The Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service
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Women are typically remembered for their work rolling bandages for the Red Cross and working in the factories, and that is seen as the extent of their contribution to the war effort during World War II. But the war also saw the first opportunity for thousands of women across Canada to become members of the Canadian military. Before WW II, women were only permitted to wear uniforms and travel overseas during a war with the Nursing Sisters, members of the Canadian Army Medical Corps, taking care of the wounded in the hospitals behind the fighting. In WW II, however, for the first time in Canadian history, the Department of National Defence (DND) and the Department of National War Services (DNWS) formally recognized the value of women’s labour and their ability to serve Canada by creating an official women’s division for all three branches of the military: air force, army and navy.

This article will focus on the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS or Wrens) but the government policies also applied to the other women’s services. In particular, we will examine government policies relating to servicewomen’s pay and benefits, jobs available for women, and societal concerns about women in the military and their effect on DND policies.

For Canada, World War II began on 10 September 1939 with the Canadian government’s decision to support Britain and declare war against Germany. The war was not a complete surprise – the tensions in Europe had been apparent for some time – and some Canadians had anticipated its inception. Women in British Columbia began organizing women’s service corps, based on the British Army’s Women’s Auxiliary Territorial Service, as early as October 1938. With the outbreak of war, membership in these groups grew and by 1941 they boasted approximately 6,700 members across the country. These groups created their own uniforms, sometimes as simple and inexpensive as an armband or as elaborate as a replication of the uniforms used by women in the British military. As well, they organized themselves into rank structures used by the Canadian Army and instituted their own command hierarchy. Members learned skills they hoped would be of use to the military, such as clerical work, transport driving, first aid and cooking in large quantities. Some groups even had ex-army personnel who taught military drill with rifles.

Soon after war was declared, these groups began asking DND and DNWS for official recognition but it was denied due to DND fears that it would have to provide the same recognition to everyone, even those which were not up to high military standards. DND was uncertain as to how to handle these groups and contemplated issuing warnings that they were in violation of the Criminal Code of Canada provision forbidding unauthorized groups from wearing uniforms and using ranks mistakable for those used by His Majesty’s Forces.

As the war progressed DND realized that it would be foolish to ignore the resources at its fingertips. As early as June 1940, National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) began to consider the possibility of putting women into uniform to free men for active service overseas. All three branches of the forces were asked by NDHQ to estimate the number of jobs that women would be able to fill. Initially, the navy responded with a mere 20 positions as light transport drivers – hardly enough to bother creating a women’s division.

Even before the creation of the women’s services, many women worked in naval and air base offices as civil servants. The Canadian Forces had also used volunteer female labour since the declaration of war. With the increasing manpower shortage, the Canadian government decided to allow women to join the military. But the government made it clear that it was doing so because of the war, and...
the need for men to serve overseas. In July 1940, the air force was the first branch of the Canadian military to create a women’s service – the Canadian Women’s Auxiliary Air Force, later renamed The Royal Canadian Air Force, Women’s Division. The navy would wait a full year after the other branches before it set up its women’s division, forced into it by manpower shortages from the Battle of the Atlantic and the need to free shore-based sailors.

Given the delay, the navy had an opportunity to learn from the experiences of the other branches. Therefore, instead of creating the women’s division as an auxiliary component, the navy integrated the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service directly into the Royal Canadian Navy, thus avoiding many administrative difficulties that occurred in the army and air force women’s divisions. The Wrens remained the smallest of the women’s services, and claimed to be the most selective.

Unfortunately – but perhaps not surprisingly – not all members of the military were open to having women in their units. Servicemen wanted to know that their women would be at home when they returned from the war. Many soldiers overseas wrote bitter letters home condemning the newly created women’s services. Many Canadians were unsure how to react to servicewomen. As Rosamund Greer recalls, “[My former employer] seemed to think that all women in uniform were prostitutes, and I took exception to that.”

According to a 1942 poll, just 7% of Canadians felt military service was the best way women could support the war effort. The opposition was particularly strong in Quebec where the support for the war was lukewarm at best and the Catholic church was committed to the values of home and family. One former Wren recalls being pushed out of a store in Montreal by the owner because she was shopping in uniform and her friends were spat on in the streets. Given the strong opinions about the respectability and femininity of women in uniform, it is understandable that the Canadian government felt the need to implement policies that reflected these opinions.

When creating the women’s services, DND decided employment for women should be in non-physical, secondary jobs. In all cases, men were to remain firmly in charge with women in the subordinate positions. Recruiters responded to the societal concerns about servicewomen losing their femininity by ensuring that the jobs they’d be doing were similar to those in the civilian world. Most servicewomen were employed as cooks, clerks and laundry maids, which earned them the reputation as secretaries in uniform.

These jobs were not terribly glamourous, but they were in line with the applicants’ work experience, and their preferences. The majority of Wren duties required no additional training beyond practical on-the-job experience. Most women did not request non-traditional jobs, which was lucky as the navy rarely granted such requests. But as manpower shortages worsened, women took on new jobs. By the end of the war, the number of trades available to women reached a peak of 39, which included dietitian, communications operator, signalman, coders and radar plotters. Unlike earlier positions available to women, these highly important trades required a new level of training that had never been available to women before. The few who were chosen for this training acquired unique skills in an exclusively male domain which would never have been available in a civilian career.

