Sisterhood at the front: Friendship, comradeship, and the feminine appropriation of military heroism among World War I First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY)

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Synopsis

This article focuses on friendship and comradeship among First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) volunteers serving on the Western Front during the First World War. I discuss the distinction between, and the gendering of, friendship and comradeship, and make the case that the conditions of FANY service were not destructive of female friendships as they were for male combatants. I argue that the sustainability of emotional connection in the context of FANY autonomy and independence instead provided the foundation for the development of a comradeship that resulted in the feminine appropriation of military heroism. Such appropriation gave authentic claim to this masculine space and helped set the stage for women’s participation in other aspects of public life.

Introduction

Fanny Goes to War, written in 1919 about the elite British women’s volunteer organization the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), begins with an enthusiastic preface about the organization’s esprit de corps. This camaraderie, touted as one of the “natural qualities of our race that largely helped to win the war”, was praised for its grounding in “discipline and devotion to duty” (Thompson in Beauchamp, 1919, p. vii). Such nationalist exclamations about comradeship are not unique given the masculine narratives of loyalty and camaraderie common to this period (Eksteins, 1989; Fussell, 1975), although more surprising in their attribution to women (Watson, 2004). In this article I explore the distinction between friendship, individual feelings of affection and regard that have claimed a privileged place in women’s interpersonal lives (Vicinus, 2004), and comradeship, group or corporate commitment to duty and shared service perceived as masculine experience (Law, 1983; Leed, 1979). I illustrate how sisterhood claimed a central place in the lives of the FANY, emerging from the everyday intimacies of women of similar age and class background working and living together. I suggest that it was this sustainability of emotional connection in the context of the autonomy and independence of the FANY organization that encouraged the development of FANY comradeship during the war. Such comradeship manifested in the feminine appropriation of military heroism and was expressed in acts of physical courage that inserted the FANY into the narratives of wartime combat and helped provide support for women’s advancement in the public sphere.

The FANY was founded in 1907 as an elite women’s yeomanry nursing corps. It combined the masculine identity of a mounted cavalry group that appropriated “the élan and daring of [...] cavalry and hunting fathers and brothers” (Baxter-Ellis, 1957, p. 8) with feminine
notions of nursing care, imagining a mobile mounted band of first-aiders ready to provide support in case of war. The founding of the FANY was supported by the reorganization of nursing in the twentieth century that changed perceptions of this work and allowed “respectable” women to take on these roles (Summers, 1988). Florence Nightingale’s work in the Crimean War, the reorganization of the British Army Nursing Service as a result of the Anglo-Boer War (Schmitz, 2000), and the development of Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service that replaced the Army Nursing Service in 1902, were all important in changing perceptions and establishing nursing as a profession where women of all classes participated through a variety of medical, philanthropic, religious, and military agencies for the care of the sick (Bullough, Bullough, & Stanton, 1990). The founding of the FANY was also encouraged by the passing of the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act of 1907, established in case of invasion, which encouraged volunteer efforts to protect and support the nation (Soloway, 1990). Although the FANY was similar to the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VAD) and the Women’s Volunteer Reserve (WVR) in being an organization of privileged women volunteers established in response to the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act, it took pride in being the first such organization to work at the Front and the first, in particular, to drive for the British (Popham, 1984; Ward, 1955). As discussed below, the FANY’s was also distinct in encouraging an identity based upon its elite and independent status and autonomous relationship to the military establishment (Lee, 2005). There was some competition between the FANY and these other women’s organizations, even though at the individual level FANY members often enjoyed friendships with women in other voluntary groups (McDougall, n.d., p. 45–6, 110; Thompson, 1 April, 23-25 April, 1918).

By the time FANY members were able to serve in the World War I, horses had been replaced by motorized ambulance transport and the FANY transferred their skills to driving and mechanics. As such, they transported military personnel and supplies and ferried the wounded from field hospitals, trains, and barges to military hospitals. They also directed canteens and military hospitals, and performed general nursing services. In these capacities they became known for their independence and a compassionate cheerfulness preserved through FANY legend in their motto “I cope” (Lee, 2005, 2007; Popham, 1984). Although independent from any military authority outside of negotiated contract agreements, over four hundred FANY volunteers worked for the British, Belgian, and French Armies, often driving under dangerous conditions in outposts behind the front lines (“Facts and dates in Corps history”, n.d.). The FANY worked with European Civil Relief schemes after the Armistice and served in a variety of capacities during World War II (Ward, 1955). They function today as the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (Princess Royal’s Volunteer Corps).

During this period of the First World War, the FANY were similar to their sisters in the VAD and the WVR in being socially and economically privileged women who did not have to provide for themselves and their families. Although the organization was sponsored by such patrons as the Marchioness of Londonderry, the Duchess of Abercorn, and the Countess of Kilmorey, most FANY were not members of the landed elite but were economically privileged women with ties to the military, political, and/or industrial establishments (Beauchamp, 1940, p. 2). Existing records suggest that all First World War FANY were white British (or white British Commonwealth-born) women between the ages of 17 and 35 years old who created a relatively homogeneous organization in terms of national identity, class, and age. Most were single women, although married women did join the corps (“Facts and dates in Corps history”, n.d., p. 2). An exact summary of their class background is not available (as Irene Ward (1955, p. 23), writing about the FANY concedes: “[They] make no secret of their failure to keep records”). The FANY were privileged enough to devote themselves to service, and they tended to do so in the name of patriotism, nationalism, and a sense of duty to God, country, and Empire grounded in the credibility and respectability afforded their class. In early FANY writings, they describe themselves as “loyal and patriotic women ..., whose stout hearts and willing hands [...] render a great service to our country and gain fresh laurels for the brow of womanhood” (Baker, 1910, p. 3–5). This legend utilized notions of genteel femininity and worked to defuse the potentially subversive nature of their organization at a time when gender anxiety associated with women’s place coincided with efforts on the part of a number of women’s organizations to enter the masculine space of the battlefront (Watson, 2004). As Schmitz (2000, p. 59) suggests, “nurses’ ambitions clashed awkwardly with deep-seated Victorian inhibitions about exposing feminine virtue to the brutalities of war”. With such cultural anxieties as the backdrop, the FANY aligned themselves with the military elite, cementing political capital through support of military and imperialist imperatives and accessing resources useful to the organization. For example, in their pre-war days, the FANY received cavalry drill from the Nineteenth Hussars, worked on first aid instruction, semaphore, and Morse signalling from the Royal Army
Medical Corps, and enjoyed contacts with the League of Imperial Frontiersmen. The Royal Horse Guards helped prepare the FANY equipment during their summer camps and the Brigade of Guards gave equestrian instruction (McDougall, n.d., p. 12–13). The FANY also embarked on negotiations with Sir Edward Carson and the Ulster Unionists in 1913, offering support for anticipated casualties in the fight over the Home Rule bill (“Secretary of the Medical Board”, 1914).

