



# Our Women *of* WAR

**OFTEN WHEN STORIES** are written about the World Wars, they're about our "boys" and "men" shipping out to fight for their country or, for those who didn't yet know any different, have a grand adventure. But there were many women whose lives were just as forever altered by the First and Second World Wars. Some were adventurous like the men and wanted to be part of the action; some felt duty-bound to contribute and support the cause; and some were "drafted" into service to their families and communities when their breadwinners didn't return from the fight. Some of these women have medals, some of them don't, but they all deserve to be remembered on November 11 for their service and their sacrifice.

The following are the stories of "our women of war" that readers have shared, so that they may take their place in Newfoundland and Labrador's wartime history.



# Women of FERRY COMMAND

THEY KEPT GANDER'S GREAT WAR SECRET FOR  
DECADES. JUST LAST YEAR, ONE OF THOSE WOMEN  
TOLD HER STORY TO WRITER HEATHER STEMP.

## FERRY COMMAND

*was one of the best-kept secrets of the Second World War and, at the time, that was a good thing. But 70 years later, Hazel Fausak (nee Bjornstad) thought it was time to let the secret out. She wanted people to know how the men and women who served with her in Gander contributed to the outcome of the war.*

*Ferry Command was formed in 1940 in response to what was happening in Europe. Poland, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Holland and France had fallen prey to the Nazi war machine. Prime Minister Winston Churchill knew Britain was next – and he knew they weren't ready.*

*Canada and the United States were trying to help by shipping planes in convoys across the Atlantic, but the process was too slow. The aircraft had to be taken apart, crated, loaded onto ships, reassembled in Britain and tested. To make matters worse, Nazi U-boats had perfected their wolf-pack tactic of tracking and sinking the Allied convoys.*

*Churchill decided to try flying the planes from North America to Europe, using an existing airport in Gander, Newfoundland, then a British colony. In May 1940, the quiet airport was transformed into a bustling wartime airbase. Local Newfoundlanders did most of the work to add the accommodations and services necessary to support the influx of pilots, meteorologists, radio operators and other staff who would be needed to run such a huge operation.*

On November 10, 1940, the first seven Hudson bombers left Gander for Aldergrove, in Northern Ireland. All seven arrived safely 11 hours later. It was an amazing feat for a number of reasons. It was the first time the North Atlantic had been flown over in the winter, the delivery had taken hours instead of days, and it was the beginning of many deliveries that some say shortened the war by months, if not years. Among those assigned to this base and its top-secret mission was a young woman from western Canada. Here is Hazel's story.

## LIFE IN GANDER DURING THE WAR

Hazel Bjornstad stated in her journal of the war years that she had no idea how Ferry Command was formed. She was just a quiet, shy girl who wanted to do something to help the war effort. An ad in the local newspaper offered a course at the Radio College of Canada, so she packed her bags and took the train from Edmonton to Toronto. She may have been shy, but she was also determined once she made up her mind to do something. Following

*(left) An aerial view of the runways, with bombers lined up to take off from Gander* Courtesy of the North Atlantic Aviation Museum



*Hazel at the "front desk," with Marcel A. receiving a message at one of the stations.* Courtesy of the North Atlantic Aviation Museum

graduation, she joined the Royal Air Force (RAF) and began an adventure that would change her life. "The Ferry Command made me the woman I became," she wrote.

At first she was posted at the signal station in Dorval, Quebec. Then in September 1944, about 15 women and the same number of men were asked to relocate and operate the station in Gander, Newfoundland. There they were housed in H-shaped buildings. Hazel lived with the other women on the upper floor of one of the long arms of the H. The rooms were about 12' x 12' and accommodated two women, with a single bed, a dresser, a bedside table and a lamp for each. There was one bathroom

per floor in the middle section of the H, with two sinks, two toilets and two tubs for all of them.

A larger room served as a recreation space where they played cards, did puzzles or had small parties. They ate at the general cafeteria (the officers had their own). Emptying cockroaches from the cereal bowls was a daily occurrence, but they got used to the routine and, according to Hazel, the food was delicious. A local pig farmer named Joey Smallwood was a regular in the cafeteria. "He sat at the end of a long table talking, talking and talking to his captive audience," she wrote. (Could she have guessed he'd be Newfoundland's first premier a few years later?)

