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Flypast



Newsletter of CAHS Toronto Chapter
A Division of The Canadian Aviation Historical Society

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CAHS Toronto Chapter Meeting

WEB EDITION

CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE

215 Yonge Blvd. at Wilson Avenue, Toronto

Special Guest Speaker: Glad Bryce

Author of "First In Last Out"

by Glad Bryce

FIRST IN LAST OUT

The RCAF, Women's Division
and Nursing Sisters in World War II



November Meeting

Topic: “Women’s Division, Royal Canadian Air Force, World War II”

Speaker: Glad Bryce

Reporter: Greg Winson

CAHS Toronto Chapter President George Topple introduced author Glad Bryce. Her recent book, *First In Last Out*, is the story of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Women’s Division & Nursing sisters in World War II.

Glad completed an Honours B.A. in Sociology at York University, and got her Masters Degree in Sociology at the University of Toronto, specializing in Adult Education and Counselling. She became a Registered Therapist following her Post Degree Training at Boston University. She went on to teach at the high school, college and university levels. As an author, her book, *Divorce and Spiritual Growth*, provided a healing presence in the Anglican Church’s struggle with divorced persons during the 1970’s and 1980’s. Other publications include *Blended Family Resource Guide*, *Inner City Education and the Role of Women in Today’s World* and *An Effective Approach to Christian Parenting*. Glad is an accomplished athlete, winning three gold medals at the 2009 FINA World Swim Championships in Sweden. She is

also a renowned watercolorist and her paintings are in many homes and galleries. Glad’s community involvement includes her home town of Bala in the Muskokas and beyond. She is the Secretary of Bala’s Cranberry Festival, heads up the Guides for “The Trek to Bethlehem”, an annual outdoor pageant held every December as well as performing in theatre around Muskoka and regularly appearing in Murder Mysteries. Glad works with a TTT youth group at Bala’s Trinity- St. Alban’s Anglican Church and a Senior’s Thursday group.

She feels very privileged to have spent the last four years uncovering the remarkable women who call themselves WDs, and was very pleased that several women came out to hear her speak. The Royal Canadian Air Force was the first service to allow women into its ranks, and women remained in the war effort longer than their counterparts in the army and navy. Glad recounted that when she meets with WDs, they often say, “we were first in, last out,” which became the inspiration for the book’s title. While there were books written about the contributions of Canadian army and navy women in World War II, no books had been written about the RCAF Women’s Division, except for a relatively slim book called *We Serve that Men May Fly*. Written by WD Mary Ziegler in 1971, the book mostly recounted her own experiences and that of other WDs during the war. Glad was encouraged to write about the Women’s Division by several people, but was not convinced until she visited her dear friend Doris Gain who had been a WD in the war. Her friend spent the next two hours detailing her role in the war effort. This encounter convinced Glad that if she didn’t write a book to tell these stories, they would be lost forever.

Soon after, Glad attended the 67th WD Reunion in Ottawa in June 2008. She interviewed nonstop, “at breakfast, at lunch, at dinner, at coffee break, on the buses, at the war museum, and on the dance floor!” Glad felt honoured to attend what would be the last reunion of the WDs. Glad interviewed more than 200 women for the book – their personal stories are told in one of the book’s appendixes. *First in, Last Out* was launched May 8, 2010, the 55th anniversary of the Victory Day in World War II.



Speaker: Glad Bryce
Photo - Neil McGavock

Canadian astronaut Roberta Bondar was present at the launch event (she also wrote the book's forward.) Roberta praised the WDs, saying she would not have been the first Canadian woman in space without their efforts in the war. An avid photographer, Roberta particularly praised photographers: "you learned how to lift a 45 lb camera, install it into a training plane, and then teach men how to use it, and you had to do it in 90 days!"

First In Last Out has even received the 'royal seal of approval.' Queen Elizabeth was given a copy of the book during a Canadian visit in 2010. "She put her nose right into it and almost missed her next appointment!" The Queen placed the book in her personal library, and later sent Glad a personal letter complimenting her work. The cover features Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Mother) inspecting WDs during the war. For many of the women Glad interviewed, their main reason for joining the war effort was to "fight Hitler." "It was amazing that these 19 year old women had this in their psyche." Their logo featured the motto "we serve that men may fly." The air force was very accommodating to women, as their ranks of men were quickly "going off and being killed," and they needed people to work on the planes.



