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Two Letters Concerning Home Leave for the Newfoundland Regiments in World War II

Christopher Crocker

In June 1944, while stationed in Italy with the 166th Newfoundland Field Regiment Royal Artillery, Gunner Wilfred Isaiah Hann (service number: 970503) composed a letter addressed to Anthony Eden, the member for Warwick and Leamington and Foreign Secretary. As Hann explains in his letter, Eden was onsite in Liverpool four years prior — on 25 April 1940 to be precise — for the arrival of the first contingent of Newfoundland’s Royal Artillery. This first contingent of 403 volunteers, which left by train for Port-aux-Basques from St. John’s on 14 April 1940, consisted of men from St. John’s district, Carbonear, Holyrood, and Bell Island.¹

The arrival of the Newfoundlanders in Liverpool was a jubilant affair. According to local newspapers, many of the men “threw their trilby hats and caps into the water” and sang “Roll out the barrel” as their shipped approached.² Eden, who was Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs at the time, welcomed the first contingent of Newfoundlanders and addressed them with a rousing speech invoking Empire and Newfoundland’s long history of support for British military activity:

Newfoundland, whose sons have fought side by side with the Englishmen since the days of the Tudors, responded at

once to the call that echoed round the world last September. This call was, of course, in no sense a command. It was a call to your own hearts, a call to voluntary service in a noble cause; and your answer has been clear and firm.³

Eden went on to note the many Newfoundlanders who had volunteered for naval service, for the RAF, and as loggers. He also recalled the Royal Newfoundland Regiment's "distinguished" service at Gallipoli and in France during World War I as well as the fact that the youngest recipient of the Victoria Cross was a Newfoundlander.⁴

In the letter he sent to Eden four years after these events, Gunner Wilfred Isaiah Hann recalls his own arrival in Liverpool as a part of the second contingent of Newfoundland troops on 22 May 1940.⁵ This second contingent comprised 212 men from Corner Brook, Grand Falls, and other parts of Western and Central Newfoundland.⁶ Gunner Hann recalls to Eden how, shortly after his arrival in Liverpool, he "happened to see an old issue of a local paper with [Eden's] speech." He explains that "The words that interested me most were these; 'If you ever have any complaints do not hesitate to let me know.'" The remainder of Hann's letter, which compares the situation of the Newfoundland troops with those of other Dominion forces, comprises a petition for the granting of home leave for the 166th Regiment, whose members by that time had been away from Newfoundland for more than four years. Near the end of his letter, Gunner Hann raises the additional issue of local leave for the regiment but writes that home leave is his main concern.

Gunner Hann, my own maternal grandfather, was born in Grand Falls on 23 or 24 November 1918 to Ella May (née Wiseman) and Permanius Hann. Sadly, Ella May died that same week from the Spanish flu.⁷ As a result, Wilfred Isaiah (or Bill, as he was known) and his brother Harold, who was just two years old at the time, were adopted by relatives also living in Grand Falls. The couple's two eldest children, Eric and Elsie, stayed with and were raised by their father, who married Mary Osmond, mother of daughter Dulcie, in 1921. According to undocumented family lore, Bill was actually on the verge of being adopted

by an American family when his aunt and uncle, Martha (née Russell) and Chesley Hann, intervened and brought him into their family, which at the time already consisted of four daughters, Edith, Doris, Mary, and Dorcas (or Katherine). Bill's brother Harold went to live with another of his father's brothers, Jethro, and his wife Naomi.⁸

At the time of Bill's birth, Chesley was employed at the Grand Falls Pulp and Paper Mill, though he had served as an edger man in the Newfoundland Forestry Companies in World War I (service number: 8406).⁹ Chesley's brother William, the youngest in the family, served in the Royal Newfoundland Regiment (service number: 1830). He was wounded at Beaumont Hamel on 1 July 1916 and was later killed in action in Belgium on 9 October 1917 at the age of 20.¹⁰ Martha and Chesley, who added another son named Victor in 1920, moved their family to Corner Brook in 1929 or 1930. Chesley took up work at the town's pulp and paper mill, which opened in 1925, while Martha continued to be heavily involved in the Lodges of the Ladies' Orange Benevolent Association. Through her work, she eventually became known to all her Lodge sisters as "Mother of the Lodge."¹¹ Following the completion of his education at the Corner Brook Public School in 1936, Bill was employed at the Hilltop Store on Broadway, where he would eventually become manager of the store's men's and boys' clothing department.¹² In 1940, together with his brothers Harold and Victor, Bill volunteered to enlist in the 57th Heavy Regiment Royal Artillery. Together with the other volunteers from the area, the three brothers departed from Corner Brook for Port-aux-Basques by train on 12 May 1940, which was Mother's Day.

