When the U.S. declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, Hamline University, a Methodist-related liberal arts college in St. Paul, had an enrollment of only 400 students, but its response to the war effort belied its modest size. Among other things, it formed an ambulance company that was eventually decorated by the French government for distinguished service on the Western Front. “We are in a great fight and our united effort is what counts. I made the greatest decision of my life when I decided to join the service. I am mighty proud to be here.” Hamline sophomore Harold Curtis of St. James penned those words to his family from “Somewhere in France” on April 9, 1918. He had been in the country for only a week, but his journey had actually begun in late March 1917 when Europe’s Great War was the topic in the campus chapel. War had been raging since August 1914 when Germany invaded France. President Woodrow Wilson declared American neutrality, but ongoing German provocations had finally become intolerable. U.S. entry into the conflict appeared imminent. Gregory Walcott, a philosophy professor who had spent the previous summer at a reserve officers’ training camp in Plattsburgh, New York, stood up and called for volunteers to inaugurate military training at Hamline. Thus it began for Curtis, who showed up that afternoon with a hundred others to begin drilling in the gymnasium.¹
When America officially entered the war two weeks later, any lingering sentiment on campus for neutrality disappeared from view. A dozen students promptly enlisted. About 30 signed up for a place in the Officers’ Training Camp at Fort Snelling. Sixteen students from farms were allowed to return home to speed food production, receiving the grade earned to date. Track and baseball schedules were cancelled because enlistments depleted the teams. Women, aided by the Red Cross, organized classes on first aid and nursing. Hamline’s president, Samuel F. Kerfoot, reported at the end of the school year that nearly half the men at Hamline had enlisted in some form of military service, as did ten percent of the faculty. “Never have we been more united to accept large responsibility and sacrifice with unselfish devotion,” he declared.²

Patriotic zeal swept the country in the spring of 1917. Colleges everywhere saw similar activity, but Hamline added something unique to Minnesota: an ambulance company.³

The unit’s creation seems as improbable as it was speedy. Louis Herrick, professor of Romance languages, was Hamline’s adjutant for the Intercollegiate Intelligence Bureau, a nationwide higher-education initiative organized to match skilled alumni, students, and faculty with positions in military and government service. Each cooperating institution was to submit a report, and Herrick appears to have been the first in Minnesota to do so. On May 10 he was notified by the War Department that Hamline could sponsor an army ambulance unit for immediate service in France. The following day he announced the news at chapel. The men for this service, Herrick said, “must have character, decision, pluck, intelligence and long experience on rough roads.” Scanning the room, he asked if there were any volunteers and nearly every man stood up. Eighty names were taken, and half an hour later Herrick boldly telegraphed Washington: “Hamline Unit Complete and Ready for Service.”⁴

Ready or not, the timing was perfect: the army wanted, quickly, to constitute its newly created United States Army Ambulance Service (USAAS). The final list of 40 men included star athletes and student leaders. Curtis was among them. The volunteers were given army physicals, and only two were rejected: one for myopia and one for low weight. The rest were sworn in and ordered to stand by. In the meantime, a group of Hamline women made a large silk banner and presented it to the unit.

On Saturday evening, June 16, 1917, President Kerfoot hosted an emotional farewell banquet at the St. Paul Athletic Club. As the evening wound down, the president rose to bid God-speed. According to Herrick, Kerfoot charged the men, in a choking voice, “to uphold the best traditions of the college and of true Christian gentlemen. ‘We hope to have you all back with us again, but . . . if any of your souls . . . should go to heaven from France . . . ’ Unable to continue, he sank into his chair and the dinner was over.” The men formed ranks and, led by Warren S. Gammell as first sergeant, joined a spirited Red Cross Drive parade already in progress downtown, making their way to the train station. There, amid cheers and tears, they boarded a special coach and departed into the night. The Hamline ambulance unit was the first military organization to leave the state. Officers from Fort Snelling came to see them off.⁵

