

On MAY 30th 1918, shortly after her 21st birthday, Betty Stevenson was killed on active service in France. She was a YMCA volunteer, one of the many women, paid and unpaid, who contributed to the war work of the organisation.

Betty was also one of a handful of YMCA workers awarded the Croix de 'Guerre avec palme (the French equivalent of the Victoria Cross). The epitaph on her grave at the Etaples military cemetery reads 'The Happy Warrior'. Her story is one of a young middle-class woman with an amazing sense of service and duty who devoted the last years of her short, but vibrant life, to working for 'her Tommies' in France. We know through her letters and the accounts of those who knew her that Betty had an abundance of youthful energy and cheerfulness and a strength and sense of duty that inspired those who knew her.

Although unique in many respects, she was nevertheless typical of a generation of young people who in a period of national emergency were expected to act as adults from a very early age. Men as young as 14 and 15 lied about their age in order to join the ranks and in many instances the military colluded with such 'dishonesty'. What made her 'different', was that she was exceptionally (though not uniquely) young for a woman to be serving in France.

## BACKGROUND

During the first two decades of the last century the social position of women changed dramatically. The struggle for women's suffrage, access to education and equal status before the law, had made great inroads before the outbreak of war in August 1914. However, the upheavals of the Great War accelerated the pace of change (Marrow, 1998; Rowbotham, 1997; Woollacott, 1994). As millions of men were mobilised to fight, so millions of women were mobilised to work in the factories to produce the guns and munitions needed. They were also catapulted into manual and administrative jobs previously reserved for men. New 'opportunities' were created for women of all classes but these were usually 'graded' according to social status.

In particular, as the stalemate of the Western Front atrophied, so the demand for workers in the armaments industry grew until by 1916 it was employing approximately one million women. Initially little provision was made for the welfare of these workers or, for that matter, members of the armed services. As a consequence the YMCA stepped in.

With regards to work for servicemen this was a natural extension of a long-established area of activity:

*first begun in Britain in 1890 when Colonel Goldsmith, a YMCA president in Devonport, suggested the association should provide activities and support at summer training camps for army volunteers. Over the next few years the YMCA became involved with the expanding Territorial Army. (YMCA, 1995)*

The YMCA had taken responsibility for providing recreational facilities, 'tuck shops' and welfare and moral support for troops during the Summer Camp. When the local volunteers went away for their annual manoeuvres, full-time staff from the local YMCA accompanied them to manage the tent or hut. They were usually assisted by students from universities and young men preparing for ordination who gave up part of their summer holiday to work with the troops. Betty Stevenson's local association, Harrogate YMCA, founded in 1904, annually operated one of these tents.

Officers from the General downwards, regularly visited the YMCA tents and expressed their appreciation of the work done on behalf of the men. In 1913 General Bethune Beeton, the Director General of the Territorial Forces, came to Redcar and spoke very highly of the work. Brigade Surgeon General Kenny, Colonels Kirk, E. Kitson Clarke, Holme and Morrell all came to the Bow Street Camp. Canon Bickerstaff (Chaplain) wrote in the visitors' book, 'the YMCA is as indispensable as ever to all of us' and Lieutenant Sowerby (York) wrote, 'after 17 years service I appreciate the YMCA more every year'. Meanwhile, at the request of the Brigadiers, the Brigade Major refused permits for photography to any but YMCA photographers (Yorkshire Union Minutes, 10 Sept 1913).

At the outbreak of war there were four of these camps within Yorkshire, at which the YMCA had 68 workers including 14 students from Oxford, Cambridge and Aberdeen universities and three Baptist College students. As soon as war was declared, local YMCAs swung into action accompanying the local 'Terriers' to their stations where they set up their tents and huts. It was work for which they were prepared and which the Army expected them to undertake. However, they rapidly found that their resources were stretched to breaking point. First, they were used to providing a tent for a few weeks each year and now they were obligated to do so for an indefinite period. That meant that they required a great deal of money to pay for the equipment, staff, subsidised meals, entertainment and items they provided for troops such as writing paper, books, postage and soap. As a consequence committees were rapidly established by local YMCAs to raise substantial sums to support this work. Between 1916 and 1918 the Yorkshire Union raised from flag days, hut weeks and collections £81553-17s-11d.

Second, they desperately needed staff. In the past a local YMCA might close or 'run down' its activities to release key staff for this work. In wartime this was not an option. Moreover many full-time workers joined up or were later conscripted, whilst the student volunteers disappeared as they enlisted or became Chaplains. Third, the scope of involvement rapidly expanded. Huts at Summer Camps were of a different order to what was now required. By 1918, 55 huts were owned and operated by YMCAs in Yorkshire. With other buildings such as halls and rooms of local associations this became more than 100 centres where soldiers were being served. Amongst these were huts or rooms attached to war hospitals, 'rest-huts' connected with the large railway junctions at Leeds, Normanton and Doncaster and small hostels erected at Catterick Camp, Ripon and Bradford, for the relatives of sick soldiers (Yorkshire Union Minutes, 27 April 1918).

