

Women and War

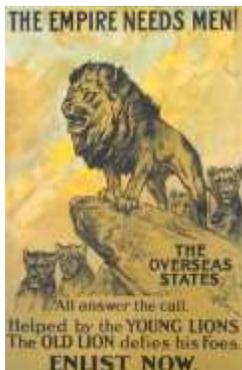
By Pam Andersson (with B. Amsden)

The First and Second World Wars brought great changes to Canadian women's lives as they adapted to the conditions war brought in practical terms – serving, volunteering, and working, in Canada and overseas. The contributions of women to the Canadian war efforts were critical, and their experiences in many non-traditional roles led to a new appreciation of women's abilities by the women themselves and society at large.

Did you know... ?

More than 50,000 women served with the Canadian Armed Forces during the two World Wars!

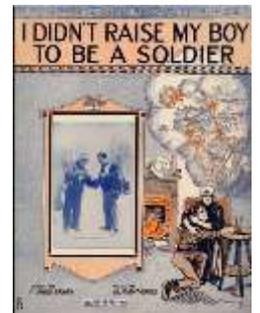
Canadian Women in World War 1



Canadian women responded to WW1 in a variety of ways, some with patriotic enthusiasm, some were pacifists, and others opposed the war as not their war. Some women of enemy nationalities were considered a risk and interned. Many simply wanted to help in whatever way they could.

Women's Mobilisation for World War 1

Canada's geographical distance from the battlefields of Europe limited its citizens' wartime contact with the fighting forces: once Canadian soldiers crossed the Atlantic Ocean, they could not return to Canada unless they were medically discharged from the army. Some women joined the army, some went to England to be closer to their husbands and worked there, and others worked at home in different ways.



Serving Women

Canadians' then traditional Victorian views of appropriate gender roles limited how women were allowed to participate in the national war effort. Combat roles for women were never considered during World War 1, even when enlistment numbers fell drastically by 1916, leading the federal government to conscript men for military service in 1917.

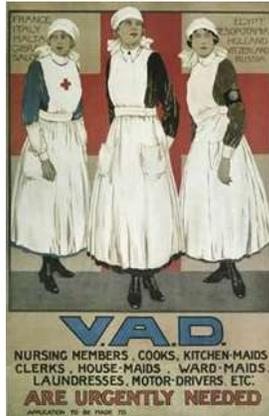
The closest Canadian women came to European trenches was nursing. Canada was unique in the British Empire in enlisting its military nurses as members of the Canadian army itself: their rank as lieutenant, as well as higher wages than other nurses, made them envied (although some British nurses with whom they might work still looked on Canadian counterparts as mere "colonials").

This military status put double pressure on the nurses, as they were held to the highest standards as both ladies and officers. Impeccable behaviour on both counts was seen as necessary by their superiors to reduce the challenges posed by women in the army, and particularly women in close physical contact with men's bodies. Approximately 2,500 Canadian

Nursing Sisters served in Britain, France, and the Mediterranean as members of the Canadian Army Medical Corps, both healing the results of and witnessing the destruction of war.

Did you know... ?

Of 3,000 nurses who served in the armed forces during the First World War, 2,504 were sent overseas with the Canadian Army Medical Corps. Canadian nurses were accorded officer status to discourage fraternization and give them authority over patients.



Also, an estimated 2,000 female Canadian Voluntary Aid Detachment members (VADs) provided semi-trained care and handled the dirtiest, most menial nursing tasks in Canada and abroad, on a voluntary basis. They were not, however, allowed to serve in Canadian military hospitals overseas.

As well, the federal government appointed The Canadian Field Comforts Commission, and paid its mostly female workers at home and at Moore Barracks, Shorncliffe to transfer goods and packages to Canadians in uniform.



Volunteers

Many women wanted to be as close as possible to their husbands, sons or brothers, so Britain saw the arrival of many Canadian women during the war years. Many of these contributed their time, money, or skills to help in different ways. These women ranged from wealthy Montreal women, along with middle-class officers' wives, to women of more modest means who applied to the Patriotic Fund for a steerage class ticket. Often arriving in Britain with children in tow, they would see enlisted loved ones occasionally or feel better just by getting a little closer to the battlefields. These women made up an important pool of voluntary labour for the Canadian Red Cross's overseas operations, as well as for British war charities and other voluntary groups. Two wealthy Montrealers who summered in the Lower Saint Lawrence – Lady [Julia Drummond](#) and [Elsie Reford](#) – worked for or closely with the Canadian military in different ways.