Their destination was Allentown, Pennsylvania, where the Lehigh County fairgrounds had been hastily converted into a makeshift training center for the USAAS. It was named Camp Crane after a former U.S. surgeon general. Troops from everywhere were flooding in. About 40 colleges and universities—all of them larger and better known than Hamline—sponsored one or more ambulance sections in the USAAS. When Hamline’s contingent arrived on June 23, the men were issued canvas cots and marched off to their billet, a long, one-story sheep barn that had been sanitized and repainted. The Minnesotans shared their barn with units from Iowa State, Cornell, and the Universities of Washington and California. The Hamline group was designated as S.S.U. 68, later changed to 568. S.S.U. stood for Sanitary Squad Unit, but in everyday language it was an Ambulance Service Section, or simply Section 568.⁶

By midsummer, 3,300 ambulance men were in training at Camp Crane. They learned to march and drill, peel potatoes, dig trenches, eat “tinned Willy” (canned corn beef), and pitch a pup tent. They had stretcher drills and constant inspections and were taught first aid, map reading, flag semaphore, and how to drive and repair a Ford Model-T ambulance, including disassembly and reassembly. Because ambulance men were unarmed, they were not trained to fire weapons. Treks into the countryside to build fitness and endurance were frequent. One day in August, during a ten-day march and bivouac with full packs,}

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they hiked more than 17 miles through rain and mud in four hours. “All the way was uphill or down,” bragged Wayne McDaniel to a friend back at Hamline. “It was a common sight to see [drop-outs] lying on the bank by the side of the road, waiting for the ambulance in the rear . . . [but] our boys stayed with it all the way.”

They worked hard and they played hard. Sports took center stage on weekends. Not surprisingly, intercollege rivalry was intense and, for a small college, Hamline was remarkably conspicuous. In a big track meet on July 4, 1917, Roy Kline was the sensation of the day, winning three events and propelling Hamline to a third-place team finish, tying with Fordham and not far behind the University of Michigan and Penn State. Earl “Curley” Cramer was first-string fullback for USAAS’s football team, which included 15 All-Americans. In its victory over a Marine Corps team at Franklin Field in Philadelphia (the game replaced the regular Army-Navy match that year), Cramer rushed through the opposing line “like a 210mm shell,” according to the Allentown News. Ira “Ike” Haaven was captain of USAAS’s winning (26–2) basketball squad.

By early September 1917, Section 568 was primed and ready to go. One contingent of 20 sections had left for France in August, but then weeks passed with no further word about departures from Camp Crane. Frustration grew, campwide. Thanksgiving came and went. Several members of the unit vented their exasperation in letters to President Kerfoot, who sent personal notes of encouragement, paid them a 48-hour visit, and sent a huge box of homemade treats at Christmas. Unfortunately, he could do little else. Daily routines, in the meantime, became contrived, with hikes, work details, and endless drilling to fill the hours. Field training at a site called Guth Station was particularly irksome. Intended to simulate conditions on the Western Front, it included winding muddy trenches and dug-out shelters for sleeping.

Everyone blamed the delays on army mismanagement, but the real story was more complicated, rooted in the USAAS’s origins. When America officially entered the war, the French government asked the U.S. to supply a military ambulance service for the French Army. Volunteer organizations—the American Field Service (AFS), American Red Cross, and the Norton-Harjes ambulance service—had 76 ambulance sections already overseas transporting wounded for the French and Italian armies. (Italy fought as an ally in World War I.) The value of their work was beyond reproach, but they were operating at capacity. Thus was born the United States Army Ambulance Service, created expressly to aid French, not U.S., forces. By mutual agreement, the volunteer organizations began integrating their sections into the USAAS.

It was initially estimated that 120 new sections would be needed. To get those numbers, the army all but promised adventurous young men swift action in Europe. “France in six weeks!” was the slogan as the volunteers crowded into Camp Crane in June 1917. But right after the first contingent shipped out in August, all further departures were suspended until full agreement could be reached on the number of ambulance sections actually necessary or portable once they were overseas. Miscued coordination, differences of opinion, and faulty assumptions at high levels within separate armies on two continents halted USAAS departures to France until early 1918.

