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FOREWORD

In *Women Overseas*, thirty-one members of the Canadian Red Cross Corps recall their experiences as overseas volunteers during World War II and the Korean War. Most of these women came of age in the midst of war and all of them rose bravely to the challenge of overseas service.

Love for their country and in many cases love for their men who were already serving overseas were often the driving forces that motivated women to leave the relative safety of Canada to accept Red Cross postings in war-torn England, continental Europe and Asia. Through these vivid narratives we learn how it feels to cross U-boat infested oceans, to survive daily bombings and severe food shortages, to witness death and destruction, and to acquire the *carpe diem* spirit and courage exhibited by so many “ordinary” people during war. We hear the voices of the Red Cross Corps sing “O Canada” and “The Maple Leaf Forever” when they first land in England and then again in France to join the soldiers who preceded them. We listen to the cheers of the French people and Canadian soldiers as the Red Cross Corps members travel along the “Maple Leaf Up,” the main highway from Normandy to Germany during World War II. We visit the Maple Leaf Clubs in London where thousands of Canadian soldiers enjoyed a taste of home on their leaves from the war. We learn that the maple leaf was a proud symbol of Canadian courage and solidarity decades before it first appeared on our flag. After reading these stories, the Canadian flag with its large red maple leaf proudly recalls the courage of those who died for the peace that Canadians have enjoyed for over five decades.

While the red maple leaf signifies Canadian nationality, the red cross symbolizes an international organization that comes to the aid of all nations. The concept of the Red Cross was created in the midst of war. In 1859, Jean Henri Dunant, a Swiss businessman, happened to be travelling in Italy when he arrived in Solferino in time to witness the aftermath of a battle between the armies of Austria and Napoleon III. He organized volunteers to set up emergency hospitals for the wounded soldiers of both armies. In 1862, Dunant's book *Un Souvenir de Solférino* (A Memoir of Solferino) recommended that all countries organize volunteer groups to care for the victims of war. Through Dunant's efforts, delegates from sixteen nations met in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1863, and the following year a treaty was drafted that called for the protection of wounded troops and those caring for them in wartime. In honour of Jean Henri Dunant, the Swiss flag with its colours reversed was adopted as the Red Cross symbol. Throughout the twentieth century there have been many international conferences to define and extend the principles of the first Geneva Convention.

Since its birth in Europe over a hundred years ago, the Red Cross has grown into a worldwide network of national Red Cross Societies, with the International Red Cross headquartered in Geneva. It assures that the principles of the Geneva Conventions are adhered to by all nations and officially recognizes the national Red Cross Societies. The League of Red Cross Societies in Geneva develops, promotes and assists Red Cross Societies throughout the world.

The Canadian Red Cross came into being in 1896 when Surgeon-General G. S. Ryerson placed a Red Cross symbol on a medical supply wagon used to assist the wounded in the Northwest Rebellion. The Canadian Red Cross subsequently provided aid to wounded soldiers in the Boer War (1899-1902) and World War I (1914-1918). After World War I, the Canadian Red Cross began peacetime relief programmes, and in 1927 it was officially recognized as an independent national society by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Four years later, the Canadian Red Cross took on the administration of the National Emergency

Fund which provided assistance to Canadians living in poverty as a result of the Depression. During World War II, the Canadian Red Cross set up the National Workroom, the Women's War Work Committee, the National Purchasing Committee, the National Enquiry Bureau and the Maple Leaf Clubs in London.

The Canadian Red Cross Corps was founded by the National Council of the Canadian Red Cross Society in June 1940 when World War II had reached its first critical phase with the collapse of the French Army. It was initially called the Women's Volunteer Services Corps and women were recruited through newspaper advertisements. At this time women all across Canada were responding to the war effort. While some joined the armed forces, others were attracted by the volunteer and humanitarian ideals of the Red Cross. Training and volunteer work with the WVSC was scheduled in the evenings and on weekends so that women could continue their daytime jobs or their studies. In late 1941 overseas postings were organized and the name was changed to the Canadian Red Cross Corps; it remained a women-only volunteer service.

Evelyn Chambers of Montreal had earlier organized the Canadian Women's Transport Service which provided driving services for the army in Canada and overseas. Millie Hutchison, another prominent Montrealer, had coordinated the training of VADs (Volunteer Aid Detachment) to assist with the non-medical needs of hospitalized servicemen in Canada and overseas. These services formed the basis for the first two sections of the Corps to be mobilized—Transport and VAD. Later the Office Administration, Food Administration and General Duties Sections were added to the Canadian Red Cross Corps. Thousands of women served in the Corps throughout Canada, and 641 of them were recruited for overseas duty during and after World War II. They became known as the Canadian Red Cross Corps, Overseas Detachment. They maintained their volunteer status in order to observe the obligations inherent in the Geneva Convention. Each section of the Canadian Red Cross Corps had its own distinctive uniform, but khaki was the colour of the uniform worn overseas, with the exception of the blue uniform worn by the VADs and escort officers.

