



## The Rolls-Royce Ambulance and the The American Volunteer Ambulance Corps in World War I

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The chassis of Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost 53AB completed testing and left the factory in January 1914. It was delivered to the English firm of Barker where a limousine body was fitted. The finished car was then transported via the French Rolls-Royce agency to the first owner, Parisian M. Marcellin. It provided luxurious travel for its passengers in the streets of Paris in the middle years of 1914. A natural and gentile habitat for a Rolls-Royce, though that would soon change dramatically.

In August 1914 war broke out in Europe and Silver Ghost 53AB was destined to convey wounded soldiers. In October 1914 it was fitted with an ambulance body and carried about 5,000 French wounded over some of the worst roads and lived mostly in the open during its three years of service to 1917. In its new inhospitable environment Silver Ghost 53AB would earn a rare, if not unique, distinction for a Rolls-Royce. It was decorated with the French Croix de Guerre. This award was created in 1915 and was commonly bestowed on foreign military forces allied to France.

***Above and inset:*** 1914 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost, chassis 53AB, was fitted with this ambulance body in October 1914 and joined Richard Norton's American Volunteer Ambulance Corps. It belonged to a section that was decorated with the French Croix de Guerre. The square-cross medal on two crossed swords hanging from a ribbon is depicted on the side of its ambulance body. [John Fasal and Bryan Goodman, 'The Edwardian Rolls-Royce', Volume II, page 718]



*Left: Richard Norton (1872-1918) founded the American Volunteer Ambulance Corps. Seems he was following in the humanitarian footsteps of his father, Charles Eliot Norton (1827-1908), who was a Harvard professor, progressive social reformer and a liberal activist. [Smithsonian American Art Museum via Wikimedia Commons]*

One might have expected that Silver Ghost 53AB ambulance would be assigned to the British army. However, when British troops landed in France in August 1914 they were only provided with horse-drawn ambulances. The army authorities refused to sanction the use of motor ambulances despite repeated appeals for them by Sir Alfred Keough, Director-General of the Army Medical Services. Keough knew of their value because the Royal Army Medical Corps had motor ambulances as early as 1905. But motor ambulances had not been used in war and the British military hierarchy was not about to start experimenting with them now. Or as Bird & Hallows put it in 'The Rolls-Royce Motor Car', "The European armies had made only tentative steps towards mechanization and, characteristically, the English War Office had sedulously averted their eyes from the mechanical vehicle."

While the British military authorities prevaricated, Richard Norton, an American archaeologist and art academic, took the initiative. He organised and headed up the Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps to operate in France. Silver Ghost 53AB ambulance was assigned to Norton's group and was part of one of the early deployments of motor ambulances in the war.

Norton's decision to use motor ambulances was prescient. The inability of the horse-drawn ambulances to deal quickly with the huge number of casualties produced by the intensity of modern warfare soon became distressingly obvious. At the same time as Norton's Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps got underway in France the London newspaper 'The Times' appealed for ambulance funds in October 1914.

Other Americans living in Paris including the US ambassador and wealthy donors such as Anne Vanderbilt established the American Ambulance Hospital at Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris on 9 August 1914. It was a military hospital and the “Ambulance” in the title is somewhat confusing because in France its meaning is more akin to that of a military hospital than an emergency vehicle. The original American Hospital had been founded in 1906.



**Above:** This image is from an illustrated circular from October 1914. It was distributed in the United States to raise funds for the American Ambulance Hospital. [From the collections of the Boston Medical Library]

In the latter part of 1914 and early 1915, three distinct ambulance units emerged with American connections: the American Volunteer Ambulance Corps of Richard Norton; the Harjes Formation or Morgan-Harjes Ambulance Corps founded by Henry Herman Harjes, a French-born American banker in Paris, who had been brokering loans for the Allied cause, and became head of the American Red Cross in France; and, the third, A Piatt Andrew formed the American Ambulance Field Service in April 1915, the name later shortened in 1916 to American Field Service.

