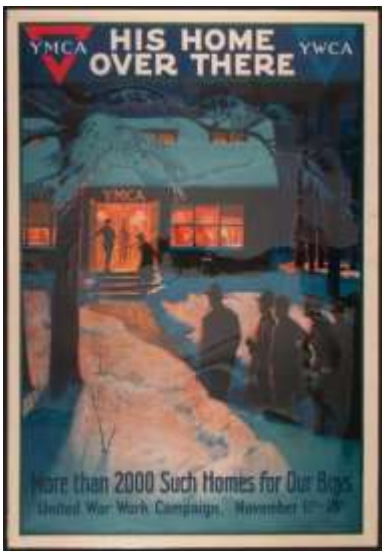
WINCHESTER Y MEN AT THE WESTERN FRONT

By Ellen Knight[1]

In 1918, Winchester bade farewell to its superintendent of schools, the principal of the Wadleigh Grammar School, and the minister of the Unitarian Church as they went off to the war in France.



Aged 46 to 51, they were too old for military service but not the Y.M.C.A., the main provider of welfare and support services to servicemen during the Great War. At a time when there was no U.S.O., the Y raised millions for welfare efforts and deployed many thousands of staff and volunteers to support the troops.

The volunteers often endured the same hardships as the troops, caught in skirmishes, surrounded by enemy fire, bombed from the air. When the World War I Honor Roll was unveiled, the names of the eight volunteers from Winchester who served with the Y were there, deservedly, along with the soldiers and sailors. Those who saw the longest and most perilous service were Superintendent Schuyler Herron, Principal Joseph Hefflon, and Rev. Joel H. Metcalf.

They went abroad to take charge of huts operated by the Y. Located at training camps and in the battle zones, these huts were the focal points for camp activities, serving as canteens, clubs, theaters, class and lecture rooms, chapels, and writing rooms. Millions of letters were written there on paper provided free by the Y.

As many Y.M.C.A. workers were not actually young men, the soldiers often called them “Pop,” though Metcalf said he was also called “Doc” and the “Y man.” The boys used the names affectionately. After Hefflon’s death, a comrade recalled, “He was ‘Pop’ Hefflon to us all. He won us from the first day he came to the Third Division. No tasks were too hard for him. If his path of duty led him on a midnight trip forth up to the front, he never faltered. His big sympathetic heart always responded when his ‘Buddies’ after long forced marches needed hot coffee or chocolate or smokes, even though it was far into the night, long past regular hours. Do you wonder that everybody loved him and called him ‘Pop’?”[2]

It was demanding and even dangerous work, volunteering with the Y.M.C.A. The first danger was crossing the Atlantic. About the time Hefflon and Herron were enjoying a farewell reception, word was received that Metcalf had arrived safely. The two educators were not so lucky.

TORPEDOED

On April 11, 1918, Hefflon and Herron left New York with a group of Y men on the S.S. *Orissa*. On

the last night of their journey, Hefflon wrote, he had retired but could not sleep. At 1:10 a.m., the ship was torpedoed.

"The explosion sounded like a dull, slightly ringing, hollow thud," he wrote. "The ship vibrated slightly, that is all. I proceeded with my dressing…when the signal to abandon ship was given….

"As I emerged onto the deck and stood by the boat, I noticed it was a lovely night – no wind, sea clam, a brilliant moon, slightly dimed by haze. There was no panic. We climbed into the boats and pulled away about 200 yards.

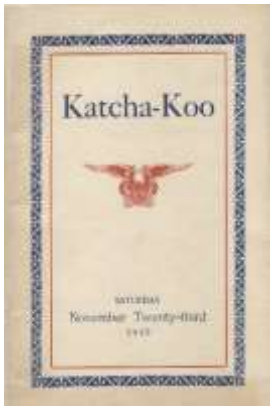
"Our boat got away without any difficulty. The sea was smooth and the moon at its full. One could see perfectly. Our ship…disappeared in about five minutes after we entered the boats."

Principal Joseph Hefflon

All the Y men survived and were picked up by destroyers which took them to the coast of Wales. There Hefflon, who had spent his adult life working with youth, got his first glimpse of young soldiers. "Those boyish faces had looked on sights no man ought to see, that ought to be impossible in a civilized world…they just gripped me and held me and choked up my throat."

Y WORK

All three men were attached to the Third Division of the American Expeditionary Force, and each was devoted to his boys. Metcalf commented that the Y man's duties were rather indefinite. "Each man went without particular orders except that he was expected to do what the occasion seemed to demand."



