The Caribou Hut: Newfoundlanders, Servicemen, and the St. John's Home Front During the Second World War

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The Caribou Hut:
Newfoundlanders, Servicemen, and the St. John's Home Front
During the Second World War

By

Kenneth Tam

Thesis
Submitted to the Department of History
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts degree
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INTRODUCTION

The arrival of the Second World War found the British colony of Newfoundland in a genuinely desperate state. Once an independent dominion, the island state and its associated Labrador territory had been so badly ravaged by the Great Depression that it had been forced to abandon independence in return for support from Britain’s Colonial Office. No matter how badly afflicted the country was, though, its colonial status left it no choice but to join the coming war — and to play a role of considerable importance in it. Situated in what would prove a strategically crucial region, the North Atlantic, Newfoundland was destined to become the departure point for many of the grand trans-Atlantic missions launched from North America. From merchant convoys to trans-Atlantic flights, Newfoundland ultimately became a crucial staging ground for many operations that had major consequences during the war. For the small, economically-damaged island, this major role in world events came as something of a shock, and carried with it challenges on the home front — challenges that Newfoundlanders would have to rise to meet, often unsupported by their government, and without experience in most areas.

A host of wartime changes faced Newfoundlanders as the conflict intensified and fully encompassed their land and sea. Across the country, new military installations were imagined and built throughout the war, some of them becoming so significant that they dictated settlement patterns in the province for a half-century after the conflict’s end. Money poured into the colony from both Canada and the United States, as both countries added their own military might to that of Great Britain, and the woeful economic
problems that had so crippled Newfoundland before the war began to melt away. Indeed, through all of these interactions, the way was being paved for Newfoundland to join Canadian Confederation, something the colony and dominion had resisted since Canada had been born in 1867. The years of the Second World War were, quite evidently, critical to the future of Newfoundland, and as such, many stories of the wartime experiences of the colony deserve attention from historians. Some of these stories have been told, though many remain uncovered.

The road to Newfoundland’s entrance into Canadian Confederation has been considered by a number of scholars, as has the defence of the island itself during hostilities. Little has been written, though, about the experience of those fighting men who stopped in Newfoundland on their way across the Atlantic, or those who were based on the island during the war. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers, sailors and airmen passed through Newfoundland’s capital city during the war; St. John’s became the home of the Newfoundland Escort Force and later Mid-Ocean Escort Force, the Canadian Army’s W Force, and 1 Group of the Royal Canadian Air Force. It would be foolish to suggest that the constant presence of so many servicemen would not leave some sort of mark, but this relationship between guests and hosts in St. John’s has not been fully explored. Put another way, the story of how this city and its people dealt with, and positively influenced the servicemen who were their guests for five years has gone untold. What follows, then, is an account covering one of main points of interaction for the people of St. John’s, Newfoundland, and the many thousands of servicemen who shared their city during the war: the Caribou Hut. Conceived of, established and then operated by ordinary Newfoundlanders with limited experience and only sparing
government support, the Caribou Hut was a highly successful hostel offering boarding and entertainment to servicemen in St. John’s. It became one of the most famous clubs for servicemen in the North Atlantic, and it was hugely successful in this role.

The story that follows will be divided into chronological sections, each with differing thematic structures based on the ever-changing difficulties the Hut faced during its life. To begin, the situation of 1940 will be examined, setting the context for the challenging origins of the Caribou Hut. The year of 1941 will next be discussed, exploring the growing need for the Hut’s unique services, and the continuing improvisation that made them available. Efforts to stabilize and streamline the operation of the Hut will be considered in the chapter focusing on 1942, while the rise of new funding strategies and disciplinary difficulties will be featured in a chapter combining 1943 and 1944. The end of the Caribou Hut, and its post-war legacy, will be dealt with in the final chapter on 1945 and the post-war years. This account, then, is both a thematic exploration and a chronological story — the story of a difficult birth, a troubled growth phase, and then a genuinely triumphant period of accomplishment that came to an end with the victory in Europe. It is a story that has not been told in nearly sixty years, and one that sheds a great deal of light on the experiences of servicemen in the North Atlantic during World War Two, and on the lives and character of the people of St. John’s during that time.

When one considers all the facets of this story, and the broader context in which it is situated, it can truly be called remarkable. The people of St. John’s, lacking expertise and suffering from a harsh Depression experience, were able to offer soldiers, sailors and airmen passing through their city excellent, home-grown shore services. While the
relations between servicemen and host populations in ports on either side of the Atlantic were often quite strained, St. John’s was recognized as a friendly port, and the efforts of its people were appreciated by the combat personnel in the colony. The Caribou Hut was an innovator and an inspiration for shore services in the North Atlantic theatre, and its contributions were greatly appreciated by its patrons. Newfoundland could be proud of the Hut’s accomplishments.

The Rock and those who Cling to it

Newfoundland (properly pronounced New-Fund-Land) is commonly referred to as ‘the rock’ by its citizens, an allusion to the popular feeling that the island itself is simply a giant rock jutting out of the North Atlantic. It is a place of rugged beauty, and it is commonly held among Newfoundlanders (including this author) that if one is born there, nowhere else can truly be called ‘home’. As the eastern-most landmass in North America, Newfoundland was one of the first places on the continent to be reached by European explorers; the Norse seamen landed on the rock around the first millennium CE.¹ These adventurers left their mark at Lanse Aux Meadows on the northern reaches of the island, a settlement that has lately been archaeologically uncovered and turned into a fascinating tourist attraction. Colonization and settlement began more recently after the discovery of the island by John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto), sailing on behalf of England in 1497. Upon reaching the island, Cabot found the waters surrounding it to be so teeming with fish that he thought it possible to walk across their backs without sinking into the sea. Fortunately, he did not test that particular belief through experimentation; he did, however, alert England to a highly lucrative opportunity for fishing on the Grand Banks,
the waters adjacent to the island.\textsuperscript{2} Though year-round settlement would not begin immediately, the new-found island would eventually be claimed by England, and in turn would become one of the first colonies of the English (later British) empire.\textsuperscript{3}

Over the course of the many wars of empire between England and France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the island would change hands occasionally, but eventually returned to the control of its original colonizers when hostilities ended. Settlement based on the needs of fishing began in earnest during the seventeenth century, with a strong Irish presence in the growing population.\textsuperscript{4} Those people who came to Newfoundland to fish faced a life of hardship, in which the poor fishermen would be constantly indebted to the wealthy merchants who sold them their equipment and supplies on credit.\textsuperscript{5} This disparity lived on long past the creation of the colony: in the census of 1891, some 767 merchants lived alongside some 53,502 fishermen, out of a total population of just 190,000.\textsuperscript{6} From the beginning, then, the majority of people of Newfoundland were quite poor, simply working to get by. This historical character of the island would in fact prove important during the war years. Only one element of life on the rock could completely eclipse the grim economic reality of life there, and that was the climate. It is perhaps difficult to imagine a land in which the weather was so unstable, so unforgiving, and so integral to the lives of those who lived and worked there.

Rain, drizzle and fog were — and remain — staples of Newfoundland weather, and these are combined with heavy snows (not always in winter), gusts of high wind, and occasional spates of warm, humid weather.\textsuperscript{7} Lying far off mainland Canada, the island rides the whims of North Atlantic weather patterns as a ship might, which, as native novelist Margaret Duley eloquently states, means “The Newfoundlander is obliged to
stay close to the elemental truths; to be a homespun creature in tune with natural things."

In other words, the harsh weather and rugged landscape greatly affect the lives of Newfoundlanders. They cannot live off the land with much success — the rocks and poor soil deny them the opportunity for any but the most modest of agricultural pursuits. Fishing the North Atlantic was, and remains, a dangerous line of work, and Newfoundlanders found that this harsh combination of land and sea conditions made life a literal struggle for survival — one in which cooperation was not merely desirable, but absolutely necessary. It is frankly difficult to articulate how pervasive this mentality was, and how fundamental it remains to the character of Newfoundlanders. In many respects, the cooperative struggle to survive against land and sea is seen as a cultural imperative by those born on the rock. Nonetheless, the experience of the Caribou Hut during the war in many respects highlights the psychology of Newfoundlanders who have grown up with these conditions, and with this expectation of who they should be.

Relative isolation was almost inevitable on the island, due to its settlement patterns. With so much of the economy governed by fishing and thus the sea, Newfoundlanders tended to settle along the coast, in fishing villages known as ‘outports’. By 1939, the only sizable settlement in the country was St. John’s, with its 47,000 people, and the city was connected to the outports up and down the coast primarily by sea. Even by the 1930s, there was only a very meager network of road and rail — the interior of the country was largely unreachable by any form of wheeled vehicle. As such, the colony’s 289,560 people rarely encountered each other on a casual basis, and trips by average fishermen and their families to visit other outports or towns were usually undertaken by boat. Such trips were almost certainly major events in the
lives of both the travelers and those hosting them, and this sort of isolation, combined with the hardship of moving from place to place, helped to generate another lasting tenet of the Newfoundlander identity: faultless generosity towards travelers and guests. Such a tenet is difficult to quantify, but it must be addressed because the Caribou Hut benefited enormously from the presence of this trait in the people of St. John's. Perhaps the easiest way to explain the cultural expectations of generosity in Newfoundland is to suggest that the people of the colony lived their lives, to some extent, by the traditional laws of the sea. In the same way it would be incumbent upon sailors to go to the aid of anyone in distress on the sea, it has become incumbent upon Newfoundlanders to do their utmost to be generous to those who come to their island. This rule is, of course, unwritten — it simply is a characteristic of the psychology of an average Newfoundlander. It is best demonstrated, perhaps, by an anecdote recorded about the years before the war by Joseph R. (Joey) Smallwood, the Newfoundlander who later campaigned to have the country join Canadian Confederation.

Joey Smallwood loved Newfoundland history, and during July of each year before the war, he and a friend would drive the rough roads around Newfoundland, visiting the outports along the coast, meeting strangers, questioning them about the history of their settlement, and occasionally purchasing antiques.\(^{15}\) It must be recalled that such vacations were not leisurely road trips on smooth highways with motels along the way: Newfoundland was very scarcely developed, and one imagines that this was therefore a tiring process. On these trips, Smallwood carried with him a canvas tent for sleeping, but as he explains in his memoirs, a complete stranger in an outport he had never before visited would always offer a room, a hot meal, and happy company when night came.\(^{16}\)
This sort of anecdote is central to the identity of Newfoundlanders, even today. While generosity is perhaps impossible to statistically prove, it really must be understood in the context of the story to follow: the thousands of servicemen passing through St. John’s were to receive the same sort of treatment that Smallwood was granted, and the Caribou Hut was destined to be one of the primary conduits through which the generosity of the people of St. John’s would flow. Indeed, the Hut owed much of its success to this unquantifiable but undeniable generosity.

A Strategic Stepping Stone

As has been alluded to, Newfoundland’s value as a strategic post came, by the 1930s, to eclipse its economic situation. Positioned as a convenient first stepping stone in the trans-Atlantic journey between Britain and her strongest allies, the country was recognized as an essential piece of territory, even before hostilities were on the horizon. In 1936, the Commission of Government began the development of a Defense Scheme for Newfoundland. Experts examined the importance of Newfoundland in its North Atlantic context, and found that several factors made the rock strategically valuable. First, the island served as a nexus for trans-Atlantic cable and wireless traffic, and no fewer than nine coastal settlements featured transmission and relay stations from across the Atlantic and to the North American continent, serving the Canadian and American governments as well as private services like Western Union. In an entirely separate matter, iron-ore was a commodity available to the island in massive amounts, thanks to the mines found on Bell Island, just a few kilometers offshore in Conception Bay. This ore was used for the majority of the production of Canada’s Dominion Coal and Steel
Corporation in Sydney, Nova Scotia — production which amounted to some thirty percent of Canada’s blast furnace capacity.\textsuperscript{20}

In more military terms, trans-Atlantic flights to Britain from North America needed to be conducted through Newfoundland, with sea planes making the trip via the port of Botwood in the years leading up to the Second World War, and with plans in place even before the eruption of the war to construct new types of land-based aircraft to make the trip from Newfoundland to Britain by 1941.\textsuperscript{21} Finally, St. John’s itself featured a well-sheltered harbour with dry docks capable of supporting ships up to 570 feet in length, and offered good shelter for 100,000 tons of shipping.\textsuperscript{22} Newfoundland occupied an important strategic place in the North Atlantic, serving as a hub for trans-Atlantic communications and transport, and providing important mineral resources as well. As the war began, these factors would draw American, British and Canadian forces to the island, and would, of course, create the needs that the Caribou Hut was founded to meet.

A Historical Blind Spot

It is perhaps the cry of every soul interested in his or her local history that professional historians do not pay it enough attention, and indeed, Newfoundlanders could argue that Canadian history has seldom treated the past experiences of their homeland with much enthusiasm. This lack of attention, however, has perhaps as much to do with the history of Newfoundland itself, as it does with any lack of present-day interest in the rock. The question that must be asked about Newfoundland history is where precisely it falls in the annals of Canadian history, as the island was independent until it joined Confederation in 1949. Canadian History from 1867 to 1948 thus has no
reason to include Newfoundland, beyond discussing how the colony (later dominion, then colony again) influenced Canadian affairs. With so much Canadian history yet to cover without even considering the province that had not yet joined Confederation, it is quite understandable that Newfoundland’s life before 1949 has been so often overlooked. Local histories of Newfoundland are often written to fill these gaps, and indeed, the famous History of Newfoundland, written by D. W. Prowse in 1895, has been regularly reprinted for readers in the province. In any case, because of Newfoundland’s position outside Canada during the war, relatively little has been written about the country’s experience during that conflict. What has been written is directed largely by the tendency to examine wartime factors in Newfoundland only as a means of tracing the origins of Newfoundland’s arrival in Confederation.

The first scholarly work to examine the Newfoundland wartime experience was David Mackenzie’s Inside the Atlantic Triangle, published in 1986. The book often invokes Canadian nationalism in its account of Newfoundland’s experience during the war, almost seeing the outcome of Confederation in 1949 as a foregone conclusion. Setting out explicitly to discuss how the Second World War moved Canada and Newfoundland closer together, thus paving the way for that union, the book comes with a message of unity and cooperation that would indeed be appropriate to the period in which it was written. Newfoundlander Peter Neary has also addressed the question of Newfoundland’s experience during the war, with his work overlapping considerably on Mackenzie’s, and developing less of a Confederation-centric bias in its discussion of the war. Indeed, Neary reacts explicitly against the tendency to see Newfoundland’s experience through the war as only a prologue to its addition to Confederation, and he
The Caribou Hut

seeks to provide a more Newfoundland-centric account of events. Neary’s efforts to tell Newfoundland’s story without undue Canadian bias are largely successful, but his work emphasizes politics, looking to the relationships between Newfoundland, Canada, Britain and the United States throughout the war, demonstrating in the process that Canada and Newfoundland were not inexorably bound together by fate. Neither book peers deeply into the relationship between the servicemen and their hosts in the country.

Aside from these monographs and their authors, only a handful of articles and theses have come to shed light on the experience of Newfoundland in the wartime years, and few deal specifically with civil-military relations. Stephen High, for instance, has examined the friendly but confused relationship between American servicemen and Newfoundlanders in “From Outport to Outport Base: The American Occupation of Stephenville, 1940-1945.” However, studies like his are not common; the point of emphasis for many of the articles covering Newfoundland during the Second World War deals more with military affairs or broader economic concerns, and less with the relationships between citizens and servicemen. Examples of this emphasis include articles like Bernard Ransom’s “Canada’s ‘Newfyjohn’ Tenancy: The Royal Canadian Navy in St. John’s, 1941-1945,” which explores the Royal Canadian Navy’s Newfoundland Escort Force beginning in 1941. Robert L. Kavanagh wrote his Master’s thesis, “W Force: The Canadian Army and the Defense of Newfoundland”, in 1995 to explore the military arrangements for the protection of St. John’s against landings, with his study largely confined to military arrangements and deployments. Little secondary history has thoroughly explored the relationship between the people of St. John’s and the servicemen in their city, and no recent works have examined the Caribou Hut itself.
The only book that exists on the subject of the Caribou Hut was, in fact, written by aforementioned novelist Margaret Duly in 1949, and was commissioned by the Association that operated the Hut as a record of its accomplishments.\textsuperscript{31} Published by Ryerson Press in Toronto, the eighty-two page book's title page rather bluntly explains the circumstances of its existence: "This book was sponsored by the St. John's War Services Association, and written in the early part of 1949, the year that Newfoundland gave up her independent status to become the tenth Province of Canada."\textsuperscript{32} This short book is essentially a primary account of the life of the Hut, and it reads more as a novel or a record of accomplishment than as a history. This is likely by intent — a book about what Newfoundlanders did to support Canadian fighting men during the war, published by a Toronto publisher in the year that Newfoundland joined Confederation could quite reasonably be understood as a book meant to help Canadians understand Newfoundland as it became part of their country. In any case, the book is not academic, and its incomplete coverage leaves much to be explored for the first time in this thesis. With the benefit of a broader perspective, the story offered here will seek to flush out the experiences of the Caribou Hut more completely, and for a new audience.

