

Voluntary Aid Detachment member Bertha Bartlett lies in the Newfoundland, Number 759, Plot of the Wandsworth (Earsfield) Cemetery.

The following has been copied from the *First Aid Journal 1916-1917*, a monthly magazine issued in the United Kingdom for members of the St. John Ambulance, the British Red Cross Society and the St. Andrew's Association and may be found on the website of the *Museum of the Order of St. John*.

December 1916 - V.A.D. members who do not need salaries are urgently required. All members appointed by *Devonshire House* have their expenses paid, with the exception of uniform. We want unpaid members for auxiliary hospitals at home, and we want them for work under the Joint Committee abroad.

It will be necessary to limit our spheres of V.A.D. activity unless gentlewomen volunteer without delay to help us keep our formations staffed with willing workers. The Joint Committee units are made up of members who have the true V.A.D. spirit. They must be willing to do anything from the daily drudgery of an idle unit to cooking, nursing, driving cars, and generally making themselves useful with house, pantry, secretarial work, or whatever helps most at the minute.

There is no room for grumblers or for members who will not undertake to do as they are told or keep to the rules.

Specialists such as motor-drivers and experienced cooks, will be used for their work, but what we want also are members who will do house-work, and pantry-work, or the odd jobs of rest stations, aid posts, recreation rooms for convalescents, clubs for nurses, etc. Members with hospital experience are needed for Rest Stations, as they must be capable of rendering first aid, and in addition, they may be called upon to do simple dressings for casual out-patients.

All must generously give their services to work under the Red Cross and St. John's, and must not select the place or type of work they prefer.

Please send in your name for this Reserve if you can afford to do so. You will find further details in terms of service to be obtained at Devonshire House, Piccadilly.

We accept members over the age of 19 for work outside the wards.



(Signed *Katherine Furse*
Commandant in Chief, Women's V.A.D. 28.11.16.)

(Right above: *Devonshire House, the London residence of the Duke of Devonshire, seen here in 1906, was used by the British Red Cross Society during the Great War. – The image is from Wikipedia.*)

The Voluntary Aid Detachment was formed in 1909 by the afore-mentioned societies and was re-organized by October of 1914 for war-time service. Its members mainly comprised, as suggested above, ladies who were able to give their time and labour voluntarily without any expectation of remuneration. The idea spread overseas to the farther reaches of the British Empire – the Empire to later become the British Commonwealth – some two thousand in all eventually enrolling in Canada and the more modest number of about forty from the Dominion of Newfoundland.

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The work at first was menial in nature but as the need grew in the military medical services, the VADs, some of them already trained in nursing, were to take a place in the various institutions and medical facilities established at home, in the United Kingdom and in the different theatres of war.

At first the (British) Army and its Nursing Services were opposed to the VADs being used in a medical role; it was felt that personnel coming from the upper classes of society – as they were likely to be if they were in no need of recompense – would shy from not only the hard work but perhaps also from a harsh medical environment. This attitude was to continue during to some extent during the entire conflict although by the War's end the VADs had garnered a great deal of respect as well – although they were never fully accepted by the Canadian military medical authorities.

And in addition to their sacrifices of time and effort made in strenuous circumstances, a number of these workers were to share the inflictions of their charges and were to pass away while in service. Such was the case of two of the Newfoundland volunteers of whom Bertha Bartlett was one.

She had been born in 1894 in the Conception Bay community of Brigus, the mainstay of which was the fishery and commerce utilizing the sailing-schooner which in Brigus became numerous. Her family appears to have been, if not immensely rich, to have been comfortably well-off. According to the few papers available, her branch of the Bartlett lineage had owned a 'room', premises, gear and boats at Bateau, Labrador, as well as houses, a farm and land in Brigus.

She had also apparently been formally educated, perhaps in her earlier years at the Methodist* school at Brigus. However there seems to be little in any further information about Miss Bartlett before the time of her arrival in the capital city with the intention of volunteering for overseas service.

