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Noon WRENS, Naval Headquarters, by Pegi Nicol MacLeod.

SERVING THEIR COUNTRY: THE STORY OF THE WRENS, 1942-1946

by Emilie Anne Plows

For us women to be called to serve with these splendid men is indeed an honour, and whatever form our service may take, it is all part of the great whole and should be our pride to carry out to perfection. And when the war is over, it will be something to take back home, an [sic] unique experience of duty and service, a wide vision of what Canada is and means, a sense of fellowship beyond ordinary relationships.

– Princess Alice, Honorary Commandant Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service¹

Introduction

By the spring of 1941, Canada had been at war for nearly two years. In light of the increasing need for manpower for the war effort, National Defence Headquarters asked the navy, army, and air force to determine what roles women could perform in uniformed service. At the time, the navy believed it would only need a small number of drivers, and, unlike the army and the air force, it did not believe it necessary to create a separate service for women.² A year later, all this would change.

Men and yet more men are needed to man the ships of the Royal Canadian Navy which patrol the seas. To replace these men on shore duty has been the basis of the organization and training of the women in the Royal Canadian Naval Service. The call goes out to

Canadian women to volunteer for service, making application at the nearest recruiting office in their vicinity.³

What with the expanding war effort and the intensification of the Battle of the Atlantic, it had become clear that more men were required for sea duty, and this left a substantial number of shore duty positions to be filled.

The purpose of this article is to give the reader a better understanding of the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS): its purpose, its organization, the challenges it faced, its role in the war effort, and, more importantly, the impact it had upon women who served as what would become commonly referred to as ‘Wrens.’ Moreover, this brief study will demonstrate how the creation of the WRCNS had two synergistic and beneficial outcomes. While the women who served in the WRCNS provided valuable wartime aid to Canada, their service benefited them both as individuals and as a community, giving them a sense of purpose, pride, and confidence they would carry with them for the rest of their lives.

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telephone switchboard operator, wireless telegraphic operator, coder duties, cook, steward, messenger, elevator operator, and motor transport driver.⁶ Additional positions would be added as the war effort expanded, the following additional trades being listed and described in a newspaper advertisement from 1943: wardroom attendant, quarters assistant, laundress, supply assistant, stenographer, confidential book corrector, postal clerk, secretary, pay writer, communications and operations specialist, sail maker, sick berth attendant, and regulator. By the end of the war, 39 trades had been declared open to the Wrens.⁷ And however trivial some of these duties may have appeared, they were all vital to the war effort. While visiting schools in Quebec and Ontario, Vice-Admiral G.C. Jones, Vice-Chief of the Naval Staff, observed:

Many of these jobs are not spectacular, but they are vital to the service. They must be done – and done well – or the service will suffer. I know how important, for instance, the work of Wren laundresses is. Perhaps these girls are not aware that they have contributed greatly to the efficiency of the service. I know that they have.⁸

Regardless of the tasks they performed, the Wrens helped fulfill many of the wartime needs of the Royal Canadian Navy.

Background

In January 1942, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) asked the British Admiralty for assistance in creating the WRCNS.⁴ The justification for such an organization was provided by the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services. He argued that women could perform a number of tasks, thus enabling men "...[for] duties of a heavier nature than they [were] now performing."⁵ In May of that year, a Memorandum was sent to the War Committee Cabinet listing the following positions or tasks that could be filled or performed by women: cipher duties, clerical work, teleprinter operations,



Into Service

In response to the Canadian request, the British Admiralty sent three officers of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)⁹ to help establish the WRCNS. The Canadian organization adopted the British model, although unlike the WRNS and the women's divisions (WDs) of the Canadian Army and the Royal Canadian Air Force, the WRCNS became an integral part of the RCN, and not an auxiliary formation.¹⁰ As such, according to the regulations, this meant that the female officers' rank and authority "...[was] prescribed for their equivalent ranks and rates in the Royal Canadian Navy"¹¹

