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Mona Wilson and the Canadian Red Cross in Newfoundland, 1940-1945

DOUGLAS BALDWIN and GILLIAN POULTER

INTRODUCTION

“THERE IS A WOMAN IN NEWFOUNDLAND who might be called the ‘Florence Nightingale’ of St. John’s. She is Miss Mona Wilson.” So began a Canadian Press release that glowingly described Mona Wilson’s Red Cross work in Newfoundland during World War II.¹ Mona Wilson later typed a detailed account of her activities in Newfoundland during World War II. This manuscript is reprinted below, supplemented by pertinent entries from Mona’s diary and her private correspondence, as well as photographs from her own collection.²

Mona Gordon Wilson, the third child of Harold and Elizabeth Wilson, was born in 1894 in Toronto, Ontario. Harold owned a popular sporting goods store in Toronto, and belonged to several of the city’s exclusive clubs. Mona attended the Toronto Model School and Havergal Ladies’ College, followed by four years of nursing instruction at The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Upon graduation in 1918, Mona enlisted in the American Expeditionary Force’s Nursing Corps and sailed to France in December of that year. The following June, she joined the American Red Cross Society, which sent her to Russia. Quartered in Vladivostok, Mona spent eight tension-filled months working in a women’s medical ward and training Russian nurses’ aides in the principles of practical nursing.

By the time Mona left Siberia, she had experienced a failed coup attempt and had watched helplessly as mounted Bolshevik soldiers rode through her hospital ward looking for deserters.

In May 1920, the American Red Cross posted Mona to Tirana, Albania. Since Muslim women refused to be examined by male doctors, Mona and several other American Red Cross nurses conducted home visitations in this war-ravaged country, and established a small school for training local nurses. Mona accompanied the mobile clinics into the mountains to preach the benefits of toothbrushes and soap and to conduct baby clinics. Late in June 1920, amidst a barrage of shells, Mona hurried to the Adriatic coast to assist the Red Cross medical unit located only about ten kilometres from the warring Albanian and Italian armies. At the conclusion of these hostilities, the Italian Red Cross decorated Mona for her efforts. In August, the American Red Cross dispatched her to Ragusa (Dubrovnik) on the Dalmatian coast to care for 30,000 White Russian refugees who had escaped the Bolshevik army in the Crimea. Here she clothed, fed, and nursed the refugees back to health. April found Mona in Vir Pazar, Montenegro. During the next nine months she organized mothers' clubs to teach the benefits of fresh air, infant care, and personal hygiene; conducted home visitations; accompanied mobile clinics into the mountains; initiated school inspections; trained young women in the principles of public health nursing; and was the resident nurse in the Danilovgrad orphanage.

Mona returned to Toronto in January 1922, and earned her Public Health Nursing diploma at the University of Toronto the following year. In 1923, she became Chief Red Cross Public Health Nurse in Prince Edward Island. In the absence of a provincial health department, Mona and her small staff ministered to the Island's health needs by initiating medical inspections in the schools, establishing dental clinics, Junior Red Cross clubs, tuberculosis chest clinics, and crippled children's camps, and organizing province-wide smallpox and diphtheria vaccinations. When the provincial government established a Department of Health in 1931, Mona Wilson became the Island's first Provincial Director of Public Health Nursing. Except for the period of World War II, she held this position until her retirement in 1961.

MONA IN NEWFOUNDLAND

On the outbreak of World War II, Canada assumed responsibility for the defence of Newfoundland (and Labrador). Canadian forces took over existing installations at Gander and Botwood, and established new bases at St. John's and Goose Bay. Their purpose was to provide naval and air cover for transatlantic convoys, and to help ferry aircraft to Britain (Figure 1).

Soon after the first Canadian soldiers landed in St. John's, the Canadian Red Cross Society convened an emergency executive meeting to appoint a representa-

tive in Newfoundland. The terse notes of that meeting mentioned that Mona Wilson was “thoroughly conversant with conditions there” and recommended that she be asked to serve as Assistant Commissioner.³ Although Mona had never been to Newfoundland, her work on Prince Edward Island was well known to the Red Cross executive, and more importantly, Mona had two close friends on the society’s National Women’s War Work Committee who recommended her for the position. Gladys Campbell, the Committee’s chair, was “a great friend of Mona’s,” and Clara McEachren, who supervised the Toronto Workroom, had known Mona since they were children and had visited her several times in Charlottetown.⁴

Mona was on a motor trip in Nova Scotia when this meeting took place and was surprised when a clerk in a hotel along the Cabot Trail asked her to telephone the Canadian Red Cross Society headquarters in Toronto. After receiving a leave of absence from the PEI government, Mona agreed to become Assistant Red Cross Commissioner for Newfoundland. On 4 October 1940 Mona sailed between the “marvelous cliffs that rose out of the sea” and into the protected harbour of St. John’s. In her diary she noted: “Arrived by boat from Halifax around 8 a.m. No trouble with immigration or customs officials. Apparently was expected. Went to Nfld Hotel, found unexpectedly that a room had been engaged for me.”⁵ The Newfoundland Hotel was a seven-storey, yellow brick building deemed the finest hotel in the colony. It had been furnished from England, and included telephones and baths in each room, tennis courts and a skating rink. The view from Mona’s room, which overlooked the city, could not have been very encouraging (Figure 2). The high unemployment rate during the Depression had caused a slow, steady decline in the standard of living and few people could afford to make repairs on their homes or to paint them. “St. Johns [*sic*] is interesting,” Mona informed her younger sister Jane, “very old of course and very dingy. The houses are built right on the streets up against another in endless rows.... Many of the old houses have no central heating, only fireplaces in the rooms. I went to look for rooms in one of these the other day. Most antiquated bathroom and kitchen with no end of pipes visible, funny little fireplaces, and the unevenness of the floors and stairs could be felt at each step.”⁶ Mona noted that Newfoundland’s tuberculosis mortality rate was triple Canada’s, and its infant mortality was double. “Never in any place on this side of the Atlantic have I seen such undernourished and miserable looking children apparently so poorly fed and clothed,” Mona remarked to a friend.⁷ There were no sewage connections in the slums, so sewage buckets at the front of each house were regularly collected by two-wheeled horsecarts with burning torches at the back to ward off flies. The Canadian troops nicknamed these vehicles “chariots” or “honey wagons.”⁸ In many areas of town there were still horse troughs.

St. John’s was a city of about 50,000 people. Situated on the north side of the harbour, the town climbed the slope of the hills that ringed the bay. Water Street was the principal commercial and industrial thoroughfare. Horse-drawn vehicles pulling casks of cod oil, drums of fish, and barrels of port and beef, created a deaf-



Figure 2. View taken from Mona's room in Newfoundland Hotel, St. John's.

ening clatter as they wound their way along the winding cobblestone roads. "Walking on the streets is quite a hazardous adventure," Mona observed. "The hills are terrific and both the sidewalks (such as they are) and the roads are horribly slippery. There are only a few streets in the city that are paved and so far I have only found pavement on sidewalks of two streets.... We used to worry in Charlottetown about the children sliding [sledding] on the grades, but heavens! that wasn't a patch on what they do here, simply swarms of them on almost every street slipping down the hills onto cross roads with street cars, trucks and what have you."⁹ At times Mona missed the amenities of larger Canadian cities. There was no "decent place to go to revive one's drooping spirits with a spot of tea," she lamented to Jane. "Not a good restaurant in the city that is not dear or serves good food — and after 8 pm it is impossible to get a bite in the hotel. *What* a country! Oh for a Honey Dew or a Murray's." When Mona finally did find something she liked, the storekeepers invariably replied, "'Sorry, but it is out of stock at present,' meaning six months to a year."¹⁰

One of the first women to appear in uniform in St. John's, Mona wrote that "the children followed me around like the Pied Piper or maybe some freak out of a circus!" (Figure 3).¹¹ To differentiate herself from other uniformed Red Cross women, Mona designed her own triangular cap to go with her "beautifully tailored khaki outfit." Mona was not as happy with her summer uniform with its brass buttons and braid which made her feel "like a member of the girl's band."¹² Pictures of Mona in her khaki uniform indicate that she supplemented her Red Cross outfit with a dark shirt and tie, oxford shoes, and a dark skirt that reached below the knees. Soon after



Figure 3. Portrait of Mona Wilson in Newfoundland.

arriving in Newfoundland, she inquired from the American Red Cross if she was entitled to wear a ribbon on her uniform indicating her World War I service. She sent three additional letters before receiving a negative reply in 1942. The uniform was an important symbol establishing Mona's rank and giving her the authority to mobilize resources and personnel.¹³ Mona's rank as assistant commissioner equalled that of captain, which meant that the servicemen often saluted her. This

was not always to her liking. "The lads wear me out snapping to attention and saluting," she complained to her sister, "I draw the line at saluting in return and that sort of rot. But my face is always stiff at the end of a day after smiling sweetly all day at all and sundry!!"¹⁴

Mona Wilson faced an imposing task. Her mandate was to care for the physical and social needs of Canadians stationed in Newfoundland. Although she was the Assistant Red Cross Commissioner, the Canadian Red Cross had no organization in Newfoundland, and her only means of material support were far away in Toronto.¹⁵ There were no precedents to follow and no specific instructions of what to do. Mona would have to blaze her own trail.

