

Their Best, and What was Required:
**The Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (the Wrens) at St. John's,
Newfoundland During the Battle of the Atlantic.**

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Presented at the *Crow's Nest Officers' Club*, 8 March 2014

Naval wisdom advises that one should never volunteer for anything lest you be “volunteered” for something much more unpleasant sometime in the future. But today is International Women's Day, and as a Canadian naval historian, I felt a certain duty to offer to speak this evening about the women we are commemorating with this dinner. Winston Churchill once mused that “Sometimes, doing your best is not good enough. Sometimes, you must do what is required.” During the Battle of the Atlantic, a group of volunteers who did both their best and what was required, especially here in St. John's, was the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service, better known as the Wrens.

The Royal Canadian Navy appointed the first large draft of WRCNS personnel to St. John's in June 1944 but they and their army and air force compatriots had started arriving much earlier. Modelled after their British namesakes, the Canadian Wrens were formed two years previously, and in many ways were the grease that kept Canadian naval operations running. With the male members of the Canadian Forces preoccupied with combat related duties, these young women took over many of the everyday responsibilities that allowed HMCS *Avalon* to function smoothly under very trying conditions: they drove staff cars and trucks through St. John's' narrow streets; coded and/or decoded messages; maintained the U-boat plot in the Operations Room on Plymouth Road; ran the Tactical Training Centre on the Southside; handled the switchboards and made sure sailors were paid when they made port; and even after a long day on duty, they kept them company at *The Caribou Hut*, *The Red Triangle*, *The USO*

Club, and dare I say it, as long as they didn't "clutter up the bar," even here at *The Crow's Nest*. By the end of the Second World War, close to six hundred Wrens served with HMCS *Avalon*, working in forty-eight trades, and the Wren establishment at John's was second in size only to the one at HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax.

Newfoundland was considered an "overseas posting" for these young ladies and indeed, all had to travel through what were officially designated "Dangerous Waters" to get here. May I remind you that 22 naval personnel were lost on the *Caribou* in October 1942, including RCN nursing sister A W Wilkie, buried with full military honours here in St. John's. More to the point, the conditions Wrens found when they arrived really made it clear that they were on the front lines of the Battle of the Atlantic. They soon discovered that "being in Newfoundland was just like being in Britain." One Wren recalled that they felt they were constantly under fire. While they hoped they weren't really being shot at, they could hear gunfire and explosions nearby on a regular basis. German submarines were an acknowledged menace, and torpedoes actually exploded under Fort Amherst and Cabot Tower, both manned by RCN personnel, in early 1942. Many a Wren remembers convoys being delayed in St. John's Harbour for days because U-boats were reported just outside the Narrows.

In addition to rationing, blackouts, air raid drills, and censorship, Wrens also endured the very tight security of a naval facility at war. The young women reporting for their shifts at the Fort William headquarters of the Mid-Ocean Escort Force met Naval guards carrying rifles with fixed bayonets who checked their passes and credentials several times a day as they went about their duties. If any needed a further reminder that they were in a shooting war, the almost daily stream of survivors, or worse – casualties -

further exposed them to the stark realities of the Atlantic War. The loss of HMCS *Valleyfield* off the South Coast in May 1944 made a lasting impression on one Wren because she had attended high school with a couple of the “boys” who went down with the ship.

Despite the contributions and sacrifices these women and their counterparts in the army and air force made, they were still subjected to a malicious whispering campaign as the war dragged on. Sadly, certain religious orders here in St. John’s were active participants in this injustice. Supposedly, women in uniform were promiscuous; just interested in sex and snagging a man. These rumours had such a detrimental impact on the women’s volunteer forces, and thus the war effort, that the National Film Board of Canada produced two shorts, *Proudly She Marches* and *Wings On Her Shoulders* to counteract this vindictive gossip. These films, plus a pay raise, helped restore morale, and the various armed forces never lacked for female volunteers.

And so tonight, as we approach the 75th Anniversary of the start of the Battle of the Atlantic, I am honoured to pay tribute to the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service. Often mere girls still in their teens, victims of unfair and unfounded scandal-mongering, and largely unsung heroines of the Atlantic War, these young women - volunteers all - were also an integral part of what has been termed the *Newfyjohn Solution*.