But first, there were a number of challenges that needed to be addressed in developing the WCRNS, and they included organization, recruitment, accommodation, and training. Although each challenge would require a period of British tutelage, the aim was to eventually leave the various compositional elements under the control of Canadian Wrens.¹²

British Wren officers Chief Officer Dorothy Isherwood, Superintendent Joan Carpenter, and Second Officer Elizabeth Sturdee subsequently traveled across Canada promoting the WRCNS. Of the three services, it can be argued that the WRCNS was the most successful in overcoming problems of recruitment, since it appeared to have benefited from observation of the development of other women's services, and it demonstrated a greater ease in establishing a general *esprit de corps* and the selection of personnel.¹³ The enlistment requirements for the WRCNS would evolve slightly over time. According to initial regulations, applicants had to be Caucasian British subjects, be between the ages of 18 and 45, and be without dependant children under 16,¹⁴ although commissions would not be granted to candidates under 21 years of age.¹⁵ There were some exceptions approved by the Chief of Naval Personnel for candidates who were particularly suitable up to 49 years of age.¹⁶ In 1943, the age requirement was amended to allow women under 56 years of age to enter as cooks.¹⁷ In 1944, the racial component was dropped, no longer limiting candidacy to women of the Caucasian race.¹⁸ Aside from these requirements, applicants were to be healthy and to have attained



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a minimum formal education of Grade 8. Educational standards were set higher for officers, who were required to have university training and qualifications, or their equivalents.¹⁹

Initially, there was concern in naval circles that all the best candidates would have already joined the army and the air force when these services were recruiting back in 1941. However, in a radio interview in 1943, Superintendent Carpenter affirmed they were inundated with applications from potential candidates. She then elaborated:

I was tremendously impressed by the enthusiasm of the Canadian girls, everywhere I went. They all seemed anxious to serve and to do something constructive to help win the war. I found them very receptive to naval tradition and amenable to discipline²⁰



The WRCNS attracted women from all walks of life: farm girls, debutantes, students, teachers and factory workers, as well as department store clerks and office workers. Recruitment continued throughout the war until February 1945, and by April of that year, there had been approximately 6500 Wrens brought into the service, primarily from Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec. Total wartime enlistment for the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWACS) comprised over 22,000 members, and the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division



eventually consisted of more than 17,000 women,²¹ thus making the WRCNS by far the smallest of the three women's services.²²

However, by the summer of 1942, there were 2000 applicants on file to form the first class of Wrens, of which 70 were selected for their "...outstanding leadership qualities and executive abilities."²³ On 29 August 1942, the first class of 67 women began their basic training at Kingsmill House in Ottawa. On 19 September, 28 appeared before the first selection board, and 21 of these Wrens were subsequently appointed officers of His Majesty's Royal Canadian Navy, representing "...the first women to carry the King's Commission in any British Navy."²⁴ Upon their graduation on 1 October 1942, the women either became recruiting officers or were sent to Galt, Ontario, to help establish the WRCNS basic training centre to be located there.

This establishment and other WRCNS training centres became referred to as *stone frigates*, with each being designated as one of His Majesty's Canadian Ships and given corresponding nautical terminology. The centre at Galt, designated HMCS *Conestoga*, conducted a three-week training program designed to enable a rapid transition from civilian to military life. The new recruits were given physical training and drill practice, and they attended lectures on naval traditions and customs.²⁵ Some of the other centres included



Cornwallis (Halifax) and *St. Hyacinthe* (St. Hyacinthe, Quebec). However, there were no existing accommodations available for the course members at these centres, and new structures of either a temporary or a permanent nature had to be built. Due to this factor, recruitment and training suffered delays around the end of 1942, and would do so again the following year.²⁶

