

Amherst in War: The Black Cats of Amherst

These are the notes I used for a panel session entitled 'Amherst in War' that took place at Amherst College on May 26, 2018 as part of the alumni reunion festivities. I was joined on the panel by Bob Brock, class of 1968, and Paul Rieckhoff, class of 1998. The panel was moderated by Katharine Whittemore, senior writer for the college, and took place in Johnson Chapel.



Exactly 100 years ago in May of 1918, a U.S. Army ambulance unit was stationed in Bussy-le-Château, in the northeast of France, supporting the French 5th Infantry against attacks from the German army. The core of the group had been formed at Amherst College in June of 1917. They had trained at Camp Crane in Allentown, Pennsylvania and shipped to France on a steamer called the San Jacinto. This ambulance unit adopted the name the Black Cats. My grandfather, Hugh Hamilton, class of 1920, joined this unit at the end of his freshman year along with a handful of his classmates. My grandfather kept a diary, and that, along with other documents, provided my introduction to the Black Cats.

Though the fighting had been going on for several years, when freshman arrived in the fall of 1916, the United States was still on the sidelines. The U.S. did not declare war until April of 1917 and the first U.S. troops did not arrive in France until a couple of months later. That being said, there were American volunteers involved in the conflict prior to that time. The first Amherst man to die in World War 1 was Merrill Stanton Gaunt. He died in April of 1916 while serving with a volunteer ambulance unit. You'll see his name inscribed near the center of the monument on Memorial Hill.

By early 1917 the mood on campus was a mix of patriotism and caution. If you read the Amherst Student of the time, you might think that the biggest impact of the war was whether athletic teams would be able to continue to play despite the loss of their stars to the military. The president at the time, Alexander Meiklejohn, was on the side of caution. Here's how the school newspaper, The Amherst Student, quoted him in February of 1917:

The essential defect of the American young man is the lack of a sense of what is worth doing. War has that glamour that attracts youth; but the arts of peace are far more worth while.

The fine thing about the present situation is the confidence that we will not go to war unless we have to. "Let us be free, honest, unfettered in our opinions. Let us wait for those in charge to tell us what to do, and then do it."

Well, students weren't buying it. There was a huge exodus. By the end of the college year in June about half of the student body had withdrawn.

In May of 1917 my grandfather wrote a letter to then Secretary of State Robert Lansing, an 1886 Amherst graduate. Grandpa wanted to know what

advice Lansing might have for a college student. Lansing's response, which was published in the Amherst Student, was brief and to the point:

This country has but one great national purpose at the present time and that is to prosecute the war with Germany with all the strength and vigor it possesses. Nothing else matters. Individual interest and benefit must be subordinated to this supreme purpose. I cannot conceive of a young man hesitating between study for his own benefit and responding to his country's call. One is founded on selfishness; the other, on sacrifice. Can a young man of lofty ideals and vision remain for a moment undecided?

With these words ringing in his ears, my grandfather, and about thirty other men, many undergraduates, two recent alumni, two professors (who were also alumni) all enlisted to form an ambulance unit. The group included four men with local or New England ties. After about two months of training, they sailed for France.

The lieutenant in charge of the Black Cats was a recent University of Virginia law school graduate named John Bocock. Here's what he wrote about life in an ambulance unit:

One might think ambulance work, at best, to be a funereal sort of work, but that is not true. It was rather a work of reconstruction, this snatching of the wrecks of the war from the very jaws of its hell, and carrying them as speedily as possible to a safe place where they might be made whole. We could take our light Fords very close to the line, and we always went along with the infantry; sometimes as far as regimental headquarters, and sometimes beyond. It got to be rather impersonal work, too, though one never got so accustomed to it that the groans were not a continual wear on the nerves. If a man died in the car, the driver did not brood over it; death was one of the ordinary incidents of the work; it might come to any of us at any moment. A broken spring was a serious matter. It meant the impairment of the service; it might mean that the wounded would have to wait, and this must not be. We did no medical work. Our problem was simply one of transportation. We risked our lives, and many men of the Service gave their lives, in the effort to save others. It was sometimes terribly hard, but it was never a gloomy task.