In this article I use the public and private writings of FANY members, friends and supporters. It is important to emphasize that in the interpretation of these writings, I assume not only that subjects re-narrate their lives and experiences in their telling of stories, but that there was motivation for self-interest both on the part of individuals and in the maintenance of a certain organizational image or legend. The FANY created their image in part by filtering out narratives that did not support the organizational legend of patriotism, respectability, trustworthiness, and competence. As a result, while it is important to keep in mind the inevitable process whereby stories that contradict this legend of camaraderie would be excluded or minimized and those that played it up would serve as anchors or punch lines for the collective history of the FANY (Thomson, 1994), whether these stories are “true” or absolutely representative of the everyday lives of FANY is less important than the fact that this was the collective identity the organization sought to build. In addition, I use sources written both during and after World War I and emphasize the different contexts in which these sources are located. Those written by the FANY and their supporters during the war hoped to encourage positive public awareness of the ongoing contributions of the organization and aid in fund raising; those published in the immediate years after the war are more plaintive in seeking to provide a record of service and in speaking in the context of post-war backlash against women’s gains. The memoirs written even later reflect both personal needs to record admirable service at the end of life, as well as loyalty to an organization struggling to maintain its identity and usefulness to the military establishment. In terms of work published during World War II, for example, stories of women’s service in previous wars had political purposes for women’s role in the military and helped encourage and underscore the necessity of their participation.

**The gendering of friendship and comradeship**

Male friendships in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were organized around idealized male fraternities in such institutions as the church, educational establishments, the military, government, and commerce (Adams, 1995). Founded upon a “long ancestry” of masculine bonding in pre-war Britain in the public schools, scouting groups, craft and professional organizations, and physical training clubs, male friendships embodied loyalty and chivalry and were often valorised in spiritual, transcendent forms “defying modern language” (Bourke, 1996, p. 138). Through the “games ethic” and athleticism generally, boys learned “the basic tools of imperial command: courage, endurance, assertion, control, and self-control” (Mangan, 1986, p. 18). In this way, young males gained “the confidence to lead and the compulsion to follow”: aspects of dominance and deference that were essential to comradeship among men. “Honour”, reflecting the classical masculine virtues of honesty, integrity, bravery and courage, encouraged group commitment to duty and service and was essential to the development of corporate loyalty and comradeship (Dawson, 1994; Lindeman, 1999). The First World War tested comradeship with new configurations of male community and a warfare that attacked the vulnerable male body in new ways (Bourke, 1996; 1999; McCracken, 2002). As a result, the rhetoric of male comradeship became one of the central organizing features of World War I: a “compensation” for these tragedies of male war, even while it masked important class divisions and the vulnerabilities of friendships forged problematically through the conditions of the battlefield (Watson, 2004, p. 266).

In her study of the organization of male intimacy, Cole (2003, p. 18) makes the distinction between male friendship and comradeship, arguing that while comradeship was “consistently hailed as the saving grace of a world in crisis”, faith in male friendships was undone by war: “the precariousness of personal friendship in the face of war’s annihilating power in fact made it the most vulnerable and dislocating of all relations”. This disruption (what Gilbert (1983, p. 443) calls the “disintegration of male love”), was shadowed by changing cultural conditions subverting the classical, utopian literary and social conventions organized around an idealized male fraternity, the troubling of potentially homoerotic masculine intimacy, and the depiction of the homosexual as an ontological identity with the criminalization of male homosexual acts in the late nineteenth century (Foucault, 1978; Nye, 1999). In addition, as Bourke (1996, p. 145) in her discussion of male bonding, emphasizes, “men expected (orig. emph.) the war to heighten male bonding, but that wartime expressions placed too great a strain on this expectation”. While war provided “an intimate environment for
love between men, it at the same time exposed the fragility of brotherhood” (Bourke, 1996, p. 147). She writes of the class antagonisms among men as well as divisions based upon race, ethnicity, religion, and marital status. These distinctions “were imported directly from the peacetime world directly into the trenches, cutting through vacuous notions of brotherhood” (Bourke, 1996, p. 147). As Cole emphasizes, it was “the cataclysm of war”, more than any other event, which “produced gigantic tears in the fabric of [male] friendship and generated a language to account for them” (Cole, 2003, p. 6). Rather than a source of communal strength, male intimacy emerged as a vehicle for isolation and bereavement: “the embittered voice that rises from the trenches is specifically rendered as the voice of the permanently scarred friend” (Cole, 2003, p. 18). Cole explains that the war “assaulted friendship” through the ongoing death of friends and by a bureaucracy that “ceaselessly and arbitrarily separated friends from one another” (Cole, 2003, p. 148).

In this way, a central aspect of the destruction of male intimacy during World War I was irreconcilability between the demands of personal relationships and a corporate group identity subsuming the individual. This irreconcilability resulted in the prioritization of group solidarity over interpersonal relationships destabilized by disconnection, distance, and self-protectiveness. In other words, the physical and emotional conditions of war shattered male intimacy at the very same time that such relationships were valorised as the saving grace of the war. As the social conditions of war elevated, although ultimately rendered vulnerable, male intimacy, “comradeship” or the notion of group solidarity was left relatively intact.