The YMCA followed the troops to the front line and to the sites of conflict scattered across the globe - for this was truly a world war. As the wounded returned so the YMCA found itself working alongside the Royal Army Medical Corps and Red Cross in hospitals and convalescent camps, in helping relatives to visit their sons. It also began to provide for the thousands of munitions workers housed in camps scattered around the country, women living in conditions barely distinguishable from those of the troops. By September 1917 the YMCAs were 'responsible for 150 munitions workers canteens serving c200,000 workers daily, the association has in addition 10 hostels accommodating 3,000

men' (*Red Triangle Bulletin*, Vol.V, 21.9.17). At one point in the war these canteens were opening at the rate of six per month. While the Red Cross mobilised itself for relief work with refugees and prisoners-of-war, the YMCA became the biggest organisation involved in welfare work with troops and munitions workers. To meet this challenge the YMCA, like the armaments industry, began to seek women volunteers and workers to sustain their work.

Immediately war was declared Arthur Yapp, General Secretary of the English YMCA, positively encouraged the organisation to expand its work with troops. Within the first fortnight 250 social centres or 'huts' for troops were operating. By 1916 the total number had grown to 1,500. These huts were located in training camps, garrison and transit towns, at railways stations and wherever British troops were serving abroad (Yapp, 1919; 1927).

*For those who responded to the appeal, the 'hut' presented a golden opportunity to leave behind the hardships and brutalities and meanness of war and become again a part of the collective conscience of the nation. Owing to the nature of its whole approach to welfare work, the British YMCA fell easily into the responsibility of caring for relatives who visited the sick and dying in France. It was all a part of the task of keeping the folks at home and the fighter as one. (Harris, Taft, et al, 1922, 71)*



Before the war the YMCA was an organisation run 'for young men by young men' but very quickly it was realised this model would no longer suffice. Before the first month of the war had passed the YMCA Women's Auxiliary was formed. By 1918, over 40,000 'ladies of the red triangle', as Yapp called them, had served in the Auxiliary. All were unpaid and, even when serving abroad, had to meet their own living expenses.

There is little acknowledgment or much written about the contribution of the YMCA to the war effort, not least concerning the role women played within the Association at home and abroad. Yet it was in welfare roles, especially as volunteers, that many middleclass (and indeed upper-class) women did 'their bit' running huts and canteens but also working with prisoners-of-war, undertaking street patrols to prevent 'vice' and offering help to soldiers and munitions girls 'at large in an unfamiliar town'. They also offered one stop advice centres at railway stations, provided hostels, education programmes and travelling entertainment shows for the troops. As a YMCA volunteer, Betty Stevenson worked in the huts and as a driver.

### **BETTY STEVENSON**

Bertha Gavin (Betty) Stevenson was born 3 September 1896 at Burton Stone Lane, Clifton in the Bootham area of York. The site of the house is now the car park of a bingo hall. Like many young ladies of her class she was educated at home until deemed ready for boarding school. At 14 she was dispatched to St George's Wood School in Haslemere, Surrey. It was typical of the many small boarding schools in that area catering for respectable young ladies from wealthy backgrounds.

The building is now a cottage hospital. From school she went to Brussels to study music. Besides learning music her diary reports that she was taught how to make crème au chocolate - a love of food constantly features in both her diary and letters.

Betty's father, Arthur Gavin Stevenson, trained as a solicitor. He married Catherine Wheeler in 1895 in the chapel of the Royal Savoy Hotel, London where his father James Cochran Stevenson was then in residence. It appears that James, who was then the MP for Westoe, South Shields, lived at the Savoy while Parliament sat. In an era when MPs received neither a salary nor a 'costs allowance' it is self-evident that James Stevenson relied upon a substantial private income to support such a lifestyle. It was not first generation wealth. Betty's grandfather had been elected Mayor of South Shields in 1867 and was its first Freeman, before becoming the local Liberal MP in 1868, a seat he held until 1895. His father, Betty's great grandfather, had moved from Glasgow after purchasing a chemical works at Templeton in South Shields. This subsequently became the United Alkali Co. of which James Stevenson was sole Managing Director after 1887.

In 1913 the family moved to Harrogate where Arthur Stevenson established himself as a leading estate agent. Initially they lived at Birk Crag before moving to Grey Gables, a magnificent Arts and Craft house in Cavendish Place where they stayed until 1922. The marriage produced two children. Besides Betty there was her brother James Arthur Radford (often referred to in her letters as JARS) born in 1901. Schooled at Harrow, like his father and grandfather, he was an ironworker and was responsible for designing the school's memorial gates. Subsequently he became a Christian Science practitioner. He married but had no children and died in 1974.

Both parents were active supporters of the YMCA. Catherine Grace Stevenson, who was to join her daughter in France in 1917, served throughout the war as chair of the Harrogate YMCA's Women's Auxiliary. She also actively championed the cause of women's involvement in the organisation as full and active members, notably after 1918 when attempts were made locally and nationally, with considerable success, to ensure the YMCA became once again an exclusively male preserve. Betty appears to have acquired early in life a highly developed sense of civic duty and responsibility.

