

# The RCAF Women's Division Come to Newfoundland

"We Serve that Men May Fly"  
(Women's Division motto)

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In 1941, the Canadian government approved the formation of the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force to replace men in aviation support roles and free them up for combat-related duties. Airwomen trades included parachute rigger, welder, meteorologist, photographer, aero-engine and airframe mechanic, clerk, and wireless operator. The Women's Auxiliary Air Force was renamed the RCAF Women's Division (WD) in February 1942, and the first draft of twenty-four airwomen arrived in Newfoundland on 15 July 1942 to take up general duties at No. 1 Group Headquarters in St. John's (No. 1 Group controlled all RCAF units in Newfoundland and Labrador).

Two days after arriving, the "air-minded war girls in the natty uniform of the RCAF," described the St. John's *Daily News*, paraded from their temporary quarters at the United Church College Residence on Long's Hill to a tennis court at the rear of the Hotel Newfoundland, preceded by the RCAF band and in charge of WD Assistant Section Officer Dunbar (whose father, incidentally, was then with Canadian Army Headquarters in Newfoundland). Following a ceremonial inspection by No. 1 Group commander Air Commodore Clifford M. McEwen, they officially began their new duties. "The novel sight of the fair sex in uniform marching along the streets of St. John's attracted considerable attention, and the smartness of the airwomen drew forth much comment."



Princess Alice and Air Commodore McEwen after inspection of WD personnel on the grounds of Government House, August 1942.

In August 1942, Newfoundland welcomed Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone and Honorary Air Commandant of the WD. Air Commodore McEwen and Assistant Section Officer Eileen K. Calhoun, officer in charge, received the princess at government house grounds where she reviewed division personnel. For her efforts, the RCAF later awarded Calhoun, "the first Women's Division officer to be posted to Newfoundland," a Mention in Despatches. "The efficiency and morale of the Women's Division ... has to a great extent been due to" Calhoun's "untiring efforts and interest on their behalf," reads

her citation. Her high principles and leadership have been an example to all and her services are well worthy of special recognition."



WD members with respirators leave the gas chamber at RCAF Station Torbay where personnel learn the effects of gas. At front is Section Officer Calhoun.

By the end of 1942, the number of airwomen attached to No. 1 Group Headquarters exceeded fifty. That number had more than doubled by June 1943 when they moved into their new barracks and quarters on Kenna's Hill in St. John's. At RCAF Station Torbay (present-day St. John's International Airport), thirty-four WD personnel (this number later more than tripled) took up duties in October 1942. The airwomen stayed at the airfield in H-block barracks in rooms with fifteen double bunks. The airwomen carried out a variety of duties and trades at RCAF Station Torbay. They were wireless radio operators, truck drivers, and clerks. They maintained telephone line connections with other sections and stations, and handled weather briefings and flight plans for aircrews on antisubmarine patrol and convoy escort work.

The efforts of WD personnel drew praise from Brigadier General John R. Brooks, commander of United States Army forces in Newfoundland. For several days in January 1943, two trains carrying troops and civilians became snowbound on the

Avalon Peninsula. Seven travelling airwomen "contributed materially to the morale" of the passengers by "organizing and presenting a show, songs and stories," Brooks told No. 1 Group's air officer commanding. In so doing, Brooks continued, they "contributed to the spirit of friendliness ... between the allied services."



One of those receiving Brooks' accolades was Assistant Section Officer Irene Watson of New Toronto, Ontario. Watson worked at the recruiting centre in St. John's and occasionally travelled throughout Newfoundland on recruiting duties. In November 1943, the twenty-six-year-old set out by air for Grand Falls. An RCAF Canso from 116 Squadron at Botwood picked up Watson and a party of senior officers at Torbay. Watson stayed in the navigator's compartment during the flight and received lessons from the Canso's navigator. Darkness had set in when they arrived over Botwood harbour. The winds were calm and the water surface glassy as the marine section prepared flares to mark the landing path.

The Canso touched down in what the pilot described as a normal landing. The aircraft suddenly swung to port and its nose hit the water. The swing developed into a water-loop, quickly flooding the cockpit and navigation compartment. The aircraft stopped with one wing and the tail section above water and the crew and passengers trapped inside. Five

managed a desperate escape, including the pilot who swam upwards through fifteen feet of water. Upon surfacing, survivors pulled him onto the tail and he immediately asked if Watson had not gotten out. When told she had not, the survivors had to restrain him from re-entering the aircraft. A rescue boat shortly arrived and attempted to tow the Canso to shallow water. The rapidly sinking aircraft now threatened to capsize the rescue boat, so a crewmember cut the towrope and the Canso slipped beneath the waves. Efforts to locate the wreck using divers and sonar failed, and the military called off the search after ten days.

A week after the accident, Flight Lieutenant Tomkins, Protestant padre at Torbay, conducted a memorial service at the recreation centre. A similar service for the Roman Catholic victims was held at the airmen's lounge. The remains of Irene Watson and the other six missing crew and passengers were never recovered. Today, all but one is remembered on the Ottawa Memorial, which commemorates those of the Commonwealth forces killed while training in Canada and the United States or while serving in units operating from bases in the British West Indies, Canada, and the United States, and who have no known graves. Canso passenger Major Kenneth S. Morton of the Royal Artillery, at the time attached to the Royal Air Force Coastal Command, is remembered on a memorial for the missing at Brookwood Military Cemetery in the United Kingdom.

Despite such tragic events, there were good times to be remembered too. At a reunion in St. John's in 1998, WD veterans reminisced to local journalist Bob Benson:

Most women managed to find a few off-duty hours to break away from the military routine. There were trips to St. John's to window shop at Ayre and Sons, Bowrings, and Baird's on Water Street. Some hiked to Flatrock, while others hitchhiked to places as far away as Harbour Grace. For others, there were social evenings at the Club Commodore, just down Torbay Road from RCAF Station Torbay, where you could dance to the music of Mickey Duggan's orchestra. There were also dances at the Old Colony Club and lunches at Liddy's in Torbay, which at that time was a tea-room as well as a lounge.

Jean Patton attended the reunion in 1998. She arrived at Torbay in 1945 in a B-24 Liberator bomber, spent a year at the station, and later returned to Newfoundland to live. She remembered touring the surrendered German submarine U-190 in St. John's Harbour and the boisterous and joyous celebration when word came over the radio that Japan had surrendered. Patton left Torbay late in 1945. They had a final parade and inspection. "The band played the RCAF March Past," she recalled, "and it still puts a lump in my throat every time I hear it."

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