Winchester helped the Y men by raising funds, such as proceeds from this show

Metcalf was assigned "to a division of shock troops which was among the first to get into action," he wrote. He "followed them in all their movements, even into the trenches," *The Christian Register* reported.

When he had goods to sell, his duty was clear enough, but Metcalf said he was also asked to take care of valuables, help write letters, and translate love letters from French girls. He carried wounded soldiers, gave first aid, and assisted with evacuating the wounded. Y men also helped keep up morale.

"I took especial delight in proving that old men can do campaign work," Metcalf wrote. Before his division was called to Château-Thierry he had never marched a mile nor carried a pack, but he hiked all summer with the boys. "I think my marching with the doughboys was the most telling thing I did to keep up the morale…. When they were feeling the fatigue of the

march we would divert their minds by some foolishness or starting some marching-song… Often I have heard weary soldiers on the march say, 'I'm about all in, but if the 'old man' can stick it out, I don't see why in h--- we can't.'"

Later Metcalf worked at the replacement and prison camps near Paris, the former for newly arrived soldiers, the latter for those who had committed some crime such as going AWOL.

Herron was originally assigned as a hut secretary. "I have been with my men at the front and have lived with them in various forests in the open and in du gouts," he wrote in August. But once it was discovered that he had been a superintendent of schools, Herron was immediately requisitioned for reassignment as educational director. According to Metcalf, 15% of the Massachusetts recruits could not read or write, and 50% of men from some other localities were illiterate. Herron's work included voluntary classes for illiterate soldiers, classes in French, talks on topics such as history and international relations, and a central library.

Superintendent Schuyler Herron

Hefflon was in charge of a warehouse and the distribution of supplies. By partitioning off one end of the old French barracks used for a warehouse, he established a room where men from the front could go for a day or two of rest.

"There are four cots with mattresses and pillows. We even have running water and a bathtub. The water runs when one goes after it and fills the tank, and the bathtub is a tobacco tin about three feet square and a foot deep. Luxury! Absolute indecent luxury! When one has for shaving, bathing, and drinking purposes a quart and a half of water a day, as often happens, a coffee tank full of water and a tin bathtub with sharp edges appeals to him as an almost immoral self-indulgence."

In October, he also was reassigned and sent to Paris, but until then he put his all into his work "somewhere in France," while yet finding time to write long descriptive letters to the editor of *The Winchester Star.*

His letters along with Metcalf's writings[3] give vivid pictures of life at the Western Front.

DUGOUTS

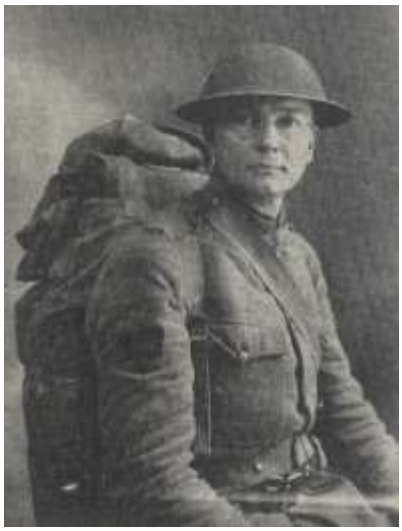
"Everyone lives in dugouts," Hefflon wrote. "Dugouts are of various sizes, shapes, depth and smell. They may be thirty feet underground constructed of concrete and entered by a passageway permitting a man to walk erect. This is a dugout de luxe….

"Then there is the common or garden variety of dugout consisting of a hole in the bank with an opening about two feet in diameter, widening out to three or four feet and five or six feet in depth. This form of dugout has one advantage over the first mentioned. It is entered much more

expeditiously. You dive into it. No sir, you did not crawl. You dive. When those eccentric H.E.'s [high explosives] begin dropping about you, you have but one thought, one desire, one fond hope, to find that hole still open.… At precisely six feet from the opening you throw yourself flat on the ground and slide through the hole. The nature of the soil facilitates and expedites this manner of entrance. The soil is clay which, when it rains, becomes a soft slippery mud of about the consistency of heavy machine oil."

UNDER FIRE

In June, Metcalf was in a little wood south of the Marne River with mingled American and French infantry men. After some shells passed far overhead, one fell in their midst about fifty yards away from Metcalf, who saw it explode. "The effect on the men was striking. The French covered their dead, carried off their wounded…and drove away as though it was a matter of course and all in the day's work. The effect on our boys was quite different. For a few minutes some of them flew around like a covey of partridges when the hunter fires his first shot… But this lasted a moment…. The conduct of the officers and the majority of the men was admirable. One of our lieutenants, though hit himself, insisted on helping me give first aid to another before he allowed me even to look at his wound. We all scurried to our holes in the ground, carrying our wounded with us… Late into the darkness, we could hear the German aeroplanes, like a swarm of angry bees, trying to spot our shelter."



