I GO (NOT) DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS

Recollections of a Canadian Wren

By
Dorothy (Robbie) Robertson

For more information contact:

Dorothy Robertson
PO Box 28
Gooderham, ON
K0M 1R0

Printed in Canada 2005

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I have been seastruck since, at the age of eleven, I read Southey's *"Life of Nelson*." I have great respect for that 11-year-old self: twice since I have tried unsuccessfully to repeat that feat, and have come to the conclusion that Southey as a writer of prose is unreadable. I read it then, of course, only because, having fallen in love with the Little Admiral during a history lesson, and having read all the other biographies in the library, Southey alone remained. From then on I longed to join the Navy and go to sea, albeit I soon arrived at the dismal practical knowledge that the latter half of that ambition was unlikely to be fulfilled. Women at sea? Perish the thought!

Incidentally, this orgy of Nelson-worship probably led to the first glimmering of literary criticism through the varying treatment accorded the blind-eye episode: you know, when Nelson as second-in-command at the Battle of Copenhagen took advantage of his partial lack of sight to ignore the recall signal hoisted by his pusillanimous superior: he clapped the telescope to his blind eye and stated truthfully that he could not see the signal–let the battle commence. In one biography, written for the eyes of innocent little children (presumably including 11-year-olds), Nelson's words were recorded as "— me, I really do not see the signal." In the second, aimed at whatever teen-agers of those days were called, the quotation read, "D–n me, I really do not see the signal." Southey, of course, pulled no punches, being unsuspicious that his monumental work would never come under the scrutiny of a small girl: "Damn me," said Nelson, "I really do not see the signal." I chuckled to myself for days over this comparison, but prudently kept my observations to myself in case Mother thought it necessary to censor my reading!

With such a background no one can be surprised that I kept my patriotic fervour in check during the Second World War while the Army and Air Force were organizing their women's branches, until the first whisper of the Navy's at last following suit

appeared in the newspapers in the spring of 1942. On the instant I sent in my application to join–one of some 800 other applications received within the first four days, I have since learned. Had I known this at the time I should have been astonished as well as delighted to receive a call not long after for an interview with the British Wren Officer, Joan Carpenter who, with two others, was lent to Canada to supervise organization of the Canadian service. Thereafter things moved much too slowly. I saw by the newspapers that the first group had been mustered and the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service officially founded in August, but it was November before the first real event of my naval career occurred: His Majesty the King bade me report to HMCS *York* for a medical examination.

This nautical language concealed the fact of His Majesty's Canadian Ship *York* being in reality the Automotive Building of the Canadian National Exhibition. The "Ex," as it is familiarly known, claims (used to claim) to be the World's Largest Annual Exhibition, and occupies a large site on the shores of Lake Ontario in Toronto (which was once called *York*, hence the ship's name). The Ex is held during the latter part of August and the beginning of September, and was in full swing when war was declared in 1939.

As soon as the doors were closed the armed forces moved in and commandeered most of the permanent buildings. These buildings were numerous, large, sturdy, spacious, and no doubt well designed for their normal purposes, which were not the housing and feeding of large numbers of human beings. The Ex struggled to carry on, and was actually held in 1940, an extraordinary mishmash of sightseers and merrymakers mingling with service personnel trying to carry out their training operations. The Air Force probably suffered the most. It had bagged the agricultural complex for its share, and was forced to endure a fortnight's hilarity, hysterical laughter, and bad jokes from the civilian visitors as they read huge signs: SWINE above "Officers" and CATTLE AND SHEEP above "Other Ranks." The Ex originated as an agricultural fair and was still trying to preserve its identity!

What I set out to say was that the Automotive Building, being intended for the display of new cars and trucks, was not easily converted into a homelike barracks. It was, moreover, a strictly male preserve at that time; it was a daunting procedure to enter the fast echoing concrete hall warm with beautiful navy blue and try to find the Wrens' section. This turned out to be a minuscule room on an upper gallery. Minuscule? It was almost invisible, and had been further subdivided into three pieces. The piece entered through the doorway – there was no door – contained one desk, one filing cabinet, and two straight chairs, on one of which was sitting the first genuine Wren-in-uniform I had seen. No other furniture: there couldn't have been; any more and no human beings could have got in. The other half of the room was concealed by inadequate shower curtains which ended about two feet from the floor and showed a disturbing tendency to part with the slightest puff of wind. Below the curtains two pairs of legs were clearly visible, one male clad in trousers of navy blue, one female clad in nothing; and through the frequent gaps in the curtains were equally clearly visible one male rear end clad in the trousers and assorted portions of female clad in nothing.

The Wren, whom I later learned to call a Writer, asked a lot of questions, filled in a lot of forms, and directed me into the third and smallest piece of the room, ordering me to take off my clothes and put on the hospital gown that was hanging on the wall. "All my clothes?" I enquired sadly, my eye on those curtains which indeed seemed scarcely to meet at all. "ALL," she repeatedly firmly. The floor space in the disrobing room was about three feet square. It contained one chair and two wall hooks, on one of which hung the clothes of the girl now being examined, on the other the aforementioned hospital gown. It took a long time and considerable agility to wriggle out of my clothes and don the gown – which likewise didn't quite meet in the middle – without flinging wide the curtains and revealing to the sailors passing the door what they probably passed the door to see. I believe there were only some 500 men aboard at that time, but if someone had told me 500,000 I would have believed him, and they all had business that took them past that door. Perhaps a whole lot of businesses – hope springs eternal, especially in the breasts of men living a semi-monastic existence.

Meanwhile I sat disconsolately on the chair in the smallest section, and sat, and sat, and SAT, getting colder and colder (it was November, and that huge concrete barn was virtually impossible to heat) and more and more alarmed at what was going on next door. I could hear everything; in fact, with only the abbreviated curtain between us, I should have been medically unfit for service if I had not been able to hear, and it was obvious that the Medical Officer had found something seriously wrong with the girl. Although it was also obvious early on that she would be turned down for service, the doctor persisted with a thorough examination, and at the end advised her to consult a specialist immediately.

All this had taken so long that there were now two more recruits waiting, one seated on the visitor's chair, the other standing nervously in the doorway. I was thankful for the partial screening of her body during the perilous passage from one inadequately curtained recess to the other. The M.O. was young, good looking, serious – and thorough. Perhaps he was influenced by his discovery in my predecessor, but it is certain that never before or since have I had such a thorough medical examination, conducted gently but firmly, and without the smallest trace of a smile. At last he seemed satisfied. He shoved a paper into my hands. "Read this," he said. "Have you ever had any of these?" It was a long list of mostly serious complaints like rheumatic fever and epilepsy. I recognized all but one, and could thankfully swear that I had never shown traces of any, and would have liked to sign with a flourishing blanket, "No," but native Scots caution made me point hesitantly to the unknown word and say, "I don't think so, but what is this?" For the first time a tiny smile twitched at the M.O.'s lips. He stared at me for a few seconds before replying. "Bed-wetting," he said succinctly. "I haven't done that since I was two!" I exclaimed, signing hastily. Probably this exchange had also been overheard by the audience, now enlarged to the Wren writer, one recruit behind the curtain, one on the chair, and two in the doorway, but they kindly gave no sign.

Dressed and out in the open air, and clutching another letter from the King (via the Governor-General, via some admiral in Naval Service Headquarters in Ottawa) bidding me hold myself in readiness to report for duty when called. I fairly danced down the street, overwhelmed by the incredible thought, “I’m in the Navy! I’m in the Navy! After all these years of longing to be one with Nelson, I’ve done it!” I don’t think I recognized it at the time, but there must also have been a feeling of relief that now the decision no longer lay with me, or could be influenced by my family; when the King called, I must go!

CHAPTER II

When it came, the summons ordered me to report to the Union Station in Toronto at 0800 hours on Thursday, 7th January, 1943, where I would be given a ticket to Galt, Ontario, there to undergo basic training at the WRCNS camp. The very first batch of Canadian Wrens, those who would be administratively responsible for setting up the service and training recruits to follow, received their basic training at Kingsmill House in Ottawa under the three British Wren officers, but all other Canadian Wrens began their naval careers in Galt in what had been a correctional institute for girls taken over by the Navy in the autumn of 1942. Later it was to be commissioned as HMCS *Conestoga* under a Captain, Isabel McNeill, the only fully commissioned ship commander by a woman in the British Commonwealth, but in January of 1943 it was simply a training camp attached to HMCS *Bytown* in Ottawa, the officer-in-charge being Dorothy Isherwood, one of the British Wrens. I never saw her because she was absent on leave during my time in Galt, and the station was being run by Isabel McNeill, then second-in-command. (For the purists, yes, I do know that some years ago Galt was amalgamated with Preston and Hespeler and called “Cambridge,” but Galt it was then, and Galt it remains in the hearts of every Canadian Wren who went through basic training there.)

My experience of basic training was different from that of most others. Probably no two Wrens had exactly the same experience, but I still believe that mine deviated rather more from the norm than others. This was partly because the station was still new enough not to have fully established an inflexible routine; and partly because, even if so established, weather conditions would have rendered it impossible to carry out much of that routine. The winter of 1942-43 was if not the coldest, certainly the snowiest in living memory. Southwestern Ontario, where Galt is situated, is a snowy region at best; the training station was on high, exposed ground above Galt, and even when new snow was not falling, strong, bitter winds were at work moving around what had already fallen. Leveled out, I suppose, it would have measured not more than four

feet, but it was level only on the parade square, where no one walked. (Introduction to that splendid naval custom of, "doubling," across the parade square had to await my first incarceration in the Naval Signal School at Ste. Hyacinthe.) Elsewhere it was a desperate battle to keep open essential lines of communication, roadways and footpaths between the buildings. I never really saw the outside of *Conestoga* for nearly 30 years, having no occasion to revisit Galt until the unveiling of the, "Jenny," statue in October 1972. All that I caught at the time were glimpses of roofs and the upper floors peeping above the huge mounds of snow lining the footpaths, which had to be cleared several times a day to make it barely possible to move from one, "ship," to another. Along with doubling, saluting of officers had to be abandoned; it was too likely that knocked-off hats, black eyes and bruised chins would result from the elbows of Wrens complying too enthusiastically with King's Regulations in the confined space of the narrow paths. The most one could honour the King's commission was to squash oneself into the wall of snow while the officer squeezed past.

Recognition of all this came slowly, none of it on that first morning of saying goodbye to my family at the Union Station and joining the group of strangers milling around the big clock in the central waiting hall. Oh well that choice was no longer mine! The fluttering in my stomach among all those strangers might have led to sudden retreat – and lifelong regret. Though I knew no one else in person, I had an introduction through my aunt to one girl, Peggy Beverley, the daughter of a Bishop, tall, exuberant and self-possessed. Once introduced, I clung to her during the train journey to Galt and in the truck up the hill to the naval station. At this point we were all caught up inextricably in naval routine, which leaves time for neither loneliness nor regrets!

Thus, arrival brought detachment form Peggy and assignment to a cabin (naval language came more easily to me than to many another bewildered recruit), the other occupant of which was a beautiful, vivacious red-headed, "veteran," of five whole weeks! Whether it was accidental or deliberate policy to pair a new entrant with an older hand I do not know, but it was a good one at lest for me. I cannot remember my

cabinmate's name (I never saw her again after leaving Galt), and did not see much of her while I was there, but she provided comfort, a knowledge of routine, and advice; this last, though not always exactly successful, was certainly kindly meant. I remember her with the utmost gratitude.

First task was unpacking the strictly dictated clothing. The supply of uniforms in those early days was erratic, and some girls whose dimensions deviated far from the average, either large or small, had to spend weeks, even months, in their own civilian clothing supplemented by navy, "issue," smocks. We had been ordered to provide ourselves with certain outer garments in case no uniforms were available. Moreover, the Navy has never provided underclothing, at least not as free issue; instead, an extra payment on entry and an annual allowance for replacement was given. Nevertheless, the Navy felt free to dictate what underclothing we ought to have, combined with the threat of disciplinary action if these articles could not be produced at kit inspection. Most of the items, of course, were standard equipment and would have been purchased and worn by all girls of my acquaintance without any chivvying by some admiral in Ottawa. But ever-memorable is that one item on the list we received with our reporting orders: "Two pairs of bloomers closed at the knee." Those I, along with, I suppose, every other Wren recruit had to buy. I never wore them, and I experienced only one kit inspection, on the day I left Galt, but those wretched bloomers in their pristine newness had to be lugged from station to station at the bottom of my kit bag, just in case. Maybe some officers thought we actually wore them, but they could only have been male officers; Wren officers, having all been themselves Probationary Wrens, understood!

The remainder of that day remains vivid as I was caught up in the routine of signing on. This involved leaving the safety of the building into which I was first dumped and where I would eat and sleep for the next two weeks, and tracking down the various administrative offices in order to be registered for such interesting things as pay – ninety cents a day as a Probationary Wren. It was charming to find that the buildings

had all been named for deceased British admirals (mine was Beatty), but distinguishing Collingwood from Drake, identical pink brick buildings which couldn't be seen properly over the snow piles anyway, was difficult. However, I did it. With such despatch, indeed, that I was the first to finish, a rare occurrence for me. The last regular stop on this routine was the kitting store, where I expected, after the warning given in the bidding letter, to be told there was no uniform for me. But I was in luck. A shipment of uniforms had just come in, and being of a more or less stock size, I was able to collect an almost complete outfit: two serge jackets and skirts, one greatcoat just like a seaman's, four white shirts, nine detachable collars size 13, two black ties one, "pork-pie," hat with HMCS tally ribbon (this was before the hat style was changed to the jauntier and more nautical, "round rig"), four pairs of black lisle stockings, and two pairs of shoes. The shoes came last, and occasioned my only spurt of independent spirit that day. In everything else I was an automaton, willingly but unquestioningly doing exactly what I was told; but over the shoes I dug in my heels, metaphorically. During the assemblage of this pile of lovely clothing, mounting pride in it was tempered by growing dislike of the Wren issuing it. She belonged to the denigration school: everything was wrong with everything; life in the Navy was dull, stupid, useless, time-wasting; she obviously regretted (after about three weeks) joining up, and had no intention of making the best of it. All the joy of climbing at last, and so unexpectedly early, into clothes I had longed to wear, was rapidly being eroded. At last the shoes were flung at me. They were all right for length but too tight; they pinched, and I like my feet to be comfortable. "Could I try a wider pair?" I asked. "What for?" was the nasty reply. "You'll get used to those when you wear them a little. They're B width, and there is no C. You'd have to take a D, and your feet look clumsy enough as they are."
"I don't care," I muttered. "Give me a D. These are too narrow and I'll <u>never</u> get used to them." For a minute I thought she was going to refuse, and wondered if I had the courage to go to someone in higher authority on my very first date. Finally, and with ill grace, she gave in and brought me the wider pair. Fine! And they remained fine for the remainder of my naval career, re-soled and re-heeled as necessary and unbulged, and no corns on my feet! The final shot, however, lay with the enemy. Having donned the

uniform and struggled successfully with the four-in-hand knot in the tie, I was looking myself up and down with satisfaction in the mirror – preening, if the truth be known, but why not? The reflection represented fulfillment of a long-held wish, and momentarily I was completely satisfied. Until a disagreeable voice cut in. "I don't know why you bother to look at yourself. You look exactly like everybody else now, indistinguishable." Crushed and resentful, I gathered up the rest of my clothing, civilian and uniform, and retired to my cabin to stow them away and try to regain a lost delight.

The day, however, was not yet quite over. Just as I was about to leave the kitting store a senior Wren entered in advance of a number of my fellow recruits, to say that the M.O. had decided to see as many of the new entries as possible today instead of tomorrow. She looked at me. "If you are finished with all the rest of the routine, report to the sick bay as soon as you have stowed those clothes." With all possible despatch, having already made the useful discover that, "as soon as possible," meant even sooner if you wanted to keep out of trouble, I scuttled to the sick bay. There was a nurse-like Wren there (she turned out to the SBA, or Sick Berth Attendant, not a full nursing sister). She handed me a short hospital gown and a pair of flat slippers. "Go behind that curtain," she said, "Take off your clothes and put these on." "All of them?" I enquired with even greater dismay than in HMCS *York* because of the so-recently completed struggle with the tie. "All," was the relentless reply. So I did. By the time I emerged there was a little queue of fellow probies waiting. I was directed towards the next room, which contained three people, the M.O. (a woman) and two Nursing Sisters. They looked at me in surprise. "Why did you take your clothes off?" asked the M.O. A stupid question, to which there was only one reply. I gave it: "Because I was told to." She called through to the other room: "Don't have them undress. I only want to look at their feet." And to me: "Sit down here." Inwardly cursing the SBA for the forthcoming renewal of tie-tying, I obeyed. Later I realized I was lucky, for the succeeding events took me so completely by surprise I never cringed, whereas they took place in full view of my fellows now clustered shoeless at the open door. While the M.O. knelt and looked at my bare feet – for what reason I haven't the least idea – the two Nursing

Sisters grabbed each one arm and, while I was still gawking stupidly at the M.O., shot small-pox vaccine into one arm and a TABT inoculation into the other. Thirty seconds later, still dazed by the swiftness of the whole thing, I was back behind the curtain climbing into my uniform while my fellows advanced shrinkingly to the injection slaughter.

And so to bed. Early. I was quite worn out.

The next day, Friday, we were swept into the normal routine of most basic training camps of most services in most of the world. Or not quite: on the grounds that our arms would be swollen and sore from yesterday's shots we were kindly excused from the working parties, and turned straight over to Sandy for introduction to drill. There were two women at Galt whom no Wren will ever forget: Isabel McNeill, of course, and (the then) Petty Officer Phyllis Sanderson. Sandy was a sturdy Scotswoman, with the voice of a Regimental Sergeant-Major (which, as Master-at-Arms, she eventually became) and the heart of a mother. Her orders were to be obeyed, and everyone knew it; but she combined with this ability of successful command, the rare and invaluable knowledge of when <u>not</u> to order, and at such times volunteers streamed out of the woodwork. Her task this Friday morning was formidable: Captain Brock from Naval Service Headquarters was coming to review his Wren troops on Wednesday next, and Sandy had exactly five days in which to drill an unwieldy bunch of dreadfully raw recruits into something that just might be recognized as a disciplined body. It says a lot that by the time Captain Brock actually took the salute we acquitted ourselves quite respectable. Many of us had never marched in step before, and some appeared never to have learned left side from right side. Some of the oddest, to me, though I suppose Sandy had seen everything before, were those who attempted to swing the right arm forward at the same time as the right leg, likewise with the left side, instead of following the correct (and natural) procedure of co-coordinating the opposite sides. Their crab-like jerks, coupled with distressed frown, were comical, and elicited some nervous giggles from the less inept. Sandy was

remarkably patient and the Captain was able to say of the result, with at least the appearance of sincerity, that it was a fine performance. He may even have meant it; there is a picture of us new entries, prudently led by Sandy herself, and it is not at all bad – lines a bit wiggly, but I have seen worse even among the Guards, and as far as I can see, no one is out of step. Considering we were also marching on a narrow, snow-packed path that had been ploughed out only an hour or so before, it could even be considered a remarkable performance, and maybe the Captain wasn't just being kind, especially as the, "veterans," ahead of us (three, four, or even five weeks in the Navy) were infinitely better.

