

Research to Remember: In Their Own Words

Recorded histories by West Vancouver Veterans.

The permanent virtual exhibit is online at digital.westvanlibrary.ca where the interviews with each of the three veterans may be viewed in full length or in short segments by topic. The interviews are also fully transcribed and text searchable, making this an invaluable new resource for researchers, teachers, and students.

Research to Remember – Background

Since 2015, the West Vancouver Memorial Library (WVML) has undertaken a series of Research to Remember projects to connect the community with local history. Starting with a grant from the Department of Canadian Heritage's World War Commemorations Community Fund, WVML created primary research packages for 24 of the 91 fallen soldiers noted on the cenotaph in West Vancouver's Memorial Park. Each research package contains a brief history on the soldier, copies of papers, photos and documents from the soldiers' service records, and questions to guide discovery and learning. These research binders are available in the Youth Department year-round and may be borrowed by all Library cardholders.

WVML also offers a [Research to Remember](#) school program for West Vancouver secondary students. In the program, which was aligned with the curriculum by two West Vancouver Schools Social Studies teachers, Youth librarians guide students through the primary research packages, teaching them to navigate historical documents and think critically about the past and the present.

Catherine Schaff – Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service

Munitions Worker ("Bomb Girl"), 1943-44

Canadian Women's Army Corps, 1944-46

This is a transcript of an interview with Catherine Schaff. This interview was with Tristan Thompson on November 3, 2019.

- **How was your lifestyle growing up different from a young person growing up in Vancouver today? [1.0]**

Well, we grew up on a farm, number one. In the summertime we walked to school, which was about two miles, and in the wintertime, it was a different story. We were driven by

my father in a sleigh box, a couple of horses leading, and my father would be all frosted over with his breathing. And so, when he'd get us to school and we were safe, then he'd go back home, and be there again in the afternoon to pick us up when school was finished. My mother was a city girl, so it was very difficult for her, too. So, she had mattresses made for the sleigh box and we were all dressed winter-like, with quilts all around us, so we didn't get cold. Not like that today.

- **What was your time at school like? [1.1]**

Well, it was a grade school, from Grades One to Eight, and then they built another room on for high school, where it went from Eight to Twelve. (Interviewer: Would it have been two teachers between the two rooms, or...?) Yes. Otherwise, one teacher taught eight grades. Oh, yes, the newspaper. I'd send in an article every week. Things that were going on in the community. And that wasn't when I was in the lower grades. Well, I knew a lot of people, so, stories got around. Mainly through the telephone. (Interviewer: Would it be fair to say that it was sort of a gossip column?) I would say that know, yup. The local paper was called the Tisdale Recorder. It's still going. Yeah, it was just volunteer.

- **What do you remember about your father? [1.2]**

Well, he was a volunteer, too. He named the district and was well known throughout. He was one of the, I guess they called him a trustee or something like that. He came to Canada as a late teenager and then when Canada went to war, he joined the Canadian Army and went overseas, where he was wounded almost immediately as so many were. He was very fortunate; so many were killed, but he was badly wounded, and was sent to a hospital in Scotland, where he recovered. And his- He didn't really talk about the war, but we- he had holes all like he'd- In those days there was no bathtubs, just sponge baths, and his back was full of holes, and as children we used to put our fingers in these holes and he would just laugh, but never tell us what it was all about. The whole back was covered. He fought Vimy. Never talked about that.

- **When you were growing up, how was life different for girls than it was for boys? [1.3]**

Well, my mother being from England, and a city girl, she kept us away from the barns. She was afraid we'd get hurt. But the boys were allowed out there, but when the machinery came in later, I really enjoyed that. Get on a tractor, and you'd back and forth with the cultivator and the plows and everything. They didn't have freezers in those days, but in the wintertime, they'd put the vegetables and fruits in the basement where they were frozen all winter. Well, there were times they didn't have enough water, which came from the rain.

- **What do you remember thinking about when the Second World War was declared? [2.1]**

Never thought much about it. (Daughter: Were your grandparents, or your parents, talking about it?) Well, they were, but we didn't know anything about war. Canada, especially in the

prairies, was nothing but land. You didn't see much. And we only ever had radio in those days - no television.

- **What kind of entertainment was popular with your family when you were growing up? [2.2]**

Radio was quite interesting. There would be people on there that liked to talk. A lot of entertainment. Music, especially Western. And there were country dances that we all loved to go to. And my husband was a- really a good dancer. Their parents taught them to dance. (Daughter: Dad's Russian-German family, they were all good dancers, and they did that Russian dance where they kick their legs out. They could all do that. And they were quite musical as well, so they played the accordion, so they really liked to have a good time and it was at the school, wasn't it Mom?) Yes, that's where they had all the dances, was in the schoolhouse.

- **When you were growing up, how did people stay in touch with one another over long distances? [2.3]**

Well, if you were phoning someone in another province, you'd try not to talk too long because you were sent a bill. But that's the only way, you know, they could communicate, apart from writing letters. And everyone wrote letters. I don't know if you've seen the old phones, they were made of wood, and with a dialing system, and you'd ring like- If you were phoning someone, two-twenty-three, or something, well you'd two rings and then three, to separate the calls. Well, if the line was busy, you had to wait until that line cleared. You'd hear them talking.