A focus on women’s friendships of this period suggests intimacy between women as a cultural mandate (Vicinus, 2004). Prior to the modern era, romantic friendships between women flourished and were not seen as destructive to marriage. As Kent (1999, p. 248) suggests, women avoided suspicion that their relationships might contain a sexual component since “dominant beliefs defined women as passionless”. Although this would change with heteronormative developments of the early twentieth century (the advent of consumer culture, Freudian psychology, a growing interest in companionate marriage, and the pathologization of “inversion” or lesbianism), the centrality of female friendships in women’s lives continued through the war period (Faderman, 1981, 1991). In comparison to men’s friendships contextualized in public arenas, women’s more corporeal friendships were more likely to be embedded in the gender-segregated daily routines of everyday life (Bourke, 1996). This is not, of course, to suggest that public arenas such as women’s educational establishments and paid and charitable work organizations, for example, were devoid of community; on the contrary, these arenas were especially known for the development of female friendships and social networks (Cook, 1977; Vickery, 2001; Vicinus, 1985). Rather, it is to emphasize that the sororal nature of these communities was contextualized in notions of gender deeply rooted in misogynous biological and medical theories of women’s innate proclivity for the emotional and domestic. These notions were set against men’s ability to transcend these concerns through analytic thought and public action (Rowbotham, 1997). In addition, it was expected that privileged women, in particular, were keepers of the “sentimental” (invocations of tenderness, gentility, and delicacy); they were supposed to be more influenced by sincere emotion than by reason, and motivated more by feeling and sympathy than by practical issues. These traits were assumed to prepare them for the domestic realm rather than the battlefield (Clark, 1991; Corbett, 1992).

When war was declared in 1914, middle-class women responded by serving the nation through the traditional extension of private responsibility into social work. As Watson (1997, p. 36) explains “[t]he outbreak of the war did not introduce new ideas of service for middle-class women; it merely shifted their focus”. Although as I argue here that many of these women subsequently did find new ideas of service in their comradeship, their initial participation in the war effort was grounded in relatively traditional ideals. As a result, it is no surprise that women’s experiences of service in these gender-segregated spaces were reproduced in their living and working conditions, creating what Sandra Gilbert (1983, p. 443, 444) has exuberantly called a “liberating sisterhood” delighting “in the reality of the workaday Herland”. Despite the many hardships involved with volunteering, as Watson (2004, p. 145) explains: “[t]hey were serving and interacting with soldiers, they were living in interesting locations away from home, and even the church groups did not provide anything close to the supervision that was commonplace for a ‘daughter at home’. These were new opportunities indeed”. Still, like friendships among men, women’s wartime service relationships were also “complicated” by the politics of class and national identity (Braybon & Summerfield, 1987, p. 74–8). This was especially true of the social and economic chasm between privileged volunteers and working class professional nurses who “viewed these wartime do-gooders with suspicion” (Knight, 1989, p. xiv) and created what Watson has
referred to as “the war in the wards” (Watson, 2002, p. 498; 2004, p. 94). As these quotes suggest, antagonisms were more likely between members of different types of organizations, and friendships more prevalent within more homogeneous organizations like the FANY or the VAD.

Despite these potential divisions, the war did not assault female friendships as it did male ones, but tended to foster them. For indeed, although both women and men participated in this war, they did not share the same experiences of it. Men were the ones who experienced the inhumanity of war through conscription and the direct brutalities of combat; as auxiliaries women were more sheltered from their own and their friends’ injuries and death, and were less likely to serve at the mercy of the bureaucracy of the war machine. Although as I argue, women faced hardships and claimed danger alongside male combatants, still overwhelmingly, it was men who suffered combat conditions in the trenches and elsewhere. As a result, women’s service conditions encouraged the making rather than the loss of friends. VAD Thurstan (1915, p. 174), for example, exclaimed about the “joys of companionship” with other women discovered in her life and service. Both Ouditt and Watson quote from VAD Dorothy McCann’s memoir about friendship and female bonding: McCann remembered the “jolly atmosphere in the mess for we were all in the same boat” (Ouditt, 1994, p. 32) and the fact that she “wouldn’t have swapped [sic] those years for the gayest in the world” (Watson, 2004, p. 268). Watson also shares WAAC member Rose Isabella (Betty) Learé’s stories of shared laughter and comments that “laughter, in fact, was her most powerful memory” (Watson, 2004, p. 269). In addition, Crofton (1997, p. 45) writes of the friendships among the women of the Scottish Women’s Hospital, described by one member as “perfect paradise”, and there is an extensive literature discussing home front friendships among women in industry (Braybon, 1981; Braybon & Summerfield, 1987; Thom, 1998). Angela Woollacott (1994) also writes about the development of camaraderie among munitions workers exposed to the physical dangers of chemical poisoning and factory explosions.

Although women were expected to excel in interpersonal relationships, it was assumed that their “vanity” prevented loyalty and their “nature” rendered them incapable of “getting along” in the corporate sense in an organization that required analytical thought, discipline, stamina, and honour: the conduit for comradeship (Rowbotham, 1997). The subtext here was the separation between “public” masculine battlefront and “private” feminine home front. Women’s participation in the battlefront challenged expectations and precipitated gender anxieties, upsetting the notion that men were fighting a war for the protection of women at home (Higonnet, 1987; Melman, 1998). Central in this masculine imperative was the notion that men had a moral commitment to defend society and its core values. As a result, the battlefield, and the theatre of war generally, were inscribed as masculine spaces (Bourke, 1999; Gilmore, 1990; Mangan, 2000).

