

An Equal Burden: The Men of the Royal Army Medical Corps in the First World War

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From Slackers in Khaki to Knights of the Red Cross

Cultural representations of RAMC Other Ranks

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter uses a range of cultural representations of the men of the RAMC produced during the war to explore how these men perceived their own work and status, and how these were perceived by those they encountered in their caring roles. Drawing on theories of cultural representation, it uses close readings of cartoons, poetry, hospital magazines, and memoirs to demonstrate the multiple and shifting ways in which the work of RAMC rankers was perceived and understood throughout the war. In contrast to the work of Jeffrey Reznick and Ana Carden-Coyne, it foregrounds the representation of the stretcher bearer and medical orderly to complicate understandings of the construction of power relationships within systems of military medical care. The range of representations explores, and the gendered nature of their construction further demonstrates, the complexity of cultural constructions of gender and gender relations in British society during the First World War.

Keywords: slackers, comradeship, Knights of the Red Cross, hospital magazines, abject masculinity, heroism, uniforms, identity

In 1914 George Swindell did not want to be an RAMC stretcher bearer. As a merchant mariner, he initially attempted to enlist in the Navy, only to be told by the recruiting officer to 'go away and grow' due to his short height.¹ Several subsequent attempts to join other military units similarly failed, until Swindell encountered a recruiting sergeant looking for recruits of at least 5 foot 3 inches

and a medical officer willing to look the other way when Swindell stood on his tiptoes during his physical examination. Newly enlisted, Swindell recalled in his memoirs that 'I had not the slightest idea of what kind of work, or what the duties, of the Corps I had joined were, all I thought about was, I have got in, the Sergeant met me coming out, come here my lad, shake hands, you have joined one of the finest Corps in the British Army ... and they will make use of you in the Hospital, not exactly what I wanted.'²

Self-conscious about both his explicitly unmanly height and the non-combatant nature of the work he had enlisted to undertake, Swindell, in his post-war memoir, consistently demonstrates his acute and long-lasting awareness of the lack of martial, and by extension masculine, status that his new position as a non-combatant military medical caregiver entailed. He records every one of the slights he and his comrades received from combatant colleagues, from the use of the epithets 'Rob All My Comrades', as an alternative interpretation of the initials RAMC, and 'poultice wallah' to the jokes about 'going into action with stretchers at the alert'.³ Ward Muir, serving even further from the front line as a home hospital orderly, was similarly defensive about the status of non-combatant serviceman, writing a passionate defence in 1917 of both himself and the **(p. 153)** men he served alongside against accusations that they were 'slackers in khaki'. '[I]t is hardly the place', he wrote of civilian critics,

of persons not in khaki to bandy sneers about the comfortableness of the Linseed Lancers whose initials, when not standing for Rob All My Comrades, can be interpreted to mean Run Away, Matron's Coming. The squad of orderlies unloading that procession of ambulances at the hospital door may not envy the wounded sufferers whom they transmit to their wards; but the observer is mistaken if he assumes that the orderlies have, by some questionable manoeuvre, dodged the fiery ordeal of which this string of slow-moving stretchers is the harvest.⁴

While Muir, a 36-year-old London journalist and member of the Chelsea Arts Club, and Swindell, an 18-year-old merchant mariner from Bolton, came from very different backgrounds which inflected their understandings of hegemonic masculinity,⁵ both their narratives reflect the questionable masculine status of military medical rankers in Britain's wartime society. The commonalities between the two depictions of RAMC ranker masculinity in both Muir's and Swindell's writings point to the ways in which wartime masculine hegemonies coalesced around dominant ideals of uniformed combatant service. While not as potentially abject as civilian men in wartime Britain,⁶ the status of non-combatant servicemen engaged in medical caregiving was, nonetheless, viewed as questionable by a society at war which valorized the combatant soldier above all else.⁷ The men who made up the ranks of the RAMC were deeply conscious of the ambiguity of their roles as men in such a wartime society. The mass mobilization which redefined the category of citizen soldier during the war

meant that these servicemen brought with them into their service all their civilian assumptions, prejudices, and aspirations.⁸ Although formed by distinctions of class, education, and region, the subjectivities of all these men were also shaped by the pleasure culture of war which was such a prominent part of turn-of-the-twentieth-century British society and which, as Michael Paris has shown, cut across class divides.⁹ Among other things, this pleasure **(p.154)** culture influenced the aspirational military ideals which Haldane had attempted to mobilize with the formation of the Territorials.¹⁰ While Lord Kitchener's distrust of the TA as a military force led him to insist on the raising of the new army in 1914,¹¹ the Territorial ethos continued to have a particular impact on the RAMC, given the important role played by the RAMC(T) in providing reserves throughout the war. This provided inspiration for lower-middle- and middle-class volunteers such as David Randle McMaster who, having volunteered for the unit specifically because of its association with the TA and the St John Ambulance Association, 'took care to let the officers see I was a "professional man"'.¹²

Military service can thus be seen in both Swindell's and McMaster's accounts to be an important source of masculine status in wartime society, although the motivations for undertaking military *medical* service were mixed. Where Swindell's enlistment in the medical service was unintentional, for McMaster it was a deliberate choice to take on a uniformed but non-combatant service role. McMaster was the son of Nonconformist parents with sympathies towards the motives of those who resisted war on the grounds of conscience. Military medical service offered him a compromise between his desire for such status and the genuine reservations of conscience induced by his upbringing. Yet, like Swindell and Muir, he was also aware that military medical service had the power to compromise the very status he sought. Neither a medical nor military professional, neither heroic combatant nor self-sacrificing resister of war,¹³ the rankers of the RAMC, whatever their social background, had to negotiate complex personal and public perceptions and representations of their masculine status throughout the war.

RAMC ranker identities were never, however, simply those of compromised wartime masculinity. As Swindell's memoirs, Muir's essays, and McMaster's letters show, the masculine status of RAMC rankers acquired **(p.155)** a variety of complex, sometimes contradictory, associations and meanings over the course of the war. Thus Swindell was punctilious in noting not only the insults hurled but also the compliments bestowed on him and his unit, such as the comment of a 15-plus-stone man whom he had carried to Mont-Saint-Eloi during the Battle of Arras, who said, 'well thanks mates, the chaps up the line don't half call you some names, I did too, but I didn't know what you had to do, and I withdraw now all I ever said'.¹⁴ Muir, meanwhile, reported how, when he entered an

ambulance-train carriage to help members of the volunteer London Ambulance Corps (LAC) unload it:

a shout arose from the wounded lying there: 'Here are some real soldiers!' Khaki greeted khaki—simultaneously spurning the mere amateur, the civilian. I could have blushed for the injustice of that naïve cry. But it would be dishonest not to confess that there was something gratifying about it too. It was the cry of the Army, always loyal to the Army. These heroic bundles of bandages, lifting wild and unshaven faces from their pillows, hailed *me* (a wretched creature who had never heard a gun go off) as one of their comrades!¹⁵

Through their labours over the course of the war, RAMC rankers gained a reputation as good military comrades, if not in arms then certainly in service. As their knowledge and experience grew, they constructed for themselves a sense of non-combatant identity built specifically around their caregiving roles. Yet at the heart of this identity was the additional fact of their military service alongside combatants, allowing them to claim the status of servicemen in wartime.

The evolution of the image of the RAMC ranker occurred not only in the subjective understandings of servicemen themselves, but also in their public representation throughout the war. By the end of the war, as well as being mocked as a 'slacker in khaki', the RAMC ranker was also being valorized as a 'Knight of the Red Cross'. This figure was constructed by observers of the RAMC rather than the rankers themselves, based on the shifting ideals of what masculine qualities were necessary to denote wartime bravery.¹⁶ The endurance required to face fire unarmed became a key marker of medical heroism for those who witnessed the RAMC at work. This perception was, in turn, mobilized by British propaganda to buttress home-front morale in ways which echoed the more familiar image of the nurse as ministering angel.¹⁷

(p.156) This chapter explores these shifting understandings and cultural representations of RAMC ranker masculinity over the course of the war, focusing on the three dominant constructions of shirkers, comrades, and chivalric heroes. Using a variety of sources, including personal narratives, hospital journals, and newspapers, it examines the ways in which men's subjective anxieties over status shifted over the course of the war into a sense of personal attainment, while public representations moved from solely critical to encompassing a particular heroic ideal. By comparing these constructions to the representations of women in comparable roles, including professional nurses and VAD volunteers, it will argue that the cultural sphere provides an additional space within which the military medical masculinities of the men of the ranks of the RAMC were contested and defined across four and a half years of war.