The Sources for this Story

The source material for the account that follows is largely primary, including materials that have not previously been consulted for academic purposes. Chief among these are the records of the St. John's War Services Association, a very thorough collection of memos, minutes and reports that detail the life and operations of that organization — the group behind the Caribou Hut — from its founding in 1940 through
the commission of Margaret Duley’s book in 1948. These records have been preserved in The Rooms Provincial Archives of Newfoundland, and beyond having been provided to Margaret Duley during her writing process, have seemingly gone unused since the war. Complementing these formidable resources is coverage from the Evening Telegram, one of two St. John’s newspapers during the war, and the only one to survive to the present. This paper’s coverage of the war was thorough, and much of it has been surveyed for this study, with special emphasis placed on periods of particular activity and development at the Caribou Hut. One must of course be cautious when considering the material presented in such a publication — bias is perhaps the constant companion of newspapers, with the editors able to present as truths their own perspectives on issues, if they so wish. Certainly, the Evening Telegram does reveal its editors’ intermittent disapproval of government of the day, but at the same time, as one of only two papers serving the St. John’s area, one can cautiously surmise that the biases of the Telegram’s editors would accurately reflect a considerable proportion of the perspective of the citizens of St. John’s at the time. It thus provides very useful context to set against the conclusions and assumptions made by the members of the Association’s various committees in their reports and meeting minutes.

Along with these primary resources, the Government of Canada’s published documents regarding relations with the Newfoundland’s Commission of Government and the Colonial Office in Britain have been used to add additional broad context. These Documents on Relations Between Canada and Newfoundland, Volume 1: 1935-49, are a substantial collection of edited documents that place a certain emphasis on questions of defence, civil aviation, and economic affairs, and again are very useful when set against
the records of the War Services Association. Additional primary documents have been brought forward by Peter Neary and James E. Candow, and published in the journal *Newfoundland Studies*. These reports, drawn from United States Army files, include medical assessments of the city of St. John’s and the island of Newfoundland, and help set the stage for one of the Hut’s more interesting challenges: meeting health and safety standards. Along with these, the manuscript of a Red Cross nurse, Mona Wilson, has also been edited by Douglas Baldwin and Gillian Poulter and brought forward in *Newfoundland Studies*, offering brief, additional insight into the Hut’s early operation. Primary materials are therefore at the core of this thesis. However, for this story to be properly understood, additional context is necessary.

The secondary works already mentioned in the discussion of Newfoundland’s Second World War play a definite role in establishing the context for this account. Beyond those, a number of resources which address the relationships between civilians and servicemen in the North Atlantic theatre during the war have proved most helpful. The temptation to cast a wide net, and to compare Newfoundland to Britain or even to mainland Canada has been avoided, as the circumstances in these larger, more populous and wealthier countries are simply too far removed from those in St. John’s. As such, Jeffrey Keshen’s *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada’s Second World War*, a recent work on the home front experience in Canada, is consulted only briefly. Instead, other port cities on the North Atlantic are used for comparison, and secondary studies of the wartime experience of these places are relied upon. Perhaps chief among these is Roger Sarty’s and Brian Tennyson’s *Guardian of the Gulf: Sydney, Cape Breton, and the Atlantic Wars*, which follows the small port of Sydney, Nova Scotia, as it becomes a
significant operations base for convoys and convoy protection during both world wars. The relationships between servicemen deployed to Sydney and the people of Sydney play a significant role in this narrative, and thus it provides some base of comparison for the situation in St. John’s. A report by Keith Jeffrey examines the experience of Royal Canadian Naval sailors in Derry, in Ireland, on the opposite end of their usual ‘Newfy to Derry’ escort run, and considers the relationship there between the servicemen and the local population. A Master’s thesis by James White on “The Ajax Affair” explores the relationship between Royal Canadian Navy sailors and the population of Halifax, Nova Scotia, during the war. Both these studies help offer some context for the relations between military personnel and host populations in the North Atlantic theatre, and as will be seen, provide a marked contrast to the Newfoundland experience.

Broader studies of military events in the Second World War have been, of course, most useful in establishing the context for the Hut’s operation. The United States Army’s special study, *Military Relations Between the United States and Canada, 1939-1945*, by Stanley Dzuiban, offers excellent help in this area. Of perhaps even greater importance, the recently-published operational histories of the Canadian Navy during the Second World War, *No Higher Purpose* and *A Blue Water Navy*, offer additional information on what naval forces were passing through St. John’s harbour, and indeed, what sorts of experiences the men of these forces faced both at sea and on shore. In addition to the latter two books, a report drafted by historian Robert Caldwell in preparation for writing those operational histories offers deeper insights into the morale of Canadian sailors during the war, and explores the needs these men had when they were away from their ships. All of these materials, and several that have yet to be mentioned, find certain use in
the pages to come. Now it is time to begin with the story of St. John’s and the Second World War — the moments before the birth of the St. John’s War Services Association, and the Caribou Hut.
CHAPTER ONE

Before There Was Need

Phoney Wars

The Second World War has come to cast such a large shadow over the twentieth century that it is often difficult, in hindsight, to recognize that the citizens watching the war clouds form did not necessarily realize how desperate the conflict would become. Over the winter of 1939-1940, Britain and France remained reluctant adversaries of Hitler’s Germany, and hostilities had slowed considerably. The resulting “Phoney War” was marked by examples of the Allied unwillingness to fight, such as a British bomber raid failing to attack a docked German battleship, for fear of harming civilians nearby.\(^1\)

By April, Germany was on the move again, but this time its interest lay in the Scandinavian countries, not in France. Actions were fought off the coast of Norway between the Royal Navy and the German invasion forces, but these were not operations central to the survival of either side, merely costly sideshows that did serve to wound the Royal Navy considerably.\(^2\)

The main event was to follow: in May, the invasion of France began through the Ardennes, an undefended (and supposedly impassable) stretch of terrain, that allowed German Panzers to flank the famous Maginot Line, and ultimately, to divide and isolate the British and French defenders.\(^3\)

The fall of France took just weeks, and was a disaster that could hardly have been imagined in the fall months of 1939 and the early months of 1940. Both Britain and France had believed that, as in the First World War, the second encounter between the Allies and Germany would be settled on French soil, in pitched battles between infantry,
armor, and aircraft. The thought that the British Expeditionary Force could be driven into the sea was hardly entertained until the men of General Gort’s ten British divisions were forced into their defensive pocket at Dunkirk, and were evacuated in what has perhaps rightly been called ‘miraculous’ fashion.\textsuperscript{4} These attitudes in Europe might appear disconnected from the story of Newfoundland, but it is important to recognize that the same expectations that were held in the home islands of the Empire were shared by those living in St. John’s — France was not expected to fall.\textsuperscript{5} The loss of that ally, and the opening of the French sea coast for enemy raiders was an inconceivable threat as hostilities began, and so Newfoundlanders went to war with different, far more economic concerns.

**Before the Storm**

As the people of St. John’s read about the outbreak of hostilities in the *Evening Telegram*, they did so with a calm that came from distance; they were far across the North Atlantic, and thus the epic struggle was not on their doorstep. Though Newfoundlanders were indeed determined to rally to the Imperial colours, and to commit their young men to Britain’s aid, they were also conscious of the economic benefits that war could bring — particularly, the steady pay that military service could offer. According to statistics published in the *Evening Telegram*, the fall months of 1938 had seen between 21,205 and 48,326 people on relief, due to the ravages of the Depression.\textsuperscript{6} Remembering that Newfoundland’s population at this time was approximately 290,000, and that St. John’s itself held 47,000 of those people, those statistics are placed into sharp relief; at the worst times, at least fifteen percent of the male population was reported as
being in need of work, with a certain possibility that there were more, unrecorded people in need. The Commission of Government of Newfoundland was keenly aware of this, and as it activated the defence plan it had prepared in 1936, it was clearly seeing an opportunity to get some of those unemployed men to work. The government’s first efforts centered around the recruitment of its own Defense Force, a unit of 400 men who would be detailed to the protection of St. John’s and Bell Island (home of the valuable iron mines). Importantly, the $275,000 required to create and operate this unit were to be paid not out of the Newfoundland treasury, but out of Britain’s war coffers. In immediate economic terms, then, 400 jobs had been created at no cost to the government of Newfoundland. Further opportunities for Newfoundlanders to gain payment of course abounded.

Newfoundland was, in fact, one of the first colonies asked to provide troops to Britain, with the Royal Navy asking for 625 men from the “oldest colony” to join the fleet. This quota was quickly met, and even while recruitment for it was ongoing, a Newfoundland Forestry Unit was established, destined to help harvest timber in England and Scotland for the war effort. A Newfoundland Artillery unit was created next, numbering 1,275 men and promising to be an autonomous fighting force as the Royal Newfoundland Regiment had been in the Great War. Recruiting for these units was both speedy and efficient, and the Telegram repeatedly ran editorials reflecting on the obligation of Newfoundlanders to rally to Britain’s aid, citing patriotism and duty as well as the practical need to defend Newfoundland itself from potential attack. Much more significant to the story of the Caribou Hut, though, is the economic preoccupation that seemed to exist as a quiet undertone during all of these recruiting efforts: as important as
duty and patriotism were, every posting for a new unit clearly declared the pay available for those who joined. The pay rate for the Forestry Unit, for instance, was $2.00 per day, and this fact was very noticeably displayed in every recruitment advertisement, along with a notice that one half of this salary would automatically be sent home to the families of the men enlisted. It would be going too far to suggest that this mention of pay allotments indicates that Newfoundlanders cared only about the money they could earn with the war, but at the same time it would seem naïve to suggest that the promise of regular work and pay in no way contributed to the quick filling of the units that were established in a Depression-ravaged colony.

The Newfoundland Commission of Government also attempted to draw funds from as many out-of-country sources as it could manage. When attempting to establish air patrols over the coast and also to begin trans-Atlantic flights, the government requested permission from the Dominions Secretary in Britain to turn the air bases on the Avalon Peninsula and at Botwood over to Royal Canadian Air Force control. The reason for this request was not subtle: operating that base was to cost the Commission of Government $180,000 a year, but if it was turned over to the control of the RCAF, the bill would be sent to Ottawa instead of St. John’s. The Dominion Secretary was unsympathetic at that point in the war, and refused permission for the turnover: “we appreciate advantage of a saving in maintenance costs but... feel that disadvantages of relinquishing control far outweigh advantage of this saving....” There would, of course, be a great deal more money entering the Newfoundland economy over the months and years that followed this request, and the Commission of Government welcomed it, but as will be soon seen, the government also remained frugal with its own limited treasury
throughout the war. This was not a unique reaction: as money and resources started entering the rock’s economy, the memories of the Depression tightened the purse strings of the average Newfoundlander.

During September of 1939, the Telegram printed several pieces that spoke out strongly against hoarding of supplies, pointing out that it would be damaging to the economy of the country. A tendency to stockpile supplies and funds after a Depression would of course be understandable, but in raw economic terms, it would tie up many of the new dollars entering the colony in the pantries and savings of common Newfoundlanders. Later that month, the Commission of Government passed laws limiting foreign currency exchange, determined to keep the money that was coming to the rock from going right back out. Shortly thereafter, the St. John’s City Council established a policy against price markups by retailers, to attempt to control any gouging that might come with the increased flow of cash in the city. At every level, then, Newfoundland’s leadership was doing its utmost to bring money into the colony’s economy, and to keep it circulating there. The people of Newfoundland, though, seemed inclined to use their new-found funds to purchase useful supplies, and to stockpile in case the wartime windfall was short and the ravages of the Depression returned. This is the mentality that the members of the St. John’s War Services Committee faced as they began considering how they could do their part for the mounting war effort in the later months of 1940. With limited money forthcoming from the Commission of Government, and with Newfoundlanders understandably seeking to secure their own finances while the money was good, the Caribou Hut faced a difficult start.
Greater Efforts

The fall of France in June of 1940 changed the war, both for the people of Newfoundland and for the wider world. After seeing one of the great Allied nations collapse with such ease before the German onslaught, the casual approach to the conflict that was widespread during the Phoney War had to be abandoned, and Britain had to prepare itself for possible invasion.¹⁹ As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill promised that the Battle of Britain was beginning, observers everywhere had to question whether the English Channel could truly stop Hitler’s seemingly unending onslaught, and concern was expressed in the *Evening Telegram* that the home country could indeed fall.²⁰ This concern was, of course, hardly limited to Newfoundland — the people of Britain were themselves unsure of whether they would be able to resist invasion, and provisions were made to move the British government to Ottawa in case the isles were taken.²¹ The surviving ships of the Royal Navy would, in the case of defeat, be moved overseas to Halifax, where they would continue the resistance, and hopefully draw the Americans into war against Germany.²² If Britain were to fall, then, Canada would become the chief obstacle to Hitler’s ambitions, and Newfoundland would become the front line for its continent.²³

As the eastern-most landmass in North America, Newfoundland was the logical first point for any German aggression to be directed against the continent, and as such, the Canadian Government began increasing its military commitments to the island over the summer of 1940. In June of 1940, Lieutenant Colonel K. G. Blackader and his regiment, the Black Watch (Royal Highlanders of Canada) were dispatched to Newfoundland to defend the airport at Gander and the sea plane base at Botwood.²⁴ More
commitments were quickly made, and by October the Canadian Army formation for the
defence of Newfoundland, W Force, officially established under the orders of Brigadier
Philip Earnshaw. Establishing his headquarters in St. John’s, Earnshaw took overall
command of both Canadian Army units and the Newfoundland militia, and by November,
his establishment in the country was expanding rapidly. December saw a full battalion
of Canadian infantry — some 775 men of the Victoria Rifles — moved into St. John’s,
Basing itself at newly-constructed barracks at the northwest edge of the city. Additional
artillery and engineering units were also bound for St. John’s, to strengthen the city’s
defences against sea attack in 1941. The Canadian Army was thus taking seriously the
defence of its potential front line against the Germans, and as this was going on, other
armed forces were taking interest in Newfoundland.

In September of 1940, Great Britain and the United States signed an agreement
which came to be known colloquially as the ‘Destroyers for Bases Deal’, wherein fifty
American destroyers of First World War vintage would be handed over to the Allies for
convoy duty. The price for these destroyers was frankly quite self-serving for the British
and the Americans alike: the United States would be leased or gifted territory in
numerous British colonies, on which they could build bases that would unofficially
contribute to the defence of those British possessions. It should be no surprise that
Newfoundland was one of the colonies selected for this deal, and indeed, the United
States was granted permission to build a strong military presence on the island — more
than a year before they entered the war. When news of this deal broke, commentary in
the Evening Telegram expressed great satisfaction at President Roosevelt’s decisions to
become more involved in the war, cheering it as “further proof of cooperation between
the two democracies.” The potential security benefits of having American forces in place in the country seemed a secondary, but nonetheless important benefit, and the editors were both glad of the deal, and certain that American investments would help improve the economic and defensive situation in Newfoundland.

Through the fall months of 1940, then, the people of Newfoundland were witnessing a massive increase in the military presence on their rock, and the city of St. John’s was a centre of much of this expansion. The arrival of Canadian soldiers, and the promise of more fighting men from both Canada and the United States promised to change the dynamics in the capital, and would undoubtedly create demands for services that were not yet provided. Something would have to be done to meet these demands, but the question of who would take on this responsibility remained. The Commission of Government was no more liberal with its funds than were the average citizens of Newfoundland. Nevertheless, something had to be done: when Lieutenant Colonel Blackader arrived in the colony, one of his first questions to a representative of the Commission was what YMCA services would be available to his men. There was a growing need for a hostel that could accommodate and entertain servicemen.

Meeting Needs Elsewhere on the Atlantic

When considering Colonel Blackader’s concerns about the availability of a hostel and recreational services for his men, it is useful to examine what sorts of such support would have been available to his Black Watch had the unit been deployed within Canada. St. John’s was, of course, by no means the only North Atlantic port that faced imminent danger with the fall of France: in Nova Scotia, Halifax and Sydney were both destined to
see massive increases in merchant and naval traffic, and could expect a corresponding increase in enemy interest because of it. This was a fact that was clearly known to the citizens of both of these places — a reality with which they were familiar because it was the role they in fact played during the First World War. While the first troops were being dispatched to Newfoundland, then, Canadian troops were also on their way to Sydney, and the Canadian forces’ bases at Halifax were being seriously reinforced, to deal with the prospect of a hostile-controlled North Atlantic. As Newfoundland would have to deal with an influx of servicemen, these two ports would have to as well. However, a number of important differences between the Nova Scotian experience and that on the rock must be appreciated in order to contextualize the work of the people of St. John’s who established the Caribou Hut.

