

Female veterans focus of book

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GLAD BRYCE

Author Glad Bryce speaking in Stayner on Saturday

BY MICHAEL GENNINGS STAFF

Author Glad Bryce will speak about her book 'First in... Last out, Stories about The RCAF Women's Division and Nursing Sisters in World War Two', at a special event the Stayner Heritage Society is hosting on Sat., Nov. 6.

"The title of my book is based on a phrase the WDs (Women's Division) used," Bryce said. "Well we were the first

ones in' they'll say. The air force was the first to allow women in during the war and then came the army and navy. And the air force women stayed in the war the longest. They did not disband until after the navy and army women had gone out. So 'first in, last out' is a phrase they're quite proud of."

Bryce said the roughly 300-page book is a fascinating look at the role women played in Canada's air force during the war.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Author Glad Bryce will be speaking in Stayner on Saturday. Her new book looks at women who served in the RCAF during the Second World War.

"Really it's a pretty all encompassing story of how the air force women began," she said. "They actually started out with eight trades and those trades were very minimal. They were learning how to do radar, specific things about meteorology, accounting — they did everything the men had traditionally done so the men could fly. None of the WDs were pilots but they did everything else. By the end of the war there was something like 55 trades. Traditionally women could only be a school teacher or a nurse before the war and this just opened huge doors."

Bryce, who lives in Bala, became interested in the subject four years ago while attending a presentation by Ruth Russell, the author of *Proudly She Marched, Volume 1*, a look at Canadian woman who served in the army during the Second World War.

"The presentation was held at the University Women's Club in Toronto. We learned that the stories of air force women weren't getting told. At the end

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of that meeting, the people of my club said 'Glad, you should spearhead this'."

Bryce, a trained sociologist who has written nine educational books, said she let the suggestion go.

"But the very next day I was visiting a very dear friend of mine in a nursing home in Gravenhurst and said 'Doris, you would have been really interested in a session I heard last night about women in the war' and she said 'I know everything there is about the war, I'm a WD', and I said 'What in the world is a WD?' and here she'd been a neighbour of mine, I had known her for years. Well she told me for an hour and a half what a WD was. I had no idea."

Bryce said she then began to poke around and found others who'd served in the Women's Division of the RCAF.

"I started to find other women who were WDs, did a couple of interviews with them and that really set me on the path," she

explained. "There was just a whole series of events that then followed."

In June 2008, Bryce said she was able to attend a Women's Division reunion in Ottawa.

"It was the 67th reunion. I took two WDs up with me and I roomed with them and I just interviewed women from all across Canada," she said. "I went to the breakfast table, the coffee breaks, on the busses, the dance floor, I just interviewed all weekend and really did get this full picture of what exactly these women were and what they had done and I experienced the difficulty of getting them to tell me their stories."

All told Bryce said she spoke to more than 200 veterans.

"I have all the stories blended in terms of their specific careers, the challenges they had, the overseas unit, but in the appendix I actually put the notes I took when interviewing each of the WDs. They are fairly short bios of them but fascinating reading."

Bryce said it's a shame these stories have never been properly told.

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Why weren't they celebrated? "I guess because of the war," she said. "Who got killed? Men. They were in the airplanes. They

were the ones that went out and shot away at Hitler. I think that's one issue and just simply the women in the 1940s — they were housewives, school teachers, nurses; they were not in the forefront at all and that holds true in their own self-image."

Often the women Bryce spoke to didn't really think they had a story.

"I interviewed women right up to colonels and they would say things to me like 'Oh Glad, you don't want to interview me, you want to interview my best friend, she went far, she was a lieutenant' and I'd say 'Yes, yes, I'll interview your friend, but I want to hear your story'. So you had to get these women feeling positive about their story before they'd tell it."

Roberta Bondar, Canada's first female astronaut, wrote the forward to Bryce's book.

"She honours these women tremendously," Bryce said, adding Bondar attended her book launch in May in Toronto. "She came that day and spoke and was just wonderful. She said

these women helped pave the way for her."

Bryce said that after the war the women returned to civilian life, putting their experience in uniform behind them.

"They got severance, after. They got cash or they could get a little house maybe or a down payment for a little plot of land or they could further their education — whatever they chose the government had offered various options," she said. "A lot of WDs I interviewed, a higher percentage took further education but not necessarily academic — it would be hands on stuff. They would go on to learn how to make fancy hats or they would go into the garment industry. One of my WDs said she took the cash settlement and bought a fur coat."

Bryce's presentation in Stayner takes place at Clearview Community Church. It will start at 9:30 a.m. on Nov. 6. Tickets are \$5 each and available by calling Catherine Walker at 428-2719 or Myrna Johnson at 428-2540.