'Slackers in Khaki'

The abject impression of the RAMC ranker in the early years of the war is not particularly surprising considering the status of the male military caregiver within British society during the previous half century. As Holly Furneaux has shown, the medical orderlies of the Crimean War had a poor reputation as brutal, clumsy drunkards, a reputation which became formalized in cultural memory through the campaigns of Florence Nightingale for a professional *female* nursing service.¹⁸ The gendered ideology of this campaign, which was based on the assumption of 'women's unique ability to minister to the sick', ensured that the 'collective heroism attributed to working men of "the thin red line" was firmly restricted to combat. Any idea of the heroism of the same soldiers risking their lives in cholera epidemics fulfilling their duties as orderlies in military hospitals had no cultural purchase.'¹⁹

The negotiations over professional identities in both the military and medical professions in the years after the Crimean War further cemented the lowly position of the medical serviceman within the military hierarchy. This was then reinforced in the eyes of the general British public during the medical shambles of the Second Anglo-Boer War.²⁰ While the men providing preventative healthcare in the form of sports and physical fitness training to the armed forces might have gained an increasingly popular **(p.157)** reputation in this period, reflecting the rise of muscular Christianity as a hegemonic ideal,²¹ the men who cared for the ill and wounded retrospectively remained a unit of low status, ripe for mockery both within the military and more broadly.

Thus the men who enlisted as non-commissioned servicemen with the RAMC in 1914, whether voluntarily or through lack of other options, were viewed as valid targets for mockery and, indeed, self-mockery. Such mockery could be found in the columns of hospital journals such as *The Gazette of the 3rd London General* and *The 'Southern' Cross*, journal of the 1st Southern General Hospital, Birmingham, both of which were sold to the public to raise funds for the hospitals.²² It also appeared in books such as Muir's *Observations of an Orderly* (1917) and *The Happy Hospital* (1918), which, again, were available for public purchase. In all these sources the image of the RAMC ranker, and in particular the home-hospital orderly, is caricatured as that of the 'orderlim'.

The 'orderlim' was originally the creation of cartoonist Stephen Baghot de la Bere, who, like Muir and a number of other members of the Chelsea Arts Club, enlisted as a private in the RAMC and was sent to work at the 3rd London General Hospital, Wandsworth. From 1915 onwards he contributed a series of cartoons to the hospital's *Gazette*, which depicted the 'orderlim' as a small, unprepossessing figure, physically overshadowed by both men and women, continually put upon by the ward sister, staff sergeants, and medical officers. He was the embodiment of unsoldierly masculinity, small, weak, physically unfit and

elderly, an image emphasized by the unsigned cartoon of 'The Youngest Lance-Corporal' (Figure 5.1).

These visual images were reinforced in the *Gazette* by humorous articles such as E. G. Doré's story, 'The Admirable Hammond', whose protagonist is described as 'a little, insignificant looking man, with sparse hair and a heart that insurance companies wouldn't bet on. He also suffered from asthma and a dictatorial wife.' He was

right in the front row of candidates for military service when Germany threw down the gauntlet to us. ... The doctors, however, looked sideways at Hammond. They told him he showed the right spirit, but they weren't there to enlist spirits. Brawn was the thing needed, and Hammond had none; so sorrowfully he returned home. Six times after that, at varying intervals, he presented himself to the military authorities, only to receive (p.158) the same saddening verdict. ... Then, for the seventh time,

Hammond tried his luck at the recruiting office. With great good fortune he was cursorily examined by a medico who had lost his stethoscope in the previous evening's general pilgrimage to the Tubes. Hammond walked home that evening with a new light in his eyes. He was going to be a soldier, with nice brass buttons down his chest and a gun under his arm. A week afterwards he got the brass buttons all right but not the gun. The corps to which he became attached do not use a gun to kill folk with. Hammond was rather disappointed, but the loss of the gun was partially



Fig. 5.1. 'Our Celebrities, No. 4: The Youngest Lance-Corporal'; *Gazette of the 3rd London General Hospital* (December 1915).

compensated by the benevolent feeling engendered in him by the presence of a Red Cross on his sleeve.²³

Fictionalized, this depiction of the volunteer orderly at once mocks the pretensions and reflects the lived experiences of men like Swindell. **(p.159)** In doing so, it points to the dominance of combatant masculinities in the war enthusiasm of the early stages of the war.²⁴

Both de la Bere's cartoons and Doré's fiction place particular emphasis on the physical insufficiency of the RAMC ranker, reinforcing Muir's point, in defence of the 'slackers in khaki', that 'when the few fit men that our combings-out revealed had gone elsewhere, the unit was kept up to strength by the drafting-in either of C3 recruits or of soldiers who, having been at the front and been wounded, or invalided back, were marked for home duty only'.²⁵ Nor was it only hospital orderlies serving far from the front line whose bodies were viewed as physically frail or damaged. As discussed in Chapter 2, Swindell was only able to enlist by standing on tiptoes during his medical examination in order to be recorded as meeting the height requirement, while J. B. Bennett managed to enlist despite an astigmatism by telling the recruiting sergeant he had completed an eye test after the sergeant had been distracted by a telephone call.²⁶ In Swindell's account, the doctor was, as implied in the fictional case of Hammond, complicit in the deception, willing to turn a blind eye in the case of a man enlisting in a non-combatant corps and thus presumed not to need the height or strength of a combatant serviceman. Jay Winter has pointed out that the sheer numbers of men attempting to enlist in the early months of the war undermined attempts at stringent physical examinations, which had been instituted to assuage anxieties about the army's martial fitness after the Boer War.²⁷ Yet Swindell's and Bennett's experiences point to the influence of additional cultural assumptions about the physical attributes deemed necessary for military medical service.²⁸ In the minds of harried, overworked military doctors, medical service in the ranks was work appropriate for unfit, overaged men suffering from physical impairments which made them unsuitable for combatant service.

The image of the RAMC ranker as unsoldierly and consequently insufficiently masculine in British wartime society was further reinforced by depictions which acknowledge that the orderly's 'place in the scheme of things ... is a humble place, and he knows it. His work is almost comically unromantic, painfully unpicturesque. Moreover—let us be frank—much **(p.160)** of it is uninteresting, after the first novelty has worn off.'²⁹ Men such as de la Bere, Doré, and Muir used self-deprecation to help defend themselves against public accusations that they were 'slackers in khaki'. By depicting themselves and their colleagues as physically insufficient as soldiers, and therefore implicitly as men, and by emphasizing the drudgery and boredom of the work they undertook, these representations served to directly address, and thereby counter, accusations of

both physical cowardice and dishonest shirking.³⁰ They also served to undercut any accusations of effeminacy that might be thrown at them as men undertaking such feminine work as cleaning and caring.³¹

Yet such self-deprecation can be read as a more problematic characterization of the RAMC ranker when set against the female nurse and volunteer rather than the figure of the male combatant. While RAMC rankers served under the authority of medical officers all along the chain of evacuation, those serving in hospital settings served additionally under the authority of the trained nurses who worked as matrons and ward sisters in these settings. As Christine Hallett and Janet Watson have both demonstrated, these women's own service was profoundly shaped by their anxieties over the need to embody and perform their work in defence of their roles both as women in war zones and professionals whose workspace was being penetrated by volunteers of both sexes.³² While these anxieties led most notably to the articulation of the tensions between trained nurses and voluntary VADs, with the latter feeling 'they had a right to critique the apparent lack of emotionalism of nurses; [and] trained nurses [feeling] they had a right—even a duty—to critique the excessive emotionalism of the VADs, which they saw as a potential obstacle to a patient's recovery',³³ they also shaped nursing sisters' relationships with the male **(p.161)** orderlies. As Watson notes of the diary of Sister Alice Slythe, the mocking anecdotes she included about her male co-workers, such as records of their mispronunciation of French words, 'served ... as a means of establishing her educational superiority over the orderlies, who, as men drawn from the ranks, were unlikely to have had advanced schooling (or any medical training), but who, as members of the army, were not under the direct command of the trained nurses who ran the wards but were outside the official military hierarchy'.³⁴ In fact the social background of RAMC rankers was varied, reflecting the wider social intake of all branches of the military attendant on the mass enlistment of total war.³⁵ What very few RAMC orderlies had in comparison to a nursing sister such as Alice Slythe was formal medical training. Thus trained nurses were able to assert a form of professional dominance over these men in relation to medical hierarchies, even if their power was more uncertain in relation to military, class, and gender hierarchies.

The contested nature of the power relations between trained nurses and orderlies was reflected in the pages of hospital journals, where the orderly became a 'gentle henpecked spouse', while Sister and, above all, Matron, became looming figures of domestic tyranny.³⁶ In de la Bere's cartoons, for instance, the physical insignificance of the 'orderlim' is reinforced by the large, rotund, masculine depiction of Matron, whose power is evident from her physical resemblance to the Sergeant Major (Figure 5.2). The figure of the ward sister is less physically repulsive and more obviously feminine in the imagining of the cartoonist of *The 'Southern' Cross* (Figure 5.3). Nonetheless, she is

represented as physically larger than the ward orderly whom she dominates with her unreasonable demands.

The representations of contested power relations between trained nurses and RAMC orderlies were not all one way, however. A cartoon in the same issue of *The 'Southern' Cross* depicts a large orderly towering above the tiny figure of a nurse begging him on bended knee to do his work (Figure 5.4).



Fig. 5.2. 'Things We May Hope to See—If the War lasts till Next Christmas', Stephen Baghot de la Bere; *Gazette of the 3rd London General* (December 1915): 62-3.