Nonetheless, in May 1943, courses for writers and supply assistants began at HMCS *Cornwallis*. Training for cooks, ward-room assistants, sick berth attendants, laundresses, motor transport drivers, and photographers were also made available at this location at a later date. In June, courses for coders, visual signalers, teletype operators, and telegraphers began at HMCS *St. Hyacinthe*.²⁷ Earlier that year, in February, a WRCNS officers' training course was established in Ottawa. It provided officers with generalized officership training and allowed them an opportunity to discuss problems they would encounter as an officer. While the course initially lasted two weeks, it was eventually extended to five weeks duration. Practical tests were administered throughout the course, and the women were assessed "...for general Officer-like qualities, with emphasis on judgment, responsibility, leadership, [and] power of command"²⁸

By the summer of 1943, the work of the WRCNS was already being recognized and acknowledged. The Minister of National Defence for Naval Services stated:

The expectations of the Navy in you [Wrens] have been justified by your hard work and dedication to duty. You who are members of the sister branch of the senior service have won the respect of all Canadians by your acceptance of requirements, readiness for responsibility and your invaluable contribution to the work of winning the war. You will share in no small measure the gratitude of the Canadian people when victory is ours.²⁹

In September of that year, Adelaide Sinclair was promoted to the rank of commander³⁰ (acting captain)³¹ and became the navy's first appointment by Canadian



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Adelaide Sinclair.

Headquarters as Director of the WRCNS, upon Dorothy Isherwood's return to England. In 1944, she was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. Her citation read as follows:

Commander Sinclair has shown untiring zeal and outstanding ability, tact and judgment in organizing the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service into a most efficient and well-disciplined unit.³²

She was the first Canadian woman to fill the position of Director of the WRCNS and she held that position until 1946, when the organization was disbanded.

The Wren uniform became a source of pride to the women who wore it. More than one former Wren recalls missing her uniform once the WRCNS was disbanded. When she was discharged at war's end and was no longer entitled to wear her uniform, one woman recounts that her eyes filled with tears as she removed each item.³³ Rosamund "Fiddy" Greer, a former Wren herself, writes that wearing a uniform seemed to change them. "We were transformed into a sameness that affected strong feelings of camaraderie and unity. We were Wrens ... and we were very proud of it."³⁴ In point of fact, many women were drawn to the WRCNS because of its uniform.

Aside from fondness for the uniform, there were a number of other reasons why women chose the navy in which to enlist. Some were motivated to join the Wrens because they had a brother serving in the navy, or they had friends who had joined the service. At least one woman enlisted in the WRCNS because of her boyfriend. She wrote: "When he went into the air force, [he] had made me promise not to join the WDs. But he never said anything about the navy!"³⁵ Some chose the WRCNS because they thought there might be less competition and more career opportunities therein, since it was the last of the women's services to be created,³⁶ and, as such, there was also a great amount of publicity accorded it in newspapers to encourage enlistment.

With regard to enlistment in general, the accounts of a number of former Wrens demonstrate the wide range of reasons they chose to join the armed forces, having left well-paying jobs in civilian life in order to do so. Most were motivated by a desire to do more and to contribute to the war effort. Some wanted to travel throughout Canada and even overseas, in order to see and learn more about the world.³⁷ Additionally, some were bored with their current employment and were seeking something that would interest and stimulate them to a greater extent,³⁸ and to be part of an adventure with all the concomitant excitement.³⁹ Aside from these more transparent reasons,



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Portrait of a WREN, by Marion Long.



there was yet another, and it was more sombre and moving. As one former Wren explained, many of the women with whom she had served joined because they had lost a brother, a boyfriend, or a husband in action to the war.⁴⁰

For many of these women, it was their first time away from home and their families. Their parents had varied reactions when their daughters informed them of their enlistment. One woman, who had decided to join the WRCNS rather than pursue her education, said that she “stunned” her mother, but that her father accepted “...the sudden change of plans with a grin.”⁴¹ Occasionally, a daughter’s decision was met with initial disapproval, as one former Wren recounted. “[W]hen I first joined up, my father was very hurt – going away from home wasn’t common then, and it put a break in the family.”⁴² However, attitudes could change, as she later explained: “When



close, even after all these years and often without much contact, because we shared so much.” And she believes the friendships she made were the most rewarding part of being in the WRCNS.⁴⁷