On Saturday the roof feel in on me. Friday had been entirely enjoyable: drill followed by lectures and discussions on naval history, naval language, general advice on routine, the categories of work to which we might be assigned; and I went to bed thinking that life in the Navy was good. In the small hours I woke with a violently throbbing left arm where the TABT had gone in; either the Navy was wrong in thinking that reaction should come immediately, or my system, as in so many other ways, was 24 hours behind schedule. Anyway, by morning my arm was scarlet, swollen and very painful – and we were no longer excused the working parties. After breakfast we were all mustered in the forecastle (lower deck lounge) of Beatty and a regulating leading hand (equivalent of corporal) doled out the duties: "You 8 swab the decks of Beatty; you 8 swab the decks of Nelson; you 8 swab the decks of Collingwood..." That was as far as I heard. As one of the last octet, in no time at all, I found myself on hands and knees scrubbing the longest corridor I had ever seen, at least from that level. My arm was sore, my knees soon likewise. Life in the Navy was not as nice as I had thought, and for the rest of the day, even though we returned to the pleasant regime of drill and lectures, I brooded on how to avoid ever again having to scrub a floor on hands and knees. My red-haired cabinmate was most helpful. "Goodness, you made the mistake of standing right in front of the mob. There are never enough real jobs to go round, and the regulators have trouble in finding anything at all for the last ones. Just put yourself in a corner and you'll be assigned a tiny little job that won't take five minutes." I thanked

her fervently, and on Monday morning, there being no work parties on Sundays, attached myself to the darkest and most distant corner of the forecastle. In came the regulator of the day. "You 8 swab...You 8 shovel...You 8 peel.." It was true; as the room emptied the jobs became less and less onerous, until there were only three of us left. The regulator looked as us in despair. "I simply can't think of anything for you. I suppose I'll have to let you go." We were heading gleefully for the door when another regulator came in and whispered urgently to the one in charge. She brightened up. "You're just in time," she said, and to us, "There's a lot of rubbish to be burned. Go with Smith here and she will show you where it is." Smith led three disconsolate probationers outside to the crest of the hill overlooking the town where an incinerator filled to overflowing with garbage leered at us. Handing us a box of matches, she told us to burn it. It was a large box of matches, and we need all. The wet garbage burned reluctantly; the screaming wind blew the matches out and the lighter pieces of garbage away. For upwards of two hours, long after the deck-swabbers and potato-peelers had finished and retired to the comfort of the forecastle, we three struck matches, chased fugitive pieces of rubbish, stamped our frozen feet from which all feeling had fled, and finally held rubbish down into the very flames, to the consequent ruin of our brand-new issue gloves. By the time the contents of that incinerator were finally reduced to blackened ash, and we three transformed into barely mobile statues of ice with scorched fingers released to the comfort of the warm building, I was a seething mass of indignation; though I must say that we were accorded great praise for persistence by the regulating office staff, who eventually ordered us inside. When I told my cabinmate that night she laughed, sympathetically but nonetheless loudly, and offered to think up another scheme. But at some time during the day I had come to realize that in the Navy, or anywhere else for that matter, one was best off on one's own, using one's own wits. One must conform to the system, of course, but it should be possible with a bit of study, to bend the system and make it work more comfortably for oneself. I proceeded to that study. A little observation uncovered the fact that just outside the main entrance to Beatty constant passage of snow-covered feet had built up a hummock of ice. A lot of people slipped, and I was lucky enough to see one actually fall. Reason told me that,

if there were never enough duties to go round, those responsible for assigning them would probably welcome a suggestion for removing one body from the mass – and one might just achieve a bit of credit for initiative as a bonus. So on Tuesday, as soon as the muster for working parties was sounded, I seized an ice chopper, closed with the duty regulator, and suggested that, as the hump of ice was clearly dangerous, I devote my duty period to chopping it off. The regulator was delighted with this suggestion. So, on succeeding days, were all the other duty regulators during the remainder of my brief stay in Galt, and I was able to spend some 20 minutes chopping ice from the doorstep daily, before scuttling virtuously back into the warmth and relaxing during the rest of duty time. And, yes, several officers did remark smilingly that it was a very good thing to do! How useful to learn, so early in my naval career, what the old sweats of the armed forces have also learned from time immemorial! You may like to know that it was thirty-one years before I scrubbed another floor on hands and knees; then it was my own kitchen floor in my own home. Somehow that seemed quite different from the long, long gangway of Collingwood.

Basic training was supposed to last for four weeks, so I was surprised to receive a message on my second Tuesday that I was being drafted to HMCS *York* on Thursday for training as a wireless operator. This didn't please me at all. My first choice of category had been that of a coder, a most romantic-sounding sort of work, learning all the secrets of the war at sea, whereas learning wireless telegraphy sounded like plain hard work. Grumbling about this to my cabinmate that evening brought the sound advice to put in a request to see the commanding officer the next morning. That was probably the best piece of advice I have ever received. Not that in the end it changed the situation, but because it brought me face-to-face for a few minutes with that remarkable woman, Isabel McNeill.

I stood to attention I front of her and she watched me carefully as I explained stumblingly that I would really prefer to be a coder. "Why?" she asked. A sensible question which could hardly be answered truthfully by the statement that it seemed

more romantic or that W.T. work sounded too hard! So I muttered something about coding seeming to be more compatible work for my talents. But Second Officer McNeill was no fool. "I suppose you think you would be privy to all the Navy's secrets," she said directly. "Well, let me tell you that you would learn very little, and it is just about the dullest work imaginable – looking up groups of letters and figures in the code books all day long; very hard on the eyes (and I see you already wear glasses) and not romantic at all. I think you are very lucky. If I had a choice I would certainly take wireless telegraphy. They are doing work so secret that even I don't really know what it is, but it is certainly much more interesting and challenging than coding. Besides, there are no plans for a new coding class for months, and you would just have to stick around here doing odd jobs. What do you want to do?" There in a few words she had turned the whole case round. I certainly did not want to stick around Galt indefinitely; I did not want to spend my days looking up bunches of figures and ruining my eyes; I did, most decidedly, wish to engage in interesting work so secret that even this wonderful woman didn't know what it was. "I want to be a wireless telegraphist," I said. She smiled back. "I thought you would. Good luck." I gave my best salute, turned, and marched out. And exactly two weeks after leaving Toronto to see the world, I was on my way back there.

CHAPTER III

Thursday, January 21st, 1943. The station platform in Galt, where a cluster of fifteen Probationary Wrens awaited the Toronto train. A picture of us, inevitably streaked with flakes of snow shows a group rather solemn at the prospect of embarking on a "real" job. Although I came to know them all very well, and some I count among my closest friends today, at that time I knew none; or, wait, one face did look rather familiar: to my dismay I recognized my disagreeable acquaintance of the kitting store. I don't think she remembered me among all the, to her, identical recruits she had outfitted; further acquaintance did soften my original impression of the embittered woman at odds with the world, but I was never able to warm to her sufficiently as to seek more than a casual acquaintance.

Suddenly my nerves were shattered by extraordinary noises issuing from a plump, pleasant-looking girl: "Dah-dah-dit-dit-dah-dit..." and much more of the same incomprehensible sounds. We all jumped and stated. "I was learning Morse at home before joining up," she explained. "And that's my name in Morse." This introductory encounter with gibberish did nothing to make me feel happier about learning wireless telegraphy! Nor, of course, was I any the wiser about her name! (Gwen Hoey, for those who knew her).

In Toronto we were met by a naval vehicle and ferried, not as you might expect to HMCS *York*, but to the extreme eastern edge of the city, to a luxury resort hotel known then as the Guild of All Arts. I have never understood why we were billeted in this place. Certainly there was no accommodation for Wrens in the Automotive Building, but there were now other Wrens working and studying in Toronto, and only we embryo wireless telegraphists were put out to pasture in such lovely surroundings in the countryside. Perhaps it was to break us in gently to the next move, a hayfield outside of Ottawa. The pleasure of the owners of the Guild in welcoming us is easy to

understand. The Guild was staggering financially in the straitened conditions of wartime pleasure, and they looked on us, quite rightly as their saviours.

We fifteen "new" girls were reinforcements to the first class, numbering about forty, who had been there about two months and were already quite advanced in their training. We were greeted by the Unit Officer, 3rd Officer Fax; she barely had the time to say hello before being transferred elsewhere, and I never saw her again. That left us in the charge of a Regulating Petty Officer Wren, two Leading Wren Telegraphists, and one lone man, Chief Petty Officer Telegraphist Barrie, in charge of our instruction. Accommodation was tight, that is, we were assigned two to a single room or four to a double; double-decker bunks replaced single beds, and the rest of the furniture was simply that designed for the intended weekend visitors. It says a lot for the general even-tempered nature of our group that, so far as I remember, there was no quarreling in the compressed quarters. For myself, I have nothing but gratitude that the alphabetical assignment of cabins brought me as my mate Dory Smelts, cheery, comfortable, adaptable and resourceful. Her cheerfulness was particularly remarkable – she had learned only shortly before of the death of her favourite brother, one of the ill-fated garrison in Hong Kong.

We fifteen remained "the new girls" for a sadly long time. This name was acceptable at first – the first group was already so well advanced that some of them were off the "buzzers" and taking directly off the air. Some even had to be put on an evening shift, partly because reception was better after dark, partly because we new girls overburdened both instructors and equipment. It says something about the quality of instruction, not to mention the determination of us new ones to catch up, that by the time we left the Guild for the real station was little to distinguish the "old" from the "new." Except the name, that is. Unfortunately, there was no "newer" class for several months to promote us to the distinction of "old" and tolerance wore a bit thin on finding ourselves still lumped together as the new ones six months later. Nothing insulting intended, of course, but annoying just the same. Curiously enough, the passage of

time has caused some of the old ones to forget that we were not there all the time. The other day one of my dearest friends reminded me of something that had happened at the Guild at Christmas. I pleaded ignorance. "You must remember!" she insisted. "How could I?" I countered. "I wasn't there!" "Of course you were!" was the emphatic contradiction. And I think she still believes that my memory is simply bad. So it is these days, but not so bad as to forget what I was not there to remember!

The three months at the Guild pass as a series of vignettes. "School," was conducted in what had been the summer dance pavilion, reached by a beautiful quarter-mile walk through quiet snowy woods. Here we spent every weekday, earphones clamped to our heads while Chief Barrie or one of his Leading Tels (Irene Carter and Gertrude Jardine, both Canadian National Telegraphists in civilian life) indoctrinated us into the mysteries of Morse. As a break from the buzzers, whose loud unvarying pitch could become maddening if listened to too long, we had lectures on naval wireless procedure from the Chief. And now I learned why Second Officer McNeill knew, so she said, so little of what we were doing. The procedure we learned was not British – it was German: we were, to quote Chief Barrie's dramatic snarl, *"SNOOPING* on the enemy!" Over and over he coached us in the location and call signs of the German Navy's coastal stations, and the make-up and probable meaning of various types of messages; above all, how to distinguish between the incessant traffic from the shore stations, in which we were really not interested, and the infrequent messages from the "units" usually U-boats, in which we were vitally interested, the prime reason for our existence being to obtain direction-finding bearings. He also stressed the "unbreakability" of the German Enigma machine code. I believed him, perhaps naively, and only a few years ago, discovered that the Admiralty had had an Enigma machine all the time, and was decoding messages throughout the war. Secrecy can indeed be kept, even from those involved on the fringes.

Life at the Guild was pleasant, and would have seemed even more pleasant if the Guild had not continued to operate as an inn, especially at weekends, and we were

able to compare the treatment of ourselves to that offered visitors. We ate apart from the guests in our own dining room, which was separated from the regular dining room only by glass doors. It was only too easy to see that what we got differed radically from theirs. Not that our food was poor, and in fact it was better than we would have had in standard barracks, but when you can see even better a few feet away it does tend to create resentment, even more when you reflect that the Navy was saving the Guild's bacon, so to speak!

Once the full impact of so different a life was over, and I had settled into the routine, few incidents stand out. Being so close to home and could get there for at least a few hours every week, there are no letters to prompt memory. One vivid recollection that must be shared by everyone is of the difficulty of getting into Toronto at all. The city has grown so greatly in area and population in the post-War years that it is hard to realize that the Guild Inn of those days was really quite isolated out in the country. The nearest public transportation was the Oshawa bus running along Highway 2, which passed once an hour and was reached by a long walk from the Guild. One stood in what recollection says was invariably a howling gale in sub-zero (Fahrenheit!) temperatures beside the unsheltered highway awaiting the bus, which like as not was so full that it didn't even stop; leaving us with the choice of waiting an hour for the next, or trudging some two miles into Scarborough and the end of the Queen streetcar line – no rapid transit subway in those days. Meantime, cars swished by with only one or two people in them, seldom, if ever stopping to pick up the half-frozen Wrens. Waggling a hopeful thumb was technically against the law; whether it would have produced results I greatly doubt. I never tried, and often was too cold to do anything but slog back to the Guild and stay. Occasionally my parents, or the parents of one of the other Toronto girls, would drive out and pick up a load, but fuel was rationed fairly severely, and the owners of cars were seldom able to offer help.

My mother contributed two memories of some of my visits. On the very first occasion – I cannot believe it could have been later – I refused to remove my,

“Pochette,” (our over-the-shoulder bag) on the grounds that it was part of the uniform and I was forbidden to take it off! The truth, I suspect, was that I was simply too enamoured by all parts of the uniform to be willing to part with a single bit except when absolutely necessary. Poor Mother, of course, was more concerned with the scratches being supplied to the back of the chair by the buckle, and protected, with reason, that she could not see how any officer was going to detect the lack of the pochette in her dining room.

Her other comment is on the speed with which I finished my meal – before anyone else! The family had log since given up waiting for me to finish and usually cleared the table before I had cleared my plate. Eye-popping astonishment at my first home meal to note a cleared plate while everyone else was still chewing. The explanation that we were allowed only a limited time to eat, and that if you weren’t finished you went hungry was greeted by a fervent, “Thank goodness!” I am afraid that this happy condition did not last very long; the more leisurely meal times at the Guild and later at No. 1 Station soon dropped me back into the leisurely mastication habit, and even three incarcerations in the Signal School at Ste. Hyacinthe had no effect – I am still a very slow eater.

As the winter wore away and proficiency in Morse increased, we began to look forward to going into action. It had been our expectation that we would be replacing men for sea duty, and I cannot recall at what stage we realized that this noble ambition was not to be fulfilled; instead, a whole new station was being built especially for us near Ottawa, and it would be ready at Easter. Moreover, the direction-finding hut was to be equipped, not with audio sets, but with a brand-new invention, cathode-ray tubes for visual D.F. Some weeks before the move, Chief Barrie went to Ottawa to inspect the almost-finished station, and reported back goggle-eyed at the extraordinary luxury in which we were to be housed: “Lilac-coloured powder rooms!” he breathed in awe. These, when eventually viewed by the expectant occupiers, turned out to be a single large room with numerous cubicles for the assortment of useful equipment, painted, it is

true, a pale lavender, but not exactly our idea of the height of luxury; not, that is, until our first experience of HMCS *Ste. Hyacinthe.*

Before the actual move, which took place on Easter Saturday, spring had come to the Guild, and the full beauty of its location was apparent. The path to school was fringed with trilliums and other early wildflowers instead of with snow, and it was possible to cross the wide lawns to the edge of the bluffs and look out over Lake Ontario and imagine you were by the sea; the last time this being-at-sea-in-the-Navy was to be possible for me for another 18 months. Nevertheless, the prospect of doing real work was enough to make even Ottawa almost as attractive as, say, Halifax. It is a happy bunch shown in the photograph taken on the Guild's lawn on the last day, W.T.'s all except for the Regulating P.O., looking confident and burning with enthusiasm.

It is odd what silly little things lodge in one's memory. Of that all-day train journey from Toronto to Ottawa, I recall only the lunch. Food has never been of prime concern to me – I mostly eat to live, not live to eat – but along with all the rest of us, I was annoyed at being swept up at 11:00 a.m., herded into the dining car, and being faced with a set meal slopped and banged on to the tables by waiters obviously anxious to get rid of us before admitting the civilian passengers. Thin luke-warm soup; indeterminate meat in congealed gravy with watery canned vegetables; and then, dessert – saucerfuls of strange purple pudding. We stared at this unlovely substance with distaste, until someone braver then the rest cautiously took a spoonful.

"It's cream of wheat!" she exclaimed, "and absolutely disgusting!" Now the British would not have been surprised at meeting cream of wheat served up as a pudding; as I discovered later, under the name of semolina. It is a common pudding given mostly to children, some of whom actually like it. But we had never encountered this food custom before (if the three or four British girls among us recognized it, they preserved a prudent silence) and we were horrified at this reversal of the normal order of things – cream of wheat was *porridge* served hot at breakfast, not sweetened,

flavoured, coloured and cold at lunch. For me it was even less palatable with its almond essence flavour, something I have always hated because it reminds me of heavy perfume. This revolting dessert was too much for P.O. Carter, who was in charge of our draft. She arose in the full dignity of her position. “Don’t touch that stuff, girls,” she ordered, and descended on the head waiter. “Remove this disgusting stuff,” she roared, “and bring us ice cream!” A hasty scurrying among the waiters to gather up the unwanted dishes, an equally hasty production of small but edible scoops of vanilla ice cream, soothed ruffled feathers.

Later I observed that this discriminatory treatment was regularly handed out by the railways to troops travelling on draft, though men and women in uniform travelling singly with service meal vouchers were allowed to eat with civilian passengers with full choice from the menu. We may perhaps have hit a particularly bad day, for it is the only occasion on which I traveled as part of a group of more than half a dozen.

