The Literature of the Lafayette Escadrille, French Army Discipline, VAD Nursing, and the Lost Battalion

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Dr. McClurken
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Students of World War I history need to be cautious when examining films that depict specific events and individuals. When making films such as *Flyboys*, *Paths of Glory*, *Testament of Youth*, and *The Lost Battalion*, screenwriters and directors had distinct artistic goals and financial objectives they wished to achieve and the films they created vary in their degree of historical accuracy. Filmmakers depend on both primary and secondary sources to accurately depict the wartime situations and individuals involved. World War I primary sources provide the voices of a generation that endured a new type of warfare that was both physically and psychologically devastating. The pain and suffering of the “lost generation” was very heavily reflected in the literature. Secondary historical sources regarding World War I are abundant and the scholarship is constantly evolving. Traditionally, historians writing secondary sources would strive to provide thorough and complete information but the majority of these works upheld the customary, somewhat sectarian, view of courageous flyers, frightened shell-shocked men refusing to fight, noble VAD nurses, and the glorious courage of Major Whittlesey’s 1st Battalion. Secondary texts are now moving in an exciting new direction. Scholars have begun questioning the entire mythos of the Great War. These modern historians are re-examining details that glorified the war experience and the men and women involved. This thought provoking and empathetic secondary scholarship concerns itself with unearthing the “truths” of the Great War in order to pay honest tribute to those who had to endure the unendurable.

The Lafayette Escadrille has been described as “Warriors with Wings.” The Escadrille was composed of thirty-eight American men of privilege who willingly volunteered to fight for France because they believed the world they cherished was facing extinction.¹ The Lafayette

Escadrille would operate for less than two years, from April 20, 1916 to February 18, 1918. It was during this time the Escadrille would rise to the level of modern day rock stars through written accounts of their antics, escapades, and achievements. While it is a fact that aviation did not play a critical role in the First World War, the Escadrille exhibited a legacy of extreme courage, excellence, and commitment that would subsequently become the ethos of all United States military aviation.\(^2\) Dispelling the overstated romantic legacy of the Escadrille is just as important as emphasizing the actual facts about these remarkable pilots. Older secondary sources, such as Edward Jablonski’s *Warriors with Wings: The Story of the Lafayette Escadrille* tend to dramatize the fame of the Lafayette Escadrille, calling the unit “romantic young heroes.”\(^3\)

It is with the publication of Philip M. Flammer’s *The Vivid Air: The Lafayette Escadrille* that Escadrille scholarship takes a turn towards the truth of who these pilots actually were. Flammer’s account does not shy away from mentioning men like Thomas M. Hewitt, an early Escadrille that was not suited for flying and earned the enmity of his comrades each time he found a way to avoid missions.\(^4\) Flammer also suggests the Escadrille pilots did not relish the worldwide attention. He claims the pilots had an idealism and moral courage that placed the notion of serving one’s country far above any individual delusions of grandeur.\(^5\)

An even later biography of the Escadrille, T.B. Murphy’s *Kiffin Rockwell, the Lafayette Escadrille and the Birth of the United States Air Force*, recounts the lies that American Bert Hall told the French government about his wealth of aviation experience. Hall was so eager to join the Escadrille, he applied armed with a false resume. Upon being placed into an aircraft, rather than

\(^3\) Jablonski, *Warriors with Wings*, 160.
\(^5\) Flammer, *The Vivid Air*, 185.
confess he had been lying, he took the controls and abruptly crashed into a hangar. Miraculously, he was unharmed and the French were so impressed with his recklessness, they admitted him into the flight training program. Hall, a gambler and bigamist, was also involved with Margaretha Zelle (aka Mata Hari) which became problematic for the Escadrille’s image when she was executed by the French for being a German spy on October 15, 1917.

The most recent scholarship examined is *First to Fly: The Story of the Lafayette Escadrille, The American Heroes Who Flew for France in World War I* by Charles Bracelen Flood. The text is what Flood calls “an emotional portrait of the Lafayette Escadrille pilots and the courage and ingenuity they displayed.” Flood’s emotional portrait points out: “Just as this first air war made some of them formidable men, it broke others. There were suicides, then and later, and those who hollowed themselves out with alcohol and other drugs.” Facts such as these are important. They show us that the Escadrille were normal men, flawed human beings, not the perfect young heroes that some earlier sources would have us believe.

