

# AMERICAN AMBULANCE HOSPITAL PARIS

Isobel Mary Watts

1883-1973

As German troops crushed French resistance and pushed across the border into France in August 1914, the expatriate American colony living in Paris created a volunteer ambulance service. Within days they were evacuating wounded from the front to the American Hospital in Paris. That hospital had been founded at Neuilly in 1906, but as it was soon overwhelmed an annex, dubbed the 'Ambulance Section'<sup>1</sup>, was quickly established in the nearby 40-room Lycée Pasteur<sup>2</sup> in Neuilly Park; a facility then still under construction.

Completing the facility, then equipping, staffing and operating both the hospital and the ambulance service were all fully financed by donations from the American community in Paris and their supporters in the United States. The facility was staffed by 16 physicians and surgeons, 30 trained nurses and 10 nursing assistants (all female), and 40 male attendants, "*nearly all from excellent American families*".<sup>3</sup> Personnel were all volunteers, receiving only accommodation, meals and a small stipend. The staff was "*nearly*" but not "*all*" American. Among the nurses was Canadian Isobel Mary Watts.

Watts was born on April 15, 1883 in North Burgess Township near Perth, one of eight children born to William Watts (1855-1919) and Elizabeth Maggie McKay (1855-1927).<sup>4</sup> She grew up in North Burgess and was educated in her local rural school and at Perth Collegiate Institute. Where she received her medical training is uncertain, but she probably studied at one of the hospital schools in New York, Philadelphia or Boston, as did so many Canadian women of the era. Most volunteers for the American Ambulance Hospital were drawn from teaching hospitals in New England.

Nursing Sister Watts arrived in Paris just as the American Ambulance Hospital commenced full operation in September 1914. Most volunteer staff worked 90 day rotations and then returned to their regular employment in the United States. After one or two tours of duty at the American Ambulance Hospital, Watts however transferred to the 22<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital, at Camiers, Pas-de-Calais, on the English Channel in northwestern France. A base hospital, serving primarily the British and Canadian Armies, the 22<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital was staffed by medical teams from Western Reserve University (Cleveland) and Harvard University (Boston). Watts joined the Harvard contingent.

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'ambulance' in French has as its primary meaning a 'military hospital'.

<sup>2</sup> A secondary school.

<sup>3</sup> Emile Berr, *Figaro*, September 21, 1914

<sup>4</sup> Albert (b.1877), Eurette (b.1877), Isobel Mary (1880-1973), Frances/Fanny (b.1884), George McKay (1886-1965), Reuben W. (1889-1974), Bertha/Bella May (1892-1970) and Harold T. (1894-1974)

## AMERICAN AMBULANCE HOSPITAL IN PARIS

The members of the Committee and the American Chamber of Commerce in Paris in appealing to you for your contributions to the American Ambulance Hospital, believe that every American will be proud of the work of humanity that is being done by their compatriots and will wish to aid. Whatever you send will be gratefully received. Mail your contributions to J. P. Morgan & Co., 23 Wall Street, New York, who will remit the money by cable to Paris. Within a few hours after it is received it is relieving actual distress on the battlefield or in the hospital.



THE AMERICAN AMBULANCE HOSPITAL IN PARIS



SHOWING AMBULANCE DETAILS



HEAD NURSE AND TWO ASSISTANTS



THE "FLEET" OF FORD AMBULANCES

After 15 month's duty at Paris and Camiers, Watts returned to Canada. The *Perth Courier* of January 26, 1917, mentions that "Nursing Sister Isobel M. Watts paid a short visit to her parents Mr. and Mrs. William Watts of town last week" and then, on March 2, 1917, that Miss Watts "has been home on leave for a month in Canada with her parents and at other points and returns overseas this week. She has received an appointment with the Canadian Army Medical Corps and is returning overseas as a member of that unit which is doing such great work for the wounded". On January 18, 1917, on her way home to Perth, Isobel Mary Watts had enlisted in the CAMC at Montreal.



Although now a Nursing Sister with the CAMC, Watts returned to duty at the 22<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital, Camiers, serving there until the hospital ended operations in January 1919. She returned to the United States and employment as a nurse at New York. She became a naturalized American citizen in 1932.

In 1953 Isobel Watts established the J. R. Watts Memorial Scholarship at Queen's University, Kingston, to be awarded on the basis of academic excellence to students studying theology at the School of Religion. The scholarship is awarded to a student at the end of their first or second year of study with the highest overall standing in the field of Practical Studies.

Isobel Mary Watts died at the age of 83 years at Miami, Florida, on March 18, 1973. She never married.

- Ron W. Shaw (2014)