CHAPTER IV

And so, to the lilac powder rooms. No. 1 Station, HMCS *Bytown*, as it was officially known, was a group of wartime prefabricated buildings occupying a hayfield some seventeen miles from Ottawa. A special note for those unfamiliar with the history of Canada; Bytown was a small settlement on the Ottawa River, named for its founder, one Colonel By, which was chosen by Queen Victoria as a compromise site for the capital of the new Dominion of Canada; the name being unsuited to the dignity of a capital city, it was changed to that of the River.


Author at # 1 Station HMCS Bytown (Gloucester) Fall of 1943

There were four buildings on the Station. The largest was the barracks, U-shaped and including our cabins (eight girls to each), the fo'c'sle (lounge, to you landlubbers), the mess, the galley, and the wardroom and officers' quarters in the shorter of the two arms of the U. The word "wardroom" is something of a laugh. Although at first there were several officers on station, the signals officers were soon withdrawn, until only a single unit officer remained (our commanding officer, so to speak, though the true Captain was the Captain of *Bytown*, of whom, so far as I can remember, we saw nothing). The sick bay was also located in the wardroom wing. I had mercifully little to do with that important section, a toothache and frozen toes being the only ailments from which I suffered in my naval career.

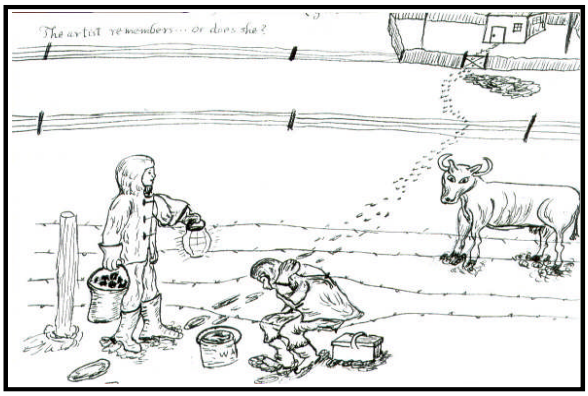
Building No. 2 was the most important, known as the Operations Building. Here also was located the Regulating Office, i.e., the administrative and disciplinary centre of the Station, presided over by a Regulating Petty Officer. But the true heart of the building was the Operations Room, large, light, airy and reasonably pleasant, where we operators spent eight hours a day on earphones plugged into the tuners ranged on a

continuous table round three sides of the room. The watch supervisor had her table on the fourth side, from which she went round to collect the messages, sort them, and pass them on to the teletype operator next door for transmission to NSHQ in Ottawa.

The third building was the garage in which our liberty boats were housed, and where our three sailors lived upstairs. No. 1. was an all-female station except for these three gallants, classified as unfit for sea duty, who were expected to do certain maintenance and other such duties considered beyond the normal woman's strength. They were very popular; they were also wise enough, while always polite and friendly, to keep themselves to themselves when off duty! The liberty boats, which the un-naval would call panel trucks, were extremely important, being our only means of transportation for personnel and supplies alike. Our hayfield was not only 17 miles from Ottawa, it was also some three miles from the highway, where it passed through a minute village called Gloucester. I suppose present-day residents of Gloucester would be surprised to hear this thriving suburb of Ottawa called "minute" and "remote," but it was then, consisting of a general store and a few houses. A bus ran along the highway, only three or four times a day, never, of course, in tune with our watches. So the only means of going to Ottawa, for a few hours off or for any other reason, was by our own liberty boats. Each held, I think, nine passengers. Supplies and those making essential journeys (to the M.O. or dentist, on draft, on long leave, etc.) had priority, so it was not always possible to get a place. We learned to make our own amusements on station most of the time. Those going into town for the day usually had a long list of commissions from the stay-at-homes, and probably did not enjoy themselves as much as they may have anticipated. Our two M.T. drivers were named Shoemaker and Leatherbarrow, a classic example of names <u>not</u> fitting the job, for they probably wore out less shoe leather than the rest of us! They were superb drivers, something that I, then very much a non-driver, admired greatly. One trip in particular I remember, a bitterly cold day when the road was covered from side to side with a thin sheet of ice. The truck (I cannot bring myself to call it a boat in such conditions) slithered the 17 miles in serpentine curves at an average speed of about three miles per hour. Other

traffic posed no problem – it was all in the ditch – and how Shoemaker kept us out is a miracle. The trip took over two hours in contrast to the normal 45minutes, and that is the night my toes were frozen. The panel part of the truck being unheated, the temperature about zero F., and our "glamour boots" being unlined, I arrived with no feeling in my toes. We were so late that we had to go on watch immediately, and it was not until some hours later that I became conscious of a lack of feeling in my toes – still, and finally asked the supervisor to take over my line while I consulted the SBA. She was a farm girl from the West, and knew what to do, which was to rub them gently between her well-greased hands while they gradually turned from white to red to plum purple and finally to normal pink. My feet continued to be super-sensitive to cold until the post-war arrival of fleece-lined boots, since when they have rarely given trouble.

These three buildings were grouped together inside a neat fence and were connected by a series of board walks. The casual visitor, of which, owing to the secrecy of our work, there were none, might have concluded that three was the total. That visitor would have been wrong. A mile away, across five fields and virtually invisible from the main station, stood the fourth. Small and seemingly insignificant, but vitally important as anyone noting the surrounding aerial mast would realize, this was the direction-finding shack. We called it simply "No. 4." Its single room, about the size of the average living room, contained a few chairs and tables, a pot-bellied iron stove, a chemical toilet in a tiny cubicle, and three machines, the mysterious cathode-ray tubes, the first, I believe, in the world, certainly in Canada. Some of the girls were specially trained as DF operators. Two at a time, they humped their way from the main station, through the first gate in our fence, across the five fields squeezing under the barbed wire, through the gate of No. 4, lugging along their sandwiches, jugs



En route to the DF Shack
Note: barbed wire, pail of coal, pail of water, basket of food, and one cow representing the usual herd.

of water, pads of paper and other stationery, and flashlights for the night journey. And back again at the end of the watch. No easy trek in winter through heavy snow, and even worse in spring when the earth was churned into heavy mud. The lack of either gates or stiles in the fences not belonging to the Navy can be explained by a feud between the local farmers and the Navy. We were not very welcome, not because of misbehaviour, but because the farmers resented our occupation of what was said to be the best hayfield in the area. As a gesture of displeasure they refused to install, or allow the Navy to install, stiles over the intervening fences. Hence the six times daily battle with barbed wire.

There was an additional hazard: Cows. Most of the girls were city-bred, and eyed the quietly browsing cattle askance. One evening the girls on the out-going day watch called through to Ops to ask when their relief would arrive. This was worrying. It was a point of honour to be in good time, and the incoming watch would leave half an hour ahead, as this one had done. But they were now greatly overdue, and a search party was despatched. They found the two delinquents sitting on a fence about half-way out to the shack. They were surveying with dismay a herd of cows standing a few feet away, who were gazing back at them with mild curiosity.

"What is the matter?" asked the leader of the search party. "Are you hurt?"

"No," answered one of the fence-sitters, "but we don't want to walk through a field full of bulls."

The search party contained a farm girl, well acquainted with the basic difference between cows and bulls.

"Those aren't bulls," she said, through shrieks of laughter. "They're cows, and anyway you never have a whole herd of bulls." [She was wrong about this, by the way. I have since seen "whole herds of bulls" in Spain, being bred for the arena.]

"They can't be cows!" was the indignant retort. "They've got horns!"

Even louder screams of laughter from the knowledgeable one. "They are cows. Get down off the fence and look underneath. They all have milk bags."

This suggestion horrified the fence-sitters. They did not budge. "We are not getting off this fence until they go away. And we will never get down and look underneath!"

On first arrival at No. 1 we had a couple of days of practice to accustom us to watch-keeping hours before being thrown into the real thing. For some reason, those first days were divided into four-hour watches, the traditional Navy way, of course, but not what we were soon to experience. I can still see Irene Carter staggering gallantly but sleepily down the gangway to the Ops room at 0350 hours muttering, "There must be some mistake! This can't be true!" The switch to "real" duty brought nominal eight-hour watches, though only one was actually eight hours. The 24-hour day ran thus: 0100 to 0900 (the graveyard watch); 0900 to 1800 (the day watch); and 1800 to 0100 (the evening watch). As far as I could understand, the rationale for this peculiar system was the convenience of the cooks, who could deal with breakfast and supper for the ongoing and off going watches in quick succession. I suppose it was not really bad, and one quickly got used to it, but that nine-hour day was a killer! One was not allowed to leave one's tuner, except for the relief of nature when the supervisor took over for a few minutes, work-round the room in turn; eating the meal of sandwiches had to be done with the earphones on and pencil poised in case something came up.

Real complaints began to gather, however, over a rearrangement of watches, resulting from a peculiarly thoughtless piece of reasoning originating in the higher echelons of the Wrens in *Bytown*. When organized into four watches working three days on each watch followed by three days off, we were allowed to apply for "weekend"

leave, which in a 12-day week usually did not coincide with Saturday and Sunday. Also, these three days constituted exactly 72 hours, from 0900 to 0900 hours. The actual days of the week did not worry us, 72 hours off being 72 hours off. All went well until someone noticed that the W.T.'s were taking more than the official allotment of one "72" ad one "48" leaves a month. Orders came that we were to be cut down.

Came the new schedule. We were now to do six days on each watch before getting our three days off. We had to be reorganized into seven watches, two working at the same time, and because a run of six graveyards was considered too much, it was further decreed that we should follow the six day-watches with three evenings, three graveyards, three evenings again, three graveyards, and at last the precious 72 hours (exactly) off. And, dead tired, to go where you would. That is, if you could get there. It is easy to see that a 21-day "week" adds up to exactly three weeks of the ordinary variety, with each of the seven watches beginning its leave always on the same day of the week. I was unlucky to have my weekend start at 0900 on Sunday. Unlucky because the day train from Ottawa to Toronto did not run on Sundays. On other days it was possible to get someone to relieve you early, scramble for the early liberty boat and catch the morning train to Toronto, reach there in late afternoon. On Sundays, however, one had to wait for the evening train, which got in at midnight, thereby wasting one of the two precious evenings. Of course, I did not go home every weekend, and as long as the starting day moved around I could pass up the Sunday starts. But now it would be every time forever.

As it happened, nearly all of my watch consisted of Toronto girls, and we felt justifiably aggrieved. Finally a crazy schedule was worked out for getting to Toronto at a reasonable hour, though I was always so exhausted that I wondered whether it was really worth it. A taxi was ordered to pick us up at 1730 hours, someone kindly relieving us on watch, and drive out to the highway to catch the bus from Ottawa to Cornwall. This was a distance of about 70 miles, which is important only because, as a means of saving fuel, wartime regulations decreed that bus trips could not be longer than 50

miles. Of course people went further than that, but tickets could only be purchased for 50-mile stretches, at the end of which the passengers had to dash out and purchase another ticket, hoping that the bus would still be there and still have room for you. At Cornwall another dash to the railway station to catch the train from Montreal to Toronto. This was touch-and-go; the train being due only 15 minutes after the bus, and we still had to buy our tickets. I don't recall ever actually missing the train, and what a relief to be able to collapse into a seat and sleep!

This killing schedule of 21-day weeks lasted a couple of months, until the M.O. noticed an alarming increase in the number of W.T.'s developing twitches and minor but irritating symptoms associated with exhaustion, probably exaggerated by a general feeling of grievance and ill-treatment. He investigated and, horrified, ordered an immediate return to the more normal watch system.

My first long leave was due in August; there is no doubt of its Memorability, with a capital M. Travel for service people was very cheap, one-third of the regular fare up to a maximum of $15.00 return – this whether you were going between Ottawa and Toronto or between Halifax and Victoria, sleeping accommodation extra. I decided to go to New Jersey where we had friends, and which was close enough to New York City to enjoy the bright lights and big stores. Not that one could buy very much, and friends or relations willing to feed and lodge one were absolutely necessary, wartime currency regulations allowing only $5.00 to be taken out of the country. Mother, searching for treats for me to take as gifts decided to include a quart of real maple syrup, which she poured from our gallon can into an empty whisky bottle. This previous fluid I packed in a sturdy cloth carrier bag, carefully padded round with hanks of grey wool from the Red Cross for knitting a seaman's pullover.

Just before leaving the Station a blow fell. This was summer, and we should have been wearing our summer uniforms since mid-May, but difficulties at the manufacturers had delayed delivery of the new uniforms. They very day before I left a

bale of the new uniforms arrived. They were not welcome, especially by me. The colour had been "specially created" for the Wrens – indeed, it was termed *"Wren Blue,"* a vivid sea-greenish blue, one of those colours that, as any interior decorator knows, looks delightful in a small sample patch but overwhelmingly bad when spread over a whole girl, let alone a hundred girls. Conspicuous, that is. Moreover, as we soon found, the material did not stand up to wear like the winter uniforms, and creased badly. What particularly dismayed me was that there were jackets and skirts to fit me, and I was thereupon ordered to wear them. The outfit was designed to be worn with white shoes and stockings and a white "pork-pie" hat like our then winter hats. Stockings had been duly issued, but the white shoes were not yet available; never mind, wear what you have, i.e., black shoes with the ghastly white stockings. As for the hats – some of these had indeed been issued in the early days, but as they had a curious tendency to fly off the head as though mounted on springs, they had been gathered up and we had continued using the winter hats. Later, of course, the jaunty round rig cap was designed, and removal washable white covers solved the summer problem.

But now here I was setting off for the United States, looking and feeling like a freak. This was not just self-conscious imagination: even Canadians stared, and I hated to think of the reaction of Americans. Travel had to be done in uniform, of course, in order to make use of the discounted tickets, and in any case it was compulsory when travelling in a foreign country. The only solution was to make myself as small and inconspicuous as possible and melt into the background. Small hope of that! After going through the American Customs in Buffalo, where I was relieved to find that my whisky bottle caused no comment, I boarded the American train. It was stiflingly hot. No air-conditioning of trains then, and even with windows wide open the hot wind brought no relief, only smuts. The train was packed to capacity, chiefly, it seemed with small children who raced up and down the corridor between the seats, yelling and whining fretfully as they dropped in the heat, poor little scraps. Litter was everywhere: crusts of bread, apple cores and orange peel, sticky candies dropped from careless fingers, sandwich wrappings and dirty newspapers being kicked around. I sat

shrinking in my seat, trying not to notice the curious, if friendly, glances and to avoid contact with children's sticky fingers on my no longer quite so new uniform.

Time passed appallingly slowly. I was too hot to read, too hot to sleep. Sometime during the afternoon, when the temperature was at its highest, there came a loud bang. Everyone jumped and looked around, but finding nothing noticeably wrong, relaxed with sheepish and apologetic smiles. Perhaps an hour later I noticed a new little brown river meandering down the corridor. It was by no means the first little river, several small children having been unable to make the washrooms; but this one was different; people who stepped into it were lifting their feet to inspect the soles – the were sticky. A horrid suspicion was born; I traced the river to its source, immediately under my seat, to the precious bag of maple syrup and wool. Bag of syrup is only too accurate a description – the whisky bottle had exploded in the heat, and bag and wool were now saturated. People were most kind. Newspapers were put down to wipe the sticky floor, and one of the women accompanied me to the washroom where we disentangled the broken bottle from the wool, dumped the remaining syrup down the washbasin drain, and tried to wipe off the strands of wool with paper towels. A hopeless job. Even after Ruth and I had washed the hanks the wool never came really clean. I knitted it up anyway, a miserable job of having to wash my hands every few rows. I often wonder about the sailor who got that sweater. Did he, on convoy duty in mid-Atlantic, eyes training to follow the lights of the ship ahead, absently lick his chest and wonder why visions of Sunday breakfast pancakes rose before his eyes?

So ended any attempt to pass unnoticed on the streets of the United States. During the next two weeks I spent several days in New York City, in uniform because of advantages like free meals and theatre tickets offered to service personnel. On the first occasion Ruth came with me, but never again. It takes a lot to astonish New Yorkers, but I did it, and Ruth, even more self-conscious than I, could not take being followed by a growing crowd of the curious until someone worked up courage to approach and ask, "Please, what are you?", pointing to the WRCNS flashes on my shoulders. I became

quite proficient in replying, “Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service. Same as your Waves.” Whereupon the questioner would return to the crowd, impart the information, and disperse the crowd, until another one formed.

One day, strolling on my own in Central Park Zoo, I was picked up by an American sailor. The nicest possible pick-up. Chalmers Horton was young, red-haired, quiet, and spoke with a delicious Southern accent, his home town being Birmingham Alabama. He did recognize me as a fellow Allied sailor, and we spent the rest of the day together, finishing at a restaurant where I met a Baked Alaska for the first time. Chalmers was a photographer aboard one of the big ships, battleship or aircraft carrier, and as far as I could understand the multiplicity of American naval categories, was a Leading Hand. We suited each other well, having the same tastes, much the same education, and no wish on either side for more than a simple friendship. He was particularly interested in the effects of rationing, which had not yet begun in the United States, evidently being under the impression that it was as strict in Canada as in Britain. I explained that most of the rationing was not hard to take except for heavy meat-eaters or coffee-drinkers, but that some items had completely disappeared from the Canadian market, bananas, for example, and that I in particular missed peanut butter and olives. Some weeks after my return a parcel arrived from Chalmers – big jars of peanut butter and olives. This still seems to me one of the most thoughtful gifts I have ever received. We corresponded for about a year, then, after my transfer to Esquimalt, we somehow lost touch. Dear Chalmers! I hope he survived the war, returned to Birmingham, and found a wife worthy of him.

CHAPTER V

Leave over, I returned to Toronto and thence to Ottawa by the evening train, arriving after 2300 hours. Up the steps of NSHQ and to the enquiry desk.

"When does the liberty boat leave for No. 1 Station?" I asked of the man on duty.

"In about six weeks," was the startling reply!

Or it would have been startling had I not had advance warning of the possibility, conveyed partly by events at the Station before I left, then confirmed in a letter from Dory Smelts. Couched in mysterious, allusive terms (she should not have been writing it), it told me that No. 1 Station had been closed! Temporarily, I should add. For some weeks prior to my departure girls had been dropping down with dysentery, the epidemic being so acute that on one occasion only the supervisor and a single operator turned up for duty. Frantic investigation revealed a serious fault in the drains – they had been put in "upside down" was one explanation, and I leave it to engineers to make sense of that. A few days after my departure on leave the Medical Officer had arrived and *closed the Station*. Just like that. The girls had one hour to pack before large vehicles arrived to take them away. And here was I, back from leave and nowhere to go.