When Halifax and Sydney began preparations to offer hostels and recreation for servicemen, they knew what to expect. In Halifax in particular, plans were struck in the fall of 1940 to begin construction and establishment of hostels for servicemen, based on those services that the port had offered during the First World War. Established Canadian philanthropic organizations, declared the country’s official military auxiliaries and receiving funding from Ottawa, could turn to the plans left by a previous generation and the experience of their own personnel to prepare Halifax for an influx of servicemen. This experience was not limited to just the leaders and operators of philanthropic organizations, but also extended to the governments in the province. The city of Halifax, the province of Nova Scotia and even the Government of Canada were aware of the need to provide recreation and accommodation for the fighting men who would be frequenting Canada’s largest military installation in the east, and so funding
was made available to organizations who could be relied upon to offer these services. The Red Cross, for instance, was put in charge of a fund of $100,000 that it could distribute to groups within Halifax as needed, to facilitate the construction of new buildings and the establishment of new services.\textsuperscript{38} The YMCA was granted $70,000 for construction of new hostels in Halifax, the Salvation Army was given $20,000, and other organizations, some of them local to the Halifax area, could find similar monies supplied to them.\textsuperscript{39} Taking advantage of these funds, various groups in Halifax set about rapid construction of hostels, to meet a need they knew was on its way.

In Sydney, resources were not so liberally applied, and improvisation seemed much more in order. Local hostels were established by groups close to the community, without excessive funding from on high, but again with the benefit of the First World War's experience.\textsuperscript{40} The need to provide accommodation and entertainment in Sydney during the early months, though, was less; the soldiers protecting this port at first were the local Cape Breton Highlanders.\textsuperscript{41} One can suppose that, because this unit was made up of men from the area, entertainment on a weekend pass could be found by simply going home. The demand for specialized hostels and recreation services in the port would become more important as the war intensified further, when servicemen from elsewhere in Canada arrived. The deployment of Royal Canadian Air Force units, and eventually other infantry and coastal artillery units to the area inevitably increased the need for hostels in Sydney, but in the beginning this port perhaps had an easier time dealing with the challenge of occupying its servicemen.\textsuperscript{42}

The quality of the services offered in both Nova Scotian ports, and the different demands placed on each of them, will be considered later, but for the moment it remains
important to highlight the factors that led to the creation of their recreation and accommodation facilities. Both Halifax and Sydney benefited first and foremost from a previous war’s experience. While Newfoundland in the First World War had hosted no significant numbers of fighting men, Halifax and Sydney had both served as military bases and convoy ports in that Great War. Knowing what to expect, governments at all levels were prepared and able to provide considerable funds to establish services for the fighting men who would move into each of these towns. Moreover, these funds could be harnessed by Canada’s official, pre-established philanthropic societies and used by members who were capable of mobilizing resources to get projects underway. Such advantages did not exist in Newfoundland. There was no experience, no funding, and no single philanthropic organization with the ability to take on the duty of establishing a hostel for servicemen. The colony simply was not prepared for the massive influx of servicemen that was bound for it. Despite that rather dire set of preconditions, though, the Newfoundlanders quickly rallied to the challenge of hosting their military guests, and in St. John’s, they would rapidly outperform their Nova Scotian neighbours.

The Caribou Hut

The beginning of the Caribou Hut did not come with a government initiative, with special funding or a particular plan. The need for some sort of support for the incoming Canadian fighting men was unmistakable, and the editors of the Telegram expressed concerns that the reputation of Newfoundlanders as being hospitable hosts would have to be upheld. How to provide the specific sort of hospitality required by men of the armed forces, though, was something of a mystery to the various, small philanthropic
organizations on the rock. Though they were made up of worldly men and women, many with business and leadership backgrounds, these organizations had never attempted to establish hostels for fighting men during wartime, and thus were entirely unfamiliar with the needs of such organizations. The Canadian Legion War Services branch could offer them this information, and on the night of 2 October, 1940, a representative of that organization called a meeting at the Canadian Club in St. John’s to discuss the needs with the people of the city. Representatives from all of the city’s philanthropic organizations attended — the Rotary Club, the Kinsmen, the Knights of Columbus and the Great War Veterans Association to name a few. Addressing these representatives was Captain Peters of the Legion War Services department, and his initial concerns were simple: at a minimum, billets needed to be found in private homes for when soldiers stationed at the St. John’s Airport were on weekend passes, and an overnight hostel for men of all services needed to be considered.

The Newfoundlanders attending this meeting considered these needs to be urgent, and the assembled group immediately called for the organization of a committee to “wait upon” the government, in order to acquire part of the King George V building near the city’s waterfront (built by the Grenfell Association as a recreational centre, but then partially on lease to the Commission of Government for its Department of Public Health and Welfare Offices) for room to establish the hostel. The representative of the Newfoundland Patriotic Association, one D. R. Thistle, nominated the Reverend Canon Howitt to spearhead this effort, and upon the selection of a name for the group — the St. John’s War Services Committee — work began immediately. In that first meeting of one hour and thirty-five minutes, Newfoundland’s capital had gone from having none but
a few scattered available services for visiting military personnel, to having a committee
determined to establish “a hut... with sleeping accommodation for fifty men,” and with a
plan to do so.\textsuperscript{52} Within weeks, the government had expressed interest in the idea of
establishing a ‘hut’ for servicemen near the harbour — the likely focal point for many
military personnel passing through by ship — but certain conditions were attached.
Essentially, the Commission of Government was willing to turn several sections of the
King George V building over to the committee, and to continue to pay for the lease and
the utilities for that space, but only if the citizens could demonstrate that the Hut would
be financially viable.\textsuperscript{53} As has been discussed, then, a certain economic conservatism was
at work in Commission of Government as it examined the committee’s proposal.

In order to guarantee that the hut, once established, could afford to operate itself,
the committee turned to the various philanthropic and patriotic organizations that had
been represented in the initial meeting on this matter. By the beginning of November,
each group had begun fundraising among its membership, and pledges of money towards
the operation of the hut were being made.\textsuperscript{54} More important than that up-front finance,
though, would be a convincing budget that indicated the hut, located in the King George
V building, could indeed pay for itself, without turning to the government for
subsidization. Fortunately, the structure to be utilized was indeed well-suited to hosting
servicemen, and it had a clear potential for bringing in enough revenue to meet its
operational needs. Built for the Sir William Grenfell Association, the King George V
building included novelties such as a swimming pool and a bowling alley, and these
attractions were in the sections of the building over which the committee sought to take
control.\textsuperscript{55} In addition to these, beds for overnight guests, food from a canteen, and social
events like dances were all suggested as means of bringing in funds.\textsuperscript{56} Charging fighting men at cost for their food and board, and fair fees for other services, the Hut would recover its estimated $3,000 a year operating expenses, and servicemen passing through St. John's would be able to enjoy certain entertainments and comforts of home at an affordable price.\textsuperscript{57} Satisfied with this proposal, the Commission of Government granted the committee control of the desired sections of the King George V building, and agreed to pay up to $5,000 for the renovations of the space. Unsurprisingly, the government refused to grant the money directly to the committee — it would pay the bills for the renovations, but would retain oversight of the expenses.\textsuperscript{58}

Turning the allotted space in the King George V building into a usable hostel was not easy. Though the architectural plans for the building before and after its conversion do not exist, the challenges reported by the committee are considerable. Cleaning and painting of the allotted space on the building's ground floor and in its basement were the first requirement, after which rooms needed to be either expanded or partitioned, a canteen with kitchen needed to be installed, and bedrooms divided to provide sufficient space for the initial thirty-eight beds that could be accommodated.\textsuperscript{59} The first estimates for this work put the total expense at just over $4,800 — the committee was using up all the available slack granted to it by the government.\textsuperscript{60} In addition to establishing the space that would house the hostel, the committee next began investigating the necessary staffing commitments. None of the Newfoundlanders involved had any experience in running a hostel, nor had they any concept of what other services should be offered in one, beyond the more obvious suggestions of beds and food, and facilities that were already in the King George V building.\textsuperscript{61} A professional would be needed to manage the hostel, and as
such, the committee made requests of organizations far more experienced in that line of work. First the Canadian Legion was consulted, but no agreement could be reached with that department. The committee thus turned to the YMCA, and with that Association reached an agreement to have an experienced manager sent to Newfoundland, to be paid by the committee to operate the hostel. Things were beginning to take shape; a building had been secured, renovations begun, and management hired. Before any of this work was completely finished, though, the committee decided it was necessary to open its hostel for business.

The first mention of the “Caribou Hut” in any of the minutes of the committee’s meetings comes in a statement that it opened on 23 December 1940, and that with its temporary volunteer staff, it was operating smoothly, if at limited capacity. In the weeks prior, when the committee had reached a hasty decision to open their hostel in time to offer Christmas accommodation for some of the Victoria Rifles stationed around St. John’s, the building was still known only as ‘the hut’. The lack of a formal discussion by the committee about what to call the hut is intriguing — “Caribou” seemed to simply be selected, with no indication as to why it was appropriate. Margaret Duley sought to shed some light on this name choice in her book on the Hut: “The Caribou was the chosen emblem for the Newfoundland Regiment from 1914-1918… the Caribou Monument… stands in Bowring Park… so it was fitting to preserve the tradition….” The naming of the hostel may seem only an anecdotal concern, but given the significance that came to be attached to the Caribou Hut, the fact that its committee hastened through the naming process seems indicative of how urgent they felt the need for their establishment was. There is no evidence in either the records of the committee or in the
Telegram of public consultation or a complex selection process, as one might find today; the name, it seems, was selected quickly so that the process of getting the Hut open, and making its services available to servicemen, could be expedited.

On 3 January 1941, the St. John’s War Services Committee incorporated to form the St. John’s War Services Association, with its office of record being located at the Caribou Hut. From this point forward, the operations of the Hut could be deemed official. Day-to-day affairs were handled by the management team within the building, with a paid staff that would eventually number thirty-seven, including among others a janitor, a housekeeper, a canteen operator, and a manager for the bowling alley. Additional volunteer staff, often young women, would be assembled to assist in the running of the canteen as needed, and by 1943 would peak at some 350 people. The Association itself operated as a business, serving as a particularly hands-on board of directors, with subcommittees overseeing specific aspects of the Hut’s operation, such as the canteen, entertainment and dances. As might be apparent by the eventual numbers of paid and volunteer staff, the Association’s modest expectations about operating requirements and demand for services would quickly be proven quite wrong — the Caribou Hut would begin hosting far more than the dozens or perhaps hundreds of men expected.
CHAPTER TWO

The Only Game In Town

An Intensifying War Effort

With the end of the Battle of Britain having given the Allies some breathing room, a new and serious problem emerged in the Atlantic in 1941: the German U-Boats. As Britain was supplied primarily by sea, the beginning of an unrestricted submarine offensive against Allied merchant traffic was not only serious, but potentially devastating to the war effort. If Britain could not be defeated by the air, perhaps she could be starved by sea.¹ Much of the activity of the war in 1941 was thus dedicated towards defeating this threat in general, and towards protecting convoys of merchant ships in particular.² For this sort of work, the island of Newfoundland was ideally placed, and St. John’s harbour seemed perfectly designed. Estimates made in January of 1941 suggested that as much as 100,000 tons of shipping could be expected to be in the port of St. John’s on any given day during the year to come.³ Defending these ships, first in port and then on their trans-Atlantic cruises, would be of the utmost importance to the success of the war effort, and to allowing Britain to remain in the conflict.⁴ The clash that resulted — the famous Battle of the Atlantic — has been well treated in the histories of the Second World War, though the effect this mighty clash had on the island of Newfoundland has been less well understood.

Positioned so far out into the ocean, Newfoundland was almost in the midst of the Battle of the Atlantic from its outset. Recognizing the risks that this close proximity could bring, the early months of 1941 saw both Canadian and American forces beginning
to move in artillery units to secure the island’s capital and parts of its coastline against air and sea assault. As construction of the American bases was slated to begin in January of 1941, a contingent of American troops — 58 officers and 919 men — arrived in St. John’s under Colonel Welty, and were soon joined by two batteries of artillery, one for harbour defence and the other for anti-aircraft work. The barracks for these men could not be built until June due to poor cooperation from the weather, so these men lived aboard their ship, the Edmund B. Alexander, for their first five months of their stay in St. John’s. Officially tasked with protecting the American installation at Fort Pepperrell (in St. John’s), these American forces were effectively part of the island’s defence against invasion, and even more were tasked to this duty before the barracks were built. In April of 1941, an additional battery of 8-inch guns and a mixed squadron of Army bombers were dispatched to the island — a total contingent of 646 men. The Americans were taking the defensive arrangements in Newfoundland quite seriously, both in the St. John’s area and outside it. As their commitment to this defence increased, so did the numbers of servicemen in the colony’s capital.

While the United States increased its military deployments in Newfoundland, the Canadian government sought to keep pace. As David Mackenzie suggests in his North Atlantic Triangle, the increases in Canadian Army presence in Newfoundland during 1941 likely had as much to do with offsetting American influence in the colony as it did with actual defence. In seeking to bring Newfoundland closer to Canada — and potentially, into Canada after the war — the Canadians had to make certain their commitment to the island’s safety was as visible as the United States efforts. In the St. John’s area, 1 Group of the Royal Canadian Air Force took over operations at the Torbay
Airport, thus taking charge of air defence in the area, and bringing in even more servicemen who would be regular patrons of the services in the capital. Throughout the year, additional artillery units moved onto the island, bringing between 100 and 150 men with each of them, and again increasing the number of men who would become regulars in the colony's capital. By the end of 1941, the Canadian Army had some 3,975 men in Newfoundland, making that single service responsible for a population increase of over one-and-a-half percent in the country. It must be said, though, that the largest, and most unstable contribution of servicemen to the island — and particularly to St. John's — came from the Royal Canadian Navy.

As the Battle of the Atlantic raged, the Royal Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy worked desperately to protect convoys, and beginning in May of 1941, St. John's became a major operational base for this effort. In that month, the destroyers Chambly, Orillia, Cobalt, Collingwood, Wetaskawin, Agassiz and Alberni were posted to St. John's, from where they would operate in protection of convoys. This was the beginning of what would become the Newfoundland Escort Force (NEF), a Canadian-operated naval formation headquartered in St. John's, whose duty it was to protect convoys on the Atlantic crossing. Commodore W. L. Murray, the NEF's commanding officer, arrived in the city in May, and took over operations immediately, his command including both British and Canadian vessels. By the beginning of June, his force had officially been established at thirty destroyers, twenty-four corvettes, and nine sloops, of which government planners expected seven destroyers, seven corvettes and two sloops would be in St. John's harbour at any given time. While the Newfoundland Escort Force was worked to exhaustion, and the number of its ships regularly in port undoubtedly
fluctuated greatly depending on the military situation of a given month, the presence of such a large naval unit in the region increased the number of servicemen frequenting St. John's by another order of magnitude.\textsuperscript{19} While ship complements vary by class, available personnel and casualties, a consultation of \textit{Jane's Fighting Ships} suggests that each destroyer could carry upwards of 200 men, each sloop as many as 150, and each corvette between sixty and eight-five.\textsuperscript{20} The presence of these sailors, along with the soldiers and the airmen already based in the St. John's area, certainly placed new demands on local services and the economy. The year of 1941 was destined to be one of massive expansion on the part of the Caribou Hut.

\textbf{Growing Demand}

Even while the opening of a hostel for servicemen in St. John's was being discussed by the War Services Committee, a need was rapidly growing for the types of services the Caribou Hut would ultimately offer. As has been mentioned, the Hut opened when its facilities were only partially complete, and with a volunteer staff, on 23 December 1940. This opening was in response to a stated need for beds for men in St. John's over the holidays, though the specific nature of those needs is not mentioned in the minutes of the meeting where the decision was taken.\textsuperscript{21} It is not difficult, of course, to speculate about the wishes of men facing their first Christmas away from home during wartime, so the Hut's quick opening was undoubtedly quite welcome. As 1941 arrived, the demand continued to increase for the Hut's services, and the startling increase is borne out in the numbers of patrons seen in the hostel over the months that followed.
When the Hut opened before Christmas, its unfinished rooms could not provide adequate sleeping accommodation — there were always more men than available beds.\textsuperscript{22} By 18 February, the Hut was able to offer thirty-eight beds in sixteen rooms, thanks to improvisation and pleading that will soon be discussed.\textsuperscript{23} The escalation in demand was not only for beds, but also for the other services offered in the hostel. On 15 February, a report provided to the committee stated that some 250 men were coming to the Caribou Hut’s canteen on a daily basis, with another 500 men coming to the Hut to make use of its reading, writing, and card playing rooms, or its pool or its bowling alleys.\textsuperscript{24} In total, then, the men of the local militaries were making some 5,250 visits to the Hut in any given week in February, and as word was spreading of the many facilities available, the attendance was bound only to increase. The numbers bear this out: 7,000 purchases were made at the Hut’s canteen in February, against some 9,770 reported in the month of April, 11,216 in May, 19,564 in June, 22,770 in July, and 30,673 in August.\textsuperscript{25} There was clearly no shortage of demand for the food offered by the Hut, and given the increased patronage, the committee elected to provide warm meals at the canteen beginning in late February. The arrangements were highly improvised, as the canteen kitchen had to be adapted to the purpose of cooking, but in order to meet the demand there was no immediate alternative.\textsuperscript{26}

As meals became increasingly desirable, beds did as well, and the War Services Association immediately brought this reality to the attention of the Commission of Government. April had seen 435 men boarding in the Hut, and that number had increased to 600 by the end of May: less than five months after the hasty opening, demand was exceeding the physical space that the Hut had been allotted in the King George V
The Caribou Hut

building. If more men were to be accommodated, more space would be needed. The Commission of Government was informed, and acknowledging the importance of the services the Hut was offering, the government gave a week’s notice and evicted tenants from the upper floors of the building, including the YWCA in May. Moving again with the urgency that had marked the opening of the Hut, the Association quickly assembled a plan that would make use of the new space, expanding the number of beds available from thirty-eight to 350 and providing room for a full-service kitchen to augment the canteen’s production of food. This ten-fold increase would, of course, create new logistical problems for the Hut, and these will be shortly addressed. What remains crucial, though, is that the demand for these beds was sharp. Every weekend, it seemed as though men from the local armed forces who were granted weekend passes, raced to the Hut to attempt to secure quarters for their days away from their barracks.