The opening months of 1918 took Hamline’s men on an emotional roller coaster. In January they learned their battalion was next to leave for France. Morale soared. A week later they were informed that a different battalion would go instead. Then, in February, they were notified that Section 568 would be in the contingent departing camp in late March, buoying spirits once more, but a few weeks later their commander, Lt. Earl McCauley, called a special meeting and dropped this bombshell: the Hamline section would remain on post for at least three more months. On the other hand, members who opted to become “casuals” could go promptly to France. As casuals, they would cease to belong to Section 568 and become individual replacements, filling openings in other sections already overseas.
It was a punch in the gut. They were fed up with Camp Crane and desperate to get “over there.” But they also wanted to stick together as a unit. Guybert “Red” Phillips described his conflicted feelings in a March 3 letter to President Kerfoot: “It hurts us just as much as it will you and the folks at home,” he wrote, “to break up that which has bound us so closely together for nine months, but . . . another three months in this camp and I wouldn’t dare look another man in the eye. It’s sapping . . . everything worthy of red-blooded American boys.” So anxious were they to go that, to a man, they reluctantly voted to break up the unit and become casuals.

Kerfoot swung into action and called Minnesota Governor J. A. A. Burnquist, who had taken a personal interest in the Hamline unit. Burnquist immediately wired Senator Knute Nelson and Congressman Clarence B. Miller in Washington, D.C., asking them to do what they could to end the delays and avert the unit’s impending demise. “Political pressure from friends of other units believed to be cause,” noted Burnquist in his telegram. Nelson and Miller protested straightaway to Surgeon General of the Army William C. Gorgas, pointing out that the USAAS had not only broken faith with the Hamline volunteers but also with the good citizens of Minnesota who had been following this unit’s progress with pride. It worked. To everyone’s relief, the army reversed itself: the Hamline unit could remain intact and depart forthwith. On March 26, their final day in camp, Kerfoot paid them another visit and heartily shook the hand of each man as he boarded the train that took them out of Allentown forever.

They sailed March 28 from New York on RMS Olympic, a huge British liner converted into a troopship. Packed into the lower decks, they slept in hammocks swung over the mess tables. U-boats (German submarines) were an ever-present menace in the Atlantic Ocean, but by spring 1918 the use of escorted convoys significantly diminished the danger. Olympic crossed without incident. After landing at Brest on April 4, the unit went by rail to a camp near Saint-Nazaire for more training and to assemble their ambulances, “which is no snap,” wrote Red Phillips, because sections of the Model-T chassis and the boxy wooden body were shipped separately and had to be joined together. Each section got 20 ambulances.

"Gosh! Why did I major in Anthropology?" Ford ambulances, partly disassembled for shipment to France, had to be reassembled by their drivers.
The five-week stay at Saint-Nazaire helped everyone get better acquainted with French culture and language, but it also brought change for several Hamline men who were transferred into other ambulance sections that were under strength. Such inter-section shuffles continued for the rest of the war as necessity arose. In June 1918 the men convoyed to the USAAS base camp at Ferrières-en-Gâtenais, 70 miles south of Paris, where they were placed in command of Lt. Myron Wick, a former AFS man who stayed with the unit for the remainder of its service.

On July 3, the Hamline men finally became true ambulanciers when they were attached to the French Twenty-Eighth Infantry Division, then based near Lunéville in the Vosges Mountains of northeastern France. For the next eight months they lived and worked side-by-side with French soldiers (poilus). World War I had unleashed a new arsenal of lethal weapons and tactics on the battlefield: poison gas (causing blindness, grotesque blistering, suffocation), machine guns, grenades, high-velocity and high-explosive ammunition, mines, trench mortars, tanks, and massed, long-range artillery (inflicting deep, ragged wounds, prone to infection). To all of this, Section 568 became first-hand witness.16

Each French division had its own corps of doctors, attendants, and stretcher-bearers (brancardiers), operating within a three-zoned system of care. In the first zone, a string of crude first-aid shelters was set up along the front. These provided temporary dressings and quick fixes. A second zone, a few hundred yards back, contained central aid stations (postes de secours), where wounds were more properly cleaned and dressed; these stations also provided triage. In the third zone, normally five or more miles to the rear, were hospitals. Brancardiers carried the sick and wounded from the front-line shelters to a poste de secours. Ambulanciers took them from the poste to a hospital. The Ford ambulance could carry three patients on stretchers or five in sitting positions.17

Guybert “Red” Phillips cleaning his ambulance, 1919. He captioned his photo, “This is Voiture Numero Onze, receiving a much needed washing at the St. Louis barracks in Metz, by its conducteur and boon companion, yours truly.”