She wrote in one of her school essays that:

*It makes a great difference to your life, if you have a vocation or not. If you have, it makes you feel as though you had some real object or aim in your life and work. I think any kind of charitable work must be an especial calling from God. (Stevenson, 1920, 5)*

Certainly she threw herself into relief work at an early age. At 16 she went to London with her parents as part of a group from the local Belgium Refugee Fund to bring back to Harrogate refugee families camped out at Alexander Palace. These were then billeted with local families. Henry Brice, who organised the transport from Alexander Palace to Harrogate, was later to help her secure a driving job with the YMCA. She instantly made a big impression on Brice not least by taking the initiative and his chauffeur driven car, to ensure refugees got to their destination. After her death he said of her:

*.. , if I had ever had an impossible task to do, I would have put Betty to do it. And what's more, by her personality she would have got people to help her, and if she failed a hundred times, you would have found her head erect and smiling ... her judgment was always sound, and her happy confidence in herself irresistible. (ibid, 20)*

### **ST DENIS - YMCA HUTS**

In January 1916 one of Betty's aunts went to France to manage a YMCA canteen and Betty was determined to join her. She was considered too young for YMCA work but after a great deal of badgering her papers eventually came through. On Friday February 11 she set off, aged 19, to join her aunt as a canteen worker in the St Denis Hut located on the outskirts of Paris. By this time

there were over 1,000 YMCA workers stationed in France, almost half of whom were women, and virtually all of whom were 'voluntary workers paying their own expenses' (*Red Triangle Bulletin*, V, 1917-18, 11). These expenses, for Betty, her aunt and later her mother, included getting to and from a camp situated:

*a few miles due north of Paris, in a very poor and not too reputable suburb. It was set in the middle of a cinder-laid compound, and was surrounded by MT workshops, in which were motor lorries and motor-wagons of every description, and wounded cars sent down from the Front for repair. (Stevenson, 1920, 70).*

Transport between lodgings and the hut was atrocious usually taking between one and two hours. Therefore, they often did not get back to their digs before midnight. So with £100 raised in Harrogate, plus £50 from the national YMCA they purchased a secondhand Ford. This made their travelling much easier and provided a vehicle for the use of the local YMCA HQ during the day.

When Betty's aunt returned to England, her mother Catherine Stevenson decided to take her place. Betty wrote at once 'What perfectly lovely news. You simply can't think how excited I am about your coming out here. Of course you'll do the work splendidly ... ' and gave some words of advice on what her mother should bring.

*Don't imagine you won't want pretty clothes; you will, so bring all you've got ... Life isn't all composed of blue overalls and brown boots. Bring lots of overalls for the work, but not ugly ones. You've no idea how 'they' love to see something pretty. They're dead sick of uniforms, I can tell you ...*

*You don't see any shabby people about here. They know that everything is so sad, but that it doesn't help anyone to look miserable and shabby. There's no silly extravagance, but every woman tries to be as cheerful and make herself look as pretty as she can, and there's more war work done. (Ibid, 66)* However grim the task or unpleasant the surroundings Betty believed it was the duty of the worker to be jaunty and positive, to try and lift the spirits of soldiers isolated from the joys and comforts of home and female company. When she arrived Catherine described the hut as:

*absolutely the one bit of brightness in the men's lives there. It stood for home, and the decencies and amenities of home, and we knew it, and it helped us to keep going. I know it can be said of countless YMCA huts all through these past four and a half years, that they were little lifeboats in a vast sea of warfare, but I can never think that in any spot in the whole of the war area was a hut so needed as ours was. (ibid, 70)*

Mother and daughter alike considered the work at St Denis so worthwhile that when offered promotion to a 'Boss job' at Abbeville, they didn't take it. While Catherine would have been perfectly happy to take the job, Betty voted to turn it down to stay put: 'We know how grateful the men are, and they know us now so well, and I somehow feel it would be mean to leave them for a new place: (ibid, 88)

For many soldiers YMCA huts served a vital need. It is evident from numerous accounts that they provided more than just food and rest, that they often had different strengths. Another YMCA 'lady', Jessie Millar Wilson, working in the Harfleur Valley near Havre, explained in her diary:

*... our Hut 15 "" had an atmosphere; a tradition handed on from one generation of soldiers to another, each adding something to enrich it ... certainly every hut where the staff stayed long enough to become known, felt that their hut and their hut alone was the only hut of any importance. (Duncan, 1999, 19)*

Through these huts and canteens various programmes and services were provided. Workers would write letters home for soldiers who needed help and read the replies when asked to do so.

They arranged for photographs to be taken for loved ones, provided a library and an enormous range of educational programmes. In addition to games and sports, shows were provided to give a little 'touch of home' .

*The 'Lena Ashwell' parties were always great favourites. They were formed at each base and moved from one to another after a few months. On nights when no lectures or entertainments could be had, tournaments and competitions were started. We always gave prizes, never money; useful gifts of metal mirrors, letter cases, cigarette holders, pipes and air cushions. The last named was very popular, as in trench warfare sleep had to be taken without any of the comforts usually associated with bedtime. They were a real luxury, folding into a small space and no weight. (ibid, 43)*

Some of the huts were large establishments with discrete rooms for a library, meals, showers and games. Nearer the front the 'huts' were anything from places made out of destroyed bombed buildings to tents and dug outs in the trenches where free cocoa was dispensed to tired soldiers by YMCA staff. But big or small it appears that it was the personal contact that was often the most important element. As one YMCA volunteer found out when asked to hand out paper at a side table: ' ... that evening I discovered that one can do a great deal in that position, more in fact than was ever possible at the counter, in the way of talking to the men. And this was the thing we were there to do' (ibid, 15). This contact occasionally took unexpected turns:

*At The Grosvenor Gardens Hut one evening a man in khaki was heard to ask one of the workers the name of the lady who had just served him with food. On being told it was Lady Ponsonby he replied, 'I thought as much. Before the war I was a servant in her house, waiting at the table. Now things are reversed, and her ladyship waits on me.' (YMCA, c1916, 73)*

### **MOTOR TRANSPORT SCHEME - ETAPLES**

Once her time at St Denis was completed Betty returned to Grey Gables on leave but she was soon anxious to return to France, this time as a YMCA driver responsible for transporting lecturers, concert parties and especially relatives from England visiting the wounded in hospital. Yapp outlined the scheme:

*When a man was so dangerously wounded that his life was despaired of, a message went through the War Office to his wife or mother indicating the fact and promising a permit to enable them to visit the hospital where the man was lying. The War Office form stated that on reaching France the YMCA would look after them. Our motorcars met every boat at Boulogne and at Havre, and automatically the relatives of men dangerously wounded were handed over to us and we motored them to their destination, wherever it might be. Sometimes a long motor run could be accomplished in a few hours, whereas on French railways under war conditions it might have taken days for them to reach their destination. During the whole time they were in France the relatives were entertained as our guests in our hostels, at the cost of the Association. (Yapp,1927, 91)*



Betty was exceptionally young to be a YMCA driver in France but her record seems to have helped and in April 1917 she was posted to Etaples as a driver. There for her first few months she was the only female resident at a house offering a panoramic view of the river, on the main road through the town. In a letter to her father written whilst recovering from a bout of flu she describes Etaples:

*I'm awfully fond of the river here. There is a bridge over it from which you can get the most wonderful view of everything. On one side the river mouth and the sea and the little fishing boats; the quay and the big sailor's crucifix, where the women pray when there is a storm at sea. The boats anchor quite near; and they look like something hazy and unreal, sitting on a shiny wet river; with every sail and mast and man reflected in the water.*

*Behind them are the houses - filthy and ramshackle, but with the sun warming their pink, white, and grey roofs. Behind the houses again is the camp - the tents crawling up the hill like white snails, and more hills and pine trees behind them. The whole thing is so illogical, boats and fishermen on the one hand, and on the other war. (Stevenson, 1920, 199-200)*

Vera Brittain, on arriving in Etaples in 1917 to take up her VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) post at No 24 General Hospital offered a more sobering description of Etaples:

*... we squelched through the littered, grimy square and along a narrow, straggling street where the sole repositories for household rubbish appeared to be the pavement and the gutter. We finally emerged into open country and the huge area of camps, in which, at one time or another, practically every soldier in the British Army was dumped to await further orders for a still less agreeable destination. The main railway line from Boulogne to Paris ran between the hospitals and the distant sea, and amongst the camps, and along the sides of the road to Carniers, the humped sandhills bristled with tufts of spiked grass. (Brittain, 1978, 370)*

Brittain found No 24 'between rows and rows of long wooden huts splashed with the scarlet and green of nasturtiums' (ibid, 371). This was a hospital for officers that Betty visited with relatives on many occasions. It is unlikely they met as Vera Brittain returned to England shortly prior to Betty's arrival.

That year, 1917, '100,000 troops were camped among the sand dunes and the hospitals which included 11 general, one stationary, four Red Cross hospitals and a convalescent depot, could deal with 22,000 wounded or sick' (Commonwealth War Graves Commission).

It was to these hospitals, amongst others further afield, that Betty took the relatives of wounded soldiers to visit their husbands or sons. In addition to transporting relatives she also began to deliver staff and stores to the many YMCA huts and hostels in the area. It seems 'YMCA cars had to take anything and everything from a sack of flour to a general!' (Duncan, 1999, 6).

Betty did not get her motorcar immediately upon arrival. So she spent her time visiting events and friends. During one of these she attended some games organised in Etaples for Anzac Day:

*Although I haven't begun driving yet I love the life, it is all so different. I shall have no table manners when I get back.*

*Directly after lunch Miss Burleigh [the war correspondent's daughter, on a lecture tour] and I went up to a place called Canada Park where the sports and football were going to be. We went up in a lorry. I shall never be able to describe it all, but I shall never forget it. Canada Park is a big sort of plain with pine woods round, and is in a hollow like an enormous quarry. The place was packed, and we threaded our way through the biggest crowd of Anzacs, Australians and New Zealanders that I have ever seen. At one end was a YMCA tent which had been put up for the day, and drinks and food were given free. Next door to Canada Park,*

*in fact touching it, is the cemetery - acres and acres of little brown wooden crosses. They are burying at the rate of 40 a day and the systematic digging is awful. Three times during the afternoon the Last Post was sounded over some grave, and I shall never forget the impression I got each time all the games stopped, and all the thousands of men sitting on the slopes stood up in dead silence while the Last Post was sounded, and then sat down again and continued their ragging. It made the most enormous impression on me. During the afternoon a huge long Red Cross train passed. They come every day, hundreds of carriages, and crawling along at snail's pace. (Stevenson, 1920,103-5)*

By May 21 Betty was driving, but by the end of the month was in bed with mumps. Writing home she describes a typical day's work programme. This began with her maid attempting to wake them at 7.30 in the morning, 'persuading' the car to start, filling it with petrol, checking the motor programme at HQ, and doing three runs - a relative to Paris-Plage, canteen workers to their hut and Lady Cooper to hers before:

*11.15am - If there don't happen to be any more relatives, I report to Stores. Take up stores of all sorts to the various huts in the camp here and also a good way away - nine or ten miles. This is rather nice work. I get fed at all the huts, and am bribed for particular stores in the most shamefaced way. One day my total haul was:-*

*1 bag large sweets  
1 tin peaches with tin opener  
1 box dates  
6 cakes  
1 khaki handkerchief  
1 pocket comb  
1 pocket glass  
3 packets biscuits  
Numerous invitations to tea!!*

*1.00pm - Got back rather late and found an important run to M..... waiting for me. No time for lunch, so on the way M.... I stopped the car and ate the things that had been given me in the morning. I ate the peaches with my brooch, and wiped up the mess with the khaki hanky, and then powdered my neb with the aid of my pocket glass. I had a puncture on the way and had to change the wheel. In the middle of it I heard shooting just behind me. I fell over backwards and discovered a Lewis gun class going on behind some bushes - machine gun ditto on the other side - and bombing in the middle. I nearly died of fright. I wish I could tell you the name and all about the place I went to. You are not allowed inside. Everyone stared at me because they never see a girl driving. I bagged some food from the YMCA Hut, and ate it in the car coming back.*

*5.30pm - Back at headquarters. Drive a concert party out to St Omer. Wait during concert and drive them on to N\_ for another concert.*

*8.30pm- Drive them back to Paris-Plage, where they are staying.*

*9.00pm- Take some relatives from the various hospitals back to the hostels.*

*9.45pm- Pick up Joyce at headquarters and drive home. Feed-bed-sleep.*

*All my days are different, and I simply love it. I love the uncertainty. (ibid, 123-5)*

The concert parties that Betty chauffeured were another YMCA venture. The Army asked the YMCA to organise concert parties and the Women's Auxiliary approached the actress Lena Ashwell to co-ordinate these. The first 'Lena Ashwell Concert' was given at Hut 15 at Harfleur, the new cinema hut providing the venue:

*The wooden hut was packed to suffocation. No one would ever believe now that human beings could take up so little room. The men had been waiting for hours and smoking incessantly and the fog of smoke and the heat within the hut was a tremendous contrast to the cold, rain, and mud without. The acetylene lights were very new and very glaring, and quite suddenly they all went out. We were all sitting on the platform, as we always did, partly because there was nowhere else to go, and partly to save time. The concerts had to be very short - two hours at the most - and there was no time to spare for entrances and exits. When the lights went out there was a rush for the candles, and a row of candles was lit in front of us and along the side of the hut. No one can imagine how hot rows of candles can be. The heat of the candles, the smoke, the enthusiasm, the terrific roar of response to our small efforts were quite incredible.*

*Ivor Novello, who was one of our party, had just written 'Keep the Home Fires Burning', and when he sang it, the men seemed to drink it in at once and instantly sang the chorus, and as we drove away at the end of the concert, in the dark and rain and mud, from all parts of the camp one could hear the refrain of the chorus. (Marlow, 1998, 118)*

After the rapturous reception given the first concerts Ashwell raised large sums of money to finance more concert parties, a percentage of the cost, along with the transport, being met by the YMCA These:

*concerts were given anywhere - in huts and warehouses; in the summer by the roadside, in woods, or open fields; or in barns under heavy shell fire. A member of one of our firing line parties wrote: 'You will be sorry to hear that one of our huts near the line has been blown to pieces. We were singing there only a few nights before. The guns were very busy then. Can you imagine what it feels like to sing Handel's "Largo" to the sound of cannon? ... We have been bombed in our billets, gassed, and shelled. What more can a fellow want? We are the happiest of Concert parties. ' (YMCA, c1916,149)*

Betty's letters are saturated with accounts of adventures and the excitement of her work but also we get glimpses of the conditions and hardships, usually carefully disguised so as not to upset or worry her parents and to avoid incurring the blue pencil of the Army censor.

*There was an air fight here yesterday, and a Taube brought down. A piece of our own Archie shell fell outside the YMCA hut, an enormous piece ... Could you send me a pair of thick rubber gloves, size 7, ladies. My hands are getting into the most fearful state with messing with the car. (Stevenson, 1920, 108)*

By October 1917 the bombing was getting closer at the same time as Betty and the other YMCA drivers were taking more and more relatives, as well as supplies, further up the line to hospitals nearer the front:

*... You must have all have wondered why on earth I haven't been writing, but we have all been head over ears in work, and I have been to Le Treport three times this week, which has taken up a whole week. I am writing this at the hostel in Boulogne, where I have just brought in a car load of relatives, and I have just missed the boat, which is bad luck ...*

*It was quite dark when I arrived, and my lights went wrong, and also my horn broke, and I nearly wept with rage and despair. However, by dint of shoving a hairpin down the jet, I got the lights working, and arrived home at 9.30, after starting at 5.30, and it's only 40 miles ... We're having rather a nasty time at night now, and it's rather nervy work driving about during a strafe or alarm with no lights, and I don't enjoy it. Our villa is quite close to the anti-aircraft camp, and the other night we had an awful time, -s flying past our windows, and flames, and explosions and goodness knows what. I suppose I shall get used to it. A thousand hugs to everyone. Buncie. (ibid, 170-171)*