**Her parents appear to have been Church of England – in which church they were married - but may, like many others, have turned to Methodism because of the dearth of Anglican ministers in the area.*

Her later travelling companion, Frances Cluett of Belleoram of whom more later, was in October of 1916 to receive five weeks of intensive first aid and other basic medical training from Dr. Reeves at the *Seamen's Institute* in St. John's – and the subsequent examination by Dr. Burden - prior to her departure overseas and Bertha Bartlett was surely to undergo the same procedures*.



**Perhaps because of these undertakings, she and many of the other lady volunteers felt that they could record themselves as being 'nurses'. However, a professional nurse had to – and is still obliged to – follow a prescribed course of several years. These ladies are documented in Army records as 'VADs' and their subsequent duties were far from being those of a graduate in nursing. The number of casualties encouraged the British to take on VADs for medical work whereas the Canadian Army Medical Corps did not employ VADs until 1916(?) but even then not in a medical capacity.*

(Preceding page: *The 'Seamen's Institute' which still stands today (2023), was opened officially on July 15, 1912, as a hostel for visiting seamen and their families in the capital city, its construction largely due to the involvement of the Grenfell Association of America. It has since served as a hospital, lecture-hall, temporary morgue and soldiers' residence. – The photograph, circa 1920(?), is from the nl.history.ca web-site.*)

It was thirteen days before her twenty-second birthday, on Thursday, November 9, that Bertha Bartlett departed from St John's on the trans-Island express train on her way to New York via Port aux Basques. She travelled in the company of three other VAD members, Misses Henrietta Mary Gallishaw, Frances (*Fanny*) Cluett* and Eda Clara Janes**.

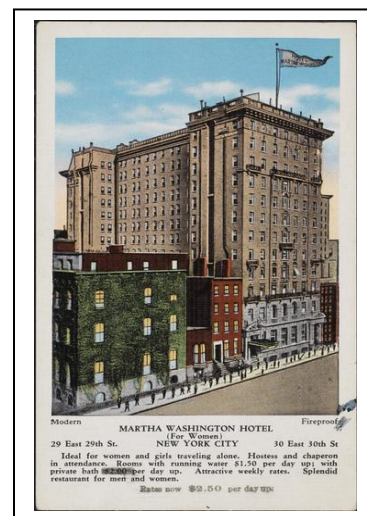
**The departure of three of the ladies by train from the capital was recorded by a reporter of the St. John's newspaper 'The Evening Telegram' who neglected to mention Miss Cluett. Memorial University's 'Luminus', Winter of 1915 edition, which recounts much of Miss Cluett's story, did not make the same mistake.*

***There was to be another person accompanying the quartet: Miss (Alice?) Hewell, a professional nurse from Portsmouth, England, had just spent four years working at the 'Asylum' in St. John's and had decided to return home at her own expense. It was felt by the 'Joint Committee' authorities that she would be a suitable overseer for the upcoming journey and she was thus engaged – and the cost of her passage in First-Class met by the same 'Joint Committee'.*

Thus having traversed the island by train on November 9-10 and then the *Cabot Strait* on board the *Reid Newfoundland Company* vessel *Kyle* on the night of November 10-11, the now-five were to await some twenty-four hours in North Sydney, Cape Breton, before continuing on by rail to New York.

Two days following, they alighted (or *alit*) on Tuesday, November 14, in *Grand Central Station*, New York, whereupon Miss Janes temporarily left the group to take advantage of an invitation to board with them, made by friends (or family – or both) in the neighbourhood of Brooklyn.

The four remaining travellers were then to make their way to the *Hotel Martha Washington* located on 29th Street East where they were met by a further young lady from Newfoundland – she likely having arrived from St. John's on the *Stephano* -, Miss Mollie Shea, also about to cross the Atlantic, but not to serve in any quasi-medical capacity but as bridesmaid to a friend in the area of Dublin – she was also to travel in First-Class.



(Right above: *The 'Hotel Martha Washington' at the time of the Newfoundland ladies' stay there was a relatively new facility with many modern amenities. It was, however, reserved for the use of only women, a policy which was not to change until the year 1998. – The image is from the ny.curbed.com web-site.*)

(continued)

Miss Shea was now to share a room in the hotel with our Miss Bertha Bartlett and to do the rounds of the city with her and the others in the next several days – those days amounted to three in all, during which they also had to finalize their travel documents and their baggage arrangements.

