

WOMEN AND WAR

Ajax Arsenal of Democracy

Lynn Philip Hodgson and Alan Paul Longfield, *Blake Books Distribution, 2005*

Durham's Lynn Philip Hodgson, a Councillor in Port Perry, provided permission to use the excerpt from one of the Blake Gray novels that highlight local history. The excerpt below compliments the interview of Defence Industries Limited employee Louise Johnson whose story is contained in the lesson "Firing Up and Gearing Down".

Facts

- In the first four hours of July 4, 1944 in Normandy when four Canadian infantry regiments attacked the German stronghold in Carpiquet, 600 guns fired 1,800 shells a minute. 432,000 shells at 25 pounds meant 11,000,000 pound of shells.
- From November 1944 6,000,000 artillery shells and 2,000,000 rounds of mortar ammunition were hurled at the Germans each month
- The quick firing '25 prd' gun fired Smoke, Armour Piercing and High Explosive shells—all produced at DIL. DIL's huge output of 25prd shells was vital to the Allied victory in Europe in 1945

Before the Reading

- Imagine a day in the life of a female munitions worker in WWII. List at least three things that would have been an important part of each day
- List three ways that munitions workers would have heard about what was going on in the various theatres of war.
- Look up the movie stars Mary Pickford and Marie Dressler. In which movies did they star and what is remarkable about these stars?

A Day in the Life

Wednesday December 15 1943

DIL A Women's Residence

"What time is it, Big Sis?" asked a voice groggily.

"Five minutes past."

"Seven?"

"Uh huh!" replied Bonne, glancing in the mirror at the large Westclox alarm clock on the night table, while fastening her bright yellow bandana firmly in place with hairpins.

"I'm going back to sleep. Wake me in ten" Turning

over, June placed a pillow on her face to shield her eyes from the overhead light fixture.

"I'll be long gone by then," Bonnie stated. "Have you seen my lipstick?"

"In my purse. You loaned it to me in the Blue Swallow Ladies' Room after church. Remember?"

"So I did. Here it is. C'mon, up and at 'em. We have a war to win!"

"Okay." Replying with a yawn, June sat up and swung her slim legs over the edge of the bed. "Is today really Wednesday the fifteenth?" Yawning, she examined her bright red-painted toenails.

"All day. Are you coming for breakfast?"

"Absolutely. We're off Christmas Eve at 4:00 o'clock. Just nine more days, Bon! Wow! Can't wait! Hey, can you hold on, Bonnie?" Energized, June leapt into action. "I'll be ready in, um, five minutes. I promise." June vowed on her way to the bathroom.

"Make it four, dear, and I will!"

"Great. Hope you left some hot water!" June called through the bathroom door.

"When was the last time you remember DIL running out?"

"What? I can't hear you...."

Bonnie smiled despite herself. Of the two sisters, she, the 'lark', was an early riser while June, at eighteen, and three years younger, was the eternal 'owl'. Roommates since their childhood at home, Big Sis, Bonnie, had resigned herself to accepting June's concept of time that was, to put it mildly, elastic, depending upon the day and the prospect for 'fun and games' of any forthcoming event. Although a hard and conscientious worker, June, like many of DIL's teenaged female employees, lived for the company's social life: dances, bowling, curling bonspiels, softball, wiener roasts and twice-weekly movie nights as opportunities to meet and mix with the few remaining young, eligible males at the plant, or, for that matter, anywhere in Ontario County. For Bonnie, the pursuit of male company was a non-issue. Her high school sweetheart, Bill Davies, now her fiancé, a Master Sergeant and Gunner with the Ontario Regiment Armoured, at the last time of writing, was somewhere in Italy, killing Nazis, in his big Sherman tank.

For that reason alone, her job as an Inspector on the Cleaning Line at DIL, the British Commonwealth's largest munitions manufacturing facility, was particularly meaningful for Bonnie, as it was for most of the workforce who each had a direct personal stake in producing shells and other armaments to the highest possible quality standards. It was quite simple, she reasoned: 'The Axis powers, or at least their leaders, Mussolini, Tojo and Hitler, were evil. Even the Reverend Peebles, a charitable Christian man if ever there was one, had said so again in yesterday's sermon. And everyone had heard or read Mr. Churchill's opinion of Adolf Hitler. With every shell coming off the line, another blow could be delivered against Hitler and his ilk by an Allied dad, husband, brother, son, boyfriend or neighbour's kid.