Bill, his two brothers, and the other volunteers in the second contingent of Newfoundland recruits arrived in Liverpool on 22 May to join up with their compatriots. After receiving initial training in Sussex, the Newfoundland troops served on coastal defence in Norfolk. Following this, the defensive 57th Heavy Regiment became the offensive 166th Newfoundland Field Regiment and entered into training, first in England and then in Scotland. In June of 1940, a few weeks after Bill and the other volunteers from western and central Newfoundland left for England, the Royal Artillery formed the 59th Newfoundland

Heavy Regiment to accommodate new volunteer recruits.¹³ The 59th Regiment, which likewise began as a defensive regiment before shifting to an offensive one, remained in England until July 1944, after which they took part in the Battle of Normandy. Following this, they saw action in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany until the end of the war in Europe in May 1945.¹⁴

While training in Scotland with the 166th Newfoundland Field Regiment, Bill met Mary Robertson Mann of Glasgow, daughter of Marion (née Provan) and John Mann. Bill's elder sister Elsie, having married a Scot who later died at sea, was living in Glasgow at the time. Mary Mann was working as a babysitter for Bill's sister Elsie, which is how the two met. The two married in Glasgow on 8 October 1942 but would not see each other again for two and a half years after the 166th Regiment left for North Africa in January 1943.¹⁵ After Allied forces, which included the 166th Regiment, gained control of North Africa in May 1943, the Newfoundland troops took part in the invasion of Sicily and continued to see action along the Italian Peninsula for the next two years. It was during this period that Gunner Bill Hann composed and sent his letter to Anthony Eden requesting home leave for the Newfoundlanders.

Though addressed to Eden, it appears that Gunner Hann's letter and the issue it raised found its way to Quintin Hogg, member for Oxford. On 14 November 1944, Hogg raised the question of home leave for the Newfoundland Forces in Parliament to the member for South Derbyshire and Under-Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs Paul Emrys-Evans. Hogg asked whether the Under-Secretary "will arrange that Newfoundland Forces should have the same facilities for home leave as Canadian or other Dominion Forces." The question spurred the following exchange in the House of Commons:

Mr. Emrys-Evans: The Newfoundland Forces to which the hon. Member refers are units of the United Kingdom Forces, and as such are subject to the same leave conditions

as United Kingdom troops. At the present moment members of the United Kingdom Forces are, where possible, being sent home after 4¾ years continuous overseas service. Only in very few cases have serving Newfoundlanders been away from home for as long as this, and the grant of home leave in these cases is now under consideration.

Mr. Hogg: Do I understand that, having taken over the administration of Newfoundland, we now proceed to make their inhabitants suffer from the same restrictions as people born in this country, instead of classing them as a Dominion?

Mr. Emrys-Evans: No, Sir; that is not the position. I understand that in the case of Canada, for example, the scheme is under consideration, but it has not been carried through yet. The position is exactly the same.

Mr. Hogg: Am I not right in saying that the Canadian and other Dominion Forces have home leave? Why should the Dominion of Newfoundland be treated differently from the other Dominions?