Major General Basil Price, already in England, was appointed to the position of Overseas Commissioner for the Canadian Red Cross Corps. Mrs. Lee was the first Corps Commandant, followed by Isabel Pepall. They received the various requests for overseas Corps workers from the Canadian Army and passed them on to the commandants of the Red Cross Corps throughout Canada. The commandants subsequently drew up lists of qualified Corps members in their jurisdiction who were ready and willing to go overseas, with candidates being selected on the basis of this information. During the years from 1942 to the mid-1950s, members of the Canadian Red Cross Corps, Overseas Detachment, were to serve in England, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Italy, Korea and Japan.

The first detachment of eighteen members of the Canadian Red Cross Corps braved the dangerous wartime Atlantic crossing in December 1942. As the war raged on, more Corps women were sent to England—138 in 1943, 293 in 1944 and 192 from 1945 to 1947. Corps members were granted the courtesy of officer's rank, but no pay. The Canadian Red Cross Society provided each member with \$5.00 a week; otherwise the Corps members were self-supporting. In joining the Corps, many of the women gave up good jobs or interrupted their university studies to take on overseas volunteer work that was dangerous and much more demanding in time and energy than the paid jobs they left behind. In doing so, they affirmed the extraordinary spirit of volunteerism that women have always exemplified.

As the stories in *Women Overseas* indicate, the work of the Canadian Red Cross Corps, Overseas Detachment, was diverse—far beyond the original plan. Some served in Canadian military hospitals as welfare and handicraft officers, others as transport drivers and general duties officers in various clubs in London. The Canadian Red Cross headquarters was in Burlington Gardens, around the corner from Piccadilly Circus. A large number of the Corps worked here, preparing and sending out parcels for prisoners of war and assembling the layettes to give to English pregnant women married to Canadian servicemen. Others worked with the blind

and disabled, and some were seconded to the British Red Cross as ambulance or transport drivers, or to the British Emergency Medical Service Hospitals as nurse's aides. When World War II ended, three Corps members were assigned to operate a postwar civilian relief depot in Normandy. Other members acted as escort officers for the war brides and their children on their voyage to their new homes in Canada. During and after the Korean War, new members were recruited and posted to welfare and handicraft officer positions at military bases in Korea and Japan where they helped to keep up the morale of the Canadian soldiers serving there.

Perhaps the most striking quality that runs through all the stories is the perseverance of the Corps members. Merely to qualify for overseas duty as a volunteer, they had to complete a stringent training programme in hospitals or in centres where they learned such skills as driving and servicing large vehicles. In addition, they had to put in at least 200 hours of voluntary service in Canada for the war effort. When they were eventually given their notice to travel to England, many were asked to leave at very short notice. Once they were overseas, they were often sent to postings that were altogether different from what they had expected. The hours they worked may well seem unnaturally long to present-day readers, but the Corps members worked these hours willingly. Their tenacity seems to have been matched only by their good humour, and it is a delight to read about the pleasure they found in their work and the camaraderie that formed among them.

While the women all shared in the same volunteer spirit, each memoir speaks in an individual voice. The Corps members had very different experiences of the war—some served at Red Cross headquarters in London, some in hospitals, others were near the front lines in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. In the first story, Phyllis Elder Matheson dramatically recounts her Red Cross training, the long, perilous ocean voyage to England, the trauma of war written on the faces of the British and the diverse responsibilities she took on, including driving duties during bombings and blackout conditions. Like the other women in this book, she juxtaposes the inevitable feelings of deprivation and fear with the

sense of humour and spirit that enabled people to face the daily horrors of life in war-torn Britain: "The housewives had started sweeping up almost before the last of the dust had settled; they had hung the dusty curtains out on the line, tacked bits of cardboard over the broken windows and brushed the plaster dust out of their hair."

In another story Frances Martin Day conveys the double-edged grief of a woman who loses her husband to the war before she can join him overseas and then decides to leave her son behind when she travels to her Red Cross posting overseas: "My life seemed over. I was stunned and numb to the point I couldn't feel anything. . . . I decided to go, not only to be busy enough to ease my sadness, but there was a war to be won."

Jean Ellis Wright's narrative recalls her work at various mobile military hospitals in Europe, caring for the wounded soldiers brought in from the battle fronts. Her memories come alive in compelling, emotionally charged details. "One lad asked me where he was, then said, 'Please—take my . . . boots off.' He hadn't had them off for two weeks, and his socks were stuck to them. I washed his face in a little pan of water, then washed his feet. He gave a sigh of relief, opened his eyes and whispered, 'Ahhh . . . thanks.' This was a precious moment for me."

Jane Rogers' memoir highlights her work as a cook at the Junior Officers' Club in London. There she meets the formidable Miss Duff, an intimidating presence in several of the women's stories. Her lively narrative is filled with self-effacing humour as she recalls her misadventures and affirms a growing mutual respect between Miss Duff and herself. As she declares early on, "In our innocence, we thought we would be the dieticians, plan the meals, and teach the English cooks how to cook the Canadian way. Was I in for a surprise!"

Audrey Copping remembers her work at St. Dunstan's, a British rehabilitation centre for soldiers blinded in the war. What starts out to be a two-week assignment goes on to the end of the war, with her full involvement in the rehabilitation activities. Later she becomes an assistant to Lady Fraser at St. Dunstan's and teaches

blind patients, including a blind man with no hands, to type.