**"I REMEMBER ONE MEMBER OF OUR GROUP BEING RELIEVED OF HIS POSITION FOR SENDING AN UNCODED MESSAGE – 'HI' TO HIS FRIENDS AT ANOTHER STATION. THIS WAS A VERY SERIOUS BREACH OF SECURITY SINCE IT MAY HAVE GIVEN THE ENEMY A CLUE THAT THIS WAS A BRITISH STATION."**

The radio operators put in long, tedious workdays. The messages were all coded so they never knew the content. They sat at desks with a radio, set of earphones, typewriter, sending key and two boxes, for incoming and outgoing messages. The messages were brought from the cipher office to the "front desk," where they were logged in and then distributed to the operators.

Hazel was one of three radio operators who worked on the front desk. Weather reports and forecasts were in groups of five figures. Letter messages were in groups of five letters. For both weather forecasts and letter messages, the first group of five

was a letter with four figures, for example, R1234. This gave the setting for the cipher machine to decode the messages received or to encode messages to be sent.

The messages were graded with no letter if it was an ordinary message, P for important, OP for very important, and O for emergency. They were not allowed to send an O message over the air for security reasons.

"I remember one member of our group being relieved of his position for sending an uncoded message – 'hi' to his friends at another station. This was a very serious breach of security since it may have given



*Hazel and the other female radio operators lived on the top floor of the H Building that stood across the road from the hangar.*

Courtesy of the North Atlantic Aviation Museum



### *Hazel picking blueberries*

Courtesy of the North Atlantic Aviation Museum

the enemy a clue that this was a British station. They could then monitor it extremely closely. That operator was gone within hours," Hazel said in an interview last year for this story.

The station operated around the clock. "Our shifts lasted for eight hours. We had every seventh day off and then changed to a different shift. When I think back, I am surprised at how we took the long hours and consecutive shifts all in stride," she said. The work schedule was later improved with more breaks between shifts.

But life at Gander wasn't all work. By the time Hazel arrived there in 1944, there was an American and a Canadian base, as well as the original

RAF base. "For us from the backwoods of Alberta, there was much to enjoy," she recalled. "Many of us had never played sports in a big gymnasium, like the one at the Canadian base. There was a theatre at the American base where the latest shows were playing." In their time off, there was Deadman's Pond where they sailed and swam. They went hiking and even picked blueberries. The women used to walk to a little store half a mile up the road that kept them supplied with Nescafé coffee with powdered cream in it.

## THE FERRY COMMAND LEGACY

"Our work, we knew, was very important for the transportation of planes and supplies. The safety of the pilots and crews depended on the information we were receiving and sending. Without this ferry service from Canada, the outcome of World War II might have been much different." This was how Hazel summed up her work with Ferry Command, but she was also aware of the effect that time had on the rest of her life.

"I shall always be thankful for the privilege of working for the RAF Ferry Command. It gave me – a very shy and insecure person – a chance to open up and find out I could do things just as well as other people who had much more privileged upbringings. It also gave me the chance to meet so many wonderful people from a variety of places and backgrounds. I kept in touch with a number of the friends I made in



