

'A petticoat army'

Despite harrumphing from the generals,
a Victoria housewife founded the Canadian Women's Army Corps

By SIDNEY ALLINSON

Women who now rightly enjoy full equality in the Canadian military may not realize how much they owe to an almost forgotten Victoria housewife.

More than half a century ago, Joan Kennedy assumed command of the Canadian Women's Army Corps that was formed by her personal initiative, despite official short-sightedness and gender prejudice. From local beginnings as leader of a group of volunteers, she went on to spearhead the formal formation of the CWAC, in which women became part of the Canadian army for the first time.

She was born Joan Barbara Fensham in Middlessex, England, in 1908, daughter of an immigrant banker who became an Alberta farmer. Having contracted malaria during the First World War, Harry Fensham resettled his family in the gentler climate of Victoria. After matriculation from high school, Joan worked as a telephone switchboard operator, then became an accountant with the B.C. Bond Corporation.

Described as "a slim, vivacious girl with short wavy hair and blue eyes, fond of a good time," she married Norman R. Kennedy, a B.C. government engineer, in 1929. The bride dutifully quit her employment, as was then expected of women upon getting married. The change to being "Mrs. Norman Kennedy, attractive young housewife and club-woman," cannot have fully suited her energetic temperament. Still, she occupied herself with vigorous fund-raising for Tiny Tim Cots in Victoria hospitals.

Evidently, she was also a shrewd observer of world affairs and the growing threat of war with Nazi Germany. Early in 1939, Joan Kennedy joined with other like-minded women to form the British Columbia Women's Service Corps, and became its commandant. Without any government support, members of the BCWSC made their own military-style blue uniforms and trained themselves in practical skills likely to be needed in a war.

The British Columbia women were first, then similar groups formed in other provinces across Canada. Each proved their foresightedness and value after the Second World War was declared in September, 1939. Few, if any, women in Canada at the time expressed the slightest desire to go into front-line combat. Nevertheless, they held strong patriotic feelings, and were determined to serve in any vital support roles opened to them.

The aptitude of women to perform a variety of military jobs caught Kennedy's imagination. Almost single-handedly, she began a determined campaign to persuade the Dominion government to co-ordinate various women's voluntary organizations into a national army unit. For more than two years, she faced total indifference from politicians and downright hostility from military headquarters. Calmly, she kept pointing out the successful example of half a million women already serving in the British armed forces. But hide-bound attitudes and well-entrenched prejudice towards women prevailed in Canada in those days. One brass-hat spluttered to her, "A petticoat army — madness!"

After being turned down by three successive ministers of defence, Joan Kennedy's persistent lobbying finally paid off. On Aug. 13, 1941, the Hon. John Ralston signed an Order-in-Council to authorize formation of the Canadian Women's Army Corps. The new unit suddenly gained priority, and Elizabeth Smellie, matron-in-chief of the Canadian Army Nursing Service, was seconded to organize the CWAC's administration.

Meantime, Joan Kennedy was admitted into the army with the rank of major — the first Canadian woman to receive an Army commission — and appointed Staff Officer CWAC, Military District 11, headquartered at Work Point Barracks, Victoria. Because of her obvious suitability, Chief Matron Smellie soon recommended Kennedy to be appointed as commander of the CWAC, promoted to the rank of lieutenant-colonel.

By then, Canada's women had become part of an enormous effort to gear up the



Cpl. Cathy Drew, a member of today's armed forces, at the Ashton Armoury with the uniform that belonged to Joan Kennedy. *Brice Stotesbury/Times Colonist*

country's post-Depression industry into a powerful wartime production effort. Previously, the potential of women had been untapped in occupations other than what was thought to be "women's work." However, they soon showed their stuff in jobs as welders and lathe-operators, helping build ships and tanks and aircraft.

Even more of a novelty in Canada was the innovative sight of women in military uniform. CWACs were outfitted in well-cut khaki tunics, shirts, and skirts, plus trousers to be usually worn only while on such duties as driving trucks. Each woman's clothing measurements were forwarded to Army Central Stores in Ottawa, so individual uniforms were tailor-made. Officers were allowed silk stockings, while other-rank legs wore lisle, and an allowance was paid for the purchase of civilian lingerie. An appropriate unit insignia was chosen: the helmeted head of Minerva, mythical goddess of war and wisdom.

Requirements were for females aged between 21 and 40, with a minimum height of five feet, weight no less than 105 pounds, and having no dependents. They were to have at least Grade 8 education, and be British subjects, as Canadian citizens were then. Basic training consisted of squad drill, marching, physical education, and military deportment, but without any weapons instruction.

When critics suggested that rigid army life could turn females into masculine individuals, Kennedy snapped, "No, life in the CWAC will never rob a girl of her charm or her womanly qualities! Whatever tasks they undertake, they'll do them in a woman's way."

