Women of Courage 1812 – 2012

Character Education

• Extract from the evolving roles of women in war character traits to value
• Analyze the hallmarks of courage
• Develop an appreciation for steadfastness, resilience, problem-solving and compassion

Facts

• Women were part of the War of 1812–1814 in a surprising variety of roles
• Twelve Canadian nurses served overseas in the Boer War (1899–1902)
• During WWI, 3,141 Canadian Nursing Sisters served overseas; 46 Canadian nurses were killed
• By 1945, 17,000 women were in the Canadian Armed Forces

Before the Reading

• Separate into male and female groups in the classroom to discuss what, if anything, would motivate you to go into the Canadian Armed Forces. Compare the female and male results. Are there differences? Why or why not?
• Discuss what you know of the “fight or flight” response to a crisis situation. Do males and females respond differently to crisis?
• Make a list of women or events that changed women’s roles in society

Reading

From earliest times men took the combat roles in war. They also did the training, planning and provisioning required to wage war. They left women roles that dealt with caretaking, nursing and maintenance of property. From 1812 to 2012, if men waged war, women were automatically involved.

Elizabeth Mitchell: a modern woman

In July 1776 the vivacious Métis woman Elizabeth Bertrand married David Mitchell, physician and deputy commissary of the British 8th Foot Regiment. The pair constructed a large, house with dormer windows on Market Street, Mackinac Island. Elizabeth made the Mitchell home the social hub for the 25 families who lived around them.

High society at the Mitchells included regular card parties, balls, dinners and tea parties. The Mitchell children were educated in Montreal and Europe. Recollections by a pioneer woman from Niagara stated, “Their two daughters were sent to Montreal to be educated and returned home highly accomplished and very beautiful women.” The War of 1812 changed all that. David rejoined the British Army and went off to fight going as far as Wisconsin with Robert Dickson’s force. Elizabeth tended the extensive business empire that she and her family had developed. Matters came to a head in 1814 when the Americans threatened Mackinac. In anticipation of
the attack Elizabeth went to her Odawa (Ottawa) Nation relatives at L’Arbe Croche to recruit defenders. With the new allies Elizabeth recruited the British repulsed the American attack on Mackinac. Elizabeth Mitchell’s contribution was recognized when she received a commendation and an official allowance of £50 for two years. The Ojibwa’s sign of respect for her took the form of the deed to Round Island, the traditional burying ground of their people. When the Treaty of Ghent handed Mackinac back to the Americans, Elizabeth stayed to manage the family’s large hay farm, fishing enterprises and fur-trade business. Dr. David Mitchell left to build them a new home on Drummond Island. He did not wish to live under American rule. The situation was tense. In 1815 the new U.S. Indian agent on Mackinac posted the following notice on the community’s church door:

Whereas a certain Eliz’th Mitchell under a pretense of trading with the savages is and for many years has been, as it has been represented to me, in the habit of holding her private councils with those unfortunate deluded People and of advising with and persuading them to the adoption of measures injurious to their real interests and that of the American government – I therefore feel it to be my Duty hereby to forbid the said Elizabeth Mitchell to hold any further intercourse with the Indians that may visit this island either directly or indirectly.

Next the American agent threatened to arrest her. Defiant to the last, Elizabeth fled alone at night in a canoe to join her husband. When tensions cooled, Elizabeth again took up the management of the family enterprises on Mackinac. Hers continued to be “the” salon to visit. One hundred-and-seventy-five years ago in 1827, Elizabeth Mitchell died “a modern woman”.

Try to think about what qualities each woman represents as you read about her exploits. Decide what subtle changes have taken place in the roles women play in war.

Mrs. Elizabeth Prideaux Selby and her daughter
Elizabeth Selby Derenzy

It’s April 27, 1813, the evening before the invasion of York (Toronto) by Americans. Prideaux Selby, the Receiver and Auditor General of Upper Canada (Ontario) lies gravely ill in his home where £3000 of public money is hidden, a huge sum for the times. The province’s administrator has asked Chief Justice Thomas Scott to move the money out of harm’s way. Who’s to undertake the risky task? That role falls to Selby’s daughter, the newly married Mrs. William Derenzy. Elizabeth hides a large portion of the public money in an iron chest which the Americans later break open to steal one thousand silver dollars. But luckily that wasn’t all the money. Risking death Elizabeth had ridden out from the Selby home that dangerous night with the public gold hidden beneath documents. Under cover of darkness she’s on her way to the house of Donald McLean, Clerk of the Assembly. Unfortunately, the gold is not long safe even there. McLean has been gunned down by Americans during their landing. Elizabeth’s mother, devises a plan to save the last of York’s public funds. She and Major Allan’s wife dress up Selby’s chief clerk Billy Roe as a market woman to move the money away from Donald McLean’s. The gold is obscured in a keg and loaded on a wagon where it’s covered with vegetables. Billy Roe in sunbonnet and petticoats fools the American guards at the Don River and manages to bury the treasure. Mrs. Selby and her daughter have played their parts in the War of 1812.