Women who took on masculine roles and trespassed into masculine space were considered “unrestrained”, disorderly, and dangerously violating norms about sexual morality (Kent, 1999; Watson, 1997). In addition, to claim a parallel experience with the combatant during the war was to undermine the suffering of men, just as women who donned military uniform were seen as mocking the sacrifice of the soldiers (Gould, 1987; Grayzel, 1999; Robert, 1997). The feminine appropriation of comradeship was also complicated by the relationship between military service and access to political rights (for participation in defending the nation was a prerequisite for suffrage), when in the face of male sacrifice, there still was no universal suffrage for men (Grayzel, 1999; Gullace, 2002). This discourse of women benefiting from the suffering of men encouraged the association of selfishness with female military participation and clouded demands for political rights. Indeed, Katharine Furse, Commandant of the VAD, was said to have felt remorse over her personal and organizational success and responded to her military decorations with the comment: “there was always a queer haunting feeling in my heart that we as women were profiting by the sacrifice of men” (Summers, 1988, p. 287).

Not surprising given these cultural anxieties associated with shifting representations of gender and the dangers associated with militarized identities for women, scholars have noted the relative absence of discussion about group commitment to shared duty or comradeship in women’s wartime battlefront writings of the First World War (Darrow, 2000; Tylee, 1990). However, as Watson (2004, p. 269) notes, women’s accounts written after the war (when such discourse was somewhat safer) do portray “powerful and deep comradeship among those who lived through the war together”: a shared fellowship that was “more clearly articulated in women’s retrospective narratives after it had played a prominent role in the soldier’s story” (Watson, 2004, p. 271). As evidence, Watson quotes from the memoirs of several WAAC members, citing Louise Downer’s memory of “the bond she felt with her comrades”, and Olive Taylor’s discussion of the “Espri [sic] de Corps
and loyalty of the girls [that] I shall always treasure” (Watson, 2004, p. 270). Margaret Darrow (2000, p. 161) is generally less optimistic about finding narratives of comradship either during or after the war and underscores the deference shown by French auxiliaries to the soldier’s story. She describes women who “suppressed the sisterhood of nursing in order to insist that they were fighting the same war as the soldiers, the masculine war, the trench-fighters’ war”. Darrow asserts that these women were never able to portray themselves as a feminine collectivity or access a separate feminine claim to corporate solidarity.

The following sections explore these concepts of friendship and comradship. First I illustrate how FANY friendships were facilitated by close living accommodations and the shared aspects of their everyday material lives, as well as by the opportunities the FANY took to having fun and creating sources of entertainment for themselves and the troops. The next section contextualizes this sisterhood in the FANY’s struggle over independence and autonomy with war bureaucracies. It argues that the organizational autonomy of the FANY helped sustain emotional connections and facilitated the development of comradship through group loyalty and disciplined service. The final section focuses on military heroism as an expression of FANY comradship.

**FANY fun and friendships: “merry-making in the midst of war”**

Fun and friendship were central aspects of FANY “sisterhood” among women of similar age, economic means, and nationality (Condell & Liddiard, 1987, p. 29). Such class-based homogeneity helped develop the legend or collective identity of the FANY: an identity that emphasized good humour and sociability. FANY Commandant Grace McDougall wrote about this in her memoir, dedicating it to those FANY who served with such “cheerfulness and courage” (McDougall, n.d., dedication). “The girls”, she wrote, worked and lived together with “a happy spirit of friendship and affection”, adding that “a visit to our mess was a glimpse of happy home life that warmed [all] hearts” (p. xxxv–xxxvi). Although McDougall could invoke the intimacies of feminine domesticity expected of women, she also understood the simultaneous assumption that women were competitive and divisive, gossiping and fighting over trite and petty domestic issues. She reported that French Army doctors were very surprised by the “good fellowship” among FANY volunteers and compared them to French nurses who “quarrelled all the time”. One doctor, explained McDougall (n.d., p. xxxv–xxxvi) “actually got his colleagues to come to the doorway on various pretext to watch the miracle!” At the end of the war, Co-Commandant Franklin (1918, p. 2) summed up the primacy of friendship in the FANY legend: “although all are thankful that this terrible war is over, yet there is a feeling of sadness when one realises how many great friendships will be broken up”.

In October 1914 after British authorities had refused their offer of service, the first FANY unit deployed during the war was established in Calais in October 1914 with the Belgian Army. Here the FANY ran the Lamarck Hospital, providing ambulance transport between the trains and barges coming from the Front and the area hospitals and boats leaving for England. They also tended civilian casualties and drove Army personnel (“Facts and dates in Corps history”, p. 3). This first unit was especially known for its good fellowship, in part because at the unit’s conception most of the FANY lived, ate and slept together in the storefront of a shop named *Le Bon Génie*, complete with brown paper over the windows for privacy. Others boarded above a nightclub named *Le Bijoux*, enjoying the sultry evening sounds. “What ripping tunes they had!” exclaimed FANY volunteer Pat Waddell (Beauchamp, 1919, p. 18). These places became quite a gathering place for the FANY to meet and socialize after work, as well as a place to sleep. The room on the top floor of the hospital where on-call FANY would sleep also became a special place for the women to congregate and enjoy the camaraderie of colleagues. “It was in this room”, recalled Waddell, “a big untidy, but an oh so jolly, sitting room”, that the FANY gathered at 10 o’clock every morning “for twenty precious minutes during which we had tea and biscuits, read our letters, swanked to other wards about the bad cases we had got in, and generally talked shop and gossiped” (Beauchamp, 1919, p. 13).