St. John's was the home base of the Newfoundland Escort Force [NEF], whose task was to escort convoys of ships on the famous North Atlantic Run. The Royal Canadian Navy played a major role in the NEF, which used every conceivable evasive technique to avoid German U-boats, sometimes sailing as far north as the Arctic ice pack.¹⁶ Despite these precautions, German submarines sank many vessels. Mona's most important task was to care for the survivors of these disasters. In 1941, Mona's diary showed that she cared for more than 500 survivors who had landed in St. John's, followed by more than 5,000 in the next year and a half.¹⁷ These men were brought in by naval escorts, small rescue trawlers, and fishing craft. Some survivors had been adrift in lifeboats for many days. Many were near death, or had to have their arms or legs amputated after spending many hours in the bitterly cold ocean. Everyone needed a complete set of clothing and ablutionary supplies. Sometimes only a handful of men needed care, other times an entire crew was rescued. Once, Mona wrote, 1,000 survivors arrived in St. John's on the same day.

In November 1941 weekly air raid practices began in St. John's. The following year the city was put on permanent blackout beginning at 6:30 every evening. Movies began at 5:30 p.m. in the summer so that the audience could return home in daylight. Automobile headlights were covered except for a small circular hole in the middle. "The first night of the black-out," Mona reminisced, "I had been so desperately busy all day that I had quite forgotten to have the headlights of the car blackened. I hadn't gone any distance when I was stopped by one of the constabulary. These tall men wore dark grey ankle-length great coats and high black fur caps and really were quite awesome." After turning off the car lights, Mona drove slowly to the pier, where she waited for the boats to appear out of the darkness.¹⁸

Radar detection systems, new tactics, and air protection brought an end to the Battle of the Atlantic late in 1943. As the action shifted away from the North Atlantic, American and Canadian servicemen, who at one time numbered over 16,000, left Newfoundland for other theatres of war.¹⁹ The decline in the number of survivors provided a welcome relief. For the first time since Mona arrived in Newfoundland, she spent a "lazy do-nothing" holiday climbing in the hills, reading, and wearing "civvies." "This is the first time in all the years I've gone out so much," she

told her sister Jane, “as before I worked such very long hours & used up so much energy in the day, just couldn’t go out.”²⁰

Mona had less work to do, and she began to get “restless because I’m happiest when I’m going full steam ahead and up to my eyebrows in work.”²¹ Early in 1944, Mona asked Governor Walwyn to write her a letter of recommendation for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency.²² Although she put out additional “feelers,” and wrote to all the prominent people she knew, Mona complained to her friend Ruth that after the Newfoundland office closed she had “no plans. No future. Would like to go to the Far East or China but think the chances are slim on account of my age. Was most interested in the clipping you sent about UNRRA — I will be 51 on my next birthday so am definitely out as far as that organization is concerned [its upper age limit was 45].”²³ Mona still had plenty of energy, “although I get irritable under pressure,” and found it difficult to “resign herself” to the fact that others considered her too old to work.²⁴

Mona and her staff spent the spring and summer of 1945 preparing to leave. There were enough supplies to last for another year, and they had to be sorted, counted, packed, addressed, and either given to other organizations or returned to Canada. When the Corps women left, “there was only myself to fill the breach again.” At the end of October 1945, Mona transferred the remaining supplies to the Women’s Patriotic Association [WPA], which moved into the Red Cross office on Water Street. Following a sad farewell, Mona sailed for Halifax on 31 October 1945.

According to her sisters, Mona always considered her Newfoundland years as the “peak” period of her life. The praise was plentiful. The *Canadian Red Cross Dispatch*, for example, claimed that “when the day comes to write the story of The Canadian Red Cross Society during the present war, there will be no more creditable chapter than that which deals with our work in Newfoundland, for Miss Wilson has not only served our men with unselfish devotion, but she has made a permanent contribution towards a better understanding between Newfoundland and Canada.”²⁵ Several years after Mona had left St. John’s, the president of the WPA claimed that, “No report that has, or may be written, can ever pay sufficient tribute or do justice to Miss Wilson. Those of us who witnessed the efficiency with which she organized her volunteers, cared for the needs of servicemen, together with her readiness to rush assistance to local communities which suffered disaster, felt that the Canadian Red Cross was really something.”²⁶ In 1946, Mona received the Order of the British Empire for her work in Newfoundland.

By the time she passed away in 1981, Mona Wilson had been awarded the highest honour in international nursing (she was the ninth Canadian to receive the Florence Nightingale Award in 1963), in Girl Guides (the Beaver Award in 1957), and in Prince Edward Island (Island Woman of the Century in 1967).²⁷

Similar to all Mona’s public speeches and annual reports, the following manuscript went through several revisions. It appears to have been initially written as one

of the many talks Mona gave at Prince Edward Island Women's Institutes meetings, and relies heavily on the diary she kept for the first two and a half years of her stay in Newfoundland and Labrador. Mona later edited it lightly for her proposed autobiography. The Public Archives of Prince Edward Island possesses the various drafts of this seventeen-page foolscap manuscript. Reprinted below is the final draft, dated 1974, titled, "Five Years of War Service for The Canadian Red Cross in Newfoundland, 1940-1945." Except for the deletion of the first two paragraphs that discuss Mona's career and other short extraneous passages, we have reproduced the manuscript in its entirety. The document has been transcribed exactly, and therefore retains the inconsistencies of the original.

* * *

"Five Years of War Service for The Canadian Red Cross in Newfoundland, 1940-1945," by Mona Wilson

THERE WAS ONLY ONE PERSON in Newfoundland whom I knew, and that but slightly, Dr. Lloyd Shaw, Secretary for Education who was a former school inspector in Prince Edward Island. Red Cross National Headquarters had provided me with the name of the Army Auxiliary Services Officer, who had preceded me to St. John's by three weeks, a friend in Halifax gave me the name of the representative of the British Red Cross and St. John Ambulance Association. I wrote of my appointment and approximate date of arrival. Dr. Shaw was most helpful when I got there and arranged for me to meet Lady Walwyn, wife of the Governor of Newfoundland.²⁸ Lady Walwyn invited me to speak at Government House at a meeting of the Executive of the Women's Patriotic Association — an organization comparable in many respects to our Red Cross National Women's War Work Committee.²⁹ Dr. Cluny MacPherson, local representative of the British Red Cross and St. John Ambulance Association, also received me most cordially. These contacts proved most valuable later.

I then went in search of Capt. Marsh Peters, Army Auxiliary Services Officer, who was 'down north' at Gander, a 250 mile overnight narrow gauge train trip from St. John's where part of the Queens Own Rifles Regiment of Toronto had just arrived to guard the airport, and where the entire RCAF personnel numbered but 35 men.³⁰ Although it was October [1940], the army was still under canvas as the bar-

racks were only in the course of construction. There were many difficult problems with which to cope in getting established. The water supply was extremely limited — one tap for 500 men! My first request, made by the O.C. (Officer in Command), was for hand operated washing machines as there were no laundry facilities nor any nearby [sic] homes where washing could be done. Gander is isolated to the extent that the only approach is by rail or air. There is no town or village and it is cut off by Gander Lake at one end and surrounded by bush and bog. The sick men were being cared for at the Regimental Aid Post in double decker beds. I contacted the local branch of the Women's Patriotic Association (W.P.A.) and made arrangements for the members to visit the patients and to take them books, magazines, treats, smokes etc. provided by the Canadian Red Cross. Preparations for emergencies were discussed with them and later some instruction in Home Nursing was given. I then visited the other part of the Regiment at Botwood, 60 miles farther along the railroad. Here a small emergency hospital was nearing completion, but there were practically no supplies for it. The Red Cross was asked to help out until such time as the army equipment arrived. So the first cable was sent off to National Headquarters in Toronto for washing machines and hospital supplies. The request for washing machines apparently was puzzling for National Office.³¹

Local officials at Grand Falls, 22 miles away, were contacted. Sir Vincent Jones, head of the Anglo Newfoundland Development Co. (A.N.D.) and Lady Jones were most cordial and helpful and entertained me on this, the first of many occasions, at Grand Falls House, their beautiful timbered home. I helped the W.P.A. to pack Christmas parcels for their men serving overseas with the Royal Artillery, Royal Navy or Royal Air Force and so got to know the important ladies of the town. With traditional hospitality, the people of this big A.N.D. pulp and paper mill town, were billeting in their homes the army lads on week-end leave from Gander and Botwood. While I was there the Regiment put on a big Sunday concert. The town turned out in a body — hundreds of people — as many as could be packed into the hall. On behalf of the mothers, wives and sweethearts of the troops, I thanked the people for being so kind to the 'invading' Canadians.

