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"Miss Tallant...docteur en medicine": A Woman Physician in World War I France

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“Miss Tallant...
docteur en médecine”:
A Woman Physician
in
World War I France

presented by
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Slide 2

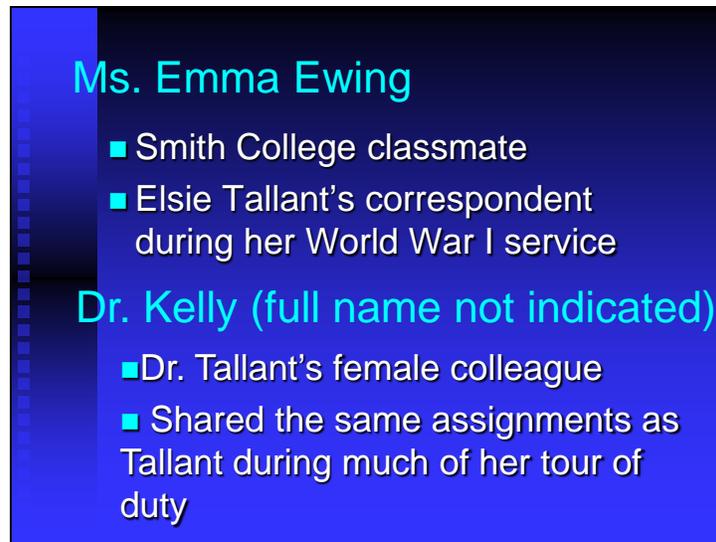


Alice Weld (a.k.a. "Elsie") Tallant (1875-1958)

- Graduated
 - ◆ Smith College, Northampton, MA (1897)
 - ◆ Harvard Medical School (1902)
- Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania (1905-1923)
 - ◆ Professor of Obstetrics
 - ◆ Physician-in-Chief, College Hospital

Obstetrician/gynecologist Alice Weld Tallant, M.D. (1875-1958) graduated from Smith College (Northampton, MA) in 1897 and Harvard Medical School in 1902. She was Professor of Obstetrics at the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania and Physician-in-Chief of the College Hospital from 1905 through 1923.

During World War I, Dr. Tallant (known as Elsie to her Smith College classmates) served in numerous capacities in France.



Ms. Emma Ewing

- Smith College classmate
- Elsie Tallant's correspondent during her World War I service

Dr. Kelly (full name not indicated)

- Dr. Tallant's female colleague
- Shared the same assignments as Tallant during much of her tour of duty

and she related many of her experiences to her friend and Smith College classmate Ms. Emma Ewing.

She also mentions her colleague Dr. Kelly numerous times in this correspondence, but never indicates her first name.

World War I Service

- Smith College Relief Unit (July 1917-February 1918)
- American Committee for Devastated France (May 1918-May 1919)
- Aide-major, first class (honorary), 6th French Army (1918)
 - ◆ Physician, Military Evacuation Hospital; Emergency Relief Unit

First, Dr. Tallant volunteered to serve for 6 months (July 1917-February 1918) in the Smith College Relief Unit in France, first serving as assistant director and then director. On August 10, she wrote Emma from the Steamer Rochambeau: “Mrs. Hawes had a map last night which shows the place we will probably go, but it is not Briancourt at all, but Blerancourt—neither is it on the Somme, but near the Oise.” After arriving in Paris, she and her Dr. Kelly had to remain there a month while “details” were worked out and their transportation was arranged. On Sept. 3, she wrote from Paris: “Dr. Kelly and I have at last received our safe conducts so that we can go up into the devastated regions... The district which has been assigned to us for relief work includes eleven villages, all of which are probably too small to be on any map of France which you have... However, if you can locate the towns of Noyon, Nesle, and Ham you can locate us in the triangle which you make by connecting them.”



In her letter of September 30, written at Chateau de Robe court, Grecourt par Hombleux Somme, she wrote:

Among the things that we have accomplished in the three weeks are: first, the organization of the medical work---we have opened a dispensary here and two others in more distant villages and expect to have an informal one in the house of the Mayor of a fourth village. We are seeing patients at their houses as well. We have arranged the work so that we visit one set of patients Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and the rest Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday with the dispensary here open every morning until ten o'clock. Yesterday in the course of our travels, we saw twenty-two patients. There are many children and they need us badly. Please tell Florence that her chocolate has been much appreciated. There is one village that is particularly desperate in every way, and we are making every effort to attend to that.