### *Ferry Command turned Gander Airport into a bustling military base.*

Courtesy of the North Atlantic Aviation Museum

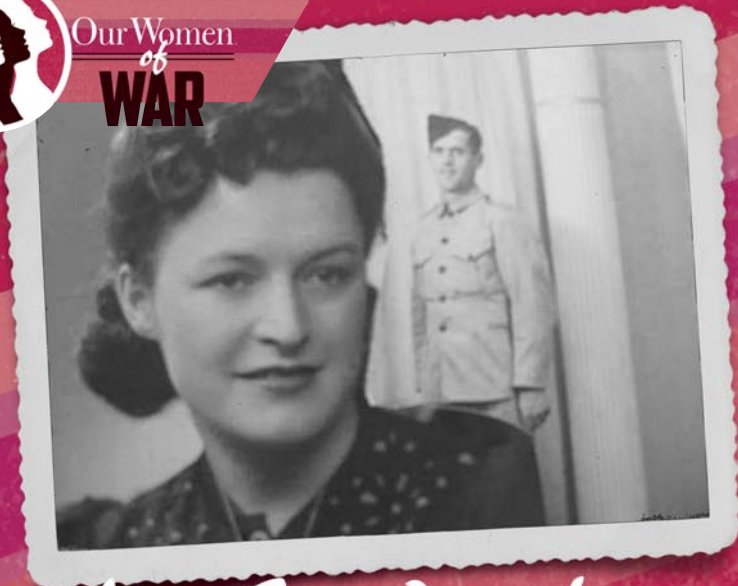
Gander and Montreal, but sadly they have mostly passed away.

"I can't help but be thankful that while unthinkable atrocities were happening in most of the civilized world, God allowed me to spend that time in a little slice of heaven called Gander, Newfoundland."

Hazel returned to Alberta in 1946. She married Fred Fausak, a WWII veteran, and raised nine children on a farm near Evansburg. Upon retirement, they moved to Evansburg. After 66.5 years of marriage, Fred passed away in 2013. Hazel lived in her own home, well looked after by

family and friends, until she passed away on January 4, 2016. 📧

*The author, Heather Stemp, wishes to thank Sandra Seaward, North Atlantic Aviation Museum; Greg Seaward, Town of Gander; Frank Tibbo, Gander historian; and Hazel's daughters, Marybelle, Valerie and Donna, for their input in this article. Heather is the author of Amelia and Me, about her aunt's meeting with Amelia Earhart in Harbour Grace in 1932. She is currently working on her second book, Taking Flight.*



*My Grandmother,*

# WEAPONS INSPECTOR

*By Brittanie Roberts*

**MY GRANDMOTHER, VICTORIA ROBERTS,** grew up on the Quebec Lower North Shore (bordering Labrador). In December 1939, she got a job at the St.-Paul-Lérmité war factory near Montreal, Quebec. Then 17, she left her home in Bradore Bay aboard a freighter bound for Montreal. For the duration of the war she lived in war housing a fair distance from her work. She told me that when she first walked in the factory, she didn't think she would be able to stand the sound of all the machines buzzing.

As the naval inspector, my grandmother was entrusted with the job of making sure there was no defective ammunition being sent out and that the right number of each weapon was coming off the line. Employees in this factory worked with hand grenades, guns, land mines and many other weapons. They were also in charge of putting all the caps on the shells for the guns. Wearing face shields, they would pop the cap in the machine, and it would go around a conveyor and onto the shell. She told me every weapon had to be perfect because it could be the difference between life and death for an Allied soldier. When she made sure everything was correct, she gave the ammunition a literal stamp of approval.

My grandmother said that because she was so young, she did not really think of all the dangers of working with these weapons; however, she was very good at her job and she made many friends at the factory.

It was during her return home after the war ended that she met my grandfather, Jack Roberts, travelling on the same boat. He was from St. Paul's River, which is about 45 minutes from Bradore Bay. He was a soldier and had been stationed in Sicily, Italy. When they got home, he continued to visit her in Bradore and they eventually started dating. She said that on the ship, her friend fell in



*Victoria (left) with a friend in Montreal, during the Second World War.*

love with my grandfather's uniform, but she fell in love with his eyes. It is definitely a fairytale love story.

My grandfather passed away in 2008 and my grandmother turned 94 last month. She still lives in St. Paul's River, on the Lower North Shore of Quebec. She and my grandfather had five boys and three girls.