Aircraftswoman 2nd Class Laura Bagby wearing a Teacozy hat towing a training aircraft at No. 3 SFTS Calgary
Photo - DND PL-11323



Three WDs photographers with "Teacozy" hats getting ready to take off
Photo - DND Image Library PL-20839

The very first WD was Kathleen Oonah Walker. She had lost her husband in the army. She had the strength, and intellectual stamina to head up the new division. The second recruit, Dr. Jean Davey, was in charge of all the medical history and planning for women throughout the air force. The WDs had to work in a man's world. The WDs did everything but fly planes. Their areas of work greatly expanded during the course of the war: When the WD was started, there were six trades in which to choose; by the end of the war this number had grown to 65. Each woman's story of acceptance in the air force was different. Women were doing jobs that men traditionally had done, and did jobs sometimes up to three times faster than men had achieved.

Many women worked in the “dope” area of the airfields. A majority of the training aircraft used in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) were of metal and/or wooden frame construction covered by a “fabric” covering, usually cotton. The women would strip the damaged or worn fabric from the wings and other parts of the planes and then proceed to recover the planes with new fabric. The fabric would then be “doped” with highly toxic cellulose nitrate to strengthen and tighten the fabric leaving a smooth airtight and moisture proof surface. Several coats of dope including colour coats would normally be required. The women were only allowed to work in the dope area for a limited amount of time before they had to take a break outside, had to take milk of magnesia tablets and drink lots of milk. Of the women Glad interviewed who worked in the dope area, not one had any health-related issues from their time there. The Nursing Sisters also played important but different roles from their counterparts in the army and navy. Much of their nursing was done in the burn units of hospitals, while Nursing Sisters in the Army and Navy were primarily treating limb injuries and internal trauma. RCAF Nursing Sisters also took part in air evacuations, air-sea rescue missions, and in transporting patients by plane and by train. During WWII the RCAF had 481 Nursing Sisters, some of which went overseas. They wore a blouse and skirt in air force blue with a rank ribbon on each sleeve. The traditional nursing veil topped the RCAF WD uniforms. They held the rank of officer, but did not have full authority until an Order – in – Council in May, 1942 gave them the “power to command”.



1942 WD Uniform showing firmer hat design
Photo - www.heritage.nf.ca

Some WDs did go overseas, although they had to be 21 to do so. The ride across the ocean was often rough. The women were given a manuscript about English culture and language, as the government felt that the conditions that they would be exposed to in England were very much different from what they knew in Canada. A now humorous event was that a posting to Newfoundland was considered “overseas service”, as Newfoundland was not part of Canada during WWII.

Princess Alice, wife of Governor General Alexander Cambridge, 1st Earl of Athlone, was the patron of the Women’s Division. “She loved to put on her air force blue and go and inspect the troops all across Canada,” Glad related. “She took her job very seriously.” Many of the WDs Glad interviewed for the book remembered Princess Alice stopping to chat with them during inspections. In addition to the standard air force blue, WD summer uniforms were a khaki colour. WD Edie Luther came to November’s meeting with Glad, and modelled the summer uniforms for attendees. The women were not initially allowed to wear pants as part of their uniform, so they would have to wear their uniform to the hangar, change, put on coveralls or pants, and then change back to return to barracks. You can tell when a WD was in the war by the style of hat they wore. The first style of hats worn by the WDs was a ‘teacozy’ style design. They later went to a firmer design, the style changing to a more tapered one by the end of World War II. The women’s hair had to be up off their collar, and would be sent back to barracks if their hair was too long.



Glad Bryce and WD Edie Luther in WWII
 Summer Khaki Uniform
 Photo - Neil McGavock

Many of the women interviewed in the book talked to Glad about marching. “They learned how to march. They drilled. They had to march for breakfast. They would have to march for lunch. They drilled in Church.” The air force gave the women many opportunities to participate in athletic activities such as basketball, volleyball, baseball, and swimming. When the women completed their service, they were offered different settlements, ranging from cash settlements, some land, a down payment on a house, a bedroom suite. Some of the women Glad interviewed had trouble adjusting to life after the war and saw themselves in a different light. WD Florence Dickson never felt she belonged in social settings, often winding up “chatting with the guys in the kitchen talking about war days.”



RCAF WD Memorial at CFB Trenton AirPark
 Photo - R. Winson

A total of 17,038 women served in the Women's Division. Not one died in active duty. After World War II, the WD was disbanded, and women then served as part of the various air force units going forward to this day. Last September, CFB Trenton honoured the WDs with a monument in the RCAF Memorial AirPark, adjacent to National Air Force Museum of Canada.

Glad was presented with a gift on behalf of the Chapter by Programs Volunteer, Bob Winson, for an outstanding story of the RCAF WDs. The Chapter also donated a copy of Glad's book to the College library. All proceeds from the sale of Glad's book will go to scholarships for women.

Glad's website for ordering books is www.firstinlastout.ca.

Our next Chapter meeting will be February 11, 2012 at 1:00 P.M. also at Canadian Forces College.



RCAF Women's Division Crest
Photo - Wikipedia