

Women in First World War

by Krista Duncan

When images of wartime come to mind, one usually conjures up an image of a brave soldier marching off fearlessly into battle, or perhaps on the battlefield heroically fighting the enemy. However, there is another image that is not evoked nearly as often, and that is of the many brave and selfless women who helped Canada's war effort in a variety of ways.

On the home front, women took on a number of previously 'male' tasks and jobs.



Although there was an initial reluctance to allow women into traditionally male dominated areas, as the war dragged on it was realized that their help would be essential to Canada's war effort. Women began working in munitions factories, helping to create shells, often working long hours in poor conditions, making an average of \$9 a week - barely enough to make ends meet. Others worked on farms and were referred to as 'farmettes'. They helped with planting, harvesting crops, caring for livestock, milking cows and other regular farm chores. For those working as farmettes, they earned \$4 a week but had room and board included.

Many of these women were required to maintain their traditional household and child rearing roles as well.

Women also tended to victory gardens, gave blood, purchased war bonds and donated old cookware and household items to scrap metal drives. There were a number of women's groups such as *The Women's Institute* that worked together to make quilts, clothing such as hats, mitts, scarves, and sweaters as well as bandages to send to men overseas. *The Canadian Women's Hospital Ship Fund* raised money by holding concerts, tag days, teas, card parties, lectures and bazaars. Some groups held canning clubs, while others adapted recipes to wartime shortages and published special cookbooks as an aid to others. In addition, many of these groups held send off and welcome home parties for troops and were often at the forefront of efforts to create local war memorials.

However, it wasn't just at home that women assisted with the war effort in the



Great War; some women were on the front lines, not in battle, but as nursing sisters. This would be women's first military involvement and saw nearly 3000 trained with the Voluntary Aid Detachment, Red Cross and St John Ambulance serving with the Canadian Army Medical Corps, often very close to conflict. Their blue dresses and white veils earned them the nickname of 'bluebirds'.

Thirty-three of these brave women lost their lives, while approximately 200 received medals for bravery.

Women's involvement during the war years allowed them to realize their potential and see just what they were capable of when allowed to do it. Out of their participation the suffragette movement grew. Many women wanted some vestige of equality after having done a man's job for a fraction of the pay. A huge step in that direction was the enfranchisement of women. Beginning in 1916 with Manitoba and four other provinces by 1917 women had begun to gain the right to vote. The Wartime Elections Act gave the vote to mothers, sisters and wives of those fighting as well as those women who had served as nursing sisters. It excluded Aboriginals, Asians and other racial minorities. Although this was a politically motivated initiative by Prime Minister Borden, it was nonetheless a victory for some women.

When their support was needed, women mobilized and answered the call in a wide variety of ways, both at home and overseas. Women are the frequently forgotten heroines in Canada's war effort -lest we forget. To provide additional insights into the role of women in both World Wars, the Canadian War Museum has an excellent temporary exhibition entitled "World War Women" on display in the LCol John McCrae Gallery until 3 April 2016.

Sources: <http://historyarchive.whitetree.ca/pages/article0027.html>
<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/feature/women/history/homefront>

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