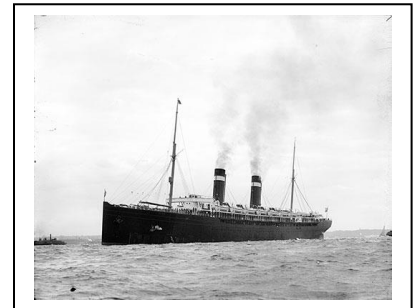
On the morning of Saturday, November 18 of 1916, the six Newfoundland ladies – Miss Janes was once again now one of the party – embarked onto the *American Lines* steamer *St. Paul* which was then to pull away from the dock-side at or about noon of that same day for what was to be an uneventful eight-day, if sometimes bumpy, crossing of the ocean to the English port-city of Liverpool.

The only personal records apparently available of that passage were made by Miss Cluett who, struck by the splendour of the vessel, penned several pages for her mother of effusive descriptions of the luxury of the ship' appointments. This was particularly true of the dining-room where, given that the Americans were not yet at war, rationing was unknown – and even after April of 1917* rationing was to be unknown in that country – and that this was the First-Class quarters, the magnificence of the occasion left the writer struggling for words.

**America declared war on April 6, 1917.*

She notes, however, that Miss Janes was often to find it all overwhelming and once, while at the dinner-table, expressed a desire to be able have some *Fish & Brewis* rather than all the magnificence that was on offer.

Note: Much of the above information a propos the journey from Newfoundland to England – and on other occasions - is to be found in a series of letters sent by Frances Cluett to her mother at Belleorum. These documents are currently held by Memorial University of Newfoundland which has made them available on-line to the public.



(Right above: *The photograph of the ship 'St. Paul' is from the ggarchives.com website.*)

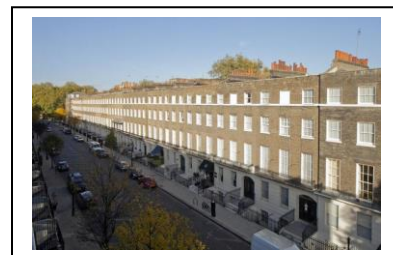
The trans-Atlantic liner *St. Paul* arrived from New York at Liverpool on November 26 of 1916 whereupon Miss Shea took her leave to find her way to Ireland while the remaining five boarded a train in Third-Class accommodation which, according to Miss Cluett's letter of the time suggests was not only comfortable but *good enough for anyone*.

They were then to steam on their way to the capital city of the British Empire: London.

**The ladies had to pay their own way to London – which, so says Miss Cluett, is why they travelled in Third Class. Until that point, their journey had apparently been entirely subsidized by 'Red Cross Society and St. John Ambulance Association Joint War Committee' funds to which had been appended the sum of seventy-five dollars per person to defray other costs – of which one was the above-mentioned train journey from Liverpool to London. Apparently that amount was nonetheless more than sufficient – particularly since Miss Janes had incurred very few, if any, expenses in New York.*

As of London, her mission completed, Miss Hewell is heard of no more, having then presumably continued on her way home to Portsmouth. The group of four Newfoundland VADs thereupon reported to *Queen Mary's Hostel for Nurses* where they – all but one, Miss Janes, as seen further below - were to await orders as to their subsequent posting which would come about on or about December 5-6.

Queen Mary's Hostel* had by that time been established in Number 40, Bedford Place, adjacent to the *British Museum*, to be a welcoming refuge for nurses, many of whom had travelled from around the globe - Newfoundland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are cited**. However, it was not only for newcomers; nurses already having served – some of them survivors from sunken hospital ships – were also to spend time there.



In the case of the arriving Newfoundlanders, they were to remain there for just days before their dispatch to nursing service*.

(Right above: *This is Bedford Place and the third door on the right going away from the camera is Number 39-40, today a hotel. Although the picture is recent, the buildings are those that were standing there at the time of the Great War. – The image is from Wikipedia via Google.*)

**Mary of Teck, the wife of the reigning monarch of the time, George V.*

***The Newfoundland girls at one point were apparently mistaken for a detachment of nurses scheduled to arrive from South Africa.*

Where her official enlistment into the *Territorial Forces Nursing Service** took place is unclear but it seemingly took place on December 6, eleven days following her disembarkation in Liverpool. Since all four of the above-cited Newfoundland VADs were then to serve alongside one another at a first posting in Lincolnshire, it is not unlikely that all four underwent the formality together perhaps before they travelled to the cathedral city of Lincoln on England's East Coast.