After spending three weeks in this area, I returned to St. John's with no end of commissions for the troops and for Capt. Peters, who wanted a piano for the recreation hut being built at Botwood, also curtains both for it and the one under construction at Gander. This gave me an incentive for exploring all the shops in the city, both retail and wholesale, of meeting the managers and heads of departments and of enlisting their interest. From then on they proved to be friends indeed and later helped me out of many a supply difficulty.³² Contacts were made with service organizations, church groups, women's clubs, with the hospitals and with Government officials. My address at a Rotary luncheon was broadcast and I addressed various other meetings. Co-operation was arranged with the Women's Patriotic Association, with the British Red Cross and St. John Ambulance Association, and with the newly formed St. John's War Services Association. Arrangements were

made with the Secretary of Customs to admit Red Cross supplies into the country duty free and with the manager of the railway to have them carried by rail free of charge. I explored the city and all its resources in order to have a fund of information available for the service men who soon would be arriving. Canadian civilians were interviewed re voluntary service and a group of workers formed. The Guild Room of St. Thomas Anglican Church was put at our disposal for sewing, so that soon the curtains for the recreation huts were well underway, as well as hospital supplies.³³

A group of survivors from a torpedoed ship had been landed in St. John's and I had heard there was very little preparation made for such emergencies, so offered Canadian Red Cross help to the shipping agents. At that time, survivors were allowed but \$35.00 with which to refit themselves with clothes, which small amount was not available until after they had been ashore for several days. This would not go far in the purchase of men's clothes in Canada and certainly was far from adequate in Newfoundland where prices were considerably higher. However, the W.P.A. was helping out with a sweater, 2 prs. socks, a balaclava cap and knitted gloves for each man. I offered comfort bags with toilet articles etc. About a week later when leaving to join the curtain makers, I read in the morning paper that 95 survivors had been landed the night before (that was before the Navy was established and 'security' came into force). We had no supplies of any description so I put it up to the sewing group that as I had offered comfort bags, how about producing them? That was enough. One lady accompanied me hurriedly down town where we bought material and had it sent back to the Guild Room by special messenger, where the ladies immediately started cutting out and sewing the bags, while we went from wholesale to wholesale store purchasing razors, shaving soap and brushes and all the other toilet articles and stationery which made these little bags just the very first thing a survivor wants to receive. There was the rush and excitement of packing and the issuing of the bags the next day by some of the ladies. That sent their enthusiasm sky rocketing and from then on they met every emergency with the same speed, dispatch and undaunted spirit (Figure 4).

As fast as barracks could be erected, Canadian troops poured into St. John's to occupy the new military camp at Lester's Field, the spot from which Alcock and Brown took off for their historic Atlantic flight to Ireland in 1919. To complicate matters, an epidemic of 'flu swept the city in December 1940 and many of the lads who had just arrived were laid low with it. One barracks had to be hurriedly rushed to completion to be used as a hospital. There were no Nursing Sisters and I did an 'all time high' on the making of endless beds. We still had no supplies so I appealed to the British Red Cross who turned over pyjamas designated for British hospitals. These all happened to have wide pink stripes and when I visited the hospital the next day and entered the long ward, all the boys sat up in bed and laughingly called out "strike me pink!"



Figure 4. Mona handing out “comfort” or “ditty” bags to survivors of a torpedoed merchant ship. These bags were sewn by volunteers and filled with toilet articles to be given to survivors brought into St. John’s.

Much time was spent helping at the temporary hospital, securing extra supplies, nourishment and comforts for the sick men and in helping, as much as possible, the local graduate nurses who had to be called in. Other cases of illness amongst the service-men were put in the civilian hospitals, also the sick merchant seamen, all of whom I visited several times a week.³⁴ The hospitals were at opposite ends of the city and I had no transportation of my own and there was very little available elsewhere. Taxis were few and expensive; the tram beltline wasn’t any help. There was an hourly bus service when the bus wasn’t broken down, — but how was one to know about that after standing on a street corner freezing in the icy wind for an hour or more waiting hopefully! The simplest way to get to Lester’s Field from where I lived was a good half hours pull up a steep hill, usually with a haversack filled with magazines on my back, and then another three quarters hour walk to the General Hospital, stopping in at two other civilian hospitals on the way. No, those days were not easy, but the men were sick and alone in a strange country and it was my job to make them feel that the Red Cross was their real friend. It heartened them tremendously to have someone taking an interest in them and thinking about their welfare.

At this early stage of the development of service for the troops, there were no auxiliary services officers in St. John’s and no local organizations ready to handle

entertainment for the Canadians. I made a small attempt at this, contacted local radio and other entertainers and arranged several evenings of entertainment for the men in camp. The first Christmas our gifts for the hospital patients and decorations for the wards, helped to dispel the gloom of the men's Christmas away from home. I telephoned all the permanent Canadian residents in St. John's and asked if they would entertain servicemen to Christmas dinner. As a result of this effort, many Newfoundlanders also offered to do this, so it wasn't too bad a day for most of the men. Also for Christmas 1940, the Caribou Hut was opened, — the first large hostel for service personnel and merchant seamen. This was operated by the St. John's War Services Association of which I was an executive member, and for some time convener of the house committee.³⁵ An office was given for our Red Cross use in this building. Much time and assistance was given in helping to get this club started and shortly after, when the YMCA manager was recalled to Canada, I acted in that capacity until his replacement was sent out. This was during the organization period, when the painters and carpenters were still in the building, when furnishings and equipment had to be purchased, weekly dances and other entertainment started, a routine set up and general supervision maintained. The Canadian Red Cross gave money and furnishings for the Caribou Hut. All the time more and more men were pouring into the city, the Navy as well as the Army. It was a busy and hectic time and I remember losing 12 lbs. that month! Many of the Army lads knew only how to dance square dances and stood around envying the Newfoundlanders so obviously enjoying themselves. Unhappy about this, I organized a dancing class with the gym teacher from one of the private schools as instructor, and a group of pretty young girls to be the partners. This proved a very successful venture and countless lads were soon 'swinging it with the best' as a result of our popular dance instruction.³⁶

Presently our supplies began to arrive from Canada. Where to put them? The city was canvassed for warehouse space without success. The Army finally came to the rescue and gave a corner of one of theirs. It turned out to be on the fourth floor of a great, eerie, silent, ice-cold fish warehouse. The old cooper in the building proved to be a friend and opened the wooden cases for me. The first time, neither of us realizing the technique of opening Red Cross rectangular packing cases, he opened them at the end. Being short, I fairly had to stand on my head to reach the bottom of them! It took a little time to discover why all day the smell of fish remained with me. Finally I realized that my greatcoat was contaminated from leaning against the cases, as everything in the warehouse reeked of fish. After that I went to the warehouse armed with a heavy piece of paper on which my coat was carefully laid, donned a smock for the unpacking and gradually congealed to the navy blue stage in the chilling atmosphere. I have often wondered if the Army ever was able to make use of the hundreds of blankets stored in that room!

With our office located in the Caribou Hut, we were in personal contact with numbers of service men, so there were endless opportunities of doing little services for them and giving them all manner of information about the city and its facilities,

— where to eat, dance, bowl, skate, be photographed, buy souvenirs, find their Newfoundland relatives etc. We did their mending and darning, sewed on ‘shoulder flashes,’ — everything from personal shopping to finding a ‘date.’ This latter might take five minutes or two hours. One of the most difficult requests was to find living accommodation for those on ‘lodging and comp.’ Their wives and children arrived and the housing situation became very acute. In the end we found not only apartments for their wives, but nurse maids for their children!

There was the famous farewell dance given by the Victoria Rifles Regiment of Montreal when they returned to Canada, for which I convened the refreshment committee. Two thousand or more guests were expected. There was no catering establishment in the city, so it meant recruiting an army of volunteers who spent an entire day making thousands of sandwiches and cutting up the cakes ordered from three local women and those made by the regimental cook. Then for rapid handling at the dance, we packed the food in individual cellophane bags stamped with the regimental crest and tied with ribbon in regimental colours.