On the Canadian home front, the majority of Canadian women – particularly if they were middle-class, married, or living in a rural area – made their contribution to the war effort through unpaid voluntary labour for a wide variety of war charities and women's organizations. Among the most prominent were the Canadian Patriotic Fund, the Canadian Red Cross, the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE), the rural Women's Institutes, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and church groups (particularly Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian). Each organization had its own objectives, but most involved women in raising money or producing goods for use by the men of the Canadian Expeditionary Force overseas. Women rolled bandages and provided "comforts" – which ranged from hand-knit socks, mitts,

sweaters, and scarves to reading material, maple sugar, playing cards, candy, and tobacco. These comforts boosted morale among the recipients serving overseas and gave the women a sense of connection to their loved ones abroad. This was especially true for women involved in funding or packing food parcels for Canadian prisoners of war.



Women's voluntary labour had an enormous economic value. The money women raised and the supplies they produced (collectively valued at an estimated hundreds of millions of dollars)-constituted a pool of voluntary taxes and free labour. They supported soldiers' dependent wives and children financially, provided a broad range of medical supplies and equipment for the Canadian Army Medical Corps, and encouraged fellow citizens to buy government war bonds. Women's voluntary work freed the already financially-strapped federal government from the full responsibility to pay for these things itself. Canadians praised women's voluntary work as a crucial element of the Canadian war effort, and women were proud of their war work.

Working on the home front

Hundreds of thousands of women provided much-needed paid labour on farms, in factories, and in offices across the country. For example, the arms industry eventually employed 12,000 women. As some female workers were handling high explosives and dangerous chemicals, they were personally at risk, but their efforts were critical: by 1917, about a third of all the shells fired by the British armies were made in Canada.

Did you know... ?

- To raise money for prisoners of war during the First World War, the Ottawa Women's Canadian Club sold souvenirs made from the debris of the Centre Block of the Parliament Buildings, which had burned down in 1916.

While the war years disrupted some society gender norms, they did not transform them as many women in World War 1 performing essentially the same roles they had in the past, but in different ways. For example, from traditional charity fund-raising, women moved to collecting money, clothing and other necessities for people serving at the front and displaced people overseas. From managing a household, women moved smoothly to organizing and doing the work needed to look after soldiers far from their home and their families.

Did you know... ?

As women's labour became recognized as vital to the national war effort, it was used as one reason that women earned the right to vote (women from the three Prairie provinces gained the right to vote in provincial elections in 1916; the federal government provided female relatives of Canadian soldiers serving overseas limited war-time suffrage in 1917; and women were fully enfranchised federally in 1918 – it was only in 1940 that women could vote in all provinces).

Canadian Women in World War 2



During the Second World War, Canadian women were not allowed to fight, but they did just about everything else. The role of women, as homemakers who kept the families together in Canadian society, changed considerably.

Women's Mobilisation for World War 2

Many Canadian women wanted to play a more active role in the war and lobbied the government to form military organizations for women. In 1941-42, the military was forever changed as it created its own women's forces.

Serving Women

Women were now able, for the first time in the country's history, to serve Canada in uniform. More than 50,000 women served in the armed forces during the Second World War, as mechanics, parachute riggers, wireless operators, clerks, photographers, and codebreakers, but also as pilots, in all three branches of the armed forces.

- The Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWACS) had 21,600 members.



- The Women's Division, Royal Canadian Air Force (WDs), had 17,400 members.
- The Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (Wrens) had 7,100 members.
- 4,480 Nursing Sisters (as Canadian military nurses were known) served in the war – 3,656 in the CWACs, 481 in the Women's Division of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and 343 in the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service. Many of these women served within range of enemy guns and some lost their lives.



Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA)

The Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) was established in 1939 in England and needed experienced pilots to transport mail and supplies for the British military, but this soon expanded to include transporting warplanes. Women were not allowed in combat roles

or as flying instructors for the RCAF, but were allowed in the ATA. The ATA had 1,300 men and 166 women – five of whom were Canadian. The ATA transported 309,011 aircraft during the war and was disbanded after the war. One of the five Canadian women that became an ATA pilot was [Elspeth Russell](#) – the only Québec-born woman to fly in the Second World War.