**One of several nursing services attached to the Army, the two other major ones being the 'Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service*

Miss Janes at this time was apparently granted a leave of absence – perhaps fourteen days - to visit her brother, Albert Evelyn, in Scotland at the Regimental Depot, Ayr, where he, one of the wounded at Beaumont-Hamel, had been since his recent convalescence*. She is recorded as having then reported *to duty* at the 4th Northern General Hospital, and joined her fellow Newfoundlanders, on December 20, 1916.

**He was later to be decorated at the 'Battle of Cambrai' – awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal – but was then recorded as having 'died of wounds' in hospital in Belgium in April of 1918. (His story is to be found in the database 'Died in Service'.*

Note: Frances Cluett is likely the most recognized name among Newfoundland's VADs. She was to eventually to serve in France at the 10th General Hospital on the Rouen race-course – the facility perhaps British rather than Canadian as the 10th Canadian General appears to have been stationed at the English coastal town of Brighton – before transferring to Constantinople in 1918. However, it is likely her letters to home – papers relating her thoughts on her myriad experiences, particularly in France and later published under the title 'Your Daughter Fanny' - for which she is best known. (her story is to be found elsewhere in this database.)



(Right: The photograph of Frances Cluett has been drawn from the Newfoundland Provincial Archives – is this her VAD walking-out uniform?)

On August 6 of 1914, two days subsequent to the British – and thus Newfoundland* - Declaration of War, the Lincoln Grammar School had been taken over by the 4th Northern General Hospital, and in seven months was to have equipped itself with over a thousand beds. Preparation and organization, however, had begun as early as six years previous to this time, in 1908, with initial training for nursing staff having commenced the following year in other facilities in not-distant York.

***Great Britain, at the time in charge of Foreign Affairs for all of her Dominions, declared War on August 4, 1914, on behalf of all her Empire. This was not to be so at the outset of the Second World War except in the case of Newfoundland.**



(Right: The photograph of the New Lincoln Grammar School become hospital is from an article by Peter Harrod entitled 'Life at the 4th Northern General Hospital' found in the christshospital.lincs.sch.uk web-site.)

Only a month after having been requisitioned, the newly-opened wards and the recently-built huts on the school's sports fields had started to fill, the first one-hundred five casualties from the Continent having arrived through the port of Southampton on the evening of that September 13. By the end of the War some forty-five thousand men had been treated there.

It is perhaps a testament to the treatment dispensed there during the period of the Great War, that Lincoln's Newport Cemetery nearby is the last resting-place of just one-hundred thirty-nine former patients.



(Right: A further photograph of not very high quality from the same source as the one above and which shows some of the aforementioned temporary huts which were some of the wards of the 4th Northern General Hospital)

The following is an excerpt from the article named immediately above and is of interest because its author was a VAD* volunteer from Newfoundland even though she is identified as having been Canadian – an error that is found in many relevant and otherwise reliable resources including the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Imperial War Museum. The above-cited magazine *Life at the 4th NGL* was issued only between October of 1916 and September of the following year, 1917, the September issue likely the one from which the excerpt is drawn – deduced from information found three asterisks below.

**Apparently the first Voluntary Aid Detachment volunteers did not arrive for duty at Lincoln until May 14 of 1915, to replace nursing staff who had been ordered to the Continent.*

'One of the most interesting articles in the publication is one by E. Bethune, from St John's, Newfoundland, entitled 'First Impressions of a VAD'. In it she describes the delightful location of the Hospital, situated amidst green fields, trees and open spaces, giving a sense of rest and freedom bound to react beneficially on the patients received there. Wragby Road would of course have been a leafy lane in those days, and Lincoln Grammar School was on the outskirts of the city. The huts and tents were a surprise to one accustomed to the usual type of city hospital, and the order to work in the tents, with its challenge to cleanliness, was unnerving. However after a few hours of work in that environment, all fears were apparently dispelled, and the charm of tent hospital life 'grips one with an increasing fascination'.*

The fine small gardens scattered about in all directions added much to the appearance and pleasure of the tent life everywhere.