The day came when one small office and the corner of a fish warehouse could no longer accommodate our ever expanding services. The Knights of Columbus were persuaded to rent us the large ground floor of their club building. This was directly opposite the Caribou Hut on the main business street, and across the street from King’s and O’Leary’s wharves, which later became the landing stages on the city side of the harbour for the naval duty boats and so proved to be a very strategic position. This space had been a ‘housy-housy’ parlor and required much remodeling and redecorating to become office, workroom and warehouse for the Canadian Red Cross. The old long tables and chairs used for Bingo were rejuvenated with a few coats of gay paint applied by a team of merchant seamen survivors. Eventually our color scheme of red, white and blue looked very fresh and smart and the new Red Cross headquarters became a bright spot for the thousands of men who, over the war years, were visitors there. On the day of our official opening with all the V.I.P.’s present, — the Governor and Lady Walwyn, members of the Government, the Mayor, and Councillors, Canadian High Commissioner, Commanding Officers of the Newfoundland, American, and Canadian Armed Forces, — Generals, Commodores, Air Marshals and what-nots, etc. things really happened! The kettles were just about boiling for tea when suddenly all the lights went out due to the excessive load of the extra hot plates. This plunged the warehouse into complete darkness just as His Excellency was admiring the display of knitted garments. However, everyone coped nobly! Flashlights were produced and an army Colonel climbed on an oil barrel to examine the fuse box. Despite the raging snowstorm outside, another officer dashed along the street to the nearest shop for new fuses, while another, armed with kettles, raided the kitchens of the Caribou Hut across the road for boiling water. So with such efficient assistance, in no time the lights were on again and everyone was enjoying their tea. However, no sooner had this excitement died down, then suddenly the wind veered and as the chimney of the old building was defec-

tive, all the smoke from the rubbish being burned, poured into our quarters from the furnace room until the rooms were thick and our guests choking and coughing with tears pouring down their cheeks. So all in all, it was an eventful day! Another dream was realized when a station wagon arrived from Canada.³⁷ This meant the end of the uncertain, long, wearisome trudging by foot, tram, bus and foot again to the various hospitals which was not only exhausting but so time consuming (Figure 5).

The Red Cross was the first Canadian service organization to become established in St. John's. Soon, therefore, it became the centre of information for all Canadians arriving and endless and widely varied were the requests and services rendered. Many more wives of army, navy and air force officers came to offer their services as volunteers and soon groups of these helpers worked regularly in our office. By the end of 1941, there were four Canadian Hospitals established, — two military at St. John's and Botwood, one air force at Gander, and one temporary naval hospital in St. John's. First on the ground in Newfoundland, and with supplies on hand, it was possible for the Canadian Red Cross to provide the hospitals with



Figure 5. Mona (centre) and the “Corps Girls” pose in front of the green station wagon. The members of the Canadian Red Cross Uniformed Corps sent to assist Mona were (clockwise from centre) H. Joan Todd (St. Catharine’s), Betty Smith (Toronto), J. Kirby McNeil (London, ON), and Wilma Baird (Montreal).

many needed articles before these were available from their own stores. All through the war the Red Cross continued to supply 'extras' not included in general equipment. In fact, our 100 hospital beds brought out to Newfoundland for the use of civilian hospitals in case of emergency, were used to establish the first temporary naval hospital in the gymnasium of Memorial College. This later became a hospital for merchant seamen. In those early days all the armed services had difficulty in getting their supplies built up, as the growth of the bases and the influx of men was so rapid and transportation facilities extremely limited. Therefore, because the Red Cross had anticipated the needs of the men to a great extent, had supplies on hand, or purchased them locally, we were able to come to their assistance when their need was the greatest. For that reason, the Red Cross will never be forgotten by them.

The days got busier and busier. More and more ships came in. The groups of survivors became more frequent. There were various conferences with officials of the Government and St. John's War Services Association as to the care of these men and preparation for similar contingencies. Their tales were agonizing. In one group of 53 men, 46 were hospital cases and 8 had to have feet amputated. They had spent thirteen days in open boats off the coast of Iceland before being picked up by a British naval ship. The men invariably landed in St. John's on a Sunday or public holiday which complicated matters as far as getting them clothed, housed and fed was concerned. On one of these occasions, a group of Greek survivors arrived with practically no clothes. As we did not have an adequate supply, the manager of one of the large department stores very kindly opened the store and personally took all the men into the mens ready-to-wear department and sent them back to us resplendent in light blue and light grey suits, gaudy ties and light blue hats. Our supply of comfort bags was nil, but a few ladies were making and filling them as fast as possible. As each man returned to the Caribou Hut he would come up to me scratching his face (as no English was spoken) indicating he wanted to shave and then would beam all over at receiving one of the well equipped toilet bags. However, it wasn't long before we could provide everything in the way of men's clothing needs from a collar button to size thirteen shoes. We even produced hair oil on request from a Lascar seaman whose wavy hair after a shampoo was standing up on end like a golliwog's. One night so many survivors arrived we couldn't find nearly enough beds in the town for them, so put up double deckers in the auditorium, writing and games rooms of the Caribou Hut and a few of us spent nearly all one night making them up. I opened a make-shift dispensary and attended to all kinds of minor cuts and abrasions; took some of the men to local doctors and hospitals for x-rays; took them shopping etc. The DEMS (army and naval gunners on merchant ships) became my special charge and I always took them to the army and navy stores to be outfitted with new uniforms. They always felt like the 'forgotten race,' — unclaimed by the army or the navy and not members of the crew of the merchant ships on which they served. There were always a hundred and one things to be done for the individual comfort of the men at these times.

I was always on the pier to meet the survivors and often the captain or 1st Officer would call down from the bridge to me. Especially those who had brought survivors in before said they always felt so relieved to know I would be there. Many times I would have to rush back to the office for an armful of shoes so the men could come ashore, their own lost when the ship was torpedoed; or would find a man wrapped in a blanket borrowed from the ship because most of his clothes had been blown off. Later, all the rescue and naval ships were provided with Red Cross dunnage bags of survivors clothing. What a relief these dunnage bags were both to the survivors and the ships officers faced with the problem of clothing men, and women too, rescued from the sea after a torpedoing! ...

Our days became a hectic rush of emergencies, piled on top of a constantly growing routine. There were more trips to Gander and Botwood and later to the Red Cross emergency stores for this area. These trips were kept up regularly through the years as the personal contact with the ever changing staffs of hospitals and camps was so much more satisfactory than by letters. In the end there were eight Canadian hospitals in Newfoundland having a total of about 700 beds.

St. John's was rapidly becoming a large and important naval base. There were hundreds of ships coming and going during the battle of the Atlantic and having a grim time of it. Called to action stations over and over again with the strain of hunting and being hunted by enemy submarines, the cold and gales and high seas, the ice and fog, — the men arrived in port nervous and exhausted. How they did appreciate what was done for them! The fact that they could get woolen comforts, they were *asked* their requirements instead of having to trail around the town, on limited time, to search out a few extras. The fact that the supplies were delivered to the ship and that they didn't have to worry about finding transportation (always difficult even at the best of times), was such a help, particularly as the ships were berthed at the other side of the harbour from the city. In the early days the YMCA Auxiliary Services Officers contacted the ships and took orders for woollies for us, frequently delivering our supplies.

Later the Naval Special Services Officers visited all ships on their arrival in port; and when the Red Cross Corps girls came out in July 1943, they made all the deliveries.³⁸ The Corps girls with the two ton truck or station wagon loaded to capacity, were familiar figures in the dockyard or on the naval jetty on the 'south side.' They got a great thrill seeing the faces of the crews light up with happiness, and eye every bundle expectantly as the supplies were taken on board. As they drove along the jetty, a smile, a wave and a cheery 'hello' greeted them from all the ships, and the lads would shout enthusiastically "Oh boy!" "The Canadian Red Cross is bringing us sweaters and socks!" The R.N. ships were particularly appreciative as they were able to draw so few comforts on the other side. There was one Christmas Eve when our office had been completely emptied of all gifts, decorations, favors etc. when a naval officer came in asking for decorations for some Christmas trees his crew had just cut. We knew there was absolutely nothing left in

the city and certainly no time to make anything. What to do? Mustn't fail the navy. Ah! I have it — and immediately went off to the nearest department store and asked them if they would take down their shop decorations for the ship, which they promptly did. Then off went the Corps girls and helped the crew to decorate the messes and ward room. What fun everyone had!

Before the Corps girls came, more army, navy and air force wives came out to St. John's to join their husbands, and as a result our group of volunteers became large, about 70 strong.³⁹ As well as the original sewing group and army hospital visitors, who were Canadian bankers wives and English and Scottish residents of St. John's, there were now naval and air force hospital visiting committees, hospital librarians, and volunteers to take convalescents on country drives. The drives were always a popular feature, because as well as a change of scene, there was time to stretch out on rugs in the sun and to 'boil a kettle' — Newfoundland term for picnic! All these volunteers only came for half a day at a stretch once or twice a week, with a different group every morning and every afternoon. There was no full time help, so I always had to be on hand to show the various workers what to do, as well as having masses of errands all over the city; then there was the book-keeping and accounts, records, reports and correspondence; and finally the over-all task of keeping the whole show running smoothly. There were a few intervals when a volunteer would work practically full time and would take charge of the packing of woollies for the various camps and ships. But these were service wives, and when their husbands were transferred, there was only myself to fill the breach again. However, it was these marvelous volunteers who kept up the big volume of work and gave such magnificent service.

