6. Bundles for Britain: Sending Warmth (and Woolens) to a Nation at War

On September 1, 1939, the American people awoke to the news that Germany had launched a massive attack on Poland. The Second World War had begun.

As news reports poured in detailing the horrors of modern war—the fear and destruction of aerial bombing; the plight of an ever-increasing flood of war refugees; and the intensifying struggle to keep the Atlantic lifeline to Europe open—ordinary Americans were eager to find ways to aid and comfort their besieged friends across the ocean.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt endorsed this humanitarian impulse within weeks of the outbreak of war in Europe. “While we, as a Nation, are neutral in the present tragic war in Europe,” he said, “I am sure we cannot be indifferent to the suffering inflicted upon the helpless women and children. It is traditional the American people should wish . . . to extend material aid to the helpless victims of war abroad.”

By December 1939, hundreds of small relief organizations began to spring up in various parts of the country. Natalie Wales Latham, a glamorous fixture of New York City society, launched one of these groups. Latham believed that Great Britain was “suffering more than is generally realized” and that the island nation, as defender of “the ideals of liberty,
democracy, human decency and freedom of spirit," deserved all the help Americans could offer.

The British Red Cross had recently issued an urgent appeal for "sweaters, knitted helmets, gloves, and socks." So on January 14, 1940, in a small abandoned office on Park Avenue, she and a small group of like-minded friends began to knit the first of thousands of woolen garments to be bundled together and shipped to the British Isles. Thus was born one of the most popular—and most important—nonprofit wartime relief organizations: Bundles for Britain.

Latham, a divorced mother of two young children, hoped she could inspire others to join her. But she had no idea on that cold January morning when she and her friends took up their needles that Bundles for Britain would eventually include an astonishing 1.5 million volunteers in every city and hamlet of the country—or that they'd produce hundreds of thousands of knitted garments in which the men, women, and children of wartime Britain could wrap themselves for warmth. Within a year's time the program became so popular in America that the dean of a women's college in Illinois complained that knitting the bundles "interferes . . . with a college girl's education now more than any other distraction." The dean continued, "If a student starts talking about a number 5, 6, or 7 these days, she doesn't mean shoes or stockings. All she wants is a pair of new knitting needles."

This was a way for Americans to engage emotionally and practically in the war effort, a potent counterweight to the antiwar, isolationist mood that dominated in the years before the attack on Pearl Harbor brought the country fully into the conflict. Meanwhile, Britons took to looking up the American communities indicated on the labels of the knitwear they received, curious about the people who made it. Bundles for Britain became a way to knit together the people of Britain and America, nurturing an affinity that foreshadowed the grand political and military alliance that would win the war. Britons writing letters of thanks for the packages would often begin simply, "Dear Bundles."
A Growing Concern

Soon after Natalie Wales Latham began knitting with her New York City friends, Americans all over the country began creating their own local chapters of Bundles for Britain. Friends and neighbors would gather together to knit, talk, and do their bit for the war effort. To raise money to buy yarn, they would sell pins and pendants, bake cakes, take in laundry, and put on neighborhood concerts and events. As word spread, local businesses began to chip in. Wool shops donated yarn and knitting needles, newspapers placed free ads, and trucking firms offered to haul the bundles to New York, where they were assembled in crates for shipment overseas.

By the summer of 1940, the news from Europe had gotten worse, not better. Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, and France had fallen under the weight of Nazi assault by June. Hundreds of thousands of British soldiers faltering in their defense of France had been plucked from the jaws of death and successfully evacuated across the English Channel from Dunkirk, but an increasing stream of refugees poured into England, while air attacks on Britain by the German Luftwaffe increased in number and ferocity.

In response, Bundles for Britain stepped up its program, sending not just woolly sweaters and socks for soldiers and civilians but also surgical instruments, bandages, ambulances, and other medical supplies. It reached out to the American medical community, publishing a list of medical and surgical supplies urgently required, the organization said, for a nation "faced with the horrors of immediate invasion." The nationwide appeal for winter clothing continued, and three thousand retailers across the country agreed to supply volunteers with wool, knitting patterns, and instructions.

As more and more goods flowed into New York, it became clear the small, donated office on Park Avenue was no longer adequate, and Bundles for Britain moved its headquarters to a suite of offices on Fifth Avenue. The packing and shipping of bundles now took place in a large unused Telegraph Company building on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

By March 1941, just fifteen months after Latham launched her ambitious venture, the relief organization had shipped more than fifty thousand sweaters, thirty thousand scarves, eighteen thousand pairs of seaboot stockings, fifty thousand socks, and eight thousand caps, and raised over $1 million in cash. Bundles for Britain was now also shipping traveling field kitchen units, X-ray machines, and used clothing. It had nearly a million volunteers in nearly a thousand chapters in all forty-eight states, as well as Alaska and Hawaii—truly a remarkable achievement.

The war dragged on. In Britain, the German bombardment of cities and towns continued; in the Atlantic, German U-boats wreaked havoc on England's vital supply lines. In Washington, DC, Franklin D. Roosevelt shepherded his Lend-Lease bill through Congress, making it possible for the United States to supply Britain with war equipment free of charge. In Berlin, Hitler finalized his plans for an attack on the Soviet Union, while tensions in the Far East between Japan and the United States continued to mount.

Bundles for Britain responded to heightened warfare in the North Atlantic by launching "Bundles for Bluejackets" in July 1941. This new division of the organization set its sights on providing woolen clothes and other items to sailors in the British navy and merchant marine, proclaiming that these men were "part of the first line of American defense."