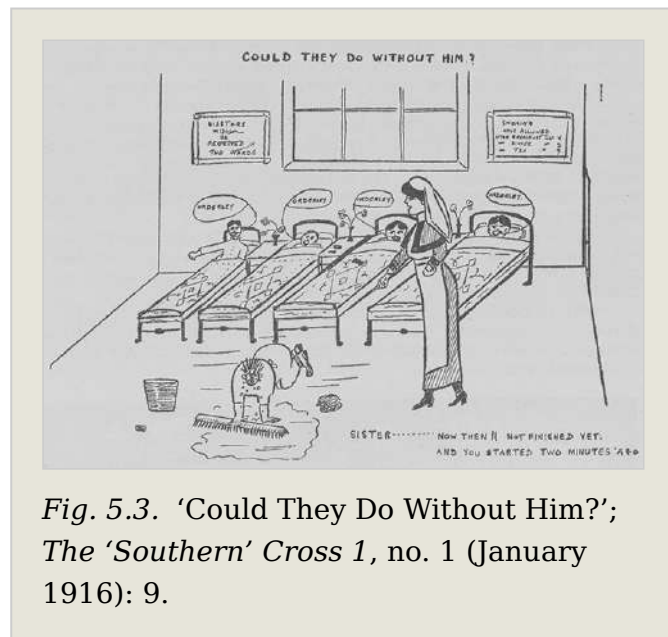


Fig. 5.3. 'Could They Do Without Him?'; *The 'Southern' Cross* 1, no. 1 (January 1916): 9.

As one poet put it in the
Gazette:

It's 'Orderly!' here, and
'Orderly!' there,
And 'Where is that
dratted man now?'
He cannot be useless,
as you often declare,
(p.162) (p.163) So
surely you're forced to
allow
That without his deft
touch
Your ward would be
much
Less orderly.³⁷

(p.164) Relationships between
orderlies and trained nurses
were thus represented as a
struggle over the gendered
division of labour within
hospitals, but one in which both
sides were equally mockable as transgressing gendered norms—the nurses
through the power they wielded over men, the men through the domestic labour
they were being ordered to undertake.

The relationship between the hospital orderly and the trained nurse was not, however, the only one through which the orderly's gender identity was defined as problematic. As the manpower crisis deepened throughout 1915, culminating in the 1916 Military Service Acts, the construction of the RAMC ranker as a gendered figure of fun altered significantly, as reflected in the pages of hospital journals. As noted in Chapter 4,³⁸ the dilution of medical services through the growing employment of women in Base and home hospitals had important implications for the work undertaken by RAMC rankers from 1915 onwards, which, in turn, threw the question of gender relations on the hospital ward into sharp focus. That dilution was perceived as a direct threat by many orderlies, something made abundantly clear in the pages of both the *Gazette* and *The 'Southern' Cross*. De la Bere, for instance, created a female equivalent to the 'orderlim' in the form of the 'orderlette', an attenuated flapper, far too weak and wilting to undertake heavy labour, instead relying on her charms to woo recuperating soldiers into doing it for her (Figure 5.5).³⁹

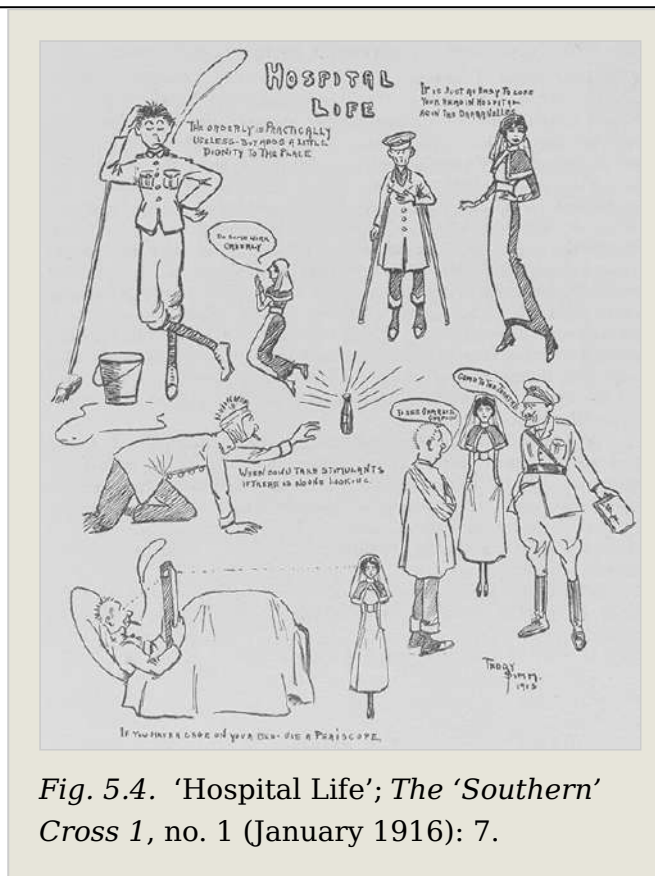


Fig. 5.4. 'Hospital Life'; *The 'Southern' Cross* 1, no. 1 (January 1916): 7.

In *The 'Southern' Cross*, a cartoonist produced a rather kinder image, although he still mocked the assumed vanity of women who would take time to primp before undertaking (incompetently) stretcher bearing duty (Figure 5.6).



1. An Orderlette carrying her own milk-can.

Fig. 5.5. 'Things We May Hope to See—An Ordelette carrying her own milk-can', Stephen Baghot de la Bere; Gazette of the 3rd London General Hospital (December 1915): 62.

In its commentary, however, the journal was as disparaging of trained Territorial Forces Nursing Staff (TFNS) nurses as de la Bere was of Red Cross VADs, with the description of the 'Femina Felina (Var. T.F.N.S.)' noting that, following dilution:

One must not suppose, however, that women now perform the work of the hospital—such occupation would be quite 'infra dig'. Section C of our long-suffering Corps was captured with the building, and these unfortunate men 'carry on' under the imperative direction of the new comers, whose time is divided between researches in modern fiction and playing parlour games, with frequent intervals for tea and chocolate.⁴⁰



Fig. 5.6. 'Women to Replace Male Staff in Our Hospitals at Home'; *The 'Southern' Cross* 1, no. 2 (February 1916): 40.

(p.165) In the *Gazette*, the threat the female VADs posed to male orderlies was made explicit in A. Pirie's mocking article, 'The Last Orderly':

He was the last R.A.M.C. orderly left in the hospital, and how he had so long escaped the small tooth comb of the military authorities was a marvel.
...

The war was over, and when at last labour could be spared to take down the huts there crept from the wreckage a gaunt figure with long, grey hair and beard.

'Is the war over?'
'Years ago,' they answered.
'Are they all gone?'
'Who?'
'The women.'
'Years ago. Who are you?'

(p.166) (p.167) A look of triumph came in his face. 'I am the last orderly, the Rip van Winkle of Wandsworth. Lead me to the office of the *Daily Chronicle*.'⁴¹

Such mockery is perhaps unsurprising given the threat posed by female volunteers to the place of male military care providers in these sites of healing. Their very presence implied that the men they worked alongside belonged instead overseas, closer to the masculine spaces of the front.

For those serving in home hospitals who were, due to their age and health, not directly threatened by overseas service, the 'orderlette' posed a more subtle threat, this time to the male orderly's psychic rather than his physical integrity. The work of the female orderly highlighted the unfitness of these men for overseas service. Instead, they were only capable of serving their country within an increasingly feminine sphere. As one joke printed in *The 'Southern' Cross* had it, the difference between a soldier and a ward orderly was 'A difference of "a-pinny-on".'⁴² Indeed, a later joke unsexes the hospital orderly entirely:

On page 875 will be found a paragraph dealing with 'Ferrets.' These pretty little animals are in great demand and much care is needed when ordering any. The number required should be stated to the nearest dozen, also colour, size, sex, etc., and purpose for which they are required.

The following table may be taken as a guide: —

<i>Article Required</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Purpose.</i>
Ferret	15	(a) Hunting
		*(b) Bottle-washing
		(c) Night Watchman

*If required for Bottle-washer, specify 'Bushy-tail'. ...

Sex

- (a) Male.
- (b) Female.
- (c) Orderly.⁴³

Even when identified as human, if not fully so, the male orderly was represented as generally incompetent and less efficient than the women he served alongside. A mock examination paper in the *Gazette* set questions:

IV. For boy and slave orderlies.

(1.) Show how sixty plates and twenty glasses may be decently wiped, after washing, with four small, damp tea cloths. Produce six plates and one glass so **(p.168)** treated. Two marks off for every smear. N.B.—No help may (or will) on any account be given, in this operation, by a V.A.D. or other female, this being particularly a male occupation.⁴⁴

This form of mockery plays both on the centrality of maturity to dominant ideals of masculinity,⁴⁵ with immature 'boy' orderlies having the same status as slaves, and on the inversion of gendered divisions of labour implied by the particularity of dishwashing as a male occupation. The arrival of the VAD thus reinforced the unmasculine nature of the service of the male orderly on multiple levels, appearing to place him yet more firmly under the authority of women who treated him unequally and required him to undertake unmasculine work inappropriate for his status as a uniformed serviceman.