My grandmother is a very loved woman. She has always been a very selfless and courageous lady, and anyone who meets her truly adores her. My family and I are very lucky to have her in our lives, and we will always be very thankful for her and my grandfather's contribution to the Second World War. ✉



# DRIVEN to Serve

## VICKY GOODYEAR SPENT THE WAR IN THE CANADIAN WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS

*By Rob Luscombe*

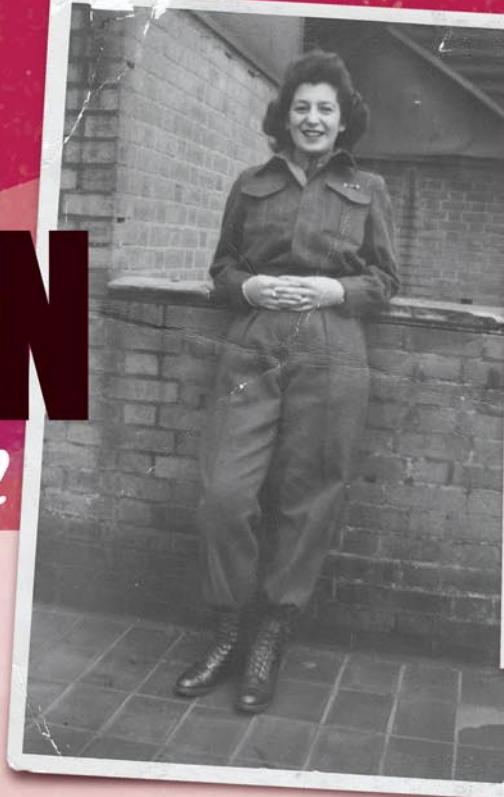
**OUR MOTHER CAME INTO THIS WORLD** as Emily Victoria Goodyear on July 16, 1925, at the Grace General Hospital in St. John's, NL. Little did anyone know until many years later that she shared the hospital nursery with her future husband, William Alexander Luscombe. He had been born on July 8, but his mother had a touch of scarlet fever so his stay was extended in quarantine.

"Vicky," as she came to be known, grew up at 6 Walsh's Square (partway up Signal Hill), the only girl in the family, sandwiched between four brothers, two on either side. Any shyness that may have been part of her genetic makeup was quickly scrubbed away fending for herself amongst all those boys.

When she turned 16, she attempted to enlist in the forces, but was refused because of her young age. So instead she found work at the Royal Stores on Water

Street, where she worked for two years. The day after her 18th birthday, she and her best friend, Gert McCumber, headed for the temporary enlistment office at Lester's Field to try again. While Gert was refused on medical grounds, Vicky was in!

Next, Vicky headed off to Kitchener, ON, where she requested and was permitted to complete a driver's course and was the only volunteer designated to Chilliwack, BC as a proud member of the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC). She



was assigned her duties as a staff driver and courier, and was given her own Jeep. She revelled in the activity and independence of the forces for the duration of the war.

On August 14, 1945, she was delivering a message in downtown Vancouver and was stopped at a red light, when suddenly people started piling onto her Jeep yelling and screaming and waving flags. It had just been announced that the war in Japan was over and the celebration had begun! A photographer from the local paper snapped a great shot (above) that captured the moment.

The war was over and so was the big adventure. After the dust settled and the paperwork was done, Vicky was released from duty and headed back home to Newfoundland. She travelled by train from Vancouver to Sydney, NS, to catch the ferry home. On board the ferry, which turned out to be the SS *Kyle*, she met her nursery-mate Bill Luscombe, who was

returning from fighting his way through Europe and taking part in the liberation of Holland. Love blossomed and the rest is history, as they say. They married the following year and raised a family of five children in St. John's.

Vicky and Bill both turned 91 this past July and celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary on June 25 at their residence in Tiffany Village. 📷



# The Reluctant WAR BRIDE

By Elizabeth Norberg



**MY MOTHER, IRENE LILLIAN WELLS**, was born in London, England in 1909. She was both a career woman and a military woman. She served in the British army, attaining the rank of sergeant. But at the age of 37 she left all that behind to move to “the Colonies,” as her parents put it – but I’m jumping ahead a bit.

She met my dad while she was stationed in the Highlands of Scotland working on codes and ciphers. He was serving in the Newfoundland Overseas Forestry Unit. As she told it, they met at a dance in Inverness. As a child I never thought of her as a war bride. It wasn’t until I was an adult that I appreciated all she’d done and all she’d left behind.

My parents were married in 1944 in London during the Blitz and actually spent one night of their honeymoon sheltering from the bombs in the London subway tubes. As she came down the stairs in her wedding gown, her father told her it wasn’t too late to change her mind. A year later, I was born in the Highlands near the

Isle of Skye. As a child she would sing me the Skye Boat song.

