

“We Will Not March at the Back”: The Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service

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Of the casualties sustained during the Second World War by the Canadian naval services – including the Royal Canadian Navy, Royal Canadian Naval Reserve and Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve – 82% were fatal.¹ Even 75 years after its fury, the Battle of the Atlantic and the strife of naval warfare during the Second World War still hold an almost mythical lore for Canadians. The legacy of the longest continuous campaign of the Second World War conjures dramatic scenes of silent yet catastrophic U-boat attacks on convoys, and the U-boats being countered by daring and calculated counter-attacks of dazzle-painted destroyers. This battle was waged in the depths and darkness of the ocean miles from Canadian coasts in a desperate effort to meet the challenge of keeping the Allied war effort supplied with men, ammunition and foodstuffs. The trans-Atlantic convoys, U-boat attacks, the *Flower*-class corvettes and *Tribal*-class destroyers are integral parts of the story of the Battle of the Atlantic and the naval history of the Second World War. However, there is one crucial part, or rather group, which is often overlooked for its contributions during these contests at sea – the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service.

“My parents, when I came home and said that I had joined the Navy, they weren’t surprised, I think they felt it was just a matter of time, and so they were very supportive.”² These are the words of Janet Hester Watt, whose smile and enthusiasm regarding her service in the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS, also known as ‘Wrens’) has not faded over the years. Watt was the fourth member of her family to wear the navy uniform, following in the footsteps of her two brothers and her sister Jean, a fellow Wren.³ The support was echoed in homes across Canada as the world was once again drawn into war. And, after 31 July 1942, a new breed of sailor began to arrive home to greet their parents with this piece of news.

In an effort to step up Canada’s military response, in early 1941 the Department of Labour and all three military branches were pressed to enlist women to aid in the war effort.⁴ The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and Canadian Army established separate women’s divisions on 2 July and 13 August of that year, respectively.⁵

Although the air force and army established women’s divisions in 1941, applications were not received or considered to fill the first class of WRCNS until July 1942.⁶ However, it should be noted that the organization’s roots



A Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS) member looks out from Signal Hill over St. John’s harbour in Newfoundland, undated.

actually stem from the First World War, as historian Roger Litwiller points out. HMCS *Prince George* sailed on 8 August 1914 with a complement of nursing sisters, who are now recognized as the first women serving at sea with the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN).⁷ For Canadian women, this was the extent of their participation with the navy during this conflict, whereas women in Britain had been able to serve and perform shore duties in the Women’s Royal Naval Service (WRNS), approved by King George V on 28 November 1917.⁸ The camaraderie women experienced through service in the First World War also formed a sisterhood which endured the interwar years, and many of these members then helped to reorganize the WRCNS in 1939. In 1942, after hesitation but finally accepting the need for additional womanpower, the RCN sent a message to the British WRNS saying “Please send us a Mother Wren.”⁹ Advice and guidance were needed to form a force of women to help shoulder the burden of the Battle of the Atlantic which was taking its toll on Canada’s naval forces.

Members of the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service formed the smallest female contingent of the Canadian military branches. But, in spite of their small numbers and their late entrance into the war effort, the effect that the WRCNS had on the war effort, and more specifically the Battle of the Atlantic, is undeniable. Women of the WRCNS served with distinction across Canada and overseas in a wide variety of duties, effectively contributing to the Battle of the Atlantic, and beyond.

Credit: Library and Archives Canada,
RG 24, R112 4950992



A 1915 postcard depicts the coastal liner SS **Prince George**, which served as a hospital ship in the Royal Canadian Navy during the First World War and had as part of its complement the first women now recognized to have served in the RCN.

Guiding this exploration into the WRCNS Battle of the Atlantic experience is a selection of the female voices of those who proudly served, including Vikki La Prairie, Alice Adams, Carol Elizabeth Duffus Hendry, Rosamond Greer, Jenny Pike, Janet Hester Watt and Ruth Werbin. Their voices offer a different perspective on the situation during wartime, and help us to understand the strength and determination of women who wished to serve their country in uniform.

The late arrival to the war meant little for the highly dedicated and determined WRCNS recruits entering the ranks. From the initial pool of 2,000 applications, 67 women reported to Kingsmill House, Ottawa, for basic training. Of these women, 22 became officers and also the first Commonwealth women to hold a King's commission.¹⁰ Eventually all basic training for female recruits was located at HMCS *Bytown II*, later named HMCS *Conestoga* in Galt, Ontario.¹¹ Following basic training, members were assigned one of 39 ratings, or as more commonly known, trades.¹² Putting women in these trades allowed the men occupying them to be released for sea duty. This was the original idea, to provide a way to allow women into uniform, however, as the war progressed, the number of ratings expanded, and women began to affect the naval war effort through large and small acts of courage and grit.