The representation of the work of male caregiving as unmanly was reinforced from 1916 onwards not only by the increasing substitution of women for men in orderly roles in Base and home hospitals, but also by the effects of the Military Service Acts, which saw an increasing number of conscientious objectors undertaking medical roles.⁴⁶ The semi-formal association between conscientious objection, particularly religious objection, and the provision of low-status medical services brought with it a number of cultural associations, many of them negative. As Lois Bibbings has argued, conscientious objectors of all types were represented in British wartime culture as:

the antithesis of the iconic figure of the soldier in wartime. ... Indeed, at a time when war and soldiering were seen as offering the potential for adventure, competition, sport and heroism as well as being a natural choice for boys and men, the notion that some men would reject the military called their maleness into question. ... In addition, to do so at a time of national need was hard to fathom and, at the very least, was often taken to be sign that the objector was less than a man.⁴⁷

In parts of popular culture objectors were represented as both physical and mental degenerates, often effeminate, always unmasculine.⁴⁸ That such men were deemed suitable to serve in the roles also occupied by RAMC rankers, men who willingly undertook military service and the associated **(p.169)** military discipline, re-emphasized the lowly status of these men within military and cultural hierarchies of esteem.

In this context, the contributions of de la Bere, Muir, and Doré can be read as ironic appropriations of cultural imagery in defence of their threatened cultural status. The journals in which they represented themselves were not simply spaces within which soldier patients and their carers (both male and female) negotiated power, whether through the assertion of order⁴⁹ or the reclamation of

agency.⁵⁰ They were also arenas in which specifically gendered relationships among carers were negotiated. Unlike the sexual anxieties which marked the relationships between patients and female caregivers,⁵¹ however, the gendered relations of power between RAMC orderlies and the female staff they served alongside reflected anxieties over professionalism and gendered social roles similar to those which shaped the relationships between trained nurses and volunteer VADs. The abject figure of the orderly as a male caregiver in wartime served as a useful foil both for trained nurses, concerned about their status as proto-professionals whose expertise should not be undermined, and VADs, anxious to have their work recognized as the equivalent of male combat voluntarism.⁵² Within this context, the RAMC orderly, neither a medical professional nor an appropriately male volunteer combatant, was reduced to a figure who could be described as the 'most immaterial of men'.⁵³

Comrades in Service

While the figure of the male medical caregiver in wartime could thus be cast as diminished and compromised as a man, he was a far from silent figure. The appropriation of abjection by men like de la Bere, Doré, and Muir enabled them to articulate ironic forms of resistance to cultural constructions of orderly unmanliness and the threat of feminization posed by trained nurses and VADs. Muir, the founding editor of the *Gazette* and a journalist who continued to write for periodical publications throughout the war, possibly forms the clearest example of this tactic throughout his wartime writings. He also, however, strove to present a **(p.170)** more positive vision of the male caregiver in his writing, describing the RAMC ranker not in relation to the women he worked under and alongside but relative to the wounded men he cared for. In doing so, Muir constructed the ranker as a comrade in service, motivated by a similar sense of duty to country and comrades as the combatant, although that duty was undertaken without bearing arms.

In Muir's writings the primary symbol of this comradeship of service was the military uniform which RAMC servicemen, like those in combatant units, wore.⁵⁴ It was the desire to be in uniform in wartime society which, according to Muir, motivated many men, however seemingly physically insufficient for military service, to enlist in the Corps. For example, Muir describes how one nameless orderly 'envisages the sheer, cowardly inquietude which would be his lot were he forced to walk the world in a dress other than this safe and calmness giving khaki. His self-respect is now secure. Without the label which khaki attaches to him he perceives that he would be eternally wanting to stop the passers-by and explain.' Instead, 'by the quite simple process of putting on a khaki suit, he suddenly found a calm which he had not experienced for one minute since the war's outbreak. ... [H]e was genuinely in the army: not as the heroic Tommy Atkins of the battlefield, but as an unmistakable Tommy Atkins all the same, with a number, and a separation allowance, and a "Religion".'⁵⁵

In making him an unmistakable soldier, the khaki uniform provided the RAMC ranker with an appropriate wartime identity which masked his non-combatant role and absorbed him into the military community. Muir is quite explicit about the extent of this community identification in his story of helping members of the volunteer LAC, who wore distinctive blue uniforms which earned them the soubriquet 'Bluebottles', to unload wounded men from an ambulance train in which the men of RAMC were identified as distinct from the volunteers:

It was seldom our custom to enter the hospital trains. An unwritten law decreed that Bluebottles only should enter the train: the R.A.M.C. limited themselves to carrying work outside, on the platform and stair. On this occasion the supply of Bluebottles had, for the moment, run short, and our **(p.171)** party took a turn at going up the gangways and evacuating the van-wards. As it happened, I and my mate on the stretcher were the first khaki-wearers to invade that particular van-ward. And as we steered our stretcher to the door and down the aisle of cots a shout arose from the wounded lying there: 'Here are some real soldiers!'

It was too bad. It was base ingratitude to the devoted band of Bluebottles who had, up till that instant, been toiling at the evacuation of the ward ... But—well, there it was. 'Here are some real soldiers!' Khaki greeted khaki—simultaneously spurning the mere amateur, the civilian. I could have blushed for the injustice of that naïve cry. But it would be dishonest not to confess that there was something gratifying about it too.⁵⁶

The wearing of military uniform enabled Muir to represent himself as a comrade of the wounded combatants in a way that was denied to the nominally civilian (if heroic) Bluebottles. It also provided Muir with both a military and professional identity in spite of his status as both a non-combatant and a wartime volunteer. Even for non-combatants, therefore, the status of 'citizen soldier' in British wartime society formed a distinctive and valorized identity.

It was not, of course, only men who could lay claim to a sense of service identity and consequent comradeship through the wearing of a uniform. As Muir pointed out, the wounded combatant 'comes in contact with a host of women, especially after he is wounded: not only nursing women, but women on the ambulances, women who serve refreshments at halting-places, women clerks who take his particulars, women who trace casualties, women who transact postal errands, and so on. One and all these women, whether paid or otherwise, are serving him and his fellows in some form or another: one and all they are uniform-wearers.'⁵⁷ Female VADs in particular used their assumption of their own distinctive uniform, as specified in great detail by the Joint War Committee of the British Red Cross and Order of St John of Jerusalem,⁵⁸ to underpin their claims to cultural approbation as wartime volunteers, the moral equivalent of male volunteer combatants.⁵⁹ Indeed, the *Reports* included eight images of

appropriate uniforms for volunteers, including both indoor and outdoor uniforms for nurses, and uniforms for both BRCS and St John (p.172) Ambulance drivers. So important was the question of uniform as a way of distinguishing different medical care providers in the military context in wartime that the *Official History* noted that:

with the exception of the voluntary aid detachments, there was no prescribed active service uniform for other personnel of the British Red Cross Society. The Society consequently submitted details of a uniform to the War Office, but, as it was more or less the same as the uniform of enlisted soldiers and commissioned officers, it was considered that a uniform of that description should only be worn by personnel of voluntary organizations employed under the Director of Medical Services on the Expeditionary Force. Eventually the difficulties of a distinctive uniform were overcome to some extent by granting honorary commissions in the army to the Commissioners, Assistant Commissioners and others employed in responsible duties connected to the voluntary aid organizations.⁶⁰

The BRCS itself observed in its report that 'representations were made to the Army Council with a view to economising in packing, transport and labour by permitting our staff in France to wear the same uniforms as the Army and to draw it from the Ordnance Stores on payment by us, but it was found not possible to comply with this request.'⁶¹ The *Report* also stated:

There is no doubt that at the beginning of the War a certain number of irresponsible ladies clothed themselves in attire which had some resemblance to uniform, assumed the Red Cross, and attempted to set up hospitals at their own expense, intending to nurse in them themselves. Others offered their services to Allied countries, which accepted them. Many were photographed in the costumes they had adopted, and the casual observer naturally supposed that they had some connection with the British Red Cross Organization. Some were ultimately brought into line with our regulations. Others gave up, on learning the conditions.⁶²

Uniform thus formed a key distinguishing marker of medical service and subject for debate and distinction for women as well as men throughout the war years.

For men serving in the RAMC, however, the status of their uniforms as the same as those of combatant soldiers, distinguished only by a small Red Cross badge on the sleeve, was a point of no little sensitivity.⁶³ The (p.173) '*Southern*' Cross was filled with jokes based around orderlies being taken for (or failing to be taken for) combatant servicemen:

Overheard in the street: 'Say, Bill, here are two soldiers coming.' 'Garn, silly, they're Red Cross men.'⁶⁴

Dear old lady, to one of 'Ours': 'Oh yes, my boy is in khaki. No, he is not in the R.A.M.C., he is a *proper* soldier.' (Turns out that he is C3 (home-sedentary)).⁶⁵

While the civilians may be the butt of these jokes, the underlying anxieties about the extent to which the uniform made the RAMC ranker the equal to a combatant serviceman provides much of the humour.