In 1946, after the war was over, my father brought us back to his small town of Port Blandford at the bottom of Bonavista Bay, Newfoundland. It was quite a cultural shock to her. She’d grown up in an upscale London home with live-in help. Her father was an architect and her mother never worked outside the home. Then, all of a sudden, she was faced with carrying buckets of water from a well to wash clothes with good old Sunlight soap and a washboard – not to mention the horrors of going up the hill to the dreaded outhouse.

In time she learned to look after a

*Mrs. Wells, pictured here in her 20s, was accustomed to dressing up in England.*



horse and sheep, though she balked at the idea of owning a cow. (Insisting that her children have fresh milk, however, along came goats and we drank goat's milk instead.) She learned to make bread in a wood-burning stove that had to be constantly fed to keep us warm. Many a newborn lamb was saved on the heat of the oven door.

She picked blueberries and raspberries in summer to make jam, and learned to can or bottle all sorts of foods, from moose to salmon, for the long winter months. She planted potatoes and fertilized them with caplin in June, then helped dig them in the fall. She learned to like the taste of moose meat, wild rabbits and salt fish – but not salt beef. She never mastered the art of cooking a decent Jiggs' dinner, much to my father's dismay. Most of these skills were taught to her by local women who'd grown up with these things.

Back then the only transportation was on foot or by train that came through once a day. My father came home from his job on the railroad once a month or so for a weekend so, for the most part, my mother raised the three of us on her own.

### *No Place Like Home*

A few times while my father was away, my mom got very homesick. By

this time she had given birth to her second child, my brother, with only a midwife and no doctor. My parents rounded out their family with a third child, another boy.

One day, my father came home to find us all missing. I suspect with help and encouragement from her parents, my mother took us children and went back to England by boat. He followed us and we all returned to Newfoundland.

After that, my mother not only adapted to, but actually began to enjoy, her new life. She loved the "times" at the Orange Lodge where she often wrote and performed in plays and concerts. She was very much a people person and often persuaded others to perform as well. She had a huge steamer trunk filled with beautiful evening gowns of lace, silk, satin and velvet, which she used as costumes in her plays. It was a little girl's dress-up dream.

Among her favourite occasions was

the Christmas season, with the mummering and the kitchen parties. Christmas lasted 12 days in those times.

### *The Indomitable Mrs. Wells*

My mother was also a bit of a local activist. Upon hearing my father complain of the workmen having to eat lunch outside in the snow, she immediately started writing to the railwaymen's union and persisted until a railway car was provided for them. She took care of my father's unemployment forms in the fall and his income taxes in the spring. She also helped local people deal with any government issues. She was fearless, willing to take on anyone.

She was also a great animal lover, and we always had a family dog. On one occasion someone had beaten her dog with a wheelbarrow handle until it was paralyzed in its hind end. My mother had him charged and not only took the weapon to court, but also the dog. She pleaded her case quite eloquently. The young fellow was found guilty and fined \$50, a hefty sum in those days.

One of the things she most enjoyed was guarding her apple trees from the young fellows who liked to jump the fence late at night and raid them. In later life she was very active in the local Canadian Legion and always loved her card games.

She's been gone now since 1990, laid to rest beside my dad in a pretty little churchyard overlooking the sea. People in my hometown still have great memories of her. She was loved, respected and feared by most. A lot of those young boys, now grandfathers themselves, still have

memories of being chased over the fence by Mrs. Wells, as she was always known, with their pockets stuffed with green apples.

Four years ago I finally had the opportunity to go back to Scotland, the land of my birth. I toured the Isle of Skye that she had loved so much and walked the streets of Inverness where she had strolled with my



*The author, age 15, and her mother, age 51, with their Newfoundland pony*

father so many years before. It was a very moving experience and left memories that I'll cherish forever.

This month her name, along with my dad's, will be placed on a new war memorial along with the names of other veterans of my little hometown nestled on the shores of Bonavista Bay. All funds for this endeavour have been raised by local townspeople. This makes me even more proud of her and them. ☺