

# Georgetown woman, 95, recalls her time in RCAF as war raged

By Melanie Hennessey  
Special to The IFP

The year was 1941. As the Second World War raged on, Canadian women were making history as they broke free from their traditional roles in the home and headed to the armed and air forces to proudly serve their country.

While that was more than seven decades ago, Georgetown resident Joan Scannell remembers this time like it was yesterday. The spry 95-year-old old was amongst the small yet groundbreaking group of ladies who comprised the first squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), Women's Division.

The calling not only blazed the way for countless women to come, but also answered Scannell's prayers at the time as she had been urging the government to change the rules and allow women to serve.

"Since the war had started two years previously, I had been bombarding the government with endless letters asking why women had not been allowed to join the forces," she recalled. "With all the bravado and confidence of youth, I was sure that my input would help to defeat Hitler, and I would be able to protect my grandparents in England."

While she never had the chance to fight overseas, the details of her time spent in the air force working on Canadian soil for the Directorate of Air Force Intelligence are among the many stories the local woman

has documented in a personal memoir she compiled for her family. Amidst the pages of the large book Scannell recalls how her journey began when she was just 21 years old. It was November 1941 and she was instructed to report to the RCAF Montreal recruiting station.

"Trembling with anticipation, I had a physical examination and a personal interview," she said. "Then I was sworn in and became a number instead of a person. As I knew how to type, my designation was 'clerk general.' I was one of 150 girls chosen from across Canada, and according to books I've read since, this squadron was composed of hand-picked volunteers."

She and her fellow Montreal recruits then boarded a train for a ride to the Toronto training grounds—a trip that took 10 hours at that time.

"When we finally arrived at a large building, the chattering girls had become a subdued lot," she wrote. "We were given a bowl of strange-tasting soup, handed some bedding and shown into a room full of bunk beds. I was soon fast asleep."

Very early the next morning the girls awoke to the familiar sound of Reveille playing. They proceeded out to the parade ground, some of them dressed to the nines in fur coats and velvet fur-trimmed boots while others wore simple ski jackets, Scannell recalled.

"For the next few days we initiated into the process of bed mak-



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read. In those days there was an expression: 'Loose lips sink ships.' I even opened correspondence from the Office of Strategic Services, which later became the CIA. All mail leaving our office had to be sealed with red sealing wax and stamped with our insignia, which I did at the end of each day."

While Scannell admits she still feels "cheated" out of the opportunity to serve overseas, she knows it was an honour to have been trusted with such highly confidential information at a pivotal moment in history, and to have been part of the groundbreaking first group of women serving in the air force.

The local woman is also grateful the air force delivered her something that lasted far longer than the war—true love. She met her husband Bill, a flight sergeant, at one of the dances that was routinely held at the Red Triangle Club in Ottawa. The couple were married on Sept. 25, 1943, with Scannell continuing to serve in the air force until 1945 when her uniform would no longer fit as she was pregnant with their first of six children.

"Sometimes you don't find out the kind of person you've married until it's too late, but I was lucky enough to marry a good man who really loved me," she said. "We had a good life together. As I settled him into bed a week before he died in 1999, he spoke his last words; they were, 'I love you, I love you.' That memory is such a comfort to me now."

ing, inspections, parades, times to eat, training courses, and what we were all dying for—the issuing of uniforms," she said. "Those first ones were ill-fitting, and the study shoes either too narrow or too wide. Everything was modelled on the Women's Auxiliary Air Force in Britain. In fact, our first women officers were mostly from Britain, who had been sent over to help direct this new phenomenon until we had enough Canadian officers."

After completing her basic training, Scannell said her squadron was posted to the Uplands Air Base in Ottawa. Her excitement was quickly overshadowed though as she didn't get to go with her fellow air force

members.

"Some of us were kept behind so that men would be released for flying duties," she said. "After showing us how to do things, the men gradually left. I looked after the records and also opened the mail and passed it to the appropriate person. Being kept back was a disappointment to me."

By August 1942 Scannell had been promoted to sergeant and posted to headquarters in Ottawa to work for the Directorate of Air Force Intelligence.

"The work was interesting, and the files I kept were all Most Secret, Top Secret, Secret and Confidential, in that order," she said. "I was never to repeat to anyone any information that I

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