Mr. Emrys-Evans: They are not being treated differently from the others.¹⁶

Hogg was not content, however, with the rather dismissive response from the Right Honourable member for South Derbyshire. He evidently raised the issue first put forth to him by Gunner Hann once again in a letter he sent to Emrys-Evans in February 1945. At the same time, or perhaps in an earlier communication, Hogg had also sent Gunner's Hann's letter to the member from South Derbyshire. Just a few weeks later, on 21 March 1945, Emrys-Evans responded to Hogg with a letter of his own. In his letter, Emrys-Evans outlines the details of a home leave scheme for the Newfoundland regiments,

which he explains had been approved by the War Office. According to despatches from the 166th Regiment, news of the home leave scheme for the Newfoundlanders was already communicated to the regiment on 18 February and the first leave party embarked for Newfoundland on 27 February.¹⁷ A few weeks later, Hogg and Emrys-Evans made the home leave scheme public in the following exchange that took place in the House of Commons on 10 April 1945:

Mr. Quintin Hogg asked the Under-Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs whether he will give particulars of the home leave scheme now approved for the Newfoundland regiments.

The Under-Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs (Mr. Emrys-Evans): The scheme provides that all men in the two Artillery Regiments who have been absent from Newfoundland for 4½ years shall be entitled to 28 days of home leave exclusive of time spent in travelling, or, in the case of soldiers with wives or parents in this country, to a similar period of leave here, if they so prefer. Subject to reinforcements being available and to operational requirements, a total of 100 men will be allowed to return to Newfoundland each month, 68 being taken from the regiment in Italy, 17 from the Heavy Regiment in Western Europe, and 15 from the Newfoundland Royal Artillery Depot in this country.

Mr. Hogg: May I ask if my hon. Friend will consider an extension of the benefits of this welcome scheme to Newfoundlanders in other units, including the R.A.F.?

Mr. Emrys-Evans: I will go into that question.¹⁸

The exchange between the two members in the House of Commons rehashes the same details of the home leave scheme Emrys-Evans outlined in the letter he had sent to Hogg a few weeks earlier.

While Gunner Hann's petition focused specifically on his own regiment, the new home leave scheme accommodated both the 166th and 59th regiments as well as Newfoundlanders working at the depot in Britain. Not mentioned in the exchange, however, was the issue of local leave, which Gunner Hann had admitted was not as big a concern for him and his compatriots as the home leave issue. Still, in his letter, Emrys-Evans assured Hogg that he would continue to communicate with the War Office concerning this "further point which Gunner Hann made in his letter." The member for South Derbyshire concludes his letter by acknowledging the return of Gunner Hann's letter, which was later returned to Hann himself by the member for Oxford along with Emrys-Evans's letter. Hann kept the two letters his whole life, and they remain in his family's possession today.

Gunner Hann himself was granted home leave just a few weeks later and found himself in Newfoundland when the war in Europe ended on 8 May 1945. His wife Mary, whom he had not seen for two and a half years, was still in Scotland. Hann could not gain permission to travel back to Scotland, so Mary secured passage across the Atlantic on the SS *Bayano*. She departed from Avonmouth along with several other war brides on 12 July 1945.¹⁹ The ship intended to dock in Nova Scotia but was diverted to Montreal due to the Bedford Magazine explosion of 18–19 July in the Halifax harbour, which occurred when a barge exploded and set off a chain reaction of explosions and fires. Bill and Mary were finally reunited when the *Bayano* arrived in Montreal. As Mary later recalled, Bill greeted her with "a great big bunch of roses which he threw, one by one, at me on the ship."²⁰ On returning to Newfoundland, Bill had a successful career in the furniture and hotel businesses and served on Corner Brook City Council as both a counsellor and deputy mayor. He and Mary had five children together and celebrated their seventieth wedding anniversary a few months before Bill died at the age of 94 on 9 January 2013. Mary died six years later, on 28 January 2019 at the age of 98.

When Bill Hann reflected on his time in Italy during the war, on numerous occasions in private but also, for example, for the *Western Star*

in 1979, he remarked that when “he got home leave for the 166th and 59th regiments who were serving in Western Europe” it was one of two things he will always remember. The other was when he travelled to the Vatican and met and received a special blessing for his friends, family, and for himself from Pope Pius XII.²¹ The UK parliamentary transcripts (Hansard) and the 166th regimental despatches tell only a part of the story of how the Newfoundlanders were granted home leave in 1945. According to the despatches, “Agitation for this leave was first started in February 1944 and it took just over twelve months for it to materialise.”²² Once granted, the despatches go on to explain:

The morale of the men rose by leaps and bounds; at last some of them were to get home which they had left some five years before. It was the best tonic that could have been given to their already high level of spirit and morale.²³



Gunner W. I. (Bill) Hann in uniform in 1942
(private family collection)

Gunner Wilfred (Bill) Isaiah Hann was surely not the only Newfoundlander and perhaps not even the first to begin agitating for home leave. However, the two letters transcribed below document the indispensable role that Hann played in bringing the issue to the attention of the House of Commons and eventually securing home leave for the Newfoundlanders in World War II.