The Black Cats of Amherst were involved in three major engagements during the last year of the war. Many members of the unit were awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French, and the unit also received multiple commendations,

allowing them to wear the prestigious fourragère along with their Croix de Guerre medals. If you want to see what a fourragère and a Croix de Guerre look like, you can see an original up the street at the University of Massachusetts. There you will find Fred Waugh's uniform top with these decorations. UMass, or Mass Agricultural College, as it was known at the time also contributed a few members, including Waugh. There were town folk from Amherst and the surrounding towns too, and so while this group is called the Black Cats of Amherst, it's not just an Amherst College story.

I have spent quite a few days over the past six months in the basement of Frost library. The archive there has diaries, letters, and other documents related to the Black Cats. One of the most moving documents is a diary written by a Congregational minister named Stoddard Lane. Lane graduated with the class of 1909 and was married and working at a church in Bogota, New Jersey when his wife died not long after giving birth to a son, Stoddard, Jr. Lane left his son with relatives and enlisted in the army. As an aside, the Black Cats actually had two ministers among its roster and would generate a couple more after the war.

Here is a quote from Stoddard Lane's diary in October of 1918 as the end of the war approached:

We began to move up as the attack commenced on October 13th. It began with a simply tremendous barrage – a terrific thing. Work began with a vengeance. Every day we moved up, traveling roads that had just been fought over, with fresh shell-holes in them, trees across them, dead horses alongside them, and sometimes dead men. Progress was rapid. After the taking of an important city the first day, the division advanced by jumps. Following up, we sometimes changed posts two or three times a day. We had all sorts of quarters – a shell-ridden farmhouse, a chateau, the vegetable cellar of a town house, the floor of an inn, etc. And what a welcome we got! Everywhere it was the same – people wild with joy at being liberated. Never shall forget our entrance into a city near here. The Boches had cleared out just the night before. Mine happened to be the first of the cars to enter. It was a triumphal entry. Could hardly get though the crowds. Everybody shouting “Vive la France!” “Welcome to our saviours!”

What stays with me as I think about the Black Cats is the way they put patriotism and love of France ahead of their own lives. They weren't

exceptional either in the college or the United States as a whole, but they certainly did represent the mood of the nation in 1917.

On a lighter note, here's a poem written by one of the Black Cats, a guy named Joe Lyman (Amherst class of 1919) who ended up as the editor of the Daily Hampshire Gazette after the war. In this poem, Lyman will mention someone named Mitchell, that's Donald Mitchell, his sergeant, another member of the class of 1919, and he will use the word 'Boches,' a slang term for the Germans. Also, (and this is a bit of a spoiler alert, or maybe just a regular alert) there's a pun in the last line of the poem that depends on the word 'shellfire,' so listen for that. Here it is:

A Letter to Dad by Joe Lyman
"My life as a cook for the section
Is dull," I told 'Mitch', with a grunt,
"I see but the verbal reflection
Of all that goes on at the front."
(Perhaps to improve the gang's diet)
He sent me next day to a poste
Where action thus far had been quiet,
With shells in the background, at most.
But Burns made a true observation
On plans, both of mice and of men;
And I heard some real detonation
Before I saw Mitchell again.
The Boches must have known my ambition
And wished me to sample their ire—
That night they raised Holy Perdition,
And tried to baptize me with fire.
Their shells gave me intimate greeting—
My hair stiffened under my hat;
July Fourth is a calm Quaker meeting
Beside a bombardment like that.
I'm writing intact and quite well, sire,
But I've seen sufficient—I guess
The fellow who first christened "shell-fire"
Prefixed a superfluous "s".

You may wonder why the unit chose a black cat as their symbol. I don't know the answer for sure, but it is clear that they saw it as a good luck charm, maybe a contrarian one, though in some places (like England) black cats are not associated with bad luck. The unit was actually quite lucky. Only one member was wounded (and he recovered well enough to play football for Columbia University after the war). A few men in the unit were gassed, but not too seriously. Other ambulance units suffered higher casualty rates than the Black Cats, who attributed their good fortune to 'black cat luck.'

Before I close, I wonder if there are any Black Cat descendants in the audience, if so, would you raise your hands?* I look forward to meeting you after the presentation. Also, if anyone is interested in seeing the Black Cat's unit history, the archive in the basement of Frost Library will be open until 4 pm and they have a copy set out for visitors to look at. It's an amazing document and certainly worth a look.

Thank you and I look forward to taking your questions during the Q&A period.

**Linda Bryant, granddaughter of Black Cat Harold Allen, attended the presentation with her husband.*

