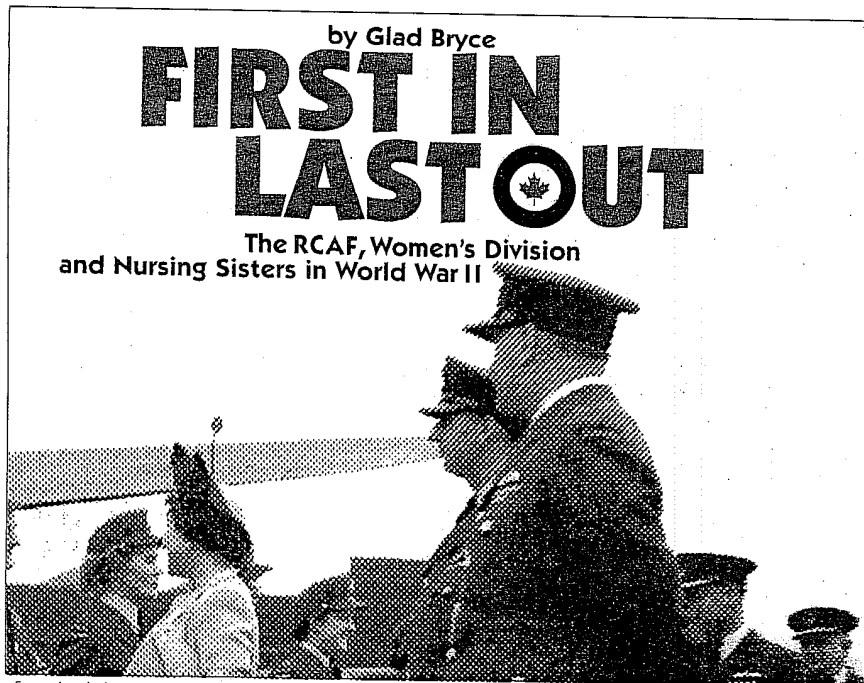


Muskoka Bookshelf

Book highlights efforts of forgotten female RCAF veterans

Glad Bryce, a year-round resident on Clear Lake just outside Bala, is an amazing person. At an age when some other women are crocheting in a corner, Bryce competes in international swimming competitions and won three gold medals in Sweden in 2009. She is an accomplished local actress, much in demand for murder mysteries. A respected water-colourist, Bryce's paintings hang in both galleries and private homes. She has belonged to the University Women's Club in Toronto since 1974 and was president of the club's graduates for five years. Locally, she is on the board of the Bala Cranberry Festival, past co-chair of the Trek to Bethlehem, a volunteer guide at two museums and founder of an



after-school church club that encourages young Bala girls to find potential inside themselves.

It is impressive that Bryce somehow found time in the last four years to research and write a book

that has created great excitement across Canada. *First In Last Out: the RCAF Women's Division and Nursing*

Sisters in World War II, tells for the first time the story of how more than 70,000 Canadian women served in the Royal Canadian Air Force, Women's Division, during the Second World War.

The name of the book comes from the fact that Canadian women were able to join the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force in early 1942, well before the Canadian Army or Canadian Navy were accepting women recruits, and were disbanded in 1946 after women in the other two military services had gone home. Hence, first in and last out

The story of how Bryce wrote the book is almost as interesting as the book itself. In the late summer of 2007 Bryce was asked to introduce a speaker at Toronto's University Women's Club. The speaker first talked about her book on Canadian women who had served in the Canadian Army and the Canadian Navy during the Second World War, and then mentioned that someone should do a similar book on women who served in the wartime RCAF.

One day after the University Women's Club speech, an 83-year-old bedridden neighbour on Clear

Lake told Bryce that she had served during the Second World War in the RCAF Women's Division. Listening to Doris Gain share her memories convinced Bryce that someone had to put those stories in print before the women veterans were all gone. By the time that Gain died two months later in October 2007, Bryce was already knee deep in her research. She had also found two other WDs, as the women referred to themselves, living a short distance from her Clear Lake home.

In early November 2007, just weeks after Gain's death, Bryce went to visit a sister-in-law at a Guelph retirement home. There she met a 101-year-old woman, Fran Oakes, who told her she was in charge of the RCAF Nursing Service during the Second World War. Bryce interviewed Oakes on Nov. 13, 2007, and found her able to recall wartime events as clearly as if they had happened the previous week. Bryce was able to interview Oakes a second time at the age of 103.

On Nov. 16, Bryce interviewed two former WDs in Torrance, Reta Frederickson and Jean Metcalfe. She learned from them that the 67th reunion of the RCAF Women's

Division would be happening the following June in Ottawa with women coming from every part of Canada. The reunion was a heaven-sent opportunity for Bryce to interview up to 100 women at one location.

Bryce's 224-page book, which includes 59 interviews, was published last spring. It has turned a long overdue spotlight on RCAF women veterans whose wartime contributions are finally being told. Thanks to Bryce, we know that the number of Canadian women who served their country through the RCAF during the Second World War was far more than the number who served in the Canadian Army Corps or in the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service.

Bryce also reminds us that the women were paid only a fraction of what the men they were replacing would have earned. The percentage was a shameful 66 per cent at the beginning, later raised to 89 per cent. From beginning to end, the book is a treasure trove of information, including charts and maps showing the locations across Canada of flying schools, bombing and gunnery schools and air stations.

Bryce gives full credit to a small group of "angels" for helping her finish her book. Bala resident Gord Ramey, whose RCAF father died overseas when he was only two, turned out to be one of Canada's top RCAF historians. Bala photographer Jon Gurr used his skills to bring old photographs back to life. Bala friend Amy Taylor helped Bryce track down funding sources. A cousin, Patricia Gidley, taught her useful computer skills. Bryce says she could not have done her book without her research assistant, Linda Cressman-Millie. Finally, Roberra Bondar, Canada's first woman astronaut, wrote the foreword for Bryce's book and attended the May 10th launch in Toronto, timed to coincide with the 65th anniversary of VE Day.

Bryce has received high words of praise from reviewers, editorial writers, politicians and ordinary readers, but the words she treasures most come from women RCAF veterans who are overjoyed that someone is finally speaking up for them. The book, which took up four years of Bryce's life, deserves a place in every Canadian library.

— Jack Hutton