



“[T]hey lived up to
their motto, but they
accomplished far more...”

RCAF WOMEN'S DIVISION

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With the Canadian declaration of war on 10 September 1939, thousands of young men came forward to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force [RCAF] to fight against Nazi Germany. A significant number of Canadian women sought to join the RCAF with the outbreak of hostilities but were, in most cases, politely told that there was no place for them in the air force. Undaunted, a number of them paid their own way to England and joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) of the Royal Air Force [RAF]. Still others travelled farther afield as they strove to "do their bit" for the war effort. For those women

who remained behind in Canada, it would be almost two full years before they would be permitted to don the RCAF blue uniform.

The MacKenzie King government had been reluctant to authorize the enlistment of women in the military services. However, by the summer of 1941 it became apparent that the services were facing a manpower shortage. Therefore, consideration was given to the possibility of women entering the service and replacing men in non-combat roles. After all, the British had been employing service women for the past two years with excellent results. The RAF's success in this program may have

inadvertently added a political dimension to the question of enlisting women in the RCAF. As the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) expanded, more and more British instructors and support personnel were arriving in Canada some of whom were bound to be members of the WAAF. The possibility of explaining to hostile female voters why British women could serve and not Canadian women was not something that appealed to politicians. Therefore, on 2 July 1942, an Order-in-Council authorized the formation of the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force (CWAAF) and the RCAF became the first military service to actively recruit women for duties.

The first three officers recruited in the CWAAF were Flight Officer Kathleen Oonah Walker, Section Officer Jean Flatt Davey in the medical branch and in the honorary rank of Air Commandant, Her Royal Highness, the Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone, the wife of the current Governor General. It was the responsibility of Walker and Davey to select the first 150 members this new organization and they went across the country selecting the recruits. Four members of the British WAAF were lent to Canada in November 1942 and formed the backbone of the instructional staff. Less than thirty days after these individuals stepped onto Canadian soil they were busy turning recruits into airwomen

at Number 6 Manning Depot in Toronto. This establishment was formerly Havergal College, a girls' school, and was to be their first stop on a service career for many Canadian women.

On 3 February 1942, an Order-in-Council changed the name of the CWAAF to the RCAF (Women's Division) whose members would be subject to the same terms of service, discipline, and responsibilities as their male counterparts.

It was no longer an auxiliary organization but a true part of the air force. Originally there had been only nine trades open to women, however, encouraged by the success of the first intake, the number of available trades was soon expanded to sixty-nine. Eventually, a total of 17,038 women would be enrolled before recruiting ended in the spring of 1944. The Women's Division, or WDs as they were popularly called, served throughout Canada, the United States and England where they became component parts of the RCAF Overseas and 6 Group Headquarters. By the end of the war, 28 WDs had been killed or died on active duty, and many had been decorated for their dedicated service.

The WDs were pioneers in gaining recognition of the ability and skills that women had to offer the nation as a whole



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and the air force in particular. In an age when most women were expected to remain at home and wait quietly for their husbands, fathers or brothers to return home from the front, they volunteered to enter a strange new world and in effect be guinea pigs for future generations. They joined for adventure, a steady job, ties to the service, or because of what we would consider “plain old-fashioned patriotism”; in other words for the same reasons that men did. They were normally paid less than their male counterparts, the rule of thumb being that it took three women to do the work of two men and therefore, they should receive two-thirds the salary of a man.

Eventually, through questions raised in parliament, this would be raised to 80 percent. Often WD Officers were restricted to command only other WDs in areas of responsibility traditionally associated with women such as nursing or food services, but there were exceptions. Women like WO2 [Warrant officer class 2] Sylvia Simm who, as the senior NCO [non-commissioned officer] at the RCAF Records Section in Ottawa, had some 500 men and women call her “Sergeant Major” or M. E. Lawrence who in May 1945 became the only woman in the wartime RCAF to hold the rank of WO1, established a tradition of excellent leadership and service.

With the end of the war the Women Division was quickly disbanded and by December 1946 that last discharge had been administered. However, in a short five years, the RCAF responding to Cold War (*sic*) pressure would again expand and the Women’s Division was reinstituted building upon its wartime traditions.

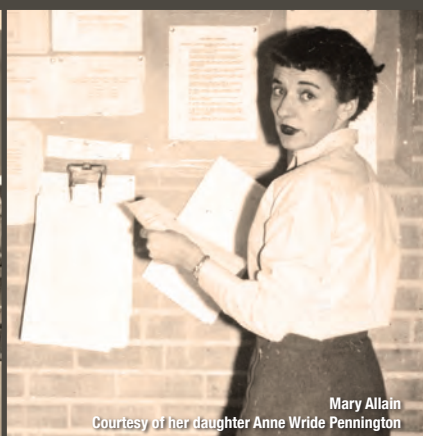
The motto of the WDs had been “We Serve That Men May Fly” and they lived up to their motto, but they accomplished far more than release men for combat duty. They created a place for themselves in the history of the Canadian air force and established the tradition of women in light blue uniforms. For them, and the thousands of women that came after them, it is most apropos that their motto is now “Per Ardua Ad Astra”. 🇨🇦

ABBREVIATIONS

CWAAF	Canadian Women’s Auxiliary Air Force
RAF	Royal Air Force
RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
WAAF	Women’s Auxiliary Air Force
WD	Women’s Division
WO	warrant officer



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Mary Allain
Courtesy of her daughter Anne Wride Pennington



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