As FANY ambulance transport units were developed to work with the British, Belgians, and French between 1916 and 1918, as well as after the Armistice through 1920 in work with various Civil Relief schemes in Europe, many more FANY came to France. Despite the increased numbers, or perhaps because of it, the women continued their knack for turning tents or clapboard sheds into temporary homes. As French doctors were said to have remarked after watching one such transformation, “women were like fairies, they brought home with them” (McDougall, n.d., p. 140). Writing about “our little outpost at Marquise”, for example, FANY Molly Marshall (1920, p. 9) described it as “one of the most ‘happy family’ units in France... We have got a perfect little ‘Wendy House’ for a hut. It is built of corrugated iron and lined with sacking... We have a very
nice balloon fabric partition shutting off the mess room [that is] very comfortably furnished. In one corner by the mantelpiece we have what is known as the ‘divan’ — a corner seat made of petrol boxes and cushions on the top; then we have a wonderful low sofa known as the ‘settee’, which is only about a foot off the ground and very deep, and which holds four with a ‘squash’”. While scenarios of male camaraderie are often set apart from the imagined world of domestic femininity (Dawson, 1994, p. 62–4), the FANY used the tradition of domesticity to build a legend of collective class-based feminine community. This community sometimes included women volunteers from other organizations like the VAD whose members shared similar backgrounds. Several FANY working for the British Army at St Omer wrote about their friendships with the contingent of VAD attached to them (Hutchinson n.d., “My FANY Life”, p. 28; Beauchamp, 1940, p. 84–5; Thompson, 1 April, 23–25 April, 1918). FANY members worked to change regulations preventing the VAD from attending their dances and enjoying riding privileges with the French cavalry. They “miss[ed] them all dreadfully” after the Armistice broke up the relationship between the FANY and the VAD (Hutchinson, “FANY Unit VIII”, 1920, p. 7).

Like the FANY at Lamarck, accommodations in other units became sources of entertainment as fundraisers, teas, dinners, and dances were organized (Franklin, April 1916, p. 6; Lowson, 1917, p. 5–6; McDougall, 1918, p. 5). Music performed by FANY members (many of whom were very accomplished), or from the gramophone, always accompanied these events. “Small parties gather in cubicles and drink café-du-lait, or better still real café. One of the most popular of these private estaminets is situated next to the office and here, in addition to all else, is a lovely gramophone and many a begrimed and begreased Fanny may be seen drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette” (Lean, 1916, p. 7).

FANY Muriel Thompson also discussed the more informal “hops” or dances in her diary, and recalled the poignancy of dancing with officers whose fates were so uncertain. The FANY usually had male officers at their dances, although also danced with each other in their mess huts. Thompson (28 January, 1918) wrote that everyone was crazy to dance and relieve the tensions of war. She explained that laughter was the antidote to despair and helped them keep going in the face of tragedy. On dining out with other FANY at a new hotel, Thompson (19 January, 1918) wrote that it was “a wonderful place but the service was vile; we laughed all the time — the lights kept going out and we scrambled through with the aid of matches stuck in bits of bread”. Commandant McDougall (n.d., p. 249) encouraged this “merry-making in the midst of war”, even though she was criticized (especially by the French) for her support. As she explained: “the girls were hard workers and keen as nails on their jobs, and dancing freshened them up”. While visiting troops “up the line”, McDougall (n.d., p. 70) also commented directly on this poignancy of laughter as an antidote for despair: “We had champagne and sing-song, and a badly wounded man was carried in; we fixed him up, and another arrived; then we resumed the sing-song. It sounds heartless, but it’s war, everyone good-humoured and trying to be happy, and the tragic moments come and go”. From the FANY perspective, gloom and heavy casualties should not prevent them organizing parties and celebrating holidays; instead, depressed times underscored the need for celebrations for boosting morale and building community.

The FANY created a semblance of “Society”: familiar with entertaining and being entertained, they asserted their class position through a focus on such pleasures. A photographer for the Imperial War Museum described them as “a very jolly type of good-class English girl” (Edis in Watson, 2004, p. 116), and Ward (1955, p. 45) corroborated this with her description of the FANY as a “happy, high-spirited, friendly team”, adding that their ability to be “good mixers” made them “stand out”. These comments refer, of course, to their “good breeding” that taught social skills and “appropriate” public behaviours. As a result, the FANY were often in demand by British authorities to play hostess to visiting VIP guests (Hutchinson, “Work with the British”, n.d. p. 16).

This class privilege also protected them in part from accusation of sexual immorality associated with militarized women, and sent the message that they would not become romantically involved with the common soldier (Grayzel, 1999). However, at the same time that the FANY were keen to avoid these kinds of accusations, as women in uniform with skills in such masculine pursuits as driving and mechanics, they were also at risk of being seen as “mannelish lesbians”. Despite the fact that they were sometimes mistaken for men by people unused to seeing women in these roles, FANY members were usually amused by such errors since it reflected their competence in masculine areas of work and service (Beauchamp, 1919, p. 16, 124; McDougall, 1917, p. 73, 75). On the issue of lesbianism, however, although accounts do suggest at least one long term lesbian couple, the FANY was keen to avoid such identification with “the mannish invert” (Vicinus, 2004, p. 202). As a result of the high need for respectability in terms of organizational legend, the record is silent on this issue in
all reports (Lee, 2005, p. 213; Popham, 1984, p. 117; Ward, 1955, p. 97). This desire not to be associated with lesbianism may have encouraged their reputation for heterosociability; Watson (2004, p. 114) calls them “fast” and Condell and Liddiard (1987, p. 49), “dashing”. Some FANY drivers, for example, wore fur coats over their uniforms during the winter: a gesture that added to their elite and somewhat glamorous reputation. As FANY Hutchinson (“Suggestions”, 1920, p. 11) explained, the FANY had proved “gentlewomen could do productive work” while still being seen as fun loving and without being characterized as “a convent school”.

Central to the FANY experience of fun and fellowship was the fact that like so many other women auxiliaries of the First World War, most FANY seemed to find their service personally empowering in that it allowed them to potentially avoid the constraints of traditional femininity (Gilbert, 1983; Ouditt, 1994). This is evident in the following quote by McDougall, explaining her sense of freedom and empowerment brought about by war:

> Up here alone, far from civilization … here we were, girls of the twentieth century in this atmosphere of storm and war living what surely few women ever dreamt in their wildest fancies until this war began. This was life! My ears tingle; I breathed in long, deep breaths. Had I spoken, a sort of wild war song would have come from my lips … I wanted to run for miles – to race, to climb – action at all costs (McDougall, 1917, p. 132).