Did you know... ?

- Even with a pilot's licence, women were not allowed to fly in the Royal Canadian Air Force-Women's Division.
- The Canadian Women's Army Corps established the first all-female military pipe band in 1942.
- Molly Lamb Bobak was the only female Canadian official war artist sent overseas during the Second World War, becoming one of Canada's most celebrated war artists.

Volunteering

As in World War I, many Canadian women contributed to war efforts through unpaid voluntary labour. Also like in the First World War, women and children kept themselves busy to help, and to keep their thoughts from worry for family and friends at risk in war. In Metis, hotels and the hall of the local golf club were used again to fold bandages, knit, raise money, and do anything else that was called for. Listen to a Metisian talk about her memories:

- [Rolling bandages](#) – Lorna Bethell

Did you know, during the Second World War... ?



- Women could purchase pattern books that they could use to knit items for military personnel, including amputation covers.
- Women and girls — some as young as 11— sold 25-cent War Savings Stamps on behalf of the federal government – raising \$318 million by the end of the program.

Women also were called upon to make do with less (less coal, less meat, less in the way of new clothing – even less of basic staples like milk, flour and sugar), and to contribute other supplies – metal, paper, rags, and glass – to help the war effort.



Working on the home front



At home, hundreds of thousands of Canada women pitched in and supported the war effort by working at industrial jobs that were traditionally held by men.

What was different on the home front was the extent that women became involved in traditionally male roles. More than 300,000 Canadian women held jobs in war production. Women drove trucks and trams and worked in war plants that made guns, ammunition, tanks, ships, and planes.



While about 35,000 women had worked in munition factories in Quebec and Ontario during the First World War, by the middle of the Second World War this number had risen sharply to 261,000 women across Canada involved in many aspects of wartime production. They made up almost a third of the aircraft industry (the 119 women working in aircraft plants in 1939 skyrocketed to 25,013 by 1944, making Catalinas, Harvard training planes, Mosquito fighters and bombers, and the Norseman). Women



formed nearly half of those employed in gun plants, and were a majority of munitions inspectors. Over 4,000 women worked in shipbuilding, mainly as office workers, but also as welders, riveters, electricians, drillers, painters, boilermakers, tractor drivers and crane operators.

More academic positions also opened up. In 1939, the Wartime Prices and Trade Board (WPTB) (precursor to Statistics Canada) was established and in late 1941 was given charge of a sweeping system of Wage and Price Controls. A young summer Metisian, Audrey Bovey, joined as a junior economist analysing costs so that the controls could prevent the inflated costs (and hoarding) of the First World War. While many grumbled about the controls, most could see the fairness of the system.

Did you know... ?



- Veronica Foster, a Canadian Bren light machine-gun assembler, became 'Ronnie, the Bren Gun Girl' as the Canadian government and National Film Board of Canada developed posters and campaign to attract hundreds of thousands of Canadian women needed to work in factories. Seen as combining femininity with female independence, Ronnie became surprisingly popular and her photo appeared in many major newspapers around the world. This included a feature on women in Canadian war efforts on the front page of the October 4, 1941 New York Times. Two years later, Ronnie's kerchief and 'positive attitude' appeared in American form, better known as "Rosie the Riveter."



- In 1942, more than 100 contestants from Canada's major military manufacturing plants vied for the title of "Miss War Worker." The winner, Dorothy Linham, starred in a Palmolive Soap advertisement.

Liked by some and a disappointment to others, at the end of the Second World War, many positions were eliminated to make way for returning men. As an example, only three of thousands of women employed at the Canadian Car and Foundry plant (CC&F) kept their jobs (what remained of CC&F was bought later by Bombardier).

Did you know... ?



The CC&F factory, in large part converted to wartime efforts, expanded its payroll from about 500 to 4,500 workers by the end of the war, half of them women. Elizabeth Muriel Gregory (Elsie) MacGill had been the first woman to earn an aeronautical engineering degree and the first female in Canada to receive a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering. She had the opportunity to put her skills to work at CC&F as an aeronautical engineer during World War 2, and is credited with helping make Canada a powerhouse of aircraft construction. For much of the war, she was responsible for streamlining the production line as the factories grew and finding solutions to let planes operate better in winter, such as de-icing controls and a system to fit skis for landing on snow.

Sources:

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