

The Century of Sergeant Strange



By Brock Weir

You joined up to get a husband.

Nearly eighty years later these words still ring in the ears of Sergeant Peggy Strange.

Landing a man was not, of course, her objective. She was there to get the work done. It was good work. Work she's very proud of. And, in the end, it was behind-the-scenes work that was invaluable to the war effort.

Sgt. Strange, who celebrated her 100th birthday with family at her Aurora residence on Wednesday, will spend Remembrance Day as she has for the last few years: visiting children at local schools to highlight the importance of remembering those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for freedom.

But before the poignant commemoration, there was plenty of time for celebration as she marked her momentous milestone, although she kept her excitement well-hidden sitting down with *The Auroran* ahead of the bash.

'I am in a fog? so much is happening,' she says. 'My 100th birthday doesn't mean anything. I just live every day. People are excited about my 100th birthday, but it doesn't even fizz on me. It seems like when I turned 65 or 75. It doesn't seem that different and I carry on.'

We've all seen those 'Keep Calm and Carry On' posters on walls and in stores, but for Peggy Strange and her generation, it was? and is? very much a way of life.

Sgt. Strange's story began on November 8, 1917 in a place that is no longer on the Canadian map. She proudly carries her Saskatchewan birth certificate with her improbable birth location to challenge those she meets to guess where it might not be. Place of Birth? 'Sec. 14, Tp.11, Rge. 3, W.2.'

Roughly translated to today's maps, it is just outside the village of Kennedy, SK.

There, Frances Margaret MacMillan came into the world.

Living and working on the family farm, she set out as a young woman to Regina, where, in the 1930s, she landed a job at Simpson's department store. She was working there when war broke out in 1939 and her life changed forever.

'My brother and sister had joined the war, and I worked in Robert Simpson's in Regina for a number of years and [after the war broke out] there was nobody left, nobody was buying anything,' she recalls. 'One day, five of us girls were called in by our supervisor, whom we got along with well, and she asked us to meet her for tea. We thought that would be lovely. When we got there, we had a nice tea, but then she told us the story that nobody was buying anything, people were disappearing for the war, and she had to let us go.'

'We didn't know what to do. After [our supervisor] left, one of the girls said, 'I can't go home because my parents are poor and I have a brother and sister who are going to school and I don't want to be a burden on them.' It was the same situation with me. There

were younger children at home and I would just become another burden, so we went and joined up.?

Her first stop was Toronto where she got her uniform and was put through basic training.

Nowadays when women join the Canadian Armed Forces, they have many paths available to them. When Peggy Strange enlisted, however, she could count her options on one hand. She could be a ?mess woman, a dishwasher, a secretary or an equipment assistant,? she recalls. She and two of the other girls chose the latter option and they were off to what is now CFB Rockcliffe where she earned her corporal stripes.

One day, the Sergeant Major came up to her and said he wanted to talk to her.

?I wondered what I had done because we weren't very well liked when we joined,? she says. ?The airmen used to say, ?You joined up to get a husband,? or ?You joined up, now our friends are going overseas where they can be killed,? and it wasn't very nice.

However, I just made up my mind I would do the best I could, work hard, and I won my stripes.?

In the end, the Sergeant Major offered her a new posting with two options: officers' training or a posting to a Canadian Detachment in Dayton, OH. She chose the latter after a friend said the last thing she wanted to be was an officer from the treatment she was receiving from the men.

?You ask any woman and they will tell you the same story,? she says. ?You were alone. You didn't have anybody, you didn't know the rules. When you did know the rules, you knew officers were officers, they were your boss, they could say anything to you and you would stand at attention.?

The promotion, she says, was very important to her and in Dayton, where she served as an equipment assistant, keeping the supplies flowing, she felt like she came into her own.

Whenever she received a snide remark from a male counterpart, she says she kept her head down, sure in the knowledge that she was doing my job and she was doing it well.

?I am proud of that,? she says. ?Our officers knew what we were doing. If you wrote a telegram, they had to be short and concise, then it went to the head officer. He would say, ?That's just perfect, MacMillan' ? they didn't call you anything but your last name. You were proud of what you did and you worked hard to do it. They were like a family, but you knew your place. Our promotions didn't come easy. You had to prove yourself.

?We worked away and we never gave it a thought. Each of us had our different sections to work on and mine bought things that were needed. [Translating orders between Canadian and American units] was quite an experience. There were two gentleman [in charge of the books] and we would show the exact number. If we were correct, he would say, ?You Canadians are so smart, you get the number right every time.' I said, ?That's what we're trained to do, but thanks for helping anyway!'

Strange, who eventually earned her Sergeant stripes, was still stationed in Dayton when the war ended.

From there, she was transferred to Winnipeg where, after doing the very necessary and exciting work, she and her female colleagues were back to doing more pedestrian desk work. It was necessary work, she says, but work that didn't require the work of a sergeant once the men came back from the front, so she weighed her options.

Eventually, she asked for ? and was granted ? her discharge. She then returned to help her mother on the family farm (her father had died by then) but her mother encouraged her join her sister in Toronto and pursue a career.

Taking a course on running a comptometer (think a very large adding machine), she landed a job in the accounts department at the Toronto Transit Commission where she worked for many years. It was on this job that she met her future husband, Francis William George Strange, himself a war veteran.

?I got to know him by checking his work,? she says with a smile. ?After I got to know him, I said, ?What would happen if I found a mistake?' He said he'd buy me a beer, but I didn't drink beer. So, after three years we finally got married in 1950.?

They were married for 48 years until his death in 1998.

Shortly thereafter, Sgt. Strange settled in Aurora, eventually moving into Hollandview Trail Retirement Residence, where she is a very active centenarian. In addition to her passion for reading, she loves to knit and sew, is an active member of Hollandview Trail's knitting club, and is well underway in making her Christmas presence.

This time of year, however, Christmas present production takes a back seat to memories.

?I think about all the other veterans,? she says. ?My brother was a veteran and my sister was a veteran, so I think of them as well, but they are all gone. Thank goodness the Legion is kind and they come to visit.

?I think it is wonderful that teachers are teaching students about Remembrance Day and what the soldiers went through.?

And the work of the women is remembered too. Last year, at Rick Hansen Public School, Sgt. Strange, who is not bowed to age and still stands ramrod straight, was hugged by a young girl ? whose arms reached little higher than her knees.

She simply wanted to say, ?Thank you.?