Although the Wrens faced considerably less dangerous circumstances by virtue of not being permitted to serve at sea, they were by no means exempt from danger. The Wrens posted either to Newfoundland or England were faced with the threat of U-Boat attacks as they sailed outbound from Halifax and crossed the Atlantic. When ships were sunk or torpedoed, the Wrens working in ports were affected and deeply saddened by the losses. Frequently, they had friends aboard those ships, or had simply met the sailors crewing them in passing. In this manner, the Wrens had a higher degree of exposure to the realities of war than many other women on the home front.

I came home on leave in July, he wouldn’t let me out of my uniform!”⁴³ Many parents were similarly proud of their daughters, and they were often a source of encouragement to them. Shortly after receiving her call to service after enlisting, one woman confided in her mother that she was unsure of her decision. Her mother replied that if she were in her daughter’s place, she would join for an opportunity to meet new people and to broaden her horizons.⁴⁴

One of the most common features of former Wren accounts are the friendships they formed during their wartime service. One woman explained: “[W]e came in as individuals concerned with our own well-being; but we soon became a community working towards a common goal of supporting the navy’s war effort.”⁴⁵ This same Wren grew so accustomed to living in a community that when she was promoted and given private quarters, she said she missed the camaraderie of the girls to whom she had grown so close. One former Wren believed she made her best friendships in the navy, saying: “[T]here are few places where you can form such fast friendships.”⁴⁶ As yet another former member pointed out: “My Wren friends and I are still



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When the war ended, the Wrens shared similar experiences to their male counterparts in returning to civilian life. One former Wren recalls:

At the time, I didn't want to think about anything but being home. I had been gone for more than two years, and I didn't want to think about the war or the people who weren't coming back.⁴⁸

She added that her particular transition back to the life of a civilian was not very difficult. Some adjusted quite easily; others took more time. It was difficult for many women who wished to continue working as Wrens to be discharged. With their service no longer required, many felt lost upon their release, afraid of returning to civilian life. One woman wrote: "[I]t was a sad experience coming home and being told I wasn't needed anymore. I didn't know what I was going to do."⁴⁹ This Wren's words sum up what must have been a common feeling for many women of the WRCNS returning home after their wartime service.

Many former Wrens will admit that their time in the WRCNS had a positive influence upon their lives. The Wrens were filled with pride to have contributed to the war effort. Moreover, some say that being a Wren made them more responsible and independent.⁵⁰ It also instilled in them a sense of confidence and purpose and

made them feel like they could surmount any challenge.⁵¹ Some even found their wartime experiences helpful later in life. One former visual signaler, while taking a trip on the Mediterranean shortly after the war, began reading aloud a message being transmitted by another vessel. She was called up to the bridge, and she was afraid she had done something wrong. Quite the contrary, the captain asked her to continue reading the message for them since no one else aboard could do so.⁵²



However, there were other, more personal advantages made available after the war to the former Wrens. Among the Wrens who married servicemen, many married RCN personnel. One woman who did so commented that their naval background offered them a better understanding of the frustrations their husbands often faced. In this way, she remained close to the Navy and she recounted a touching moment for her at the commissioning of HMCS *Athabaskan* on 29 September 1972:

All sailors salute the quarterdeck whenever they cross it. When I watched the ship's company of *Athabaskan* board her for the first time, I had a sense of a ship coming alive. Each sailor gave part of himself to his ship and his shipmates when he saluted *Athabaskan's* quarterdeck. I think that I, too, left a bit of my spirit with Canada's navy when I saluted the quarterdeck for the last time.⁵³



Newfoundland,⁵⁸ which was then considered an overseas posting, and there were an additional 503 Wrens serving in Great Britain.⁵⁹

In recognition of their wartime efforts, 20 Wrens received various degrees of the Order of the British Empire. Three Wrens were appointed Officers of the Order (OBE), seven were appointed Members of the Order (MBE), and, finally, eight were awarded the British Empire Medal (BEM). Two others received a King's Commendation.⁶⁰