Another job for the drivers was to take visiting relatives to funerals. This must have been very distressing for everyone involved. The YMCA also provided each relative with a photograph of the grave to take home:

*.. , The other day I was out before breakfast to take two relatives to a funeral. Officer's relatives. I've had to take thousands to funerals but I've never felt as miserable as I did at this one. It was a mother and such a pretty daughter. I'd been driving them up to the hospital for quite a long time. They thought the boy was getting better, and then suddenly he died. I could hardly bear that funeral, and how they bore it, I can't imagine. The cemetery is in a big sandy hollow in some pine woods, just off the road, and on the other side is a big hutment consisting of the mausoleum, the padre's rooms, and the orderlies' rooms. I sat in the car shivering, on the coldest morning I've ever known, with very few clothes on, as I'd dressed in such a hurry, and watched it.*

*First came the piper (they always pipe the officers to the cemetery), and you know what a piper makes one feel like. Then two buglers. Then a young padre with his white robes all blowing about in the wind, showing trench boots and glimpses of khaki.*

*Then the coffin covered by a Union Jack on a two-wheeled cart, like a stretcher, with two men in front and behind, wheeling it, and then my two relatives and a YMCA lady with them. They walk very slowly, and had to walk behind those pipes for at least ten minutes before they reached the grave. I couldn't see anymore then. The cemetery is always full of soldiers, and they all stand at attention while the sad little procession passes, and all traffic is stopped until they have passed. (ibid,179)*

The driving must have been exhausting on roads crowded with troops, pitted with shell holes and in wet weather reduced to mud and slime. The cars were open topped and without windscreen wipers which meant in the rain and snow the glass was lowered to allow the driver to see where they were going. At night they were obliged to pick their way without headlights. After two bouts of flu within a month, Betty was given a break from driving and sent to work in the canteen of the Canadian Gordon Hut to enable her to recuperate. After a few months she was back to driving, but although she'd looked forward to it, by February she'd had enough:

*I am going to transfer, and be a hut worker for the summer. I can't tell you how pleased I am. Driving has got so on my nerves, I don't feel I ever want to do it again, at least for some time. Mr Scott [General Secretary] has been very decent about it, and is going to try and get me permanently into the Gordon Hut, which is, of course, what I'm longing for. In the meantime, I am driving for three weeks as another of our drivers has been sent to another base for so long. It's an open Ford van, and I'm so cold, I don't know what to do - I wish I'd got that fleece lining. Everything is frozen, and my face is all peeling and raw with the wind. I'm a very miserable Starkey, and I've got another cold. (ibid, 208)*

Eight days later 'Archie' her car broke down and not having anything to do while it was being mended:

*We wandered along the road to HQ, and saw standing in front of the gate the horse and cart from the Stores. Then I didn't feel bored any longer. I seized Effie by the hand and we raced along towards it. As we got to the gate Cannon came out: I leapt into the cart, seized the reins, dragged in Effie and then Cannon and off we went.*

*Jock, the little traffic man at the corner of the Rue de Rivage, nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw us. I couldn't get used to having no horn, and nothing to make a noise with, so at the last minute I opened my mouth and yelled, and the others squealed, and Fox backed into the curb, so no wonder poor Jock lost his nerve for a moment. He soon recovered, and then started cheering and waving his arms, which, of course, muddled the other traffic considerably. We left him disentangling himself from a maze of cars and lorries. I then drove Cannon to the post office where she had some cheques to*

see to. While she was inside, a company of Belgian artillery came past, this was too much for Fox: she turned completely round, and then began to back till I thought she would never stop, all over the road and the kerb (much to the delight of the Belgian Army), and Effie and I clinging like limpets to our seats. At last Cannon came out and held Fox till all the cavalcade had passed. We then did a little tour of the town, and then took Fox back to the Stores where she lives. Altogether we had a successful tour. (ibid, 214)

Betty arranged to take over the driving of the Flying Fox for the stores for the few weeks until she went on leave. When she returned in May 1918 it was to once again work in a hut, but not the Canadian Gordon Hut as she'd hoped but the Lion d'Argent, one of around 30 in and around Etaples. At the beginning of her stay in Etaples, Betty had been resident in the town but later, as the air raids became increasingly frequent, she moved further out.

On March 21st 1918 the German offensive began and no YMCA workers were allowed to return to France. Betty was then at home on what was to be her last leave and her return was delayed until May 7. During the retreat, between May and August 1918, there were over 20 air raids on Etaples. Many of these were very serious. Marguerite McArthur, a YMCA education worker stationed at the Walton Hut, Etaples at the time describes one of these:

*For two hours or more pandemonium reigned. The crash of bombs shook the house, guns thundered incessantly, machine guns clattered, we heard shrapnel pattering on the roofs, and the sudden shiver of masses of broken glass ... We knew they were trying for the station, which is pretty close to us. Once, when a bomb fell with tremendous violence, the shutters burst open, and there was a crash of broken tiles and glass ...*

*At breakfast the next morning we got our first idea of the extent of the damage. A bomb had fallen in the garden of the YMHQ, blowing out the back wall and smashing doors and partitions. The Crescent Hostel had been half-wrecked - everywhere door and windows were blown out. The workers at the sidings had taken refuge in a dugout; their hut was riddled with shrapnel, and a bomb had fallen quite close ... Nearly all the hospitals had been hit, and the casualty list was a long one. (I believe that about 100 bombs were dropped, and the total casualties amounted to about 500). (Kellet, 1920, 145-7)*