There was no very set routine to be followed because the picture changed from week to week and the duties from day to day and hour to hour, so there were continual adjustments to be made. We just never could have managed without our wonderful teams of volunteers. The service wives formed into army, navy and air force groups, and there was much gay rivalry between them. The Red Cross always helped to make Christmas a memorable day for the men in hospital. There was a Christmas bag for every man and woman containing a variety of useful and amusing articles, all gaily wrapped — the wrapping having been done by the Girl Guides. Our visitors were the first to arrive on Christmas morning to distribute these gifts and to set the dining tables and trays with festive favors and to admire the colorful decorations of the wards usually arranged by the patients. Our marvelous volunteer groups besides sewing, knitting, book binding, making leather jackets and minesweeper mitts, made hundreds of Christmas and Easter favors and decorations for the hospital trays each year. These were social as well as working gatherings, a means of getting the Canadians to know one another and a chance to exchange helpful shopping hints etc. in another country. Nothing would daunt the large sewing group of local ladies. No matter how unusual or how unfamiliar the request, or even how great the quantity, it was produced somehow. There were times

of emergency when, short of supplies, this group worked frantically on Saturday afternoons, Sundays and public holidays, — even taking dozens of articles home to sew on at night in order to complete the required articles in time. They did masses of hospital mending and made hundreds of pairs of curtains to help relieve the bareness of hospital wards and recreation rooms, or add a note of homeliness to Nursing Sisters quarters, service hostels, sergeant's messes and ward rooms (Figure 6).

Again more warehouse space was required, and after much searching, begging, beseeching, finally a space was secured in the basement of the sanatorium building on the outskirts of the city. This was soon filled up and still more space was needed. Supplies for hospitals, for service men and women, for survivors, for civilians and for other emergencies were necessary. We were apprehensive and wanted to be prepared for any eventuality as Lord Haw-Haw, in Berlin broadcasts, threatened the destruction of Gander and St. John's. Lady Walwyn, wife of the Governor of Newfoundland, happened in one day when I was desperate as to where to store our latest shipment. The next day, the Commissioner of Finance offered a section of the Commission of Government's emergency warehouse. Later we were given the use of an empty schoolhouse outside the city, and still later purchased a huge and



Figure 6. Mona oversees the work of local volunteers who sewed and mended vast quantities of clothing, curtains, linens, and comfort bags.

wonderful warehouse from the Americans. With these four scattered warehouses and the one adjoining our office together with the one in the Botwood area, we were able to keep our supplies safely divided in case of bombing or fire. Each warehouse contained a complete range of supplies, so that any emergency would find us still able to function (Figure 7).

Always the packing of woolen comforts went on and our office usually was stacked high with tremendous bundles of sweaters, socks, mitts, windbreakers, felt insoles for seaboots etc. Packing cases brought in from the outside town warehouses, were opened and repacked and shipped off again, — daily scenes of terrific high-tension activity. Some of the ships' crews liked to use the plywood of the cases for handcrafts, — dart boards, frames for the family snapshots, trinket boxes for the girl friends. We worked continually under the strain of limited time, sorting, counting, packing the piles and piles of comforts when two or three groups of ships were in port at one time, and for merchant ships too, so the deliveries would be made before the ships sailed. The sailing hours were shrouded in secrecy and frequently were changed. It was necessary to have the supplies aboard in good time so the men would be sure to have the comfort of the woollies against the cold Atlantic crossing. Many of the officers came personally to ask for the comforts for their men; other times we had a continual stream of callers. Coffee was served at 11 a.m.



Figure 7. Mona and helpers at work packing cases of supplies provided to naval and merchant ships leaving St. John's harbour on the Atlantic crossing. Left to right: May Boyle, Elizabeth Holland, Mona Wilson, Elizabeth Dobey.

and tea at 4 p.m. presided over by our charming volunteers. Everyone was welcome, whether he was the donkeyman from a merchant ship, a naval rating, or high ranking army or air force officer. Many were the tales of high adventure told around that tea table and how much the men enjoyed these chats, and the sympathetic attention of the ladies, was shown by the way they came back almost every time they were in port. There were so many varied requests to be met, — personal shopping, — one officer handed over \$200 and a long list!... It was grand fun helping the men out in no end of ways and interesting to contact so many nationalities, — the Free French Navy, Norwegians, Russians, Poles, Americans, British and New Zealanders. We were the official agency for comforts in the port, so met them all. Occasionally they expressed their appreciation by inviting all the workers to a ship's party ...

During 1941, 500 survivors were landed at or near St. John's and about 5,000 more during the next eighteen months. They were brought in by naval escort ships or by the small Rescue Trawlers or larger Rescue Ships traveling with the convoy. Sometimes there was only a handful, other times entire crews of 45 to 65 men, or crew members of several torpedoed ships, — 200 or more. The biggest emergency of all was when 1,000 men were landed at one time. What a joy it was to be able to help them all! After the grueling experience of being torpedoed, and perhaps drifting on the vast Atlantic for 3-24 days in a lifeboat or on a raft off the bitterly cold coast of Iceland, the stormy mid-Atlantic or the fog bound coast of Newfoundland, they would be landed just a few hundred yards below our office. As the rescue ship would glide along the jetty, the men often could be heard murmuring with relief "Ah, the Red Cross is here!" They would be looked after. The Americans would pat the jetty and say: "Good old terra firma." I've seen negroes kiss the jetty in thankfulness for a safe landing. I was on the pier or at the railway station to meet practically every group of men landed in or near St. John's during five years, come wind, snow, rain or sleet, and any hour of the day or night, often standing for hours in the freezing cold waiting for the port and starboard lights of the rescue ships to loom out of the blackness of the harbour.⁴⁰ After all their harrowing experiences, these survivors never failed to come ashore with a smile and "Thumbs Up!" Their spirit was marvelous. Some of them had been torpedoed as many as seven times and yet were ready to 'sign on' again. Quite a few of them came back as old friends who had been landed in St. John's before. One was heard to call from the deck "Is Miss Wilson there? She was there the last time I landed here." He came ashore carrying in his hand only the small comfort bag which had been given to him a year ago, now stuffed with all that was left of his possessions. He recalled that other occasion when 60 men had arrived unexpectedly at 4 a.m. and the manager of the Knights of Columbus Hostel and I had rolled up our sleeves, donned aprons and fried bacon and eggs for all of them.

The usual procedure on landing was to come straight to our office, where an assembly line of clothing and bags of toilet articles was laid out, including a dunnage

bag to carry whatever each man required. Then they were transported to the service hostels for hot food, a shower, shave and into their clean clothes. Within an hour of landing, with faces shining, they were out exploring the town and would often drop into the office to say "Well how do I look now?" These were interesting times; this contact with men so recently rescued from danger and death, — gay too, because of their relief and joy at being safe again. Tales of great heroism and many jokes were told and dangerous incidents made to appear amusing in retrospect. We always tried to find out in advance the nationality of the men who were coming in. If they were Norwegians, the largest sizes in clothes were laid out for the burly Scandinavians, if they were Chinese, the very smallest, and the brightest colored shirts for the negroes. There was the occasion when a large group of Lascars was landed. Accustomed to the warmth of India, they shivered and shook with the penetrating damp cold of this northern country and so were particularly pleased to receive long fleece-lined underwear. There was a big dance on that first night at the hostel where they were billeted and much to our consternation, we suddenly saw the Lascars circulating among the dancers clad only in their new long underwear and bright shirts! Another time 190 survivors were landed, 50 of whom were women and children ranging in age from 8 months to 80 years. How glad we were to have civilian clothing for women on hand! They had lost everything and were not entitled to compensation because of crossing to Canada at their own risk. Two of the women were on their way to be married, and although our clothing didn't perhaps quite come up to the quality and beauty of a trousseau, we did our best to fill a few gaps in their wardrobes ... This service to survivors was a joint effort and its smooth running was due to the friendly relations which existed between all concerned, — the naval and immigration authorities, Women's Patriotic Association and the hostels, — Caribou Hut, Red Triangle and the Knights of Columbus, the two latter being Canadian hostels.