Conclusion

When the WRCNS was disbanded in August 1946, almost 7000 women had served in a variety of trades fulfilling various wartime needs of the RCN.⁶¹ Regardless of the tasks they performed,

from cooks and laundresses to recruiters and officers, the Wrens contributed valuable service to the navy and to the nation. Perhaps just as important is the impact their wartime effort had upon the women who

Overall, most Wrens enjoyed their time in service, and many say they loved the experience. One former Wren affirms that it was one of the best experiences of her life,⁵⁴ while another said she found the war years good and satisfying.⁵⁵

In reading the accounts of several former Wrens, it is clear that they remember their experiences fondly. These women surely cannot be judged wrong for having enjoyed their time during the war years. They were certainly aware of the realities of war and they were not immune to them. Rather, their joy came from serving their country in its time of need.

In total, over 1000 Wrens served abroad; the first, in April 1943, were posted to Washington to work for the Canadian Joint Staff.⁵⁶ By the end of the war, approximately 50 Wrens were working either in Washington or in New York.⁵⁷ There were also 586 Wrens serving in



Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service Canteen, by Pegi Nicol MacLeod.

served in the WRCNS. Overall, their service had a positive influence on them. Serving as a Wren gave these women a sense of pride, confidence, and purpose. In this way, the women of the WRCNS not only provided an essential service to the country's war effort, but the organization itself also benefited those who served as Wrens.

...I am very proud of my Wrens and the splendid way they have conducted themselves throughout their term of Service, and I am proud to wear their uniform. ...May their training and experience as Wrens stand them in good stead now and throughout the years to come ...⁶²