While the number of trades available to servicewomen grew throughout the war, none of the jobs involved combat activities. It was thought that men were by nature more suited to dangerous jobs and that it was against a woman’s nature as the nurturer and giver of life to kill another human being. And, indeed, for most women, the fact that they would not have to bear arms was a relief. Many had not wanted the responsibilities associated with using offensive weapons and were content to carry on with their active duty without the worry of having to use lethal force. The policy was also in line with the current social beliefs. The Canadian public simply did not want its women involved with firearms and the Wrens were happy to oblige.

Despite the fact that women were doing the same jobs as the men they were replacing, they received only two-thirds
of the pay. The military attempted to rationalize the inequality by stating that the government expected it would take three women to do the work of two men. As well, the government did not want the women's services competing with civil employment. Others argued that the differences in pay were because the navy provided benefits, such as food, lodgings and medical care, which were unavailable in the civilian world. But it was not just that they received lower pay, servicewomen were also denied other benefits provided to servicemen, such as the dependence allowance. As well, a women whose husband was in the military was entitled to a separation allowance, however, as soon as she put on a uniform, she was no longer eligible for the assistance.

Despite the general lack of enthusiasm for women in the military, the Canadian public did not support the inequality in pay and benefits provided to women and the criticism began to hurt recruitment. Many girls joined the services as a means to contribute to their family's income and thought they should receive fair benefits. Despite the government's low expectations, in reality, the women often outperformed the men they replaced.

In recognition of all these factors, in July 1941, adjustments were made to the pay and benefits of servicewomen – women would now make about 80% of what men made. Servicewomen also became eligible for benefits, such as the separation allowance and allowances were given for dependent siblings and parents. No benefits were provided for children as one of the conditions of recruitment for women was that they have no dependent children they would be leaving. As well, the benefits confirmed that only a wife, never a husband, could be declared as a dependent. Since the pay and benefits in the women's services were now better than those provided in private industry, servicewomen could hardly complain. The rate of pay, however, reminded women that they were only temporary employees of the military and they were still subordinate to servicemen.

By mid-1942, servicewomen faced a new challenge. Based on rumours that were circulating, the public began to question their morality. These women were attacked at their most vulnerable point, their sexual respectability. The ‘whispering campaign’ seemed to confirm fears about the unsavoury things that would happen if the genders were mixed in the military. Only a small percentage of young, unmarried servicewomen became pregnant or contracted venereal disease, but this did not stop Canadian society from believing that servicewomen were ‘loose.’ The Wrens were luckily spared most of the allegations as they had always recruited the ‘better type’ of girl. Ironically, the rumours may have been a result of high morals, as some suspected that it was rejected servicemen who began the rumours.

Any woman who became pregnant was discharged from the women's services. Of the fathers named by discharged servicewomen 86% were members of the military, but there were no repercussions for servicemen. The Canadian forces viewed “illegitimate pregnancies [as] unfortunate, but primarily the woman’s responsibility.” In fact, men were almost expected to have a ‘fling’ once they joined the military. The double standard with regard to sexual morality in the forces is clear – women were discharged from service in shame, and men suffered no recriminations.

Another concern for servicewomen was the rumour that they were plagued with venereal disease (VD). Infection was more prevalent in servicemen than servicewomen, but again this did not stop the rumours. Initially, the treatment was different as well. Servicewomen were given a medical discharge for VD (as well as for pregnancy), while men were given treatment. This policy was replaced within six months, however, and women were extended the same medical treatment as men, although men received medical priority.

In order to reduce and prevent the number of infections, men were given ‘early preventative treatment’ and condoms; women got scare tactics and questionable information. Servicewomen complained that they were told there was no infallible measure to protect themselves other than abstinence, which seemed to contradict what the men were being told and the condoms they were given. Women were reminded that a VD infection would risk their dreams of a husband and family once the war was over. With one social violation, women turned from being innocent and in need of protection to a menace that threatened both the brave men of the services and society in general.

The government decided not to counter the rumours as it would bring more attention to the problem. Instead the women’s services attempted to emphasize the positives of the servicewomen’s lives, and the Wrens highlighted the high morality of their recruits. In attempts to gain public support and entice recruitment, the women’s services used the media to get their messages across. Advertisements reminded Wrens that they were ladies before they joined the navy so they should conduct themselves as ladies not sailors. As an example of their ladylike qualities, Wrens kept their hats on indoors while other servicewomen and men had to take off their headdress.

A short film, Proudly She Marches, was made by the National Film Board as a response to the ‘whispering campaign.’ A recurring theme in the video was the idea of freeing a man for active service. Servicemen were seen passing
their workspace to a servicewoman so that they could go off to fight. The film made the services appear like a thrilling experience, but with no danger.