- **What did you do for fun on the farm when you were growing up? [2.4]**

Well, mainly going to the top of the hay - it was piled in there - that sort of- just childish things. There was no skiing or anything in our family. The way we were all dressed in that picture, it was either made by me or I'd go to sails. My mother was trained in England as a milliner. (Daughter: So, she knew how to sew.) Yes. They made hats.

- **Tell me about your decision to move to Vancouver...[2.5]**

We left the farm- of course the war was well over, and my husband never got a pension or anything, nor did my father. He had a sister living in Vancouver, North Vancouver, and husband, and the sister had phoned and said, "John, if you can be out here by Friday weekend, I've got a job for you." So, we just packed up all the children and left the farm. Never went back. And he was working for the District of North Vancouver, building roads. That was in Canyon Heights, right near the Cleveland Dam. And we had a few hundred dollars, which we bought property on Canyon Boulevard, I think it was. Well, we had to have a little money to go with, so we sold a cow, and used the money for the down payment for the house on Canyon Boulevard. From there, we were here. They needed help, and his brother-in-law worked for the Municipality as well, so he had access to the- what was needed. And there were many people waiting for that job. Jobs were scarce.

- **Tell me about leaving home to become a Bomb Girl working in a munitions factory... [3.1]**

I'd heard about it in the newspapers, that they were looking for help. And so, I spoke to my father about it, and he said, "Away you go," so I got on a train, went to Ontario, and met a family there that I stayed with wherever I went. Isabelle and Joe Morrison. They had one son. And through her I worked in the shell-filling plant at Ajax to begin with, and she moved to where they were making bombs, and had me go along.

- **Tell me more about your job as a Bomb Girl at the munitions factory... [3.2]**

To make the shells, you sat behind glass, and it was a long room and there was young people working all the way- young girls, mainly, and you'd be sitting on this stool, and with your- pressing the shells, the gunpowder into the shell. And occasionally they would blow up when you were doing it. The plate glass protected you. We didn't make a lot of money, but we made money.

- **What did a typical day at the munitions factory look like? [3.3]**

It was sort of a monotonous day, doing the same thing over and over and over. Yeah, they were fairly heavy, like- we just put the shell in there, but then it went into a larger, about that high, and strange thing: These shells that I was making, my husband was firing on the battlefield. (Interviewer: Would you have- obviously he wasn't your husband at that time, but would you have made that connection while you were making the shells? Did you know what job he was doing at that time?) Well, sort of yes and no. We wrote letters.

- **How did you spend your free time when you were working as a Bomb Girl? [3.4]**

In the off time, went shopping, buying clothes. Mostly you made friends with everyone, but it didn't last because you were moving around so much. They were mainly people about my age. All the older people were at war. I think I'd left home when I was about 16 or 17. Dropped out.

- **How long did you work as a Bomb Girl, and what did you do next? [3.5]**

Probably about six to nine months. As soon as I was 18, I joined the Army, in Toronto. I think it probably had a lot to do with my father, and to get off the farm. Just wanted to do something. When you're a teenager, you don't really think that much about helping others. You're trying to help yourself. Agree?

- **What are your first memories of serving in the Canadian Women's Army Corps? [4.1]**

Well, the uniform. That was the first thing. Being fitted into a uniform, and then you were in. That was important. (Daughter: What about the training?) Well, I started out taking

office work, doing that, and it was so boring, so I got into driving. I forget now how long that course was. It was quite a while. And they taught us how to drive just about everything. And sent out to a place that needed a driver. Well, you were taught everything about driving a car, from the tires, to putting fuel in, and so on. But never really had to do that because those vehicles were in good shape. (Daughter: Part of your training was the marching, so you had to-) Oh, yes. (Daughter: Can you talk about that?) Well, it was fun to march, and I was- It came in very useful to me a few years ago. I joined the lower mainland Colour Party, and I was marching in all the parades. Well, my training in the Army has served me well during my life. You never got up without making your bed. Never left it unmade, and, consequently, some of the children picked that up, too. And you never left a mess. No, I loved it.

- **What did you love about your time in Canadian Women's Army Corps? [4.2]**

Well, I loved to get in those vehicles. Drove a lot of Jeeps, and later on cars, and meet the- I was sent to Halifax, after my training. I'd meet the ships coming in, that sort of thing, it was quite interesting. Bringing the boys back from war, from England. It was quite interesting. I taught all my children to drive except the last one; my nerves had shot by then. They'd get so close to hitting another vehicle. I've just given it up. The army vehicles were not that great, especially during the war. Pretty heavy, junky. The Jeeps were probably the favourite, and they were all open, you'd be driving along.

- **What do you remember about the people you met as a driver in the Canadian Women's Army Corps? [4.3]**

Well, if I was picking- I'd mainly be picking up officers, so I would take them to a facility that was for the armed forces. They were just normal people. They just talked about where they were going. They were really only interested in themselves. (Daughter: Were they happy to be home?) Well, the ones that I met in Halifax were. They all were.