A visiting lecturer gave an account of Betty's work at this time:

*... while he was lecturing a bad raid was in full progress, and he said he frankly admitted he was in a great fright. After the lecture was over, he said to the officer in charge, 'Well, I shall have to stay here all night. My chauffeur can't possibly come through all this to take me back to my billet.' The officer just glanced at his watch and said, 'oh yes, Miss Stevenson will be here in twenty minutes.' Sure enough, there she came, he said, threading her way through all the shell holes and broken ground. He got in, and said to her: 'Are you bound to come out when it's like this?'*

*'Bound?' she said, 'I don't know what you mean.'*

*'Well, , he said, 'do men order you to come out when there is a raid on?'*

*'No,' she said, 'they don't order us, but, of course, we come.'*

*She took him to his billet, and said gaily, 'You won't be too late for your supper,' and off she went. He said he would never forget it. He heard she was killed a short while after. (Stevenson, 1920, 294)*

Betty, writing home at this time says, 'It's a great stunt. I believe V-S- is going on leave. She will tell you all the news. I can say nothing. Our house is full of souvenirs!' (ibid, 232). These souvenirs turned out to be a hole in the bedroom ceiling almost over the bed; the glass and window frame had also been blown out. Her parents saw the damage when they visited her room after her death.

As the situation deteriorated Betty and all the other YMCA women were sent to stay at Les Iris, near Paris-Plage. She returned, however, with her friend Mrs Stewart Moore as they 'had volunteered to go every evening to the railway station and feed the fleeing refugees who were passing through in thousands' (ibid, 293). A few days later she was killed in one of the many air raids taking place at this time. Adam Scott sent this account to the *Harrogate Herald*:

*She had been busy all day, in the afternoon at the - and later with the refugees at the station. Owing to a car breakdown a group of workers were later than usual in starting off for-- , where we have been sending all our ladies recently to sleep, for greater safety. A very early raid sent us all to the cellars and after it was over we put the party of two ladies in two cars to send them out of the danger zone, in case the planes returned. We were held up half way, and a second raid came over, forcing us to take shelter under the banks by the side of the road. Everything went well until an enemy plane, just as the raid was finishing, dropped several bombs in open country near us, probably in order to get rid of them before returning. One bomb killed Betty instantaneously and wounded two other workers, who are in hospital. I was by her side within a minute of the bomb falling, but nothing could be done. She could not have felt it, as she was shot through the left temple. She was taken to hospital at once. (Harrogate Herald, 12 June, 1918)*

Her friends said she died with a smile on her face, as cheerful as she looked in life. She was given a military funeral and posthumously awarded the Croix de Guerre avec palme by General Petain, for courage and devotion to duty. The letters and accounts of her death served to confirm how well loved she was. Almost everyone commented on her cheerful spirit, courage and popularity. As Adam Scott wrote to her parents:

*Wherever she went she carried sunshine with her. Full of mischief and pranks, and humor and jokes at the expense of all of us, yet so gentle and sympathetic with anyone in trouble, she had no enemies and no rivals. The mess brightened up perceptibly on the dullest and rainiest day when Betty entered. (ibid, 254)*

## **CONCLUSION**

Adam Scott and Lena Kaye were both with Betty when she died. A year later they married in 1919 and named their first daughter after her. Adam Scott also received the OBE in 1918, for his work in France and went on to serve the YMCA in England, India and Ireland, before being appointed Assistant General Secretary of the National Council (private correspondence).

In 1918 Harrogate YMCA set up a committee to plan a suitable memorial for all the members and workers who had died in the war. The committee of which Catherine Stevenson was a member decided the best memorial to their collective memory would be to establish a club for young people. Within two years sufficient funds had been amassed to purchase Belvedere, No 2 Victoria Avenue the palatial town house of Lord Faber located in the centre of Harrogate near the war memorial. The YMCA moved into the building in 1920. The front room on the left as one entered the main entrance up the steps was transformed into a memorial room. It was panelled and the names of all those from Harrogate who had died in the conflict listed on the panels. Among the names was that of Miss Betty Stevenson. A new fireplace was also installed with a large iron fire basket; a surround of mahogany and a bronze with St George and the Dragon as the centre piece in repouse work with panels to right and left displaying The Lord's Prayer. Magnificent boardroom chairs were donated by the 'Doctors of Harrogate' for the room whilst the cloisters adjoining the garden were fitted with windows and formed the Billiard Room (private correspondence with Win Carter, 1996). It was by any standards, certainly

those prevailing today, a magnificent club building for young people - furnished and equipped to the highest standard.

Belvedere ceased to be a YMCA shortly after the Second World War when it was sold to the College of Art. Subsequently the college moved out and Belvedere was divided up into suites of luxury offices for accountants, solicitors and the like. Predictably the new occupants vandalised the panelled memorial wall, painting over the names. Also in the course of refurbishment the fireplace was stolen and it is not known if it was ever recovered (private correspondence with Win Carter).