**Likely the site of the 4th Northern Hospital although, perhaps surprisingly, this is disputed in some sources.*

Miss Bethune described the good fellowship, unity and helpfulness existing between the nurses and Sisters, making each day's work a pleasure, and helping to spare her the dreadful feeling of being a stranger in a foreign land. She went on to marvel at the spirit of the men who had been at the Front. Folks were expected to endure necessary pain, but it was a revelation to her that the men exuded such marvellous cheerfulness and readiness to help despite severe pain and enforced idleness. As a Canadian, she described the combination of cheerfulness, patience and 'grit' as a 'fair sample of the British spirit' The 'stiff upper lip'! In a scarce-veiled criticism of the 'idlers' who were calling out for an end to the war and peace at any price, she concluded by suggesting that they might see and appreciate the spirit of those who were paying the price, and doing their bit to hasten the coming of victory, and honourable peace for humanity.'*

**Possibly written by Ella Bethune who served from August of 1917 until March of 1919, firstly at the 4th Northern General Hospital before being transferred to France to the (British) 74th General Hospital at Trouville.*

It is of course impossible to know if Bertha Bartlett, who was not very likely to have met or known Miss Bethune, except perhaps back in Newfoundland, would have been in total agreement with her. But they may have shared similar opinions on the amount of work that was their daily lot. Miss Cluett is once more responsible for much of what follows:

Every day appears to have been a long day at the 4th Northern General Hospital for not only the medical staff but also for those who were not, which included the included the Newfoundlanders: up at five-thirty and in the wards at seven – the hospital one mile distant from the nurses' and the VADs' hostel; thirty minutes for breakfast; then first duties: scrubbing of tables and benches; sorting of all items to be laundered; sweeping and dusting; change of towels; preparation of hot water, soap and afore-mentioned towels; first change of dressings; cleaning of pantry (kitchen area) and bathrooms; sterilization of instruments.

At ten o'clock the patients were served a first *lunch* including hot milk. The mid-day meal for patients was at twelve-thirty, during which many needed assistance with their eating of it; collection and cleaning of dishes (no paper plates in those days).

Those members of staff who still had any appetite had their main meal of the day at or about two o'clock.

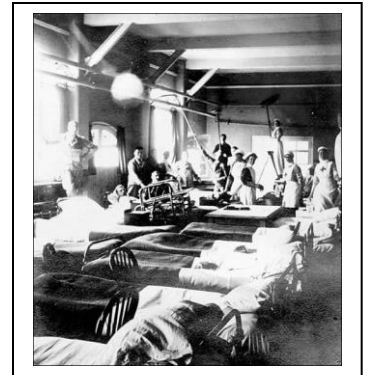
This was followed by washing of faces, hands and backs and the making of beds, linen changed each day; another *lunch* for patients followed which included the making of several *special* teas as a treat for the patients.

A five o'clock *lunch* for staff was followed thirty minutes later by the preparation and change of dressings, administrations of medications, and then a general clean-up, all of which terminated at or about eight-o'clock in the evening.

Then came the walk to the hostel which was not always a pleasure, depending on the mood of the weather gods.

The VADs were allowed three hours *off duty* each day after work, one half-day *off duty* per week and a full day *off duty* once a month but there was to be no half-day during the week during which the full day was chosen.

It has been difficult to ascertain the type of patients who entered into the 4th Northern General Hospital. It would appear that at the outset of the Great War, before the British had established large medical complexes on the Continent as they were later to do in and about such places as Boulogne, Étaples and Rouen that many casualties who would later be treated in those places, were returned to England, often accompanied by wounded Belgian troops. As time passed, those requiring long-term care received the necessary immediate treatment in France and Belgium to allow for their return to the United Kingdom.