Visit the app to view more of Guybert Phillips’s photographs from the front lines.
Driving in the first two zones was perilous, frequently amid incoming artillery fire and very often at night, over bomb-cratered roads and without headlights, due to blackout restrictions. As one participant put it, “An ambulance driver is nearly always in mortal danger.” Courage and stamina were essential. Working in pairs, the drivers were supposed to be on 24-hour shifts, but in reality, shifts were seldom by the clock. Even off-duty, the men of Section 568 were never far from the heart of battle.18

In early summer 1918, German forces launched a huge, last-ditch offensive intended to break through Allied lines defending Paris. They had initial successes, but by early August the initiative passed to the Allies, buoyed by the infusion of fresh American troops. The Kaiser’s army doggedly defended its positions and launched fierce counter-attacks but was forced to retreat in the face of a resolute Allied advance toward German borders that could not be stemmed. The bloody 47-day Meuse-Argonne Offensive that autumn finally pushed enemy forces past their last, fortified defenses, cutting them off from essential rail supply lines. Hamline’s ambulance men were in the thick of this Allied advance. Working on the front lines east of Reims in the Aisne and Meuse-Argonne sectors from September 2 to October 4, including the Fourth Battle of Champagne, and then in the Meuse-Argonne sector, October 19 to November 2, Section 568 and the Twenty-Eighth Division pressed forward under intense fire into territory previously occupied by German troops.19

Everyone’s mettle was tested as they transported the sick and wounded through devastated, depopulated...
landscapes in a relay race with mortality—often in plain view of the enemy as shells whizzed overhead. They lived in dugouts and cellars. The sounds of battle became commonplace, the sight and smell of death familiar. The ambulanciers shared the roads with endless columns of horse-drawn artillery, supply wagons of every description, and war-weary troops moving to and from the front. [The Argonne was notorious for traffic jams.] Writing to a Hamline friend, Norm MacLean told guardedly of being a nervous wreck after one night’s work when he escaped injury while his ambulance was “practically destroyed by shell fire.” Robert Van Fossen wrote, “We don’t dare keep more than two or three men here [in our dugout] at a time as one shell might get them all.” Harold Curtis, now reassigned to Section 606, mirrored the experiences shared by all Hamline ambulance men when he plainly described the horrors he had seen and the exhaustion he felt: “[We are] supposed to be 24 hours on-duty and 24 hours off, but the last drive we were on went three days straight, with no relief. The Boches [German soldiers] are shelling this place hot and heavy. . . . Sometimes I am so worn out that the bursting of shells nearby does not wake me.”

By November 2, the section was occupying former German positions north of Reims in Marly-Gomont, not far from the Belgian border. Then came a lull, and amid rumors of German surrender, the Twenty-Eighth Division was withdrawn from the front. They were camped west of Épernay on the banks of the Marne when word spread on November 11, 1918, that an armistice had been signed. Soon church bells could be heard in the distance. It was over.

For the work carried out under heavy bombardment of explosives and gas during the battles of October 19 to November 2, Section 568 earned the French Croix de Guerre with Silver Star, as directed by Twenty-Eighth Division Order No. 12.839, dated January 13, 1919. French Gen. François Marjoulet presented a silk unit flag and medal at Metz on February 26. Ten members of the unit also received individual Croix de Guerre medals for bravery under fire. This was a true honor, not given lightly.

Following the armistice, the section stayed with the Twenty-Eighth Division, moving first to Metz and later Thionville to assist with hospitals there. In April the men returned to Ferrières for out-processing and on May 7 embarked for home from Brest aboard the battleship USS Rhode Island. They were discharged from service at Camp Dodge, Iowa, on May 24, 1919, without fanfare.

