

Brigadier General Sheila Hellstrom

In December 2020, the Friends lost a long-standing member and supporter



of the Canadian War Museum, and the larger Community lost a woman of great substance and Canada's first female General. Her obituary is included in this edition, so I will not go into her many accomplishments, but rather, focus on how a community of women responded to her passing.

BGen Hellstrom passed in the winter, during COVID-19. She had no immediate family here in Ottawa and only distant elderly cousins in Nova Scotia and Sweden. For the first while after her passing, no one was sure who was her Executor. What happened next is testament to the tremendous respect in which she was held among women, not just military women, but also female Curators, academics and archivists across the country.

When it was clear that no one was available from the family to respond to the initial requirements of Police, an Ottawa Police Detective went through an address book and found a local emergency contact list and found a phone number for Major Karen Breek, a retired military Doctor and friend. Major Breek immediately came to her home and from there, enlisted the help of a number of other military women to help find the Will and start to sort out the personal effects. Covid was a major concern, but that did not seem to deter anyone from volunteering. At one point during the first week, there were a dozen women at the house helping. After a few days, the Will was located and the Executor was contacted. However, the Executor was elderly and did not live in the city, so this Team of women, just proceeded to do what needed to be done, with the permission of the Executor.

No one at that point in time would have imagined that this support would remain in place until the Memorial Services finally took place here in Ottawa in September 21 and in Lunenburg in October 21.

However, there were some extraordinary activities that took place in relation to BGen Hellstrom and her legacy which are worthy of note. BGen Hellstrom had specifically asked in her Will that her “military memorabilia”, be distributed among Museums. This proved to be a very challenging undertaking, but once again, women from many disciplines came to the table to help.

With the help of Erin Gregory, Curator with the Canada Aviation and Space Museum, the Team was advised that the most effective way to offer items to Museums is to provide a catalogue of the items that includes photos and a description. She also suggested that students from Algonquin College in the Applied Museum Studies programme could be hired to do this during the summer. As the many volunteers had already sorted all the personal effects of BGen Hellstrom into categories such as 3D memorabilia (uniforms, plaques, certificates, etc) and 2D materials (journals, files, letters, etc), and after a discussion with the Executor, it was agreed that Estate funds would be used to develop this catalogue. What is important to note here is that it took a Village to make all this happen and had BGen Hellstrom not stated in her Will her wishes, it would likely not have been possible to use Estate Funds for the task.

The students were hired and then a number of female archivists and Erin came forward to help ensure that the students would deliver a product that the Museums could use. By the end of the summer and after about \$6,000, the Catalogue of the 3D materials of the Estate of BGen Sheila Hellstrom was distributed electronically to Museums across the country, as well as others such as the Legion in Lunenburg where she was born and raised and her alma matter, Mt Allison University.

As many major museums need to approach acquisition boards, the Catalogue proved to be an exceptional tool for all concerned. The interest in Museums from across the country has been amazing and items from the Catalogue have been acquired by a number of Institutions. The Canadian War Museum has requested several items to add to their collection including a CF Uniform and some of her documentation.

However, the story has an even more amazing twist. Thanks to the volunteers that found and secured about 12 boxes of pictures, papers and journals that BGen Hellstrom had collected throughout her life and with the

assistance of Jacqueline Vincent, a professional archivist, the Algonquin College students were trained on how to scan and catalogue papers and photos. As a result of these efforts, in September, Library and Archives Canada accepted BGen Hellstroms' entire 2D collection into this National repository. She will be only one of a handful of Canadian women to receive such an honour.

BGen Hellstrom served in a time when, if women married or had children, they had to leave the Service. She would most certainly have never become Canada's first female General had she chosen that path. However, one consequence of that was that when she passed, she did not have any children to take on the tasks described above. What she did have though, was a generation of women that she had inspired and who were ready to lend their talents and effort to ensure that her legacy was honoured. RESPECT.

Louise Siew
Captain (N) Ret'd