The sailor at the Enquiry Desk was equal to the situation. With reason. He dialed the Wren Barracks. "There's another Wren from No. 1 Station returned from leave," he burbled happily, with significant emphasis on the word "another," evidently well aware of the reaction this would cause. The <u>words</u> of the reply were unintelligible to me, but their sense was not; the Barracks was full to bursting, and the advent of even one more body was decidedly unwelcome. Feeling very lonely and unwanted, I had to spend the night on a cot thrown up in a corridor, and the following morning was hustled on to the train for Montreal and Ste. Hyacinthe.

I have certain regrets at being absent from the dramatic departure of my mates from No. 1 Station and from the succeeding few days at HMCS *Ste. Hyacinthe*. Good as it is to be able to boast of being once one of the sights of New York City, this cannot match what happened to them. The Wren officers in NSHQ must have been appalled at the summary action by the M.O. They were suddenly faced with having to dispose of more than sixty displaced girls. A few, who had already been selected for officer training, were detached immediately, and a couple more who had applied for a change of category had their wishes granted with unprecedented speed. A few more, like me, were on long leave and therefore no immediate problem. But that still left about fifty and something had to be done about them before nightfall. Someone had a brainwave – send them to the Signal School for a course. Take them straight to the railway station, and that would get them out of *Bytown's* hair. So the trucks laden with girls, baggage and bicycles (cycling was one of our chief pastimes) lumbered into the station, the train was boarded, and before they could say Jack Robinson they were off to take "a course." They were half-way to Montreal before someone remembered that the Signal School might like to know of the treat in store for them. No one, it appears, even bothered to think of us who were on leave.

HMCS *Ste. Hyacinthe* was located in the town of the same name some 40 miles southeast of Montreal. It was occupied by about 2,000 sailors, anyway a large number, being trained in wireless telegraphy and visual signaling. It had once been an army camp, dating from the First World War, and consisted of a large number of tarpaper shacks of varying size which had been abandoned by the army as unfit for human habitation. It had been hastily scooped up by the Navy at the start of the Second World War. The 2,000 now under training were all male. At least, there were actually two classes of Wrens, one each in visual signaling and wireless telegraphy, the latter being the long-awaited "newer" girls. (Presumably the Navy had decided they had done enough for the Guild; all future classes of W.T.'s were trained in *Ste. Hyacinthe*.) But these Wrens were lodged in a local convent and came aboard only for classes held in a building discreetly isolated from the 2,000 men.

How I wish I could have been a mouse under the desk in the office of the Captain of HMCS *Ste. Hyacinthe* when the signal came in: “Fifty Wren Tels on way to *Ste. Hyacinthe.* Put them up for the next six weeks and give them a course.” Or words to that effect. The poor man had something less than six hours to find a solution to the lodging problem, and little more to think up “a course.” There was no more room in the convent, so accommodation must be found on board, sleeping, eating, and all other necessary facilities, preferably in some remote corner where contact between the fifty and the two thousand would be of the slightest. I am sure he did his best, but it was a battle lost before it began. His answer, the Chiefs’ and Petty Officers’ mess, not only fell far short of the standards we had come to expect, but also could not be satisfactorily isolated from the male body of the ship.

By the time I arrived the girls had had a week to recover from the shock of arrival, which hit them at 2100 hours. There is no doubt that we had been spoiled, first at the Guild, then at No. 1; now we got a glimpse of how the Navy really lives. The former Chiefs’ and P.O.’s Mess was one of the larger buildings, a single huge room into which 30 double-decker bunks had been hastily thrown, with a smaller “heads” reached by a short passage through double swing doors. No doubt it was the presence of this room that inspired the eviction of the NCOs from their quarters. A smaller building a few yards away was converted into a Wrens’ mess hall and galley. I think this conversion must have been specially for us; the Chiefs and P.O.’s had presumably done their eating in what was now our dormitory, a deduction based not only on the former name of the building, but on the accumulation of crumbs in the cracks between the floorboards, and the attendant population of small four-legged creatures who were more difficult to evict than the NCOs. As choice living quarters neither building met our, admittedly distressingly high, standards. The dust of ages was ingrained in the boards, and refused to yield even to several vigorous sweepings a day; mountains of dirt were thrown out, and still it rose in clouds as we walked about. The bunks were all right, standard types to which we were accustomed, but there was a complete absence of cupboards in which to stow our clothes – only a few pegs on the walls – and very little

drawer space. Many of our possessions had to remain stuffed in our dunnage bags under the bunks, or were hauled off for storage elsewhere, like the bicycles. The lack of privacy was perhaps the greatest cause of grumbling. Never before had we lived fifty to a bedroom with nary a partition to muffle the sounds. I might say that this is the only time, even including two further sojourns in the Signal School, of such undesirable proximity, and I think we had sufficient grace to recognize the difficulties of the situation and accept them as inevitable.

If the dormitory was dreary, the heads behind the double swing doors were shocking, and something more. Alas for our lilac powder room! Here we were confronted by a large bare room, with a concrete floor and a shelf running around three sides. Tin basins sat at intervals below taps projecting from the walls, and a continuous drainage ditch took the dirty water away. In one alcove off this room were three showers, their floorboards green with slimy moss; there was no sign of a bathtub. In a second alcove was a row of toilet cubicles – with doors, thank goodness – and another utensil which none of us had ever seen before. A group of the first girls to discover this clustered round and discussed its possible use with interest. Washing the feet, perhaps? This remained the favourite guess until someone wiser and more experienced enlightened them. Need I say that the urinal remained unused, for foot-washing or anything else, during our six-week occupation! Lack of a bathtub was something else; we muttered mutinously, and the muttering at last bore fruit. Returning from class one day we discovered that the good officers had taken pity and ordered the installation of a tub. There it lay, right in the middle of the floor, unscreened in any way from the direct line of the two swing doors and the main front door which, in the summer heat, was left open most of the time. It was several days before anyone dared to use this treasure, and then only when a screen of loyal friends had been thrown up between tub and doors. I remember taking only one bath in those six weeks; loathsome as the slimy showers were, they were preferable to the fear of those open doors.

Autumn, the best season in eastern Canada to my mind, with its days of delicious warmth and sunshine without the debilitating humidity of summer, nights of deliciously cool and mosquito-less star shine – was ruined by two unpleasant conditions. Our mess hall was, I am sure, never intended for the preparation and consumption of food, for it lacked those greatest of all hot-weather necessities, screens on the windows. Especially in September they are needed, when millions of eggs laid by industrious flies in April hatch out. Such an invasion of flies was bad enough in the dormitory; in the mess hall they were unspeakable. The tables were covered with a solid layer of dead, dying, and still-alive houseflies, flapping, buzzing, squirming, which had either to be scraped off by hand, or scrunched to death by the tray. I have no recollection of whether the actual food was good, bad, or simply indifferent. It had to be eaten in order to stay alive, but one ate left out quickly as possible. The situation was ironic, when the very reason for our being in St. Hy. was to escape the dysentery outbreak at No. 1. However, we all survived and returned in due course to No. 1 with a greater appreciation of our luck.

The second inconvenience was due to the cool nights. With temperatures often dropping below freezing at night, heat in the buildings was essential. There was no central heating, of course, each hut had one or more pot-bellied wood or coal-burning stoves. The huts themselves, made of flammable material well seasoned by age and dust, constituted a high fire risk. So, two by two throughout the night, we mounted fire watch, keeping the stoves filled with fuel and ensuring that the fire remained inside the stoves. As there were three or four huts for which we were responsible, turns came round about once a week. My first was from 0200 to 0400 on my third or fourth night on the station. I did not enjoy it. One was sleepy, and there was nothing to help pass the time. Light was insufficient for reading; talk was forbidden because of the sleepers in the bunks. One could only yawn and look longingly at one's bunk.

I did enjoy the “course,” on the other hand, and so, I believe, did everyone. One good reason for that is certainly because no one could take it seriously, and therefore there was little strain. What was being taught us with British Naval wireless procedure, of no conceivable use except in a very general way, and actually quite entertaining. I can remember no final examination to discover whether we had actually learned anything and the only tests were the daily practices in Morse, both receiving (which was useful) and transmitting. It is the only time I ever touched a key. These exercises were marked in a central office, and I became a serious cropper on the first day. Someone told me that I must use block capitals in writing down the messages from the buzzer, but forgot to say that this applied only to the parts in code, not to the plain language portion which was sent at a higher speed. Nor was it mentioned that time was allowed at the end of the session for patching up this portion before submitting it for marking. I got hopelessly behind, then sat miserably doing nothing to fix things – which would have been easy – until it was too late. However, things improved rapidly after that, and I came to enjoy the buzzer sessions.

We were divided into two classes alphabetically, each in charge of a CPO Tel. As an “R” I fell to the lot of a small, cheerful, soft-hearted (where the ladies were concerned) soul from the Royal Navy. He greeted my arrival with flattering joy, which had, alas, nothing to do with me personally. For purposes of teaching communication procedures he had created his own personal battle fleet. Each girl had been turned into a “ship” – battleship, cruiser, destroyer, whatever – given a name and call sign, and despatched on missions at sea by the commander-in-Chief – himself, of course. Before my arrival the fleet had consisted of four ships in each category except one, and his delight on seeing a new face was occasioned solely by being able to balance the fleet. This pleasant game had been explained enthusiastically to me on the way to class, and my friends assured me that I would be able to choose my category of ship. I leaned towards destroyers, lean greyhounds of the sea that always seemed to be dashing about doing the most interesting things. Alas for dreams. Rubbing his hands with satisfaction, Chief said, “Here is my fourth submarine!”

I do not like submarines, even the thought of them, having a touch of claustrophobia. "Do I have to be a submarine?" I asked gloomily.

"Yes," he said firmly. Then relaxing a little, "but I shall let you choose your name."

The other three submarines were named on the blackboard, all noble fish starting with "S": fierce *Shark*, flashing *Swordfish*, magnificent *Salmon*. I meditated on other marvelous fish: Sturgeon, perhaps? Or Sea Trout? Or even Sea Serpent? Into these dreams came the Chief's voice: "Yes, you can choose. Do you prefer HMCS *Shrimp* or HMCS *Bloater?"*

Some choice! I hadn't the slightest idea of what a bloater is, and didn't like the sound of it; with no good grace I voted for *Shrimp*. The Chief was so pleased with his joke that HMCS *Shrimp* became his favourite ship. While the other submarines and most of the rest of the fleet basked in harbour undergoing, I suppose, refits, the wretched *Shrimp* scoured the undersea waters of the world. Can this have anything to do with the fact that I am now allergic to shrimp?

CHAPTER VI

At last the welcome signal: drains fixed and Station ready to resume action. Return to base.

A few bars of "Don't Fence Me In," and I am back in the fo'c'sle of No. 1 Station. It was a pleasant place of comfortable chairs, tables for cards or letter-writing, books, a radio, and a gramophone on which the girls played their favourite records – and played them and played them almost unto death. *Oklahoma!* Was new then, and we received strong doses of its songs, in spite of which it remains by favourite of all Broadway musicals, wrapped in its pleasant aura of nostalgia.***** Cards have never been a particular favourite of mine – to be consistently beaten at Snakes and Ladders or, worse still, checkers, by one's baby sister (ten years younger!) Is discouraging to a teen-ager to say the least! I seem not to have been gifted with either skill or luck. But for a while Bridge was the rage. None of us knew anything about the technicalities of the game, and those who do will wonder that a reply of, "One No Trump," to a partner's bid signaled a complete bust in that suit. But that is what someone said was right, so we used it. Gwen Hoey's emphatic and alarmed, "One No!" still rings in my ears. Poker faces we none of us had, but Gwen's must have been the most open and transparent of all!

Several times during the winter a film was shown, a real, "talking," film. I hadn't realized that such a thing was possible outside of the commercial theatre; even my high school, one of Toronto's most affluent and best-equipped, had been able to show only old silent moves. On one memorable occasion the film broke at a most suspenseful moment. Our Supply Assistant, who was running the machine, spliced the film and restarted. A few feet later came another break; another splice; another break; and so on and on. Three hours later, "Lights Out," sent us to bed, aquiver with indignant

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***My memory is at fault here. *Oklahoma* is a post-war musical. Don't know what I**

was thinking of.

suspense. The film went back to the distributors with a stinging message, but we never did see the story to the end. Forty years on this seems singularly unimportant. Especially as I cannot even recall the title of the film!

Each Watch seemed to acquire its individual character. My Watch was 'D', and we gained a reputation for being the noisiest, most boisterous, watch of the lot. This may have resulted in the inclusion of all the noisiest and most boisterous, or may have come simply from the wearing off of these characteristics on the rest of us. Muriel Ramsay, our Watch Supervisor, was herself no shrinking violet! And she received plenty of backing from the rest of us: Alice Rutherford (Ruddie), Mary Black (Blackie), Vin Crane, Elsie Housing, Doris Smelts, Helen MacLeod, Eileen Carr (Agathe), Gwen Hoey, and myself (Robbie). "Wearing off," must certainly have applied to Agathe and me at least, devilry not coming naturally to either of us, but I doubt that our reputation departed far from that of the rest of D Watch. We were fast learners!

This must surely account for the one act of which, in retrospect, I am heartily ashamed – the cutting of Cabin 8's Christmas tree. A huge tree, lavishly decorated, had already been set up in the forecastle, but we decided that we must have our own, so one day several of us borrowed a saw – a fretsaw, the only one they had – from the sailors, and set forth. We did not anticipate much trouble, we were, after all, out in the country, but had not reckoned on how long it would take to escape on foot the settled farmland and reach the woods that had seemed so close on warm summer days. This day was bitterly cold, and strong winds that always seem to blow in Ottawa made it seem even colder. Tramp, tramp, tramp, we slogged out a couple of miles, and naught but bare fields and the occasional house met our increasingly desperate eyes. It was already beginning to get dark, and we were about to turn back, when we spotted a TREE! It was a spruce, about 20 feet tall and completely bare up to the top seven feet, but these made a perfect Christmas tree. Unfortunately, this desirable object stood in the front yard of a house. We surveyed it avidly from the road. The house looked shut

up, even deserted, and we were so cold. We opened the gate and walked up to the tree. From close it was even better. We looked around. No one was in sight. And we cut it down. Not quite as easily as that, of course. A fretsaw is not the ideal implement with which to fell a tree measuring a foot in diameter at the highest point we could reach. And we had to make a second cut just below the branches in order to carry it home. I think – I hope – that it was the cold that so affected morals. I did feel slightly uncomfortable at the time, but was too nearly frozen to care. It was a lovely tree, and we decorated it, set the presents around, and sat warm and comfortable in our dressing gowns around the tree on Christmas morning. I know, because there are pictures, and I fear we look simply happy and quite guiltless. No one appears ever to have complained of vandalism; perhaps the house really was abandoned.

Elsie Houlding came from the West – actually most of D Watch were westerners – and she asked me one winter "weekend" to go with her on a visit to a neighbouring farm family who were "friends of friends" back home in Unity. Our hosts were very good to us, and it was a cozy, friendly couple of days, but what sticks in my mind is snuggling close in bed with Elsie while she told me about life in Saskatchewan; in particular, of the death of her father in 1940, only three years before. I, a city-bred girl, could hardly believe the story – how her parents, alone in their house with a 3-year-old adopted son, were marooned by a raging blizzard; how her father developed acute appendicitis; how there was no telephone, the roads were impassable, and the nearest neighbour was a mile away. Her mother knew that she could neither struggle through the drifts to the neighbour while carrying the child, nor leave him behind with the desperately sick man. So she had to sit there and watch her husband die. This in mid-20th century Canada! I hadn't known Elsie very well before, but that weekend cemented what has become a lifelong close friendship.

In early spring an upheaval occurred at No. 1 Station. Almost before the Station had been completed it had been discovered that the Ottawa region was not the ideal place for reception of overseas wireless signals, something the Canadian Broadcasting

Commission had discovered some years before. In the evening signals boomed in, but towards midnight they began to fade, and by the time the Graveyard Watch arrived the air was silent as far as German shore stations were concerned, and remained so for several hours. So we had scarcely settled in before construction was started on a new station outside of Moncton, New Brunswick. As soon as it was ready – before, as the girls found out – most of our old girls left No. 1 for Coverdale, and a new batch came from *Ste. Hyacinthe* to replace them. Four of us old girls volunteered (I think) to stay on at No. 1 as supervisors, Dorothy Duncan, Alice Russell and myself in the Ops Room, and Celia Weiser in overall charge of the direction-finding hut.

Mid Watch No 1 Station
Note: boredom of nothing heard, small snack on the receiver, Mortimer the mouse at sandwiches, discarded knitting when duty called

It was quite a change, not least in the general quiet that descended on the Station after the departure of my dear rackety friends! And those first letters that reached us from Coverdale! As hinted, construction of the main buildings was not as complete as they had expected. The most noticeable lack was doors: not a door to be found, not at the entrance not to the cabins, not even to the heads! The builders defended themselves, so it was said, by saying that no doors had been specified in the contract, which seems rather odd. Or was it all a delicious plot? Those first letters were full of the hazards of dressing and undressing while dodging the delighted eyes of workmen popping up like jack-in-the boxes at the cabin windows. Being watch keepers,

girls were disrobing at any time of day or night, something the workmen were not slow either to discover or appreciate.

Then the character of the letters changed. The girls had discovered MEN. For nearly a year at No. 1 we had lived an almost manless existence. Even excursions into Ottawa brought contact with few men below the rank of Admiral and under fifty. But in Moncton there were no fewer than three stations full of men within, so to speak, arm's length, and now the boot was on the other foot – the men it was who had been deprive of adequate female companionship. There was a busy naval station in Moncton, an equally busy RCAF station close by, and, best of the lot, an RAF transit camp where British airmen who had finished their training in western Canada were held pending make-up of a convoy back to Britain. The other two camps kept their men busy during the day, but the British boys were free as the air, and quickly discovered that our girls also had a lot of daytime free. We, back in No. 1, read with goggle eyes accounts of seemingly endless parties, picnics, beach days, dances, and on and on and on. Our girls seemed never to sleep! And most dramatic of all, within the first three weeks news of half-a-dozen engagements and at least one marriage filtered through. This pace could not be kept up, and things settled down in a month or so when satiety was reached, although some of the love affairs did go on to marriage, some with happy results, some not.

Meanwhile, back at No. 1 life continued. One thing that proximity to Ottawa did bring us was a plethora of visitors. Our friends and relations were not among them; only people in uniform were permitted on board, and my only personal visitor was Mary Harrison, who came out one day during her Officers' Training course. No, most of the visitors were officers, especially Naval Signals Officers, some of whom treated the Wardroom as a species of country roadhouse or club where they would spend an afternoon's relaxation from the rigours of city life. With these we had little to do, except for official inspections of work.

