

From Our Archives:

A Century Ago—Bill & Lois Wilson's Military & Home Front Service

Bill Wilson's Military Education & Service



Lois & Bill, Ft. Ethan Allen, VT, 1916

The Stepping Stones Archives reveal Bill Wilson's military training and service in the First World War. As a cadet at Norwich University, the private military academy in Northfield, VT (known as the "Birthplace of ROTC"), Bill trained for military life. He encountered challenges as a freshman (1914 -15), culminating with an elbow injury that led to a leave of absence in February 1915.

Bill spent his leave back in East Dorset, VT, with his grandfather Fayette Griffith, who was dear to him and who had raised him since age nine. It was during this time that Bill became secretly engaged to

Lois Burnham. He returned to Norwich in February 1916 as a second-semester freshman. Despite some academic challenges and other missteps—including a suspension for refusing to name the guilty parties in a hazing incident ¹—he acclimated to the military lifestyle and did well. Records show that Bill also served simultaneously as a Corporal in the Vermont National Guard (VNG) at Fort Ethan Allen, in Colchester, VT, owing to Norwich's longstanding ties with the VNG.

On April 6, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson formally declared war on the German Empire (followed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire on Dec. 7), and Bill was ready for mobilization. Obligated to give at least two years of military service, Bill and his fellow Norwich cadets were called up for the Great War shortly before graduation and each asked to declare his area of service. Bill's top choices were aviation, infantry, field artillery, the quartermaster corps, or coastal artillery. Seeking to balance patriotic duty with personal safety, Bill chose the Coastal Artillery, which, with its longer training stints and positioning well behind the front line, was generally viewed as less hazardous than some other sectors. "So I put my money on safety, and I was overwhelmed immediately with my first great dose of guilt and shame," said Bill, who was motivated, in part, by his desire to return to his wife-to-be.²

Bill departed for officer's training in Plattsburgh, NY, and then for artillery training at Fort Monroe, VA, where Lois occasionally lodged at a local inn to visit with Bill. Eight weeks later, Bill graduated as Second Lieutenant William Wilson. His next stop was Fort Rodman, in New Bedford, MA, where he attended a party hosted by the prominent Grinnell family. He thought it "rude to refuse" their offer of a drink. Lois later wrote "First Drink" across the top of Bill's letter recounting the occasion.³ "All during college I had backed away from drinking," said Bill. "I was frightened of liquor...my self-consciousness was such that I simply had to take that drink."⁴



Picture of Lois that Bill carried overseas



Bill & Lois Wedding
Portrait, Jan. 1918

Now a member of the 66th Coastal Artillery Company (C.A.C.), Bill's prospects for overseas duty grew daily. He and Lois were married in a hastily arranged ceremony on January 24, 1918, in Brooklyn, NY, and briefly lived together in New Bedford.

In April, the 66th C.A.C. was transferred to Fort Adams, in Newport, RI. On July 18, 1918, by way of New York City, Bill shipped out aboard the old British liner Lancashire for Southampton, England, where his company was stationed for part of the summer. It was there that he made his legendary visit to Winchester Cathedral, recounted in "Bill's Story" in the "Big Book," and read Thomas Thetcher's headstone, eulogizing the Hampshire Grenadier who met his death in

1764 by "drinking cold small beer."⁵

By September 1918, the 66th C.A.C. was in France, with the 1st Squadron training and drilling under Bill. As did others, Bill used a "code" in his letters to elude the censors and let Lois know how close he was to the fighting. If he signed a letter "Billy" with the "y" straight, he was safely behind the lines. A cursive "y" would mean his company had been called to the front.⁶ Bill never had to use a cursive "y" because the anticipated action never came for the 66th. On Nov. 11, 1918, the Armistice of the Great War ended all hostilities.



Bill, France, 1918

Bill's hard work, dedication, and inspirational leadership were highly regarded and affirmed by the 1st Squadron with the gift of an engraved pocket watch, which we will exhibit in 2019. Bill's company remained in France until the following March, when they departed from Bordeaux aboard the S.S. *Powhatan*. In May 1919, he was discharged from Fort Devens, MA, and returned to Lois. She believed his return to her would be the answer to his troubles with alcohol but he continued to drink until 1934.

See our spring 2019 newsletter for a story about Bill's efforts to reenlist during World War II.

Written and researched by Geoff Bermingham.

Special thanks to Joe G. and Roger W. for their contributions to this story.

Endnotes:

^{1, 2, & 4} Bill W., *My First 40 Years*, Hazelden, Center City, MN, 2000, pp. 37, 40 and 42-43.

³ Stepping Stones Archives, WGW Collection 102.4, Box 27, Folder 30, Item 3, p. 1.

⁵ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., NY, Third Edition 1976, p. 1.

⁶ Robert Thomsen, *Bill W.*, Hazelden, Center City, MN, 1975, p. 108.

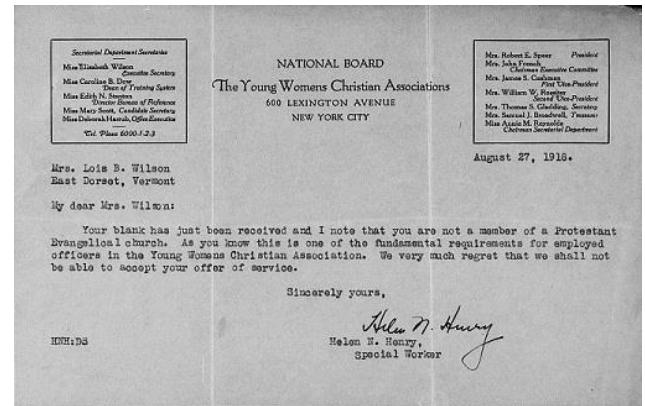
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Continue to next page for a story on Lois' service.

Lois Wilson's Service on the Home Front

Though roles for women in the U.S. military were greatly limited during the First World War, significant contributions were made by millions at home and thousands abroad. Lois Wilson was no exception. Her attempts to have The Young Womens Christian Associations send her overseas so that she could join up with Bill and care for the wounded were twice derailed. First she suffered a miscarriage that required time for her to recuperate. Next, the YWCA decided that her affiliation with the Swedenborgian sect did not fulfill their "Christian" requirement.¹



YWCA National Board Letter to Lois, 1918, Stepping Stones Archives Center, permission required for further distribution



Lois, Occupational Therapist, 1919, Walter Reed General Hospital, Washington DC

Lois enrolled in an accelerated training program in occupational therapy in New York. Upon graduation, she applied to be a War Department Reconstruction Aide and took a position at Walter Reed General Hospital (now Walter Reed National Military Medical Center), Washington, D.C., where she worked in the "shell shock" ward with men suffering from what is now known as post-traumatic stress. "The experience there was often heartbreaking," remembered Lois. "For I saw at close hand what war does to young men, and I kept wondering what it was doing to Bill."² After Bill returned from France in March, Lois landed a

position back home with the Brooklyn Navy Hospital as a physical therapist, making \$150 a month—\$45 more than Bill earned in his first NY job. Their first apartment together was on State Street in Brooklyn, just three blocks from Lois' childhood home at 182 Clinton Street.

Written and researched by Geoff Bermingham.

Endnotes:

¹ & ² William G. Borchert, *The Lois Wilson Story: When Love Is Not Enough*, Hazelden, Center City, MN, 2005, p. 57.

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