As soon as the new beds were installed, these men filled them; in the second week of June, mid-way through the expansion process, ninety-three beds were available, and they were all filled. The total numbers of lodgers thus jumped from the 600 seen in May to 2,575 in June, 2,693 in July, and 3,485 in August. The demand continued to escalate into September, when delays in construction and the acquisition of supplies meant that the Hut had only 182 beds available on its upper floors. At this point, demand was still far exceeding the Hut’s abilities, despite its breakneck expansion, so Canadian associations stepped in to provide additional hostels. In July, Captain Peters of the Legion War Services department was able to secure funding for two 350-bed Canadian hostels, one run by the YMCA and the other by the Knights of Columbus. These would be built and operational around Christmas, but importantly, it was agreed from the outset that
they would work under the models set by the Caribou Hut, and that they would cooperate
with the Newfoundland-run hostel to provide the best and most consistent possible
service to the servicemen.35

As 1941 came to a close, the demand for beds and recreational services in St.
John’s was close to being met, with the promise of two large Canadian funded and
operated hostels working in conjunction with the Caribou Hut. Importantly, though, the
Hut remained the only Newfoundland-run hostel, and neither the YMCA’s Red Triangle
Hut nor the Knights of Columbus Hostel offered the wide variety of entertainments that
the Hut could boast — neither had the facilities for swimming or bowling.36 As the
Caribou Hut made 300 beds available in the first days of 1942, it remained the destination
of choice for servicemen in St. John’s, and demand was not destined to diminish in the
foreseeable future.37

Expansion and Improvisation

Having established that the need for beds and services escalated at a severe rate
over the course of 1941, it seems important to discuss precisely how the St. John’s War
Services Association managed to continue expanding and improving its services, in the
face of a still tight-pursed government and general population. Accomplishing this
expansion was no mean feat from a financial point of view: from expectations of an
annual operating budget of $3,000, the Hut’s basic expenses rose to $51,858.50 for the
year — the latter number not accounting for the cost of the mundane but absolutely
necessary items like bed sheets, or services like laundry.38 While these sorts of items and
services could be handled relatively effectively by motivated volunteers when the Hut
had fewer than twenty beds, the rapid increase in patrons quickly overwhelmed the pre-existing improvised laundry arrangements.\textsuperscript{39} New challenges were clearly created as the Hut's business increased, but it must be said at that same time that its income did increase during the same period. In terms of basic operating expenses the Hut's annual income of $51,809.98 left a deficit of only $48.52, thanks to the at-cost fees charged for meals and beds, and the slight profits from entertainments such as bowling.\textsuperscript{40} When the members of the St. John's War Services Committee had promised the government that the Caribou Hut could indeed pay for most of its own operating costs, they had not been overly ambitious.\textsuperscript{41} Nevertheless, setting prices that granted servicemen their accommodations and recreation at reasonable rates did leave a great deficit in the maintenance and upkeep budgets. As such, the operators of the Hut became masters of inspired improvisation, and at finding help wherever it might be located.

The first and most obvious challenge the Hut faced as its numbers of beds continued to increase was quite simple: it needed more beds. Absurd as that statement might seem, finding sufficient beds to fill the space allotted to the Hut was not a simple matter. The Government provided a certain number initially, but these were all single-level beds — not bunk beds that would make the most use of the available space.\textsuperscript{42} The members of the Association thus went to work, seeking out contacts and securing bunk beds first from the Red Cross, and then striking a deal with the Canadian Army to take 180 additional beds on loan.\textsuperscript{43} With beds, however, came a need for mattresses, pillows and blankets, and these were to come from a wide array of sources. The Canadian Army loaned the Hut 153 mattresses, 100 pillows and 857 blankets, and once the United States Army arrived on site, the Association was able to secure eighty additional mattresses.
apparently under the lend-lease program, from the Americans.\textsuperscript{44} In concert with what the Government could supply, these loaned beds and mattresses were able to fill the Hut, but of course, men could not sleep through cold Newfoundland nights under blankets on bare mattresses. The greatest need the Caribou Hut would face in 1941 was one that can be so easily be taken for granted: bed sheets.

Every time a new man took up a room in the Caribou Hut, his bed needed to be made with fresh sheets. While the housekeeping staff in the Hut was soon worked to the limit in meeting this need (a staffing concern that will be addressed when it reached its worst in the context of 1942), simply finding a supply of sheets was a fantastic challenge in itself.\textsuperscript{45} Between the Red Cross and lend-lease from the United States Army, the Association was able to secure some 1,300 sets of sheets, but because laundry could not reliably be done on short notice, this was a potentially insufficient supply.\textsuperscript{46} The Association turned to the community for additional supplies, but it was in fact Commodore Murray of the Newfoundland Escort Force, and his wife, who took on the cause of the bedclothes, purchasing and donating 120 sheets, and then convincing Canadian companies to donate hundreds more.\textsuperscript{47} Though these hundreds of sheets did not end the Association’s search for additional sources — having stockpiles of sheets on hand seemed to be the Association’s desire — they did manage to meet the immediate needs of the Hut, and many thanks were paid to the Murrays.\textsuperscript{48}

Much of the operation of the Caribou Hut was as creatively managed as was the bedding situation. A need would be discovered, and it would be met by whatever means were available. If furniture needed repair, the Association would contact the local troop of boy scouts or the militia to see if it could be repaired without cost.\textsuperscript{49} A Nickelodeon
was donated and then filled with records on an exchange basis by a local company, Ayre & Sons Ltd., at no charge to the Hut. Association member and Red Cross nurse Mona Wilson volunteered her ladies to assist men in sewing on new shoulder flashes, darning socks, and offering advice on how to get around town. Laundry service — a constant problem, as evidenced by the vast numbers of sheets in the Hut — was at last situated with the American base at Fort Pepperrell, though it would be destined to move to the Knights of Columbus and YMCA hostels once they were operational. Continued requests from lodgers to have access to a telephone booth led to establishment of a new telephone line to the Hut, donated kindly by Newfoundland Telephone Company, and extra doors were nailed together to fashion the booth. This addition was warmly received and the booth was widely used. Wherever possible, then, the operators of the Hut did their best to get something for nothing, and the people of St. John’s — while not yet liberal with their pocketbooks — were quite willing to help solve whatever problems they could. These improvised efforts were quite impressive, though it must be stated that efforts of the Association were not limited to just these sorts of problems and solutions.

As was mentioned earlier, no one who sat on the St. John’s War Services Association had any experience in operating a hostel, and so as soon as issues came up that were beyond the members’ ability to improvise, they sent abroad for assistance. When it came to organizing appropriate social events, the entertainment committee contacted other hostels in the theatre, or drew on the experience of Mrs. Murray, who had worked with the Ajax Club in Halifax. Technical improvements, such as a public address system for the Hut, were considered as well, and letters were sent to New York inquiring as to whether one could be donated, though none could be at that time.
the filtration system for the swimming pool failed, a company in Ottawa had to be contacted in order for a replacement to be purchased from Canada.\textsuperscript{56} Some 250,000 tickets for a machine that dispensed meal tickets for men in the canteen were ordered from Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{57} The operators of the Hut clearly did not lack imagination or determination when it came to doing what they could to make the Hut as effective a hostel as it could be, and their attention to detail won them the appreciation of the men they served.

The minutes of the St. John’s War Association meetings repeatedly highlight statements of thanks and appreciation offered by the military units in St. John’s, and from ships passing through. Senior officers such as the Canadian Army’s Colonel Groff would occasionally tour the building, and offer sincere appreciation for the efforts of the Association and the Hut’s staff.\textsuperscript{58} These visits were appreciated, but were not quite so meaningful as the thanks from the men themselves. On several occasions, units whose men frequented the Hut would show their gratitude for the work done on their behalf. In June, for instance, the men of the 52\textsuperscript{nd} Coastal Artillery Regiment wrote a letter of thanks, and included with it a donation of $23.93 to help with the continued operations and improvements to their hostel of choice.\textsuperscript{59} By the same token, the sailors of HMCS Skeena wrote a letter of appreciation in November, and included with it a $100.00 donation.\textsuperscript{60} That the men of this destroyer — who just two months prior had distinguished themselves in the defence of SC 42, one of the most brutal convoy battles of the war — would offer donations to the Hut seems quite telling.\textsuperscript{61} When they went to the Hut on their leave, they inevitably paid for the services they received, and yet they so appreciated the efforts of the operators and staff to give them the comforts of home that they wished
to contribute to the hostel’s continued operation. As will be presently shown, this warm relationship between servicemen and a hostel that they did not themselves operate was not necessarily common. Perhaps an anecdote from the Christmas of 1941 in St. John’s can shed some light on these good feelings.

As December of 1941 arrived, the Caribou Hut was operating at a high capacity. The number of actual beds in operation varied, as more were being added as the space was made ready for them and as the beds themselves were delivered. It was nevertheless quite clear to the committee that there would be a huge demand for turkey dinners to be offered on Christmas Day, and that there would be no way for the Hut to accommodate all of these requests. Two efforts were thus undertaken: first a source of turkeys had to be located, and at the same time, an appeal had to be issued to the people of St. John’s to take servicemen into their homes on Christmas day. The first attempt to acquire donated turkeys failed — the Canadian Packers were approached, and this non-Newfoundland organization refused any donation. A new appeal was thus sent out via the Telegram to the people of St. John’s, and in this way the required ten turkeys were obtained by the Hut to be prepared for its lodgers. On Christmas day, when men turned up at the Caribou Hut, they could either take a plate of turkey from the canteen kitchen, or they could choose to go to one of the homes that had volunteered their Christmas table for a serviceman. In the event, many of the homes that offered to host a servicemen on Christmas day did not need the extra place set at their tables: many more homes had volunteered than were needed.

This warm story of the relationship between the people of St. John’s and the servicemen who were frequenting their town is probably not unique, but it is still telling.
Certainly, the generosity of the Christmas season undoubtedly benefited servicemen wherever they were stationed, but the St. John's population's unreserved support both of the fighting men and of the Caribou Hut does much to explain why the hostel had managed to expand so successfully in its first year. While the Newfoundlanders were still looking after their own post-Depression finances, they were more than willing to invest their efforts in the Hut, and through the Hut, to help the servicemen protecting the shores of their country. It would seem ridiculous to suggest that, on the opposite side of the relationship, the servicemen were unaware of how welcome they were in St. John's. Indeed, given some of the much less pleasant interactions between military personnel and the populations of other Atlantic ports, the situation in St. John's was extremely positive.

Cooler Ports

In a year that ended with every serviceman in St. John's sitting at a Christmas table for a warm, home-cooked meal, the situation in Halifax was entirely different. Before beginning a comparison between these two ports, it is essential to recognize that, in most respects, the comparison is not a terribly fair one. Halifax, a longtime naval base and garrison town had the advantage of funding and experience, as has been already established. By the same token, one can suppose that any city with such a sizable military base in its midst would have a different experience in dealing with servicemen — while all of the fighting men who came into St. John's were guests, and indeed, were something of a novelty, Halifax was long accustomed to hosting military personnel. The citizens of Halifax thus had pre-existing notions about how to deal with servicemen, not simply as temporary residents, but as a regular part of their lives. This differing relationship
changed the character of interactions between the servicemen and the citizens in that city. With all these differences, then, one might question why a comparison should be drawn between St. John’s and Halifax. The answer is simple: geography. Sailors on the North Atlantic likely frequented both of these ports at various points in their careers, while both cities hosted army and air force personnel in similar defensive roles, because of their locations. It seems essential, then, to compare the experience servicemen had in the different ports, since the same men — or at least the same sorts of men — routinely visited them during the war. With these perhaps ominous provisos established, an examination of the hostels in Halifax paints a picture entirely different to that in St. John’s.

The monies that were poured into the establishment of hostels in Halifax were reasonably well spent. Large buildings were constructed, and under the guidance of groups like the YMCA, these clubs were each meant to accommodate as many as 1,000 men — dwarfing the Caribou Hut in numbers and scope. However, as James White points out in his thesis, “The Ajax Affair”, these hostels were not full-service clubs — if anything, they could be likened to barracks with canteens, and no other recreational services akin to those offered in the King George V building. Such recreation services were of course available in Halifax, but they were spread out across the city, and importantly, they were mixed in amongst the civilian buildings frequented by Haligonians. The subject of White’s study is a perfect example of this: the Ajax Club, established by a well-intentioned woman in late 1940, was a club for the sailors of the Royal Canadian Navy, offering the men a place to drink alcohol and socialize in a controlled and disciplined setting, before returning to their hostels for sleep. Once again,
comparing a club licensed for serving alcohol to the dry Caribou Hut could seem inappropriate, but the crucial base of comparison is not in what services the Ajax Club offered, but in its fate. Victim of sharp protest from the Halifax community through 1941, the Ajax Club had its liquor license suspended and was closed in May 1942.71 This was not due to discipline problems — as White explains, the club was a model of discipline, and worked smoothly through its short life.72 Instead, the closing was a result of the relationship between the sailors in Halifax, and a faction of the local Haligonians who perceived the sailors to be hard-drinking encumbrances to their community.73

In St. John’s similar concerns about servicemen and drink were approached from an entirely different point of view. The Telegram occasionally commented on drunk men outside taverns in the downtown, but was unfailingly sympathetic to the ‘boys’, who the editors expected were often on their first trip away from home, and were suffering through some of the grimmest circumstances of their lives. To these editors, it was the responsibility of the people of St. John’s — the hospitable hosts — to make certain that the servicemen weren’t served when they’d already clearly had too much to drink, or if they did not have a bed in which to sleep it off.74 The tavern owners were chided for not being responsible enough in their serving of alcohol, but the editors certainly did not object to the drinking itself, so long as it did not spill over into public demonstrations of inebriation.75 Of course, one cannot take the words of the editors of a single newspaper as the certain attitude of everyone in the city, but such forthright support for the servicemen’s right to drink remains telling: the attitudes between the civilians of St. John’s and Halifax were thus quite different. The question that might be asked next, then,
is why the Newfoundlanders were willing to be so accommodating as hosts, while the Haligonians were more reluctant.

Granted considerable funding, the people of Halifax established clubs and hostels for the many thousands of men passing through their port, but they did so with expectations about the relationship they, as citizens, would have with these soldiers, sailors and airmen. Instead of guests for the duration, the Canadian armed forces were permanent (and Halifax-born novelist Thomas Raddall might say integral) tenants in the city, and thus had a pre-existing relationship with Haligonians. Unfortunately, this relationship was an acrimonious one, and the closing of the Ajax Club is a subtle indication of the distrust and discomfort that existed in Halifax at the time. Later, far more dramatic and violent examples will reinforce this point, but for the moment it remains to note that for all the money and experience they had, some of the people of Halifax were much more reluctant to play host to the armed forces than were the people of St. John’s. This conclusion in no way elevates the Newfoundlanders — it must be remembered that many people in Nova Scotia, including some in Halifax, remained warm hosts. In Sydney, for example, the McLennan family offered up its coastal home to the Canadian Army as a field headquarters, and then in 1942 offered up another of its buildings as a club for Merchant Seamen. Simultaneously, the clubs available in Sydney, far more modest than those in Halifax and perhaps even in St. John’s, warmly entertained the Canadian forces garrisoning the port in 1941.