On June 9, several men from the unit returned to their alma mater for a Commencement Week chapel service and formally presented the college with the two unit banners—the one made by Hamline women, which they had carried throughout their service, and the one given at war’s end by their French command, on which hung the unit’s prized Croix de Guerre medal. The occasion was subdued. Speaking for the group was Roy Stemsrud, who was now first sergeant and one of 12 Hamline men who had remained with S.S.U. 568 from start to finish. The original group had been thinned out by transfers and mandated reassignments into other ambulance sections. Some members had left in order to secure promotions in rank. One, who lost his hearing at Camp Crane due to meningitis, had been mustered out of service. Sadly, four men from the section had been killed in action and two wounded. Among the dead were three from the original Hamline group: Pvt. Wallace Ramstad from Crookston succumbed to a gas attack that came while he slept in a dugout near the front; Pvt. Glenn Donaldson of Winona and Sgt. Warren Gammell of Madison, Minnesota, who was also the unit’s prime organizer, were killed when their ambulance took a direct hit from German artillery while they were evacuating the wounded under intense fire. Donaldson and Gammell were posthumously awarded the U.S. Army’s Distinguished Service Cross; Ramstad received the Croix de Guerre.
S.S.U. 568: THE HONORS AND THE FALLEN

LEFT: Silk flag for Section 568, issued by the French Twenty-Eighth Infantry Division in 1919. ABOVE: Croix de Guerre citation, which the returnees presented to Samuel Kerfoot, honorary head of the ambulance section.

Wallace Ramstad of Crookston, gassed to death while asleep in his dugout

First sergeant Warren S. Gammell of Madison, Minnesota

Glenn Donaldson of Winona, a freshman when he joined the unit, who was killed in action. “His cheerful disposition endeared him to all,” unit member Harold Nelson told President Kerfoot.
small, closely knit campus—but no one who drove an ambulance on the Western Front came back from the war unscathed. Life for them would never be the same.25

These men had been part of an all-out, patriotic fight that touched every element of American society. In Minnesota, as in much of the nation, colleges and universities were in the vanguard during the initial months, providing a disproportionate share of the first wave of volunteer enlistments and, soon, most of the officer corps. Indeed, as historian David Kennedy observed, it was the educated classes—the ‘professional custodians of culture’—that pressed most strongly for American intervention and engagement, a view broadly reinforced by influential campus professors across the country.26

As the conflict progressed, what was at first voluntary became compulsory for most college males. During the fall of 1918, programs such as the Students’ Army Training Corps (SATC) essentially militarized the campuses of the University of Minnesota, Hamline, Macalester, St. Thomas, Gustavus Adolphus, Carleton, St. Olaf, and Dunwoody Institute, arguably bringing more headaches than benefits to the institutions involved. But duty to country prevailed. Such united compliance would seem unlikely to later campus generations, but in 1918 it typified the national mood. With few exceptions, collegiate institutions remained front and center throughout the war, actively supporting America’s resolve to “make the world safe for democracy.” In the end, Allied victory was the collective effect of all who contributed, including a determined little ambulance company.27

Notes
1. Harold Curtis, Letters of an Ambulance Driver (St. James, MN: privately published, 1922), 73, copy in Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS); Henry L. Osborn, Hamline University in the World War (St. Paul: Hamline University Press, 1920), 12–14; Oracle (Hamline’s student newspaper), Mar. 29, 1917. Curtis was a prolific letter writer, mostly to family, and a regular correspondent to his hometown newspaper, the St. James Plain Dealer. His book of reprinted letters provides much detail about life in an ambulance section over a two-year period. Hamline professor Osborn’s book is equally noteworthy because he experienced the events he wrote about first hand and interviewed participants shortly after they returned from the war, while memories were fresh.


3. Hamline was the only Minnesota college to organize an ambulance unit; the University of Minnesota organized a hospital unit that became Base Hospital 26 and was stationed near Allerey, France. Franklin F. Holbrook and Livia Appel, Minnesota in the War with Germany (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1928), 1: 344, 371. See David M. Kennedy, Over Here: The First World War and American Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 179–84, for an account of how elite eastern schools set an enthusiastic tone for the war effort that was emulated nationally on American campuses in 1917.


