

Canada's Forgotten War Babies

Part One

by Jacqueline
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During the
Second World
War, Canadian
soldiers made
love and war.

Since the conclusion of the Second World War sixty years ago much has been documented concerning the topic of war brides; one widely accepted statistic is that 45,000 British and 3,000 European war brides married Canadian soldiers. At the end of the war, the majority of them came to Canada to live and they brought 21,000 children with them.

As the Second World War gradually fades from living memory, war brides remain in the spotlight as they continue to be the focus of countless books and movies and receive a considerable amount of media attention. Case in point, one Calgary-based artist, Bev Tosh, is currently paying tribute to their collective experience in a thought-provoking and critically well received exhibit. "I had this image of a ship full of brides, all dressed in white. I found it a magical image," she says of her childhood fantasy.

The truth is that the majority of these starry-eyed newlyweds had to overcome culture shock and endure hardships upon their arrival, but it can also be argued that most ultimately attained domestic contentment and enjoyed the postwar prosperity of their new homeland. Rarely acknowledged over the past six decades is another group of women who never had the opportunity to come to Canada, whose servicemen boyfriends left them behind at the end of the war, pregnant and unmarried. According to most historians, an estimated 30,000 children were born in Britain and Europe during and immediately following the Second World War, the consequence of unions between Canadian servicemen and young single women.

Without the support of their lovers and ostracized by their families and communities, many of these young unwed mothers were forced to give up their children for adoption at birth or hand them over to relatives. What is more, at a time when there were few social supports or economic opportunities for women, those who decided to raise their children on their own usually suffered enormous social consequences. No doubt those who opted to keep their babies endured additional heartache watching their children grow up in an era when society routinely stigmatized them as "illegitimate" and placed them at a blatant disadvantage.

As for the Canadian fathers of these children, they were by and large average soldiers, sailors or airmen – typically in their early to mid twenties, they were away from home for the first time facing a terrifying and uncertain future as they prepared for battle. Following D-Day and the subsequent end to the war, many of the Canadians left for home, never knowing they were about to become fathers; others knew full well but chose to relinquish their responsibility.



A British soldier tastes grapes offered by a local Sicilian girl as they sit on the hood of a jeep. For many soldiers, "rest and relaxation" included spending a little time with the local girls, bringing them as far away from war and destruction as possible. (IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM)

MAKING LOVE NOT WAR

As one would expect, most of these illegitimate Canadian offspring (22,000-plus) were born in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, reflecting the length of time the Canadian military spent training in the United Kingdom. Between 1939 and 1945, nearly half a million Canadian soldiers poured into wartime Britain. The Army was concentrated in southern England, and some of the troops who arrived in Aldershot in 1939 spent up to five years there in training. As pilots with the Royal Canadian Air Force arrived to supplement the RAF, they were dispersed throughout the country, but based primarily in the north.

Dr. Pat Brennan, a historian with the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, says that the social and demographic conditions during the war made a high percentage of unplanned pregnancies in the UK inescapable. "The country is simply too cramped for the bases to be cut off from civilian society. The bases were right in civilian communities, so there was endless opportunity for socializing. Inevitably, soldiers and airmen get leave, they go to the pub or to dances," he says, describing the general atmosphere.

Although it has become a cliché, the terror and destruction of war itself have traditionally provided a powerful catalyst for young lovers. For British women, being held in

the arms of a Canadian soldier in an air raid shelter during the Blitz would have been extremely comforting and infinitely better than being alone. The passion of such encounters in wartime was heightened by the need to make the most of every hour, and the sadness of frequent partings was intensified by the uncertainty of what fate had in store or whether either partner would survive to meet again.

Certainly the social circumstances of the war allowed many young people to relax their deep-seated inhibitions, including well-established restraints regarding sexuality. Canadian military personnel were far from home and far from the restraints of church, family or the conservative small-town communities to which many had belonged. "There is a certain liberty morally and socially that would not have taken place in Canada," explains Brennan. "You're dealing with a group of males who are under military discipline, but not under the kind of social control that they had been at home."

Likewise, young British women were feeling more independent and less under the control of their parents or families as they assisted with the war effort. They too felt less fettered by the social and moral norms of the time in terms of romance and sex. "We weren't as casual about sex as people are now," recalled one woman who was sexually active during the war. "You held your breath and prayed. It was tough when you didn't want to get pregnant ... There wasn't anything foolproof except abstinence, and who needed that? I'd already tried that and didn't think much of it."

Inevitably such women found themselves victims of the uncompromising double standards that existed in 1940s society. "The whole approach to sexuality was that good girls didn't. One of the most humiliating and almost life-threatening things that could happen to a woman, in terms of social ostracism or stigma, was to have a child out of wedlock," Brennan asserts. "I suspect that most of these were loving relationships within the context of the war. It wasn't as if these women were dating and having sex with endless Canadians. In most cases, it was likely one man; but sex

education being what it was and lack of access to birth control led to unplanned pregnancies."

The Canadian military soon became aware of a potential crisis and reluctantly attempted to deal with it. Initially military officials had been adamant that no marriages would be permitted between Canadian servicemen and British women, lest it hinder overall efficiency; an added concern was that a significant number of the men would settle down and remain overseas. This latter fear was kindled by what had occurred a generation earlier following the Great War. Nevertheless, as the Allied campaign escalated and the months slipped by, military officials were compelled to tolerate matrimony, especially in cases when it was to legitimize a child that had been conceived.

Obviously, this option was only feasible in cases where couples had a fervent desire to be wed and where no other personal obstacles to marriage existed. "It was very easy for men to avoid their responsibility. The military made no effort to force marriage on servicemen who found themselves in this situation. If they didn't want to get married, the military put no pressure on them to get married and more or less washed their hands of any responsibility," emphasizes Brennan.