Betty's parents became trustees and continued their involvement with Harrogate YMCA through Belvedere, the first floor of which was set aside for work with women and girls. Her father was Treasurer, her mother Chair of the Women's Auxiliary. By the mid-1920s Harrogate YMCA was one of the few YMCAs in England that still admitted women as associate members. Catherine (Mrs A G Stevenson) was Chair of the Women Associates. During this time as a member of the National Council of Women's Auxiliary she organised an extensive survey of the remaining branches. In an article she wrote in the *Red Triangle* she reported that:

*In Yorkshire there are seven branches with a membership of over 1,100 women. The actual association with the YMCA varies in degrees; in some the women are real members of the body corporate, in others they are slowly getting there. At Harrogate we think our position is as near perfection as possible. We have our own constitution, under which the Chairman, Secretary and three members, elected by the Women's Association, are members of the General Committee.*

*All important sub-committees have one or more women representatives upon them ... Some of us who worked as unskilled 'labourers' for the YMCA in the big years 1914-18, are thoroughly pleased at our inclusion now in the Association. We feel we are now real 'YMs'. The idea may appear new and revolutionary, but it is the natural result of the joint work done in war-time by men and women. Then we were a joint family, doing all the housework together. Now, in this great Association, there is once more the glorious opportunity to become 'a blest communion, fellowship divine'. This is the real motive behind the movement of the Women's Auxiliary. (Stevenson, C., *Red Triangle*, 1921,79)*

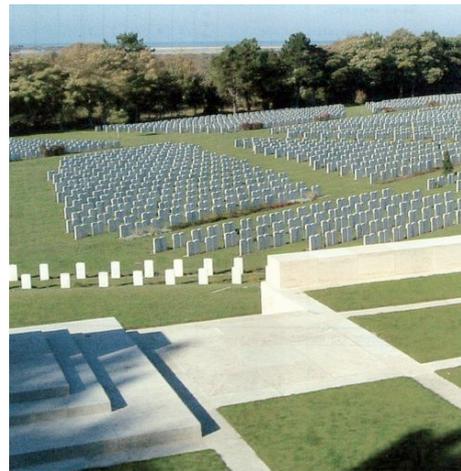
For a brief period during both wars women exerted a strong influence within the YMCA, not least in Yorkshire, but by 1949 they were once again being edged out. At a special meeting of the Yorkshire Union of YMCAs a memorandum from National Executive on 'The Place of Women and Girls in the YMCA' was placed on the agenda. A resolution was stating that the function of the Women's Auxiliary was to be 'that of service to and through the Movement, rather than as an avenue by which women and girls may enter into membership of the Association or participate in the programme activities' (minutes, 10 Dec 1949). Not until 1964 were women given full and associate membership when the National Council suggested that local constitutions should substitute young people for young men and boys (Yorkshire Union minutes, 26 September 1964)(1).

Yapp notes (1927,57) that before 1914 the YMCA was seen as a 'namby-pamby' organisation but by 1918 it had been transformed into one of the most popular and well respected organisations working with young people in Britain and elsewhere. That status was in no small measure secured as a consequence of the sacrifices and dedication of hundreds of women such as Betty Stevenson.

The memory of the 'Happy Warrior' was preserved in a book of letters collated by her parents and sold to raise money for the Harrogate YMCA. In addition her name is etched on the main war memorial in the town. Her name is the last in a long list and remains the only woman's cited. She is also remembered on a special plaque located in Christ Church, Harrogate where she worshipped. It reads:

**Betty Stevenson**  
**The Happy Warrior**  
**croix de guerre avec palme**  
**A fait preuve dans ses fonctions de chauffeuse et de dame**  
**de cantine de beaucoup de courage et de devouement.**

Betty was not the only YMCA worker killed in France. She is buried next to Rev William Henry Spinks who died on 29 May, three days after returning to France, 'from injuries received whilst rescuing a Chinaman' (gravestone) during the same bombing raid. But she was one of only two women listed in the YMCA's 1921 Roll of Honour which includes 15 British YMCA workers who 'have given their lives while serving the men of Her Majesty's Forces at home and overseas'(Red Triangle, 1919/1929, 453). The other was Emily Pickford who was killed near Abbeville on the 7 February 1919, while serving as a member of the Lena Ashwell Concert Party. Listed also are 48 (12 women) who died through illness while in service; included in that is the YMCA education worker Marguerite McArthur who died in Etaples of pneumonia on 13 February 1919.



#### FOOTNOTE

I have corresponded with many people over the past few years in connection with my research into the life of Betty Stevenson and would like to take this opportunity to thank them and all those who have helped in this enterprise. Needless to say I would welcome any information people might like to share with me regarding the role of the YMCA women during the First World War.

#### NOTE

The Women's Auxiliary disbanded in 1997 after 85 years of service and YMCA Friends became its successor welcoming members of all ages and both sexes.

**“This article and the excellent research undertaken was fully completed by Ruth Gilchrist. “Architects of Change, Studies in the History of Community and Youth Work’ Editors Gilchrist, Jeffs and Spence. I am very grateful to those who gave copyright permission for this article to be published as part of the YMCA Women’s Auxiliary Website.” David H Smith.**

Ruth Gilchrist - can be contacted via email : [ruth@ukyouth.org](mailto:ruth@ukyouth.org)  
Education, Training development officer for the NE, Yorkshire and Humberside Regions  
0191 4140990 Mobile 07920725716

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