Elizabeth Derenzy had contributed to the war earlier. She’d suggested provincial leaders organize a society, to relieve suffering among the loyal population. The Loyal and Patriotic Society of Upper Canada, created in 1812, initially spent its donations on clothing for local militia. After the invasion funds went to soldiers’ medical care and relief for needy families. Clerk Donald McLean’s York descendants received funds from the Society. Elizabeth married Captain William Derenzy of the 41st Regiment of Foot February 8, 1813 and was named an executor of her father’s estate when he died May 9, 1813. The Selby ladies were a force to be reckoned with—for any era.
Lieutenant Georgina Fane Pope: a woman of firsts

P.E.I. born Georgina was one of eight children of Father of Confederation William Henry Pope. As lawyer, newspaperman, politician and judge, Pope expected a great deal from his children. Georgina delivered. She trained as a nurse at Bellevue Hospital School of Nursing in New York City—when nursing was a young profession. In 1899 when Canada answered the call to help Britain with the Boer War, Georgina was the senior nursing sister of the four who went with the first Canadian troops to South Africa. With the rank, pay and benefits of a lieutenant she worked in hospitals north of Cape Town and then took charge of a military field hospital at Kroonstadt. Most of the 230 patients suffered from typhoid as well as their wounds. Not daunted by a harsh climate and dangerous conditions, Pope did a second tour of duty serving in Natal until the end of the war in 1902. In 1903 she received the Royal Red Cross in recognition of exceptional military nursing service. She’d nursed and led while facing all the war and South Africa had to dish out. While working at the Garrison Hospital in Halifax Georgina became a regular member of the Canadian Army Medical Corps becoming its first Nursing Matron-in-Chief in 1908. At 55 years-of-age Georgina accepted a tour of duty during WWI serving near Ypres. Her words say it all, “My hair is now white ... but the sight of soldiers or sailors marching, a bugle call, the sound of the drums or military band has power still to stir in me the old enthusiasm and once more I long to minister to such cheery, grateful patients as the Soldiers and Sailors of the King.” Georgina Fane Pope was a trailblazer in military nursing in Canada.

Lieutenant Kay Christie: WWII

Kay Christie was a Toronto nurse with seven years’ experience when she signed up for the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. Late 1941 she sailed to Hong Kong with two Canadian infantry battalions. The British military hospital where Kay served was under heavy Japanese shelling until the British surrender on Christmas Day 1941. Then hell began. In Kay’s words remembering 50 years later, “In one hospital the Japanese soldiers lined up all the females, many of whom were just young girls. These women were mostly British, who had been employed as secretaries or teachers and so on, or they were wives of British business men or army officers. They were such a wonderful group who worked so hard at their volunteer duties in the hospital. As one of the soldiers stood in the doorway with a machine gun, the others took the younger girls, laid them on the floor and raped them while the mothers could do nothing but stand by helplessly and watch.” Kay spent 21 months as a POW behind barbed wire in the Far East. The conditions for all Hong Kong captives were hellish and it is a tribute to the dedication of medical personnel such as Lieutenant Kay Christie that 1,400 Canadians ultimately returned home. Kay was made an associate member of the Royal Red Cross in recognition of her service in adverse conditions.

From the War of 1812 to the present women’s courage in war has forged iron links in a chain that helped and helps keep Canada safe.
After the Reading

- What characteristics do women display in this reading? Are the WWII women more courageous than those from the War of 1812 and the Boer War?

- Who do you admire most of Elizabeth Selby, Georgina Fane Pope or Kay Christie. Provide three reasons for your choice

- What ifs: What if the Selby women had been discovered by the Americans trying to hide the gold? What if, Georgina Fane Pope’s father hadn’t been an important man in RE.I.? What if Kay Christie had been one of the women raped in the POW camp in Hong Kong?

Extensions

- Create a history of nursing in war from Florence Nightingale to the present using what you consider the five most significant advances made by women in nursing

- Atrocities in war are not a modern phenomenon. Compile a descriptive list of five atrocities from 20th century warfare that have left their mark on modern consciousness. Why do atrocities in war never seem to stop? What could make them stop?

- Women have quilted since the time of the War of 1812. Create a collage of the past 200 years of quilting in North America including an image of what is cutting edge in quilting today

- Use images of the Mackinaw Jacket, 1812–14 military outfits and Parisian fashions of 1812–14 to design THREE modern outfits based on those images—Fashion Collection 1812–2012!

Fashion trend 1812–2012: The Mackinaw Coat

Captain Roberts of the British Army in Fort St. Joseph (on an island near Sault Ste. Marie) hated to see his 10th Royal Veterans go through another winter without great coats. When in November, 1811 the last hopes faded of the schooner Hunter arriving from Amherstburg, Captain Roberts took matters in his own hands. He wrote to his superiors in Quebec, “I am, this day, obtaining, upon my requisition to the store-keeper of the Indian department, a consignment of heavy blankets, for the purpose of making them great coats, a measure the severity of the climate strongly demands and one, I trust, the commander of the forces will not disprove of when he is informed that not a remnant remains of the coats served out to them in the year 1807 and that they have received none since.” The design and sewing was accomplished by the talented Métis and white ladies of Fort St. Joseph and of neighbouring Mackinac Island—women such as Elizabeth Mitchell and her daughters.

The majority of the first 40 coats were made from 3.5 point Hudson Bay blankets in colours of blue and red with a few black on red plaid. They were expertly trimmed with brass buttons, shoulder straps and fancy pockets. When orders poured into Fort Mackinac where Roberts had moved after capturing the island in the first battle of the War of 1812, a shorter coat was designed for deep snow. The jacket was thick, double-breasted and blue at first. Very soon orders came from as far north as Port William and as far east as Penetanguishene; they were for the plaid version—a Canadian fashion statement had begun. It’s never really died out since. Has it?

Photos:
Makinaw Jacket 1942C www.olive-drab.com/od_soldiers_clothing_combat_ww2_mackinaw.php
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