An important first step into entering the naval service for women was volunteering and committing themselves to the alien world of military service during wartime. For those serving today, the mix of anxiety and anticipation which rests in the pit of one's stomach whenever whispers of postings or deployments arise is all too familiar. For

most WRCNS, postings sent them to the coasts. Greer, a native of Vancouver, was posted on the opposite coast of the country. Charleton, a prairie girl from Winnipeg, Manitoba, was posted to Halifax, and La Prairie's training took her across two provinces, until she too, like Charleton received her posting to Halifax. WRCNS also found themselves being posted to Newfoundland, or even to Londonderry, London or Plymouth in Great Britain,



Jenny Pike (né Whitehead), left, develops photographs in a darkroom alongside a colleague in an undated photo. A member of the WRCNS, she was the only woman working in the darkroom that processed the initial D-Day landing photographs.

with HMCS *Niobe* in Scotland, and a small number went to New York or Washington.¹³ In her autobiography, Greer notes that during the war, around one-sixth of the WRCNS served outside of Canada.¹⁴

Before taking up the watch on these postings, however, the first great hurdle new recruits faced was basic training at HMCS *Conestoga*. And not dissimilar to experiences of servicemen and women throughout the ages, each WRCNS member remembered this experience – during research on this topic, I found that the stories of basic training were the most colourful and animated parts of many WRCNS memoirs. WRCNS recruits shed their civilian clothes, identities and were immediately thrown into military life complete with early wake-up calls, tight timelines to make (or inevitably break and suffer the consequences), shared responsibilities and standards to maintain. These new recruits faced a steep learning curve when adapting to their new environment – kitchens were galleys, bathrooms were heads, floors were decks, and the training school HMCS *Conestoga* was in fact a ship, despite the solid ground underfoot.¹⁵ On reflecting about her training, Greer comments, “There were so many things to learn! We learned how to salute ... who to salute ... and when to salute.... We learned to say ‘Yes Ma’am’ and ‘No Ma’am’ (and very often, ‘I’m very sorry Ma’am’).”¹⁶ Greer further reflects that the instructors at HMCS *Conestoga* “taught us, organized us ... and scared us half to death.”¹⁷

This pace of life was a stark contrast to the glorified patriotic visions about serving that recruits may have held when beginning this journey, but WRCNS members persevered. They graduated, and continued to advanced training schools, or received immediate postings, depending on their rating. For instance, WRCNS member La Prairie was employed as a visual signaller and was sent to St. Hyacinthe, Quebec. Her training prepared her to read Morse Code from incoming ships, which was delivered from great distance and at great speed, and then return instructions to guide the ships to harbour. La Prairie reflects that

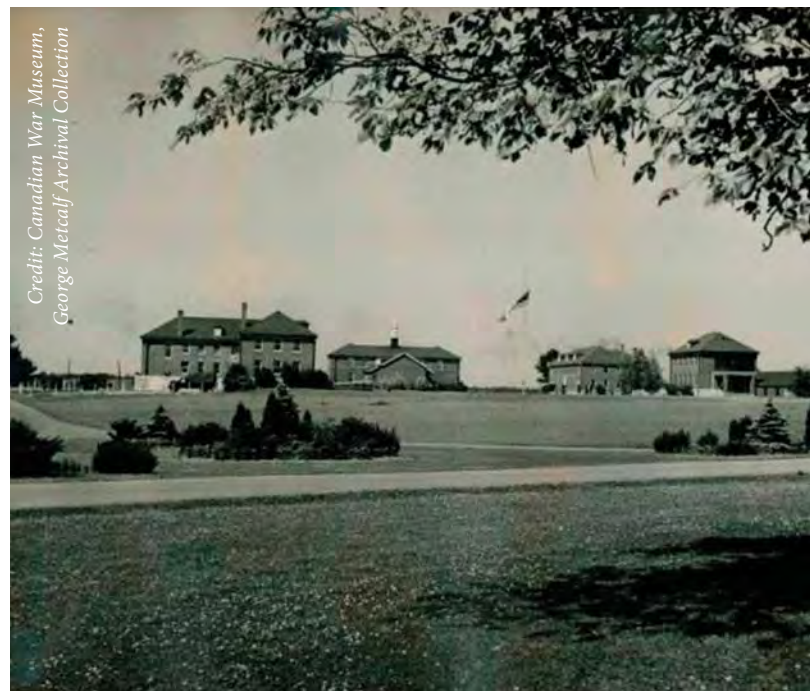
Every day, bad weather or good, we were out learning.... [In particular] it was semaphore [a system of flag signals], we had to know the whole fleet signal book off by heart. We had to, by telescope, be able to identify different flags on different ships. We were beautifully trained.¹⁸

