

FRANCES GAGE

WOMEN'S ROYAL CANADIAN NAVAL SERVICE

ARTIST, COMMUNICATOR & COBOURG RESIDENT

Frances Marie Gage, born in Windsor, Ontario in 1924, was drawn to the arts from an early age. She had a lovely singing voice and played the violin. When the family moved to Oshawa, Frances attended King Street School and Oshawa Collegiate and Vocational School where her artistic talent was encouraged by her art teacher. But with the arrival of World War II any artistic ambitions were put on hold.

Early in the war Frances worked on a farm for the Ontario Farm Service but when she graduated from high school, looking for adventure and not sure of her career, she decided to join the Navy.

The Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service, formed in July 1942, was the last of the women's branches to be formed, intended to free seamen for combat duty. Ultimately 7,000 women would serve in 39 trades. The Wrens, as they were affectionately called, performed such jobs as sick bay attendant, cook, mail sorter, ambulance driver and telegrapher (communications), where Frances would ultimately work. In the first group of recruits was Isabel Macneil who, as Lieutenant Commander, would become the first woman to command a ship in the British Empire. That ship was HMCS Conestoga (previously the Ontario Training School for Girls) located in Galt, Ontario, where basic training for the WRCNS was carried out.

When Frances completed the four-week basic training at HMCS Conestoga she was sent to the HMCS Hyacinthe near Montreal for further training as a signaller. She belonged to a group named the Katakana Wrens, "Katakana" being "the form of Japanese used especially for scientific terms, official documents and words adopted from other languages" (Miriam-Webster Dictionary). They were trained to intercept Japanese communications from ships, subs and shore stations, to discern the movements of aircraft and submarines. This assignment was so secretive that she had to learn how to maintain as well as operate the special coded typewriters.

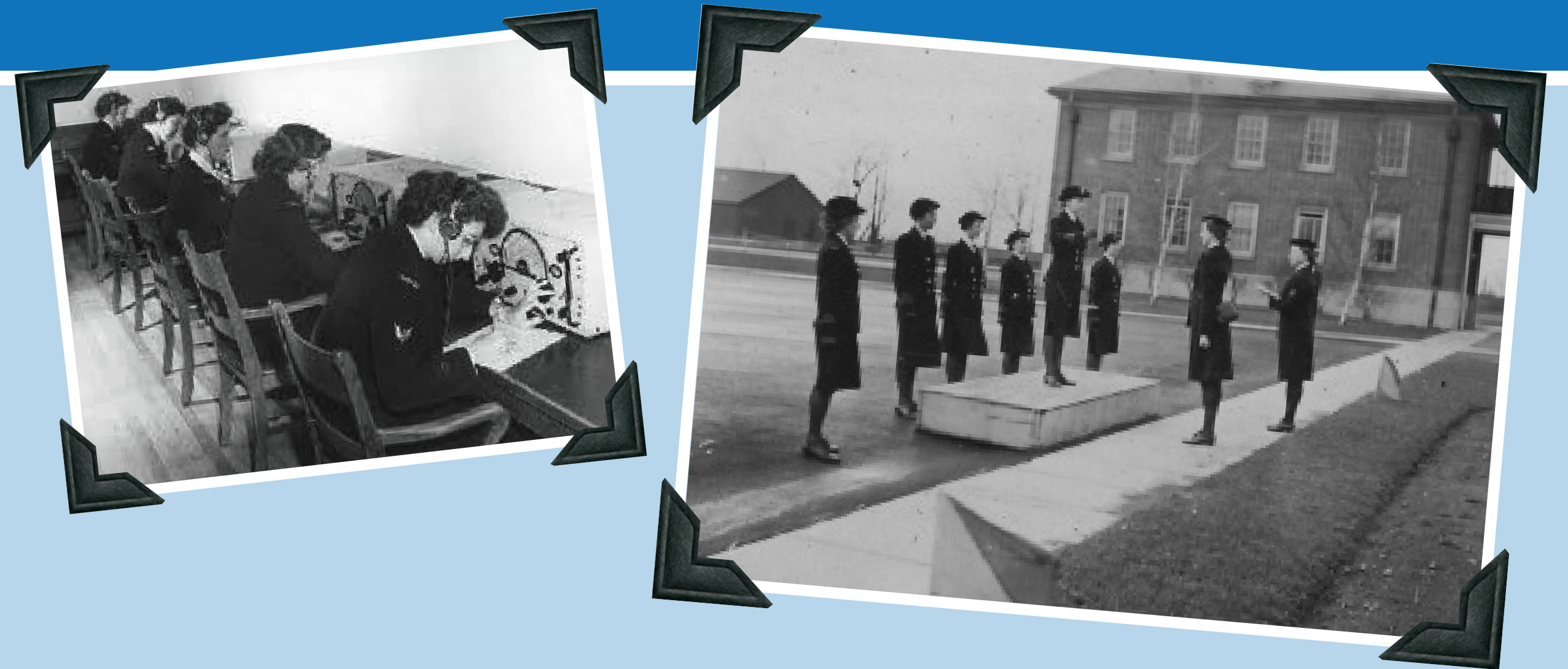
Messages were typed in code and sent to headquarters for decoding.

"I was too involved with all the beauty, the rewarding activity, the fields, my friends, animals, birds, the long wonderful walks in the woods, my gardens... instead of working and sculpting..."

Frances Gage



Frances with Curator Dorette Carter at the Art Gallery of Northumberland



Early in 1946, while still technically a Wren, Frances was selected to work at the House of Commons on a new Canadian Flag. This endeavour proved futile and, like so many others, she needed to consider her future career - singer? veterinarian? a career with the Navy? She eventually chose the four year program at the Ontario College of Art, subsequently training in New York and Paris before returning to Toronto.

At a Wren reunion in Victoria, British Columbia in 1971, the idea to create a statue to honour the more than 7000 women who joined the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service was born. Frances was the natural choice to create such a monument. The city of Galt, home of HMCS Conestoga, was chosen as the most logical site to display the statue. The completed work, *Jenny Wren*, is proudly on display at the Central Branch of the Cambridge Public Library (Galt and Cambridge merged in 1973).

In 1972 Frances left Toronto for the Kitchener Waterloo area where she remained until 1987 when she realized she had turned her back on her career.

She reluctantly returned to Toronto where she could focus on her art, but after six long years in the big city she moved to the south shore of Rice Lake. Yet the amenities of "city life" still called, and...

"As early as two years after moving to Roseneath, I was already thinking about relocating to Cobourg... before I even moved to Cobourg, their art gallery was planning a show of my work."

In 1998 Frances moved into her new home on Ball's Lane in Cobourg.



Statue of "Jenn Wren"
Photo by Barry Duff