RAMC servicemen thus needed to look beyond uniforms to fully define themselves as fulfilling the hegemonic norms of martial masculinity which shaped British wartime culture and society. To do this, they used two tactics, pointing, on the one hand, to their specific role within the armed forces and the expertise that underpinned it, and, on the other, to the equality of their sacrifice through service with that of combatants. The first of these points was potentially the more difficult idea to lay claim to. The structure of the RAMC, which privileged the professional identity of the male doctors who formed the officer corps,⁶⁶ militated against men of the Other Ranks of the Corps defining themselves as medical professionals. Thus McMaster, who initially hoped to get a commission in the Corps on the basis of his pre-war training with the Red Cross and Boy Scouts,⁶⁷ was forced to concede to his parents that 'I think medical training would be necessary' to gain a commission as an officer in the Corps.⁶⁸

Despite this, McMaster continued to present his training and experience relevant to medical caregiving as forms of qualification for the specific branch of service he had volunteered for. He explained to his parents that 'I have not chosen this as pleasant work because it will probably be pretty unpleasant to work amongst the sick + wounded, but I feel that this **(p.174)** is the place for me with my ambulance training.'⁶⁹ Non-combatant work was thus transmuted from a space for shirkers and cowards fearful of death, injury, or discomfort to a form of emotional sacrifice appropriate for men with relevant experience to undertake in wartime. Similarly, Muir was quick to point out the importance of professional identity to RAMC servicemen: 'However newly enlisted he is, the C3 youth who wears the Red Cross is a professional, and, consciously or otherwise, comports himself as such.'⁷⁰

As we have seen, however, despite efforts to formalize the medical training of rankers by the RAMC before and during the war, such training remained partial and erratic. Thus despite many rankers' undoubted sense of pride in their specialist knowledge and experience, their attempts to construct a professional medical identity as a basis for claims to appropriate wartime masculinity were always limited. Certainly, such struggles for professional recognition can bear no comparison with those of either doctors or trained nurses, for whom the specific context of wartime society presented both a challenge and an opportunity.⁷¹ RAMC servicemen turned, therefore, to the other key facet of their wartime

identity—that of the soldier—in their attempts to construct their social status in wartime as appropriate, focusing in particular on the hegemonic ideals of masculine self-sacrifice and endurance which came to define the soldier hero during the war.⁷²

The drawing of equivalences between the service of combatants and non-combatants was, of course, not without its problems. Thus while Muir boasted that

No sooner was I in khaki than I had the job of helping to evacuate these same trains and to carry a mournful string of stretchers. Not once did that lump-in-the-throat trouble me. The second night after my enlistment I was allotted to the task of removing a dead body and depositing it in the shell in the mortuary. I had never handled a corpse before; but now it was my business to do as I was told, and I did as I was told,

he also acknowledged that ‘any discomfort to which the orderly is exposed is negligible—an affair positively to blush for—compared with the sufferings and unavoidable physical humiliations of the patient’.⁷³ The comparison between the discomforts of the life of the home hospital orderly, however much stoicism they might demand of the individual, and the dangers faced (p.175) by the soldier patients he encountered, which were, by then, brutally inscribed upon their bodies, was stark.

The ability to draw comparisons was somewhat easier for men serving further up the chain of evacuation, as they faced similar dangers from shelling and, particularly in the case of stretcher bearers, gunfire. Richard Capell, a lance corporal in the 6th London Field Ambulance, might express ‘every feeling of humility at the thought of the far greater pains and perils that our fellows in the infantry faced and endured in those tragic times’.⁷⁴ Here, as with other caregivers, Capell subsumes his own trauma and the resilience with which he faced it within his admiration for those cared for.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, he was willing to construct his own experience as a bearer at the Battle of the Somme as a trial of his powers of masculine endurance: ‘little but one black nightmare of what seemed almost futile effort and brutalising fatigue’.⁷⁶ He also emphasized that the unit member who won the French *Médaille militaire* at the battle had ‘earned it’⁷⁷ (emphasis in original). J. B. Bennett, meanwhile, used his diary to record his regular experiences of coming under shellfire at Gallipoli with a detachment which echoed the records of combatants.⁷⁸ In his post-war memoir he would recall how ‘we had to carry loaded stretchers long distances without slings by devious routes as there were no roads, only tracks through scrub, and as it was done at night in inky darkness it was best [*sic*] with hazards including sniping as my experience testified. ... None of these efforts were free from rifle fire and gradually one gained a sixth sense of self preservation and an awareness of risks and dangers’.⁷⁹ Here Bennett’s construction of his actions as demonstrating a

stoic endurance of danger bears comparison with the personal narratives of combatants.⁸⁰

Sharing physical danger meant that RAMC rankers were also able to draw equivalences between themselves and their combatant comrades around the shared experience of trauma.⁸¹ The descriptions of providing **(p.176)** care that Frank Ridsdale gives in his diary entries from the Somme clearly echo the exhaustion and terror experienced by combatants:

[A]rrived Knightsbridge midnight, sent on dressing wounds straight away working all night, terrible wounds, doing dressings in a dug out by the light of a Candle. Very tired, one death in the night, men moaning + in agony with pain, terrible bombardment all night shaking the place, never to be forgotten night ... very tired, relieved off dressing 9 am, just down for a little rest + then called up to go to the trenches to dress wounded + get them back, terrible bombardment on, awful sights in first + second lines, dead bodies laid all over, part of bodies scattered on trench sides, terrible carnage + slaughter, brought many wounded down, hard + difficult work in the very narrow trenches, parts of parapet blown away, dug-outs filled with dead + wounded, a terrible smell + many flies + rats, many men unable to be brought in owing to heavy firing, very hard day for all ... feeling the want of food + sleep, but still going on. ...

Up at 5-30 am, away to trenches for many Wounded again, terrible bombardment on, parapets being blown away, an awful hard task getting men-down [*sic*], carried some down on my back with awful wounds, more dead + parts of bodies all over, a terrible stench, many buried + awful wounds, some of the men been wounded 2 days + laid out all time, wounds smelling badly, more scenes of carnage + slaughter, stretcher bearer of Hants badly wounded, dressed him, fractured arm + leg + wound in face, just finished dressing him + got him away + then we were ordered back to Acheux.⁸²

Such entries compare with J. C. Tait's diary entry from a month earlier, when he wrote of 'Dead and wounded ... strewn everywhere. ... Some wounded were being carried out—some on stretchers, other struggling along with the help of a comrade. ... The dead were thrown aside until the wounded are all away. It was a veritable nightmare.'⁸³

The experiences of stretcher bearers in Gallipoli made an equally vivid impression:

Strangely enough the bullets worried us not at all, it was the nerve-strain of the whole thing, the knowledge that we were just as likely to be making for the enemy's lines as our own; the smell of the thyme mingled with that of the dead who, it seemed, were piled up everywhere; our own weariness,

everything combined to make that first night remain vividly in our minds. For four days and nights very few of us got more than a few hours sleep, the number of wounded seemed countless and in addition our lines and their **(p.177)** immediate vicinity were heavily shelled morning and afternoon and we saw many men mangled or killed quite close to us.⁸⁴

Such testimony demonstrates the extent to which RAMC rankers understood themselves to share the traumas of front-line service simply because they were there.⁸⁵

While George Swindell might argue that, even with the shared experience of trauma, his labour bore no comparison to the trials of the infantry,⁸⁶ that labour was the final way in which RAMC rankers positioned themselves as equal to their combatant comrades. As we have seen, one of the key jobs undertaken by men serving with the RAMC was not that of care provision but rather of construction. The work which men undertook building hospitals and aid posts, improving roads and reinforcing sites of care was particularly significant in structuring their identity as servicemen. The work of the majority of British servicemen on the Western Front was that of the labourer rather than the soldier. The dominance of fatigues and working parties meant that the work of construction which shaped many men's civilian lives was also the dominant trope of their military experiences.⁸⁷ In undertaking the manual labour of construction, RAMC servicemen were serving in exactly the same way as their combatant colleagues, without arms or killing, but in the service of the national military endeavour. Such service formed one key way in which RAMC servicemen viewed their war work as an appropriately masculine form of service, equal to that of the combatant.

Construction was not, however, the only form of physical labour that RAMC rankers undertook, and the physical effort required in the evacuation process could also be used to create a point of comparison between combatant and non-combatant service. Stretcher bearers in particular used the labour of carrying heavy stretchers long distances to position themselves as being as stoical and able to endure as the men they carried. C. Midwinter's memoirs of the 32nd Field Ambulance, for instance, noted that 'carrying in the wounded on Gallipoli, under fire, was terribly hard work. The ground made the going very rough. Stretchers had to be lowered over ledges, steered through narrow paths and thorn bushes.'⁸⁸ H. L. Chase's history of the 2/1st London **(p.178)** Field Ambulance describes the work of the bearer companies at Ypres in August 1917 as:

an almost overwhelming task [involving] carrying wounded through Sanctuary and Chateau Woods past the Hooze Crater and down the Menin Road, where they were met by the motor ambulances which relieved them of their loads and then sped away down the Menin Road ... while the

bearers returned to the regimental aid posts for more wounded. The carrying track was nothing more than a single line of duckboards winding its way along through a veritable sea of mud, and one false step might well have proved fatal, as was evident from the numbers of drowned men (and horses) who could at intervals be seen almost completely submerged in that dreadful swamp.⁸⁹

Swindell similarly recalled the effects of weather: 'it was easy carrying wounded on a stretcher, on dry duck-boards, but when the rain had soaked them, and also washed some pieces of mud onto them, it was like trying to walk, the greasy pole'.⁹⁰ The slipperiness of muddy duckboards was nothing to the difficulties of walking through the sand of the Egyptian desert with a wounded man as burden, however. W. D. Fothergill recalled, when evacuating men across the Sinai Desert, 'being issued with snow shoes as an experiment to see if we could make better progress in the sand—we didn't'.⁹¹ The effort and ingenuity involved in such labour were used by RAMC rankers to position themselves as adaptable and self-sacrificial comrades to the men they carried, sharing the labour as well as the danger of war.