CHILDREN OF THE LIBERATION

In the Netherlands, the impact of so many Canadian soldiers on the social landscape was even more pronounced than in Britain. In the spring of 1945, 170,000 Canadians descended upon the Dutch countryside. What is more, this was actual combat and the Canadians were hailed as liberators by the war-ravaged and suffering population. Conditions had been so bad during the final winter of German occupation that some Dutch people ate tulip bulbs to survive, and thousands died of hunger or disease.

Women had become the providers, hunters for food at a time when many men were imprisoned in Germany or dared not show themselves for fear of being sent into German war

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Thousands of war brides followed their husbands to Canada, the majority from the United Kingdom, but also a large contingent from the Netherlands. The brides and children pictured above embarked at Greenock in Scotland. They were part of the first large group of war brides to come to Canada in February 1946. (NAC / PA147114)



In the wake of repatriated soldiers, sailors, and airmen came more than 47,000 war brides (CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES)

service. At the end of the war many Dutch men were still absent. Those who were available were thin, weak, badly dressed, poor and quite unattractive. By contrast Canadian soldiers were weather-bronzed, muscled heroes of liberation who were presumably ready to show a girl a good time and had the capability to provide it.

Roughly 2,000 Dutch women fell in love and married Canadian soldiers over the following months. But as 1946 rolled around, babies started being born to unmarried Dutch women whose liaisons with their Canadian liberators had ended in pregnancy. By the time the Canadians were gone it is estimated that over 6,000 so-called "Children of the Liberation" had been born in the Netherlands. The issue was so apparent that a joke did the rounds: "In twenty years, when another world war may have broken out, it will not be necessary to send a Canadian expeditionary force to the Netherlands. A few ships loaded with uniforms will be enough."

The majority of Dutch citizens, however, saw little humor in the situation. Although a woman had reigned since 1890, the Netherlands before the war had been a male-dominated country, conservative in its codes of social and sexual behavior. Religion, particularly in its Reformed and Roman Catholic versions, still had a strong influence. Many Netherlanders, witnessing what they considered to be "loose" behaviour, such as necking in public places, thought that something new and deplorable was taking place. They were inclined to take for granted that soldiers would be sexually active, but they were extremely critical

of the Dutch women who gave the appearance of being so. From the beginning there were plenty of Netherlanders inclined to think ill of those who dated Canadians.

Inevitably, some prostitution did occur - given the economic conditions, there were Dutch women desperate enough to sell themselves for cigarettes. A cartoon drawn in 1945 by a Hilversum artist, Jan Nieuwenhuis, depicted a handsome soldier leering at a pretty woman and asking: "How many cigarettes?" One piece of poetry "Meisje let op je zaak" (Girl, look after yourself), explicitly took the girls to task for seducing soldiers for the sake of a package of cigarettes, a chocolate bar, a drink or a can of corned beef.

According to Dr. Brennan, the Canadian military's response was swift and formal. They warned the civilians that the Canadian government assumed no responsibility for illegitimate children and would not constrain the fathers to do so. "The image of the army, morale in the army and discipline in the army - these were their concerns, not the fate of these women in their society," he said.

YIELDING TO CONQUERORS

For many it is utterly distressing to accept the fact that Canadian soldiers committed rape during World War II or that they may have fathered a small number of children in this manner. But as Susan Brownmiller wrote in her classic 1970s book *Against Our Will*: "Rape in warfare is not bound by definitions of which wars are 'just' or 'unjust.' Rape was a weapon of terror as the German Hun marched through Belgium in World War I. Rape was a weapon of revenge as the Russian Army marched to Berlin in World War II. Rape flourishes in warfare irrespective of nationality or geographic region."

As a feminist scholar, Brownmiller concludes that: "Men who rape in war are ordinary Joes, made less ordinary by entry into the most exclusive male-only club in the world. Victory in arms brings group power undreamed of in civilian life. A certain number of soldiers must prove their newly won superiority - prove it to a woman, to themselves, to other men. In the name of victory and the power of the gun, war provides men

with a tacit license to rape. In the act and in the excuse, rape in war reveals the male psyche in its boldest form, without the veneer of 'chivalry' or civilization."

"Rape was a serious problem because it reflected badly on the army's image and it also reflected badly on morale," explains Brennan. "Soldiers who couldn't be disciplined in that way probably couldn't be disciplined in battle, which is why the Army cracked down on things such as looting, rape and brawls by drunken Canadians."

How much rape did Canadian soldiers commit in World War II? Certainly they did not share the unenviable reputation of the Germans or the Russians; indeed, only a handful of Canadian servicemen ever stood court martial for rape. However, Brennan is quick to mention that anything short of a physical attack on a woman was generally considered consensual sex. Finally, it is crucial to understand that Allied troops also had the advantage of being on the rightful and victorious side of the war.

Perhaps Susan Brownmiller conveyed this standpoint the best: "Those who judged at Nuremberg and Tokyo were those who had emerged from the war victorious. It was the other side that was held accountable. No international tribunals were called to expose or condemn Allied atrocity, no war crimes depositions were taken from 'enemy' women, no incriminating top-secret documents from our side of the war were held up to merciless light."

Over half a century later the impenetrable doors to the National Archives veterans' files remain frustratingly closed. When the war children can get the information contained in those files, they may finally be encouraged to come to terms with themselves and their Canadian fathers in a way that they deserve.



Next Month:

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explores the contemporary situation. War Babies still long to connect with the men who fathered them. roots.

Thousands have been successful, but for others the daunting quest continues.