

Military women are received differently today, says Second World War vet



By Brock Weir

Eleanor Thomson looks on in wonder at today's women joining Canada's armed forces.

Today, she observes, they are greeted as heroes, saluted for their bravery, and commended for their patriotism in serving one's country.

In her day, however, things were much different.

She recalls a desire that was in her from a very early age to join the army after the outbreak of the Second World War and do her bit for King and Country. Her mother would have none of it until she finished high school, however, at the very least.

With her grade 13 marks in the books, there was no stopping her and the Humber Bay native set off for her calling, as a radio operator in the Canadian Army.

"Today they let girls be in the army in full force, not just the reserves," she said. "This is a welcome change. When I came in, all of our neighbours were in one of two camps, like the entire civilian population. Half of them said, "Oh, isn't it wonderful, you're so patriotic!" But the other half said, "Ugh, no! Women in the army? That's just disgusting. They were real snooty about it."

"Nowadays, they say, "Oh, you served in the army, aren't you wonderful!" Nobody turns up their noses now and it is quite fascinating to watch."

From her earliest days in the army, however, largely posted throughout the war on Canada's west coast in bases in Vancouver and Prince Rupert, her aspirations to be a radio operator were cut short as they were fully stocked. With an eager young woman on their hands, they told her she would be most useful as a clerk typist and a stenographer, so she did what she was told, and she has no regrets.

"I have never been sorry because typing is an easy skill to carry around," she says.

Ms. Thomson might be modest in that regard. Her service to the Canadian military, not the least of which can be attributed to her typing skills, have earned her the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal.

A mainstay and familiar face around the Aurora Branch of the Royal Canadian Legion and in military ceremonies throughout Town, Ms. Thomson was nominated for the medal by her home regiment, the Toronto Scottish Regiment (Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother's Own) for her work with the National Council of Veterans Associations in Canada, the Royal Canadian Legion, and their

own Regimental Association.

Already a recipient of the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal in 2002, she was heralded by the Regiment for her efforts in producing their three newsletters every year since 1984.

She first tried her hand at producing these newsletters when they were still done on hectographs, a labour intensive transfer printing process, an ancestor of what can be seen today in iron-transfers and temporary tattoos.

Needless to say, when she came on board, she put her skills ? skills which she honed as an elementary school teacher as well ? to good use, and has continued to do so ever since.

Finding herself in the steno pool during the final days and in the aftermath of the Second World War, one might think she missed her chance to be on the frontlines, but the frontlines came to her when she was tasked with interviewing Commonwealth and American prisoners who survived Japanese prisoner of war camps.

?The stories they told were not stories, they were the truth,? she says of the harrowing tales she transcribed. ?They were all put in hospitals when they got back to gain a bit of weight. You know how hospital gowns tie up in the back, but this one man from England was sitting in a hospital bed while I wrote down his story. He leaned forward to get himself a cigarette from the side table and he had no buttocks, just bone sticking out and I nearly threw up on the spot.

?It was dreadful the treatment they received and you could see the result from some of them. The stories were pretty gruesome.?

Despite her efforts, and the efforts of thousands of women during this time, when life started to get back to normal, they found that their services were no longer required. Eleanor went on to a long career teaching elementary school, primarily in Grade Four, but the desire to serve never left.

When the Govern-ment opened up the doors to new recruits for the army reserves around 1952, she was more than eager to get back in, even if it was only for a couple of nights a week.

?Part of it is the camaraderie and part of it is we want to serve our country,? she says of her desire to continue with the armed forces, the Legion, and the Toronto Scottish in particular. ?I like doing the newsletter and keeping in touch with some of the old boys. There are a lot of fellas and girls I knew in the outfit and, just like anything else, you want to keep in touch.?