

DEMONT: Driven to do their part

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Halifax group looks to honour women's contributions



Betty Oland shows off her driving skills in Montreal during the Second World War.

You may have missed the news, but a historic wrong is on the way to being righted in this town. High time too.

By now, Janet Guildford of the Halifax Women's History Society can rattle off the numbers without even thinking: There are 100 or so monuments, plaques and cairns in the municipality. Only a dozen depict women.

"Most of them," she says, "are fairies and nymphs in the Public Gardens."

Her organization wants to change that. And they know exactly where to start — honouring female volunteers in the Second World War, who showed there's other ways to win a war besides on the battlefield.

They nursed the wounded, knitted them scarves, mittens and quilts, organized blood drives and cooked and served soldiers, sailors and airmen thousands of meals.

To boost morale, they danced with the servicemen at church halls, boat clubs and messes.

These women also worked, often unpaid, for national organizations like the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE), the St. John Ambulance and the Red Cross.

That's how Betty Oland, who has spent most of her 92 years in Halifax, did her duty.

She went by Shuter back then, a name that ensured a comfortable life in Montreal's "Golden Square Mile" among the anglophone elite.

The way her daughter, Jennifer Paterson, tells it, she was a live wire in those days, the cat's meow.



Betty Oland is shown with a colleague in Montreal in 1942 or 1943.

At almost 93, Oland wasn't comfortable speaking to me personally last week as Remembrance Day approached. But her daughter, the Oland family historian, knows the story by heart.

How when the Second World War started, her mother spent a year at secretarial school and hated it so much she stole away every afternoon to go to the movies instead.

How when the 20-year-old joined the Canadian Red Cross, her mother envisioned her daughter "dancing with soldiers and rolling bandages."

And how everything changed because of the car sitting in her grandfather's garage at St. Andrews, N.B., where the clan summered.

There she learned to drive, a rare skill for young women in the 1940s,

Her bosses found out. Next thing Oland knew, she was driving British inspectors to munitions plants in the Montreal area.

"She spent all her time waiting around," says Paterson. "She found it boring."



Betty Oland (second row, third from right) is shown with colleagues at the Lydiard base in Swindon, England.

Things improved a little after a year when Oland started driving blood samples between recruitment centres and hospitals.

If she longed for excitement, she got it when a gasoline shortage made the Red Cross switch its fleet of cars for motorcycles. The Montreal society girl ended up on the cover of Indian Motorcycle Ltd.'s in-house magazine.

If that wasn't enough, in 1944 she signed on when the British Red Cross asked for Canadian volunteers to drive ambulances overseas.

Forty Canadian women volunteered. On the way over, their freighter stopped to take on a load of munitions. Their captain informed them

there was no point learning the lifeboat drill; their ship carried so many explosives that they were all dead if it was hit by a Nazi torpedo.

They landed in England a week after D-Day. Oland spent most of the next year stationed at an airbase near Swindon.

She and an orderly got the wounded off the planes and into their ambulance and hoped the patients didn’t die before they got them t hospital. None did.

For a while she was transferred to a Scottish Red Cross unit near Cornwall. In bombed-out London, she took cover in air raid shelter as the blitz continued. On VE-Day, Oland took off her shoes and waded with the other celebrants in the fountain in front of Buckingham Palace.

“She was 22 years old, a kid and it was an adventure,” says Paterson.

Nevertheless, she was happy after the war ended to return to Montreal, where she resigned from the Red Cross.

Life moved forward. She married Donald Oland, a businessman who had lost a leg in the war. The couple moved to Halifax in 1947. Any visitor could see the pair of medals she earned, which she has kept in a shadow box ever since.

Now, if all goes right, by 2017 there will finally be a public acknowledgement of the contribution made by Oland and all the other anonymous female war heroes. Guildford and her group have found a site just north of the Seaport Market on the Halifax waterfront and put out a call for proposals for the monument’s design.

Thanks to an anonymous lead donor, they are also well on the way to raising the \$750,000 needed for the project. It’s been a long wait. They want to do it right.

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