During this period, from the summer of 1941 to June 1943, the pressure of work was terrific. It gained in momentum and forged ahead with all speed. So many emergencies kept occurring and recurring until a frantic pitch was reached and we were geared "on high" most of the time. Our office seemed to be the place everyone turned to for everything, both large and small. The days were fifteen hours long, Sundays and holidays included, and many an all night session and sometimes several in succession. The survivors and the merchant naval ships kept us busiest, trying to keep enough supplies on hand to meet all the demands. The mad dashing to the wholesale departments and searching for clothing and more clothing. St. John's didn't stock unlimited quantities of many of the articles we needed, so a hurried trip for an emergency always meant going to all the shops along Water St. before accumulating sufficient quantity of any one thing.

Then there was the tragic fire which destroyed the Knights of Columbus Hostel when the building was crowded with servicemen and their friends enjoying an entertainment.⁴¹ One hundred Canadians lost their lives, mostly in trying to help the

girls to escape. The hospitals were filled with badly burned cases. All telephone communication was suspended so there was the distressing delay of having to drive all over the town here and there trying to find civilians, nurses and V.A.D.s to help in the hospitals; of gathering up our Red Cross volunteers to feed patients, make dressings, write letters and help the Nursing Sisters in countless other ways. The military hospital wanted twenty arm baths for continuous immersion of burns. These weren't to be found any place. It was a Sunday, but we got various managers of wholesale departments to allow us to poke through their shelves for anything which would do for a substitute, but without success. Then we found a tinsmith who gathered all his men together and made the arm baths in record time. This was an occasion when the blood plasma secured through Red Cross Blood Donors Clinics was the means of saving the lives of many of our men. More plasma, also sulphadiazine secured by plane from New York, were flown to St. John's when supplies were becoming exhausted.⁴²

Another fire, which partially destroyed the Notre Dame Memorial Hospital at Twillingate, 300 miles from St. John's, meant rushing beds, linen, blankets, etc. to their aid. And yet another fire at Harbour Grace, 85 miles from St. John's left 36 families homeless. On that occasion our Corps girls, with the aid of some army lads, worked until midnight loading the 2 ton truck with emergency clothing and early the next morning, left for the scene of the fire. How appreciative the people were of this timely help and how much they admired the beautifully made clothing! Another call was when an army barracks in an isolated post burnt down and all the mens clothes were lost. An officer phoned, "Could we send out dry socks and sweaters as the men were still fighting the fire, were soaking wet and bitterly cold?" Slipping and sliding over the narrow icy road, with sheer rock on one side and the sea pounding the rocks below on the other, a car full of woollies got to the men within half an hour.

Another fire emergency occurred at the newly opened club for Allied Merchant Seamen above our office. This time the roof caved in. Tons of water poured down into our warehouse and office, but the Navy saved the situation by forcing the door and with a large crew of men and fleet of trucks, removed absolutely everything from the warehouse, workroom and office, taking it to their own buildings for safe keeping. Once again the Navy's famed energy and resource saved from ruin, thousands of dollars worth of supplies. A blizzard prevented a large group of Airwomen from reaching their barracks seven miles away. Where to accommodate so many for the night? A house, ultimately to be a YWCA Leave Hostel, had just been taken over. Extensive alterations were in progress, there was no furniture whatsoever, but the furnace was on. The army rushed in mattresses and blankets, the air force some food and dishes and we provided pyjamas and toilet articles, getting stuck in a snow drift en route. There was another occasion when we hurriedly packed chocolate, magazines, books and games to be dropped by parachute to a troop train snowed in en route to their camp; and still another when we rushed wool-

lies to an isolated air force station by dogteam. One evening after the office had been closed and everyone gone wearily to their homes, a long distance call from Gander asked for emergency surgical dressings for a number of men badly injured in an air crash. Immediately we were dashing to the warehouse, loading cartons and cases of dressings on the truck and off to Torbay RCAF station seven miles out of town. A plane flew them the 250 miles to Gander where they were in use within three hours of receiving the message in St. John's ...

All kinds of standard operating supplies were given to the hospitals either made in our own workroom (which finally was housed in another building along the street) or sent out from National Headquarters. Many specially designed articles were made up to meet the needs of some special operative case or operating room staff. Large quantities of supplies also were given for the purpose of making up sterile operation bundles to have on hand for emergencies. There were also sterile emergency bundles for minor and major operations especially made up for ships' sick bays, which were used for many a serious operation at sea. The American hospitals, especially in the early days, were given operating room supplies also and as their hospitals, like some of the Canadian ones, were called upon to care for civilians, they also were provided with layettes and childrens clothing.

Our volunteers did so many other things, — such as teaching Home Nursing and First Aid classes, helping at Blood Donor clinics, helping in the service hostels, assisting at the Naval Well Baby clinic etc. Then there were our Corps girls,⁴³ so absolutely indispensable, and who did every job so efficiently and charmingly. They did not start coming until July 1943 when actually the really hardest part and that of greatest strain was over, but we were able to branch out more after their arrival; the office work got attended to with thoroughness; they took complete charge of our five warehouses and all the arrival and shipping of supplies; there was always someone on hand to do the driving; to make the deliveries of our supplies; to take the hospital convalescents driving in the country etc. The girls who taught recreational handcrafts in the hospitals at Gander, Botwood and the two naval hospitals in St. John's, made a great contribution to the recovery and happiness of many hospital cases.

Our Corps girls teaching handcrafts at Gander and Botwood had complete charge of the departments in these hospitals and also acted as Hospital Welfare Officers, arranging recreation for patients, taking them to the movies, planning picnics and outings for them etc. The other handcraft workers were under the supervision of the naval occupational therapy instructor. Handcrafts were tremendously popular in the hospitals with the officers as well as the men, so keen in fact was the interest that it was difficult to get the workshops locked up at noon so the instructors could get a spot of lunch. At Gander, the Hobby Shop was open several nights a week for the airmen and airwomen of the station, in addition to its use by the hospital patients during the day. Some very beautiful and artistic articles were made in these departments, — of leather, metal, wood, plexiglass, etc., also weav-

ing, sewing and needlepoint. One naval petty officer made most marvelous models of destroyers out of tin cans. Stuffed animals were very popular for awhile and it was amusing to see the naval ratings on discharge from hospital, leaving with a long-necked giraffe or pink elephant proudly tucked under his arm. Especially before Christmas and Easter, the patients would excitedly pack up their handwork to send home to the wife, sweetheart or the kiddies. "The greatest relief imaginable from boredom" one officer remarked. The enthusiasm of the patients was matched by the doctors. One doctor stated that the tone of the whole hospital had risen when handcrafts started. The civilian patients admitted to the hospital at Gander were delighted to have an opportunity of making things too. They usually were brought into the hospital from some remote and isolated outpost by a "mercy flight" and would have to be flown back as well. The experience of being ill and so well cared for in a Canadian Service hospital would be remembered and cherished for a long time. Mothers made gifts to take home to their children and were given wool and materials and taught to make practical articles of clothing.

Our Transport Corps girl was kept frightfully busy and constantly on the move. The continual transferring of large quantities of supplies from our out-of-town warehouses to our office packing centre was very heavy and tiring work, but for the past two years, the Navy very kindly assigned one or two ratings to us as full time helpers. When large new shipments had to be moved from pier to warehouse, a larger working party was provided. In the early days either the Army or Air Force helped us out tremendously with fatigue parties and trucks. There was one occasion when our transport driver, after a particularly trying and wearisome day, was returning to the office about 6 p.m. with the two-ton truck in a driving blizzard. She had picked up an elderly woman battling her way against the gale and had turned down a side street to leave her at her home. This street was a terrific grade down the steep hill on which St. John's is built, but our driver, being new to the city and in the dark and storm, didn't realize this. The truck skidded and slithered on the icy grade and finally slid into the corner of a house and got firmly wedged. A group of men who gathered said, with a defeatist attitude, that nothing could be done. She would have to leave it for the night. She would have to get a "wrecker" etc. However, after much trouble, she finally persuaded them to shove the truck bodily back on the road. Before long the irate owner of the house telephoned demanding compensation for damages! The Corp girls were much amused when next morning the written orders for the day appeared "(1) Repair one house complete with paint." With the naval helpers, our driver sallied forth with boards, nails, tools and paint to mend the damage done the previous night.

