

New book chronicles women's air force WWII effort

By MATTHEW STUEHLER

Astronaut Roberta Bondar and author Glad Bryce have joined forces to commemorate the achievements of an unsung group of women.

Bryce, who lives in Bala, recently released her book *First In Last Out: The RCAF Women's Division and Nursing Sisters in World War II*. Bondar wrote the foreword for the book. Both women were at the book launch held at the University Women's Club in Toronto.

The book chronicles, with great respect and passion, the role of the Royal Canadian Air Force

Women's Division. By the end of the Second World War, there were 17,000 WDs, as they were known. Twenty-eight WDs attended the book launch.

A casual conversation inspired Bryce to write their story. "I visited an aging friend of mine who was in a nursing home at that time and she told me she knew what it was like to be in the war," said Bryce. "I said 'how do you know that?' and she said 'I'm a WD!' For the next hour and a half, she told me what it was like to be in the air force. I thought 'if her story doesn't get told, it's going to die.'"

Bryce later learned that the experiences of women in the navy and the army had been chronicled, but not the experiences of women in the RCAF. That knowledge confirmed her determination to research and write the book, a project that would end up consuming four years.

A boon for the book is that Dr. Roberta Bondar, Canada's first female in space, wrote the foreword.

Bondar describes how the WD motto, *We Serve that Men May Fly*, was backed by tireless

effort as Aero engine mechanics, airframe maintenance workers, parachute riggers, instrument mechanics, fabric workers and photographers, among other jobs.

"I stand in awe of these young women who learned the mechanical operation of an F-24 aerial camera, installing the 45-pound camera into an Anson training plane and instructing aircrews in their operation," writes Bondar. "These skills had to be learned in 90 days. And the list of the technically difficult jobs the WDs

learned and excelled at for the duration of the war goes on and on."

Bondar also notes that while these women performed difficult and crucial jobs, it was astounding that it took a member of Parliament, Mrs. Dorise Nielsen from North Battleford, Saskatchewan to ask the government to give the women pay that equalled that of men.

"The government finally raised their pay from 66 per cent to 89 per cent of what men received,"

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writes Bondar.

Bryce says Bondar's presence at the launch was priceless.

The former astronaut spoke with those who gathered and signed copies of the book as well.

"What impressed me was that she insisted on spending time with every single WD I had there," said Bryce. "Roberta put us all into orbit."

The family of one WD who had died since the war also attended the event.

"They came out from near the B.C. border," said Bryce. "They came out to honour their relative. They were just absolutely thrilled to be there and part of the celebration of these women."

Bryce said she was delighted to launch the book in such a dignified manner.

"The whole book launch was about the WDs that were there," she said. "They were wonderful. They were also asked to autograph books and that sort of thing, so it was

a true celebration about what the book is about, which is about what they have given us. They've given us our freedom."

The launch was so successful that close to 300 books were sold at the event.

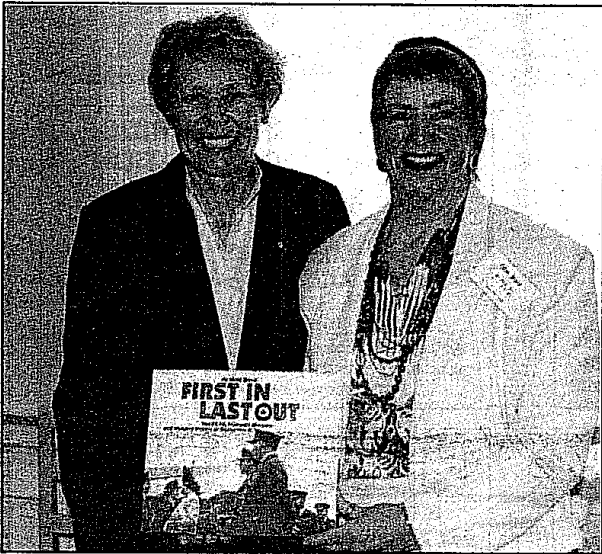
Listed at \$35, and packed with photos from the era, the book is for sale in Muskoka at the Gravenhurst Book Store, as well as Scott's of Muskoka in Bracebridge.

All proceeds from the book are going to the University Women's Club Heritage fund scholarship, said Bryce.



VARIED TASKS. Engine mechanics, parachute riggers, photographers and maintenance workers – women of the WD did it all as they lived up to their motto: we serve that men may fly.

Submitted photo



TELLING THEIR STORY. Canadian astronaut Dr. Roberta Bondar (left) and author Glad Bryce of Bala launch Bryce's new book at the University Women's Club in Toronto. The book tells the Second World War story of the RCAF Women's Division and Nursing Sisters, a group of women known colloquially as the WDs.

Astronaut Roberta Bondar wrote foreword, attended book launch