DOCUMENTS

**1. Typewritten Letter from Gunner W.I. Hann to Anthony
Eden, 15 June 1944²⁴**

Gnr. Hann W.I. 970503
166th Nfld. Field Regt. R.A.
Italy²⁵
June 15, 1944

Sir Anthony Eden²⁶
C/O British House of Commons
London, England

Dear Sir:

The time has come to remind you of a part of your speech, which you made to the first draft of our Regiment who landed in Liverpool in April 1940, when you welcomed them to the shores of Great Britain. These men, if you recall, were chiefly from St. John's and the East Coast.

I am a member of the second draft, made up chiefly of men from Western and Central Newfoundland. We landed in May month, 1940 and I happened to see an old issue of a local paper with your speech in same. The words that interested me most were these; "If you ever have any complaints do not hesitate to let me know."²⁷ Well it would seem that we are the forgotten regiment, lost in the depths of the huge British Army. We have been away from home now for over four years. The Indians who live many more miles away from here than we do are going home on leave, the Australians, the Canadians, the Newzealanders, are all going home on leave and there is not even a rumour of any home leave for Newfoundlanders.²⁸

I would appreciate it very much if you would do what you can to get home leave for our Regiment. I might add here that even in North Africa and in Italy we are also being treated most unfairly when it

comes to local leave. The latter I am not too interested in at this stage, but I am definitely interested in home leave for our Regiment.

Your early attention to this letter would be appreciated by me and all the men from Newfoundland in the 166th.

Yours very truly,
Wilfred Hann
[handwritten signature]
Gnr. Hann W.I. 970503



Soldiers in Italy in 1945; W. I. (Bill) Hann crouching in front (private family collection)

**2. Typewritten Letter from Paul Emrys-Evans to Quintin Hogg,
21 March 1945**

Dominions Office,

Downing Street, S.W.1.

N. 663/35.

21st March, 1945.

My dear Hogg, [hand-written]

I have now made some further enquiries into the question which you raised in your letter of the 26th February about the granting of home leave to Newfoundlanders serving with the Artillery Regiment in Italy.

Since I replied to your Question in the House of Commons on the 14th November last, details of a home leave scheme for the Newfoundland Regiments have been approved by the War Office. These arrangements provide that all men who have been absent from Newfoundland for 4½ years shall be entitled to 28 days of home leave exclusive of time spent in travelling, or if they so prefer to a similar period of leave in this country. Subject to the availability of re-inforcements and to operational requirements, a total of 100 men will be allowed to return to Newfoundland each month, 68 being taken from the Regiment in Italy and 26 from the Heavy Regiment in Western Europe and 6 from the Newfoundland Depot (R.A.) in this country.²⁹ I think that these arrangements, which are now in force, satisfactorily meet the case.

I should perhaps add that this scheme is not intended as a special privilege for Newfoundlanders alone, but is being or will shortly be applied to other oversea personnel now serving with the United Kingdom Forces.

I am still in communication with the War Office on the further point which Gunner Hann made in his letter to you, namely that the

Newfoundland Regiment in Italy was not being granted its full share of local leave and I will let you know as soon as I have received their views on this point. In the meantime I am returning Gunner Hann's letter.

Yours sincerely [handwritten]

Paul Emrys-Evans [handwritten signature]

Gnr. Hann W.I. 970503
166th Nfld. Field Regt. R.A.
Italy
June 15, 1944

Sir Anthony Eden
C/O British House of Commons
London, England

Dear Sir:

The time has come to remind you of a part of your speech, which you made to the first draft of our Regiment who landed in Liverpool in April 1940, when you welcomed them to the shores of Great Britain. These men, if you recall, were chiefly from St. John's and the East Coast.