The last of the World War II memoirs is Claire Watson Fisher's inspiring account of the Civilian Relief Programme, designed by Ambassador and Madame Vanier, which was instrumental in distributing clothing and supplies to devastated Normandy in the months after the war's conclusion. In *Women Overseas*, story after story expresses the gratitude of those who received parcels from Canada, including prisoners of war, families of soldiers and the people in Europe who suffered during the war. Fisher remembers the joy of French children who received clothes from Canada, and she quotes one letter written by a nine-year-old French girl: "Long Live Canada, I love Canada and my pretty pink dress. I send many kisses and say thank you."

Several of the Corps members also took part in a historic initiative that began on February 3, 1947 in Vancouver—the development of the Canadian Red Cross Civilian Blood Donor Service. In fact, the Red Cross had been actively collecting blood from 1940—in response to a request from the military for blood for war casualties. Within the Civilian Blood Donor Service, the women's responsibilities included driving to remote parts of Canada often in the midst of harsh winter weather, to set up clinics and deliver blood where it was needed.

Three of the memoirs in *Women Overseas* describe events during and after the Korean War, a conflict that began five years after the end of World War II. Accordingly, these narratives are placed in the latter part of this book. Serving in a different war, a different continent and a different time, Dorothea Wiens states: "In contrast to those of the Red Cross women who served in World War II, my memories are not of bombs and blackouts but more resemble the picture created by the television series *M*A*S*H*." Unlike the Red Cross volunteers of World War II, women posted in Japan and Korea were paid a small salary. They were motivated by a sense of adventure, a thirst for meaningful work and a desire to learn about other cultures. In uncovering the different aspects of Asian culture, Jacqueline Robitaille Van Campen comments on her discovery that she is not only a Quebecker but also a Cana-

dian, “I gained a great sense of my country which has never left me. Et voilà—a wonderful episode of my life!”

After the Korean War, the Canadian Red Cross Corps members continued their work in cities across Canada. They assisted the nurses at the Red Cross blood clinics and drove people to and from the blood clinics as well as to other health services such as cancer clinics. About fifteen years ago the Corps officially disbanded. However, several decades earlier, the Overseas Club was founded by Betty Bussell Simone, Vi Gore Parkinson, Marguerite Roberts and Nancy Laing, with the purpose of continuing the friendships that had been formed overseas and supporting the National Canadian Red Cross Society with substantial financial contributions. The first meeting was held in December 1945 in Toronto with ninety-nine members attending. Since then there has been a national reunion at a different host city each year. There are nine branches of the Overseas Club in Canada and one in England.

Betty Bussell Simone founded the Vancouver Island Branch in 1973 and became the first president. In 1974 the group began to meet regularly in Victoria where the Corps members found a closeness and pleasure in each other’s company rooted in their common bond of having served overseas. Because they had been scattered all over Great Britain, the Continent and eventually Korea and Japan, many of them were meeting for the first time. Until discovering each other, they had not realized the diversity of each other’s experiences. Frances Martin Day suggested that at each meeting one of the members share her overseas experience with the others. As the stories unfolded, it became clear that they should be permanently recorded as an important part of Canadian history. To this end, Frances Martin Day collected the stories and self-published them in 1989 as *Memoirs of the Vancouver Island Branch Overseas Club* for the members of the Overseas Club and their families.

In the summer of 1995, these memoirs were brought to the attention of Phyllis Spence and Barbara Ladouceur, who quickly realized that the stories should be published in order to make

them available to the general public and to preserve them for future generations. They had recently collected the oral histories of thirty-six Canadian war brides and had published them as *Blackouts to Bright Lights: Canadian War Bride Stories* (Ronsdale, 1995). The members of the Corps were enthusiastic about the new project, and it was agreed that Frances Martin Day, Phyllis Spence and Barbara Ladouceur would be the editors.

Since most of the stories in this collection were originally written for the families and friends of the members of the Overseas Club, it was necessary to refashion them for the general reading public. In order to give a more in-depth picture of the Canadian Red Cross Corps experiences, Phyllis Spence and Barbara Ladouceur interviewed members of the original Corps and integrated new information into the memoirs. Some members provided letters written home while overseas and these added important new details to their accounts. Many of the members also searched through their photo albums for pictures of their war work; these unique photos have been included wherever possible. Most of the women in this book have played an integral role in the evolution of their memoirs. Sadly, several of the women have passed away, and in these cases their families kindly agreed to participate in the editing process.

Women Overseas now proudly takes its place in the growing collection of books that are providing new insights into the important responsibilities that Canadian women took on during World War II and the Korean War. As P. H. Gordon says in *Fifty Years in the Red Cross*, "Without our women there would be no Red Cross as we know it." Certainly the memoirs in *Women Overseas* indicate that the women who served with the Canadian Red Cross Corps are heroes whose accomplishments have been overlooked for many years. Their legacy is now preserved to enlighten and inspire us, as well as future generations of Canadians.

*Frances Martin Day, Phyllis Spence
and Barbara Ladouceur*
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