first ambulance sections to Italy. Michael Reynolds describes the situation in *Hemingway’s First War*:

For the Norton-Harjes drivers who remained in France, the Italian disaster at Caporetto presented a reprieve from joining the U.S. Army. The Red Cross had hastily assembled in Paris three sections of ambulances to be ferried over the Alps into Italy. By December the cars were ready, but there were no experienced drivers available.39

Although Reynolds acknowledges the “ambulance drivers who served with Hemingway” as “identifiable sources who contributed to” *A Farewell to Arms*, some of the information he provides is not entirely accurate.40 Indeed, Andrew’s American Field Service had been taken over by the army, and the unemployed Norton-Harjes men, who spurned militarization in a show of support echoing Norton’s dislike of U.S. officers, became pioneers of the American Red Cross service in Italy.41 Instead of ferrying three sections over the Alps, however, the headquarters in Paris sent two groups by train preceded by an initial convoy that departed for Milan on November 18.42 According to George Buchanon Fife, who served as a correspondent with the American Red Cross in 1917, there was no shortage of seasoned drivers either: “No sooner did it become known that the Red Cross was sending an ambulance division to Italy than its headquarters in the rue François 1er were overrun by applicants for enlistment.”43 After the disruption of many positions during militarization, the emergency organizers had a large pool of experienced men to choose from, and they were able to staff three sections of thirty-five men apiece, with the names of thirty-five to forty more volunteers placed on a waiting list.

Since officials anticipated intense work in Italy, they sought an experienced crew that could handle the difficult task. The terms indicated a six-month period of enlistment, five hundred lire per month (“roughly $96,” as Nagel indicates) for “personal expense except clothing and medical attention,” as well as a “willingness on the part of the men to
do whatever work assigned to them in the ambulance in Italy.” As Fife explains, it was made clear at the outset that for this service only those who had actual ambulance service at the front would be acceptable and, preferably, those who had had much of it, because there had been many intimations that the work of the corps in Italy would be a severe test even of men well acquainted with hazards and hardships and a never ended day’s work.

One of the initial organizers, Beverly Myles, spoke of not only a preference for men with knowledge of operating, maintaining, and repairing the “machines” but also having a desire for volunteers with plenty of experience in battle zones. Many of the enlistees, therefore, had hauled wounded on shell-pocked roads in France amid enemy gunfire in regions such as the Somme, the Marne, and Verdun, where workers became inured to the atrocities of the western front.

The story of Section One’s departure from Paris reveals much about the character of the men who initiated the service. “Paris was still asleep,” Fife wrote, when the drivers prepared to set off from the rue François 1er in the early hours of a mid-November morning:

It was cold and foggy, with a haze about the few, far-spaced street lights. In the cobbled courtyard of the transportation building, once the home of the United States Embassy and still bearing the National Arms cut deeply in the stone of a high gate-post, a number of the cars were parked; others were lined along the curbing to the vanishing point. And moving about among them with swinging lanterns to stow their kits and duffle, the men of the section, in short bulky jackets lined with sheep’s wool, or in hairy, goatskin great coats, were grotesque shadows in the mist.

In addition to his impressions of the drivers’ hardened nature, Fife was also in awe of the oversized fur coats that became something of a trademark of their unique demeanor. Reynolds has likewise noted that these men “dressed in somewhat non-regulation uniforms with cigarettes dangling from their mouths,” traits that marked them as “not your spit-and-polish young soldiers off to make the world safe for democ-
racy." Accordingly, they were “accustomed to working hard when there was work to be done, but in the slack periods they did not maintain military discipline unnecessarily.” Fife’s inclination to describe these men in sensational terms, along with Reynolds’s descriptions, reflects the extent to which Section One was a selective group that held a mystique. Indeed, the volunteers who paved the way for Hemingway’s unit were hardened veterans and something of a maverick crew.