- **Who are some people you met in the services who you still think about today? [4.4]**

They're all dead now. I had a friend from, well I think she ended up living out near- her name was Torchy. We called her Torchy. She was tall and redhead. She's the one that sent me to Halifax because she, she was playing illegally. She drew the ticket for Vancouver and I got Halifax, and I forget how she did that, but that's why I went to Halifax. During my time in the services, I had a couple of friends - Torchy and her husband, and they were both in the services. And we stated friends for many years. Another friend that I stayed with when I was working in the war plants in Ontario, that, unfortunately, neither are here any longer.

- **How did you get transferred from Halifax to Vancouver? [4.5]**

I managed to get a transfer to Vancouver since my mother was not well and I wanted to be there to help her. (Daughter: Except she was in Saskatchewan. But it was closer than Halifax.) Doesn't really make sense.

- **How did you go from being a clerk to being a driver in the Canadian Women's Army Corps? [4.6]**

I applied for it, and fortunately I was granted. And I was given a test time and completed that. I think it was just the story I told that I'd grown up on a farm, around machinery, and had driven tractors and so on. That helped.

- **What was your reaction to the Second World War ending? [5.1]**

Very happy. I'd get to go home on holidays, and I'd ridden that train right across Canada a few times. I'd been writing to my husband, who was my boyfriend at that time, on a regular basis, and didn't always get the letters there, because of the way it was during the war. And so, that was the plan, and we were married. In those days you didn't live together, like they do today. So, we were married within months after he got back. And my first child was born not too long after we were married. I think it grew with the letters.

- **Why was your marriage considered controversial? [5.2]**

Well, the wedding was fairly normal. You know, we'd always- our family had always gone to church, so it was a church wedding, and families were all invited, but didn't all come. Do you remember? No, you wouldn't, you were not born. (Daughter: The story, there was complications because...Neither of Mom's parents or Dad's parents went to the wedding, because Dad was from a Catholic family and Mom was from an Anglican family. So, sparrows and blue jays don't mix. And you refused to sign a paper saying that you were gonna raise your children Catholic. So, Dad had to walk you around the church.) To talk me into it. Yeah, that was the request of the Catholic church, that I become a Catholic, and I- I refused, so the priest talked to John and said, "You talk her into it and it'll be okay." So, I did sign it, but I never became a Catholic. For John and I, we were quite happy just to be married, but the family thought that we should be either Catholic or Protestant, and- But we were married through the Catholic church, but to this day we're Protestant. Well, John was so happy to have me that he would've done- He left the church for me.

- **Why do you choose to volunteer? [5.3]**

I'm volunteering at the Silk Purse. Of course, you knew that. I've been there longer than anyone. I'm interested in art. (Daughter: And people.) And people. I like people. Well, I think you- To volunteer and get outside yourself. And you can give more that way. In every field they need volunteers.

- **What advice do you have for young people? [5.4]**

Do as you're told. Get with it.

- **How do you make friends? [5.5]**

I make friends very easily. I like people. (Daughter: Mom makes- Mom talks to everyone, so she's open to people, to meeting people. And she's also a good listener, so she'll ask a question. That's how she approaches people. And then they get to talk about themselves, and that's what people want. So, Mom is expert at that, and that's why she makes friends. Did you know that?) No. There's good in everyone.

- **What are you most proud of having done? [6.1]**

I guess, still being alive and well. I'm very fortunate to still be alive. My mother died at 76 and my father, 72. Had a brother who died at the age of 40, heart trouble. No matter where I go, when they hear I've had eight children, it's big news. Everyone knows.

- **What are your thoughts on the Legion? [6.2]**

Well, I- My family belonged to the Legion a long time. My father would go every year to the Remembrance Day, and that was his extent. I think the Legion, they're doing the best they can. Well, it was kind of a fun night out, and Branch 44 is the one I originally joined. They make a nice evening of having- quite often they'll have music. They play bingo and make everyone welcome. Oh yes, they always have something to eat. Kandys is in charge of TB Vets. Some of the ruling in- Way back when, men could join but women couldn't. And it's- fortunately, that's changed.

- **What does it mean to “take the salute” on Remembrance Day? [6.3]**

Well, when they parade, they have someone in authority that's taking the salute. Like, I stood there, like. And it's always been done by men, so I was, the first woman to have done it in West Van. It's an honour.

- **What should young people be thinking about on Remembrance Day? [6.4]**

Well, I think that they should think about those that have gone on ahead and not made it. Just want things to be better and help where they can. (Daughter: Those people who gave their lives for our country.) Yes. Like thousands upon thousands have. I don't think much of the police now, who just go around shooting people who don't behave. I've been watching too much television.

- **What do you want your legacy to be? [6.5]**

Well, I- Have you got any suggestions? (Interviewer: I was hoping to cheat off of your answer.) Well, for me, life has been very good. I'm very happy with my family, and just want the best for them. If help is needed, get in there and do it.