I am a member of the second draft, made up chiefly of men from Western and Central Newfoundland. We landed in May month, 1940 and I happened to see an old issue of a local paper with your speech in same. The words that interested me most were these; "If you ever have any complaints do not hesitate to let me know." Well it would seem that we are the forgotten regiment, lost in the depths of the huge British Army. We have been away from home now for over four years. The Indians who live many more miles away from here than we do are going home on leave, the Australians, the Canadians, the Newzealanders, are all going home on leave and there is not even a rumour of any home leave for Newfoundlanders.

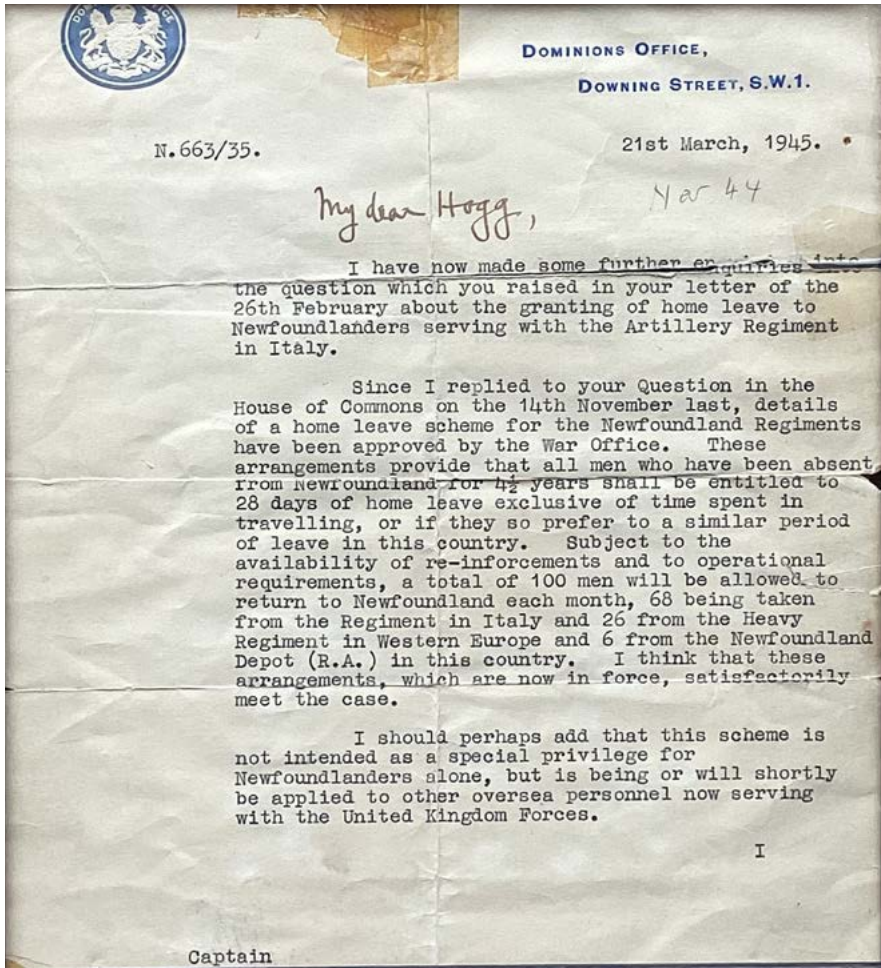
I would appreciate it very much if you would do what you can to get home leave for our Regiment. I might add here that even in North Africa and in Italy we are also being treated most unfairly when it comes to local leave. The latter I am not too interested in at this stage, but I am definitely interested in home leave for our Regiment.

