



WOMEN AND WAR

Victory at Vimy: Canada Comes of Age, April 9–12, 1917

- Ted Barris, Thomas Allen and Son Ltd., 2007
- Durham's Ted Barris, a professor at Centennial College, author of 14 previous books and a broadcaster of renown, provided use of the excerpt about ambulance driver Grace MacPherson Livingstone, for Reading and Remembrance 2007: Women and War.

Facts:

- 3,141 women enlisted as nursing sisters in the Canadian Army Medical Corps in WWI. 46 died.
- The Canadian military in WWI employed women as transport and ambulance drivers and to work in supply depots. Between five to six thousand women worked in the Civil Service in support of the war effort; thousands more in factories. Volunteers organized hospitals, nursing homes, canteens and charitable associations to send food and supplies to soldiers overseas.

Before the Reading

- Locate Etaples, France
- Vimy Ridge was fought in 1917. Establish approximately how many wounded the ambulance drivers and medical staff had to handle in those fateful days in April 1917. How does their level of activity compare to today?
- What were the roles women held in support of the war effort in WWI?

Excerpt from Victory at Vimy

Midnight April 9, 1917 – No. 1 General Hospital, Etaples, France

Vimy kept ambulance drivers working around the clock at No.1 General Hospital in Etaples on the coast of France, sixty miles away. By late afternoon of April 9, the call had changed from a request for thirty to a call for sixty-five motor ambulances to be ready when wounded began arriving. The weather at the railway siding at Etaples had been no better than the wintry conditions the Canadians had fought through that day. So the ice and snow on the three-quarter mile-long road between the railway station

and the hospital made the trip more treacherous than usual. The prospect didn't bother one nineteen-year-old ambulance driver from Vancouver. As a rule Grace MacPherson worked twelve hours on and twelve hours off, but when there were big pushes at the front, she might work fifty to sixty hours straight without sleep—good weather or bad.

"I didn't mind the hard work. That's what I went over for," she said. "We had to clean the inside of the ambulances ... repair flats and pump up the tires by hand We served an area of over 50,000 beds," in the three major hospitals nearby.

Grace was used to challenges. She had even battled her way through red tape and male chauvinism to get to France in the first place. From the very night in 1914 when she read in the Vancouver newspapers that Britain had declared war on Germany, she announced to her family, "I'm going. I'm going to drive an ambulance." She then wrote to the war office in Ottawa and the Red Cross in Britain. When neither offered any help getting overseas, she took every penny she had and bought her own transatlantic ticket. In Britain, Grace faced another hurdle. The then commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, Sir Sam Hughes, had very definite opinions about women in war. Nevertheless, Grace secured an interview with the Minister of Militia himself (and "about ten crossed-sabers an generals sitting around this enormous suite") at the Savoy Hotel in London.

"I've come from Canada to drive an ambulance," she announced to Hughes and his entourage in the hotel room.

"I'll stop any woman from going to France," Hughes told her curtly "And I'll stop you too."

"Well, Sir Sam, I'm going to France," she insisted. "I'll get there with or without your help."

Conditions at the front in France superseded Sam Hughes's resistance to the idea. The war office had decided that men in the ambulance corps could better serve the war effort closer to the front, so driving jobs around Camiers, Le Touquet, and Etaples, where the major hospitals were located, were re-assigned to women volunteers. Busy shifts, such as transporting the wounded from railway stations to took every driver in the ambulance convoy. Their vehicles had no windshields, no lights, and tires that were notoriously prone punctures. Despite any urgency en route to the hospital, road conditions required ambulances to travel at little better than walking speed—four or five miles per hour. In addition to coping with vehicle maintenance on their own, the drivers often had to provide stretcher-bearing services by themselves.

Beginning late in the evening on April 9, Grace MacPherson made least ten trips between the railway siding and No. 1 General Hospital, the ambulance convoys working well past midnight. She remembered the Vimy wounded being "a very sorry looking bunch." And yet she never allowed their disabled condition or their frame of mind to affect her.

Whenever a passenger groaned from the back, Grace would say: "You cut that out! Nobody's riding in my ambulance moaning like that."

"Oh, I got a leg off," he might say.

"Look, I bashed my thumb," she'd respond, trying to distract him.

The patient might say, "You're a queer sort of bloke."

"You're going to get the best ride you ever had in your life," she'd say finally. She refused to allow herself to express sympathy openly, for the patient's sake and her own sanity. On other occasions, the soldier might have reacted to the sight of a woman driving vehicle. Not a surprise. Soldiers—wounded or not—loved conversation with a woman dressed in a blue uniform that a cape, a short skirt, and high boots. It bothered Grace, when she learned that young men fighting for their country "had not been out of the trenches, except for fleas and getting a bath, for so many months." The British Red Cross paid its women ambulance drivers only ten to fourteen shillings a week. It didn't matter to Grace MacPherson.