'Sure, the German, Italian and Japanese armed forces were made up of kids too: brothers, dads and so on. And they were doing what their leaders were making them do, for their own gain and glory, but their leaders were in the wrong and it was Canada's job to stop them once and for all and send them packing, preferably six feet under and this was war. Better their boys than ours. Talk does not stop tyrants, we've learned the hard way, but, our boys with the proper ammunition and equipment can.' "June! Hurry or we'll miss breakfast!"

"Almost ready!" June announced, rushing past Bonnie, her head swathed turban-like in a towel. "How'm I doing,

Sis?"

"Fine. Dry your hair. You'll catch your death!"

....

"Okay. I'll look after it." Agreed Bonnie, stamping her feet while holding open the door of the Coles Cafeteria. "I'll get into the line-up, June. You get a table. Over there, with Lil Montgomery and Valerie Cole."

"Wow!" Looks good!" I could eat a horse." June remarked approvingly when Bonnie set down the tray. "Half a grapefruit, scrambled eggs, toast, jam and coffee. Not bad for ten cents, eh, girls?"

"Yep, a good deal, for sure," replied Valerie. "Wow, do I need a smoke! You know, I still can't get over seeing Mary Pickford in the flesh at the Community Hall last May. Here it is December, and I'm still dazzled. My gosh! She is one beautiful babe."

"I agree Val. She's radiant and even lovelier than she is on-screen and in the movie magazines at the hairdresser's," Bonnie added enthusiastically.

"Compare her to Marie Dressler, and, well...But they're both big Hollywood stars in their own ways, and they're Canadian."

"If only Mary had brought along Douglas Fairbanks. Now, wouldn't that have been the capper! He's so dreamy..." whispered June.

"Amen to that, June, kiddo. By the way, did you hear about that new guy on Line 2? Harold, something or other?"

"A new guy? Do tell." June exclaimed excitedly. "Is he cute?"

"June!" Bonnie interjected. "Be a lady."

"Not unless you like geezers. Wait. Hold on'til I finish, kiddo. We're not talkin' Einstein here. Charley, the Security Guard, caught him goin' in on the B Shift with a full package of matches and a flat fifty of Sweet Caps tucked in his trousers waistband last Thursday. Can you believe it? What a dim bulb!"

"So, tell us what happened," Lil asked.

"Well, according to my Gus, management not only suspended his ass, the JP gave him ten days in the Whitby hoosegow."

"JP? Whazzat?" queried June.

"That's what cops and crooks call a Justice of the Peace, doll."

"About this Harold man, Val," Bonnie remarked, "I hadn't heard a word!"

"Nor me," agreed Lil.

... Outside the Cafeteria, as Valerie had predicted, the 'cattle truck', an open GMC stake truck, was waiting, running on high idle, spewing a mist of blue exhaust under the entrance canopy. Waving to Bonnie and Lil, paper coffee cup in hand, Val stepped up onto the running board and entered the cab's passenger side. As soon as June had climbed onto the back, Stu revved the engine, dropped the clutch, forcing her to lunge in desperation at the wooden sides so as not to be thrown over the tailgate. Looking back through the cab's rear window, Val gave her a 'thumbs up' and a grin as Stu briefly gunned the engine before he swung the truck around and braked fifty feet from the building.

Stepping down, Val commented, "Wasn't that a hoot, Junie? Short, but sweet. More fun than the Dodgem bumper cars at Sunnyside and the Crystal Beach 'Cyclone' roller coaster, combined, eh?"

"A real barrel of laughs, Val. If you ask me, he's loonie tunes and a big show-off. I think I sprained my wrist, too. Remind me to walk next time, thanks all the same," confessed June, shaken but wiser.

"There won't be a next time, June. That was Stu's swan song. He's being let go. Today."

"No wonder!"

All this fun and \$21.00 bucks a week, too!

"Morning ladies!"

"Morning, Charley!" replied a scattering of voices.

"Got anything I should know about? Any old iron...rings, bracelets, belt buckles, cigarette lighters? Matches?"

"Nope, sorry" replied Val on everyone's behalf. "Still want to search me?" she teased.

"Only if you promise not to tell Gus this time, Val," bantered the security guard, good-naturedly, pretending to have a broken arm. "Move along please, ladies. 'A' Shift starts in seven minutes. Have a good one!" he called encouragingly.

