



Two million Americans joined the armed forces and 2.7 million more were drafted. Nearly half of them saw combat in France. All who went abroad understood the inescapable tragedy of total war, a war that spared no one.



He waits for death—
He knows—
He watches it approach—
He hears it coming—
He can feel it underneath his feet—
Death bearing down on him from every side,
Violent death, death that tears the sky to
shrieking pieces...

—Mary Borden, excerpt from the poem "Unidentified," 1917



OVER THERE

Over 350,000 African Americans served in segregated units, where many were assigned menial tasks. Others were deployed with the French Army and fought with distinction, earning France's highest military honor, the Croix de Guerre.



National Air and Space Museum



National Archives and Records Administration



Many who went abroad experienced first hand the muck-filled and rat-infested trenches that ran nearly 500 miles across northern France. They witnessed the horrors of mechanized warfare: machine guns, flamethrowers, poison gas, tanks, warplanes, and an endless rain of exploding shells from rear-line artillery. And they learned that warfare had become "cruel, deliberate, scientific destruction," as President Warren Harding described it in 1921.

Casts of wounded soldiers with sculptures used to make prosthetic masks, about 1918



Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

WORLD WAR I: LESSONS AND LEGACIES

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Tens of thousands of women served for the first time in the armed forces—in supporting roles or as nurses in the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marines.

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