Section One’s trip to Italy reflects the degree to which the drivers exuded unconventionality. Even before the unit had left Paris, the staff car had shed its muffler, and the “unholy noise” that ensued earned it the nickname “Old Firecrackers.” The vehicle, according to Fife, wreaked havoc throughout the countryside as the convoy journeyed south until the car was finally “demolished against a pillar” not far from Avignon. One car burned up in the street during a refueling pit stop in Marseilles and had to be salvaged for parts. Two other vehicles became inoperable and needed to be pulled in order to keep them moving, a system of travel that proved just as challenging for the driver doing the towing as for the man “condemned” to ride behind. After seventeen days and roughly two-thousand kilometers of dusty roads and constant repairs, Section One arrived in Milan on December 5. Major problems notwithstanding, most of the vehicles were in relatively good form, a testament to the perseverance of the group and their skills in repairing cantankerous vehicles on the fly. One of the drivers later summed up the trip by saying that “twenty-one convoys, each consisting of one car, have arrived at the Italian front for service. Several of the convoys made the entire trip without becoming separated. Most of them were completely separated, however, some of them being nigh well disemboweled.” Despite Section One’s eccentricities, it was nonetheless a dependable outfit that could be relied on to get the job done in the most difficult of circumstances.

Besides enlisting as ambulance drivers, these men, perhaps unwittingly, also became representatives for the American people. When they arrived at the Italian border town of Ventimiglia, the warm welcome of United States support became abundantly clear. Passport checks were waived, and the road was literally strewn with flowers and cheering locals all the way to Milan. By mid-December, after two additional sections of drivers and vehicles arrived, all three units were involved in a formal presentation of their services to the Italian Army. The ceremony was attended by civil and military officials and included flag waving,
speech making, and a formal review of the ambulance corps by General Gastaldello. The reception acknowledged the drivers as "tangible proof of the assistance which is coming to Italy from the United States" and solidified the bond between America and its beleaguered ally.

After their formal presentation in Milan, the Red Cross drivers, now three sections strong, continued another two-hundred-and-fifty kilometers to locations near the Austro-Italian front. By December 23, they were housed in "comfortable villas a few miles from Padua," and in the absence of heavy fighting, other than helping with the occasional case of a soldier with frozen feet, the men were mostly working "to get their equipment in order before moving forward to take up their serious work still nearer the front." In other words, they had quite a bit of downtime, and without a clear sense of work to occupy them, instead of polishing their boots and keeping careful account of fuel consumption, they tended to do as they pleased.

The names of those listed with the first three ambulance sections include several men that Hemingway later came to know. George Utassy, originally leader of Section One, was eventually promoted to quartermaster general of the corps and became a key figure in the recruitment effort that resulted in Ernest’s enlistment. Meade Detweiler assigned Hemingway and Ted Brumback, also of the Kansas City Star, to Section Four upon their arrival in June and later visited Ernest at the hospital in Milan. Coles van B. Seeley was admitted as a patient the same time as Hemingway, and the two developed a friendship over the course of their recovery. James Baker, Charles Griffin, and Edward Welch Jr. later transferred to Hemingway’s Section Four. John Dos Passos, who was initially separated from the first group but subsequently arrived at the front all the same, became friends with Ernest during the twenties in Paris when they recalled their time in the Red Cross amid the postwar literary scene.

Over the course of their first few weeks in Italy, the drivers from France received their direction from temporary leaders, but plans soon developed for a permanent supervisor at the front. Vernon S. Prentice and Gordon Sarre, along with Captain Felice Cacciapuoti, the Italian liaison officer, initially worked on equipping the units, setting up their accommodations, and coordinating efforts with the Italian government. As the sections established themselves, the need for an overseer became quickly apparent. Myles noted as much in his report to Prentice
on January 1, 1918: “It is recommended that one man be selected for administrator and that the formation of field staff, the office administration, and the coordination of the sections be left entirely to him. . . . He must have not only the responsibility but also the authority to deal with all matters pertaining to the ambulance service.” The director should operate from a base behind the lines “taking whatever trips are necessary to the front for inspection, and occasionally going back to the headquarters and Milan to conduct new sections to the front.” Recognizing the profound impact such a position would have on the service as a whole, Myles noted that “it is of utmost importance that the administrator be recognized head of this service. On the character, initiative, diplomacy and resources of the man selected for this position will depend more than any other factors the success of the service.” Not all of the duties would be as glamorous, however, since they also needed a bureaucrat with a talent for pushing paper and collating section leaders’ reports “showing the numbers of wounded carried, approximate number of miles covered by each car, financial accounts, and requisition of supplies for the sections.” Even so, Myles imagined the leadership position to be vital in establishing an organization that the members would be proud to call their own, an outfit similar to the ambulance units founded on the Western front:

The esprit de corps of the service must be built up if the greatest efficiency is to be gotten from the men. They must be made to feel that they are part of a crack organization and that they have its reputation to uphold. This esprit de corps depends more than any other factor on the man who is at the head of the service.60

Indeed, Red Cross organizers had high expectations for the newly arrived ambulance units preparing for action over the next several months, and they emphasized the person in charge as integral to their success. On January 25, Bates, with experience as a driver and section leader in France, wrote in his diary about accepting the job:

They asked me to take charge of the field service and promised me a free hand. Utassy, one of my old Section 63 men is to be in charge of the office work as Quartermaster General, and although our work is parallel, Utassy is head of his own department, it is understood that
there can be but one head of the service and that I shall be that head. I am delighted with this arrangement. It is the identical position that Norton occupied in the old service and the very one of all that I hoped to have.  