The importance of the shared experiences of danger, trauma, and labour to the construction of RAMC rankers as servicemen is reflected in the citations for military awards that men received. Sergeant Major Frank Hulbert, for example, received the Military Cross for working 'continuously for 72 hours under heavy shell fire and set[ting] a splendid example of pluck and initiative in removing the wounded from a barn which was being heavily shelled.'⁹² In his *Short History of the Royal Army Medical Corps*, Fred Smith names ten men of the ranks who received the Distinguished Conduct Medal for evacuating the wounded under fire, and one, Private F. Bennison, who received the medal for 'volunteering for isolation with cerebro-spinal fever patients, and nursing them devotedly for many weeks.'⁹³ These actions of caring in the context of the dangers of **(p.179)** war were acknowledged by the military authorities as equivalent to the acts of combatant service worthy of formal recognition. As David Rorie, MO with the 51st (Highland) Division noted, 'of all the fellows who won the war, none was stouter-hearted than the stretcher-bearer: none carried out his job more steadily and efficiently during the campaign. He was never treated to the limelight and he never asked to be: but he is well worthy of the highest tribute that can be paid to his pluck and his endurance'.⁹⁴

If the greatest quality of courage during the war was, as Max Plowman suggested, that of 'caring for your pals more than yourself', then, as Bennison's citation demonstrates, RAMC rankers were judged to have passed this 'very basic test of manhood'.⁹⁵ Stretcher bearers and orderlies both proved themselves to be as worthy of this accolade as witnesses and caregivers to fellow servicemen in moments of pain and fear, from the battlefield through the dressing station to the operating theatre, and even into the home, a space made

alien and fearful by permanent injury.⁹⁶ While a combatant's comrades were judged on the fact of their 'being there' in moments of danger and boredom, the RAMC rankers' ability to both share and bear witness to men's pain, resilience, and rehabilitation enabled them to lay claim to the wartime masculine identity of comrade.

Knights of the Red Cross

The RAMC ranker could, then, be constructed as the equivalent of the combatant serviceman through the fact that he faced danger, endured physical hardship, and acted as witness to wartime sacrifice. He could also, however, be constructed in a more mythic vein as the Red Cross Knight, a figure which functioned both as the male equivalent of the angelic nurse and as the non-combatant version of the apotheosis of heroic wartime masculinity achieved by combatants through death.⁹⁷ While rankers themselves used the image of the staunch comrade to define their own **(p.180)** wartime identities, and both orderlies and their critics employed the figure of the abject orderly in their commentaries, the Red Cross Knight was an ideal constructed predominantly by those observing the work of RAMC rankers from an external standpoint, perspectives that were key to the language and imagery utilized in the figure's construction. The principal creators of this image of the RAMC ranker were not only the men they cared for along the chain of evacuation but also the doctors, nurses, and chaplains who worked alongside them in the dressing stations, CCSs, and hospitals. The Red Cross Knight, therefore, was one defined by traditional ideals of heroism as expressed through religious language and chivalric imagery, both of which served to elevate the male military caregiver from simply appropriately masculine to profoundly heroic.

As with the abject orderly, the Red Cross Knight, who stands at the other extreme of appropriate wartime masculinity, appears most often in the pages of hospital journals. Where the abject orderly is a figure of fun and mockery, however, the Red Cross Knight is one of sentimentality. In the pages of *The 'Southern' Cross* he is visualized as comparable to questing knights in a poem entitled 'The Red Cross Knight', which concludes: 'The Red Cross Knight the stretcher bears, / The "MASTER" carries he. / "As ye did unto one of these / Ye did it unto ME"'⁹⁸ (Figure 5.7).

The religious language of the poem is an almost exact echo of the better-known 'Woodbine Willy' poem 'To Stretcher Bearers', which concludes, "Ere we are now, stretcher-case, boys, / Bring him aht a cup 'o tea! / Inasmuch as ye have done it / Ye have done it unto me."⁹⁹ In this well-known chaplain's verse the stretcher bearer becomes sanctified as a St Christopher, a bearer not simply of the suffering but of Christ himself.

The sanctification of the stretcher bearer is further reinforced in the Scottish-Canadian poet Robert Service's poem 'The Stretcher Bearer', in which the eponymous bearer has the temerity to demand directly of God, "ow long? 'ow long?". Where God may 'in 'Eaven's height / ... turn away 'Is face', the stretcher bearer cannot. Instead he must stand as a witness despite being 'sick with pain / For all I've heard, for all I've seen'. The bearer as witness becomes a Christ-figure himself, bearing the weight of humanity's pain:

I don't care 'oose the Crime may be;
 I 'olds no brief for kin or clan;
 I 'ymns no 'ate: I only see
 As man destroys his brother man;
 I waves no flag: I only know,
(p.181) As 'ere beside the dead I wait,
 A million 'earts is weighed with woe,
 A million 'omes is desolate.¹⁰⁰

(p.182) As such, he is the moral equivalent of the dead soldier, constructed as Christlike in his sacrifice of life for the sake of humanity.¹⁰¹



Fig. 5.7. 'The Red Cross Knight'; *The 'Southern' Cross* 1, no. 8 (August 1916): 231.

It is notable that the pseudonymous author of 'The Red Cross Knight', like Studdert Kennedy and Service, specifically identifies the valorized figure at the centre of his poem as a stretcher bearer, while signing himself as 'Orderly'. The association between stretcher bearers and the religiously inflected self-sacrifice of St Christopher was an easier one to make than between such figures and the hospital-bound nursing orderly. It was not merely that bearers' labour was literally that of carrying, but also that bearers could more easily earn admiration for their courage because their work was so often undertaken under fire. While RAMC bearers were not officially supposed to carry men from no man's land, which was the role of regimental stretcher bearers, their work nonetheless involved moving regularly towards the danger of the front line to collect their loads, and many would enter no man's land if necessary.

Importantly in this context, they did so specifically unarmed. This fact served to burnish bearers' heroic credentials, as it was generally acknowledged that being unarmed in the face of danger put these men at a psychological disadvantage. As A. E. Francis commented, it was one thing 'to do gallant deeds with arms in hands and when the blood is up but the courage demanded to walk quietly into a hail of lead to bandage and carry away a wounded man, that is worth talking about'.¹⁰² To face death and danger without the power to fight back made the labour of the stretcher bearer, in the eyes of his combatant colleagues, not chivalric or even sanctified but simply heroic. As we have seen, nursing orderlies serving along the line of communication would sometimes volunteer to act as bearers. Doing so meant that they could lay claim to having faced danger not merely through coming under shellfire but in a role fully defined as self-sacrificial.

However, such voluntarism was not always deemed necessary for the work of nursing orderlies to be defined as heroic—certainly not from the perspective of the men they cared for. For men in pain, the men who nursed them could be seen as equally heroic to their bearer comrades, as **(p.183)** reflected in Private W. H. Atkins's poem in *The 'Southern' Cross* entitled 'The R.A.M.C.':

Oh! it's weary work in the white-washed ward,
Or the blood-stained Hospital base,
To number the kit of the man who was hit
And cover the pale, cold face,
Or hand out fags to the brave boys in rags,
Who'll stick it and cheerfully grin,
As the deftly used knife cheats grim death of a life
While the grey of the dawn creeps in.
To hold the hot hand of the man who talks wild
And blabs of his wife or his kids,
Who dreams he is back in the old home again,
Till the morphia bites, and he loses his pain
As sleep settles down on his lids.

The 'Hospital Orderly' doing his bit,
Of V.C.'s not many they score,
Yet are earned every day in a quiet sort of way
By the 'Royal Army Medical Corps.'¹⁰³

It is the emotional rather than the physical labour of these men that is valorized here, drawing heavily on ideals of reparative and sentimental masculinity.¹⁰⁴ In associating caring acts more commonly associated with female caregiving with the explicitly heroic symbol of the Victoria Cross (VC), the poet defines and celebrates the work of the orderly as not merely masculine but also heroic. His emotional labour is viewed in parallel with that of the stretcher bearer, urged in the first stanza to 'Turn him gently, now bandage his head', allowing the work of both groups to be ultimately defined in the final stanza as that of 'the Red Cross Knights'.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

Writing of the work of Regular Army nursing orderlies in the early days of the war, Charles Vivian argued, 'Nursing the sick is an ideal occupation—at a distance; at close quarters it is an occupation that demands far more courage than actual fighting, for it calls for patience and self-repression, for self-forgetfulness and the finer qualities which win no Victorian [*sic*] Crosses, but demand that the very best men have to give shall be given **(p.184)** night and day.'¹⁰⁶ Philip Dana Orcutt, an American *ambulancier* with the American Field Service Unit, similarly placed the work of French and Belgian stretcher bearers at the heart of the military effort: 'The Staff is the brains of the army; Aviation, the eyes; the Artillery, the voice; the Infantry and Cavalry, the arms; the Engineers, the hands; the Transportation, the legs; the People behind it, the body; but the *Brancardier* [stretcher bearer] is the soul.'¹⁰⁷ The valorization of military medical servicemen can thus be seen to extend beyond the civilian-infused ranks of the RAMC during the First World War to include the medical services of allies as well. Nor were British RAMC servicemen the only medical servicemen to come under attack for their perceived lack of masculinity. As Laura Boyd has shown, French *brancardiers* struggled with perceptions of insufficient masculinity throughout the war,¹⁰⁸ while the American William Stevenson was deeply dismissive of the French old men and boys left to act as orderlies in the American Hospital in Paris, when younger, fitter, more intelligent men went off to fight.¹⁰⁹

Yet, as this chapter has shown, popular cultural production in wartime provided spaces within which the status of medical caregiving as a masculine activity could be mocked, acknowledged, and even celebrated by a variety of practitioners, recipients, and observers. In hospital magazines, the abject orderly became an important figure in the gendered 'war on the wards' over professional medical status and voluntarism. In personal narratives nursing orderlies and stretcher bearers along the line of communication took up the

themes of experience and expertise as a way of identifying their war work as equal to that of the combatants they carried and cared for. And in the poetry of patients and other observers the men of the RAMC were transfigured by their service and sacrifice into warrior saints and Christ-figures, the moral equivalents not simply of combatants but of the 'glorious dead'.