Throughout these difficult days, the bonds between the British and American people grew stronger. American newsreels captured scenes of unthinkable destruction abroad, while journalist Edward R. Murrow broadcast harrowing scenes from the bombardment of London, captivating listeners with his signature tagline, "This . . . is London," and homey sign-off, "Good night and good luck."
Friends in High Places

From its inception, Bundles for Britain inspired not just ordinary Americans and Britons but also illustrious and prominent leaders of those societies, a fact that helped broadcast its purpose far and wide.

In March 1940, the organization received backing from none other than the president’s formidable and wealthy mother, Sara Roosevelt, who agreed to become one of its sponsors. Shortly thereafter the beautiful Clementine Churchill—a member of the English nobility and wife of Winston Churchill (then civilian head of the British navy but soon to be prime minister)—agreed to be its honorary representative in England.

In August 1940, Bundles for Britain got a boost from America’s beloved First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, who at founder Natalie Wales Latham’s behest agreed to issue an appeal for donated clothing over the radio. Soon the program received the official endorsement of the British royal family.

In September 1941, as Bundles for Britain anticipated a renewed wave of German bombing over the coming winter and received another urgent plea for woolen garments from the British Army, the organization held an exhibition of children’s art in New York to raise money for the effort. Meanwhile, two young female pilots—one British and one American—launched a splashy twelve-city tour in a donated plane to drum up additional support. Eleanor Roosevelt herself opened a Market of the Americas, selling antiques, curios, and art objects on behalf of the organization. And Bundles for Britain London representative Janet Brewster Murrow, wife of Edward R. Murrow and an accomplished radio reporter in her own right, launched a twenty-city U.S. lecture circuit to urge her compatriots to keep the flow of humanitarian assistance going.

In the United Kingdom, it was now commonplace to call any package from America a “Bundle for Britain.”
A few weeks after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and brought America into the war, Bundles for Britain announced it would send $16,000 in donations to the Queen of England—the first part of a nationwide effort to collect a million Christmas greetings for Her Majesty, along with $50,000 to buy holiday gifts for British children.

The American entry into the war brought a profound change in the conflict—and in the ties that bound the American and British people. The two countries were now brothers-in-arms. Winston Churchill traveled to Washington, DC, to spend the holiday season of 1941-42 with the Roosevelts at the White House. While there, he sent his warm greetings and best wishes to the “splendid volunteers” of Bundles for Britain for all that they had done in service to the British people.

With the United States now fully engaged, calls for assistance and humanitarian aid for American soldiers, sailors, and airmen naturally increased. New relief agencies emerged to meet the need, including a fully independent offshoot of Bundles for Britain known as Bundles for America, launched in January 1942.

Although the two organizations were separate, Bundles for America and Bundles for Britain collaborated closely. In fact, the inspiration for Bundles for America came from the founder of Bundles for Britain, Natalie Wales Latham, who became president of the new organization, while the widow of the former American ambassador to the United Kingdom took the helm at Bundles for Britain.

Within weeks of its founding, Bundles for America launched its first major drive to knit more than eighty-one thousand sweaters, helmets, scarves, gloves, and socks for American soldiers and sailors, at the direct request of the War Planning Board. Later that spring it began salvaging items for the war effort, including remnants of fabric and other waste materials. By late summer of 1942, Bundles for America was a leading organizer of scrap-metal drives, sending out 250,000 volunteers in September to orchestrate this effort. Thanks to this work, thousands of tons of scrap metal were collected in the fall of 1942 and tens of thousands of articles of clothing were sent to U.S. servicemen.

Meanwhile, the work of Bundles for Britain continued. In September 1942, the organization launched an ambitious fall drive to raise $3.2 million in humanitarian assistance for the British people who, in spite of America’s entry into the war, were still under savage bombardment. In America’s first full year at war, the organization shipped three thousand cases of clothing to the UK. In the spring of 1943, Bundles launched its “Save and Sew Campaign” for the repair and reuse of damaged clothing, and began collecting warm woolen garments and gifts to comfort British children during another winter at war.
BY 1944, the newly established United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was beginning to take over the enormous job of relief in war-torn Europe, and Bundles for Britain activity dwindled considerably. Here, a Sister of Charity distributes UNRRA-supplied food to hungry, barefoot children in postwar Belgium, which had suffered greatly during the German occupation. UN Photo

A Cause Completed

The year 1944 saw the Western Allies return to beaches of France to retake that country from the Nazis. Ironically, the Allies’ success on D-day and subsequent dash across Europe made it more difficult for Bundles for Britain to maintain shipments of humanitarian relief to the British people. Nearly every ounce of transatlantic shipping had to be dedicated to carrying supplies for the Allied advance.

Moreover, by this point in the war, the United Nations Forces—the name Franklin D. Roosevelt created for the wartime alliance—had established the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA), which began to assume responsibility for collecting and distributing humanitarian aid to Europe.

Although Bundles for Britain would continue to send clothing and other items overseas through 1945, its activities dwindled significantly after the desperate days of 1940, ‘41, and ‘42. On May 19, 1945, in the wake of victory in Europe, Bundles for Britain announced it would close its doors in June.

Britain’s Lord Halifax, ambassador to the United States (who had also been the British delegate to the San Francisco Conference establishing the United Nations), took the opportunity to acknowledge the American people for their work in sending aid across the Atlantic. “The appreciation of the people of Britain for the sympathy and support they have received from America is unbounded,” he said.

In its five years, Bundles for Britain sent its allies in the United Kingdom hundreds of thousands of knitted garments and other articles of clothing, as well as millions of dollars worth of medical equipment and other supplies. The men, women, and children who made up this remarkable volunteer organization helped forge a permanent bond of friendship between the British and American people.