Rev. Metcalf in his YMCA uniform. "After this war," the chief of his division wrote, "I am going to tell your wife and daughter and in fact all the good people of Winchester of your tremendous service when only brave men stood in their places."

SURVIVING A SHELLING

While accompanying a load of supplies up to the front (or as close to the front as they dared go), Hefflon entered a French town where a man running past yelled, "'Get on your gas masks; they're throwing gas shells!'…

"No sooner had his words penetrated my inner consciousness than I had the mask on and was running for that gateway….and crouched behind it against the wall. Meanwhile a truckload of soldiers had come up and the Lieutenant in charge hustled them into the park and told them to scatter and find cover, while he himself stood in that gateway through all that followed calmly conversing with a brother officer and shouting at his men to keep under cover and keep their masks on – and to do it he must have had his own mask off.

"I take off my hat to that Lieutenant. If all American officers are like him you need not worry about the American Army being well led." And then the shells came fast in an almost continuous

stream. After each explosion, “one heard a rain of branches or tiles or plaster or a mixture of all falling and then the whistle in the distance and repeat. These were high explosive shells of large caliber fire from a distance of two or three miles…. They passed over at no great height.” After one explosion, “it seemed like a gigantic hammer weighing millions of tons striking the earth directly under me.”

After a 30-minute bombardment they delivered their supplies. “And that sort of thing is going on every night along this front. Our drivers are hunting out Y.M.C.A. secretaries with their units and passing on through them to the soldier boys their extra comforts, their reading materials, and giving them the touch of home so far as they can.”

DESOLATION

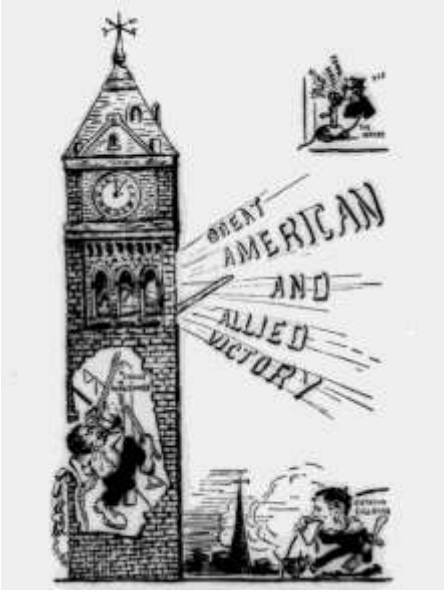
A couple months later, Hefflon wrote, “The beautiful little town where we waited for death is now a ghastly ruin…. Far and wide, over the valley as far as the eye could distinguish, one saw broken roofs and shell holes everywhere. It seems to me that literally millions of shells must have been poured into that valley. Along the road that we were following, on each side were craters varying in size from 2 feet to 30 feet…. And this condition exists for miles….

“The beautiful church is ruined, the chateau unroofed and its upper stories gone, and the great century-old trees, bare skeletons with uplifted shuttered arms…. And it was up this road…for three days and two nights our trucks and camionettes were carrying up supplies and taking out wounded.”

TURNING POINT

In July 1918, the Allies resisted a German offensive near the Marne River and then launched a major counterattack, beginning the steady Allied advance which led to the Armistice with Germany in November.

Metcalf was at Belleau Wood in June and the second Battle of the Marne in July. At one point, he wrote, the French shouted to the Americans, as they arrived, to get away quickly. “Instead of retreating, we advanced and fought the battle which centered around Belleau woods. We relieved the marines for six days, so you can see I was right in it. In the day time I carried supplies into the woods, alone and with runners, and at night we sold supplies in the ‘Y.’ This place got several hundred 8-inch shells every day. They simply peppered the ‘Y.’ It got so every time I walked out, I made up my mind just what hole or depression in the ground I would drop into when I heard a shell (you can hear them 5 or 6 seconds).”



Victory Celebration – On July 17, when news of the great Allied victory at the Second Battle of the Marne in France was announced to Winchester residents, it was accompanied by a great din. Promptly at noon, the fire alarm opened with its bell and whistle and was quickly followed by all the factories of Winchester and Woburn. Added to that was the sound of the big bell in the Town Hall, which pealed for five minutes.

After the war, the Rev. Joel Metcalf spoke to Winchester audiences about his experiences at that battle.