Finally, the FANY created structured entertainment in the form of open-air concerts and performances for the troops and hospital inmates that helped build the FANY legend of spontaneity, audacity, and camaraderie. It began at Lamarck when concerts were first held in the hospital yard; as the FANY reputation grew they were invited to perform at the YMCA concerts for troops on the way to and from the Front. The women recited, sang, and played various musical instruments; rehearsals and performances were very impromptu since they would be on duty in the wards or driving ambulances up to the very last minute (Beauchamp, 1940, p. 86–8). Later FANY convoys were more organized and created performing troupes that went by such names as the “Fantastiks” and the “Kippers”. They wore black and yellow-orange pirouette costumes decorated with bobbles, and staged acts that often included parodies of popular songs of the time (sometimes songs that had just days earlier been performed by Lena Ashwell) with new words substituted (Beauchamp, 1919, p. 214–15; Hutchinson, 1918, p. 4).

**Autonomy and independence: “red tape never cut any ice with me”**

I make the case here that the routines associated with FANY members’ participation in war were not destructive of female friendships as they were for male combatants. This is in part because these service units did not contain the heterogeneity of class, race, or national origin experienced by many male combatants, and their members did not face the constant serious injury, death, and dismemberment of their friends. In addition, friendships among the FANY were sustained by a stability of service whereby members stayed with their specific units unless the whole unit itself was transferred, or unless a volunteer requested a transfer. This stability was founded on the FANY organization’s autonomy over the conditions of its service and the control of future decision-making. This can be compared to a bureaucracy that treated male friendships “with contempt” and which “ceaselessly and arbitrarily separated [male] friends from one another” (Cole, 2003, p. 148). Cole writes that not only were men separated by death and injury, but that the “inscrutable directives of the war operation regularly and senselessly scattered men apart, even as it thrust them together. Indeed, a sentiment of anger against the war machine for its useless dispersal of friends permeates war texts of all sorts, contributing to a sustained bitterness against authority” (Cole, 2003, p. 149).

Although the FANY were fortunate in their formal independence from the war authorities, it was hardly won and came after ongoing and sometimes bitter struggle with the male military establishment. British authorities, anxious to keep women out of militarized roles, rejected the FANY offer of service at the beginning of the war and only accepted it in 1916 after lengthy negotiations. During these negotiations, the FANY insisted upon maintaining their independent status and refused to be merged with the VAD or any other organization. They ended their proposal for offer of service with the following warning that if the British would not accept these terms, the FANY would instead work with the Belgians or the French: “[The FANY] would like the assurance of the War Office that their services cannot be utilized by British wounded or British authorities before offering their personnel elsewhere” (“Organizing Officer”, 1915, p. 4). A compromise of sorts concerning FANY independence was worked out with the Joint War Committee of the British Red Cross (BRCS) and the Order of St John of Jerusalem (the male ambulance drivers’ organization). The FANY was to be employed or commissioned by the BRCS and would provide drivers; the BRCS would...
furnish ambulances and supplies. The FANY would keep its name and uniform, and members would receive the same privileges as other BRCS members (McDougall, n.d., p. 110; Popham, 1984, p. 26). Indeed, even after the contract was negotiated with the BRCS and plans for the new convoy underway, the FANY had to work to avoid having a male BRCS officer stationed with them to oversee and act as go-between with the British Army (Franklin, September 1916, p. 5).

In 1917 when the FANY was negotiating a new convoy for the Belgians that would provide ambulance transport for their wounded, the British authorities were anxious about British subjects working outside their auspices, and, in particular, bothered by an independent organization able to negotiate on its own behalf with the Allies, the Anglo-French Hospital Committee, and the BRCS (Popham, 1984, p. 33). The latter was also concerned enough to create a new ruling that any new units for any army in the British area of Calais had to be sanctioned by the British Adjutant-General (McDougall, “November gazette”, 1917, p. 3). McDougall (n.d., p. 203) avoided this ruling against FANY autonomy by negotiating directly with the Governor of Calais and overruling authorities. Despite her ongoing struggles with the British, McDougall also had to stand up to the Belgians. On one occasion, after a month when the FANY worked almost constantly under fire, McDougall received a note marked “seen and approved” from the Belgian Base-Commandant forbidding their dangerous night service. McDougall was so angry that authorities would attempt to legislate the conditions of FANY service that she returned the note with “seen and not approved” scrawled across the top. The Belgians backed down (p. 177). Finally, McDougall’s personal demonstration of independence as Commandant of the FANY is illustrated in the following two incidents. On one occasion, after McDougall had been told that she could not travel by troop train because she was a woman, she ignored the command and replied that she “wasn’t a woman but a FANY!”; on another occasion she defied the rule barring women from troop ships and pretended to command a company of Belgian soldiers returning to Calais (McDougall, n.d., p. 105, 121–2). As she was said to remark in “a notable mixed metaphor”: “Red tape never cut any ice with me” (Popham, 1984, p. 26).

FANY success in these struggles over authority helped establish their independence and gave them relative control over the conditions of their work and service. It is important to note that it was the patriotic legend of the FANY and the fact that they did identify with military elites that allowed them autonomy and relative independence from those same elites. That they had the best interests of the military establishment at heart was never disputed and allowed the FANY latitude in their work and organizational development. Writing several years after the Armistice, FANY Co-Commandant Franklin (1920, p. 6) commented on the interactive relationship between freedom from the “rules” of the war bureaucracy and the development of camaraderie: “The Fannies have, I think proved that esprit de corps is a much finer thing than to surround the average British girls with all sorts of rules; once establish the former and they will play the game all through”. The next section focuses on group solidarity and the development of FANY comradeship, discussing its grounding in the feminine appropriation of military heroism and its expression in acts of physical courage.

