Temporary exhibition coming March 1, 2019
Great Women During the War 1939–1945

An exhibition developed by the Canadian War Museum in partnership with the Juno Beach Centre.

During the Second World War, women experienced anxiety, fear, worry and loss, while holding on to hope.

They contributed to the war effort by working and by drawing upon their energy and skills to seize new opportunities, and to successfully take on new responsibilities — often receiving little recognition in return.

They paved the way to profound social change.

This exhibition pays tribute to some of those women — Canadian and European alike — in recognition of their courage and many unsung contributions.


Photo:
Credit – CJB

Press photos of the exhibition on this link: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FORi4CvOzwUH29ihmtpUyj1NSY0MmQG?usp=sharing
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About Great Women

During the Second World War, women experienced anxiety, fear, worry and loss, while holding on to hope. Women’s experiences varied greatly, depending on their circumstances. Many women overcame major obstacles to make essential contributions to the war effort, often receiving little recognition in return. Through the 16 stories in this exhibition, we pay tribute to the courage and contributions of Canadian and European women during the war. Great Women During the War, 1939–1945 is an exhibition developed by the Canadian War Museum in partnership with the Juno Beach Centre.

Making a Difference

Visitors are ushered into this section of the exhibition with a photograph of British women using magnets to salvage nails from the debris of a bombed-out factory. This image introduces the idea that women's contributions to the war effort — unpaid labour, undermining the enemy, and helping their communities, friends and families survive — depended on where they lived.

In Canada, Mary Holland and Mary Ziniuk knitted socks and other woollen items for military personnel. Other Canadian women raised funds for the Red Cross and other volunteer organizations, or sold government war savings stamps. Their volunteerism is represented by artifacts that include knitting books and yarn dyed to match Canadian uniforms, and by a photograph of women filling comfort boxes to send to soldiers on the front lines.

The stakes were higher in occupied Europe, where women like Louise Boitard risked their lives to shelter Resistance fighters and Allied airmen, forge papers, smuggle documents, and more. Visitors can also view an excerpt from a 1961 interview in which Boitard describes her wartime actions. Assorted propaganda, Boitard’s Bronze Star citation, and other artifacts and photographs illustrate the direct impact of women's sacrifices on the lives of fighting men.

This section ends with the stories of war brides who left the ruins of Europe to settle in Canada, where they continued to change lives — including their own — after the war.

Donning the Uniform

This section focuses on the experiences of women who served in the military during the Second World War. More than 50,000 Canadian women took on non-combat military roles, freeing up men for battle. Some women — like military nurse Mary
Adelaide Cooney — still found themselves dangerously close to the action. On display are her medal set, the service uniform she wore as she followed the troops across Europe, and a photograph of her with a group of nurses who survived the sinking of the troopship SS Santa Elena. Visitors can also explore a digital gallery of paintings of Canadian servicewomen by Molly Lamb Bobak, Canada’s first female official war artist to be sent overseas.

While most servicewomen were given routine tasks, some, like British Special Operations Executive agent Sonya (Butt) D’Artois, had truly exceptional experiences. Highlights include D’Artois’ performance reports, and the makeup compact and cigarette case she carried as part of her cover behind enemy lines in France. Together, these objects tell the fascinating story of a young woman whose abilities as a spy were vastly underestimated, but who proved herself courageous and capable in the field. Visitors can also watch an excerpt from an interview with D’Artois from the 2002 documentary Behind Enemy Lines: The Real Charlotte Grays.

**A Civilian Workforce**

In some countries, the war brought new opportunities for women, as men left civilian jobs to enlist in the military. In others, women’s opportunities were curtailed by the war, as occupied countries embraced policies tied to traditional gender roles.

In Canada, Lorida Langlois became an inspector in an explosives factory, but lost her job when she married. As a member of the Farm Service Force, high-school student Inge Oswald hated working in a tomato-canning factory, but benefitted from wages and exam exemptions. As the war dragged on, recruitment expanded to married women, mothers of young children, and members of religious and ethnic minority groups. After the war, women were laid off in great numbers. These stories are told through photographs of the women and their workplaces, as well as artifacts that include recruitment posters, the brooch Langlois bought with her first earnings, and Oswald’s Farm Service Force uniform.