On first glance, this could appear to be a typical shore duty. However, in La Prairie’s experiences, these signalers were left exposed to weather, and had great risks and responsibility on their shoulders too. One shift in particular occurred during a storm in December when La Prairie

stood alone on the roof of her tower, ice freezing to her eyelashes as five different ships returning home attempted to signal her while the wind drowned out her vocal instructions to her partner below.¹⁹ Signal towers and wireless telegraphist stations in Halifax were ‘womaned’ solely by WRCNS members.²⁰

While La Prairie and her signaller companions guided ships and sailors home, other WRCNS members prepared them for deployment and service in the U-boat-ridden, unforgiving Atlantic theatre. Duffus was called up in March of 1943 and was assigned a position performing staff officer training. These WRCNS members taught tactics to escort vessel crew members to prepare them for convoy protection duty in the Atlantic. The WRCNS officers took control of a tactical table, issued scenarios to the students and “would play the game as situations arose.... Perhaps it would be announced that there was a submarine sighted somewhere or someone had seen a ship blow up, so they knew a submarine had done that.”²¹

Women also fought and safeguarded the information battlespace, like Charleton of Winnipeg who enlisted as a WRCNS with HMCS *Chippawa* in 1942 as a writer. Following training, she was posted to Halifax where she was tasked with burning secret messages along with other administrative duties.²² WRCNS members with transmitting, receiving, coding or similar ratings were posted across the country to send and intercept messages including at HMCS *Coverdale* in New Brunswick. Another WRCNS member, Adams, who would later be anointed



An undated photograph shows HMCS *Conestoga*, near Galt, Ontario, which was the training centre for new Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service members.



Credit: Library and Archives Canada, RG 24, R112 4950817

Signaller Irene Cheshire of the WRCNS sends a Morse Code message by signal projector in an undated photo.

with the nickname of ‘Ruddy,’ joined in 1942, and was among the first group of women chosen to be wireless telegraphists. She was posted to HMCS *Coverdale*, where she engaged in the tracking of enemy submarines, and intercepting their signals in an effort to recognize patterns, and by extension, boat numbers.²³ It was here, on 30 April 1945 under the supervision of watch leader Elsie Michaels (née Houlding), that a startling message from German Admiral Karl Doenitz was intercepted. Doenitz’s message being relayed to his forces declared that Adolf Hitler was dead – the intercepting operator was the first Allied military member to know this information!²⁴

Throughout the Second World War over 1,000 WRCNS members served overseas, and six members died in service.²⁵ WRCNS member Watt indicated that her journey into uniform, along with most others, was inspired out of a call to action to aid kin, neighbours and fellow Canadians at sea, and to seek adventure. These women contributed to the effort in more ways than originally thought possible, with great pride, as they were cognizant of the toll Atlantic crossings were taking on their Canadian brothers,

husbands, friends and neighbours. Charleton recalls that “[w]e couldn’t help but know something of that in the year 1943 because [of the] great loss of shipping at that time, in ’43 and ’44. But especially ’43 was bad because the U-boats were over here on the Atlantic coast.”²⁶ One day in particular, Charleton had been summoned over the intercom system to report to the office where she was tasked with recording a roll call of sailors arriving on base who had survived a U-boat attack. The memory of a particular sailor stuck with her as “[h]e said that he’d lost his parents and he had just lost his only brother who was left. He’d just lost him at sea.... I couldn’t do anything about it except reach over and ... and take his hand.”²⁷

Working behind the scenes, the women of the WRCNS strove to give Canadian sailors the training, care and intelligence required to turn the tide and eventually dominate in the Battle of the Atlantic. And even after skirmishes in this theatre ceased, many like Greer “all but ran to re-enlist for the duration of the Pacific hostilities.”²⁸ Their war was not over and their duty was not yet done. WRCNS members continued the fight, received new cross-country



Members of the Canadian Naval Mission Overseas staff in London, England, celebrate V-E Day. Second from the left is WRCNS member Lorna Stanger.