Some visitors do stand out. Royalty came in the person of Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone, wife of the Governor-General. It was summer, judging by the summer uniforms that we all, including the Princess, were wearing in the photographs taken by a Navy photographer. These, incidentally, are the only photos I have of No. 1 that show more than a door or part of a wall as background to people. We were not supposed to use our cameras at all. Although the Station was always in a reasonably tidy and clean condition, the days preceding the Princess's visit were spent in an orgy of scrubbing and painting and sweeping and dusting. I sometimes wonder if the Royal Family does not get fed up with the unnaturalness of it all, and long for just once to find a normal, less-than-perfect, atmosphere in the places they visit. We, of course, were given no choice – only perfection was good enough for Princess Alice! A charming, gracious beautiful lady, the Princess won all hearts despite the exhaustion.

Less lovable, but in many ways more interesting, and decidedly more comical, was the Invasion of the General, which occurred in the spring of 1944. My friends had departed for Coverdale, and some new prototype D.F. equipment had been installed in No. 4 building. The Navy proudly invited senior officers of all Services and all Allied nations to come and view it one Sunday in late spring. The time of year was not propitious, as any countryman would know, just that moment when the ground is still frozen except for the top two or three inches of gummy, semi-liquid mud. Following the dysentery outbreak a five-foot wide, three-foot deep, ditch had been dug surrounding the Station, and this was now filled with a couple of feet of dark brown water. A single-plank, "bridge," for the benefit of the girls going to and from the D.F. shack had been thrown across. A muster of all the rubber boots was ordered in the Regulating Office, so that the visiting officers could make the journey in relative comfort, overlooking for the moment the five barbed wire fences, and girls were stationed along the route to direct the visitors to the almost-invisible shack. All day the girls in the Ops room worked to an entertaining chorus of curses, laughter, and wry comments as the assorted admirals, generals and air marshals gamely struggled to insert their large male feet into the smaller female boots. Some refused, but most tugged them on somehow and

departed to walk the plank precariously, which soon built up a mound of slithery mud from the many feet tramping back and forth. Poor Lieutenant Crowther, our Unit Officer, had a thin time of it, badly outranked in the overrunning of her wardroom by Canadian, British, American, and other Allied brass hats, who had to be fed and soothed after their muddy ordeal.

The show was supposed to be over at 1800 hours, and she was relaxing with Dunc, Alice and me at a window when an Army staff car drew up, disgorging three assorted generals. Shown the boots, two put them on, but the third, apparently of more independent mind, refused and set off in advance of his companions. The guides having been withdrawn, the shack was pointed out and the plank indicated as the first step on the route. He surveyed it with distaste, and failed to notice that immediately beyond lay the results of our skating rink, now a stretch of smooth ice covered with an inch of water. Disdaining the plank, he essayed a standing broad jump across the ditch, missed the far edge, and slid helplessly down into the waist-deep water. Scrambling with difficulty up the side, and now thoroughly upset, he rushed on to the ice, and whirled across it, now on his feet, now on his bottom, arms and legs flailing like a windmill, water spraying on all sides. Picking himself up, he disappeared through the first of the seven fences, while his companions watched in frozen amazement before picking their way gingerly in his wake over the plank. It was the supreme moment of a trying day for the four watchers at the window. We doubled up with laughter while weariness dropped away. On their return the trio waited for no refreshments, but climbed into their car and drove away.

Animals, I suppose, will always tend to collect where people are gathered, and we had our quota of four-footed friends. Early on there was the Admiral, an adorable kitten officially belonging to one of the Signals Officers but adopted enthusiastically by everyone on board, including our three ratings, one of whom I saw patiently feeding the tiny thing out of an eye-dropper. The Admiral was not with us for long. One day he disappeared, and no amount of searching brought him to light. A week or ten days later

a pathetic little body was found wedged under the steps leading to the officers' wing. He had evidently misjudged his size, squeezed in and was unable to squeeze out. Why no one heard his frantic mewing is a mystery. Exit the Admiral; his exalted rank had done him no good.

An isolated, unguarded, all-female station was considered in need of a dog, so one day a darling puppy was produced. He grew into a huge, gangly-legged, flop-eared, slobbily affectionate brute, quite the ugliest dog I have ever seen, mustard colour with large liverish blotches, and feet that could have doubled for the Hound of the Baskervilles. He loved us, and everyone else, and would certainly have welcomed with equal enthusiasm any off spies who happened by. As a watchdog he was a complete flop; as a father he was not. To what extent he increased the canine population of the surrounding farms I could not say, but he did rather well at home. About the time our hero grew to manhood we were adopted by a beautiful pure-bred collie bitch. She belonged rightly to a farmer a few miles away who was hopeful of turning her into a sheep dog. Beauty she had, in quantity; brains she had none, also in quantity. She must have been afraid of sheep, because she ran away whenever she was untied, always finding her way to us, where she was much petted and there were no sheep. At last the farmer gave up in disgust, and told us to keep her.

Not only had the humans welcomed her advent. The local mutt overwhelmed her with the same affection he lavished on us, with somewhat different results. The high-born lady accepted his attentions with grace, and in due course was found to be *enceinte*. Excitement on the Station mounted as the natal day approached. A comfortable nursery was prepared in the garage, and a system of efficient message-bearers organized. I was on day watch as the messages began to pour in: "Two puppies!" "Four puppies, and another coming!" "Seven now!" And the final count: *"Eleven!"* And they <u>all</u> looked like father! Some mustard with liver spots, some liver with mustard spots; all with little round knobs of heads weighed down by huge ears; great long dangling legs; and ridiculous little pieces of string hanging on behind for tails.

Mother was so proud of the squirming brood; father, too, slightly bemused, but standing over the crèche with an ear-splitting and wagging tail. We loved very last one of them.

But Betty Crowther put her foot down. "Two dogs on a small station is fine," she decreed. "Conceivably even three or four. But *thirteen is too many!* Some must go!" General mourning, but no one, not even our valiant sailor lads, was willing to commit the crime of disposing of the surplus-to-requirement pups, and procrastination continued until the pups were really too old for disposal, and the anxious question began to be asked, "What do we do when they are old enough to leave their mother?" One day our M.T. driver gathered them up, put all but one into a basket, and drove into Ottawa. When she returned the basket was empty, and she declined to say exactly what she had done, but I suspect that for some years there was an increase in the mustard-and-liver canine population of Ottawa.

Mortimer was a more unusual pet, if, indeed, he was a pet; or a "he." A tray of sandwiches was left in the galley each night for the graveyard watch which the supervisor would collect sometime between 0200 and 0300. But one frosty winter's night the supervisor – me – while returning with the sandwiches was frozen into immobility as an enormous water-rat scurried across the boardwalk in the moonlight. I stood petrified for quite a few minutes after this evil-looking, wooly creature had vanished before daring to continue. Thereafter neither I nor any of the other supervisors willing to undertake the hazardous journey, so we used to take the tray of food with us when we went on duty. A German spy is one thing, but three-foot-long (as my imagination saw him) water-rats is another, *Wind in the Willows* devotees notwithstanding! One night early in the new regime a mouse appeared, a field mouse with great ears like satellite dishes, long whiffly whiskers, and a mobile tail longer than his body. Attracted by the smell of sandwiches, and emboldened by sundry hungry squeaks from behind the floorboards, he advanced on the tray and began a hopeful circuit to assess the availability of dinner for himself and family. Round and round he ran, rearing up on hind legs every few inches, dainty paws gripping the rim, nose a-

quiver with excitement. We were fascinated by his performance, and his utter lack of fear, but when he started to climb into the tray it was time to offer him a large piece of sandwich. He accepted the gift with delicacy and gratitude, ate some himself, and carried the remainder home to an excited family. Thereafter he came every night, and we stationed an operator close to the tray to give him his rations when he showed impatience over the delay. But one night he did not come, though the family squeaked piteously for their dinner. Next morning we found him floating, drowned in a pail of water, with his little pink feet curled pathetically against his chest. General wailing around the Station, and fury directed against the Regulating P.O. who had done the dreadful deed. "How could you?" we stormed. "Mortimer was our friend!" Poor Crich was apologetic. "I didn't know he was your friend," she protested. "I thought he was just a mouse." Just a mouse indeed! Mortimer was a mouse of character – an admirable husband and father, a good provider – and incidentally a most desirable companion to lighten the monotony of the tedious, signal-less hours of the graveyard watch. We did not speak to Crich for days!

Routine life at No. 1 was interrupted for Dunc, Alice, Sukey and me by our second trip to *Ste. Hyacinthe*. We had all been doing the work of a Leading Wren without the rate, because Naval regulations decreed that promotion required a course at the Signal School. Such a course was duly organized for the month of April, and I looked forward if not to *Ste Hyacinthe*, at least to a joyful reunion with some of my friends coming from Coverdale. If the first stay at Ste. Hy was chiefly characterized by FLIES, the second is remembered for MUD. We were instructed to bring our rubber boots, and duly packed them in our dunnage bags. On arrival at the Signal School in the evening, we signed on, and were told by the Regulator, "Put your boots on and I'll take you to the barracks." We looked at her blankly. "Our boots are with the rest of our kit." A not unreasonable place, for why should we wear bit clumping boots on the train from Ottawa? Hoddie sighed and told us to follow. We did, with the result that not one of us reached the barracks with a complete pair of rubbers – one or both had disappeared forever, sucked off our feet by the mud of the parade square. Or not

forever – they said that when the square was paved the following summer thousands of Wren rubbers were retrieved that had met the same fate as ours. Need I say that from that moment until we thankfully – and – literally scraped the mud of St. Hy from our feet, we never ventured out of doors without our boots. Nor were we ever completely clean, for the mud inevitably tracked in dried on the floors, and despite all we could do rose in clouds and turned our navy uniforms into something not far off the army's khaki. An illustration of the origin of khaki in the dust of India.

The Signal School now differed markedly from its September self. The old tar paper huts had been abandoned, and new wartime housing buildings were in course of construction. The barracks into which we four were shown was a great improvement on the single long room with its thirty doubledeckers. It was divided into cubicles for four, two doubledeckers with chests of drawers and hanging cupboards, and Hoddie told us to take any beds we liked that were not already claimed. The building seemed half empty, and Sukey and I selected a cubicle that had only one occupant. She was absent, so Sukey and I put our things away, made up the bunks – she in the lower, I in the upper – and as it was now after 2200 hours and we were tired, turned in. I was awakened by a muffled confusion of sounds, low moans, various bangs, and urgent whispers, as our cubicle-mate returned from what must have been a night in the wet canteen. She fell over, bumped into, and staggered to her bunk, assisted by a couple of other girls, who proceeded to undress and tumble her into bed, to the accompaniment of a running commentary: "Poor darling! We'll fix you up! Just stand up a minute while we get your skirt off. There, there, you'll feel better in a minute!" And so on. The minions departed at last, and I settled back hopefully to sleep again. No such luck. From the other bunk there continued to flow a crescendo of moans and snorts, ending at last in a sound – and smell – that indicated the deposition on the floor of a considerable quantity of the evening's refreshment. All this time I had been aware of not being alone in my misery. Our bunk shook violently as Sukey heaved from side to side, muttering at intervals, "I'll kill her! I swear I'll kill her!" The stream of vomit was evidently the last straw, and a monster earthquake brought a furious face peering into

mine. It's an indication of the disruption to my normal peaceable state of mind that my immediate thought was, "Good! She's going to kill her!" However, what Sukey actually said was, "I can't stand it any longer! I'm going to find somewhere else even if I have to sleep on bare springs!" A vicious ripping of blankets and she disappeared.

In the morning an unlovely sight met our eyes. The floor was strewn with assorted soiled garments among the pools of vomit, and sprawled in the bed lay a pasty-faced girl snoring gently and contentedly. Sukey and I cleaned and straightened our half of the cubicle, exactly half, and departed for breakfast, neither of us sufficiently filled with the milk of human kindness to do anything for our unknown companion. When we returned everything was clean and tidy, done by her more charitable minions, and she herself, dressed and more or less in her right mind, was sitting on her bunk, smiling in a sickly, apologetic way. It was an unfortunate introduction, and though this episode was never repeated during my fortunately brief acquaintance, I was never able to take to this girl with much warmth.

Like the September course, our leading hands' course was interesting if virtually useless. We were turned over to one Lieutenant McCormack who, being Irish, possessed a vivid imagination and exercised it on our behalf. There were four weeks to fill. In the first two we learned Radio Theory. <u>All</u> of it, beginning with the illuminating question, What is Electricity? Actually it took only nine teaching days to complete the study, weekends not counting and the tenth day being required for the final examination. Bear in mind that quite a few of the girls had never taken even a high school physics course, and you will readily understand: (a) what a monumental task the Navy undertook (but when did that fine Service shrink from attempting the impossible?); (b) what a miracle (?) that everyone passed; and (c) why I know nothing of Radio Theory now.

In Week No. 3 we learned all about repairing radio equipment. <u>All</u> radio equipment. Again this was done in four days of lessons with one day of examination.

Again we all passed. Which makes it all the more puzzling that the last thing we were told was, “But if you ever touch any of this equipment for repair purposes you will be subject to severe disciplinary action!” Perhaps the Navy had a few doubts about the depths to which our newly acquired “knowledge” had taken root.

That left week No. 4, and I suspect that Lieut. McCormack’s imagination gave out entirely over provision of anything of a remotely practical nature, and he set out to entertain us. Or did we entertain him? A moot question. One day we gave impromptu speeches – on subjects chosen by him, of course. The victim was given five minutes to prepare a one-minute speech. The topics were varied enough: how a torpedo works; what are the uses of a depth charge; what is a magnetic mine? Topics we knew all about, of course. But in his alphabetic assignment he began to run short of ideas, and by the time my name came up, I was ordered to make a recruiting speech for the Army. Needless to say, those drawing torpedoes and depth charges made something of a hash of their speeches, thus allowing the teacher to tell us all about it himself, with appropriate gestures and excellent illustrations. All very entertaining, but not of much use in the Ops room at No. 1 Station.

On another day he decided that we ought to learn “Gunnery drill.” This had nothing to do with firing guns. It was a special kind of marching done, he said, in the Gunnery School, though how he came to know it is a mystery as he was a signals officer. I certainly never met this kind of drill again, and my memory is only of the appalling difficulty of marching in my oversized boots on the loose gravel of the drill shed: the boots threatened to fly off with each forward step, a most uncomfortable as well as exhausting state. Oh yes, and he was scathing of NCO’s who, on route marches, issued the instruction, “Shorten step in front.” According to him, this meant that only the obedient first file should shorten step, the following column calmly trampling them into the dust as they maintained their stride! On the last day of all he abandoned all pretence of “instructing” us in anything, and devoted himself to pure entertainment (or showing off?), as he told us exciting, if decidedly tall, tales,

purportedly about or witnessed by himself. Some of them I have since heard in slightly different versions.

One day I heard that the Anglican Padre was offering to hold Confirmation classes. I had been duly baptised in England at the age of one month, and had likewise dutifully attended Sunday School during my youth. But on reaching confirmation age, like so many others, I had dropped away; now, I thought, the time had come. The Chaplain was delighted to add me to his class of two, a young sailor and another Wren. Time was short, because none of us was likely to be around Ste. Hy for long, but in wartime anything can be speeded up, and the Confirmation Service had already been arranged with the Bishop of Montreal to take place just before my return to Ottawa.

Before Confirmation, proof of Baptism had to be submitted. My certificate, I knew, was in my baby book, and I wrote urgently to Mother for it. The very day before the Service the proof arrived. Not the certificate itself – this had been stuck into the book too firmly for Mother to remove, and in any case she feared the postal service's ability to get it to me in time. No, she sent a night letter telegram. In the usual block capitals and absence of punctuation it read as follows: YOU WERE BAPTISED IN GODALMING PARISH SURREY ENGLAND ON MARCH 25 1918 G C FANSHAWE VICAR BOUGHT YOU RED WOOL HOUSECOAT DO YOU WANT IT OR DO I SEND IT BACK TO EATONS LOVE MOTHER. A night letter allows 50 words, and Mum hated to waste any of them. Fortunately the Chaplain had a sense of humour, and said the "Proof" did not have to be shown to the Bishop.

It was a perfect evening. The Navy laid on a car and driver to take us three candidates and one friend each to Montreal. Elsie was my companion, as she was the one who urged me to be confirmed. The long April evening was aglow with apricot and gold, pink and palest blue and lavender, as we drove into the setting sun. it still shone through the stained glass of the Cathedral windows as we two Wrens put on white

headdresses and all three approached the Bishop's throne. The intimacy of so few people in a tiny pool of light within the vast Cathedral lent the Service a reverence and a blessing that can surely not be present in a large service of dozens of candidates and its attendant congregation. And the Bishop! What a wonderful man. His humanity, his grace and conviction, his so-evident love, his understanding of and sympathy with the trials and frailties of human nature, the combination of the spiritual and the mundane. It made an extraordinary impact at the time, and remains with me to this day. I can still see in my mind's eye that compassionate, gently smiling face as he spoke from his throne. I wish that I could do more to be worthy of the privilege of feeling his hands on my head. Afterwards at refreshments in the Bishop's quarters the Bishop showed a lively sense of humour, and in retrospect, I rather regret not showing him Mother's telegram: I am sure he would have laughed. On the way to Montreal we had been pretty quiet, overwhelmed by the beauty and peace of the evening and the solemnity of the ceremony to come. But on the return journey tongues were loosened and we chattered in a happy release from tension.

And so we returned to our stations sporting the anchor insignia of a Leading Wren. The best part of this sojourn had been getting together with so many of my dear friends, and hearing of rather less hectic and hysterical adventures of life at Coverdale. I envied their proximity to the sea, even the Bay of Fundy, and the "real" sea was within such easy reach that they seemed to be forever jaunting off on weekends to Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. But for the four of us it was back to our hayfield outside of Ottawa.

Certainly there are worse places in summer than a hayfield, and I for one appreciated the peaceful country life as compared to the bustle of the city. When the road dried out it was possible to hold morning divisions outside beside the flagstaff for the daily raising and lowering of the White Ensign. Once, ever memorable for me though for no one else, finding myself the senior rating at divisions, I read that most beautiful of all prayers, "Oh Eternal Lord God, Who alone spreadest out the heavens

and rulest the raging of the sea..." In the cool of the evening, drill (not Gunnery!) was organized on the road outside the station, consisting mostly of up and down and quick about-turns, three or four steps to either side putting an obedient squad into the ditch. For a short unhappy time, we were put on kitchen duty; the cooks and stewards were thought to be overworked, and we W.T.'s were ordered to peel potatoes and vegetables, and everyone to wash her own dishes – by holding them under the hot water tap. The latter procedure lasted only until it reached the ears of the M.O. in *Bytown*; had the dishes been our own personal property it might have been all right, but they were from the common stock. The M.O. was horrified at this unhygienic procedure and ordered an immediate stop; we complied enthusiastically. And the timely arrival of another steward got the potato-peelers out of our hands, and our off-duty time was our own again.

