

# Women and the Canadian Military

## Introduction

*Lynne Gouliquer*

Guest editor

The following section is a special issue segment entitled "Women and the Canadian Military." The impetus for the exploration of this topic occurred in 1999 when I organized a double session on this same topic at the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) conference. The works of the seven researchers who presented generated much discussion and interest. Following the CRIAOW conference, I sought a venue through which these works could be published. As such, I am grateful to CRIAOW for providing the initial public forum, and *Atlantis* for accepting a request to consider these articles for peer review and publication.

This special *Atlantis* segment brings together original texts by Canadian scholars that examine the multifaceted ways in which women have been, and still are, involved with the Canadian Military. Women have been part of militaries throughout history (DePauw 1998). Yet, until recently, scholarship has been remiss in illuminating and theorizing women's participation (Hacker 1981; Hacker and Hacker 1987); this is also the case in the Canadian context. To a certain degree, it has been possible to trace women's official involvement as soldiers in the Canadian military, given the relatively detailed files this organisation keeps on its personnel; for instance, we know that women were officially part of Canada's military all the way back to the nation's earliest days. However, the majority of the literature examining women's involvement focuses on the second world war when nearly 46,000 women served their country (Dundas 2000).

In line with this tradition, the illustration chosen as the cover of this issue is a reproduction of one of Molly Lamb Bobak's many war paintings illustrating this period. Her art-work captured the daily activities of the Canadian Women's Army Corps during World War II. Like many who

enlisted at that time, Molly Lamb Bobak - the first female soldier to serve as a war artist - joined for patriotic reasons (Molly Lamb Bobak, personal communication July 4, 2001). Although joining the military was a non-traditional act at the time, the majority of women who served performed traditional feminine occupations (e.g., laundry responsibilities, nursing). And still today, the majority of women serving in Canada's military continue to hold traditional feminine occupations.

Notwithstanding this fact, in the last decade and a half many important changes have taken place regarding women's official and unofficial involvement in the Canadian Armed Forces. In 1989, legislated discrimination curtailing women's employment in the Military was lifted, except for that of serving as Roman Catholic priests or on submarines (Armed Forces given 10 years... 1989; Suh 1989). Another notable event was the commitment of millions of dollars in aid from the federal government for the creation of the Military Family Support Program in 1991 (Associate Minister of National Defence 1991). Subsequently, Family Resource Centres were opened at all military bases. While the costs of the military lifestyle on families far exceed the rewards, the Family Support Program and Resource Centres provides military wives, partners, and families with much needed resources (Gouliquer 1995).

The first two papers in this section focus on women's relationship to the military as soldiers. To begin, Susan Mann examines the nursing sisters - the Bluebirds - of the World War I era. As mentioned above, this is an era during which little is known about the lives and experiences of female soldiers. Mann explores how "silences" in history are created and have affected scholarship about these women. She notes that some of the history, hidden in texts such as personal diaries, is in danger of being lost and not integrated in our discourses

and theorizing about women's roles. In the second text, Tina Davidson examines a different genre of texts, that of internal army newsletters. She argues that the images and texts found in the Canadian Army Corps' communication vehicles helped regulate and prescribe acceptable feminine comportment for World War II female soldiers. Davidson's contribution is unique not only in terms of the analysis she develops, but in drawing our attention to these previously unexamined documents.

Except for some recent research (for example, MacBride-King 1986; Harrison and Laliberté 1994, 1997; the Family Violence and Military Community research teams and Violence and Abuse research centre 2000), the contribution to the military by women partnered with Canadian soldiers tends to have been historically ignored. As soldiers' partners, they are only recognized by the military as appendages or dependents of the soldiers, thereby rendering their existence vicarious and conditional. Consequently, their work in helping fulfill the military mission not only remains invisible to the Canadian military, but also to its government and society. In the third article in this segment, Deborah Norris adds to the small body of research on this topic. She discusses the impact of military naval deployments on the everyday lives of the female partners of male sailors. Norris' study illustrates and explicates how military ideology intersects with gender relations to make invisible the unpaid work these wives and partners perform for the institution.

In the last article of this collection, Carmen Poulin speaks about a marginalised group that has remained invisible not only in military writings or feminist and queer literatures, but also in lay and scholarly works. She examines how the military culture and milieu shape the lives and realities of the female partners of lesbian military members. Until 1992, the Canadian Armed Forces discharged many female members found or suspected to be homosexual. In addition to adopting a nondiscriminatory employment policy in 1992, the Armed Forces accepted to recognize same-sex relationships in 1996, to the extent that it now offers the same social benefits to both homosexual and heterosexual couples (Gouliquer 2000). Given the conservative milieu and years of active attempts to eradicate all homosexuals from the organization, Poulin's study provides the first glimpse into the ways in which the military's social practices affect the psychological and sociological reality of lesbians partnered with women soldiers in the Canadian military.

Using the voices of women speaking out from very different locations and eras, these four papers expose the hegemonic mechanisms of male domination and heterosexuality that have long been the pillars of world militaries, including the Canadian Armed Forces. Most important, they aim to fill a void in the Canadian literature. It is hoped that this section on "Women and the Canadian Military" will inform new feminist research and incite scholars to take up this historically understudied field.

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