

Intel Sunday
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When Belleville's Elizabeth Dawe enlisted in the military in 1942, she was only following in the footsteps of many Canadian women.

In May of 1941, Ottawa — for the first time in the country's history — took the step to authorize the enlistment of 'female auxiliary personnel' in various trades of the armed forces. Prior to this, women were restricted to work only in nursing positions — a practice that had been firmly established since the First World War. All other trades were closed to the women, as it was believed that there were enough male volunteers for those jobs. Although this attitude began to change slightly after 1941, Dawe argued that, a year later, it was not really that significant.

"Women who were going into service were looked upon as sleazy girls looking for a good time. You know, they had this idea that 'there have never been women in the army before, so why now?' Personally, I think that the women in the forces were some of the most intelligent women I've ever met," she observed.

Her own reason for joining the armed forces came from a patriotic feeling for the country that she loved. She knew that she would go wherever she was sent to serve. Little did she know at the time that she would end up as a fighter control operator, a position which was previously limited to men only.

Soon after basic training in the Manning Depot in Ottawa, Dawe and nine other women were chosen to work as plotters at the fighter control operations headquarters in Newfoundland. Smiling broadly, she recalled her experience on the troop train on her way to her first posting.

"Women in uniform were very new then. There were 10 girls, including me, who were supposed to travel to Newfoundland in a train with hundreds of male troops. So, they locked us girls in a compartment of our own for the whole trip. We were allowed out only when the train stopped at stations and other times, for food. Fortunately, we had the washroom attached to our compartment," she chuckled. That train trip lasted two days and two nights.

When they reached their destination, they were billeted at the Canadian Air Base at St. John's, but

found that they were to report to work at a fighter control room at an American military air force base at Fort Pepperell. There, they received four-week training by the British WAAF personnel, among them being Lady Bowring.

"I was in awe of those women. I admired them because they had experienced the front lines of war before coming over to Canada to instruct us. It was good to see women doing that kind of work."

As it turned out, Dawe and her friends could not have been happier with the arrangement.

"They had all the amenities especially great variety of food. They had barrels of apples which was not so at the Canadian Air Base. Food was basic there," she recalled.

Working at eight hours shift each, each woman was assigned to plot the routes of enemy aircraft and submarines along the east coast areas.

"The civilians around the cities along the coastal areas never knew about it at the time but we, as plotters, knew that the waters were crawling with German submarines. They came right up into the harbours. I don't remember the submarines attacking the area. They were probably on spy duties. The danger of being attacked was, however, very much there," said Dawe.

The plotters were deeply aware of the significance of accuracy in identifying an approaching aircraft as that of the enemy.

"If you plot it wrong, then you have put the life of your own pilot at peril because orders would have reached the fighter jets to counter that incoming aircraft. That would be like the recent case of the American friendly fire incident in Afghanistan. So, we had to be sure," she said.

Dawe served in her position, as a plotter, for two years before getting married. Her husband also served the RCAF communications department at the time in October 1944. She requested to be discharged from the service and got her wish in January of 1945.

They lived in Newfoundland until her husband retired in 1974. The couple, then, came back to Belleville and soon after, Dawe became involved with the Quinte Humane Society and would remain as president of the board for the next 22 years. Currently, she is active with the Quinte Animal Welfare Foundation in Belleville while contributing her

time to running the thrift store on Front Street as well.

On July 2, 1941, the Canadian Women Auxiliary Force was established followed by the formation of the Canadian Women Army Corps a month later. The navy would not get on board for another year when 6,500 women would enlist.

This article is the last of the series on local veterans. You can reach Benzie Sangma at bsangma@cogeco.ca with comments on or story ideas for Remember When.