DR. MARY LEE EDWARD
A LEADING WOMAN
BY NORALEEN DUVALL YOUNG, CA, AX/PURDUE


“Word has been received from France of distinguished honors having been conferred by the French government upon Dr. Mary Lee Edward.” So begins the short article in the November 1918 issue of the Kappa Alpha Theta Magazine.

Dr. Mary Lee Edward, Sigma/Toronto, was born in Petrolia, Ontario, Canada in 1885. In 1905, she became a member of the Sigma Chapter at the University of Toronto. Completing her undergraduate degree in 1906, she went on to attend medical school at Toronto and became the first female medical graduate in 1908. As the only woman in the class, she was “... pelted with chalk, chalk brushes, and assailed with catcalls and a song ‘Hop Along Sister Mary.’” After earning her MD, she worked first for a women’s hospital in Philadelphia and then went to work for the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. The hospital itself had been founded by Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell in 1857 and was a leading center for treating women and children and for employing women in the medical profession. Edward studied for a year in Vienna on scholarship and then returned to the infirmary to take the position of chief resident surgeon.

When the United States entered World War I, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) put together staff and supplies for a Women’s Overseas Hospital, and Edward volunteered. The hospital unit comprised physicians, nurses, aides, dietitians, and a dentist, and they were all women! Funded entirely by the NAWSA, the organization received donations from a variety of women’s groups. The physicians approached the US Government to offer their services, but as one report stated “... they were shut out from service with the army, no matter how great the need might be, as the Medical Reserve Corps of the United States Army does not admit women.” So they offered their services to the French government, which accepted.

Edward arrived in France in February 1918 and was sent on to Château Oignon in northern France. Dr. Edward described the château as having “… velvet tapestries on the walls, and [the] most exquisite chapel and quaint stairways and every luxury of the aristocracy but no bathrooms.” The château was located on the road to Compiègne, so it received wounded straight from the front lines. The château was also on a direct route to Paris and so endured many bombing runs by German aircraft.

Dr. Edward wrote of her experiences:

“May the 28th, operated 5-8 pm, then 9-3 am. Wounded were arriving from (?). Bombs shook the operating room theatre and the barrack. Cannons roared and planes vibrated the atmosphere.

“June the 13th, operated 16 hours on major cases, so big one could not believe they would survive.

“June the 15th, our team was off-duty 24 hours, doing only dressings and rounds. Very tired, we walked into a thick, velvet forest north of the château, and then to bed. The hospital was quiet. However, near daybreak, chaos disrupted, as our hospital had been bombed. Many of the dead lay in a crater, and body parts were strewn about. Thirteen orderlies and stretcher bearers were killed, 11 were wounded.”

On September 3, 1918, Dr. Edward was awarded the French Croix de Guerre for her service and valor and at the same time was named a lieutenant in the French army. (Two other female physicians were also honored: Dr. Caroline S. Finley, and Dr. Anna Von Sholly, as well as a nurse, Jane McKee).

After the armistice in November 1918, the hospital unit was sent to Germany with the French Army of Occupation to work with returned prisoners of war. Later the American Commission for Belgian Relief and British medical personnel asked the unit to establish two hospitals in Caudry and Le Cateau. In an interview upon her return in the summer of 1919, Dr. Edward reported that at the war’s end they began establishing hospitals for women and children who had no medical services during the war.

Dr. Edward became an US citizen in 1936 and continued to serve as a physician in the New York area until her death in 1980 at age 85. 

About the author: NORALEEN YOUNG, ALPHA CHI/PURDUE, is a certified archivist; she has served Theta as project archivist for more than 15 years. 

Image credits: We appreciate the assistance of Ann Cullen, a relative of Mary Lee Edward, in obtaining scans from Reflections of Dr. Mary Lee Edward, 1977.