Comradeship: “kneeling in the mud with hell raging all around”

The FANY became known for their group loyalty and established a legend of sisterhood “borrowed from their brothers serving as officers in the Army” that rivalled the fraternity of the soldiers (Condell and Liddiard, 1987, p. 49). However, as already discussed, comradeship or corporate solidarity was not something expected of women and their organizations. Indeed, female comradeship was assumed to be stymied by women’s lack of amenability to discipline and by their inability to get along with each other. The former issue was explicitly addressed by the FANY in a report to the British authorities, rebutting their notions about the unsuitability of women in ambulance transport during negotiations for the convoy working for the British in Calais. Their organization was a “disciplined body”, [my emph.] the FANY explained, “accustomed to obedience and military life. For five years previous to the outbreak of war the FANY have been trained under military supervision following the lines of the Royal Army Medical Corps training” (“Organizing Officer”, 1915, p. 3). In terms of women’s supposed inability to get along with each other, it took several years of FANY service before an article appeared in Vogue telling of their work “up to their knees in blood, amputating, tying up, bandaging, without rest or relief”, that had “killed the irritating masculine ‘gag’ that women cannot work together”. It is now “generally accepted”, explained the author, that “not only can women work with men, but they can work together with remarkable harmony” to perform “important collective service for the Empire” (Jesse, 1916, p. 55).

Among FANY colleagues the term “comrade” was used liberally, as evidenced by the founding of an “Old
Comrades’ Association” after the war was over. McDouggall (n.d., p. xxv) invoked this sense of comradeship in shared duty in her many discussions of the loyalty of the women with whom she served, dedicating her memoir to her “compares”. “[This] comradeship was wonderful”, was one such quote. FANY Walton (1916, p. 1) wrote about her time working with the FANY at Lamarck Hospital: “I look back with much pleasure to those happy months which I spent at dear old Lamarck and many times I have had nostalgie au front and have longed to be back with my old comrades who are working so bravely at Calais”. Writers in the FANY Gazette were also especially quick to invoke comradeship in describing FANY service. FANY Joynson (1916, p. 3), for example, declared her “great admiration for the pluck of the little heroic band of comrades” working around the clock transporting the wounded during a time of heavy casualties in Calais. When Pat Waddell lost her leg in a railway accident, she was described as “our brave little comrade” (O’Neill-Power, 1917, p. 6), and similarly, when FANY Eveline Shaw died of dysentery in 1918, her colleagues evoked the “sad death of our comrade of the French units” (O’Neill-Power, 1918, p. 4).

Central in all these assertions of comradeship was the presence of shared duty and disciplined work. As FANY Wicks (1916, p. 5) explained: “The basis of esprit de corps is mutual respect and admiration and the way to attain this is hard work and strict discipline”. In this quote Wicks emphasizes how comradeship was facilitated through group loyalty for shared commitment to the work at hand: shared service that put the FANY into the midst of one of the most brutal wars of recent history. They often drove under fire and not only witnessed, but also participated in, the tragedies of warfare of the modern era. Through their navigation of the terrors of this war, the FANY made the case for their place as militarized women in this most masculine of spaces, and proved the indispensability and competence of women at the Front.

In the “Afterword” to Not So Quiet on the Western Front, Marcus (1989, p. 244–45) likens the volunteer women ambulance drivers of the First World War to Wagnerian Valkyries who guarded the borders between life and death as they transported the slain and the dying. With their ambulances like the mythical horses of the Valkyries, the drivers, writes Marcus, “had to be superhuman, driving for weeks on three hours of sleep a night, eating spoiled food, and very little of that (no decent Army rations for volunteers). They became experts at the geography of hell, driving at night with their lights off in the freezing cold and snow… with their loads of screaming and moaning wounded”. FANY accounts both during and after the war corroborate this experience, described at one point by McDouggall (1917, p. 55) as an “awful hell of agony”. Official accounts in the FANY Gazette were heavily censored and details tended to include numbers of cases carried and exclamations of FANY “pluck” and “courage”; private accounts recorded some of the horrors. Writing in her diary, Muriel Thompson, for example, described “a dreadful day … news is very bad” and went on to share the hell of standing in the icy cold and wind waiting for the trains to bring the casualties from the Front and witnessing ambulances loaded with dead, “dripping with blood, one with no foot, and one with the bone of his leg sticking out in three places” (Thompson, 12, 13 April, 1918). In addition, published, retrospective accounts testify to the challenges of FANY service over and again. Beryl Hutchinson (1972, p. 26) wrote about how the FANY “made many horrible journeys with living and dying amid a haunting smell of burnt flesh”, and Pat Waddell (Beauchamp, 1919, p. 57), for example, remembered a particularly bad zeppelin raid on Calais in March 1915 when they were called to assist with casualties and faced death and destruction. The wounded were “more or less mutilated; and heads, hands, and feet were torn off”. On another occasion she described the awful strain associated with driving (captured by the FANY in the term “stretcher face”), and shared poignant conversations with wounded men about their insufferable conditions and chilling experiences. One evening she recalled transporting a dying young soldier who was crying in agony for his mother: “somebody’s son and only nineteen” (Beauchamp, 1919, p. 190). Although these stories demonstrate individual grief and despondency, and occasionally pessimism about the war, the official organizational legend is one of unwavering support for the war effort (Popham, 1984; Ward, 1955).