She was forthright about what were the tasks to be expected. "Any woman who goes into this with the idea of finding glamour is entirely misled," she said. "Her job will probably be pounding a typewriter, scrubbing floors, cooking, or something equally commonplace but necessary."

Kennedy's emphasis continued to be on recruiting women capable of non-combatant duties to relieve men for front-line service. Early requirements were for clerks, telephonists, cooks, and drivers, but eventually CWACs were performing scores of demanding skills, including code-ciphering, motor-mechanics, and map-making.

Whatever their rank, women received only two-thirds the pay of a male soldier. A female private got 90 cents per day, compared with \$1.30 for a man. Lt. Col. Kennedy's daily pay was \$6.70. (A man in her equivalent position, commanding an entire corps, would have usually held the rank of general.)

In 1943, after some understandable grumbling about inequality of earnings, CWAC pay was raised to 80 per cent of a man's rate.

Early on, Kennedy did not see her unit having any revolutionary effect on women's status. In 1942, she said, "We are only in it for the duration. In post-war years, women will return to the same position they enjoy in the business world. They are the housewives of tomorrow."

Her perception changed rapidly, though, when she saw their enormous capabilities, and she mused publicly about the near future. "Canadian women on active service won't be content with a frivolous or idle life after the war is over. A life of teas, bridge, and gossip will be empty, after the important job they're doing now. Most will want to do something useful in their community."

Within a few months of the unit's formation, 80 members were sent to Washington, D.C., working at the British Military Mission. They made such an impression in the U.S. capital, a platoon of them were invited to march in a U.S. armed forces parade down Fifth Avenue, New York. One newspaper gushed, "Those smart Canadian gals in khaki stole the show!" The first draft of 350 CWACs went over-

seas in November, 1942, to London. There, they bravely endured Luftwaffe bombing raids, the first female Canadian soldiers to come under fire. Later in the war, 43 CWACs served in Italy, 156 in Northwest Europe, and eventually 4,000 were stationed overseas. No CWACs were killed by enemy action, but four were wounded by a German V2-missile attack on Antwerp in 1945.

After being posted to Britain for a while in 1944, Lt.-Col. Kennedy returned to be appointed General Staff Officer in charge of training for the CWAC. Her ability was further recognized by being appointed to an army board to organize formation of the new Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, a highly technical regiment. Having demonstrated her versatility yet again, she returned to administering the CWACs until after war's end in August, 1945.

The competence shown by females in general during the Second World War helped change forever the way in which women were viewed by the military establishment and Canadian society. Success of the 21,000 "Kennedy CWACs" not only paved the way to equal status for females in the Canadian Forces. They had an even wider influence on later generations' perception of women in all career roles.

The CWAC was disbanded in September, 1946, then re-formed three years later, including a local platoon of women in 155 Coy, RCAASC, now the 11 (Victoria) Service Battalion. After unification of the three armed forces in 1968, women blended into the ranks of most units. Finally, in 1989, the Human Rights Commission ordered that women were to be fully integrated into all aspects of the military.

Kennedy herself was let go from the army in 1946. She returned to Victoria, obtained a divorce, and quickly adapted to home-town life again. She took mischievous fun in telling how previous military comrades of both sexes often passed by without recognizing her in civilian clothes.

The post-war years gradually became more difficult for her. Despite her executive skills, she faced an increasing struggle to make ends meet, and ended up trying to build a small secretarial business.

The whole city was shocked when she died suddenly of a heart attack at her Rockland Avenue home on Oct. 11, 1956. She was only 47; her early death more than likely the result of strain from overwork during five gruelling years of wartime responsibility.

The only Canadian woman ever to be accorded a funeral with full military honours, her casket was draped with the Union Jack and borne on a gun-carriage flanked by six army officers as pallbearers. The procession marched slowly through streets lined by Victorians standing to show their respect. They then laid her ashes in an unmarked grave at Hailey Park Memorial Gardens, Colwood.

Forty-three years later, in 1999, a special plaque dedicated to her was unveiled at the Ashton Garrison Museum, Vanalman Avenue, where her personal effects are held. It has become the primary museum of the CWAC, housing the country's largest collection of female uniforms and artifacts.

Further recognition is planned to take place this coming August, commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Canadian Women's Army Corps.

A guard of honour from the 11 (Victoria) Service Battalion will parade for a special religious ceremony at Kennedy's burial-place, where a suitably inscribed headstone is to be erected to memorialize Canada's first female soldier.

Sidney Allinson is a Victoria writer on military history. His Kruger's Gold: A novel of the Anglo-Boer War will be published at the end of this month.



Joan Kennedy was the first Canadian woman to receive an Army commission. *Sidney Allinson collection*