Children's work has started with a weekly meeting here for games and such, and one hundred twenty-five children are already enrolled. This week, the work will be extended to the villages which are too far away for the children to get here. Our supplies are being classified so that we can have a store here and sell and distribute goods, and we are planning a traveling store for the more distant villages.

...It does hit one pretty hard sometimes to see the wreck that has been left behind. One woman told me that when she came back to her ruined home her cat was waiting for her as her 'seul souvenir'.

She wrote from Paris on October 11:

Being director is a busy job. I am in Paris just now seeing Red Cross people and Government Officials and speaking to Smith Auxillary Committees when my one desire is to be at Grecourt with my people. I have just seen Miss Ann Morgan, who is here in the Councils of the "section civile" of the A.F.F.W. with which our unit is affiliated.



Although she had to return to the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia after six months, Dr. Tallant returned to France as soon as she could, serving as a physician for the American Committee for Devastated France (May 1918-May 1919).

She does not seem to clearly delineate her service on this committee from her previous work, although she seems to have received correspondence from several French individuals in which the writers thanked her for her work. Presumably, she was still seeing patients in this capacity.



World War I Service

- Aide-major, first class (honorary), 6th French Army (June-September 1918); after automobile accident in June, she was off 4 weeks with a concussion.
 - ◆ Physician, Military Evacuation Hospital
 - ◆ Coulommiers
 - ◆ Coincy
 - ◆ Château-Thierry

Next, she became Aide-major, first class (honorary) with the 6th French Army, serving as a physician in the Military Evacuation Hospital (H.O.E., B-52) at Coulommiers and Château-Thierry (June-August 1918), after the American Army rejected her request to serve as a physician. In an interview by Blanche Day, published in the July 4, 1957 issue of the Germantown Courier, Dr. Tallant related some of these experiences.

In a March 1919 letter that was subsequently published in the Smith College Bulletin, she described her work at the

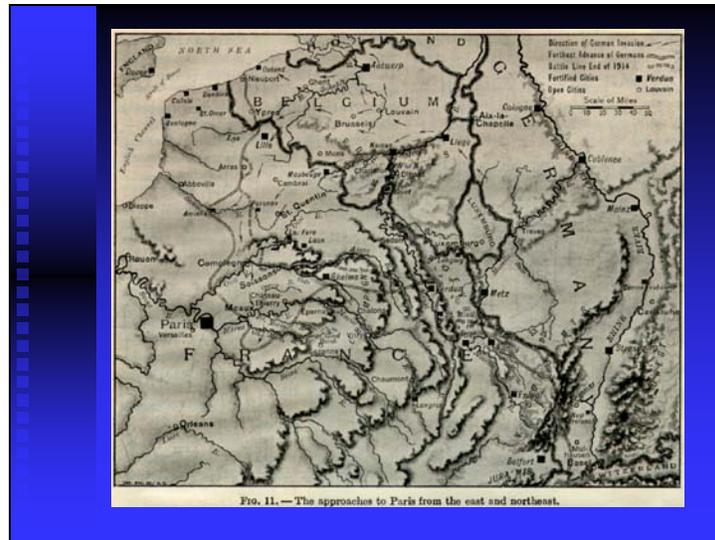
Day wrote

The site occupied by the Smith College Unit had been retaken by the enemy and its personnel absorbed by the Red Cross, so Dr. Tallant joined Anne Morgan's American Relief Committee.

Miss Morgan sent her, along with another woman doctor and a nurse, to offer her services at the American Army Hospital. "They turned us down," Dr. Tallant reports. "The American Army didn't recognize women physicians. But they said they had 120 patients lying waiting for attention and could use the nurse."

Leaving the R.N. with the Americans, the rejected lady M.D.'s traveled on to the French Army Hospital. "...They were hit so hard they didn't care whether we were man, woman, or child. It was at the time of the Battle of Chateau-Thierry."