GASSED

"The second battle of the Marne, that is, the German offensive beginning on the night of July 14, was a tremendous effort on their part," Metcalf wrote. "For two nights previous, I had carried chocolate to the men on the bank of the river, and for weeks they had not fired a shot and their trenches in plain sight of where I was seemed deserted. We shelled them all the time with a strafing that must have done some damage.

"At 12:15 Monday night without an instant's warning they opened with a crash on a 50 mile front. It was the most terrible thing imaginable. Like a thunderstorm and a sudden fall of rain, the heavens seemed to drop steel everywhere for 10 miles back of our lines. I was in bed (that is on the floor) with my shoes off when the first shells fell. By the time I got my coat on and shoes and got to the door, the court yard was raining shells, so I rushed through the chateau, smashed open a window on the lee side of the shells and tumbled into a dugout with about 24 others who were there. The air reeked with gas, high explosive and mustard.

"Imagine me, the tears running out of my eyes from gas, crouching in a corner sitting on a nail (two nails in fact) gasping for breath, the mask cutting my ears and forehead till they ached. We sat thus for 9 mortal hours, like Paul, praying for the day and the end of the bombardment, while the wild roar of the shrieking death continued outside.

"At 12 o'clock the worst was over, and we came out of our holes in the ground, to find the chateau, except the lower stories, in ruins and many of our company dead and wounded.
"I helped in first aid all that day. The only things to eat were the Y.M.C.A. stuff which we gave them, the wounded and unwounded, without money and without price, chocolate and crackers– all that we had.

"The next day the doctor gave me charge of evacuating the wounded. It was somewhat exposed, so I got two taps (one on the head dented my helmet, and a piece of shrapnel went through my coat), but I was lucky and wasn't hurt. After it was all over, and as I had not slept for three nights, I went back ten miles for a night's rest and returned next morning.

"Then I was given a few days to rest up.…The doctor called it a mild case of shell shock. It was only because I was so mortally tired I could not eat or sleep, so when I came back to Paris the doctor told me I could never go to the front again, but I went once and stood it finely for two months, sharing all the hardships with the boys. I would not take anything for my experiences. I would give a year of my life for it – or, if duty demanded, all of it."

THE GLORY OF WAR

"The glory of war is all in the imagination," Metcalf wrote after the war. "We saw the regimental flag at a review that was held a few days before we went forward. After that I know not where they put it in storage.

"We had a fine regimental band, but the players left their instruments behind and joined the medical corps as stretcher bearers. I have heard many intelligent officers say they could see no glory in dying like animals in the mud.

"Some who were 'over there' were most struck with the fearful monotony and irksome routine of army life. I was most impressed with the heartbreaking fatigue of it all. One has to be a combination of a porter on an African exploring expedition and a ditch-digger."

A DEATH IN PARIS

Undoubtedly Hefflon rejoiced when the Armistice was signed, but the news that came to Winchester from France was unexpectedly sad. Weakened through the exposure of service at the front, Hefflon contracted pneumonia.[4] Attended by June Root, a nurse of the Army Nurse Corps who hailed from Winchester,[5] Hefflon died on Jan. 6, 1919 at the Red Cross Hospital in Neuilly, a suburb of Paris. Metcalf cabled the news home.

As a mark of respect, the flags in Winchester were flown at half mast, and Wadleigh School students were dismissed during the day. "Winchester can ill afford to lose this estimable gentleman," the *Star* editor wrote, "an exceptional man, beloved by all."

Herron survived, but having resigned and been replaced as superintendent he did not return to Winchester. Metcalf resumed his ministry in Winchester but went back to Europe in 1920 to assist with the rebuilding of churches in Hungary. On his return, he moved to Maine before dying in 1925.

The names of “Pop” Hefflon, “Pop” Herron, “Doc” Metcalf and other Y.M.C.A. volunteers are memorialized on the WWI Roll of Honor. Beyond that, their writings still speak vibrantly for them, recalling their experiences, condemning war, praising the American and French spirit, and testifying of what Herron himself said, that “the heroes of this war are not all soldier boys.”

---

[1] This article © 2019 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on May 22 and May 23, 2018. This article supersedes all previous articles.

[2] *Winchester’s War Records*, p. 56.

[3] Metcalf quotations are taken from his articles in *The Christian Register*.

[4] Including Hefflon, eighteen men who enlisted from Winchester died in the service. Ten were killed in action, one was killed in a post-Armistice plane crash, and seven succumbed to illness, mostly influenza and/or pneumonia.

[5] Root, a member of WHS Class of 1912, took an extended course in nursing in New York City and upon completion offered her services as a Red Cross nurse. She was chosen to be one of a unit of picked nurses for service in the war zone, probably leaving the country in February 1918.