Bates has been identified by Carlos Baker as the “inspector of ambulance services,” but the importance of his role in the corps and subsequent influence on Hemingway has never been fully discussed. Not long after arriving on the Italian front and setting up headquarters in Vicenza, the newly installed captain found that he had unprecedented authority in shaping some of the most significant work being accomplished by the Red Cross at the time. As the Permanent Commission to Italy took form in the early months of 1918, Bates was considered as the “ranking American officer in active service” on the Italian front.

Bates’s letters and reports reflect not only the humanitarian mission abroad but also the role of the Red Cross in promoting rapport between volunteers and the people of their host country. In a missive to H. Nelson Gay, of the American Poets Committee in Rome, Bates responded to an inquiry about general operations at the front. His reply suggests the increasing importance associated with ambulance drivers in the absence of United States troops:

We are also painting a small American flag on each side of the cars, and on the ambulances which we brought from France we are changing the “Croix Rouge Américaine” to “Croce Rossa Americana.” We recognize the importance of the propaganda element in our work and wish to leave nothing undone to mark us as Americans. To this end, in addition to the above, we are changing from the old French Ambulance Service, English-cut uniform, to the regulation American uniform with “U.S.” on the collar, and a small red cross. For every American seen in Italy, “rumor” gives 10 more. At no time were there more than 100 ambulance men in Milan; and yet a Milanese whom I met in Rome told me that one of his friends had written him there were at least 3000 American troops in the city and that the uniform had already ceased to attract attention.

In The Best Times, John Dos Passos later criticized this policy. Recalling an encounter with two Red Cross officials who “rubbed me the wrong
way by declaring in a fit of winey candor that we were at the Italian front only as a propaganda gesture to help keep the Italians in the war,” Dos Passos noted his idealistic perceptions prior to learning about that objective: “What I liked to think I was doing was dragging the poor wops out from under fire, not jollying them into dying in a war that didn’t concern them.” In the spring of 1918, however, the Red Cross mission had been clearly defined in terms of bolstering morale on the faltering Italian front. After Austrians had previously donned uniforms of their rival to defeat the enemy during the retreat from Caporetto, Red Cross workers planned to wear American military garb to encourage their ally in the fight.

The bond that developed between Americans and Italians also resulted in officer privileges for ambulance drivers. Sections on the western front included French lieutenants through whom American volunteers were required to clear their directives, but the Italian service allowed for more leeway. “There are no Italian lieutenants in the Sections,” Bates wrote, “and our American leaders are allowed to wear the Italian insignia of rank (1st Lieut.). . . . In addition to all this, as if this were not enough, we are all regarded as having the rank of officers and are treated accordingly.” This meant that general workers were granted the rank of honorary second lieutenant while commanding officers attained a level of distinction one grade higher. The point clarifies Bill Horne’s uncertainty as expressed to Hemingway’s sister Marcelline about volunteers’ roles with the foreign service. Regarding the status of honorary second lieutenant, Horne told her “how true that was I don’t know—but it makes good sense.” Bates’s letter not only explains the issue of rank but shows that the newly installed captain considered this situation as a remedy to problems that occurred in France, “where the lieutenant was always saying that our men could do this, that, and the other thing, because the French poilu [soldier] did it and that we were no better than they.” Accordingly, the privilege indicates the extent to which drivers enjoyed unprecedented standing as token members of the foreign army while still retaining autonomy outside of the military.