**Right:** *Henry Herman Harjes (1872-1926). [Editor, Michael Hanlon, 'Roads to the Great War']*



**Below:** *Abram Piatt Andrew Jr. (1873-1936) an American economist and politician. He travelled to France in December 1914 to volunteer with the American Ambulance Hospital. Supported and encouraged by the hospital, Andrew founded and became the director of the American Ambulance Field Service in April 1915. Pictured here with a future director Stephen Galatti. [Editor, Michael Hanlon, 'Roads to the Great War']*



Richard Norton was in Boston when war broke out. He went to London and then Paris to see how he could be of service. At the American Ambulance Hospital he saw hundreds of wounded soldiers who had been left for days on the battlefields. Drawn into the chaos of care for the wounded, Norton organized a volunteer unit of ten motor ambulances in London, paying for it out of his own funds, and staffed mainly by American volunteers. With the approval of the London War Office, the unit went to France in October 1914 with the British Red Cross, which helped underwrite some of Norton's operating costs. Norton had allied his Corps with the British Red Cross after the American Ambulance Hospital refused to sponsor it. The hospital was initially unwilling to develop a large ambulance wing, though they subsequently relented and sponsored the American Ambulance Field Service.

*'The American Register and Anglo-Colonial World'* of 29 November 1914 reported on the American Motor Ambulance Corps, "Professor Richard Norton, the distinguished archaeologist of Harvard University, .... commencing with only four ambulances, since increased to fifteen ... (assisted) upwards of nine hundred wounded." The article concluded with details of how donations could be made.

By June 1915 the American Motor Ambulance Corps had 25 ambulances and during 1917 the Corps had grown to 12 sections, each composed of 20 ambulances and 40 stretcher bearers.

Norton's relationship with the British Red Cross eventually became strained as he found his sponsor inflexible and administratively cumbersome. So by December 1915 he had joined Harjes and forged a link with the American Red Cross instead. The Harjes and Norton corps merged into one ambulance unit, the Norton-Harjes Formation under the American Red Cross banner. By 1917 they had 300 ambulances and 600 American volunteer drivers.

The *'Leicester Daily Post'* of 20 April 1917 carried this item from New York, "Mr. Robert W. Goelet, of New York, has given 250,000 dollars to the Harjes-Norton American Ambulance, to be used to equip two additional sections for service in France. Mr. Eliot Norton (Richard's brother), in announcing the gift, states that 11 volunteers have already sailed for France, and the first additional sections will commence operations about May 1<sup>st</sup>."

Most of the efforts of the Americans supported the French, however, Henry Harjes in 1917 donated 40 ambulances to Serbia. They were delivered by the American Red Cross Committee through the French authorities.

After America entered the war in April 1917 the volunteer ambulance organisations amalgamated in October 1917 into the United States Army Ambulance Service. At the time of the handover, the American Field Service comprised almost 1,000 ambulances with some 1,200 volunteers and the combined Norton-Harjes Formation had 300 ambulances and 600 men.



**Above:** Ford Model T ambulances of the American Ambulance Field Service, before the name changed to American Field Service, on their way to Villers from Reims, France. [G W Osgood Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan]

**Right:** An American Field Service ambulance with the French army. [Tennessee Virtual Archive 33152]



**Below right:** Norton-Harjes officers gathered in front of a fleet of American Red Cross ambulances. [National Library of Medicine 101674109]

**Below:** A 1917 advertisement encouraging men to join the American Field Service. [Library of Congress LC-USZC4-8878]



By war's end American volunteers had contributed a total of over 3,500 personnel to ambulance work between 1914 and 1917, primarily serving with the French army. Ford built 5,745 ambulances for the Allied armies. The British Red Cross Society itself provided 2,171 ambulances. It is likely that well over 10,000 motor ambulances were deployed during World War I. Richard Norton was at the forefront of this extraordinary humanitarian effort.



***Above:** Richard Norton was awarded the Croix de Guerre in September 1915, the Légion d'Honneur in 1917 and the Order of St Lazarus. He died on 2 August 1918 in Paris, aged 46, of meningitis after a short illness of one day. [American War Memorials Overseas]*

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