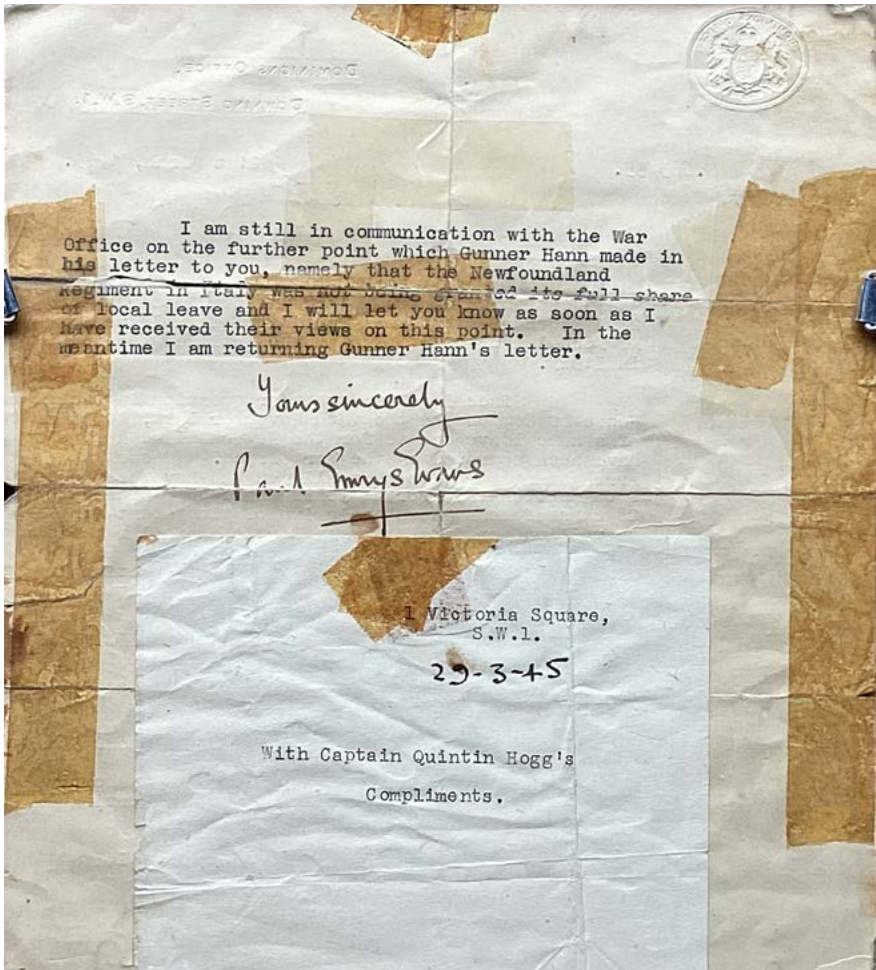
Your early attention to this letter would be appreciated by me and all the men from Newfoundland in the 166th.

Yours very truly,


Gnr. Hann W.I. 970503

Two Letters Concerning Home Leave for the Newfoundland Regiments in World War II





Notes

- 1 Edward W. Chafe, *Gunners World War II: 166th (Newfoundland) Field Regiment Royal Artillery* (St. John's: Creative Publishers, 1987), 1; Allan M. Fraser, *History of the Participation by Newfoundland in World War II*, edited and with an Introduction by Peter Neary and Melvin Baker (St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland Libraries, 2010), 29.
- 2 "Newfoundland Gunners Here, Welcomed by Mr. Anthony Eden," *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 25 Apr. 1940, 1.
- 3 "Gunners Arrive from Newfoundland, Welcomed by Dominions Secretary," *Birmingham Daily Post*, 26 April 1940, 3.
- 4 Eden is referring to Sergeant Tommy Ricketts whom he did not mention specifically by name, at least not according to the record of his speech published in the *Birmingham Daily Post*.
- 5 Chafe, *Gunners World War II*, 1. Both contingents crossed the Atlantic from Quebec on the *Duchess of Richmond*.
- 6 Ibid.; Fraser, *History of the Participation by Newfoundland in World War II*, 29.
- 7 "Vital Records, Register of Deaths, Book 7, 1917–1918 District of Twillingate," *Newfoundland's Grand Banks* (LDS Microfilm), <http://ngb.chebucto.org/Vstats/death-reg-bk-7-1917-1918-tw.shtml> (accessed 20 Sept. 2023).
- 8 "Newfoundland 1921 Census, Grand Falls — PART — 3, Twillingate District," *Newfoundland's Grand Banks* (original transcription by Glynn Hewlett), <http://ngb.chebucto.org/C1921/21-g-falls-3-tw.shtml> (accessed 20 Sept. 2023).
- 9 "Hann, Chesley G.," *The Rooms, Military Service Files* (St. John's: The Rooms Provincial Archives) <https://www.therooms.ca/hann-chesley-g> (accessed 20 Sept. 2023).
- 10 "Hann, William S.," *The Rooms, Military Service Files* (St. John's: The Rooms Provincial Archives) <https://www.therooms.ca/hann-william-s-0> (accessed 20 Sept. 2023).
- 11 "Mrs. Chesley Hann Passes," *Western Star*, 12 Oct. 1963, 3.
- 12 Shelby Gough Sr., "Legion Corner," *Western Star*, 6 June 1979, 7.
- 13 Fraser, *History of the Participation by Newfoundland in World War II*, 29.
- 14 See *ibid.*, 184–96.