The Newfoundland case, though, remains unique: St. John’s was host to fighting men from Canada, the United States, and even Great Britain, and through 1941 the Caribou Hut had earned praise from all of these nations, for its determination to look after
the guests of Newfoundland, and for its success in doing so with such limited resources. As 1941 closed, and the promise of the establishments of two new major huts meant that St. John’s would be able to offer recreation and accommodation for all the men who passed through it, the Newfoundlanders had already proved themselves to be excellent hosts. As 1942 arrived, this success would be amplified and streamlined, and the Caribou Hut would remain a warmly appreciated home away from home for many of the men fighting in the North Atlantic theatre.
CHAPTER THREE
Stabilizing and Streamlining

Enter the Americans

The end of 1941 had brought with it a famous day of infamy, and a fundamental change to the way in which the war was being fought on all fronts. No longer was the United States’ involvement in the war strictly defensive: American troops and aircraft would move to Britain, and ships of the United States Navy would begin more forceful escort work in the North Atlantic theatre. Though hindsight would show that 1942 ultimately saw the tide of war turn in the Pacific, and that American involvement would be decisive, the beginning of the year was not greeted with blind optimism or overconfidence in Newfoundland. Editorials in the Evening Telegram reflect caution on the part of the editors, and one would suspect, on the part of Newfoundlander, about the potential for Germany’s anger to be directed even more fully against North America, now that such a powerful adversary had joined the fight. Patriotic sentiments obviously remained, but Newfoundland’s status as a potential front line had seemingly increased — as one editorial on 11 December pointed out to its readers, “what to do in case of attack, where to go for shelter or for temporary accommodation, what to be ready to take along if evacuation of the home was necessary are but a few matters to which immediate consideration must be given.” Victory was by no means seen as a certainty at this stage.

Canadian and American planners seemed to agree with the public sentiment in Newfoundland, and 1942 would see sizable increases to both countries’ military establishments on the island. The Canadian Army expanded the presence of W Force in
the St. John’s area by a battalion, with another 807 officers and men of the infantry arriving to reinforce the defences there. Along with these troops came additional anti-aircraft batteries, operated by 411 officers and men, and an additional 129 support personnel.4 The United States Army reinforced the country as well, adding another infantry battalion, four harbour defence batteries and six anti-aircraft batteries.5 American use of the Torbay Airport for transiting personnel became so great that the United States Army made a request to the Royal Canadian Air Force to allow construction of a 160-bed barracks there, though this request was ultimately turned down.6 Similar expansion was seen across the country, with small outports like Stephenville being overwhelmed by American personnel, leading to friendly but often confused land settlements, and overtaxed sanitation systems.7

As the numbers of men on the ground continued to increase, the numbers of sailors landing in St. John’s on leave did so as well. In February 1942, the Newfoundland Escort Force was evolved into a new formation, the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (MOEF), and its duties were expanded to include the escort of convoys all the way across the Atlantic, instead of to a mid-ocean hand-off with the Royal Navy. Along with the familiar Canadian and British ships of the NEF, this new MOEF included American warships, in varying numbers depending on the demands of the other theatres of war in which the United States was involved.8 Though the American fleet’s primary base in Newfoundland was situated at Argentia, the duty of convoy escort would indeed bring United States fighting ships into St. John’s harbour with more frequency, and thus exacerbated further the demands on shore services.9 On the whole, 1942 brought the numbers of fighting men in Newfoundland generally, and St. John’s in particular, to new highs. During the year
prior, these numbers would simply have overwhelmed the already taxed Caribou Hut, but help was at hand: as has been mentioned, the YMCA and Knights of Columbus had opened their own hostels to work in cooperation with the Caribou Hut. 10

With three large-capacity hostels open to serve this new influx of fighting personnel, St. John’s was well positioned to deal with the new demands. However, a steep learning curve remained for the management of the Caribou Hut. While the YMCA’s Red Triangle Hut and the Knights of Columbus hostel could benefit from the vast, pre-existing experience of their parent societies in serving large numbers of servicemen for extended periods, and could easily import experienced personnel into their respective management staffs from Canada, the operators of the Caribou Hut still had a great deal of work ahead of them. 11 The Hut had essentially reached its maximum capacity by the end of 1941, but with the increases in the number of personnel in St. John’s, it would now have no choice but to maintain its highest possible level of output for 1942 and the years beyond. As such, systems needed to be formalized, with staffing concerns worked out, questions of health and sanitation addressed, and the structure of the King George V building modified on several occasions, to improve its overall suitability for heavy, long-term use. The period of improvisation was over: it was time for stabilization.

Staffing

Through 1941, the question of staffing the Caribou Hut had been one largely of improvisation. The housekeeping personnel, for instance, were employed at whatever rates seemed appropriate, and when duties increased with the Hut’s expansion, wages
went up.\textsuperscript{12} There was no close study of the staffing structure of the Hut, no analysis of the most efficient manners in which to offer the services provided, or what the market value of the work being done truly was.\textsuperscript{13} This lack of close study is quite understandable: for those twelve months of rapid growth and improvisation, attempting to sort out an adequate staffing arrangement would likely have been hopeless, because the Hut's size and offerings were changing too quickly to be accommodated by any carefully-reasoned plan. Perhaps, had the operators of the Hut been more experienced in hostel operation, they could have intuitively streamlined their organization, but this was not the case. For their first year, they had improvised to make the Caribou Hut work, but at the beginning of 1942, as they saw their hostel working at its full capacity, they determined it quite necessary to improve the organization of their personnel. Their move was well-timed, as the influx of new servicemen, and thus new paying hostels and armed forces, would create competition for staff.

Beginning their review at the start of 1942, the members of a new War Services Association investigative committee considered the amount of help necessary to operate the Hut at its full capacity. Their initial findings were quite straightforward, leading to new positions being added for an assistant day janitor and a canteen assistant.\textsuperscript{14} At night, a single janitor was being overwhelmed by the responsibility of maintaining the multi-floor Hut, and was finding his responsibilities were incompatible — he had to oversee the front desk, \textit{and} patrol and clean the corridors of the Hut all at once. The addition of one individual, an assistant janitor to the night shift, corrected this problem with ease, allowing one man to stay at the desk and another to patrol the halls.\textsuperscript{15} On the face of it, then, this sort of staff concern was not particularly baffling, nor was it daunting. The
committee investigating the staffing situation simply contacted those who had been working in their positions for the past year, and asked them what additional staff would improve the productivity of their section of the Hut. The challenge, ultimately, lay not in determining what sorts of personnel were needed, but in finding people to fill those positions, and then keeping them.

It is necessary to recall that, just a few years before 1942, as many as 48,326 people were on relief in Newfoundland, and that at the start of the war, the pay offered by the various armed services was chief among the interests of those seeking to enlist or join up. The availability of work had increased markedly by 1942 in St. John’s, the American base building efforts at Fort Pepperrell and parallel Canadian efforts drawing as many as 20,000 workers at their peak. Shortages in labor in Canada were similarly drawing workers away, and the wartime increase in the price of fish continued to draw unemployed men back to the sea, with some 6,000 leaving the labor force by the end of the year. These new sources of well-paying work drained the Newfoundland labor pool quite dramatically, to the point that, in the following year, the Commission of Government estimated that no more than 500 to 800 unskilled laborers could be found for new projects. Because of this new economic reality, attempts to locate new personnel for the Hut, be they male or female, were not as simple or successful as they would have been in the previous years. The best example of this difficulty comes with the position of canteen assistant.

The Hut’s Matron, Miss LeMessurier, was in charge of much of the Hut’s maintenance and programming, and was also the appointed manager of the canteen. A canteen committee from the War Services Association, essentially made up of part-time
volunteers, assisted with higher-level administrative matters, from the securing of food supplies to lobbying for better quality control of rations, but the day-to-day operation of the canteen, and the organization of its hundreds of volunteers had to be overseen by just Miss LeMessurier, in addition to her numerous other duties. Considering the importance of the canteen to the Hut’s revenue, and the fact that it was serving at least 1,000 customers a day, it was quite clear to the committee investigating staff that a full-time, paid assistant to Miss LeMessurier was quite necessary. Throughout most of 1942, though, no candidate could be found for the job — the position was not filled until one Mrs. Kennedy was hired on early in 1943. That a paying job in St. John’s could go unfilled for so long just a few years after the Depression’s ravages had dominated the colony is very telling indeed: there was plenty of work, and the small population of St. John’s (and Newfoundland in general) was being utilized to the fullest. Indeed, the demand for good workers was becoming so great that the Hut had to begin carefully protecting its own valued personnel against competition.

The first and only ‘emergency meeting’ held by the Association and management of the Caribou Hut took place on 18 August 1942, in the face of what is characterized as a potential crisis by the records of the War Services Association. Mrs. Emma Fowler of the housekeeping staff had been offered a job by the Americans based at Fort Pepperrell, and the salary they had offered had exceeded her own by $4.00 a week. Loyal to the Caribou Hut, Mrs. Fowler had given her employers an opportunity to make a counter-offer, and thus an emergency meeting was convened, specifically to deal with this potentially grave loss. It should be pointed out that the loss of an experienced employee like Mrs. Fowler would have been serious in August of 1942 — given the difficulty the
Hut faced in finding new personnel, the loss of a veteran employee who was familiar with the Hut’s operational practices could have put the hostel in a difficult, perhaps untenable situation. Recognizing this reality, the operators matched the American wage offer, and Mrs. Fowler was thus able to remain with the Hut.\textsuperscript{26}

In a report then issued to the War Services Association, the managers of the Hut recommended that wages for all paid employees be increased immediately, to preempt similar crises in future.\textsuperscript{27} This proposal was agreed to, and wages in the Hut went up that month.\textsuperscript{28} Wages had not been static before this — indeed, in 1941, many staff personnel, had been given a substantial raise, but in those previous cases, the raise could be accounted for by the increased scope in duties brought about by the expansion of the Hut.\textsuperscript{29} Competition for employees was at last becoming a factor in St. John’s, and while this was certainly a benefit to the local economy, it was still a challenge that the Hut had to overcome, lest its staff be chipped away by the competition. As the Caribou Hut began to formalize its operations, it did so with a mind towards retaining its personnel.

\textbf{Health and Sanitation}

As the American presence in St. John’s began to grow in 1942, the United States Army Medical Corps began to take an interest in Newfoundland, curious as to what sorts of conditions its fighting men would face when they landed on the rock. The resulting reports to Army, three of them since brought forward from the United States National Archives and published by James E. Candow and Peter Neary, reveal reactions that, without hyperbole, could be termed ‘mild horror’ at the state of medical affairs in Newfoundland. The first such report was filed after a tour of St. John’s in September of
1940, then submitted in December, before the Hut had opened. Assistant Surgeon General R.A. Vanderlehr and Surgeon Roger E. Heering cooperated for this first effort, and these men identified a very serious tuberculosis problem in Newfoundland, that was obviously a threat to servicemen passing through should they be billeted in a residence with an infected person. The reaction to this report was quite “alarmist” — the United States Army evidently became quite wary of basing its men in Newfoundland, fearing they might all die of plague. Colonel Leon Fox thus set out to review the situation on the island again, and he found that many of the fears that were spreading were quite irrational — that while the tuberculosis situation warranted attention, the rock was not, in fact, a diseased colony that would rot those men stationed there. His report calmed much of the fervor, but not before Captain Daniel Bergsma was dispatched to the island for a week to assess its medical situation. Bergsma’s observations were both surprising and rather damning, though their reliability may be questioned.

After spending one week on the island of Newfoundland, Bergsma believed the greatest threat to American servicemen on the ground was venereal disease, because according to his “reliable persons”, Newfoundland girls were not merely amorous, but were in fact aggressively promiscuous. According to what Bergsma had been told, the young women of Newfoundland could leave their homes penniless on a trip to the shop, and prostitute themselves repeatedly on the walk to the store in order to fill their purses for their shopping. Bergsma unsurprisingly fails to actually name his sources for this impressive claim, but it should be mentioned that the Telegram painted a rather contrary picture two years later, with a scolding article about the loose morals of New York girls who were becoming too familiar with sailors whose names they did not even know.
any case, Bergsma went on to state that Newfoundlanders were completely deficient in their understanding of the causes of disease, many of them not understanding that vermin can spread sickness, and many of them foregoing bathrooms for buckets. Reading this report, one could scarcely help but imagine that the sanitation at the Caribou Hut would be non-existent, and that any women in the building would be violently accosting innocent servicemen on a regular basis, seeking what Bergsma terms “wealthy American husbands” at every opportunity. Interestingly, the records of the operation of the Hut give no indication of any of these challenges. On the contrary, beginning in late 1941, and particularly through 1942, the organizers of the Hut went to great lengths to improve the general sanitation of the King George V building, even if they had to knock out walls to do it.

Looking briefly back to the latter months of 1941, when the Hut expanded and devoted space to a new, fully-functioning kitchen for the canteen, the tour of an American officer based at Fort Pepperrell determined that the only factor keeping the hostel from earning a first class health rating from the United States Army Health Authorities was its lack of an electric dishwasher. This machine was installed by the following August, though it took some time before all of the canteen volunteers were able to effectively operate it. With this First Class certification, the Hut management could have simply accepted that their hostel was considered sanitary and focused on other matters. Instead, they declared war against the cockroaches that had made themselves patrons of the original canteen, using poison and then a ‘special machine’ borrowed from the Department of Public Health and Welfare to combat this menace. If the Newfoundlanders truly had no concept of the health dangers of vermin, this decision

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could be seen as rather baffling. The efforts to improve the general sanitation of the food serving areas did not end with roach extermination; the section was thoroughly renovated, with a fresh cleaning, some structural improvements, and a new coat of paint during February of 1942, to improve both its aesthetics and its cleanliness.\footnote{43} The canteen committee and staff of the Caribou Hut certainly paid close attention to the conditions in which food was kept and sold. They were not unique in their attentiveness.

A swimming pool, even today, can be a bath of bacteria and disease, and the managers of the Hut were very determined to make certain that their own pool would not become a danger to the men who used it. This concern was with the committee from the beginning of its operations, but the members' efforts to filter the water and check it for bacteria were not initially successful.\footnote{44} As water quality continued to degrade, more stringent efforts were made towards what Margaret Duley called one of the Hut's greater triumphs — to make the pool water be of a higher standard of quality than drinking water.\footnote{45} Once the shortfalls in water purity became evident, the Association immediately undertook serious measures to maintain cleanliness in the pool area and ensure it was very well looked after. It was determined that the pool needed to be drained, cleaned, painted, and that new changing and washing arrangements needed to be established on the pool deck, but these decisions were not easy to put into action as there was no available labor to carry out the job.\footnote{46} Once again, the competition for workers was causing difficulties for the Hut, but fortunately for the Association, one of the chief benefits of 1941 remained with them: the support and appreciation of the armed forces.

In July of 1942, the Captain of HMS Greenwich, a Royal Navy destroyer depot ship, learned of the labor problems that were halting the pool cleaning operations at the
Caribou Hut, and he subsequently assigned five of his men to assist the Hut in dealing with the problem. These five men proceeded to drain the pool, scrub its walls, and give it a fresh coat of paint. When this was complete, entirely new sanitary systems were installed in the pool area. First, the structure of the locker and shower rooms was completely changed, putting the showers on the route from the lockers to the pool, and thus allowing men to wash before swimming. To deal with concerns about what men might track into the pool on their feet, a foot bath was installed — a shallow tub was placed on the way from the showers to the pool deck, so that men would have to step through a disinfectant liquid before entering the water. With the help of servicemen, then, the Hut was able to institute very stringent and ultimately effective sanitary policies that served to ensure even the most potentially dangerous health hazard did not harm its patrons. The Hut subsequently posted a sign on the pool deck, thanking the sailors who completed the work, and letting swimmers know that it had been volunteered sailors who had carried it out.

General sanitary concerns continued to be addressed by the operators of the Hut on a regular basis as the war wore on. Despite Bergsma’s poor appraisal of the appreciation of bathrooms on the rock, the Hut’s plumbing was reasonably sophisticated and carefully maintained — men were not reduced to the use of buckets. Indeed, men were provided with sinks in their rooms, with either cake soap or liquid soap in each. While it is impossible to know whether some of the volunteer girls on staff with the Hut did or did not enter relationships with some of its patrons, there were certainly no recorded discipline problems involving aggressive young Newfoundland ladies attempting to pursue and corrupt the innocent servicemen who so often occupied the Hut.
Indeed, beginning in July 1942, members of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force took up permanent quarters on the fourth floor of the building, and no complaints were made by them about the standard of cleanliness or the level of amour in the Hut. Given the frankness with which the Association regularly addressed the problems in its hostel, it seems unlikely that the unwelcome assaults of aggressive young women would have drawn no mention in any of the managers’ reports. The final evolution of the sanitary concerns in the Hut would not come until 1943, when in November it was decided to make a health exam necessary for employment at the Hut, a final development that built upon the sanitary successes of 1942, and made the Caribou Hut a healthy hostel for the remainder of the war.

Moving Walls and Paying Bills

Practical efforts to formalize and streamline the operations of the Hut carried with them some very definite needs to reconfigure the King George V building to suit the demands of its staff and guests. After so much improvisation to bring the Hut up to its maximum capacity, it is perhaps no surprise that the hostel’s management and the War Services Association were quite open to creating, moving or removing walls, windows and doors to improve working efficiency. However, the labor shortage did create challenges when it came to making work possible, and indeed, affordable for the committee which was still operating on a tight budget. Recognizing the changes needed by the building and finding the money with which to make these improvements would be one of the Caribou Hut’s more important accomplishments of 1942, and the lessons learned in this endeavor would pay great dividends in 1943 and 1944. The number of
structural changes that were discussed and implemented in the Hut over 1942 defies any attempt to list them all. Many of the more significant changes were tied, as has been mentioned, to concerns of health and sanitation, while others were carried out specifically to streamline the working environment. The best examples of these sorts of improvements, and the challenges inherent in implementing them, come in the case of the canteen and the garbage removal arrangements.

