

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## A Letter from a Woman in the Second World War

### Overview

Students will use primary source evidence in order to take on historical perspectives related to women in war. This lesson is intended to be an activating experience for a unit on the Second World War. The lesson procedure assumes that students have prior experience using primary source evidence (e.g., know how to read and interpret documents) and an understanding of the six historical concepts, in particular the ability to take historical perspectives.

### Aims

1. To engage in an activation activity as part of an introduction to a unit on the Second World War.
2. To engage in historical research using primary source documents.
3. To explore and better understand female involvement and perspectives of war.
4. To take a historical perspective through the process of writing a letter from the point of view of a women involved in Second World War.

## Background

*(The following is taken and adapted from the Veterans Affairs Canada website)*

During the Second World War, the role of women in Canadian society changed dramatically. Canada needed women to pitch in and support the war effort from their homes, to work at jobs that were traditionally held by men, and to serve in the military. Canadian women enthusiastically embraced their new roles and responsibilities and helped contribute to the success of Canada's Victory Campaign. Many women took a wide variety of civilian jobs that had once been filled by men. Canada had its own version of "Rosie the Riveter," the symbolic working woman who laboured in factories to help the war effort. Women worked shoulder-to-shoulder with men in factories, on airfields, and on farms. They built parts for ships and aircraft and manufactured ammunition. They drove buses, taxis, and streetcars.

This level of female participation in the workplace was a first for Canada - thousands of Canadian women proving they had the skills, strength, and ability to do the work that men did. Of a population of 11 million, only about 600,000 Canadian women held permanent jobs when the war started. During the war, their numbers doubled to 1,200,000. At the peak of wartime employment in 1943-44, 439,000 women worked in the service sector, 373,000 in manufacturing and 4,000 in construction.

Women's smaller physical size and manual dexterity helped them develop a great reputation for fine precision work in electronics, optics, and instrument assembly. With their sons overseas, many farm women

had to take on extra work. One Alberta mother of nine sons - all of them either in the army or away working in factories - drove the tractor, plowed the fields, put up hay, and hauled grain to elevators, along with tending her garden, raising chickens, pigs and turkeys, and canning hundreds of jars of fruits and vegetables. Women who worked with lumberjacks and loggers during the war were called "lumberjills."

Canada's Elsie Gregory McGill was the first woman in the world to graduate as an aeronautical engineer. She worked for Fairchild Aircraft Limited during the war. In 1940, her team's design and production methods were turning out more than 100 Hurricane combat aircraft per month.

During the war, women extended their charitable work to the war effort. They knit socks, scarves, and mitts and prepared parcels for Canadians overseas, gathered materials for scrap collection drives, and helped people displaced by the war by providing clothes and setting up refugee centres. To deal with wartime shortages, women became experts at doing more with less. They made their own clothes (sometimes even using an old parachute to make a wedding dress) and planted Victory Gardens to supply much-needed fruits and vegetables to their families and communities. In short, women - acting in the traditional role of homemakers - gave, saved, and made do. As part of the war effort, many commodities in Canada were rationed. Weekly rations of food included 1 1/3 ounces of tea, 5 1/3 ounces of coffee, 1/2 pound of sugar and 1/2 pound of butter. Some other rationed items included meat, whiskey, and gasoline. Although household products of every kind were hard to come by, homemakers - conscious of the need for aluminum for the aircraft industry - often donated perfectly good aluminum cookware to scrap metal drives.

Many women joined war relief clubs which were formed to improve the morale of the troops overseas. These clubs packaged canvas "ditty bags" with items such as chocolate, sewing kits, and razor blades. To save fabric and buttons for uniforms, the government forbade many 'extras' on manufactured clothing, such as cuffs on pants, any hem in excess of two inches, double-breasted jackets, flap pockets, and more than nine buttons on a dress. So much of Canada's silk and nylon was required for the war effort that women could not find the seamed stockings that were then in style. Some fashion-conscious women resorted to paint, drawing lines up the back of their legs, to simulate the look of stockings.

Many Canadian women wanted to play an active role in the war and lobbied the government to form military organizations for women. In 1941-42, the military was forever changed as it created its own women's forces. Women were now able, for the first time in our history, to serve Canada in uniform. More than 50,000 women served in the armed forces during the Second World War. The Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWACS) had 21,600 members. The Women's Division, Royal Canadian Air Force (WDs) had 17,400 members. The Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (Wrens) had 7,100 members.

Women in the services filled many positions, including mechanics, parachute riggers, wireless operators, clerks, and photographers. 4,480 Nursing Sisters (as Canadian military nurses were known) served in the war. 3,656 in the Canadian Women's Army Corps, 481 in the Women's Division of the Royal Canadian Air Force and 343 in the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service. Many of these women found themselves within range of enemy guns and some lost their lives. Nursing Sister Margaret Brooke was awarded the Order of the British Empire for her heroic efforts to save her fellow Nursing Sister Agnes Wilkie after the S.S. Caribou, the ferry they were taking to Newfoundland, was torpedoed in the Cabot

Strait in 1942. The collective experiences and accomplishments of all Canadians, including those of women, during the great struggles of the Second World War have provided our country with a proud and lasting legacy that will continue into the country's future.

## **Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 2 lessons

### **Procedures:**

1. In small groups, students examine Second World War propaganda posters and discuss and interpret the meaning of the posters.
2. In a carousel activity, individual students read one biography of a woman involved in war. They return to their group to share and discuss the experiences of women in war.
3. Individually, students assume the role of a women involved in any aspect of Second World War (e.g., nurse at the front; wife who is “keeping the home fires burning in Canada”; worker in a munitions factory; etc) and write a letter to a significant other about their experiences during the war.

## **Resources**

[Women and War \(Veterans Affairs\)](#)

[The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

## [The Memory Project](#)

Search Google Images for war posters depicting women. Search key words such as "Women" "War" "posters" "propaganda"