One day we leading hands were approached by the Unit Officer. Would one of us like to volunteer for service on the West Coast against the Japanese Navy? Would we? Would I? I certainly would! The sea at last! There was a snag, of course – yet another sojourn at the Signal School in order to learn Japanese Morse, and this time it would last twice as long as either of the other stays. But the sea beckoned like the Holy Grail – Ste. Hy or no Ste. Hy, I must go.

CHAPTER VII

The catchword for my third incarceration is HEAT. The time was July/August of a hot, dry summer. The sun beat relentlessly on the flat roofs of the one-storey huts, which had barely cooled off at night before the next day's sun heated them up again. Moreover, construction of the new buildings and the paving of the parade square were finished, and the Signal School was in high gear as a "pusser" station. The Commanding Officer, Captain Musgrove, was a tolerant man, popular with the lower ranks for his understanding. The same could not be said of Commander S, in charge of Signals he believed in running a tight ship, and "run" is an apt word. Despite the heat, for the first time I found myself doubling across the parade square – and it was not small. There was an hour's drill every morning, followed by Morning Divisions, complete with the band. And many evenings, too, came the pipe, "Fall in for Evening Quarters!" I think I should have enjoyed all this considerably more, probably, if there had been a bit more "starch" in my backbone, but the heat made it hard even to lift my feet from the ground. What I really hated was the bugle piping Wakey, Wakey at 0600 every morning (0630 on Sundays, which seemed like heaven!) If the bugler had stood outside to blow, it would have been bearable, but this ear-splitting blast was directed into every dormitory from an instrument a few inches away from the microphone. After two or three mornings of starting awake with a fit of the shakes I attuned myself to the clicks of the switches turning on microphones further down the line, and dove for cover under the pillow until the last shattering notes died away. I can't say that, outside of classes and the compulsory routine, I did much because it was just too hot for anything but flopping, panting, and drinking gallons of liquid. In the midst of all this there was a scare about pollution in the town water supply, and we were ordered not to drink the water. Most of my friends turned to soft drinks purchased fro the canteen, but, not caring for carbonated beverages, I solaced myself with huge cans of grapefruit juice. The last laugh was on me – it was discovered that the soft drinks my friends were

downing, in copious quantities, were bottled in Ste. Hyacinth from the very water they were not supposed to drink. However, as far as I know, no one suffered ill consequences.

One of the greatest pleasures was to be reunited with some of the old gang from Coverdale. Alice Rutherford, Jan Mackay, Joan Cheatley joined me as prospective watch supervisors, and Gertrude Jardine, now a Chief Petty Officer, came to take charge of operations. Jean Kinnin also joined the supervisory group. She had been with the class immediately behind us and had been training there at the time of our first stay. She was retained by the school as an instructor and like me, welcomed the chance for a change. The remainder of the class were new entry from basic training in Galt. Our advent overloaded the available facilities, with the cheering result that we old ones were put on an evening shift, classes from supper to midnight, and, wonder of wonders, allowed to sleep in the morning. If only it hadn't been for that infernal bugle!

I do recall one moment of acute embarrassment. At morning drill, the quarterdeck alive with squads of sailors and Wrens, marching, wheeling left, wheeling right, turning about, I found myself, for the first time and very nervous in charge of a squad of Wrens. All was going well until I shouted, "Left turn." I should have said right. The girls obediently turned left, and marched straight at a long column of men marching parallel a few yards away. All ranks – except the Petty Officers – seemed quite pleased at the prospect of combined operations; even Hoddie was grinning, but with more presence of mind that I had, yelled, "About turn!," and once again the girls obeyed just in time to avoid a collision.

CHAPTER VIII

At last the course was over, and we were on our way to Esquimalt, this time for the purpose of actually releasing men for sea duty. Four nights and three days on the train: a tedious journey, but more comfortable for us Wrens than for the girls of the other two services: They were crammed two to a lower birth, whereas we had an upper apiece. How kind, I innocently thought! Later, much later, I discovered the real reason, though at least I did not have to wait until the present controversy over homosexuality in the armed forces for light to dawn. We also rejoiced in an overabundance of meal tickets, three per day, and later used the leftovers in a reckless binge at the Empress Hotel in Victoria, which gracious establishment, being a railway hotel, accepted them with a calm that indicated previous experience.

Vancouver. The Sea at last – I could hardly believe it. The six-hour ferry ride through the lovely Gulf Islands from the rail terminal in Downtown Vancouver to the very steps of the Empress Hotel making a welcome change from the train. Arrival for me was a sort of home-coming, return to the exact spot of my first entry, aged six, into Canada after the sea voyage from San Francisco. But there was little time for nostalgia. In short order we were whisked by naval truck to Esquimalt, and our new quarters in Moresby House II. Moresby House I was a former inn on Esquimalt Road hard by the gates of HMCS *Givenchy*, the "working" naval base to which we were attached; in contrast to HMCS *Naden*, the training and transit base. The second Moresby House – eventually there were four of them – was brand new, a temporary wartime structure originally intended for shipyard but commandeered by the Navy as additional housing for Wrens. (It was still there thirty years later; so much for "temporary.")

It was late afternoon when we arrived, were mustered in the forecastle, and greeted by the Unit Officer. She delivered a bombshell – we were to drive immediately to Gordon Head, our future work place, to be introduced to the present male staff and

our work, before returning to Moresby House to re-pack in preparation for an early start to Seattle and a week's course at the U.S. Naval Base on Bainbridge Island. At Gordon Head the second, and more devastating bombshell fell.

A word of explanation about Japanese naval procedure. They used a five figure code, in International Morse when the war started, but as time went on these symbols were simply too long for the increasing amount of traffic, so a set of shorter symbols was devised. (Later I learned that the, to me, incomprehensible selection, a mixture of International and Kata Kana, was made up of the first syllables of the Japanese words for zero to nine.) This change had taken place some months before, and was well known at Gordon Head, but the news had never been passed on to Ste. Hy, surely a matter of secrecy being carried too far! So here we were, supposedly fully-trained operators setting off for a week's liaison with an allied Navy, in complete ignorance of one of the most basic parts of our work. It did little to bolster confidence or create pleasurable anticipation of the coming week.

Both confidence and stamina were at a low ebb by the time we stumbled, in the dark, into the Waves' barracks on Bainbridge Island. It was 0200, and the Waves were naturally asleep except for a weary Petty Officer, who ushered us into the cabins and told us to take any empty bunks we could find. We had to feel our way around: to find an empty bunk, to locate the desperately-need heads, to extract a few necessities from our dunnage bags without disturbing the sleepers. A few hours of exhausted sleep, and the bugle had us up again.

The first day is better forgotten. Not that people were unkind. The Waves took us in hand and showed us around. At breakfast we discovered that all food, whether in mess or canteen, was located at the bottom of a cliff, and everything else, working and sleeping quarters, was at the top; with seventy-two steps between. In the operations room the Americans soon discovered the terrible gap in our knowledge. They were not pleased. However, they had to accept the fact, and proceeded to remedy the lack in

typically energetic American fashion: we were re-attached to the buzzers we thought we had escaped forever, and remained attached thereto during working hours for the duration of our stay. I have no idea what they had intended to teach us during that week; I only know that by the time we returned to Gordon Head everyone was expert in the new figures and ready to work into the takeover.

After the first day, lesson time excepted, things brightened up. The Waves were friendly and helpful, and several of our girls formed friendships that lasted for years. We were taken on a tour of Seattle, an interesting and pleasant city apparently originally designed for the comfort of mountain goats. Those steep streets! Our new Signals Officer, Lieutenant Dorothy Bruce, stopped by daily to make sure we were all right, but otherwise we saw little of her, except whisking past in the company of U.S. officers, laughing and waving gaily. She seemed to be having a good social time.

Not so we! We were having no social life at all as far as men were concerned, though they flocked about the station in thousands. The American girls they treated in typical sailor fashion, whistling, joking and laughing; us, they ignored with a studied indifference that was worse than insulting. Worst of all was the Friday night dance. We Canadians sat lonely at our tables, surrounded by an ever-expanding thicket of beer and soft drink bottles, while the American girls whirled happily around the floor, at least until the men were too drunk to stand and to avoid the bottles which had now littered the floor as well. Much later, back home in Gordon Head, Lieutenant Bruce was appalled to find that her experience of the American officers had been so different from ours, and undertook to make discreet enquiries. A week later she reported mirthfully if apologetically the reason for such uncharacteristic behaviour. The day before our arrival at Bainbridge Island the Captain had mustered the entire male complement and addressed them thus: “A group of Canadian Wrens are coming to spend a week on this base. Canadian girls are not like American girls. They are ladies. They don’t like to be whistled at. They don’t like to have their behinds pinched... *Any man who annoys them in any way will receive one month’s hard labour, with no appeal!”* Is it any wonder that

no man dared so much as to look at us!

It was worth everyone of the 72 steps up afterwards to get the meals. Not that our Navy provided poor food. In fact, Ste. Hy's wretched catering excepted, it set a high standard for mess catering – not quite "mother's cooking," but that could hardly be expected. But those American meals! Our eyes bulged to have our trays piled high with, for example, fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, three other vegetables, soup, pie and ice cream, with a huge bowl of tossed salad waiting at the table. Coffee and milk – tea, predictably, did not appear – came like water out of taps in the wall. I did dislike the divided metal trays on which the meals were served, in which one chased little pieces of beet through the gravy and ice cream before capturing them among the carrots, but this was a very minor complaint. For the first couple of days we were too busy stuffing to notice what was going on around us, but as we got used to the daily munificence it became evident that the Waves did not share our enthusiasm. Girl after girl, returning with a loaded tray, would pick at a bit of chicken, poke at the carrots, taste the pie, then throw down her fork, exclaim, "Nothing fit to eat!," dump the whole lot in the garbage, and depart for the PX for coke and fries. I was aghast: at the ingratitude – what better could they possibly want? Or expect? – and even more at the waste of good food when so much of the world was starving. Could they possibly think the meals were ill-prepared? I wished I could introduce them to Ste. Hy's grease-swimming eggs; or the hard little grey worms afloat in warm water that were the No. 1's cooks' first attempts at preparing dehydrated mashed potatoes. (In extenuation of the latter, I should add that these hither-to-unimagined objects had been sent with no instructions, and the cooks did not realize that the potatoes should have been soaked overnight.)

Altogether it was an exhausting, if interesting, week, and we were more thankful than otherwise to return to Esquimalt and begin our work.

We began by working with the men, who were withdrawn gradually as more reinforcements arrived from the Signal School. No women, I suspect, were ever

welcomed more warmly. Most of the men, having been there for two or more years, were fed up with shore jobs, and were longing to get to sea. Alas for high hopes! It follows that there can seldom have been more angry and frustrated men than these when they discovered that they were being posted, not to sea, but to a remote new station at Masset, at the northern tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands. At Masset there was nothing – no movies, no pubs, no sports facilities, above all, no GIRLS. Gordon Head now looked a highly desirable place to be, and it was a disgruntled bunch of "seamen" who said good-bye and disappeared into the green of the endless woods instead of out on the deep blue sea. As far as I know, no one actually said, "Why don't they send these eager-beaver Wrens to Masset and leave us here?" But I am sure it must have been in the back of many a mind.

The watch to which I was assigned as supervisor was in the then charge of P.O. Tel. Macleod, one of the most bashful men I the presence of women that I have ever encountered. We made a good pair! Despite this, Macleod was an excellent instructor, and I soon picked up my duties. Unlike No. 1 Station, the Middle Watch, 0000 to 0800 hours, was the busiest, and required a double watch. We were organized into five watches, which worked two Evenings, four Middles and two days, and two days off. The supervisors were more fortunate: with only one required for the Middle Watch, we had a straight-forward schedule of two days on each watch, followed by our two-day weekend. I don't remember that any of the girls complained of this discrimination, perhaps, as much newer entrants, looking on it as veterans' perks. Gordon Head worked closely with the American stations on the west coast, Seattle being the headquarters to which all message were relayed. We also copied the plain-language news broadcasts from Tokyo of NSHQ in Ottawa. The news being in Japanese, we learned nothing. If you wonder at our ability to write Japanese, wonder no more. At Ste. Hy we were taught to copy direct from the air on to special typewriters, where the Japanese characters were transliterated into phonetics in the Latin alphabet. The machines had special keyboards, which created certain pitfalls that haunted me for years after I returned to a standard keyboard. In order to ease typing of the figure

code, all the figures were put on the top row, moved one to the right, that is, the “one” was where the “two” is, and so on. The result? Years later, on one of my first days at Kemsley Newspapers, I typed a whole batch of letters dated 1066 instead of 1955.

Philip Brownrigg was intrigued rather than annoyed, and wanted to send them out that way, but pride made me do them over.

In Esquimalt, for the first time we W.T.’s were sharing accommodation with girls working a normal 9 to 5, Monday to Friday week. And certain tensions crept in until we had all shaken down together. Most cabins accommodated four girls, but senior ratings were assigned cabins for two. Ruddie, with her infallible nose for a good thing, noticed that a certain cabin at the top of the gangway was somewhat larger than the other doubles, and asked if we could have it. Permission granted by Lt. Bruce, we moved in and had hardly settled before the Accommodation Officer, a young and very new Sub-lieutenant, stormed in and decreed that this was a cabin for Petty Officers, and ordered us to move forthwith. Grumpily we began to haul our possessions to the end of the long corridor, and suddenly encountered Lt. Bruce. She was surprised to see us moving on so soon, and we poured out our grievance. She listened with growing annoyance, and blew her top – how dare a jumped-up little Subby shunt her girls around! Ruddie and I sat down and waited. Not a long wait – a furious but helpless Sub-Lieutenant ordered us back into our chosen quarters; she said she had discovered that the room was too small for the two single beds to which P.O.s were entitled. A saving of face? Possibly, but Ruddie and I returned in triumph, and remained in residence throughout our stay.

Not surprisingly, the biggest source of friction between watch-keepers and non-watch-keepers was over the matter of sleeping in the mornings. The latter were willing to grant those coming off Middles the right of sleeping during the day, but were slow to understand why the Evening Watch should not have to rise when they did. To us it seemed quite fair: release from duty at midnight, followed by a half-hour drive in an

open truck and a hot meal usually meant bed not before 0130: why should we be expected to turn out for breakfast five and a half hours later when the others had had a full night's sleep? Eventually our shipmates saw reason, our reason, but at some point the officers noticed that no W.T.'s ever turned out for Sunday morning Divisions: one watch was on duty; one just off duty (and very scruffy they looked); one was on weekend leave; and the fourth was blessedly sleeping in. The Captain thought this over, then ordered that some W.T.'s, he didn't care which, just be produced each Sunday. With the weakest case, the Evening Watch was sentenced to make the token appearance.

Once settled into the routine of work, I found plenty to do in my free time. For our first off-base excursion, Ruddie and I went in to Victoria on reconnaissance of shops, movies and restaurants. We got a lift into the centre of the city in a naval vehicle, and were given directions for finding the No. 4 streetcar back to base. After a pleasant afternoon we boarded the streetcar and settled down to enjoy the ride. Anyone who ever rode those cars during the war will recall vividly the slow, rattling, jolting ride – I am sure the transportation authorities specially selected the oldest and most rickety cars for lugging the thousands of sailors back and forth between the naval bases and downtown Victoria. Our introductory ride was memorable. This particular car seemed peculiarly reluctant to make the journey. First we were proceeding up a slight, a very slight incline when the car jerked to a stop. The driver swore; threw a switch; we moved a few yards; jerked to a stop; the driver swore; threw a switch; we moved a few more yards;...and so on. At last we achieved level ground and the Toonerville Trolley began bowling along Esquimalt Road. Presently the car stopped again, all the doors opened, and everyone got out, including the driver. Everyone, that is, except Ruddie and me. Two thrifty Scots, we sat patiently waiting for the driver to come back (we guessed he had had a sudden need to visit "auntie") and continue the ride. So we sat and chatted, and began to feel rather warm. The driver put his head in the door. "Aren't you girls going to get out?" "Is this Admiral's Road?" we asked, rather surprised. "No," he said pleasantly. "Well, that's where we are going," we told him.

"Not in this car," he replied calmly. "It's on fire." Only now we realized that from being merely warm, the seats had become hot, and flames were shooting out from directly under us! We got out. A few yards up the road a naval truck stopped to pick us up. The driver's comment on our excited story was significant: "What, on fire again?" Despite this dire news, future rides were merely uncomfortable and unexciting.

Author in Victoria 1944

Our little Operations Building at Gordon Head stood on the corner of a former daffodil farm, on land that is now part of the University of Victoria. With spring, the daffodils came popping from the ground in their thousands, serried ranks stretching from the walls of the building out past the DF shack into what seemed the distance. They were stunted from years of neglect, but nevertheless thrilling, especially for us Easterners, who had never dreamed of flowers outdoors in February. We gathered them as tight buds, packed them in damp paper handkerchiefs in one-pound chocolate boxes and posted them home to our mothers. My mother reported that hers opened in succession over a six-week period, and graced the dining room table until the last one faded about the time her own came into flower.

We traveled back and forth in the back of an open truck, and for this reason were allowed to retain our bell-bottoms, probably because the modest authorities feared the lifting of our skirts by the wind as we passed through the staid streets of Victoria. Though I never got quite as close to them as to the old girls, the new girls were a companionable bunch. Some, of course, had been at Ste. Hy with us, and shared the experience of Seattle. Because of the five-watch operator/four-watch supervisor system, after the first few weeks I did not have a watch of my own. Also, one of the disadvantages of being a supervisor was that we seldom had usable free time together; Ruddie and I could easily have shared one bed, Box and Cox fashion. But one incident from the early days I do remember. Because of the sleepers, the

Evening Watch was expected to be quiet when turning in, so it was with dismay that one night, half an hour after they should have been asleep, I heard a lot of giggling and talking coming from the adjacent cabin where four of my girls lived. I hauled myself out of my upper bunk, a perilous job of feeling for the desk in lieu of a ladder, groping my way to their door, and telling them sharply to pipe down. "Yes, Robbie," they said meekly, and silence reigned for a few minutes, long enough for me to get back in bed. The giggling was renewed. By the time I reached the door for the second time I was thoroughly angry, and snarled for the first and last time in my naval career, "PIPE DOWN, or I'll put you on charge!" It worked. Next morning they approached apologetically. "Would you like to know what we were laughing about? We had just found out that Cookie didn't know where babies come from, and we were instructing her!" Cookie, I might add, was 20 years old, and this must sound very odd to today's youth. She protested, red-faced, that she had seen the film "Birth of a Baby" a couple of years before, and had been left with the impression that the baby came from the mother's navel. What is more, she was none too sure that the information now imparted to her by her shipmates was true – it sounded unlikely and downright disgusting! Ah, innocence!