6. Bill Parker to President Samuel Kerfoot, June 22, 1917, Hamline University Archives (HUA); Camp Crane, Center for the History of Medicine, University of Michigan, http://chn.med.umich.edu/research/1918-influenza-escape-communities/camp-crane/. The sheep barn remained home to the Hamline unit until January 1918 when the men moved into a newly built barracks.


8. Smucker, History of USAAS, chap. 3.

9. Ginn, U.S. Army Medical Service Corps, 48; Oracle, Nov. 29, 1917; Alumni Quarterly, Jan. 1918, 3, 6; Curtis, Letters, 50; Smucker, History of USAAS, chap. 3.

10. Ginn, U.S. Army Medical Service Corps, 38–40. The USAAS was an exception to the insistence of Gen. John J. Pershing, head of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), that American soldiers serve only under American command. The AEF planned to have ambulance sections independent of the USAAS, but by summer 1918 came up short and had to “borrow back” USAAS sections from the French and Italians.


12. Alumni Quarterly, Apr. 1918, 11; Oracle, Feb. 21, 1918; Curtis, Letters, 51, 62–67; Thomas Ray to President Kerfoot, Mar. 6, 1918, HUA.

13. “Red” Phillips to President Kerfoot, Mar. 3, 1918, HUA; Oracle, Mar. 14, 1918; Lloyd Heins personal narrative in Mary D. Akers, Hamline in the Great War: articles and extracts, vol. 2: 60–63, manuscript collection, MNHS.

14. J. A. A. Burnquist, telegrams to Sen. Knute Nelson and Hon. Clarence B. Miller, Mar. 6, 1918 (related correspondence from Nelson and Miller is attached). General Correspondence, Records of Gov. J. A. A. Burnquist; Minnesota State Archives, MNHS; Oracle, Apr. 4, 1918; Pace, Hamline History, 62.

15. Here and below, Smucker, History of USAAS, Appendix C–D; Osborn, Hamline, 20–21; John J. Abbatiello, Anti-Submarine Warfare in World War I (London: Routledge, 2006), 107–11; Oracle, May 23, 1918 (Phillips quote); Curtis, Letters, 12–14; Heins, in Akers, Hamline in the Great War, 2: 70. Numerous automobile makes, including GMC, Fiat, and Packard, were adapted for use as ambulances, but the Ford Model-T became the USAAS’s vehicle of choice because it was robust, small and easier to maneuver, simple to repair, and comparatively inexpensive. See Arlen Hansen, Gentleman Volunteers (New York: Arcade, 1996), 97–115, for a finely drawn description of the vehicle’s pros and cons. S.S.U. 568 had three commanders during its active service: Lt. W. A. Fair (June–Nov. 1917), Lt. Earl McCauley
(Nov. 1917–June 1918), and Lt. Myron Wick (June 1918–May 1919).


19. The number of books on World War I is huge. Nick Lloyd, Hundred Days (New York: Basic Books, 2014) provides an especially good contemporary analysis of the war’s final months on the Western Front. Smucker, History of USAAS, Appendix C-II.


22. Smucker, History of USAAS, Appendix C-II.


27. Holbrook and Appel, Minnesota in the War with Germany, 235–59. Effective fall semester 1918, SATC programs were established at more than 500 post-secondary educational institutions nationwide. Nearly all able-bodied males enrolled in SATC institutions were inducted into the army. As student-soldiers, they combined daily military instruction with academic coursework; wore uniforms; lived, bunked, and ate together; army-style; and performed routines commonly seen on all U.S. Army posts (marching, guard duty, etc.). The well-intended purpose was to bolster collegiate enrollments while identifying potential officer material and providing a way for young men to continue their educations pending call-up, but SATC disrupted nearly every aspect of academic life on campus. College administrators and faculty breathed a collective sigh of relief when the war ended and the SATC was dissolved.

The photos on p. 320, 322, and 327 (top two) are courtesy Hamline University Archives, St. Paul; p. 323 (top), courtesy U.S. Army; p. 323 (bottom) is from the USAAC Bulletin, Aug. 1947. All other images are in MNHS collections—p. 327 (portraits) from the Gold Star Roll, State Archives, and p. 324, 325, and 329 from the Guybert Marion Phillips World War I photo album.
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