The canteen had been improvised from the first days of the Caribou Hut. Thanks to the Hut’s expansion into other parts of the King George V building, it had grown, and an improved kitchen was built adjacent to it in July. Through the last months of 1941 and the first months of 1942, the improvised arrangements for moving food and dirty dishes back and forth from the canteen to the kitchen had proven quite difficult — people had to walk the food out through the kitchen door and around the corner into the canteen. During the remodeling that included the cleanup of the canteen, a restaurant-style opening was cut in the wall shared with the kitchen, to allow for the food and dishes to be passed back and forth much more quickly. In itself, this simple improvement might not be entirely noteworthy, but the difficulties with this effort, and indeed, the other canteen improvements, were not tied to efficiency, but to finance. At the start of 1942, the Caribou Hut’s 1941 accomplishment of remaining largely self sustaining was in danger. Inflation was beginning to increase the real cost of the foods being sold at the canteen, which remained one of the Hut’s central economic engines. This would only be made worse by closing the canteen during the renovations — a total loss of revenue would be disastrous to the hostel’s income — so it was absolutely necessary to keep the canteen running while construction progressed. The canteen did remain open, thanks to close
cooperation between its staff and the workers, but the month of February still showed a $900 deficit in canteen receipts. It would not be the last such loss.

By March, the War Services Association recognized that the growing cost of food would necessitate higher canteen prices, but the desire to keep costs fair for the servicemen meant that those increases could only be modest. It was immediately recognized, then, that a fundraising effort might have to be undertaken. In financial terms, the situation in St. John’s had certainly begun to change: as has been mentioned, there was no shortage of work, and one could therefore expect that monetary donations were much more likely than they had been in 1941. There remained reluctance to begin a financial drive, though, as the Association sought instead to advocate increasingly economical practices to try to control the deficits. Asking for money in a financial drive would be the last resort, so although the campaign officially began in March the Caribou Hut continued on into 1942 without actively seeking donations. Each month saw a deficit in receipts comparable to February’s, with October seeing a year-to-date deficit of $6,513. In straightforward economic terms, this was a difficult situation for the Caribou Hut — it was losing money on one of the primary services it offered — but in operational terms, this lack of profits exacerbated problems that were being faced with further improvements to the King George V building.

While budgets remained tight, certain concerns with the layout of the Hut still required attention and renovation as 1942 wore on. Chief among these was the garbage removal system, which was very unsatisfactory and perhaps even unsanitary. Since the opening of the Hut, garbage cans had been placed in one of the interior halls of the hostel, and with the expansion of services over 1941, these cans had begun to take over the
corridors in the annex of the King George V building. On trash day, these cans were hauled through common areas at the front of the Hut’s ground floor and put on the curb in front of the building, but they grew so numerous that they began to take over the entire front of the building, and often blocked access to neighbouring offices. Worse, while they were stored inside, the odors from the trash could be quite offensive, and potentially dangerous. A new trash removal system was clearly needed, so the Association approved the expense of making the necessary changes to the building, even though the Hut was continuing to lose money.

Behind the King George V building was an alley, so plans were approved during the summer to cut a kitchen window that overlooked this alley into a larger door, and to build a platform on which trash could be kept outside at all times. This new door would allow kitchen garbage to immediately be put outside, and would also assist with the delivery of foodstuffs. Due to the labor shortage, work did not begin until the early days of October, just as the size of the Hut’s deficit was being fully appreciated. The combined expense of these renovations, along with the losses that the canteen was seeing, drove the War Services Association to move forward with a brief financial drive to end 1942. Having established a target of $12,000 during the first discussions of such a drive in March, the Association moved forward and sought donations from the philanthropic organizations that had contributed to the Hut’s Association and organization since the first meeting in 1940, and from certain citizens. The Telegram aided in this process, publishing calls for donations on a daily basis, and inexplicably indicating that $25,000, not $12,000, was the target. The results were impressive: by December, $18,180.76 had been collected, including a $5,000 donation from the Commission of Government.
Though the *Telegram*’s more ambitious goal had not been met, the necessary monies had been secured. Moreover, the economic situation in St. John’s had quite clearly changed. While inflation was reported to be increasing the cost of basic supplies by as much as 150 percent, the people and organizations of St. John’s had been willing to open their pocketbooks, in support of the Hut. Learning from the success of this drive, the War Services Association would change its strategy in 1943 and 1944, bringing about new opportunities for capital expenditures that, in 1941, would have seemed impossible.

**Tragic Interlude**

December 13 of 1942 saw one of the greatest tragedies of the war for Newfoundland: the Knights of Columbus hostel was destroyed by fire on the night of a dance, killing more than 100 men, women and children who had been in attendance. This agonizing loss drew sympathy from around the world, along with offers of support and assistance from cities like Boston. In the aftermath of the disaster, St. John’s became a city obsessed with fireproofing, with the editors of the *Telegram* imploring their readers to be aware of fire prevention arrangements. The War Services Association needed no convincing: the Association and the Hut’s management became far more diligent about examining fireproofing arrangements in their hostel in 1943 and 1944. Once the fire was identified as electrical in origin, they extended their attention to the wiring in the King George V building. The fire itself did no damage to the Caribou Hut, but it loomed large in the minds of its staff for some time, even though the stone construction of their hostel was far less vulnerable to a blaze. The loss of a 350-bed hostel also made certain that demand for the Hut’s accommodations remained high, at
least until more Canadian funding arrived to allow the reconstruction of the destroyed facility.\textsuperscript{79} In the final analysis, a stark reminder had been given to the people of St. John’s: even a well-run hostel, like a well-run home, could be vulnerable to tragedy. Thankfully, this reminder did not have to be repeated amongst the servicemen huts during the war.

\textbf{Cold Days in Ireland}

The Royal Canadian Navy learned many lessons in the Second World War, but one that took some time to become apparent to its leadership was the importance of sponsoring its own shore services. The Ajax Club, for instance, had served Canadian sailors, but was in fact a privately-run operation in Halifax.\textsuperscript{80} In St. John’s, no similar club had existed up to 1942, despite the importance of the port to the Canadian Navy. Obviously, the Caribou Hut had offered accommodation and recreation to many men of the fleet — the sailors of \textit{Skeena} may be recalled as testament to the navy’s fondness for the Hut — but given the large numbers of ships passing through St. John’s harbour, a need remained for single-service clubs to serve Canadian sailors alone.\textsuperscript{81} Since the RCN did not officially establish these posts, 1942 saw Captain Mainguy, commanding the navy’s establishment at St. John’s, establish two on his own — the Crow’s Nest club for officers, and a recreation centre for his sailors on the edge of town.\textsuperscript{82} Like the YMCA and Knights of Columbus hostels, these clubs offered additional services to the St. John’s area, and helped to relieve some of the pressure on the Caribou Hut.\textsuperscript{83} Importantly, though, the Canadian Navy had \textit{not} acknowledged the need for its sailors to have shore services established for them in ports away from home, and this became all the more
obvious as Mid-Ocean Escort Force was established, and its operations took it overseas to the Irish port of Londonderry, or ‘Derry’. 84

Because the MOEF conducted trans-Atlantic escort, non-stop from St. John’s to Derry, sailors who were frequent patrons of the Caribou Hut and the other hostels in town became regular visitors to Northern Ireland. 85 In his research on this subject for his “Canadian Sailors in Londonderry”, Keith Jeffrey reveals that the Irish who greeted these new guests were not impressed by them; accustomed to the highly professional sailors of the Royal Navy, the Irish found the Canadians to be troublemakers, second only to American sailors in the trouble they caused. 86 The discipline of Canada’s sailors is not the central subject here, but one of the factors that certainly contributed to the Canadians’ poor reputation in Derry was inevitably the lack of recreational services available to them when ashore. There were no sufficient services similar to those offered by the Caribou Hut in Derry in 1942, and the Royal Canadian Navy, the only Canadian service to frequent the port town, made no immediate moves to rectify this. 87 An awkward situation thus developed: Canadian naval personnel could find friendly accommodation and activities to divert them from the war while they were in St. John’s, but they lacked a comparable outlet when they crossed the sea to Ireland. This situation was only made worse when it was decided that escort groups from the MOEF would spend more time in Derry than in St. John’s, because the former port gave inexperienced crews access to the anti-submarine warfare courses operated by the Royal Navy. 88 Canadian ships would thus spend upwards of two weeks in Derry, and just a week (or less) in St. John’s, a situation that benefited the training of inexperienced crews, but which clearly agitated the men when it came to their relaxation. 89
The question of servicemen in Derry will be concluded later, as the Canadian Navy’s attitudes changed, but once again, it seems evident that St. John’s was unique in its hospitality among the major Atlantic ports. The Irish in Derry offered only a few and reserved all-services entertainments, and these were often provided with a wary concern of drunkenness, in a vein similar to that seen in Halifax. When the Canadian Navy did not offer additional alternatives, Robert Caldwell reports that the sailors of the escort groups became guests at the hostels of the Royal Navy and the United States Navy. Any inter-service rivalries aside, those two fleets were happy to welcome Canadians into their clubs, a measure that was as magnanimous as it was unsuccessful. Canadians still found themselves with nowhere to sleep and nothing to do in Derry, and trouble inevitably ensued.

In any case, the Canadian Navy’s solution to this problem, and its relation to the Caribou Hut, will be considered later; for now it remains to reinforce the point that the people of Derry established nothing similar to the Caribou Hut for the men passing through their port. Again, this should not be taken as a criticism of the men and women of Derry, but yet another indication that the Caribou Hut was distinct, and that the relationship it demonstrated between the servicemen and the civilians of St. John’s was far more pleasant than many of those found elsewhere in the Atlantic theatre. In 1943 and 1944, some of the lustre would fade from this shining relationship, as the character of the fighting men passing through St. John’s changed, but the changes would not be so drastic as one might expect. The Newfoundlanders remained good hosts, and the servicemen grateful guests.
CHAPTER FOUR

Changing Character

Across the Sea

Through 1943 and 1944, the focus of the war at last began to shift away from Newfoundland. American buildups in Britain made the island an offensive air base, and as British and American bombing campaigns began to take the war back across the English Channel, fears for the security of the rock began to fade — even the price of maritime shipping insurance began to drop.¹ More importantly, through a combination of factors, the Battle of the Atlantic was changing, and ultimately, coming to an end. The Royal Canadian Navy worked closely with the Royal Navy and the United States Navy, and with the provision of more and better escorts, and importantly, the establishment of aircraft-supported hunter groups (whose sole purpose was to track and destroy the German submarines) the danger to shipping began to decrease as well.² This latter point did not, of course, reduce the number of ships involved in escort work — no matter how successful the campaign against the U-boats, merchant shipping could not be allowed to cross the North Atlantic unprotected while the war continued.³ The Mid-Ocean Escort Force maintained its operations, protecting all the ‘slow’ convoys sent across the Atlantic, while the Canadian Navy started to add larger and more powerful ships to its fleet.⁴ These big ships — like the famous Tribal class destroyers — were assigned mainly to British waters, and drew with them some of the most experienced personnel from the escort groups.⁵ The departure of some of these familiar sailors marked the beginning of a sharp change: St. John’s was becoming a rear area.
Recognizing that an invasion of France was to come, Canadian planners began moving their forces. When Newfoundland had been a potential front line area, it had warranted the best the Canadian Army had to offer — regular units like the Black Watch and the Victoria Rifles had been sent to its defence. Men of that professional sort were now needed elsewhere, instead of tied to a rear defensive position that seemed unlikely to be assaulted, and as such, beginning in 1943, detachments of these units began to be shipped overseas, to reinforce other formations. By 1944, the units themselves had left Newfoundland, and in their place came men of the conscripted National Resource Mobilization Act (NRMA) troops of the Canadian Army — those who had not volunteered to go overseas to fight, and thus were confined to defensive operations in North America. This, in itself, was not a popular move. Newfoundlanders, whose friends and families had gone overseas with the country’s artillery regiment, apparently did not warm to the often French-Canadian Territorial soldiers, whose pay for guarding the rock was triple that of the Newfoundlanders who were overseas, risking their lives. This was, at least, the opinion of Canadian officials warily watching the civil-military relations in St. John’s, though events did not necessarily bear out their conclusions.

While the Canadian Army moved its best men overseas for combat duty, the Royal Canadian Navy did the same. Crews for its new fleet destroyers, and eventually, its cruisers would be made up of the best men who could be drawn from the weary escort groups based in St. John’s, meaning that new personnel were constantly coming into the city. These new people, and indeed, many of the battle-weary sailors who remained, held different attitudes than those who had gone before them. In examining the Navy’s records for the recently published official histories, Robert Caldwell discovered that, by
1943 and 1944, many of these men were becoming quite unruly, and causing far more
difficulty ashore than they had in past. This increase in trouble would ultimately lead the
Navy to recognize the need for its own shore services, but in the interim — and indeed,
for the rest of the war — it caused many problems, wherever the fleet’s sailors put ashore
for recreation. A very concerned report to the Canadian government in April of 1944
pointed out that, on Water Street — on which the Hut resided, in downtown St. John’s —
the plate glass window of every store and shop had been shattered, and that the owners
had subsequently boarded up their windows for the duration, rather than simply replacing
the glass. Those responsible for the vandalism were the 8,000 sailors who were reported
to frequent the downtown at any given time, and whose discipline was not meeting the
standards expected by the navy. The transformation of Newfoundland into a rear area,
and the wear and tear of the long war at sea, were thus having detrimental effects on the
servicemen who passed through St. John’s.

While Canadian officials feared that the behaviour of their servicemen was
poisoning the relationship between the two countries — a possible danger to later
unification — the people of St. John’s seemed far more tolerant than might have been
reasonably expected. The editors of the Telegram, though again not necessarily a voice
representative of all people, paid relatively little attention to the increases in vandalism.
In March of 1944, an editorial did appear regarding “The Bottle Menace” but once again,
it blamed the problems of drinking in the streets primarily on taverns that were too liberal
in meeting a perfectly acceptable need for the servicemen. Indeed, the only seeming
indication in the Telegram that vandalism was on the rise was the necessity to devote
more column-inches to the daily list of cases before the Magistrate’s Court — a list that,
during April of 1944, could account for as many as a dozen men in one day. While one might have expected a backlash from citizens, one either did not take place, or was not pronounced enough to draw regular attention from the *Telegram*. By the same token, the Caribou Hut lost none of its determination to serve, or its enthusiasm. Disciplinary problems certainly did find their way into the King George V building, and as shall presently be discussed, did change the mode of the hostel's operation in some marked ways. However, the Hut continued to operate and innovate, and support for its work only increased as proud Newfoundlander found that the good wartime economy provided them with more money to give to their country's hostel.

**New Discipline**

As the character of the fighting men began to change in the North Atlantic theatre, the effects were being felt at the Caribou Hut: disciplinary problems reached a new level and began to influence its operation. Discipline is, of course, always a concern in a hostel where servicemen spend their recreational time, and as has been mentioned, an unfounded but nonetheless visceral concern about lack of discipline was central to the closure of Halifax's Ajax Club. In the case of the Caribou Hut, the years before 1943 had been, by comparison, rather quiet. In 1941, there were occasional references to men arriving at the Hut intoxicated, and occasionally these men would cause some disturbances. Merchant sailors were usually blamed for these incidents, though, and throughout 1941 there were no reports of particular disciplinary difficulties at the Hut. In the absence of trouble, precautions still had been taken; a sergeant of the civilian police force, the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary, was requested to come by at closing
time to round up stragglers who were not staying the night.\textsuperscript{22} With the arrival of large numbers of fighting personnel, Military Police and Shore Patrolmen had been available to the Hut as needed, but though they posted one man to the Hut every evening, they were largely unnecessary throughout the rest of 1941.\textsuperscript{23} It appeared the servicemen were generally well-behaved, even if they drank heartily before coming to the Hut for the night.

During 1942, the larger number of servicemen in St. John’s did increase concerns, and a closer partnership was formed between the Hut’s management and the various military police forces. For a few weeks in February and March, reports of excessive drunkenness drew concern from the members of the War Services Association, and once again the Merchant Marine sailors were blamed for much of the trouble.\textsuperscript{24} The Merchant Seamen’s Club had moved into a building across the street from the King George V building, and some of its sailors had begun to come to the Hut for entertainment after their own club closed.\textsuperscript{25} The solution to this problem proved quite simple: the committee requested additional security assistance from the Provost of St. John’s, and with this willing assistance from the military police, order was maintained and complaints fell away for the rest of the year.\textsuperscript{26} For two years, then, the Hut had lived something of a charmed life — at no time had rowdy or malicious servicemen behaved in a manner that was beyond the ability of the staff to handle. The operators had been given no reason to consider changing the way in which they did business out of fear of misconduct or petty crime by the men boarding with them. This pleasant state of affairs was destined to end.