postings in Vancouver and learned Kana, the Japanese version of Morse Code.²⁹ Soon, all members like Greer were released from service following the capitulation of Japan in early September 1945. Her war ended on 6 March 1946, and she recalls there was only the wake-up call of reveille, “there were no parades ... no brass bands.... I knew my job was done. It was time to go home.”³⁰

Duffus shared a similar sentiment in a recent interview, saying that the service of the WRCNS had been largely in the shadows and has continued to stay there. She reflects, “[a]n awful lot of people don’t know what the women did in the services during the war.... [I]f it weren’t for what they did, a lot of things would not have been done.”³¹ Some members, like Jenny Pike are remembered for their refusal to be forgotten. For instance soon after the war, when told to march at the back of a Remembrance Day parade, Pike proclaimed “[w]e are women veterans, we will NOT march at the back, we’re going to join the men where we belong.”³²

Members of the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service did more than just free men from shore duties. They functioned as a fully integrated part of the Royal Canadian Navy, not just as an auxiliary force.³³ The work contributed by the WRCNS encompassed much more than shore duties and created lifelines for Canadian ships at sea, which helped keep the Royal Canadian Navy afloat in the Battle of the Atlantic, and well-supported during its existence throughout the Second World War. **CNR**

Notes

1. W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty and Michael Whitby, “Appendix I,” *No Higher Purpose: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1939-1943* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell, 2004), p. 633.
2. Historica Canada. *Record of Service: Janet Hester Watt*, 21 September 2018, p. 1:10.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1:20.
4. Rosamond Greer, *The Girls of the King’s Navy* (Victoria, BC: Sono Nis Press, 1983), p. 14.
5. Carolyn Gossage, *Greatcoats and Glamour Boots: Canadian Women at War (1939-1945)* (Toronto, Ontario: Dundurn Press, 1991), p. 35.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
7. Roger Litwiller, “Women in the RCN: An Incredible Legacy,” 1 October 2018.
8. Greer, *The Girls of the King’s Navy*, p. 11.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
11. “WRCNS - The Wrens,” CFB Esquimalt Naval and Military Museum, available at <https://navalandmilitarymuseum.org/archives/articles/paving-the-way/wrcns-the-wrens/>.
12. Litwiller, “Women in the RCN.”
13. Greer, *The Girls of the King’s Navy*, p. 11.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
18. “Vicki La Prairie: Veteran Stories - The Memory Project,” The Memory Project, Government of Canada, available at <http://www.thememoryproject.com/stories/1650:vicki-la-prairie/>.
19. *Ibid.*
20. “WRCNS - The Wrens,” CFB Esquimalt Naval and Military Museum.
21. “Carol Elizabeth Duffus Hendry: Veteran Stories - The Memory Project,” The Memory Project, Government of Canada, available at <http://www.thememoryproject.com/stories/45:carol-elizabeth-duffus-hendry/>.
22. “Ruth Werbin: Veteran Stories - The Memory Project,” The Memory Project, Government of Canada, available at <http://www.thememoryproject.com/stories/2103:ruth-werbin/>.
23. “Alice Adams,” CFB Esquimalt Naval and Military Museum, available at <https://navalandmilitarymuseum.org/archives/articles/alice-adams/>.
24. When interviewed, WRCNS member Joy Kermack stated the following, “In May 1994, I was visiting my watch leader and long-time friend Elsie (née Houlding) Michaels in Victoria. She had a favour to ask. Would I choose a safe place for something she had kept all these years from Coverdale? The Canadian War Museum is now the custodian of the message received on Elsie’s watch in German plain language from German Admiral Doenitz telling all his forces that Hitler was dead! Coverdale had scooped the Allies with this news. Of course, it’s too late to reprimand her now. Actually, I think she did Canada a favour – it is probably the only existing record.” “HMCS Coverdale,” Canada.ca. Government of Canada, available at <https://www.canada.ca/en/navy/services/history/ships-histories/coverdale.html>.
25. Litwiller, “Women in the RCN.”
26. “Ruth Werbin: Veteran Stories.”
27. *Ibid.*
28. Greer, *The Girls of the King’s Navy*, p. 125.
29. “Alice Adams,” CFB Esquimalt Naval and Military Museum.
30. Greer, *The Girls of the King’s Navy*, pp. 141-142.
31. “Carol Elizabeth Duffus Hendry: Veteran Stories.”
32. Barbara Fosdick, “Jenny Pike,” CFB Esquimalt Naval and Military Museum, available at <https://navalandmilitarymuseum.org/archives/articles/paving-the-way/jenny-pike/>.
33. Greer, *The Girls of the King’s Navy*, p. 32.

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