(Right above: *A ward at the Ascot Military Hospital – apparently a convalescent facility, in the town of the same name, showing both patients and their VAD attendants. – The photograph is from a collection taken by Newfoundland Volunteer Ruby Ayre during the first years of her service there during the Great War, held by Memorial University which has made it available on-line.)*

Thus many of the facilities back across the channel in England were to become more attuned to treatment convalescent and rehabilitational – medically and psychiatrically – in nature. In fact, special facilities were created to satisfy the need although, however, the coast of Lincolnshire was at times the victim of German air-raids, and wounded civilians were to be added to the tasks of the various medical staffs.

Some seven months after having reported *to duty* at Lincoln, VAD Bertha Bartlett's services were required elsewhere, in the south-eastern London Borough of Southwark as of July of 1917, at the Bermondsey Military Hospital. Here it would be that her war-time career was to end some sixteen months later.

Less than a century before, most human activity in the area had been agricultural, the exception having been along the Thames where docks and accompanying installations had grown up as well as a residential area for those who worked there. It was not an affluent community and poor-houses were a part of its fabric. In 1900 a new facility was built to serve as a hospital for those in need as well as a residence for the less-fortunate.

This was the St. Olave's Union Workhouse which was to also be known as the Bermondsey Institution that was, during the course of the Great War, to become the Bermondsey Military Hospital equipped with some eight-hundred beds and to which, having left Lincoln on July 4, Nurse Bartlett was assigned on July 23, 1917*.



**Where she was to spend the intervening days from July 4, has not been ascertained by the author; perhaps she again found herself at Queen Mary's Hostel.*

(Right above: This aerial view of the buildings which served as Bermondsey Military Hospital during the Great War, this photograph likely taken in the Nineteen-Thirties – by that time likely to have changed somewhat from the years of war-time service – is taken from the 'workhouses.org.uk' web-site.)



(Right above: This second photograph, this of one of the main buildings - most of which no longer exist – and here seen in 1916, is from the same source as the one above, the 'workhouses.org.uk' web-site.)

Apart from the customary wards adapted for the care of wounded military personnel, Bermondsey had also a wing which was dedicated to the treatment of infectious diseases. As of the month of April of 1918, many of the patients were to be Royal Fusiliers who had returned from service in Africa and who were stricken with the recurring problem of malaria.

However, by that time the disease known as the *Spanish 'Flu* - which was to evolve into a pandemic - was taking hold and the Bermondsey Military Hospital was to play a role in this new battle.

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(Right: *This photograph from a Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) web-site – Heroic Newfoundland Nurse Remembered 100 years on - is also found in a number of other sources but, apart from it being of Nurse Bartlett, one presumes, in the company of a number of patients in hospital uniform**, there appears to be no explanatory caption to accompany it. The cap badge of the soldier sitting at right may be of a light infantry regiment but this is far from certain and is of no real help.)



It was reportedly during her period of service at Bermondsey that Nurse Bartlett contracted the *Spanish 'Flu* on or about October 14 of that 1918; it is perhaps to be assumed that she received treatment in the hospital where she was at work.



(Right: *This photograph, presumably of VAD Nursing Sister Bertha Bartlett, has been extracted from the group image seen above which offers no accompanying information.*)

The daughter of Robert Bartlett, recorded as having been both a fisherman and a carpenter, and of Mary (also found as *May*) Susannah Bartlett (née *Wilcox**) of the Conception Bay community of Brigus, District of Port de Grave, she was also sister to Elsie, Winnifred-Hilliker, Bessie and Evelyn (twin), to Clarence-Wilcox, Robert-Malcolm, Mary-Irene, Dorothy, Ruth and perhaps Lillian.

**The couple had been married in Brigus on April 9 of 1890.*

VAD Bertha Bartlett is recorded as having *died of sickness* on November 3, 1918, in the aforesaid Bermondsey Military Hospital, a victim of the *Spanish 'Flu*, and was subsequently buried in the Newfoundland Plot of the Wandsworth (*Earlsfield*) Cemetery (also known as *Magdalen Road Cemetery*). She had enlisted at the age of some twenty-two years: date of birth in Brigus, Newfoundland, November 14, 1894.

VAD Bertha Bartlett was entitled to only the British War Medal (seen right) for her *overseas service*, as the Inter-Allied War Medal (also known as the *Victory Medal*) which some source attribute to her, required any recipient to have served in a *theatre of war* - which the British Isles were not.



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated - December 28, 2022.