In February of 1943, reports of significant disorderly conduct reached the War Services Association. Drunkenness had risen to entirely new levels, particularly during
the weekly Saturday night dances that were held in the Hut, and the only way to control the problem was to suspend that event until a means of maintaining order could be found. In the first steps towards a possible solution, letters were written to the heads of all the military services in St. John’s, informing them of the nature of the problem, and explaining why the dances had been suspended. The loss was deeply felt by the servicemen in the area, and though the hostel did offer Saturday night movies in place of the suspended dances, the move drew notice. Action was taken quickly to restore what had been lost: the Provost of St. John’s worked to establish an even closer relationship with the Hut, in order to better police its entertainments. Within a month, a marked improvement in the overall disciplinary situation had been detected, and the members of the Association were pleased that the incidences of disorderly conduct had been greatly reduced. On the face of it, then, the discipline problems of 1943 had faded away in similar fashion to those of 1942, but there remained a notable difference: for the rest of the year, and into 1944, the Hut was compelled to rebuild itself into a much more secure operation.

Before 1943, the worst case of theft reported to the War Services Association had been in the year prior, when the management discovered an “epidemic of blanket stealing” had befallen the Hut. This epidemic was, perhaps unsurprisingly, traced back to a merchant sailor, who was obliged to return the stolen blankets. Problems became much less amusing in 1943, when in addition to the increased drunkenness, it appeared that men were engaging in petty theft on the Hut’s property. Along with the canceling of the dances in February, the management proposed having the main office enclosed by a metal grill, to make certain that men did not duck through the serving windows to make
use of the telephone, or to steal items within.\textsuperscript{33} To protect the belongings of the volunteer ladies, a locked cloak room was provided for their coats during their shifts.\textsuperscript{34} When, in December of 1943, one lady had her gloves and coat stolen, the Association refused to shoulder responsibility owing to the fact that she had not used the locked cloak room for her belongings.\textsuperscript{35} These problems, in themselves, seemed small, but the operators took them as serious indications of a shift in character, and responded to them with changes to the structure of their building. Where before money had been spent to improve services, it was now being paid out to secure them. If the situation deteriorated further, the losses for the Hut — both to theft and in security expenses — could create difficulties.

Ultimately, the problems with discipline were put to rights within the Caribou Hut, though the solution was not necessarily conventional. The need for additional security in the King George V building was quite evident by late 1943, and at the same time, it was becoming clear that there were many servicemen in St. John’s who would need permanent accommodations, similar to the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force that had boarded in the Hut since 1942.\textsuperscript{36} That being the case, the Hut increased the number of rooms available to permanent renters to 150, and gave fair rent and good accommodations to a large number of the Royal Canadian Navy’s Shore Patrol.\textsuperscript{37} With the recognized authority of the military police living in the building, reports of mischief and theft disappeared in 1944 and 1945, though it cannot be suggested that this marked a return to the 1941 and 1942 conditions — good behaviour, this time, was as much as compelled, instead of offered voluntarily. Nonetheless, the Hut did deal with its security issues, and good order was maintained in the hostel for the rest of the war. Given the relative difficulty of achieving this security, it would perhaps be understandable if the
War Services Association and the Hut’s management lost some of their enthusiasm for operating their hostel. There was no such loss, though — in fact, the improvements to the Hut continued, and in a far less improvised and budget-constrained fashion.

Capital Spending

The success of the financial drive at the end of 1942 changed the attitudes of the War Services Association in 1943. Even though it was partially committed to covering the operating deficits from the canteen, the surplus from the financial drive provided the Association with cash that could be used to purchase new equipment and upgrades which, in the years prior, could only have been dreamed of. The first purchase was the public address system that the Association had hoped to have donated in 1941, but which had never materialized. This system cost $300, an expense that never before had seemed prudent to risk, but which could be chanced thanks to the more than $20,000 in the bank account. Once installed, the public address system proved quite useful, greatly improving efficiency in the building. In February, the idea of replacing most of the floors on the main level of the Hut, including the kitchen and the canteen, with ‘AA’ quality linoleum for ease of maintenance and durability was also considered, the $1,100 cost no longer seeming daunting. In July, the Hut made perhaps its largest purchase: a van was bought for $1,325, to move supplies to and from the Hut to events around St. John’s, and to offer transportation for volunteers as they ventured home late at night during the blackout. Of course, in keeping with the tradition of improvisation and seeking donations, the War Services Association did check with the Commission of Government to see if the vehicle could be serviced free of charge by the department of
Public Works, but this request was turned down. The denial was of little consequence: money was available to pay these costs, and the Association was becoming accustomed to judiciously spending its funds.

By the end of 1943, the Association had recorded an operational deficit at the canteen of $7,000, and had spent a further $10,000 in capital expenses. There remained in the bank some $8,000 of surplus funds — the leftovers of the 1942 financial drive, along with additional donations taken in over the course of the year. These funds were greatly appreciated by the Association, and as such it was determined to begin a new fundraising campaign in 1944, to top up the bank account and to allow the Hut its continued flexibility. The days of tight purse strings seemed far behind the people of Newfoundland. In March, a special committee was appointed to run the new financial campaign, and the Mayor of St. John’s was appointed as the chairman of the effort, renewing the previous ambitious goal of $25,000. The drive was carefully coordinated to go after businesses, governments and individuals, and was an unqualified success. The Commission of Government was one of the first and greatest contributors, offering another $5,000 donation without any oversight on how it was spent — quite a change from the $5,000 of 1940. Other societies in St. John’s contributed with similar enthusiasm, as did private citizens, who alone raised $14,504. The total receipts shattered all expectations: more than $37,802 was taken in under the campaign, a massive sum that at last brought the Hut’s operating budget into the same league as its peers in Nova Scotia. With this money in hand, the Hut was financially secured for the rest of the war, with options to continue purchasing resources as needed, and to make up the growing deficits in the canteen.
That the people of St. John’s remained so committed to the upkeep and operation of the Caribou Hut in 1944 is telling. Despite the damage their city had incurred by rowdy sailors, and defying Canadian expectations of their distaste for the NRMA soldiers who had taken over the responsibilities of W Force, they continued to treat the Hut as a priority. Margaret Duley believes this support was born of the Newfoundlanders’ hospitality, as they would never “take the visitors entirely for granted.” 50 It seems unlikely that any Newfoundlander, including this author, could disagree with Duley’s assessment on those points, though it bears pointing out that simple national (later provincial) pride is not the only justification for those remarks. After the Allies’ success in Europe in 1944, the operators of the Hut were budgeting their capital resources certain that war could not last beyond the coming year. 51 Similarly, an editorial in the Evening Telegram in December suggested that though 1944 would not see the end of the war, it would no doubt only “last through the greater part of 1945.” 52 Victory in Europe drew enthusiasm in Newfoundland, and patriotism drawn from that enthusiasm was reflected repeatedly in the Telegram. As fundraising for war-related causes continued in December 1944, the editors extolled people to continue to offer what little they could, and this call seemed to be regularly answered.53 As a Newfoundland-conceived and operated hostel, the Caribou Hut was in a fine position to take advantage of this feeling, and so both it and its patrons continued to benefit from the strong support of the community.

At Home Elsewhere, a Decreasing Need

It is both ironic and somehow seemingly inevitable that, as the capital funding available to the Hut reached its height, the demand for its services — so high for so very
long — was at last beginning to ebb away. By September 1944, reports of canteen receipts were showing continually diminishing sales and returns, leading the management to warn the operating Association that the peak in customers may have passed, and that financial caution would be in order for future acquisitions.\(^54\) Other shore services were, by this time, either in operation or being set up, including more clubs and facilities operated by the Royal Canadian Navy.\(^55\) In January of 1945, it was reported that all the hostel’s rooms were no longer booked during the week, though on weekends they remained in high demand.\(^56\) The signs nevertheless seemed quite clear to the management and to the Association: the transition into a rear area, and the shift of military focus to continental Europe, was decreasing the need for their hostel.\(^57\) Services were not reduced — those men still in the St. John’s area would continue to need and deserve the amenities offered by the Caribou Hut — but each meeting carried with it a different tone: the end of the adventure was near.

If the increase in capital funding for the Caribou Hut at this time qualifies as ironic, the fact that it was only in 1944 that the Royal Canadian Navy truly began establishing its own shore services might be termed tragic, or ridiculous.\(^58\) Across the Atlantic in Derry, Ireland, March of that year at last saw the a concerted Canadian effort to build a Caribou Hut-styled hostel for men on the long layover between convoy runs.\(^59\) As has been discussed, the need for a hostel in the Caribou Hut’s mold had been necessary from the beginning of the Canadian deployments to Derry, but the RCN had not taken that responsibility upon itself for two years.\(^60\) What is most interesting about the navy’s eventual response is the template that was generated for what an ideal shore service centre, like the Canadian Navy Club in Derry, should offer — notably bowling
and, if possible, a swimming pool. Such amenities were indeed long available in the Caribou Hut, and it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that this fact may have informed the navy's thinking on the matter.

Halifax was to benefit from more Canadian Navy shore services in 1944 as well, though the services offered by the Navy League made up only a small percentage of those activities available to sailors in the port. Haligonians' attitudes towards servicemen and liquor remained unchanged, though, as the Navy League discovered when it attempted to establish a new club for Canadian sailors. With a plan to establish a wet canteen in a larger recreational complex for sailors, to be situated on Wanderers' Grounds belonging to the city, the League found itself in a prolonged struggle with the Halifax City Council. The plans were so disrupted by councilors in favor of temperance — and supported by substantial public opinion — that they were held over into 1945, and ultimately, they were abandoned. This was perhaps a less dramatic fate than the closure of the Ajax Club, but it seems no less significant in what it reveals about the relationship between servicemen in Halifax, and the people there. As White points out, there seemed a prevailing tendency among the citizens to "condemn everyone in uniform due to the actions of a few." The relationship between Haligonians and the fighting men in their city was clearly strained, and there would be even sharper evidence of the division between these two groups in 1945.

Finally, and on a much more pleasant note, the people of Sydney were unfailingly good hosts, much in the vein of the Newfoundlanders. While Roger Sarty and Brian Tennyson point out that the Cape Bretoners were by no means impressed with the NRMA troops (perhaps the one source of Canadian officials' fear about Newfoundlanders'
opinions of the conscripts), the people of Sydney remained good hosts to their small, Canadian garrison, and to the merchant sailors who passed through their port. The economies of scale in Sydney were, however, truly different than those in St. John's — in 1943, Sydney hosted a huge Royal Canadian Air Force gala that drew 500 people, where the Caribou Hut's regular, weekly dances in 1943 averaged nearly the same numbers. Nevertheless, Sydney remained a warm host to its servicemen.

The end of the war in Europe was at hand, and as the Christmas of 1944-45 arrived, it seemed inevitable to many people in the Atlantic theatre that respite was on the horizon. Indeed, relief was near, but at the end, the wartime relations between servicemen and the communities they had been frequenting for six years would be aired in a most dramatic fashion. What remains to discuss, then, is the end of the European conflict, the end of the Caribou Hut, and the way in which the great establishment came to a close after so many years of hard work and innovation.
CHAPTER FIVE

Fond Farewells

Victory and its Complications

The Caribou Hut came into 1945 fully expecting that year would see the end of the war in Europe. As Allied forces squeezed Germany from east and west, and the last-ditch counter offensives in the Ardennes were stopped by American troops, it seemed a simple matter of time before the Nazis were forced to surrender. In practical terms, this reality brought a new set of issues to the attention of the St. John’s War Services Association: their Caribou Hut would have to settle outstanding accounts, and also assist with any celebrations held in the city to mark the day of victory. Beyond this, the appearance of a bright light at the end of the war’s tunnel in no way lessened the work that still had to be done — whether the Germans surrendered or not, the Caribou Hut would continue to play an important role in St. John’s for as long as servicemen remained there. It was thus with a sober sense of reality that the War Services Association looked to its budget in January of 1945. With the canteen still returning deficits on a monthly basis, and with the demand for beds decreasing marginally but noticeably, it was determined that the Hut would be able to survive twelve months of operation thanks only to the remaining $24,000 surplus left over from the its last financial drive. This money would be carefully horded — there would be no enthusiastic spending simply because the end appeared near. Even once the Germans surrendered, the Association might have to operate the Hut until the last Canadian and American servicemen had been sent home. This was a serious responsibility, and it was not shied away from.
The settling of accounts remained on the minds of the operators of the Hut for the first four months of 1945. Through the course of its life, the Hut had looked to the United States Army for many of its supplies, and it will be recalled that the Americans had been happy to lend whatever equipment they could to the hostel. With the end in sight, the accounts on these ‘lend-leased’ items needed to be looked after. When thinking of lend-leased items in relation to the Atlantic theatre, one’s mind might naturally drift to ships, aircraft, and guns — those things that had, without doubt, fueled the British war effort through some of its darkest moments. The list of items on the Hut’s account was remarkable in its own, decidedly ordinary way: 320 bed sheets, 160 pillow cases, eighty mattresses, an electric dishwasher, an electric toaster, and an electric floor scrubber. The Americans at Fort Pepperrell happily took cash for the dishwasher, floor scrubber, and for half of the pillow cases and sheets — a total bill that has not survived in the Association’s records, but which one supposes could hardly have been crippling. The toaster and the mattresses were returned and accepted, clearing those accounts. However, in April the matter of 160 sets of sheets and eighty pillow cases remained, the cash value of these estimated to be some $154. It is a testament to the continuing fiscal conservativism of the War Services Association that this amount was not immediately paid out, though the issue would not remain outstanding for long.

While the accounts were being attended to, plans were also formed for the events of VE day — the day when the Germans surrendered. In early April, the operators of the Hut took the lead on this front, forming plans with the other hostels and barracks in St. John’s to develop a program of celebration for the day, whenever it came. The plan was relatively straightforward: every organization in St. John’s would offer dances and movie
showings on the day, to make certain the men had a chance to celebrate and enjoy their triumph. In itself, this plan may seem both simple and logical, but as shall presently be discussed, it proved far better developed than the events in Halifax. It bears noting that the Caribou Hut held enough respect among the other hostels in St. John’s to suggest and implement a plan like this. Though other Huts and clubs undoubtedly shared similar ideas as to how to operate on VE day, the War Services Association and the Caribou Hut were still looked to for leadership in making the arrangements. The Hut had certainly earned its influence.

On the Day of Victory

Emotions could only run high on 7 May 1945, when the Germans at last surrendered to the forces pressing their country from each flank, and the ports in the North Atlantic would each have their own experiences with the celebrations that came with victory. The most dramatic case came in Halifax, where VE day, and those that followed, were marred by massive riots involving thousands of men. Here again, the undercurrent of acrimony identified by James White in “The Ajax Affair” was quite clearly in play: the source of the first incidents of poor discipline came when sailors in Halifax discovered that the sale of liquor had been restricted on VE day. Evidently, the temperance movement which had closed the Ajax Club had maintained the ear of the city council, and out of fear of indiscipline on the part of celebrating servicemen, liquor stores were closed. This was in itself a disastrous move, and it was not helped by the choices made by the Canadian Naval authorities in the port. Robert Caldwell finds that the navy’s approach was to offer an “Open Gangway”, to allow men to find their own satisfaction in
victory, and expecting them to do so without causing harm to property. The sailors and other servicemen in Halifax wanted to drink and celebrate their victory, but the city yet again proved reluctant to allow them this opportunity. As such, the men developed their own solutions, opening liquor store windows with bricks and thus obtaining alcohol by their own methods.

The rioting went on for days, and spread from Halifax to other parts of Nova Scotia, and Sydney too saw a liquor store robbed, and a bonfire set. Part of the difficulty in the Cape Breton port may have been caused by authorities when, fearing rowdiness, they cancelled all regularly-scheduled dances and entertainments. The policy of denying servicemen the chance to celebrate seemed to be a self-defeating one. In Halifax, it took stringent intervention on the part of the RCMP, shore patrol, and regular units from the Army to put an end to the major disturbances. In the subsequent inquiries regarding the breakdown of control, Vice Admiral Murray — formerly of the Newfoundland Escort Force, but by war’s end commanding Canada’s escort forces from Halifax — was condemned for failing to control his men. The wisdom of his lack of planning for VE day celebrations can certainly be questioned, though it would seem eminently unfair to judge the man whose leadership was so integral to victory in the Battle of the Atlantic for this oversight. Perhaps more important to the riots than Murray’s failure to plan, though, was the attitude of the Haligonians towards the servicemen in their city. Again, the people of Halifax cannot be summarily condemned as poor hosts, as the servicemen were not simply guests for the duration in that city. Indeed, fighting men and civilians had been, and would continue to be co-tenants in the port, and their attitude was thus different than the one that could be found in St. John’s. Haligonians’ lack of tolerance for alcohol
The Caribou Hut had executed its established victory plans on VE day, and they had been highly successful. In true Newfoundland style, the canteen's store room was accosted by the cooks, and a full-course meal was served to every serviceman for free. With full stomachs, the men were invited to free movie shows and to free dances, both of which proved so successful and so well appreciated that they were repeated for the rest of the week. There was no destruction in the Caribou Hut, and as the *Evening Telegram* reported, VE day passed without any significant disturbances in St. John's. Indeed, the paper printed the story of Halifax's misfortune on the front page, seemingly unimpressed with the looting by servicemen and civilians. Though the paper did not delve deeply into the causes, one suspects that any Newfoundlander would undoubtedly scoff at the idea of a day of such importance being greeted without celebratory events or access to alcohol, for both the servicemen and the citizens of the city. No incidents of excessive drunkenness were reported in the Hut during this period of celebration, though whether this reflects self-control on the part of the servicemen, or a higher tolerance for drunkenness on the part of the staff, remains unknown. Looking back on the events of the day, though, the chairman of the War Services Association — the Reverend Canon Howitt — was most pleased by the "orderly way in which the celebrations were carried out... as compared to other places." Commodore Taylor, senior Canadian Naval officer in St. John's, concurred, and expressly thanked the Hut for its entertainment program.