"When I stepped off that ship [in France] and got into that first ambulance," she said, "I felt as if I had been there all my life."

When he stepped off the ship in France, Jim McKenzie was told the No. 1 General Hospital at Etaples needed volunteers. Though most medics landing in Europe craved the excitement of front-line service, Pte. McKenzie had learned basic first aid at Work Point barracks in Victoria, B.C., and was content to serve in what they described as a "humdrum" orderly position at the French coast base hospital. Not long after he'd arrived at the hospital, a train pulled in to the Etaples siding with a load of wounded after dark. McKenzie and his roommate heard aircraft motors simultaneously. A German bomber had followed the train into Etaples, and when the train stopped, the aircraft veered off to the hospital encampment and began bombing and then returned for a second pass, strafing the hospital workers as they fled the burning camp huts.

"I'd made a bunk out of a wood frame and burlap over top," McKenzie said. "As soon as I heard the plane engines I dropped out of the bunk to the ground. Pieces of shrapnel flew right across the room about six inches above the bed. If I hadn't hit the floor, I'd have been ripped to pieces. You see, it didn't matter. We were all on the firing line."

The bombing raid on Etaples surprised ambulance driver Grace MacPherson too. The first indication of trouble was the German leaflet drop; they warned British and Canadian officials to move their military bases away from the hospitals along the coast. Then, on a moonlit night, the German Air Force flew low over Etaples and dropped about thirty bombs on buildings adjacent to No. 1 General Hospital.

"We got the stretchers filled in the ambulance," she said. "I had two or three sitting on the floor in the back and two beside me in my seat and one on the seat of the ambulance. He had a blanket ... thick with blood and I was holding him by the shoulder. We got them up to the hospital and went back for more."

Shortly after the German bombing raids, British dirigibles flew over the bombed-out hospital areas and photographed the damage for propaganda purposes. A working battalion then built protective walls around the hospital. More tightly guarded blackouts on clear nights became the rule. Male hospital staff were moved to tents on sand dunes away from the hospital, and the nursing sisters' lodgings were moved to a nearby castle.

"How I hate the moon, the Kaiser and the Huns," wrote Nursing Sister Rubie Duffus.

* The May 19, 1918, bombing at Etaples killed seventy, including Nursing Sisters Margaret Lowe, Katherine Macdonald, and Gladys Wake. The May 30-31 bombing at Doullens went through three floors and killed three more nursing sisters and, in an operating room, the surgeon, two attending nurses, and a patient.

After the Reading

- How did Grace overcome the hurdles that stood in the way of her service?
- What character traits and personal skills did Grace have to be an ambulance driver during WWI in France?
- How do you imagine that the women who served successfully were treated for their years of war service when they returned to Canada?

Read on!!

The following Government of Ontario bulletin was issued after WWI. Source: Department of Labour Archives, Government of Ontario

TO WOMEN WORKERS

Are you working for love or for money?

Are you holding a job you do not need?

Perhaps you have a husband well able to support you and a comfortable home?

You took a job during the war to help meet the shortage of labour.

You have "Made good" and you want to go on working.

But the war is over and conditions have changed.

There is no longer a shortage of labour.

On the contrary Ontario is faced by a serious situation due to the number of men unemployed.

This number is being increased daily by returning soldiers.

They must have work.

The pains and dangers they have endured in our defence give them the right to expect it.

Do you feel justified in holding a job which could be filled by a man who has not only himself to support, but a wife and family as well?

THINK IT OVER.

• How would Grace MacPherson Livingston feel after reading such a bulletin?

• Draw lots to argue both sides of the argument from the bulletin above. Which side is most persuasive and why?

References:

- The Ontario Women's Directorate has a lesson with student assignments and resources recommended for 8-11 year olds and 12-14 year olds. The lesson is based on Grace Macpherson Livingston. www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/owd/english/history_month/studyunits_4.htm
- *Not So Quiet* by Helen Zenna Smith, Reed Business Information, 1989 is the female response to All's Quiet on the Western Front. First published in 1930, the book recounts the experiences of female ambulance drivers and other women who served in WWI.
- *Women Overseas: Memoirs of the Canadian Red Cross Corps*, editors F.M. Day, P. Spence and B. Ladouceur, Ronsdale, 1998 also features female personnel such as ambulance drivers.