

Veterans bring girl power and tail fire to students? Remembrance Service



By Brock Weir

As a young woman in the 1930s, Peggy Strange was a salesgirl at the Regina Simpsons store.

Despite the Prairies' 'Dirty Thirties' it was a relatively prosperous store with five sales girls and a larger staff complement to serve customers.

Then, Canada joined the Second World War and her life, along with the lives of countless others changed.

'When the war broke out people weren't buying anything,' says the Aurora resident, who celebrated her 99th birthday earlier this month. 'We were just hanging around. The head lady said to us one day, 'I would like to talk to you girls this afternoon,' and she told us we were all finished.'

Undaunted, she and her fellow salesgirls went to a nearby café for a 25 cent fish and chip lunch to plan their next course of action. 'I can't go home,' I said to myself because I don't want to be a burden on my folks, and it was the same for the other girls,' Mrs. Strange recalls. 'We decided to join the war effort. We went down, signed up, and we came to Toronto where we bought our uniforms, learned how to salute and everything else. When we got there, we decided what we were going to be.'

In those days, options for young women were limited. Outside the typical nursing roles, the opportunities given to Peggy (Born Frances McClelland) and her friends were limited to being mess women, cooks, cleaners, stenographers and equipment assistants. With only one girl in their group proficient with typing, the rest of them dodged the steno pool and took the last option, where she became a Sergeant in the Women's Division of the RCAF, working at what is now CFB Rockcliffe in Ottawa.

Mrs. Strange, a resident of Hollandview Trail Retirement Community, was one of three veterans who came to Rick Hansen Public School on Friday for the school's Remembrance Day Service.

She was joined by 91-year-old Seaman First Class Jack Crone, and Second Class Warrant Officer (RCAF) Stan Bray, '92-and-a-half' to interact with students.

Our veterans of the past were joined by currently serving Sergeant Carl Coney of the RCAF.

'Freedoms and rights are gifts that Canadians open every day,' said a group of Grade 8 students leading the service. 'The students, staff, family and community of Rick Hansen Public School would like to extend our gratefulness and gratitude to our honoured guests for their service to our great company. We would like to say thank you for protecting us, thank you for protecting our rights and freedoms, and thank you for protecting those around the world in need of our help. Your presence here today has reinforced the reason Remembrance Day should be important to all Canadians. We will never forget.'

Participating in Friday's service was an emotional first for Mr. Bray, who served in Canada's reserves for two years before enlisting to be a pilot on March 18, 1942.

'Each year for the last 70 years, I would sit home all by myself and watch the ceremonies from television, and I would always shed a few tears,' said Mr. Bray ahead of the service. 'I am very impressed by this.'

Like Mrs. Strange, Mr. Bray has close ties with CFB Rockcliffe, often going to the base during his youth in the 1930s to watch the planes take off. It was a formative experience, he said, and it inspired him to pursue a career in the air 'like everybody else.'

'It was the thing to do,' said Mr. Bray, wearing his long bar of medals including his Pacific Star. 'I wanted to be a pilot like everyone else when I was a kid. Billy Bishop was still flying them.'

Joining the air force, he underwent aptitude tests and his superiors found out he learned Morse Code in the Boy Scouts, he was made

a wireless operator in a squadron based on the west coast, operating out of a Lockheed Ventura. From there, he was bound for the United Kingdom, serving in Buckinghamshire coordinating transports to take supplies for Canadian forces serving in The Netherlands.

?My buddies,? said Mr. Bray when asked what goes through his mind each November 11. ?I lost three neighbours, one in Hong Kong. Canada sent a regiment over to Hong Kong and never got out of it. Another one of my buddies was a Tail End Charlie on a Lancaster and he was killed by a German fighter plane. Another was also a tail gunner. I had a cousin who was captain of a Lancaster. He was 20 years old and on a bombing run two days before the war ended. Bam! The plane blew up and seven guys were just written off.?

Mrs. Strange's experience was very different. It was a challenge at the time being a woman and doing the work she did, she said, and it was not only the work that was difficult. The women, she said, were often challenged by the men serving alongside them.

Opportunities for servicewomen are much greater today and Mrs. Strange said it is important for these lessons to be shared.

?What a wonderful bunch of little children to sit through all this and they sat so quietly for so long,? she said, giving little hand waves to the primary children thanking the veterans on their way out of the assembly. ?It is wonderful the older students are taking an active part in teaching the children about the war.?