Without question, the plans made by the Caribou Hut's operators for the VE day festivities had helped make the occasion civil and enjoyable for the servicemen in St.
John’s. However, movies, dances and big meals alone cannot account for the pleasant atmosphere that was recorded in the city on that day, when compared to the disaster in Halifax. What seems as important in the St. John’s context is that differing relationship between the servicemen and the city that was hosting them. From the outset, as has been seen, the Caribou Hut was appreciated for its efforts to provide the comforts of home, and its determination to do so with obviously meager resources. As Colonel G. W. L. Nicholson, a Newfoundlander, has pointed out, servicemen’s behaviour in the city was undoubtedly influenced by “the generosity and goodwill extended in such a practical manner by all these clubs, as well as the widespread hospitality offered them in hundreds of homes in the city.”

Newfoundlanders in general, and the operators of the Caribou Hut in particular, had succeeded in being good hosts to their wartime guests, and their efforts had clearly been appreciated.

Loose Ends

While VE day marked the end of the German war effort, it was not the end for the Caribou Hut. In late May, another improvement was being authorized for the hostel: a new cable had been acquired for the building’s elevator, and it was to be installed immediately. A new projection screen had also been ordered, to improve the movie-watching experience at the Hut. As long as servicemen were present to take advantage of the facility’s services, the Association was determined that they would be offered any comforts the operators could provide. By the end of May, the forces in St. John’s were already beginning to draw down; 25 May saw all Canadian Anti-Aircraft Artillery recalled, with the Coastal Artillery being ordered home two days later. As the end was
clearly in sight, the Americans also offered one more vote of thanks to the Hut: they forgave the $154 debt the hostel owed for the outstanding lend-lease sheets and pillowcases.\textsuperscript{31} While the meager sum undoubtedly meant nothing to the United States economy, it was a gesture welcomed by the Hut.\textsuperscript{32} Settling the books was to become a major concern in the month after VE day — particularly as a new demand reached the War Services Association. Need for beds and entertainment was steadily falling off as June arrived, and the Commission of Government was determined to get its building back.\textsuperscript{33} Newfoundland servicemen would soon be returning from overseas, and a program to help these men return to civilian life was considered necessary. It seemed appropriate that the King George V building, which had served so many visiting soldiers, sailors and airmen, would now offer its hospitality to the returning sons of Newfoundland.\textsuperscript{34} The War Services Association was told to get out by 22 June, and the members agreed.\textsuperscript{35}

The evening of 17 June brought the Caribou Hut's last night of full operation, and a special gala evening welcomed the fighting men remaining in St. John's to celebrate the hostel's impressive career.\textsuperscript{36} The following day saw a much more prideful celebration for the members of the War Services Association, and the staff and volunteers of the Hut. For once — and only once, it must be said — these people who had worked diligently since October of 1940 came together to celebrate their personal accomplishments.\textsuperscript{37} In five years together, they had innovated a great deal, gained a sort of work experience that was entirely new to them, and done a commendable job in looking after their city's defenders. Joined by the heads of the armed forces in St. John's, the city councilors and the Governor, these fine men and women celebrated in what was to be the Hut's last hurrah.\textsuperscript{38} As the \textit{Telegram} concluded, "thus the curtain was rung down on a
Newfoundland effort, by no means the least in the various types of war efforts performed by Newfoundlanders. \(^{39}\) From that point, the business of the changeover to Government control absorbed the War Services Association, and on 22 June, the Caribou Hut ceased to exist. \(^{40}\) With no hostel left to operate, one might expect that the Association would have simply ceased operation. This was far from the case: thanks to the refusal to spend money casually, the Association still had a vast surplus fund, as well as assets including the van it had purchased. These publicly raised funds had to go somewhere.

The first outlet for the money was quite simple: all paid staff received bonuses of a week’s pay for every six months of service they had given to the Hut, a neat reward amounting to a total payout of $3,200. \(^{41}\) Donations that had been received after VE day were returned with thanks, removing that concern from the accounts, and goods valued at $2,200 were donated to the YMCA hostel, which continued to operate in service of the Canadians who remained in St. John’s. \(^{42}\) Another $1,200 in goods were left for the government to make use of in its centre for returning Newfoundland fighting men, and the van was to be sold for $600 or $700. \(^{43}\) With these deductions included, the Association’s reserves were pared down, but $10,200 remained in its savings account. \(^{44}\) This money stayed with the Association until 1948, when the $7,500 that remained was donated, appropriately, to two of the Newfoundland philanthropic associations to which the Hut had owed much: $2,500 went to the Great War Veterans Association, and $5,000 to the Red Cross. \(^{45}\) With the money gone, a meeting was called for 18 June 1948, the third anniversary of the Hut’s farewell party, to call for the liquidation of the Association. \(^{46}\) Held in the King George V building — still called the “Caribou Hut” by those attending — this meeting marked the end of the fine history of the Association. \(^{47}\) After
accomplishing much, the St. John’s War Services Association, and its Caribou Hut, were at an end.

**Denouement**

As has been mentioned, only one book has been written about the Caribou Hut, and that was released in 1949 by noted Newfoundland novelist Margaret Duley. This book did not emerge out of Duley’s own interest: on 4 June 1948, as the last remaining members of the War Services Association met to discuss liquidation, it was suggested that a history of the Caribou Hut might be commissioned, and that Margaret Duley be contacted about writing it.\(^{48}\) Funds that had been kept from the final donations to the Red Cross and the Great War Veterans Association were set aside to pay for the publication, and the matter was to be further pursued.\(^{49}\) The liquidation of the Association, and the end to the regular and recorded meetings blocks any further record of the negotiations with Duley, though the existence of the proposed book rather indicates that she took on the project. With a narrative flare that reflects some of the best qualities in the tradition of Newfoundland storytelling, Duley paints a compelling and almost lyrical picture of the Hut, how it was run and how it was funded. Though there was no indication in the Association’s initial discussion of the book for it to be anything more than a compilation of experiences, the arrival of Confederation gave the project a new life.

As stated earlier, the introduction to *The Caribou Hut*, as published in Canada by Ryerson University Press in 1949, explains the circumstances of the its writing: “This book was sponsored by the St. John’s War Services Association, and written in the early part of 1949, the year that Newfoundland gave up her independent status to become the
tenth Province of Canada.\textsuperscript{50} One can draw certain implications from this statement, not least that the story of the Caribou Hut's accomplishments became something of a resume for Newfoundland — a statement released to Canadian readers, explaining precisely what this new province had done to aid Canadian fighting men during the Second World War. Duley is never direct about this point, though she is frank about some of the instructions given to her by the former members of the Association when she took on the job. Because so many people had been involved in the operation of the Caribou Hut, and because these people had all taken part without any particular desire for self-aggrandizement, Duley had been asked explicitly to mention no names, to single out no persons, and to assign no developments to any individuals.\textsuperscript{51} Hers is a work that speaks in broad strokes, of the War Services Committee and Association, of the management, the volunteers. In and of itself, this instruction seems to encapsulate the spirit of the Caribou Hut in the most meaningful way — it was a place opened by those who sought to be good hosts, for no reason other than to be good hosts. Perhaps that conclusion is a conceit of a proud Newfoundland author, but if it is so, then it is a conceit that Margaret Duley and this author quite happily share. It would seem fair to conclude that the Caribou Hut earned that conceit.
CONCLUSION

When war came to the world in 1939, the people of Newfoundland quickly saw a chance to escape some of the ravages of the Great Depression, and to restore their country’s economy. When war took a more serious turn, these people came to realize that the war would not simply be an easy solution, it would be a heavy burden, particularly on their homeland. The rock was the first bastion of defence for North America, and it was the home for some of the most important escort forces to serve in the Second World War. With these realties came a responsibility: the people of the country had to play host to thousands of servicemen. This the Newfoundlanders did with great aplomb, and the Caribou Hut was one of their triumphs. Improvised from the start, the hostel was unlike anything Newfoundlanders had ever established, and yet it was a grand success. More than just a success, it was also a forerunner — while other ports like Halifax, that knew what to expect in a great war, were able to match many of its services, the Hut became a shining example to organizations like the Canadian Navy when the time came to establish hostels of their own. The Caribou Hut was an innovator and an inspiration for shore services in the North Atlantic theatre, and its contributions were greatly appreciated by its patrons. Sitting outside the usual context of Canadian history, its story could often be overlooked, but its accomplishments remain impressive, and worthy of pride on the part of Newfoundlanders.

Of course, in light of this positive history, the question might be asked: why was the Caribou Hut such a success, when so many other North Atlantic ports seemed to have such difficulty in dealing with their populations of fighting men? Halifax, the veteran
The Caribou Hut

naval port of Canadian history, suffered much at the hands of its guests, and perhaps even inflicted much upon them at the same time. Londonderry, relatively untried as a military port, failed to rally to meet the needs of all the visiting military personnel who passed through it. Even Sydney, though remote and well-meaning, saw some difficulties in the final days of the war. In the light of these comparisons, St. John’s, and the domestic response exemplified by the Caribou Hut, can certainly be seen as an exception — and perhaps a surprising exception at that. Is this a case of a story represented only in its most positive light, or did the Hut indeed succeed where others were less able to meet the needs of servicemen?

The discussions have now been made regarding the different circumstances of war seen in Halifax, Sydney, Derry and St. John’s. For the Irish port, Canadians and Americans were men coming from overseas, and were relatively unknown to the citizens of the town. In Sydney, the Canadian servicemen were citizens of the same country, albeit from different parts, and were treated well as defenders of the port. In Halifax, a city always tied to the military, the servicemen were co-habitants, with whom the citizens would have to live after the war. These circumstances certainly must have influenced the relationships between the servicemen and the men and women of the ports, just as St. John’s was affected by its status as a wartime-only port, on the potential front line of war. While all this may be established, though, the key to the relationship between citizens and servicemen in any place is not exclusively one of geographical and social positioning: it is centered on how the people of these places respond to that positioning. A strong faction of Haligonians favored temperance in the face of co-habitation, while a considerable number of the Irish people in Derry seemed inclined to keep to themselves
throughout the war. The choices made by people, here as in all of history, are the most fundamental ingredient in any relationship. In Newfoundland, hospitality and generosity were chosen, and these choices were guided by the realities of life on the rock.

It seems necessary to pause for a moment, and to reconstruct the mindset of those Newfoundlanders who operated the Caribou Hut, and who opened their homes to servicemen. This is, it must be admitted, an exercise in informed speculation — there is no objective evidence for what follows, only the understanding this author gained from being born and raised on that island, and from a having a proud family of Newfoundlanders. The rock is a place at the mercy of the elements — it is raw, and it demands the utmost from those who live upon it, not so that they might thrive, but so that they might survive. Unlike many parts of Canada, where the land and the climate are moderate and often overwhelmed by the construction of western civilization, Newfoundland is a place belonging to nature. It is a vessel made of rock, an ever-lasting ship defying the North Atlantic, and like sailors, its citizens must live by the laws of the sea. On the rock, people survive together, or perhaps not at all. This is a truism in Newfoundland culture, and a central principle in Newfoundland thought. A person helps his or her neighbor, because that is what is done — because to survive together, one must be willing to work together. When people from away arrive on the rock, they are enveloped by this relationship. It matters not who they are, or where they are from: once on the rock, they are as much at the mercy of the land and sea as anyone else.

The raw truth of life in Newfoundland produces a camaraderie, and a generosity. When war came in 1939, and servicemen came in 1940, these things melded with another peculiarity of the Newfoundland mindset: a sense of the bigger picture. Despite their
isolation, or perhaps because of it, Newfoundlanders always understood the world beyond their home — they learned about it, sometimes as an escape from the harsh conditions of their lives, sometimes out of interest and wonder. When war came, and Newfoundland appeared on the front line, the international situation was not a mystery to the people of the rock. The war did not need to be explained to them. Understanding their home’s place in the grand scheme meant that, when military units arrived, the Newfoundlanders understood the significance of the fighting men. This was not an influx of migrant workers doing a mundane job, or would-be troublemakers: these were men sent to fight in defense of the rock, and of the North Atlantic. They were not just people from away, they were men sent from their homes and families to fight the good fight, in Newfoundland. This could not be lost on any Newfoundlander. To be a good host to these people, and to try to do anything possible to make their lives even a little bit easier, was incumbent on the people of the country. The servicemen thus received the best Newfoundland had to offer, and as the Caribou Hut demonstrated, there was much to be given.

It is impossible to empirically prove a concept as potentially porous as ‘Newfoundland thinking’. In other contexts, like Nova Scotia, scholars such as Ian McKay have gone to great and successful lengths to demonstrate that identities can be constructed — that a breed of anti-modernist nostalgia is at work, and that the seemingly idyllic state of mind assigned to people of that province was for decades invented.¹ It seems inevitable, then, that an outside observer, either analytical or cynical, might scoff at the prospect of Newfoundland being any more receptive. It is difficult, though, to be nostalgic for a time that has not yet ended: in Newfoundland, the factors that led to a
warm reception of guests in 1940 continue to lead to warm receptions in the present day. No matter how far technology marches, the North Atlantic remains an overawing force in the lives of Newfoundlanders, compelling the imperatives of hospitality and camaraderie to remain. The rock cannot be separated from the sea that governs it, and thus its people’s struggle to survive together, while easier with technology, does not end. If the identity centered around hospitality was invented, then it remains subscribed to, though this might lead to another question; if hospitality is valued by Newfoundlanders today, it can be wondered whether it is now being applied to memories of the Second World War. This, of course, is a fair concern: history can often be marred when the perceptions of the present are liberally applied in an attempt to remake the past. Analysts might therefore suggest other motives for the Newfoundlanders’ generosity — it could be suggested that they sought to maximize the benefits of military investment by creating a positive environment, or that they were seeking mainly to encourage their defenders to fight harder if the island was to be attacked. Newfoundland girls did find many husbands among servicemen during the war, so perhaps the purposes for the generosity were in fact self-serving.

Suggestions such as these place far too much stock in the acting ability of the average Newfoundlander. Genuine hospitality cannot be faked for five years; the Caribou Hut did not offer imagined warmth, and was not operated so diligently by invented determination. Newfoundlanders chose to be good hosts, and were so for five years of war. This choice was guided by the nature of the rock’s people, in light of the circumstances in which they lived, just as the support of temperance in Halifax may have been a function of that port’s constant co-habitation with the military. What resulted from
the choice was a genuine and somehow remarkable relationship, that while by no means perfect, revealed some of the best in both guests and hosts, and which played an important role in the Battle of the Atlantic. The Second World War will be remembered for many things in many places, but in Newfoundland, it can always be recalled as a time when, despite all that the world was suffering, camaraderie endured, people survived together, and a triumph of hospitality and generosity could be found in St. John’s, at the Caribou Hut.
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41. RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes, 4 November 1940.

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Ibid.; RPANL, MG 637 B1, “St. John’s War Services Association (operating the Caribou Hut) gratefully acknowledges the following donations and loans”, 28 September 1941.

44 Ibid.

45 RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes, 10 June 1941.

46 RPANL, MG 637 B1, “War Services Association gratefully acknowledges,” 28 September 1941.

47 Ibid.; RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes, 8 July 1941.

48 RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, 23 September 1941.

49 RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, 8 November 1940.

50 RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, 11 March 1941.


52 RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes, 10 June 1941; RPANL, MG 637 B2, Minutes of the Regular Weekly Meeting of the Executive, 18 November 1941.

53 RPANL, MG 637 B2, Minutes of the Regular Weekly Meeting of the St. John’s War Services Association, 28 October 1941.

54 RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes, 8 July 1941.

55 RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, 18 February 1941.

56 RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes, 17 June 1941.

57 RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes, 25 February 1941.

58 RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, 4 February 1941.

59 RPANL, MG 637 B1, Minutes, 10 June 1941

60 RPANL, MG 637 B2, Minutes of the Regular Weekly Meeting of the Executive, 18 November 1941.