Val opened the door to the building as Charley, the guard kept a close watch on each worker passing through. "You too, Charley! Don't take any wooden nickels!" Valerie called, as she sauntered in the entrance way.

Passing unchallenged past two female security guards whose random body searches were felt to add another

layer of protection from catastrophe, Bonnie, June, Lil and Val, along with many of their 'A' Shift mates, arrived in the crowded Change/Locker Room, greeting one another and the remaining outgoing 'C' Shift workers. "Hi, Connie, Ethel, Linda. Hi, Marg, how's the hand?"

"Getting better thanks, Val, Doc says I won't lose my index finger after all. The nail's going to grow back eventually, thank heavens," Marg replied, carefully scrubbing her partly bandaged right hand with a homemade mixture of salt and sand to remove the orange discolouration that resulted from handling copper shell casings without gloves. Although it was against company regulations, many of the women had quickly discarded the heavy cotton gloves provided by DIL as too thick and awkward to be useful on the line. Some brought substitutes from home, which although less clumsy, were too thin to prevent the chemicals from leaching through. Thus, for the majority of workers, the resulting tint of their hands served to identify her or his specific job: blackened finger tips being common as the result of handling the sacks of high explosive gunpowder. As the washroom soap was incapable of completely removing the tarnish, many workers kept small bristle brushes and containers of salt and sand or Snap, a popular, gritty, commercial hand-cleaning compound in their lockers for end-of-shift cleanup.

As they chatted, Mildred, an attractive, partially clad woman of June's approximate age walked by. Her white undergarments were tinged with a distinct, bright pinkish hue, a sure sign that her workstation was close by the TNT Storage Room. Val whistled, and with a throaty laugh, called, "Hubba, hubba!" to which Mildred responded with a smile and a universal hand gesture of defiance, before going to the sink and rinsing her mouth. She and many of her colleagues customarily packed a quantity of salt on their gums before going on shift to counteract the bitter odour of the fumes emanating continuously from the chemical soup of nitrites, nitrates, fulminate of mercury, salpetre, nitro-glycerine, toluene

"Really glad to hear that, Marg," June chimed in. Marg was only one of several workers who had suffered an injury. Her's was relatively minor, far less severe than were some of the other's who, either by mischance or carelessness, or both, had suffered the loss of one or more finger tips, or fingers or albeit rarely, a partial or an entire hand. Only senior management and the families of the unfortunate victims knew of cases of severe maimings or fatalities, if any. Although the company took aggressive steps to

continually educated and train the workers in order to prevent such incidents, with a workforce of 9,000 persons, they occasionally occurred nonetheless, in the production of 1,700 or more shells, six days per week, excluding Sundays. Though medical care at DIL was first rate, it was decided by Head Office that no injuries would be reported in the weekly staff newsletter, *Commando*, for reasons, it was stated, of employee morale.

After pulling on and fastening their dark coveralls, June and Val sat down on the wooden bench beside their Cleaning Room Supervisor, Bonnie, to put on their special rubber-soled safety shoes, lacing them through the non-metallic eyelets, then tying them up to a comfortably snug fit.

As they hurried along the corridor, Bonnie glanced at her watch. "One minute, girls." Just as they stepped into the Cleaning Room, the ear-splitting DIL works whistle sounded eight o'clock. "Hot damn, we made it again!" All this fun and twenty-one bucks a week, too!" Val exclaimed.

After the Reading

- List the safety precautions the DIL munitions workers had to take. Compare their safety precautions to some you know of in today's workplaces.
- How have the authors attempted to make their characters human and appealing? If you were writing about young women in the workforce today, what would they likely be discussing?
- Although this excerpt takes you into the lives of young DIL workers, what historic facts do you learn about WWII?

Extensions

- Read and report on all of *Ajax Arsenal of Democracy* for November 9th
- Imagine that you are Bonnie. Write a letter to your sweetheart Bill Davies in Italy
- Fiction or non-fiction? Which account of munitions workers appealed to you more and why? The non-fiction story of Louise Johnson or the fictional version of DIL in *Ajax Arsenal of Democracy*.
- Go to the Pickering-Ajax Digital Archives site, www.pada.ca and locate pictures of the munitions industry in Pickering Township.

The various books in the series may be obtained from:

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