During May and June of 1944 when most of the ships were on the other side for the Invasion of the Normandy Beaches, our work for the navy became very quiet, but we were busy again the following winter. After VE Day, we knew our sojourn in Newfoundland was nearing its end. Most of our service volunteers returned to Canada which made the work doubly heavy for our Corps girls, who had to maintain all

the services as long as necessary. Then there was the task of emptying the smaller warehouses of reserve stock, moving all the supplies into town and concentrating them in the large warehouse a short distance from our office; then the task of listing the contents and stenciling addresses on all the cases in readiness for re-shipment to Canada. There was the endless sorting, counting, packing and addressing that went on for months. This was broken by a trip to Botwood and Gander for decisions on the disposal of all Red Cross supplies in these places, also an all day trip by Army supply boat to Twillingate to find out what of our supplies would be most useful to the hospital there, as all surplus hospital supplies were to be divided amongst Newfoundland hospitals, particularly the voluntary ones. I experienced an exciting flight from Gander to the Grenfell Mission headquarters at St. Anthony, when the door of our plane suddenly opened right beside me while we were flying at 2,000 ft. Later on the same trip, after lighting on a tiny land locked harbour at the tip of Newfoundland, we had difficulty in getting safely up again.⁴⁴

Through all the tedious packing of the summer of 1945, ran the bright thread of "Welcome Home" to the returning troops. The Corps girls were at the jetty to greet every group of Newfoundlanders, some of whom arrived with their wives and babies; also Canadians arriving on naval ships which put into St. John's to refuel before proceeding to Halifax or Quebec. The girls went aboard the ships distributing cigarettes, matches, chocolate etc. and gaily chatting with the men. "That smile is better than all the cigarettes put together Red Cross" would be heard. Many of the men had experienced the touch of the Red Cross before and glowed with appreciation. Others would give the cheery greeting so often heard overseas "Well, Hello Canada!" and "The Canadian Red Cross! Everywhere you go!"

When everything was finally completed (and we had issued over two million articles during the five years), the packing and shipping all done and absolutely everything put in shipshape fashion, we turned over the office, fully equipped, together with a small warehouse stocked with emergency clothing and the station wagon, to the Women's Patriotic Association, — our very good friends who had worked so closely with us during the war years.⁴⁵ The Corps girls departed, and later my last farewells were said and official calls made, an RCAF flight took me to Dartmouth and the Newfoundland interlude was a thing of the past, except for one Corps girl remaining at Gander hospital for handicrafts.

The success of the Canadian Red Cross war effort in Newfoundland was largely due to the many volunteers who gave so unstintingly of their time and services. These were mainly Canadian "service" wives, also Canadian, English and Scottish residents of St. John's.⁴⁶ Along with our splend[ed] [*sic*] Corps members, they all did a magnificent job. The Canadian Army, Navy, Air Force and Auxiliary Services gave most friendly co-operation at all times. The Governor of Newfoundland, Sir Humphrey Walwyn and Lady Walwyn took an active interest in our work and were frequent callers at our office. Officials of the various departments of the Commission of Government, the Newfoundland Women's Patriotic Association

and other local organizations, the managers of business firms and clerks, all were most co-operative and helpful. The kindness for which the Newfoundlanders are famous, was experienced on all sides at all times. But it is to the thousands of women of Canada who so skilfully made the lovely comforts which meant so much to our fighting men, to the National Women's War Work Committee and the National Purchasing and Transportation Committees, which made possible the steady flow of supplies so greatly needed, and to the many individuals and organizations in Canada who sent out supplies and donations from time to time, to whom we extend a very extra special word of praise, appreciation and thanks.

I like to think that when of an evening, groups of ex-servicemen gather together and are moved to think back and recall their war experiences, some of them may remember how the Red Cross came to their assistance and helped them when they were in need. These may be men of Newfoundland fishing off the Grand Banks, or men on a farm in Canada, or in a stately drawing room in England or the hills of Wales or Scotland. They may be in a business office in a big American city or reminiscing over a camp fire in the forests of Norway or on the beaches of Iceland or the vast steppes of Russia. They may be in a cafe in Belgium, on a canal barge in Holland or on the docks in Finland, Sweden or Denmark. They might be in a village of France or a seaport in Portugal. They might even be men of Gibraltar or Malta, or soft voiced negroes from the Gold Coast, the Carolinas, Jamaica, Trinidad, or Cubans, or silky bearded Lascars of India. They might be vociferous Greeks or quiet self-effacing Chinese, or men of Java or the Dutch East Indies, or Australians or New Zealanders. Men of all these different nationalities were made welcome at our office in St. Johns and given help in one way or another. I feel sure that many of these men today are wearing some of the lovely knitted garments issued to them during the war, and that these are treasured not only for their comforting warmth, but also for their memories and the little label on the inside bearing the words "Gift of the Canadian Red Cross Society."

Notes

¹Canadian Press articles, 29 March and 1 April 1944, Public Archives of Prince Edward Island [henceforth PAPEI], Acc. 3652.

²"Five Years of War Service for the Canadian Red Cross in Newfoundland, 1940-1945," PAPEI, Acc. 3028. Mona kept her diary from 4 October 1940 to April 1942. PAPEI, Acc. 3652, file 81.

³Minutes of the Sub-Committee of the Canadian Red Cross Society, 16 August 1940, CRC Archives, Ottawa [henceforth CRCS Archives].

⁴Interview with Mona's sisters, Margaret and Jane, in Toronto, 1987.

⁵Mona's Newfoundland Diary, PAPEI, Acc. 3652. Later that month, Mona moved to a room on Topsail Road.

⁶Mona to Jane, 1 September 1940. This collection of letters between Wilson family members was kept under Jane Hamilton's bed in Toronto until her son destroyed them following her death in 1989. Jane allowed D. Baldwin to read this collection of several hundred letters and to make photocopies of some of them [henceforth AP]. These have recently been deposited in the PAPEI.

⁷Mona to Amy Palmer (PEI), 12 October 1940, PAPEI, Acc. 3652. For provincial tuberculosis mortality rates see George J. Wherrett, *The Miracle of the Empty Beds: A History of Tuberculosis in Canada* (Toronto 1977), Appendix 6.

⁸Sergeant Thomas Miller's opinion of Newfoundland, 27 October 1941, National Archives of Canada [NAC], vol. 2793, file 7410-17.

⁹Mona to Jane, 12 July 1941, AP.

¹⁰Mona to Jane, 24 August 1941, AP. Mona liked to tell a good story, and her letters were usually lively and written with considerable description.

¹¹Mona to Barbara Delaney, 5 March 1953, PAPEI, Acc. 3028.

¹²Mona to Jane, 12 July 1941, AP.

¹³The design of women's uniforms was considered a way to counteract any loss of femininity or respectability which might occur when they took on traditional male roles. Tina Davidson, "'A Woman's Right to Charm and Beauty': Maintaining the Feminine Ideal in the Canadian Women's Army Corps," *Atlantis* 26.1 (Fall/Winter 2001), 45-54.

¹⁴Mona to Jane, 24 August 1941, AP.

¹⁵Of course there were other volunteer organizations, including the British Red Cross and St. John Ambulance Association, the Women's Patriotic Association of Newfoundland, the YMCA, the Salvation Army, the Canadian Legion, and the Knights of Columbus. Two days prior to Mona's arrival in Newfoundland, the St. John's War Service Committee was established to coordinate the activities of these service organizations, and Mona quickly became a permanent member of the Committee's executive.

¹⁶Initially, the NEF escorted convoys of ships from North America to the mid-Atlantic, but in February 1942 all convoys were reorganized under the mantle of the Mid-Ocean Escort Force which operated between Newfoundland and Ireland. Marc Milner, *North Atlantic Run: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle for the Convoys* (Toronto 1985), 91.

¹⁷Mona's Newfoundland Diary, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.

¹⁸Mona's handwritten notes entitled "Nfl'd Story," PAPEI, Acc. 3652.

¹⁹For overviews of the naval combat see Marc Milner, "Atlantic Fighting Force," *Horizon Canada* 4.41 (December 1985), 968-73; P.F. Neary, "Newfoundland and the Anglo-American Leased Bases Agreement of 27 March 1941," *Canadian Historical Review* 67.4 (December 1986), 491-519; James B. Lamb, *The Corvette Navy* (Toronto 1977); David Mackenzie, *Inside the Atlantic Triangle* (Toronto 1986), 79-80; Bernard Ransom, "Canada's 'Newfyjohn,' Tenancy: The Royal Canadian Navy in St. John's, 1941-1945," *Acadiensis* 23 (Spring 1994), 45-71.

²⁰Mona to Jane, 19 February 1944, AP.

²¹Mona to Ruth Barton, 2 July 1944, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.

²²Mona to Jane, 19 February 1944, AP.

²³Mona to Ruth Barton, 8 May 1945, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.

²⁴Mona to Ruth Barton, 2 July 1944, PAPEI, Acc. 3652. Mona was not alone in anticipating that post-war life would be an anti-climax; her fears were shared by many other women in the female military auxiliaries. See Jeff Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War* (Vancouver 2004), 188-193.

²⁵*Canadian Red Cross Despatch* (September-October 1944); also see, CRC, National Executive Minutes, 21 June 1944, CRCS Archives.

²⁶Caroline Hutchinson to McKenzie Porter regarding his history of the Canadian Red Cross Society, 29 September 1958, CRCS Archives.