In occupied France, the Germans passed laws restricting a woman’s ability to work. Some, like railway employee Madeleine Verly, not only continued to work, but used their jobs to help the Resistance. Verly’s dramatic story and artifacts are a highlight of the exhibition. Her Railway Circulation Pass, which allowed her to travel freely, was critical to her success in gathering intelligence about German activities. Other documents recognize her bravery through numerous medals, including the Médaille de la Résistance and the Croix de Guerre for distinguished acts of heroism in combat.

This section closes with the story of Rose Smethers, who braved aerial bombardment and widespread destruction in London, England, to run her family business.
Worry and Loss

The final section of the exhibition shows the ways in which women’s emotional lives were affected by the Second World War. For women under Nazi rule, fear of deportation, imprisonment and death were part of everyday life. Those far from the conflict lived with constant worry about their loved ones, waiting for news and hoping desperately for their safe return.

Betty Butcher’s heartbreaking story of loss is told through a series of objects, including a commemorative ring made from the propeller of her brother’s downed plane. Others include the winged brooch she cherished as a souvenir of her fiancé, killed in France, and the service flag she hung in her window in remembrance of loved ones serving in the war. Alta Wilkinson’s scrapbooks of letters, telegrams, trinkets and photographs — assembled in tribute to her son Arthur, who was killed in the fighting at Caen — are a poignant expression of a mother’s worries and, ultimately, her grief.

The exhibition ends with the tragic stories of three European women. Photographs and a sculpture introduce German artist Oda Schottmueller, who was executed for criticizing the Nazi regime. Marianne Golz-Goldlust’s letters are powerful first-hand accounts of her time in prison, as she awaited execution for smuggling Jewish people out of Czechoslovakia (today the Czech Republic and Slovakia). Family photos and official disappearance certificates are all that remain of Jenny Zajderman and her four children, who were deported from France and killed at Auschwitz.

List of Women (by Country):

- **Canada**
  - Mary Holland
  - Mary Adelaide Cooney
  - Molly Lamb Bobak
  - Lorida (Landry) Langlois
  - Inge Oswald
  - Betty Butcher
  - Alta Wilkinson

- **Great Britain**
  - Sonya (Butt) D’Artois
  - Rose Smethers

- **The Netherlands**
  - Nell (Greefkes) Ringguth

- **Germany**
  - Oda Schottmueller

- **France**
  - Louise Boitard
  - Jeanne (Marchais) Pfannmuller
  - Madeleine Verly
  - Jenny Zajderman

- **Austria**
  - Marianne Golz-Goldlust
Personal Stories

The exhibition Great Women During the War, 1939–1945 uses personal stories to illustrate the many important roles women played during the Second World War. Here are some of the stories visitors will encounter as they make their way through the exhibition.

- **Mary Holland** was among the many Canadian women who contributed to the Allied war effort from home, doing unpaid work that had a direct impact on the lives of fighting men. Trained as a nurse and librarian, she spent the war years raising four young children. While Holland joked that her kids were her war effort, she also made time during her busy day to knit socks, balaclavas and other clothing to help keep soldiers, sailors and airmen warm. (Making a Difference)

- **Nell (Greefkes) Ringguth** was only 12 when the Germans invaded her home country, the Netherlands. Forced to grow up fast, she helped her mother support the family by delivering bundles of what she thought were hand-knit sweaters, but which she later learned were illegal documents and guns. Ringguth was one of the estimated 48,000 European war brides who married Canadian soldiers after the war. These women — and the 22,000 children they took with them — left behind family, friends and familiar surroundings to live in Canada, where many faced isolation, homesickness and adjustment to the harsh climate. (Making a Difference)

- **Molly Lamb Bobak** served with the Canadian Women’s Army Corps, a non-combat service branch created to free up eligible servicemen for battle. After winning an army art contest, she became the first and only woman among 28 official Canadian war artists to be sent overseas to document the Second World War. Posted to the Netherlands after VE (Victory in Europe) Day, she painted the everyday experiences of her fellow servicewomen. (Donning the Uniform)

- **Sonya (Butt) D’Artois**, a British Special Operations Executive agent, was only 19 when she parachuted behind enemy lines in Normandy, nine days before D-Day. She was injured while landing, her equipment was intercepted and her Resistance contact was killed, forcing her to develop a new strategy on the spot. For more than three months, D’Artois relayed information, conducted sabotage missions, and recruited and trained Resistance fighters. Some officers doubted her abilities before the mission, but her courage, resourcefulness and determination under incredibly dangerous conditions proved them wrong. (Donning the Uniform)