In 1914, George Swindell may not have wanted to join the RAMC; by 1919 the anonymous author of *A Mounted Brigade Field Ambulance in Peace and War* could write that the glory of his small, non-combatant unit, 'if it burnt with a lowlier flame, shone no less steadily than that of the famous regiments whose names are written in the history of the British (p.185) Army'.¹¹⁰ While the abject orderly never disappeared from the pages of the *Gazette* during the war, the four and a half years of conflict saw at least a partial transformation in the reputations of the men who formed the Royal Army Medical Corps from simply slackers in khaki to more complex figures laying claims to both martial and reparative masculine identities. In this their cultural representations develop on earlier narratives.¹¹¹ Yet the fact that they still had to fight against this image of compromised, abject masculinity throughout the war demonstrates the extent to which the status of the RAMC ranker in the eyes of the British public had failed to alter dramatically. The First World War did effect some noticeable change, with collective acts of carrying, cleaning, and caring—and the courage and resilience needed to do so in the context of war—acknowledged and even celebrated as appropriately masculine wartime endeavours. Nonetheless, the military medical serviceman, the uniformed non-combatant undertaking work increasingly culturally associated with women, would remain a problematic figure. In the war's aftermath he would become, at least initially, an increasingly forgotten one in the British memory and commemoration, only finding his place within that memory again in the changed cultural perceptions of wartime heroism of the early twenty-first century.

Notes:

(¹) Swindell, 'In Arduis Fidelus', p.1.

(²) Ibid., p.3.

(³) Ibid., p.72.

(⁴) Muir, *Observations of an Orderly*, pp.155-6.

(⁵) Ellis and Meyer, 'Introduction', p.5.

(⁶) Ugolini, *Civvies*, pp.307-12.

(⁷) Gullace, *Blood of Our Sons*, pp.49-50; Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, pp. 41-52.

⁽⁸⁾ Helen McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.4-5; Ilana Bet-El, 'Men and Soldiers: British Conscripts, Concepts of Masculinity and the Great War', in *Borderlines: Genders and Identities in War and Peace, 1870-1930*, ed. Billie Melman (London: Routledge, 1998), pp.73-94.

⁽⁹⁾ Graham Dawson defines the 'pleasure-culture of war' as 'Images and stories about military war ... [which] clearly provided pleasure and excitement for a very large number of men and boys' (Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, p.4). As Michael Paris has demonstrated, such images and stories were a fundamental part of pre-war British culture (Paris, *Warrior Nation*, ch. 3).

⁽¹⁰⁾ Beckett, *The Amateur Military Tradition*, p.213; Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-16* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp.19-20.

⁽¹¹⁾ Beckett, *The Amateur Military Tradition*, p.226; Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, pp.40-6.

⁽¹²⁾ Randle, letter to Mother and Father, 12 August 1914, Letters of David Randle McMaster.

⁽¹³⁾ Lois Bibbings points out that, while the dominant image of conscientious objectors in British culture during the war was as 'the antithesis of the soldier ... assumed to be selfish as opposed to self-sacrificing and a coward rather than a hero ... embody[ing] a whole range of unmanly qualities and ... frequently cast as shirking, lazy, spineless, un-Christian, unpatriotic and un-English/British', within communities of resistance to the war they 'were ... seen and saw themselves as patriots and heroes' (Bibbings, *Telling Tales About Men*, pp.89, 195).

⁽¹⁴⁾ Swindell, 'In Arduis Fidelus', pp.149-50.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Muir, *Observations of an Orderly*, p.214.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Meyer, *Men of War*, pp.141-5.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Carol Acton, 'Negotiating Injury and Masculinity in First World War Nurses' Writings', in *First World War Nursing*, ed. Fell and Hallett, p.124; Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War', in *Behind the Lines*, ed. Higonnet et al., pp.209-11.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Furneaux, *Military Men of Feeling*, pp.196-7.

⁽¹⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, pp.198, 216.

⁽²⁰⁾ Summers, *Angels and Citizens*, p.205; Chapter 1, pp.24-5.

(²¹) Campbell. *'The Army Isn't All Work'*, pp.104–5.

(²²) For discussion of the cultural significance of hospital journals in the provision of care in wartime, see Reznick, *Healing the Nation*, pp.65–98.

(²³) E. G. Doré, 'The Admirable Hammond', *Gazette of the 3rd London General* (February 1918): 121.

(²⁴) Gullace, *'Blood of Our Sons'*; Pennell, *A Kingdom United*.

(²⁵) Muir, *Observations of an Orderly*, p.153.

(²⁶) Chapter 2, pp.61–2.

(²⁷) Winter, *The Great War and the British People*, p.50.

(²⁸) Doctors were just as likely to have physical fitness requirements ignored as RAMC rankers, although for very different reasons. Officers in the corps were required to hold medical qualifications, severely limiting the potential pool of recruits and creating a particular manpower crisis which would dog the Corps throughout the war. (Whitehead, *Doctors in the Great War*, pp.32–59; Chapter 2, pp.55–6).

(²⁹) Muir, *Observations of an Orderly*, p.154.

(³⁰) Joanna Bourke defines shirking as 'a range of activities aimed at avoiding particular duties.' Malingering was 'the physical manifestation' of this phenomenon, which 'In peace and war, ... was regarded as an evasion of man's duty to the state and to other men.' (Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, p.78.)

(³¹) The performance of 'feminine' labour was regularly used to lampoon men as 'unmanly' in this period, particularly in anti-suffrage cartoons, where husbands of suffragettes were depicted cooking, cleaning, and childminding, usually badly, to emphasize the disruption to the natural order of separate spheres that female suffrage was deemed to represent. (Catherine H. Palczewski 'The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam: Visual Argument, Icons, and Ideographs in 1909 Anti-Woman Suffrage Postcards', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91 (2006): 365–94, DOI: 10.1080/00335630500488325.).

(³²) Christine E. Hallett, "'Emotional Nursing": Involvement, Engagement, and Detachment in the Writings of First World War Nurses and VADs', in *First World War Nursing*, pp. 94, 97; Watson, 'War in the Wards'.

(³³) Hallett, "'Emotional Nursing'", p.96.

(³⁴) Janet S. K. Watson, 'A Sister's War: The Diary of Alice Slythe', in *First World War Nursing*, ed. Fell and Hallett, p.107.

(³⁵) Chapter 2, p.71.

(³⁶) The Balladmonger, 'The Orderly', *Gazette of the 3rd London General* (April 1918): 178.

(³⁷) RAMC(T), untitled, *Gazette of the 3rd Southern General* (December 1917): 73.

(³⁸) Chapter 4, pp.125-6.

(³⁹) This posed another form of threat, as recuperating patients were often employed in orderly roles in hospitals. See Carden-Coyne, *The Politics of Wounds*, p.211.

(⁴⁰) P.A. and S.D. 'Femina Felina (Var. T.F.N.S.): The Woman of the Moment', *The 'Southern' Cross* 1 (July 1916): 150.

(⁴¹) A. Pirie, 'The Last Orderly', *Gazette of the 3rd London General Hospital* (October 1917): 20-1.

(⁴²) 'Conundrum', *The 'Southern' Cross* 1 (April 1916): 87.

(⁴³) 'Requisition Hints', *The 'Southern' Cross* 1 (August 1916): 179.

(⁴⁴) Tom Roberts, 'Examination Paper', *Gazette of the 3rd London General Hospital* (May 1917): 224.

(⁴⁵) Meyer, 'Separating the Men from the Boys': 4-8; Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.186-7.

(⁴⁶) Introduction, p.12.

(⁴⁷) Bibbings, *Telling Tales About Men*, pp.95-6.

(⁴⁸) *Ibid.*, pp.111-18.

(⁴⁹) Carden-Coyne, *The Politics of Wounds*, p.320.

(⁵⁰) Reznick, *Healing the Nation*, p.65.