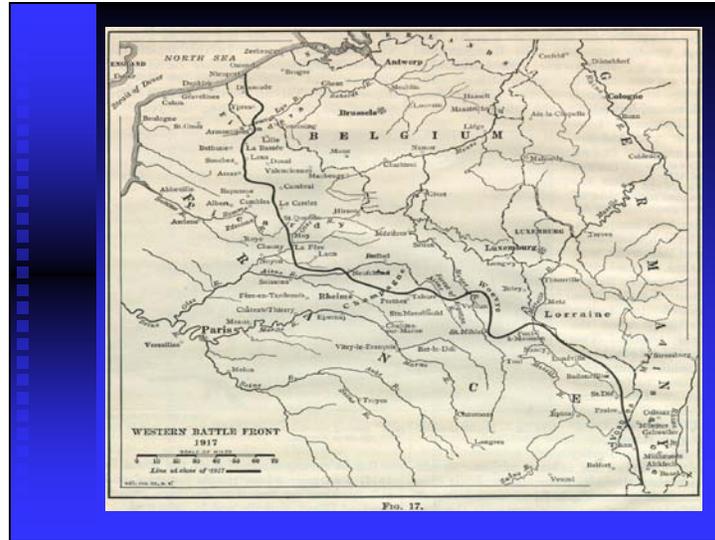
Slide 9



The next two slides are maps to give you an idea of where Dr. Tallant served. I hope you can see them. Some of the places previously mentioned are not on the maps, but C-Thierry and Somme are on here, as well as Compeigne, where Dr. Tallant wrote one of her letters to Emma.

These maps are from the book Murray, Frank M. *The Geography of the Great War*. Macmillan, 1919. I found them online and cite the URL later.

Slide 10



Again, here is Chateau-Thierry.

World War I Service: Emergency Relief Unit, 1918

- August: nearly 150 cases of diarrhea and dysentery in 3 weeks
- September: influenza outbreak--called the "grippe" or the "Spanish grippe"; more than 600 patients and 1500 visits--did not lose a single case.
- Cared for 35-40 villages alone after Dr. Kelly was re-assigned to Vic-sur-Aisne on October 7; Dr. Tallant joined her there in November.

Source: letter excerpt (dated March 1919) to Emma Ewing published in the Smith College *Bulletin*, 1919.

In her subsequently published letter of March 1919, she summarized her experiences of the previous year.. She wrote:

"I do not need to tell you at home anything about the grippe, and of course the number of cases in our small villages would not sound like much beside the statistics of the big cities of the U.S. But it was enough anyway and there were plenty of mighty sick people to look after during those weeks. By the end of November the Ch-Thierry region was so well on its feet that the need for the work of our Committee was no longer, and that centre was discontinued. I then moved on to join Dr. Kelly at Vic, where the work was growing too big for one doctor, and there I have been ever since."

She later continues, "It has been much the same work as what I did with the Smith Unit last year, only that there has been much more of it. Also it has been a more varied medical practice, with much more serious sickness than we had to deal with in the Somme. We have treated all varieties of French soldiers in the villages here, even to the Malegaches, as they call the natives of Madagascar, and lately, since the Boche prisoners have been working in this region, we have even had some of them among our patients... This village work is not the kind that can be blazoned forth in large letters, but it has been needed badly and there was no one else to do it, so I am glad enough that I had the opportunity to fill in the breach. You need not publish it abroad, because it might sound like boasting--or a fairy tale--but I did not lose a single case of grippe. Wasn't I lucky? And I am just enough of a kid, in spite of my advancing years, to be pleased over the remark of an old woman which was specially hard hit by the epidemic,

Awarded *Croix de Guerre*

- Dated April 12, 1919 by the *Service de Santé*:

“Miss Tallant, Alice Weld, docteur en médecine, membre du Comité américain pour les régions devastées de la France...”

QUOTE “We have troubles enough, but when we are sick ‘les Dames’ come and take care of us and we don’t die of the grippe.’ END QUOTE Isn’t that rather nicely put?”