- **Lorida (Landry) Langlois** took advantage of the new opportunities and higher wages available to Canadian women who found jobs in traditionally male sectors during the war. When the sewing-machine company where she worked converted to the production of explosive shells, she took on the fast-paced and dangerous position of inspecting bomb detonators. Many women lost their jobs in mass layoffs at the end of
the war, but Langlois lost hers when she got married. Her employer, like many others at the time, only employed single women. (A Civilian Workforce)

- **Madeleine Verly** was a social worker with France’s national railway when she joined the Resistance in 1942. Movement in occupied France was strictly controlled, but her Railway Circulation Pass allowed her to travel at restricted times, and to sensitive locations, without arousing suspicion. Verly used this freedom to transport documents and collect valuable information about German ship movements and the construction of the Atlantic Wall in Normandy. (A Civilian Workforce)

- **Alta Wilkinson** found various ways to cope with grief after her son Arthur was killed in action in Normandy in 1944. She created three scrapbooks of letters, telegrams, trinkets and photographs to commemorate his life and service. After the war, she forged a lasting friendship with the French family who tended Arthur’s grave, and visited his burial place in 1953. She also found mutual support among other grieving mothers and widows by joining the Remembrance Association, Silver Cross Women of Canada, serving twice as the organization’s president. (Worry and Loss)

- **Jenny Zajderman** fled from Germany to France with her family in 1938, hoping to escape Nazi persecution of the Jewish people. In 1942, however, she was arrested in Paris, deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp and gassed. Her husband, Szlama, had already been taken, and for an entire month, their four children, ages 3 to 12, lived without their parents — until they, too, were arrested and killed. Szlama was the family’s sole Holocaust survivor. (Worry and Loss)
**Did You Know?**

- During the Second World War, thousands of Canadian women on the home front knitted woollen socks, gloves and other much-needed items for servicemen. To ensure that their contributions met military standards, they used specific patterns and yarns dyed to match the uniforms.

- Canadian women raised $318 million (about 3.1 billion euros today) by selling war savings stamps on behalf of the federal government. These funds helped cover the cost of the war.

- More than 50,000 women served with the Canadian Armed Forces during the Second World War, but they were paid less and performed a more limited range of duties than their male counterparts. Assigning women to non-combat service roles freed up servicemen for the battlefield.

- Because their duties could bring them dangerously close to the action, nurses with the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps wore practical service uniforms similar to men’s combat uniforms, often including trousers.

- Labour shortages and Canada’s role as food supplier to the Allies made women’s agricultural work essential. Recruited into the Farm Girls Brigade, the Women’s Land Brigade and the Children’s Brigade, women and children were put to work weeding, picking fruit and performing other manual labour.

- With so many women entering the workforce, the Canadian government established a wartime day-nursery program in 1942. Most working mothers did not have access to it, however, and the program ended in 1946, when women’s childcare needs were no longer a priority.

- Canadians displayed service flags in their windows, with one maple leaf for each loved one serving in the war. The leaves were painted, patched or embroidered over if the person they symbolized was killed.

- There were so many marriages between Canadian soldiers and European women that the military created special bureaus to assist them. An estimated 48,000 war brides emigrated to Canada after the war, bringing 22,000 children with them.

- Unwilling to stand by as Nazis occupied their countries, many European women risked imprisonment or execution by joining Resistance groups. Because they were routinely overlooked and underestimated, women could often work right under the Germans’ noses as couriers, safe-house operators and liaison agents.
• The Allies tried to keep women out of the line of fire, but some work was inevitably dangerous. Of the 50 women sent into France by the Special Operations Executive — a secret British service tasked with espionage, sabotage and reconnaissance in occupied Europe — 13 were captured and killed.

• A siren suit has nothing to do with Greek mythology. It was a one-piece garment that British women could quickly slip on over their nightgowns for warmth and modesty when seeking shelter during the nighttime attacks heralded by air-raid sirens.

• Millions of European men were sent to Germany to work in war-production factories, leaving their wives to endure the hardships of Nazi occupation alone, as heads of their households.

• Both the Axis and Allied powers used propaganda to influence behaviour, boost support for their policies and encourage resentment of the enemy. Posters, films and other media depicted the opposing side as monsters, and women and children as victims of evil.