(⁵¹) Acton, 'Negotiating Injury and Masculinity', p.124; Carden-Coyne, *The Politics of Wounds*, pp.242-9; Das, *Touch and Intimacy*, pp.206-14.

(⁵²) Watson, 'War in the Wards', 499-508.

(⁵³) Auxiliary Hospital, 'The Longer V.A.D. Catechism', *The 'Southern' Cross* 1 (August 1916): 174.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ For a discussion of the significance of military uniform to men's soldierly identity in wartime, see Ugolini, 'War-stained', 155-71. The particularly gendered nature of the identity associated with military uniform is demonstrated by the debates over the wearing of uniforms by women volunteering in auxiliary roles, as discussed by Lucy Noakes in "'Playing at Being Soldiers"?' in *British Popular Culture and the First World War*, pp.123-45. The issue of nurses' uniforms was less contentious, with both trained nurses' and VADs' uniforms being based on pre-existing designs.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ Muir, *The Happy Hospital*, pp.17-19.

⁽⁵⁶⁾ Muir, *Observations of an Orderly*, pp.213-14. The Bluebottles' uniforms shared their colour with the much despised 'hospital' or 'convalescent' blues worn by patients and which served to discipline and infantilize their wearers (Reznick, *Healing the Nation*, pp.99-112).

⁽⁵⁷⁾ Muir, *The Happy Hospital*, p.35.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ *Reports by the Joint Committees*, pp.109-12.

⁽⁵⁹⁾ Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, p.87. Uniforms were also important for military nurses as a symbol of their training, during which 'they learned the rules of uniform, practice, and behaviour by which a trained nurse could be recognized among her peers' (ibid., p.74.).

⁽⁶⁰⁾ Macpherson, *History of the Great War*, Vol. 1, p.219.

⁽⁶¹⁾ *Reports by the Joint Committees*, p.107.

⁽⁶²⁾ Ibid., p.81.

⁽⁶³⁾ Ugolini, 'War-stained': 163. Regimental and Field-Ambulance stretcher bearers additionally wore an armband or brassard emblazoned with a red cross when working in the field.

⁽⁶⁴⁾ *The 'Southern' Cross* 1 (February 1916): 45.

⁽⁶⁵⁾ 'The Stock Pot', *The 'Southern' Cross* 2 (May 1917): 132. The question of mistaken identity and the role of serviceman in wartime was an issue of no small anxiety in relation to military medical uniforms, or lack of them, throughout the war. Fears that service patients would use their lack of uniform to evade military discipline influenced the decision to introduce the uniform of 'convalescent blues' (Reznick, *Healing the Nation*, pp.103), while the dangers of misidentifying a disabled ex-serviceman in civilian clothes for a shirker could be used to undermine the moral authority of young women distributing white feathers to perceived shirkers (Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons*, pp.92-4).

- (⁶⁶) Whitehead, *Doctors in the Great War*, pp.11, 112.
- (⁶⁷) Randle, Letter to Mother and Father, 6 August 1914, Letters of David Randle McMaster.
- (⁶⁸) Randle, Letter to parents, undated, Letters of David Randle McMaster.
- (⁶⁹) Ibid.
- (⁷⁰) Muir, *The Happy Hospital*, pp.102-3.
- (⁷¹) Whitehead, *Doctors in the Great War*, pp.255-7; Watson, 'War on the Wards'.
- (⁷²) Meyer, *Men of War*, pp.155-6.
- (⁷³) Muir, *The Happy Hospital*, pp.102-3.
- (⁷⁴) Capell, 'Stretcher-Bearers on the Somme', *6th London Field Ambulance History*, p.1.
- (⁷⁵) Acton and Potter, *Working in a World of Hurt*, pp.33-4, 43-6.
- (⁷⁶) Capell, 'Stretcher-Bearers on the Somme', *6th London Field Ambulance History*, p.1.
- (⁷⁷) Ibid., p.5.
- (⁷⁸) Bennett, Diary, 15-20 August 1915, Papers of J. B. Bennett. On combatant diary records of shellfire, see Meyer, *Men of War*, p.54.
- (⁷⁹) Bennett, 'Memories of Gallipoli, Aug 1915-December 1915 at Sulva Bay and Anzac', pp.12-14, Papers of J. B. Bennett.
- (⁸⁰) Meyer, *Men of War*.
- (⁸¹) Carden-Coyne, *The Politics of Wounds*, pp.61-9; van Bergen, *Before My Helpless Sight*, p.401; Carol Acton and Jane Potter, "'These frightful sights would work havoc in one's brain": Subjective Experience and Trauma in First World War Writings by Medical Personnel', *Literature and Medicine* 30 (2012): 61-85, doi: 10.1353/lm.2012.0010.
- (⁸²) Ridsdale, Diary, 1-3 July 1916, Papers of Frank Ridsdale.
- (⁸³) J. C. Tait, MS diary, 1 June 1916, Papers of J. C. Tait, Documents.9897, IWM.
- (⁸⁴) Whyte, 'Memoirs of the Great War, 1914-18', p.20, Papers of A. L. G. Whyte.
- (⁸⁵) Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, pp.1-30.
- (⁸⁶) Swindell, 'In Arduis Fidelus', p.150.

(⁸⁷) Rob Thompson, "'By the leave o' the ground": The Engineers at Third Ypres', Leeds Legacies of War Seminar Series, 9 December 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coQ3wTU2ypc>, 38:15–40:30.

(⁸⁸) Midwinter, *1914–1919 Memoirs*, p.22.

(⁸⁹) Chase, *The 2/1st London Field Ambulance*, p.56.

(⁹⁰) Swindell, 'In Arduis Fidelus', p.95.

(⁹¹) W. D. Fothergill, TS memoir, p.4, LIDDLE/WWI/GS/0575, LC.

(⁹²) Fred Smith, *A Short History of the Royal Army Medical Corps*, 2nd edn (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, Ltd, 1931), p.82.

(⁹³) Smith, *A Short History of the Royal Army Medical Corps*, p.86. Smith gives the total number of awards made to the Corps as a whole during the course of the war as follows: 7 Victoria Crosses, 2 with bar; 499 Distinguished Service Orders, 25 with bar; 1,484 Military Crosses, 161 with bar, 22 with 2 bars, and 1 with three bars; 3 Albert Medals; 395 Distinguished Conduct Medals, 19 with bar; 3,002 Military Medals, 195 with bar, 4 with 2 bars; 1,111 Meritorious Service Medals, 1 with bar. He only publishes the citations of a small selection, however (p.67).

(⁹⁴) Rorie, *A Medico's Luck in War*, p.3.

(⁹⁵) Mark VII [Max Plowman], *A Subaltern on the Somme in 1916* (London: J. M. Dent and Son, 1927), pp. 100–1.

(⁹⁶) Chapter 3, pp.104–5. For full analysis of this episode, see Jessica Meyer, "'A Blind Man's Homecoming": Disability, Masculinity, and Medical Care-Giving in First World War Britain', in *Phallacies: Historical Intersections of Disability and Masculinity*, ed. Kathleen M. Brian and James W. Trent, Jr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp.153–70.

(⁹⁷) Meyer, *Men of War*, p.96.

(⁹⁸) Orderly, 'The Red Cross Knight', *The 'Southern' Cross* 1 (August 1916): 231, ll. 5–8.

(⁹⁹) 'Woodbine Willie' [Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy], 'To Stretcher Bearers', *More Rough Rhymes of a Padre* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1919), pp. 9–10, ll. 41–4.

(¹⁰⁰) Robert Service, 'The Stretcher Bearer', *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* (New York: Barse & Hopkins, 1916), ll. 9–16. Service served as a stretcher bearer and ambulance driver with the AFSU from September 1915 until the spring of 1916. He spent the winter of that year in Neuilly-sur-Seine, home of the American

Hospital, a voluntary unit caring for the casualties of the war. (James Mackay, *Vagabond of Verse: A Biography of Robert Service* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1995), pp.239-45.)

(¹⁰¹) Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 231-85; Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p.90.

(¹⁰²) A. E. Francis, *History of the 2nd/3rd East Lancashire Field Ambulance: The Story of a 3rd Line Territorial Unit, 1914-1919* (Salford: Francis Jackson, 1930), p.87.

(¹⁰³) Atkins, 'The R.A.M.C.', ll. 18-34.

(¹⁰⁴) Furneaux, *Military Men of Feeling*, pp.214-15.

(¹⁰⁵) Atkins, 'The R.A.M.C.'.

(¹⁰⁶) Charles Vivian, *With the Royal Army Medical Corps (R.A.M.C.) at the Front* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1914), pp.93-4.

(¹⁰⁷) Philip Dana Orcutt, *The White Road of Mystery: The Note-book of an American Ambulancier* (New York: John Lane Company, 1918), p.60.

(¹⁰⁸) Laura Boyd, 'Perception and reception: The status of British and French non-combatant men during the First World War', PhD diss., University of Leeds, n.d.

(¹⁰⁹) William Yorke Stevenson, *At the Front in a Flivver* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p.23.

(¹¹⁰) *A Mounted Brigade Field Ambulance in Peace and War* (1919?), p.47, C-40/MOU, LC.

(¹¹¹) Furneaux, *Military Men of Feeling*, pp.187-216.

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