Another way the women’s services attempted to reach average Canadians was through household magazines, such as the Canadian Geographical Journal. An article entitled “Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service” in the December 1943 issue was surprisingly honest about the hesitance of some Commanding Officers towards having women in their units. The article confronted the gossip that plagued the women’s services saying it “was only a matter of days before hard-bitten critics had to admit that those girls could do the jobs they had assumed just as well as any man, sometimes better.” While Proudly She Marches ignored the problems and instead focused on the highlights and excitement of joining up, the journal articles provided a forum to promote as well as discuss the women’s services.

Despite the contributions of the WRCNS, recruiting was phased out in early 1945 as it was clear the war would soon be coming to an end. The Wrens began to prepare members for the return to civilian life. For some women returning home to friends, family and their former lives was exactly what they wanted, but for others it was an unwelcome step backwards. Not all women wanted to return to civilian life. Many petitioned the government to retain the women’s services saying it “was only a matter of days before hard-bitten critics had to admit that those girls could do the jobs they had assumed just as well as any man, sometimes better.” While Proudly She Marches ignored the problems and instead focused on the highlights and excitement of joining up, the journal articles provided a forum to promote as well as discuss the women’s services.

The Canadian government quickly realized that the military could not return to its pre-war exclusively male recruitment policies. The manpower shortages that plagued all branches of the military continued into the 1950s and with the start of the Korean War it was apparent that women would be required to supplement the dwindling forces. In late 1950, the government authorized women to serve in the reserve forces of all three services but only to fill the vacancies where it was difficult to recruit men.

The positions offered to women continued to be limited and they were denied positions in DND headquarters in Ottawa, positions that had been filled by women during the war. But, despite setbacks, progress continued to be made. In January 1955, the government authorized women to be integrated into the Royal Canadian Navy as regular force members rather than re-establishing the separate female component used during the war.

While these steps showed that Canadian government and society were willing to accept the contributions women could offer the military, they were still limited in their employment opportunities and always regarded as secondary to men. As well, the number of women who could join the RCN as regular force members was limited to 400 and they were given only positions that would not “interfere with men’s prospects.” And, despite being members of the navy, women were not permitted to sail.

Debate continued about whether women were necessary to peacetime operations. In 1964, at the lowest point of female recruitment, there were only 288 women serving in the navy across the country. From the 1950s to the 1980s the involvement of women in the navy came under relentless scrutiny as experts tried to decide the fate of female sailors. Some believed that women no longer served a purpose in the navy and their involvement should be ended, while others advocated a greater equality between servicemen and servicewomen.

The discussion continued, but the fact remained that after all their hard work and dedication, the government could not take away a woman’s right to serve her country. And as the women’s movement gained ground in society, it seemed inevitable that women would continue to appear in more and more non-traditional professions. The liberal social trends in Canadian society helped encourage the pursuit of equality within the navy and ensure that women could continue to be full-time members. Despite fears that employing women would cause Canada to lose credibility in the eyes of its allies, by the mid-1970s women were serving in all major locations within Canada, with NATO forces in Europe and assisting United Nations forces in the Middle East. However, despite these advances, women were still excluded from combat roles, sea duty and postings in isolated areas.

The Canadian government declared that the military must eliminate all obstacles
preventing women from pursuing careers in any trade offered by the navy. Women were permitted to choose any position with the exception of the Roman Catholic chaplaincy and service on the Oberon-class submarines because of concerns about accommodation. These concerns were addressed in 2001 when Canada purchased four Victoria-class submarines from the British Navy which provided servicewomen with more privacy in their accommodations, and the restrictions against women serving in submarines were lifted. In the Navy, women represent only 12.3% of both the regular and reserve forces, although usually more women choose to serve in the reserves rather than regular forces. Women also remain under-represented in leadership positions within the navy as a whole and no woman has been promoted beyond the rank of Lieutenant-Commander.

In my experiences within the Naval Reserves, I have been in both the majority and minority. Thus, for several courses, including my basic training, the ratio was equal or in favour of the women. Yet once I began my training on the ships, I noticed the ratio declined for the hard sea trades, as I found myself the only woman in the communications department. As well, on a ship with 62 crew members only seven were women and none were above the non-commissioned rank of Petty Officer Second Class. While I cannot speak for all possible situations, I have noticed that women are under-represented within the Naval Reserve yet they are nonetheless treated as equals and are given the same opportunities for training and career advancement as servicemen with the same qualifications.

In conclusion, the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service was considered a success not only by its members but also by the Canadian government. The military recruited over 43,000 women to serve during the war, and 6,600 served as Wrens. Government policies relating to servicewomen during WW II were not written to create inequality between servicemen and servicewomen. Instead they were influenced by values in Canadian society. Because of the fluid nature of society, these policies evolved to reflect changes. The policies regarding employment opportunities, pay and benefits and the treatment of venerable disease adapted to meet the needs of servicewomen even as they bowed to the pressures of society.

Allowing women to become members of the military was a huge change and it is not surprising that ‘society’ was initially reluctant to accept it. But given the imperatives of war, and the excellence with which the women fulfilled their duties, it became more acceptable. A democratic government must reflect the wishes of society, but in the midst of war it must also be realistic about wasting human resources. As societal values and the position of women in society evolved, women were permitted to continue as members of the navy and achieve equality within their military careers.

Notes

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