Even so, volunteers were required to adhere to restrictions put in place by the official censor, another integral component of the propaganda objective. “Every line of our letters is read,” Bates wrote in a missive, “and the Italians are very sensitive; that is why you will notice that if I happen to mention them in my letters it is always in terms of admiration. The French and English show a certain tendency to look
down on them and they feel it keenly.” These circumstances led Bates to discipline his men on several occasions: “Our boys have been putting very unflattering comments in their letters home and it is causing us a great deal of trouble. . . . Have had to fire one man for this and before we get thru I expect to fire some more. It’s inexcusable.”69 Not long before Hemingway’s arrival, Bates intercepted a letter written by Dos Passos expressing “pacifist ideas” to a friend in Spain that violated the censorship policy.70 Even though Bates recommended a dishonorable discharge, administrators settled the matter instead by barring Dos Passos from service after his enlistment expired at the end of May. The incident shows not only the extent to which Italian support became crucial prior to Hemingway’s involvement but also the friction that developed between Bates and some of the jaded members who populated the corps during its inception.71 By late February of 1918, the Red Cross had begun a recruitment campaign to enlist new drivers for additional sections anticipated for the increase in activity during the summer. In strategizing for the work to come, Bates did not regard the crew from France with the same sense of awe as did Fife, nor did he envision them as integral to the future of the corps: “The old crowd,” as he called them, “were for the most part malcontents and misfits who had failed to get into a regular service when the French sections were taken over. They were a hard crowd to handle.” Therefore, he was eager to enlist new workers who might conform to Red Cross policy: “I hope to be able to pick my own men,” he wrote, “the kind of men we ought to have for this service instead of putting up with a lot of bum material that is sent over by someone else.”72 Although Bates explained that he cancelled what he considered to be extravagant allowances in an effort to save money, he also mentioned that it helped to hasten the departure of drivers from France upon the expiration of their enlistments, noting in his diary that his action had the “desired result: it saved the R. C. a large sum of money monthly and got rid of practically all the old crowd.”73 Indeed, Section Two threatened to walk out even before the administration had their replacements. When Bates wrote his report on the subject of reenlistment, he noted that “in Section 1 about ten men are reenlisting, in Section 2 about five men and in Section 3 four men.” Furthermore, he noted that “the failure of the men to reenlist has been primarily due to the lack of active work on this front,” but there
were “some, however, who maintained that they did not reenlist because of the suppression of the expense account.” By the time Hemingway’s crew signed on, recruits were “furnished with lodging and mess free” but expected to pay their own transportation expenses. None of them were allotted additional funds as were the original personnel. The changes reflected Bates’s goal to enlist workers on “a purely voluntary basis,” adhering to principles associated with the “gentleman volunteers” who established ambulance sections on the Western front.

As in *A Farewell to Arms*, where Frederic Henry states that he “was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain,” the impetus for Hemingway’s enlistment with the Red Cross developed amid a climate dominated by demonstrations of idealism inspiring various forms of involvement in the war, not the least important of which had been that of ambulance driving. Gwendolyn Shealy has described the era of World War I as a period in which the American Red Cross completed a significant shift from a relatively limited humanitarian aid establishment to a sizeable corporate entity with an unprecedented amount of economic power over which the United States government held significant sway. The bureaucracy as well as propaganda measures, she claims, are at least two indicators of this transition in terms of the role of the organization as a “tool of the government,” especially in terms of “boosting Italian morale with the message of American friendship.” The culmination of activities arising as a result of these conditions occurred at the same time Hemingway began his enlistment process and lasted throughout his entire period of service.

Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*, the benchmark study establishing irony as the main outgrowth of reactions to the horrors of the European catastrophe that rendered initial wartime values obsolete, notes *A Farewell to Arms* as a quintessential example of the postwar literature that abandoned earlier notions of optimism: “It was not until eleven years after the war,” Fussell writes,

that Hemingway could declare in *A Farewell to Arms* that “abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.” In the summer of 1914 no one would have understood what on earth he was talking about.
Fussell makes a valuable point about the passage of time necessary for Hemingway’s growth as a writer, but George Monteiro, echoing Robert Lewis’s comments in “A Farewell to Arms”: The War of the Words (1992), offers a more profound statement on the sophisticated depictions that Hemingway produced in the twenties. “Arguably,” Monteiro states, “it is Hemingway’s hidden but never expunged idealism that provides the basis for a true understanding of Frederic Henry’s denunciation.” Indeed, the same can be said for much of Hemingway’s war fiction as a whole. Even more, Fussell’s citation of Henry’s famous phrase as a reaction to a wide array of circumstances leading to the escalation of World War I is more readily understood in terms of Hemingway’s decision to enlist with the American Red Cross in Italy as the fighting intensified during the spring and summer of 1918.