Apart from the work, food – when does it not? – raises the most memories. The eight-hour absences from the barracks meant carrying sandwiches for one meal. Oh the monotony of it! The whole day's supply was made up at once, which meant the Evening Watch got them when they were reasonably fresh; by Middles they were beginning to lose heart; and by the following day were suitable only for the starving – and how I wished for some starving children to give my share to. Any hope of surprise was also removed by a strict three-day rotation: thick slabs of roast beef; thick slabs of rat-trap cheese; wet canned salmon. All encased in thick slices of tasteless white bread. I could eat a bit during the day and evening but faced with those abominations at three o'clock in the morning was more than I could chew. Especially the salmon. I had never cared much for salmon sandwiches, and those flabby soggy things simply turned my stomach. It did nothing to help to know that canned salmon had practically

disappeared from the grocer's shelves, and that any Canadian housewife would have killed to get a few of the cans whose contents ended up in our garbage. I was especially sad to miss the lunches served in mess, which were particularly good, even imaginative, at least the few that did come my way. Most especially the Boston Baked Beans and Brown Bread. Beans have always been one of my top favourites, and when I remarked as much to Uncle Arthur, he countered, memories of the First World War in mind, "You will be sick of them before you get out." He was wrong: in three years I could count on the fingers of one hand the times I was lucky enough to be around for the feast; and one of those times followed immediately upon a visit to the dentist, when my mouth was still frozen and I had been order not to chew for a few hours.

On the other hand, watch-keeping gave us the bonus of the late meal served at 2300 hours to the Middle Watch and at 0030 to the Evening Watch. This was invariably delicious, and was always served by the same cook, short and stout and middle-aged Rosie. This delightful woman actually *volunteered* for the job, which the other cooks disliked, being somehow convinced that the W.T.s were making a greater contribution to the war effort, and that by feeding us well she could be a part of it. Dear Rosie! She was unpopular with the rest of the galley staff because she had a short temper, and because she fought fiercely, and successfully, for the best provisions for "her" girls.

A Chinese laundryman operated a thriving business in a small hut midway between the Moresby Houses. He was a popular figure. Whether wearing skirts or bellbottoms, a white shirt and detachable collar was compulsory, and what a plague they were to keep clean! Competition for the washing machines and irons was fierce during our precious free time – until we discovered this friend. He turned out immaculately ironed shirts and starched collars for a ridiculously low price, much better than I could produce myself. He spoke little English, and issued his tickets in beautiful hand-written Chinese characters. I don't remember ever hearing him utter that old cliché, "No tickee, no launlee," but he operated on that principle. Once I witnessed a verbal altercation between the man and an unfortunate Wren who had mislaid her

ticket; despite practically weeping on his shoulder, she was turned sadly away, shirtless and collarless.

Speaking of the Moresby Houses, an explanation for the multiplicity, probably apocryphal, was once given to me. It was customary to name naval barracks after deceased admirals whose careers had been in the relevant areas. Admiral Moresby had operated in the Pacific, so qualified for the first Moresby House. But when another name was needed for our barracks, the next old sea dog on the list was one Admiral Hoare, and the Commanding Officer couldn't quite bring himself to call it...Finish it for yourself!

Our bicycles came into their own in the lovely climate of Vancouver Island. We roamed the countryside, much more safely in that time of fewer people and less traffic. Sometimes I had a companion, sometimes I went alone. On one of these solitary rambles I came upon a great mass of raspberry bushes loaded with green berries. A few showed deliciously red here and there, and I tumbled off the bike and advanced on the largest and reddest. I pulled; the berry resisted, and finally squashed in my hand. I tried another, and another, with the same result, and light dawned – these were unripe blackberries, the first I had ever seen.

No bicycles were needed for scrambling over the rocks of Saxe's Point. This has been tamed now into a pretty, manicured park, and I must go right down to the water and turn my back on the land to find again the wild jumble of rocks and surging sea that I loved. On occasion a group of us lit a fire and roasted wieners. Ruddie, meditatively waving a smoke-blackened and ash-covered wiener half-way to her mouth: "You know, if my mother had served me this, I'd have thrown it at her, but here it tastes delicious." Actually she would have done no such thing. Mrs. Rucherford, an energetic, forceful former school teacher, who had raised five children in Depression-ridden Saskatchewan, ran a tight ship and permitted no nonsense from her children, who, let's face it, had too much love and respect for her to attempt any nonsense. Even nearing the end of a long life, when I met her, she exuded the determination that had overcome

so many difficulties.

One day Gracie Baker suggested that we go sailing in Esquimalt harbour. Gracie, also known as Able Baker, was a teletypist who was with us at both No. 1 and Gordon Head. She had somehow become acquainted with some of the naval plumbers who, though not professional seamen, had mastered the art of sailing the Navy's whalers. It was a beautiful sunny day, and the harbour was ruffled with white-capped waves as much as, so memory tells me, four or five feet high. Our plumbers were experts indeed, more so than several other crews also aiming at an exhilarating ride. The wind was blowing straight into the dock, and every time they pushed off thy were blown back in. Proud I am to report that we made it away on the first try. And what a glorious sail it was! The whaler sped through the water heeled almost on her side, bounding from crest to crest, water pouring over one side while Gracie and I, perched on the upper rail, clung tightly, ignoring the chilly water soaking our backs and bottoms. By the time we reached the other side the boat was half-full of water, and we had to tie up to a destroyer and borrow a bailer before setting sail again. The journey back was even faster, the wind being now behind us, and we laughed and shrieked our way back to the dock: where the professionals were still vainly trying to get away.

The driver assigned to take us back and forth to Gordon Head was a former despatch rider who had miraculously survived a crash "over the Malahat" on his motorcycle. This hump of land that has to be crossed when going up-Island from Victoria has been so tamed by the modern highway that I did not even notice the crossing a few years ago, but it used to be a narrow, twisting road with tortuous bends and frightening slopes. There were many accidents, almost all fatal, to cars and motorcycles that failed to make a curve. Our man was terribly injured, many bones broken, but he survived and, though misshapen and no longer fit for despatch-riding, was retained in the Navy for the relatively simple duty of driving Wrens and their necessary gear. A nice man, gentle and accommodating, he would vary the evening route to pick up watch-goers in Victoria and save us the time of returning to barracks on

the streetcar. I remember one early morning when, no one of senior rank being present, I rode in the cab. A light mist was rising behind the Olympic Mountains in Washington, and in the sky Mount Rainier hung, a disembodied pink “ice cream” cone, a full 125 miles away. A rare sight, the driver said.

Rats and mice dwelt in the basement at Gordon Head, which the men may not have minded, but we did. So we got a cat, an adorable tabby and white kitten whom we called Mu Fu, the Kana code signal for “There is no more to come.” Being little bigger than the rats when he came, he was not expected to take up his duties immediately, and he spent most of his kittenhood upstairs, exploring the Operations and Teletype Rooms, sleeping in the message box on the supervisor’s desk when tired. As no one was willing to evict him from the box, a second was obtained for the messages. Mu Fu grew to an excessively large size, but never understood that he could no longer fit into the box. He continued to sleep there, his stomach alone in the box and the rest of him overflowing to occupy half the desk, while the supervisor obligingly retreated with her work to a smaller and smaller portion of the desk. Not long after Mu Fu attained full and handsome adulthood, and the rodent population was duly reduced, he took unto himself a wife, a stray female, and thereby gave the lie to his name. Being wiser now, we named the lady Yu Fu, meaning “More to come!” And so there was, though not by birth, at least while we were around. Another stray kitten, very small, frightened and nervous, joined the crew. He was all black except for a quizzical white streak above one eye, so we called him IMI, or Immy, the question mark in International Morse. Unhappily, Immy lived only a short time. Lt. Bruce, like the rest of us, was very fond of Mu Fu and Yu Fu, and as she lived on Vancouver Island, I believe she took them home after the war.

One day a visitor came from NSHQ in Ottawa, Lieutenant Skarsted, the communications Officer in charge of Intelligence work. He was a pleasant man, and showed great interest and appreciation of our work. We liked him, and I think he liked us; at least, we must have been something of a relief to him. He had not actually come

to see us. Rumblings of discontent, even signs of mutiny, from our unhappy land-doomed predecessors in Masset, had reached Ottawa, and Lt. Skarsted had been despatched to enquire into the complaints. As his ship approached, he was greeted by seeing the White Ensign hauled down and the Jolly Roger hoisted in its place! After that, it must have seemed luxury to come to the peace of Gordon Head.

One regret for a lost opportunity I do have. Besides daffodils, our grounds at Gordon Head grew a fine crop of hay. The Station hay and all, was enclosed by a high barbed wire fence, the only entrance being guarded by two civilian home guardsmen. No one, in or out of uniform, was allowed through without permission. One Sunday, when neither Lt. Bruce nor C.P.O. Jardine was on station, the senior guard came to me to say that the owner of the land was at the gate asking permission to come in and cut the hay. "Has he got authorization?" I asked. "No, but I know him personally," was the reply, "and he comes every year to get his hay. It's quite legitimate, and he won't come into the buildings or be able to see anything that he couldn't see form outside the fence." I thought a minute, then said he could come in. A minute later his car passed, arm sticking outside the window; the sleeve was navy blue and bore the four gold rings of a full Captain. And I, a mere Leading hand, could have denied him entrance! Too late to tell him to go back and get written authorization from Headquarters. Curses!

Christmas 1944, and dinner at HMCS *Givenchy*. A traditional Canadian Christmas dinner of turkey and mince pie; also a traditional Navy Christmas dinner of officers serving the other ranks. I don't remember it very clearly. Having just come off the second Middle Watch of the run of four (some of the male telegraphists were still with us) in time to join my friends at present-opening, bed was the only thing I wanted. But Ruddie persuaded me to go with them to the Dockyard. I nodded over the meal, but was glad in the end that I had gone. Vancouver Island gets little snow, and that winter it snowed on only one day, Christmas Day, as a special present for homesick Easterners. Enough had fallen by the time we left the Dockyard to be scraped up into balls for a fight before, I thought, the longed-for bed. However, on the way home some

men on a submarine, docked for refit, hailed us to come aboard and join them for a party. Again I was dragged, protesting mildly, into the seamen's mess where all the crew not on leave was gathered. It was hot and noisy, and out of the daze I was in I found a mug of liquid thrust into my hand, and gulped down a big mouthful – straight, neat, unwatered pusser rum. For several minutes I wondered if I would ever breathe again; certainly I could speak not a word for half an hour. The girls laughed unfeelingly, and said we had been warned only to sip, not gulp. Well, maybe, but I never heard the warning. To this day, I hate rum.

On Boxing Day I was invited to dinner at the home of the Bullens, whose eldest son, Hamish, is my "almost twin." His father was, I believe, my father's commanding office in the First World War, and Mrs. Bullen took my mother, a very young American bride, under her wing. Hamish was born a month before me, a rather small and scrawny baby in contrast to my own overblown plumpness. If he can be considered my first boyfriend, he received treatment both unkindly and unfeminine from me: when placed together on a sofa I invariably knocked him over. Perhaps it is as well that we saw little of each other in the succeeding years! This Boxing Day visit was even less successful than Christmas dinner, coming after a third night of work with little sleep. Spotting me drooping and nodding while pre-dinner conversation droned around, Mrs. Bullen kindly led me off to be and tucked me in for a couple of hours sleep that scarcely sufficed – that night on watch I had to stand up most of the time to keep from dropping off to sleep – a hanging offence according to King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions!

Princess Alice visited Esquimalt in the spring of 1945 when the War was clearly coming to an end. She came to both Moresby House II and Gordon Head, and much dusting and scrubbing at both locations preceded her arrival, the Evening Watch once more being sacrificed to the god of cleanliness. She was as beautiful and charming as ever, and even survived the shock of Smitty's poster above the landing. Because the morning delivery of mail was made about 11 o'clock, well after the Middle Watch would

have had breakfast and turned in, girls anticipating something from home had got into the habit of staying up and coming to the forecastle in their housecoats to claim it. Now the forecastle was very much open to the public, and everyone was expected to appear there fully dressed. A few days before the Princess's visit, a notice appeared: *No mail will be given to Wrens in housecoats.* The following day it was joined by a cartoon by one of the W.T.s a recognizable and alarmed Gertrude Crich, the Regulating P.O., was being confronted by two girls, one clad in bra and frilly panties, the other wearing her birthday suit, asking hopefully, "Any mail, Crich?" Everyone was delighted, including Crich, and it was not only photoed and copies for general distribution, but a blow-up measuring some four feet by three was fixed at a point where anyone ascending the stairs could not fail to see it. The officers conducting the Princess planned the route for maximum effect. It worked. The astonished Princess stopped dead and in mid-sentence while the Unit Officer explained, then joined in the laughter.

VE-Day came, but meant little to us engaged in the war against Japan, which was expected to last another year. I do remember attending a Service of thanksgiving in the Cathedral, before going to Gordon Head and the Middle Watch. Seemed odd to be thankful for the "end" and promptly continuing. When it came, the abrupt end to the Pacific War stunned us. The Japanese even more so, of course. In what I can only interpret as a desperate attempt to maintain a "business as usual" attitude, I copied reams of plain-language English "news" in the form of a school geography lesson about Hokkaido, the northernmost island of the Japanese archipelago; this on the very day that Japanese naval HQ was broadcasting surrender instructions to all its ships. Unlike VE-Day in Halifax, VJ-Day passed quietly in Esquimalt, partly because the hard feelings between Navy and City that existed in Halifax did not prevail in Victoria; partly because, being forewarned, the Senior Command opened all the wet canteens to free beer in *Givenchy* and *Naden*, and closed the gates to any sailor with the slightest smell of liquor on his breath. Any property destroyed in drunken rampages was going to be naval, not civilian.

CHAPTER IX

The coming of peace did not, could not, mean immediate discharge from the armed forces; this had to be done by degrees so as not to overwhelm civilian facilities. Our job, of course, ended with the effective end of the Japanese Navy. So in typically logical Navy thinking, we Acting Petty Officers, were allowed to write an exam on Japanese naval procedure, and, having successfully passed, were promoted to full Petty Officers. This curious procedure was the result of K.R. & A.I's rule that promotion was only to be made on completion of a "course," and while the war was on we could not be spared to take a course. If we had, no doubt it would have been as relevant to our work as the Leading Hands' course of eighteen months before! Which leads to another curiosity. Soon after our arrival in Gordon Head we discovered that the men we were replacing were paid five cents a day extra for their ability to copy Kata Kana. They advised us to apply for the same, which we all promptly did. In due course back came the answer – sorry girls, you can't have it because of an agreement among the three services that pay for all women doing the same job was to be equal; unfortunately, there were no army or air force girls copying Kana; therefore, nothing extra for us. Mutinous mutterings, in which Lt. Bruce joined. Finally a way out was found: raise the Kana-copying W.T.s to First Class – and they would be entitled to *25 cents* a day extra. I have never dared to ask my dear friends back in Gloucester and Coverdale what they thought of this remarkable decision. I only know that the news was received with blank incredulity by the Leading Wrens: we were already ranked as First Class, and now received just ten cents a day more than the operators for the privilege of taking all the responsibility. But wait – no one can accuse the Navy of lacking either a heart or the ingenuity to find a way to soothe ruffled feathers. Word came down that, if we applied to be paid as Petty Officers (which after all was the rank of the men we had replaced), such applications would be looked on favourably. They were. But once again I felt guilty about the others still slaving in the German sphere, and the only consolation I can offer is that we had had to endure those three scorching months in Ste. Hy to achieve it.

Well, something had to be done to keep us busy, besides writing examinations in dead naval procedure. Some of my friends got fascinating assignments around the base; I was sent as "secretary" to the Accommodations Officer at HMCS *Naden*.

Being a "holding" station, *Naden's* population fluctuated wildly from day to day, and Lieutenant-Commander Foxall's job was to account for the comings and goings of its temporary crew. I was ordered to report for duty in his office at 0800 hours on Monday morning. The office was empty: Commander Foxall, like the rest of the officers, did not begin work until 0900 hours. So I sat in nervous loneliness for an hour, with only one visitor: that god-like creature, the Master-at-Arms, came in, greeted me with a broad smile and cheery words, to which I replied in a suitably subdued mutter, and laid a bit of paper on the Commander's desk. He confided to me that this was the count of beds occupied the previous night, which appeared to be the only way of knowing just how many people were aboard, and that it was his duty to have these vital statistics on the desk daily before the boss arrived.

Promptly at 0900 hours the boss arrived. He was a good-looking sandy-haired man, in his thirties, I guessed. He was looking very pleased, and I gathered shortly that I was the cause of his pleasure – he had never had a secretary all to himself before. I had never been a secretary before, either, so we sat and stared at each other for some time, he with his little self-satisfied smile, I beginning to shift on my chair. Clearly neither of us had any idea of what to do with the other, but it was clearly his duty to begin. Time passed. At last he cleared his throat and spoke:

"Can you sew?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, with astonishment and also caution. The answer was true enough as far as ordinary darning and mending was concerned, but I prayed he was not referring to skilled tailoring and dressmaking, my only experience in that line having

been disastrous. At school, where one afternoon a week had been a purgatory devoted to either sewing or cooking, both of which I loathed, the state of my dressmaking skill can be judged by the reply of the Grade 8 teacher when on being offered a free choice of a sewing project for the year, I had opted for making a dress for my baby sister. "How old is your little sister?" enquired Miss Hart. "Two," I replied. "We'll make it size five," was the decision. And when the dress was finished – by Mother – it fitted Jean nicely. My only other attempt, five years previously, in a fit of patriotic fervour, had been a dress for a British bomb victim, a beautiful little princess-style dress with six shoulder-to-hem fine French seams – only when the dress was turned right-side out, all the ragged edges were poking through and the whole lot had to be ripped out.