After this hospital service, Dr. Tallant cared for French civilians that had been “bombed-out” and were infected with influenza. For those services to the army and the civilian population, the French government awarded her its highest honor, the *Croix de Guerre*. The next three slides quote from her citation for the *Croix de Guerre*.

As translated in *Technology's War Record*:

“Miss Alice Weld Tallant, M.D., member of the American Committee for Devastated France. Voluntarily performing the duties of a major-aide in the French Army at Coulommiers and at Château-Thierry, during the months of June, July and August, 1918, she showed great devotion, watching night and day during the rush of wounded...”

This is the translation of the crucial portion.

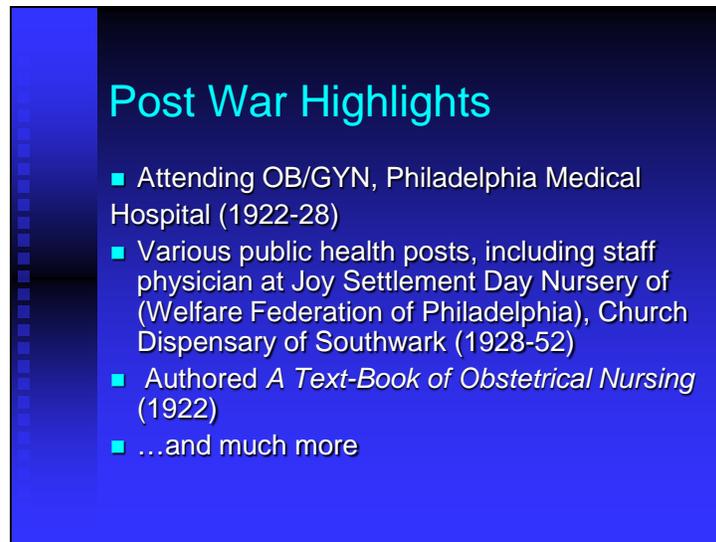
As translated in *Technology's War Record*:

"Afterwards devoted herself with untiring energy to the care of the civilian population returning to the devastated regions, and rendered them inestimable services."

Portrait of Alice Weld Tallant in uniform in Coulommiers, France, where her hospital was located, and where she received a second officer stripe, aide-major de premiere classe, July 1918.

(Photographer unknown).
From the Alice Weld Tallant Papers, Smith College.





Post War Highlights

- Attending OB/GYN, Philadelphia Medical Hospital (1922-28)
- Various public health posts, including staff physician at Joy Settlement Day Nursery of (Welfare Federation of Philadelphia), Church Dispensary of Southwark (1928-52)
- Authored *A Text-Book of Obstetrical Nursing* (1922)
- ...and much more

Dr. Tallant's career as an obstetrics professor and practitioner continued to flourish after her return to the U.S. She published medical articles as well as the 1922 monograph, *A Text-Book of Obstetrical Nursing*, and she was reported to have delivered more than 3,000 babies during her years in Philadelphia .

There were numerous archival files relating to Dr. Tallant's post-war career, including scripts from radio interviews.

In fact, those files alone could comprise one or two additional papers in and of themselves.



Alice Weld Tallant (1875-1958),
public health obstetrician, with
a young patient in South
Philadelphia, not dated.
(Photographer unknown).

From the Alice Weld Tallant Papers,
Smith College Archives

Portrait of Alice Weld Tallant holding her *Croix de Guerre*, not dated.

(Photographer unknown).

From the Alice Weld Tallant Papers, Smith College Archives



This could be circa 1957 because the same photograph appears in the Germantown Courier article from July, 1957.

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Acknowledgements:

- Karen Kukil, Archivist, Sophia Smith Collection and Smith College Archives,
- Susan Barker, Administrative Assistant, Sophia Smith Collection and Smith College Archives
- Benjamin Shearer, Ph.D., Editor, *Americans at War: A Biographical Dictionary of Americans on the Home Front* (forthcoming from Greenwood Press)

Note: The 3-volume work edited by Dr. Shearer was actually published in 2007 with the following title: *Home front heroes: a biographical dictionary of Americans during wartime*. Ximena Chrisagis authored the entry about Dr. Alice Weld Tallant.