NOTES

1. Princess Alice, Honorary Commandant of the WRCNS. Foreword to the booklet issued by WRCNS: 7 June 1944. Library and Archives Canada: RG7 G-26 Volume 113, File 328-D: Women's War Organizations – WRCNS 1942-1946.
2. Jean Bruce, *Back at the Attack: Canadian Women During the Second World War – at Home and Abroad*. (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1985), p. 93.
3. *Vancouver News-Herald*, 28 June 1943. Library and Archives Canada: MG30 E391 Volume 1, Adelaide Helen Grant Sinclair Fonds, 1942-1946.
4. Barbara Dundas, *A History of Women in the Canadian Military*. (Montreal: Art Global, 2000), p. 60
5. As quoted at *Ibid.*
6. Memorandum to War Committee of the Cabinet, 6 May 1942. (No signatory) Library and Archives Canada: RG2 B-2 Volume 52, File W-30: War – Women's Voluntary Service (WRCNS), RCAF (WD), CWAC 1942-1944.
7. Bruce, p. 93.
8. The *Montreal Gazette*, 26 August 1944. Library and Archives Canada: MG30 E391 Volume 1
9. The WRNS dated back to the First World War. On 28 November 1917, King George V approved the creation of the WRNS. It was disbanded on 1 October 1919. Taken from: Rosamund "Fiddy" Greer, *The Girls of the King's Navy*. (Victoria, BC: Sono Nis Press, 1983), p. 11.
10. Bruce, p. 93.
11. *Regulations for the Organization and Administration of the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service 1942*, (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1942), Article 12.6, p. 13, (Canadian War Museum Research Centre).
12. Gilbert N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada: Its Official History*. Volume II, (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1952), p. 318.
13. Carolyn Gossage, *Greatcoats and Glamour Boots: Canadian Women at War (1939-1945)*. (Toronto & Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1986), p. 38.
14. Dundas, p. 62.
15. *Regulations for the Organization and Administration of the W.R.C.N.S 1942*, Article 5 (d), p. 7.
16. *Ibid.*, Article 2.1 (b), p. 5.
17. *Women's Royal Canadian Naval Regulations: Amendments, 1943* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1943), amendment #2 (Ottawa, 23 January 1943) (Canadian War Museum Research Centre).
18. *Women's Royal Canadian Naval Regulations: Amendments, 1944* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1944), Amendment #28 (Ottawa, 22 July 1944) (Canadian War Museum Research Centre).
19. Ruth Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), p. 113.
20. Navy Radio, Recorded 10 June 1943 for broadcast 14 and 16 June on CBC. Library and Archives Canada: MG30 E391 Volume 1.
21. Gossage, p. 38.
22. Pierson, p. 95.
23. Greer, p. 19.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
25. Tucker, p. 320.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 318.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
28. WRCNS Report Re. WRCNS Organization and Problems ca. December, 1945. Library and Archives Canada: MG30 E391 Volume 1.
29. Press Release: 28 August 1943. Library and Archives Canada: MG30 E391 Volume 1.
30. Press Release: 1 July 1945. Library and Archives Canada: MG30 E391 Volume 1.
31. According to the Canadian Navy Lists, Adelaide Sinclair's official substantive rank was commander, although she was a temporary acting captain. *The Canadian Navy List (July 1945)*. (Ottawa: Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, 1945), pp. 217, 550. *The Canadian Navy List (January 1946)*, p. 256.
32. Press Release: 1 July 1945. Library and Archives Canada: MG30 E391 Volume 1.
33. Lisa Banister. *Equal to the Challenge: An Anthology of Women's Experiences During World War II*. (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2001), p. 401 (Elizabeth Victoria "Vicki" La Prairie – née Wickham).
34. Greer, p. 35.
35. Banister, p. 117 (Lillabelle Roe).
36. *Idid.*
37. *Idid.*
38. *Ibid.*, p. 447 (Tish Herbert).
39. Gossage, p. 67.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
41. Banister, p. 447 (Tish Herbert).
42. *Ibid.*, p. 117 (Lillabelle Roe).
43. *Ibid.*, p. 118 (Lillabelle Roe).
44. *Ibid.*, p. 294 (Janet Garvin – née Watt).
45. *Ibid.*, p. 210 (Doris Catherine Harper – née Cale).
46. *Ibid.*, p. 119 (Lillabelle Roe).
47. *Ibid.*, p. 325 (Beatrice "Trix" Geary – née Schreiber).
48. *Ibid.*, p. 460 (Tish Herbert).
49. *Ibid.*, p. 162 (Lorna Corvey – née Stanger).
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 461, 462 (Tish Herbert).
51. *Ibid.*, p. 325 (Beatrice "Trix" Geary – née Schreiber); p. 462 (Tish Herbert).
52. *Ibid.*, p. 402 (Elizabeth Victoria "Vicki" La Prairie – née Wickham).
53. *Ibid.*, p. 8 (Isabel "Peggy" Porter –née Davis). Two years prior, on 27 November 1970, Isabel Porter was also present at the launch of HMCS *Athabaskan*. She recounts: "[t]he bottle of Champagne broke as I said, 'I name this ship *Athabaskan*. May God protect her and all who sail in her.' " This experience is of particular interest to the author, as her brother was serving as a Combat Systems Engineer aboard *Athabaskan* at the time this paper was originally written (April 2006).
54. *Ibid.*, p. 325 (Beatrice "Trix" Geary – née Schreiber).
55. Bill McNeil, *Voices of a War Remembered: An Oral History of Canadians in World War II*. (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited, 1991), p. 297 (Eleanor Sinclair).
56. Bruce, p. 94.
57. Dundas, p. 64.
58. Bruce, p. 94.
59. Tucker, p. 322.
60. Dundas, p. 64; F.J. Blatherwick, *Canadian Orders, Decorations and Medals*, 3rd Edition, (Toronto: The Unitrade Press, 1985), p. 22.
61. Bruce, p. 94.
62. Princess Alice, Honorary Commandant of the WRCNS. Victory birthday message for V-E Day. 9 August 1945. Library and Archives Canada: RG7 G-26 Volume 113 File 328-D.