²⁷For more on Mona Wilson, see Douglas O. Baldwin, *She Answered Every Call: The Life of Public Health Nurse, Mona Gordon Wilson, 1894-1981* (Charlottetown: Indigo Press 1997).

²⁸Since 1934 Newfoundland had been governed by a British-appointed Commission of Government. Entries on the Walwyns and other leading citizens of St. John's can be found in the *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* (5 vols., St. John's 1981-1994).

²⁹Before the war was two weeks old, Lady Walwyn had organized a public meeting in St. John's to revive the Women's Patriotic Association of Newfoundland. The WPA had supplied material comforts for Newfoundland soldiers and sailors in World War I, and Lady Walwyn envisioned it providing a similar service in World War II. Following this meeting, about 300 St. John's women, including the wives of many of the "best" families in the city, registered to start work immediately. Thereafter the number of branches grew steadily until it reached 409 at the war's conclusion. Women's Patriotic Association of Newfoundland *Quarterly Meeting Reports*, 1939-1945, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador [PANL], P8/B/13. Also see, G.W.L. Nicholson, *More Fighting Newfoundlanders* (St. John's 1969).

³⁰Mona wrote in her diary that it was "Quite an experience travelling overnight on narrow gauge rr."

³¹The vast bulk of the supplies Mona distributed in Newfoundland were provided by the Red Cross National Women's War Work Committee in Toronto. Mona twice attended executive meetings of this committee as an advisor. The Red Cross shipped over two million items to Newfoundland. The label on every article of clothing read "gift of the Canadian Red Cross Society." "Never a packing case, of the many hundreds shipped out from Canada, is opened but what someone does not stop to admire the beautiful knitting and think with admiration of the thousands of women at home whose needles fly day and night to produce these lovely warm garments," Mona wrote in her annual report. Annual Report of the National Women's War Work Committee, 1944. Also see McKenzie Porter, *To All Men: The Story of the Canadian Red Cross* (Toronto 1960). For the importance and variety of the contributions of women to the war effort, see Ruth Roach Pierson, *'They're Still Women After All': The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart 1986).

³²"You may think it takes a long time to get anything done in Charlottetown," Mona complained to a PEI friend, "but it is much worse here. Time as we value it just doesn't exist." During this two-month period, Mona lost twelve pounds, seldom returned home before 7:30 p.m., and often worked until 10:30 p.m. Mona to Amy Palmer, 28 January 1941, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.

³³For the first half of December 1940, a chest cold restricted Mona's activities.

³⁴Some of the opposition Mona had to overcome is indicated in her diary entry for 10 January 1941: "Taken by Capt. Peters for interview with Brig. Earnshaw. He will not allow

Red + comforts to be given to troops! Approved of comforts for hospitals only. Heard complaints re my plans for Red + work. Misunderstanding however re. hosp. visiting. Thought 3 times week for visitors too frequent. Did not approve of asking people to undertake hospital-ity. That people would prefer to offer this. Magazines & books not to solicited must be procured from Capt. Peters. All this left me feeling quite [word indecipherable] & low in my mind."

³⁵The St. John's War Services Committee convinced the Newfoundland government to lend it the King George V [Seamen's] Institute on 93 Water Street as a hostel for members of the armed forces. The hostel was renamed the Caribou Hut in honour of the Newfoundland Regiment, whose emblem in World War I was the caribou. The Caribou Hut provided a meeting place for military personnel, merchant seamen, and civilians. Although the YMCA had offered to provide a professional manager for the hostel, when the Caribou Hut opened early in January 1941 he had not arrived, and the War Services Committee accepted Mona's offer to take temporary charge of the hostel. Mona also became a permanent member of the Committee's executive. St. John's War Services Association, *Minutes*, 2 October and 4 November 1940, Newfoundland Archives, P8/B/15; Canadian Club, Minute Book, 4 September 1940, PANL, P8/B/1. Also see Margaret Duley, *The Caribou Hut: The Story of a Newfoundland Hostel* (Toronto 1949), and Alan M. Hurst, *The Canadian Y.M.C.A. in World War II* (YMCA nd.).

³⁶Soon after arriving in St. John's, Mona was swept up in a whirl of dinners, teas, and parties with the town's elite. Although her new associates felt that Mona "fit in well" and easily made friends, she had a low self-image when it came to socializing. After her first few weeks in Newfoundland, she wrote remorsefully to a friend in Charlottetown, "Now I regret having kept my nose so steadily to the grind in PEI and so lost all the social graces. My inability to play bridge, mix easily with strangers, and chat incessantly is indeed a handicap" (Mona to ? in P.E.I., 29 October 1940, PAPEI, Acc. 3652). The next year she complained to her sister, "Heavens the parties! The pace is too strenuous for me. I have been aboard corvettes for luncheons and dinners, and cocktail parties on British sloops. I often wish I had some of the gaiety in my make-up of the rest of the Wilsons — but unfortunately I'm not built for a social life" (Mona to Jane, 12 July 1941, AP). Three years later, she apparently felt the same way, for Mona informed Jane that she now only went to the parties "I *must* go to because as you know I have never been a social success — and still dread going out amongst people that I don't know well. I have so often wished I had your brains, charm and ease of manner in meeting people" (Mona to Jane, 19 February 1944, AP). Despite these protestations, one suspects that Mona was having the time of her life. One New Year's Eve, for example, she remained at a dance until 5:30 a.m., commenting later, "How's that for an old timer?" Another party was "heaps of fun with everyone I know," after which Mona and thirteen friends returned to the hotel for "more hilarious fun" before finally getting to bed at 3:30 a.m. (Mona to Amy Palmer, 9 January 1944, PAPEI, Acc. 3652).

³⁷The green station wagon arrived in late April 1941.

³⁸In the spring of 1943 the Canadian Red Cross Society sent an observer to Newfoundland to report on Mona's activities. He was astonished by the burden Mona shouldered, and recommended that she be given full-time help. Thus, in mid-July 1943, three members of the Canadian Red Cross Uniformed Corps arrived in St. John's to assist Mona, followed by two Nursing Auxiliary members." Report of the Activities of the Canadian Red Cross Society in Newfoundland," 1943.

³⁹By 1943, Mona was coordinating over 300 women, and the sewing group's production soared from 5,300 articles in 1942 and to over 7,000 the next year.

⁴⁰Mona took pride in being at the pier to greet every group of survivors. "At any hour of the day or night," she recalled, "the telephone might ring, there would be a message from the port officer — 'friends outside,' or 'at the usual place at 2 am.' In wartime, telephone messages were guarded. I would ask 'Many?' also 'Large?' also 'Colour?'" Mona Wilson, "Nfl'd Story," PAPEI, Acc. 3652. Despite all the difficulties, Mona confided in Ruth Barton that she would not exchange her job for any other. Mona to Ruth Barton, 20 June 1943, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.

⁴¹Several fires in St. John's in late 1942 and early 1943 increased popular apprehensions that saboteurs were active. Since the city was constructed mainly of wood, fire could have catastrophic results. In December 1942, the Knights of Columbus hostel burned to the ground. A little over a month later, soldiers discovered toilet paper folded into a fuse in the loft of the YMCA's hostel. The next day another club burned down, and in early February oil-soaked papers ignited fires at the Canadian naval base. For the Knights of Columbus fire see Jack Fitzgerald, *Newfoundland Disasters* (St. John's 1984) and *The Canadian Medical Association Journal* 47 (March 1943).

⁴²Sulfadiazine was a new anti-burn drug not yet available in Canada. Mona wired her needs to the Canadian Red Cross Commissioner, who phoned Trans-Canada Airways to hold a plane in readiness, and then contacted a hospital in New York to fly a shipment of sulfadiazine to Toronto. Sixteen hours after Mona had learned of the emergency, 2,000 tins of dry blood serum and 20 pounds of sulfadiazine arrived in St. John's. War Diary Force W, NAC, RG 24, vol. 13809; Dispatches, Local Correspondence Public Health and Welfare, PANL, 9/40, 3/42, 6/43, GN 1/3/A, November 1943; Fitzgerald, *Newfoundland Disasters* and *The Canadian Medical Association Journal* 47 (March 1943); Canadian Red Cross, Sub-Committee Minutes of the Central Council, 21-2 January 1943, CRCS Archives.

⁴³The Corps women included Betty Smith (Toronto), J. Kirby McNeil (London, Ontario), Wilma Baird (Montreal), and H. Joan Todd (St. Catharine's).

⁴⁴Unable to attract the pilot's attention, Mona finally threw her shoe at him. The return trip was just as harrowing, as the plane barely cleared the trees on its take-off.

⁴⁵Earlier, surplus stock was sent to Europe and the Far East, and the medical supplies (including the station wagon) were given to the Department of Public Health.

⁴⁶Newfoundlanders generally volunteered for the WPA and other local organizations.