Injury from shrapnel was a constant fear for the FANY, piercing their ambulances and blowing holes in their huts. The roads were shell-pocked and often icy, the vehicles difficult to start and had to be hand-cranked, and the absence of headlights and glass in the windscreens as precautions against attracting enemy made driving very perilous (Beauchamp, 1919, p. 191). Much of their work was done under fire: “we always have a hail storm of shrapnel all over the hut and garage, as the guns are all round us”, explained FANY Allen (1918, p. 4), adding sardonically that “a miss is as good as a mile” and “so the work goes on”. “The wounded”, she wrote, “are simply pouring in, in all sorts of conveyances. Hundreds waiting to be received, situation appalling, not enough staff to
deal with them ... wounded lying all over the ground, nothing being able to be done for them until we kept going around and finding the worst cases and trying to get someone to attend to them. It was simply ghastly ... Several men were absolutely dying unattended — too late to do anything for them ... There were so many ambulances wanting to be unloaded — sometimes fifty at a time” [orig. ellipses] (Allen, 1917, p. 5–6). FANY drivers had no definite hours of duty; they just worked for as long as they could possibly stand and then took brief periods of rest and started all over again. During May 1918, seventeen thousand “cases” were dealt with in five days (“Copy of the FANY Corps”, 1918, p. 9). The hardships of this period were also intensified by the influenza epidemic raging through the troops as well as through the ranks of the FANY, and an increase in casualties that kept those FANY still standing working around the clock (Puckle, 5 October, 1918). This service coincided with a particularly ghastly attack when German bombs struck a cinema being used as a hospital. The FANY transported the wounded to the hospitals and dead to the mortuaries, although not before they found the place in total darkness, with screaming and groaning 

Several men were absolutely dying unattended — no one could be more patient, considerate and gentle than the FANY, but if the car be empty they drive like bats out of hell” (Lean, 1916, p. 8). Just as the combatants relied on their “mates” for their survival (as Lindeman (1999, p. 265) explains, the presence of comrades improved the odds that they would survive the war), so the FANY also understood that good comradeship was key to their success and ultimately their survival too. McDougall shared stories of how her fellow officers followed her under fire into a bombed building to deliver her helmet and how they would put themselves at risk to protect a fellow FANY. On one occasion, for example, McDougall and her fellow “comrade” Doris Russell Allen were delivering stores in a region close to the Front that was decimated by fighting. As darkness approached, they lost their way, and, since headlights were forbidden, they were able to stay alive by taking it in turns to hold a flashlight in front of the car. When they found themselves on the edge of a dangerously deep drain with a burst tyre, brave “comrade Russell Allen” risked her life “kneeling in the mud with hell raging all around” to change the tyre and get them both back to camp (McDougall, n.d., p. 152).

Alongside comradeship between FANY members was comradeship invoked between FANY and male combatants, important in claiming legitimacy as militarized personnel in this masculine space. In his article on the nurses of the Anglo-Boer War, Schmitz (2000, p. 61) describes similar claims: “as products of an age in which gender roles were being redefined, if rather slowly, they also wanted to be soldiers”. Indeed, the FANY liked to think of themselves as soldats, suggested in the following quote by Waddell who remembered French inhabitants showing surprise that English mademoiselles drove under fire during air raids, calling them les petites soldats and excoriating how Le Bon Dieu protégé les FANY (God protects the FANY) (Beauchamp, 1940, p. 127). The FANY working with the Belgian Army, in particular, proudly wore insignia denoting their status as affiliated “soldats of the Corps de Transport de Calais (Belge)” (Ward, 1955, p. 56). Commandant McDougall also made such claims, referring to herself in relation to the trench fighter as “their little sister in khaki” and writing how the soldiers “turn[ed] to salute the Englishwoman in khaki in their midst” (McDougall, 1917, p. 9). Indeed McDougall’s 1917 book, A Nurse at the War, was included in a series called “Soldiers’ Tales” organized by the publisher. Such an inclusion confirmed her collegiality with male soldiers and her legitimate role in this masculine space.

Beryl Hutchinson (“Work with the British in the St Omer Convoy”, unpublished p. 33–4) commented on FANY comradeship and broadened its location beyond FANY colleagues to all those who served during the war. She wrote that the most important aspect of her service was “the pure comradeship” between “every man and woman, senior General, to FANY Bugler, to aged and wobbly Base Detail stretcher bearer”. These were the comrades “with whom one shared the conditions, the life of dedication”, explained Hutchinson: “We may have been naïve, lived with illusion; we did not say the actual words, but we all had the feeling that we really were keeping the world fit to live in, that our many sacrifices had been worthwhile”. This comment, reporting a sense of shared commitment and sacrifice buoyed by patriotism, illustrates the way Hutchinson inserts the FANY into the masculine space of the war zone, making the case for a “women’s war” alongside the male combatant.

In this article I have argued that rather than providing “gigantic tears” in the fabric of friendship as has been suggested for the male experience, the physical and emotional conditions of FANY experience and their organizational autonomy and relative independence from war bureaucracy instead sustained and provided the foundation for female comradeship. Referring to a statue in Calais called ‘The Brave Boys of Calais’, McDougall (n.d., p. 263) once suggested half-jokingly...
that “if ever a millionaire has money to chuck about he could do worse than put up a statue in Calais, with a FANY in khaki on top and a motor ambulance in bas-relief, and engrave it with these names, as the khaki girls of Calais!” Although these “khaki girls” did not receive their statue, overshadowed instead by the masculine story of the war, still they maintained their independence and developed strong friendships, corporate solidarity, and a legend of comradeship. Against traditional notions of gendered service that in Darrow’s words saw women as “acolyte to the soldier’s heroism” [Darrow, 2000, p. 161], the FANY saw themselves fighting a parallel war to the combatants. By claiming the narrative authority of working alongside male combatants, the FANY developed feminine stories of the war in part through acts of physical courage that appropriated masculine military heroism in this most masculine space of battlefront. In this sense they created a feminine group identity or sisterhood that rivaled the fraternity of soldiers and helped develop women’s collective war experience.

The FANY claim to personal heroism in the military context suggests possibilities for gender transformation and provides an inadvertent feminist message. Even though the FANY did not connect organizational ambition with social and political struggles for women’s advancement and their alignment with military elites supported imperialist imperatives, still they provided a model of female autonomy and heroism. Such behaviour also makes the case for women’s collective citizenship through their participation and potential sacrifice in war. The FANY showed not only the ways women could enter and work productively in the war zone but also the necessity of such service for the war effort. Ultimately even though their intentions were patriotic and intended to support British imperialism and military prowess, they were part of a call for women’s full citizenship in British society.

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