The narrative surrounding French military discipline is complex. The idea that French commanders would execute psychologically damaged men for failure to “go over the top” seems appalling but these types of situations did occur. The Souain Corporals affair would become a notorious example of French military injustice. The text *They Shall Not Pass: The French*

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6 Murphy, *Kiffin Rockwell*, 80.
8 Flood, *First to Fly*, 3.
10 The Souain Corporals affair was an incident where four corporals in the French Army were shot by firing squad as an example to the rest of their companies during the First World War. The executions, which occurred in the vicinity of Souain on March 17, 1915, are considered to be the most egregious and highly publicized military injustice done by France in World War I. This event inspired the book *Paths of Glory* by Humphrey Cobb. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Souain_corporals_affair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Souain_corporals_affair)
Army on the Western Front 1914-1918 by Ian Sumner examines over two hundred first person accounts by French enlisted and officers. Sumner’s narrative explains how, in September 1914, the Commander-in-Chief, General Joseph Joffre set up special tribunals to replace the pre-war system of military courts which Joffre felt were inadequate due to judicial bureaucracy. All sentences were to be carried out within twenty-four hours.\textsuperscript{11} Sumner explains that senior officers were unconcerned with physical and psychological excuses and the firing squad was sometimes a welcome alternative for men who were utterly desperate to leave the trenches.\textsuperscript{12}

While Mr. Sumner’s narrative paints a dark picture of French discipline, the more recent work of Dr. Elizabeth Greenhalgh, The French Army and the First World War, states that aside from a spike in October 1914, the average monthly executions throughout the whole war were between seven and eight souls. She explains how these numbers are in no way excessive for an army of that size.\textsuperscript{13} Dr. Greenhalgh also mentions the film, Paths of Glory, which she feels has “penetrated the public consciousness” and therefore unduly influenced perceptions of French discipline during the Great War.\textsuperscript{14} This work appears well-researched however the statistics Greenhalgh provides are surprisingly low in number and some type of professional verification seems in order.

The examination of French military discipline becomes even more interesting when the text, The Embattled Self: French Soldiers Testimony of the Great War is taken into account. Dr. Leonard Smith explains that discipline was swift and terrible as the French army needed to

\textsuperscript{11} Ian Sumner, They Shall Not Pass: The French Army on the Western Front 1914-1918 (South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Books Ltd., 2012), 68.
\textsuperscript{12} Sumner, They Shall Not Pass, 130.
\textsuperscript{14} Greenhalgh, The French Army, 60.
celebrate its mastery through murder. Smith claims the common French soldier lacked any agency and was the victim of a capricious military authority that catered to the capitalist hierarchy and these men died to pay for the nation’s consent to world war. This account seems to favor the notion of French commanders as unjust, which shows that recent secondary sources are very much in contention about the nature of discipline within the French army in the Great War.

The study of Great Britain’s VAD (Volunteer Aid Detachment) nurses is a fascinating historical exploration of upper class British women whose patriotism demanded they sacrifice very comfortable lives and live under horrific conditions. Secondary source works such as Jean Pickering’s article “On the Battlefield: Vera Brittain’s Testament of Youth” explain that Brittain’s desire to speak for “a generation of women” allowed her to utilize personal experience as a paradigm for the entire generation. Pickering feels that Brittain’s work represents the emotional climate of the war and its aftermath which reflects heavily on her losses and colors her ability to be completely objective. Lastly, Pickering acknowledges that Brittain sought to “valorize female nature and culture” which leads her to the conclusion the text was intended to appeal to a whole generation of idealistic women. Pickering’s well researched article clearly respects the nature of Vera Brittain’s memoir but it does raise some questions about realism. It is unlikely all VAD nursing experiences were as noble as Brittain claims.

The recent scholarship of Dr. Yvonne McEwen, In the Company of Nurses: The History

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16 Smith, The Embattled Self, 162.
of the British Army Nursing Service in the Great War, provides a great deal of information regarding VAD nursing from 1914-1918. This text paints a very different image of the role VAD nurses had in the Great War. Dr. McEwen explains many of these women were untrained and only utilized as probationers, cooks, and general cleaners.\(^\text{20}\) Another interesting point that Dr. McEwen makes is the fact that the VAD nurses were not wanted by the fully trained certified nursing community. Rather than embracing the VAD women, McEwen tells us *The British Journal of Nursing* referred to them as ‘war giddy women’ who carried out ‘spurious and emotional nursing’ which did more harm than good for the patient.\(^\text{21}\) The British magazine, *The Nursing Times* November 1914 issue contained an editorial with this plea:

We want for this great national crisis a trained nurse of executive ability, who can hold all the threads of voluntary war nursing in her hands, who, working in touch with the military authorities of all the Allied countries and helped by an expert committee, could send out at an hour’s notice emergency units of trained adaptable women for service at any place they are needed. The need is too urgent for any muddling and overlapping, there is no place for the amateur or Important Person.\(^\text{22}\)

Due to McEwen’s recent scholarship, the myth of Britain’s upper class VAD competent “angels of mercy” is being challenged. While the VAD nurses probably had good intentions, their lack of training was more than an inconvenience, it was an impediment to quality patient care. These complex challenges of large scale wartime nursing agencies are now being thoroughly examined and the truth about the VAD’s role in the Great War is being brought forth for further historical analysis.

The story of Major Charles Whittlesey’s “Lost Battalion” is one of the most famous Great War accounts. As the entire 308\(^\text{th}\) Infantry was an American unit, the interest in the United


\(^{21}\) McEwen, *In the Company of Nurses*, 59.

\(^{22}\) McEwen, *In the Company of Nurses*, 60.
States has never waned. Thomas Johnson and Fletcher Pratt’s secondary source text *The Lost Battalion* was first published in 1938 and reprinted in 2000 with an added introduction by Edward M. Coffman. *The Lost Battalion* was considered a very fine work and still has a great deal of relevance, however, the work is a tribute to Whittlesey’s 1st Battalion and reads very much like a work of fiction with spurious dialogue inserted into the narrative. The chapter which contains follow-up information on the men is sparse, with its focus mainly on Whittlesey’s suicide at sea in 1921. Armchair historians, concerned only with the details of the assault in the Charlevaux Ravine, would find this work adequate. However, researchers interested in any follow up of the men involved will be disappointed. This is interesting because quite a few of the 194 survivors were still living when Johnson and Pratt originally published their text.

More recent scholarship by Robert J. Laplander, one of the leading authorities on the Lost Battalion, reflects much more heavily on the suffering of the participants. Laplander’s text, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, does not glorify the experiences of Whittlesey and his men. The author provides a detailed step by step account which deserves credit for its accuracy and honest evaluation. This 3rd edition contains an extensive section titled “Survivors and Casualties” which illustrates the physical and mental suffering survivors endured. Laplander’s magnum opus provides the reader with a balanced and reliable view of the attack at the Charlevaux Ravine and the men who participated, thus furnishing scholars with enough information to be objective in the analysis of this significant assault.

The 2018 text, *Never in Finer Company: The Men of the Great War’s Lost Battalion*

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continues to moves the scholarship about Whittlesey and his men into a more realistic and empathetic realm. The author, Dr. Edward G. Lengal, examines the events at Charlevaux Ravine from the perspective of the men who suffered during the offensive. Lengal stresses the fact that “each man was haunted in his own way.” In this account of the Lost Battalion, Lengal continuously reminds the reader of the arduous nature of Whittlesey’s mission. The work is written with a tremendous empathy for the sacrifices of both Whittlesey and his 1st Battalion. The text also contains two chapters which provide both immediate and long term follow up about many of the survivors. This empathetic approach to scholarship does not diminish its value. By emphasizing the terrible physical and psychological costs of this offensive, the modern student of history can better understand the significance of wartime sacrifice.

The most appropriate way to approach the question of historical accuracy in wartime research is by utilizing a combination of sources. The “War to End All Wars” took the lives of an entire generation of young men and left deep scars on the survivors who documented their many sufferings for posterity in primary accounts. The wealth of existing secondary sources can be used to verify facts and assertions made by primary accounts. Unfortunately, these older secondary sources tend to glorify the war experience which often distorts the narrative and inhibits the presentation of relevant, but often unpleasant, “hard truths” that need to be revealed. The more recent and sometimes controversial secondary studies open the door to a new kind of Great War scholarship, one that seeks to question the traditional, and somewhat biased, image of the war and its combatants. By combining primary, existing secondary, and the most recent polemical secondary scholarship, historians have the benefit of firsthand knowledge, ongoing

perspectives, and evolving analyses. Incorporating varied and, in some cases, oppositional points of view will help to ensure that scholarly works provide a fair and equitable account of the entire Great War experience for future generations who, hopefully, will never encounter such a devastating worldwide conflict.

*I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.*

*Bonnie L. Akkerman*
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