- 15 Bill's brother Victor also met and would later marry Mary's younger sister Marion Provan Mann. They married in Scotland on 4 January 1947 and flew from London to Gander, Newfoundland, nine days later. Like Bill and Mary, they settled in Corner Brook; see Lin Crosbie-Marshall, "Of Love and War," *Newfoundland War Brides* (originally appeared in *Downhome Magazine*, Aug. 2007) http://www.nlwarbrides.ca/stories/Hann_Mary.html (accessed 20 Sept. 2023).
- 16 Hansard, vol. 404, col. 1768 (14 Nov. 1944), <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1944-11-14/debates/ecf45ee4-c3a7-435e-8fa4-7db7cd0dcf3f/OralAnswersToQuestions> (accessed 20 Sept. 2023).
- 17 "Despatch No. 13. Period 1st Jan.–28th Feb. 45," *Despatches of the 166th (Newfoundland) Field Regiment, Royal Artillery*, 24.
- 18 Hansard, vol. 409, col. 1651 (10 Apr. 1945), <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1945-04-10/debates/e901bf12-533f-434c-95cd-535d0a6a2f2b/OralAnswersToQuestions> (accessed 20 Sept. 2023).
- 19 "SS *Bayano* (Cunard White Star) travelling from Bristol to Halifax. Embarking at Avonmouth. List of passengers disembarking at Halifax. BT27/1574," *Board of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and Successors: Outwards Passenger Lists* (The National Archives, Kew).
- 20 Crosbie-Marshall, "Of Love and War."
- 21 Gough Sr., "Legion Corner," 7.; see also "Bill I. Hann (Primary Source)," *The Memory Project, The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/mpsb-bill-i-hann> (accessed 20 Sept. 2023).
- 22 "Despatch No. 13. Period 1st Jan.–28th Feb. 45," 24.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 For a digital copy of Gunner Hann's letter, see "Bill I. Hann," *The Memory Project, The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/primarysources/memory-project-6280> (accessed 20 Sept. 2023).
- 25 According to despatches, the 166th was ordered to pull out of action near Chieti in the Adriatic sector on 12 June 1944; see "Despatch No. 9. Period 1 Jun.–31 Jul 44," *Despatches of the 166th (Newfoundland) Field Regiment, Royal Artillery*, 15. This took place on 16 June when the Newfoundlanders moved to a concentration area at Campobasso; see Fraser, *History of the Participation by Newfoundland in World War II*, 177.

- 26 Eden was not actually awarded a knighthood and the accompanying title “Sir” until October 1954; see Victor Rothwell, *Anthony Eden: A Political Biography 1931–57* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 163.
- 27 In addition to the *Birmingham Daily Post*, which appears to contain the whole of Eden’s speech, several other newspapers summarize or contain small excerpts. However, none of the papers I have been able to access through the British Newspaper Archive contain the exact words Gunner Hann cites in his letter.
- 28 The issue of home leave was still a contentious one for Canadian soldiers, for example, and the same was perhaps the case for other Commonwealth forces; see C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Government: The War Policies of Canada, 1939–1945* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1970), 444–46.
- 29 According to the 166th regimental despatches, the first leave party for Newfoundland consisted of “Two Officers and sixty six other ranks [who] were to be at port of embarkation by the 27th February, three other ranks [were] going to ENGLAND where they had been married;” “Despatch No. 13. Period 1st Jan.–28th Feb. 45,” 24.