So now, with a dim feeling fluttering on the outskirts of my mind that this was an odd first question to be asked of a secretary, I awaited expansion. He positively glowed. "I've just received my campaign ribbons, little scraps of cloth. Do you think you could sew them on my jackets?" "I <u>think</u> so," I answered, not at all sure that it was the truth. He was delighted, and was all for hustling off immediately to collect his jackets and the bits of coloured ribbon, but decided reluctantly to postpone this joy until after lunch and turn his attention to the Master's bed-count and one or two other things of more generally naval interest.

The sewing took all afternoon. The scraps of ribbon were very small, and could be barely stretched to three jackets. I had to sew them over strips of cardboard before they could be attached to the left breast of each jacket – and Commander Foxall hovered anxiously over me to ensure that I got them in the right order. Which did nothing to improve my skill. During the afternoon every officer aboard managed to come by – either Commander Foxall had passed the word of our project around at lunch, or it had been spread by the first casual dropper-in. The room bellowed with laughter and bad jokes about bringing in their bagfuls of holey socks and buttonless shirts, and could I undertake suit alterations. These were generally aimed at the Commander, who received them with gracious pride. My role was undoubtedly a

starring one, but whether as a movie queen or prize cow I have never been certain. However, all the visitors, from the Captain down, were so kind that I couldn't take offence, and eventually I discovered that this peculiar introduction to a naval secretary's life stood me in good stead with the other officers, who always had a friendly word when we met, and occasionally asked me for a bit of help – not, thankfully, with their mending.

After a few days Commander Foxall and I settled into a more office-like routine. There wasn't very much work (which I suppose was the reason he had not been allotted a secretary until there was a glut of girls requiring employment), so we spent a good deal of time chatting. He had a wife and little daughter "up-Island," which he visited at weekends. And I discovered that between-times he dated one of my fellow W.T.s, "Boopsie" Rutter, the very attractive girl with bedroom eyes, as one smitten sailor put it. This interesting discovery was made accidentally one Sunday when several of us were trotting down to Saxe's Point for a picnic wearing, quite illegally, our naval bellbottoms along with civilian clothing, and we encountered the two of them sauntering along the sidewalk, also in civvies. We all eyed each other guiltily, because he was breaking regulations just as surely as I by dating a plain Wren. To say nothing of his marriage vows! We exchanged hurried greetings and went our separate ways.

But the days of relaxed comfort in the office had to wait a week or so. Every morning before the Commander arrived, the Master delivered his bed-count; and just as regularly at 0900 hours Commander Foxall picked up the scruffy bit of paper and exploded with wrath. "He's done it again!" he would roar, and fling the paper back on the desk. At first I thought that the Master had got the count wrong and in some mystifying fashion Commander Foxall knew it. Then one morning, after the usual tantrum, he looked at me speculatively and asked, "Do you see the Master when he brings this in?" Incautiously I said that I did. "Well, just look at this," and he shoved the paper in front of me, trembling finger indicating the heading: ACOMADATION REPORT. "It infuriates me every time I see it. The man can't spell! Just tell him to

correct it tomorrow, will you?" Utter dismay: how could I tell my superior officer that I would do no such thing; that I stood in considerably more awe of a Master-at-Arms, even so apparently friendly a one as this, than of the Commander himself, or even of the Captain. Mornings of agony passed; the misspellings continued, and the blasts of rage, and the inevitable question, "Didn't you tell him?" I wondered how long my muttered excuse of "I forgot" could stand up.

It all ended suddenly. One morning Commander Foxall entered with a broad smile, greeted me cheerily, picked up the bed-count, and surveyed it with satisfaction. "It only takes a word," he said. "I happened to see the Master in the hall yesterday, and told him about the misspelling. He didn't mind a bit – thanked me, in fact – and now just look at this!" And with a triumphant laugh he placed the Master's latest bit of paper in front of me. It was headed ACCOMADATION REPORT. Equally happy smile from me. "You're right, it <u>does</u> only take a word!" I said.

I was still in Esquimalt when the prisoners of war began arriving back from Japan. Canadians and Americans were sent straight home, but the many British were held on the West Coast until transportation across the Atlantic was available. Meantime, they were outfitted with new uniforms and put on special diets to overcome the effects of extreme malnutrition. One of our seamen who was aboard the Royal Navy aircraft carrier HMS *Implacable* that brought a large group back, told us that if we thought they looked emaciated <u>now</u>, we should have seen them two or three weeks before; that aboard ship they had been fed a diet designed to add a pound a day without disastrously overloading weakened digestive systems, and the crew was forbidden to offer them so much as one chocolate bar. We put on a dance for a group of the ex-prisoners, and what an evening it was! In spite of their skeleton-like appearance, in spite of blackened and rotting teeth that would need years of dental work to put right, in spite of oversized clothing that seemed about to drop off, they were the most cheerful bunch I have ever known. True survivors. A Marine I danced with looked even more peculiar than most. Soldiers, sailors and airmen could be issued

appropriate Canadian uniforms, but there are no Canadian Marines, so this chap was clad in an army battledress top, a naval petty officer's trousers, and red Japanese boots made, apparently of papier maché. Yet he was perkiest of all, looking forward to getting home to his family in Yorkshire at last, "at last" after twelve years. When the War broke out he had been coming to the end of a tour of duty in the Far East and was trapped there for another seven years. Meantime back home grandparents had died, younger brothers born and well into school; so much of the prime of life lost. Yet he was cheerful: the past was past, the future unknown but full of possibilities.

CHAPTER X

And so to the final months. Just why I don't know, but we all had one final posting back east. I hoped to see Coverdale at last, but no such luck – it was back to No. 1 Station. We were given two days' leave en route, to be taken anywhere we chose. Most girls chose, foolishly, I thought, to go home, but Jan Mackay, Jo Cheatley, Joan Bradshaw and I opted for Banff. This was the beginning of November and the first snow was on the ground. The great Banff Springs Hotel had been closed during the War, except for the hot pool. We stayed at the Women's .....(free) and walked around looking at the town, and going for a swim in the hot pool. What agony crossing the snow-covered tiles from the changing room in bare feet and thrusting those frozen members into steaming water! And what a weird sensation to be swimming out of doors surrounded by snow! An Australian Air Force Officer whom we met at the pool invited us to join him with the car and driver he had hired to go to Lake Louise. A peaceful drive through the white forest to the great deserted Chateau Lake Louise, where smooth turquoise water perfectly reflected the mountains at the end of the lake. So different from the way I have seen it since, warm and sunny – and swarming with people. Although the Banff Springs Hotel was officially closed, the caretaker kindly led us through the main rooms, where the furniture was shrouded in dust-sheets, regaling us the while with stories of the famous and infamous who had stayed in the hotel in the fabulous pre-War days. He seemed to have known them all intimately, and had his own views on their personalities, views he was not at all slow to share with us. In particular he had it in for Joan Crawford – "She was a punk!" he snarled – this was years before her daughter aired similar views.

The last two months at Gloucester are best passed over quickly. Jan, Jo and I found that the Unit Officer's idea – I can't believe it was seriously endorsed by any high-ranking communications officer – was to monitor the Portuguese and Brazilian navies. There was no discernible reason for doing this, and in any case it scarcely mattered when neither navy appeared to have anything larger than a river gunboat, or signals

which had any chance of being received in Ottawa. I couldn't take it seriously, and when the Unit Officer told us to work out our own watch system, I recalled hearing some male wireless officer saying he had once worked a system of 24 hours on and 48 off. Between giggles, we decided it sounded rather good and decided to try it on the Unit Officer, never dreaming that she would accept this crazy suggestion, especially as she ought to have suspected that we had no intention of remaining alert and competent for 24 hours at a stretch. To our amazement she did agree, and thereby lost the last shred of our respect.

My discharge papers came through early in January, shortly after I had sewn on my brass buttons and exchanged my beloved round rig cap for a petty officer's tricorn. Three of us chose to go to New York for our discharge leave, along with Nancy Kingston's brother, a Pilot Officer. The brass buttons proved invaluable. All kinds of free theatre and concert tickets were available to other ranks and at greatly reduced rates to officers. We three "others" would line up for the chosen play, asking for an extra one for a guest. But if all the free tickets were gone, Peter and I would hasten to the officers' wicket. No, I didn't lie – didn't need to, as the buttons and tricorn went unquestioned.

Last scene of all, which ends the active part of my naval career, the final signing off at HMCS *York*, where it had all started almost exactly three years before.

I owe the Navy a lot, more than I can ever put on paper. True, it did deny me overseas service, which I wanted most of all. No W.T.'s were sent, but – overseas service vs those friends I would never have met? A thought not to be borne! The closest I came to overseas service came at No. 1, when a notice was posted asking for volunteers to relieve the British Wrens in Malta who, not surprisingly were getting bomb-shy. I think almost all of us over the age of 21 (the minimum age for servicewomen to go overseas) put our names down, commiserated with those too young, and mentally began packing our kitbags. Nothing happened. Weeks later the Unit Officer, who was

also puzzled by the silence, made enquiries and discovered that Prime Minister King himself had rejected the proposal, on the grounds that it was too dangerous and that Canadian parents would be upset if their darling daughters were sent to such a perilous post. Detestable man! What business was it of his if we were willing to go?

That apart, joining the Navy was the most significant step I ever took, and changed my life forever. I needed, first of all, the compulsion provided by the Service to get me on that train to Galt; to overcome the terrible inertia, the overpowering shyness of meeting strangers, that had always held me back from breaking free of the comfortable nest and out of a life I increasingly disliked, found boring and frustrated. Even the cycling adventure of 1940 had not been enough to break the chains; I know now that, whether she realized it or not, only Mary had kept me from backing out of that trip at the last minute. I know that because twice in the succeeding two years I <u>did</u> back out of jobs that would have meant leaving Toronto. And yet – I *wanted* to leave so badly: home smothered me, I wanted something different from life in Toronto's middle class; I wanted to see the world. Planning ventures was fine, but when the moment of leaving came – *I could not take that first step*. By removing the right of last-minute refusal from my hands, the Navy gave me the necessary courage to continue the break for freedom. Without that experience I know exactly what I would be today, a sour old maid, leading a lonely, monotonous existence, with few friends, seldom leaving home, and regretting lost chances. A vestige of that frightening hesitation still haunts me every time I head for the airport, but the once-insurmountable wall seems so small now. A second's hesitation, I step over, and am free.

But most of all, the Navy gave me friends, friends I should never have met if I hadn't joined up. Friends, laughing, loving and loyal, with whom I lived and worked in close association for three years, years that have stretched into a lifetime. It is now half a century since we met, and though we see each other only occasionally now, when we do it is as if the years between had never been. There are some into whose homes I can walk unexpectedly as I can into no others' except my sister's. Despite the years,

no one seems to have changed. Oh, we are older, of course, and if not actually grandmothers, at least of grandmotherly age. But the bond is still strong, stronger perhaps because of those intense memories of youth and of a life shared in out-of-the-ordinary circumstances. The husbands are a remarkably tolerant and amiable lot, having apparently recognized that, in a gathering of Wrens, they must submit gracefully to a joyous, if noisy disruption of normal routine, and even temporarily take second place.

There is no doubt that part of this particularly strong bond is due to the fortunate circumstance of being wireless telegraphists, and thereby spending all our time with the same group of people in small, relatively isolated, stations. This is especially noticeable at reunions. Mary, who was a censor officer in Halifax most of the time, often remarks on how lucky we are to have kept so close: she herself kept in touch with very few, and rarely finds anyone she knows at reunions. We are indeed lucky. At the 50th anniversary reunion in Halifax in 1992, a Wren who was not a W.T., put her finger on the feeling we generate among ourselves. "I have never," she wrote to me afterwards, "met a bunch of women who are so comfortable together." Comfortable! How right that is!

Those reunions! Every three or four years we gather in one of the big cities, an astonishingly large number of what was never a large body of women so many years after the event. Like our mini-reunions, these big ones are joyous and noisy, the hotels tolerant enough to welcome us echoing to a chorus of rapturous greetings among friends not heard from for years: "You haven't changed a bit!" – not strictly true as to outward appearance, but, yes, to those who see beneath the surface to the essential person within, true; to a catching up on family news, husbands, children, and now grandchildren; to "Do you remember" — half-forgotten words: "Nip to it, Matilda!" and "On the double there!"; to "Wakey, wakey!" and "Do you hear there?"; to glamour boots and bloomers-closed-at-the knee; to the *Tiddley Times* and K.R. & A.I.

The first of our really close group died in January 1999, and of course we must expect more of these gaps in the future. After all we are now all over 70, and it is not in the nature of things that we shall live forever. But, living or dead, this is the group that must always be closest to me, despite the many dear, dear friends I have discovered since. In fact, I owe even these to the Navy, not just because it gave me the courage to go forth and find them, but because it changed me fundamentally. The Wren who interviewed me on that memorable day at HMCS *York* wrote as her assessment (which I did not read until my discharge): "Fair. Wears glasses and smiles seldom." Undoubtedly true in 1942, but not, I believe, in 1946. Very telling was the reaction a couple of years ago of my niece when she told me of her worry about her 4-year-old son's constant whining and extreme reticence. "Don't worry," I said. "He will grow out of it." "Are you sure?" she asked doubtfully, having herself never been either whiny or shy. "Positive," I assured her. "I am afraid David is very like me. I can just see myself at his age driving Mother wild with my whining, and as for meeting and talking to strangers – no one could ever force me to do it." Barbara gaped at me. "YOU? A whiner? Shy? I have always thought you one of the friendliest and most adventurous people I know!" Yes, those three years changed me. They gave me, in fact, the rest of my life.

Some years ago Norma Green of the Toronto Wren Association composed words to the tune of "When you and I were young Maggie." Though it refers to Halifax where I was never stationed during the War, this song is so true and poignant that I can do no better than close with it.

CITADEL HILL

I wandered today to the Hill, Jenny
To watch the scene below,
To raise a few ghosts from the past, Jenny
That we left there long, long ago.
The shore patrol's gone from the Hill, Jenny
Where once at their step up we sprung,
No, it's not quite the same on the Hill, Jenny
As when you and I were young.

And now we are aging and gray, Jenny
And not quite as spry as we were then,
Let us sing of the days that are gone, Jenny
When you are I were Wrens.

I looked on the streets where we walked, Jenny
With the young and the gay and the best,
And I sat on the grass where we sat, Jenny
Where we laughed and we loved with the rest.
The green grassy slopes are still there, Jenny
The ships in the port still come and go.
But the hillside is lit up at night, Jenny
Much brighter than long, long ago.

And now we are aging and gray, Jenny
Though we'll ne'er forget all the fun!
Let us sing of the days that are gone, Jenny
When you and I were young.

Oh, it's true that we've changed some with age, Jenny,
Our steps are less sprightly than then,
In our book is a well-written page, Jenny
Of when you and I were Wrens.
And old Citadel Hill's on that page, Jenny,
And the clock, and the Gottingen cars,
And the fog that rolls in on the Hill, Jenny,
Is the ghosts of the Wrens and the Tars!

And we know that we're still young at heart, Jenny
When we think of the things that we did then.
So we'll sing of the Citadel Hill, Jenny
When you and I were Wrens.

Gordon Head Special W/T Station Reunion

From August 11th - 14th, 2001, telegraphists who were WWII Special Operators at Gordon Head Special W/T Station met near the wartime site of the Station at the University of Victoria. Of the wartime complement of approximately 65 RCNVR Reservists and about 65 WRCNS Wrens who replaced them in 1944, 9 men and 13 women attended the Reunion.

Gordon Head Special W/T Station was the only “Y” and D/F element that had any continually significant role in the RCN’s radio intelligence operation against the Japanese. As part of the Naval Service Headquarters’ Operational Intelligence Centre network of stations that monitored enemy wireless transmissions, the Station was opened in 1940 and, at first, continued to provide to the Royal Navy the kind of radio intelligence data that had been furnished from 1925 by a similar facility in Esquimalt. Following Pearl Harbour and the rationalization of radio intelligence operations among the UK, the US and Canada, the Station became part of the US Navy’s West Coast network. Information collected at the Station was passed to Bainbridge Island, near Seattle for onward transmission to Washington and elsewhere as appropriate.

Author Dorothy “Robbie” Robertson at the 2001 Gordon Head reunion.

With the recent gradual lifting of security restrictions on information about Allied radio intelligence activities, we were able to access materials from the DND Directorate of History and Heritage and from recent publications in the public domain. Information from these sources was supplemented by research, funded by the Reunion, into files at the National Archives of Canada. All of this formed the basis for papers presented at the Reunion by former staff and by a retired UVic faculty member interested in our rather unusual event. These papers were about the history of the Station, about the vast Commonwealth and US Pacific signal interception operations of which the Station was a part, and about the role of code-breaking and traffic analysis in the 25 or so years leading up to the Battle of Midway.

When sold by the Department of National Defence in 1959, the 25 hectare property that the station occupied became a substantial part of the University of Victoria campus. Although the relationship between the nearby Army Camp and the University had been well known for some time, it was only when plans for the Reunion were initiated that a connection with the Naval Station became of some specific interest. This connection was very pleasantly recognized for those attending the Reunion at a reception sponsored by the University of Victoria Alumni Association.

Among the pleasant features of the Reunion, was the invitation for those attending the Reunion to have “Tea at the Empress” as guests of the hotel - for the same charge (ridiculously low by present day comparison) that prevailed during the wartime! Also, Canadian Forces Base Esquimalt made arrangements for an excellent tour of the Dockyard with access to the impressive Chiefs’ and P.O.s’ Mess for lunch, followed by an interesting visit to the Naval Museum at “Naden”.One of the highlights of the program was the address at the Reunion Dinner by a former RCN/Armed Forces Commodore on the topic “The Navy Then - the Navy Now”.

A particularly interesting aspect of the Reunion was the fact that the former WRCNS and the former RCNVR types had never met each other, having “passed in the night”. The program provided opportunities for these groups to meet and for everyone to renew acquaintances, some of which had lapsed for over fifty years. As well as the casual story-telling that was facilitated by being together on campus, there was semi-structured time for people to spin yarns about what did (or didn’t!) happen during their time at the Station and elsewhere during their “Y” experiences.

The Station building still stands in a remote corner of the University - having been moved from its original location to serve as a Day Care Centre and currently as a furniture warehouse. There are tentative plans for the funds left over from the Reunion program to be donated to the University as seed money towards the placing of both a commemorative plaque on the Station building and a framed statement in the University building that now occupies the original site. Additionally, photographs, other memorabilia items, the research materials from National Archives together with the Reunion Proceedings will be used to enhance the Special Collections that the University of Victoria Archives Department maintains on campus history.