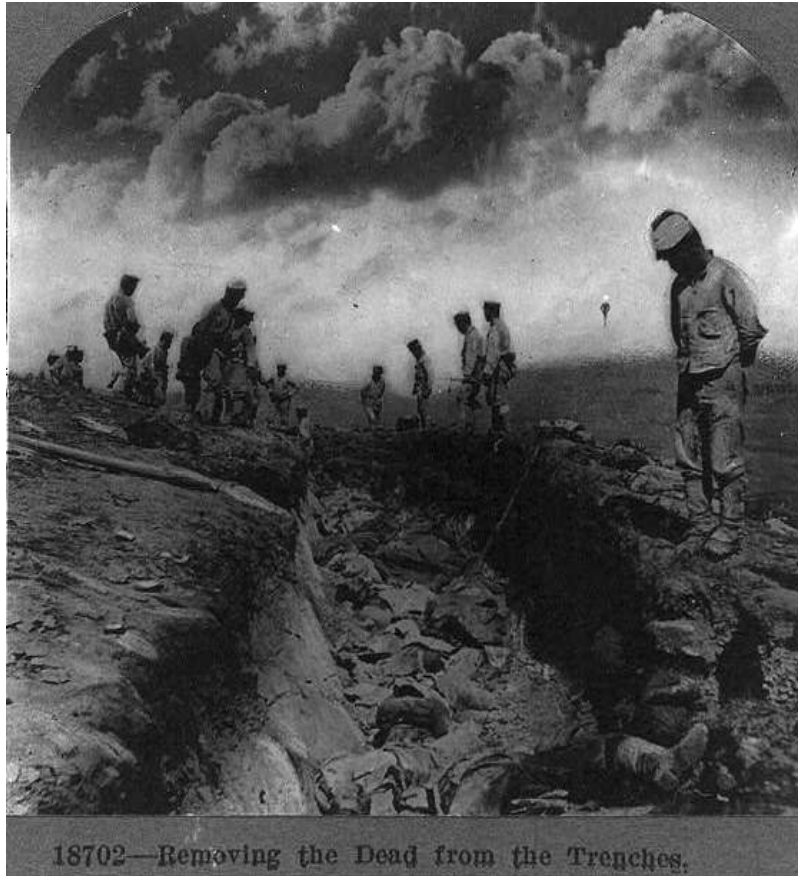


# IOWA HISTORY



18702—Removing the Dead from the Trenches.

(Courtesy Library of Congress)

## **Iowa Girl in the Trenches**

“I went to the war because those whom I loved were in the war. I wished to go where they were,” Helen Hayes Gleason explained.

The Coe College graduate and Cedar Rapids native was talking about her reasons for spending a year on the front lines in Europe during the Great War, or World War I as it later became known. A music major, Gleason was studying in France when war broke out in Europe in 1914. At first the sight of soldiers in their smart dress uniforms on the boulevards of Paris was exciting to Gleason and her friends.

“But rarely again did I see that display of fine feathers,” she said. “Their clothing took on the soberer colors and weather-worn aspect of the life which was no sunny boulevard affair, but an enduring of wet trenches and slimy roads.”

Gleason quickly volunteered for war duty and was sent to Belgium. As a member of an ambulance corps on the front lines, Gleason saw life in the trenches firsthand. She and two other women lived in a cellar of a bombed-out cottage in a Belgian village near the French border.

They slept in sleeping bags piled on top of straw. They cooked soups and hot chocolate for the fighting men.

At 5:30 every morning the women set out for the trenches with their wares for the soldiers, who were wet and freezing after a night in the mud and slush. As they made their way to the front lines in the dark early morning, a sentinel stopped them and asked for a password. They followed him to the men who waited eagerly for the hot nourishment.

“We are in the front trenches with the mitrailleuse (guns) ahead of us about 200 yards,” Gleason said. “The men are grateful; it does your heart good to see them.”

When Gleason wasn’t cooking and risking her life serving food to the men, she was helping tend the wounded and dying. And sometimes it meant caring for the enemy.

“There stood a gray motor car, a wounded German in the back seat, his hands riddled, the car shot through, with blood in the bottom from two dead Germans.”

“I realized the power of the bullet, which had penetrated the driver, the padded seat, the sheet metal and splintered the wood of the tonneau,” she recalled.

As Gleason described her experiences, she left little to the imagination. She recounted men returning from the front lines who had been “herded into the train cars for twelve hours.” She said they were happy just to have “great hunks of hot meat, bread and cigarettes.” She described another train bringing 900 wounded men to the makeshift hospital.

“The Belgians had been shot to pieces,” she explained. The wounded men arrived with bandaged heads and “only the eyes showing, stumps of arms flapping a welcome.”

For her work Gleason was awarded the Order of Leopold by the king of Belgium. It is the highest honor and is awarded for extreme bravery and service of “immense benefit” to the Belgian nation. The British War Office awarded her their coveted “1914 Star” for bravery.

The awards were glorious reminders of the work Helen Hayes Gleason had done, but she had other memories that remained with her also.

“In those early days, the hum of a shell seemed no more than the chattering of sparrows. That was the way with all my impressions of war—first a flash, a spectacle, later a realization, and experience,” she said. “War is raw and chaotic.”

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