

points of interest

# WOMEN AND THE CANADIAN AIR FORCE

By Second Lieutenant Keven Lachance



*Top: Captain Riel Erickson  
Credit: Warrant Officer Serge Peters*

*Below: Air Force personnel on parade for the  
67<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle of Britain.  
Credit: Warrant Officer Serge Peters*

**T**oday's Canadian Forces is made up of individuals possessing immense expertise and a shared feeling of pride. These assets enable them to defend the interests and the beliefs of Canadians around the world. The strength of the organization resides in the professionalism of its members and in its great diversity, allowing for a true and fair representation of the society it is defending. The goal of the recruitment campaign currently underway is to make diversity within the Canadian Forces more representative of the diversity among the Canadian population by standardizing enrolment criteria such as age, nationality and gender.

The best example of this relates to the role of women, particularly in the field of aviation. As society in general has changed, women's roles have evolved substantially since World War II, over 50 years ago. At that time, most of the women serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) were hired as non-commissioned members or performed administrative tasks on the ground. Despite the conventional thinking at the time, that men should be the decision-makers and at the helm of power, there were some women who believed in their abilities. These women were the pioneers; they shaped the Air Force as we know it today and became role models for generations to come.

On the eve of World War II, July 2, 1941, a Privy Council order authorized the creation of the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force. A few months later, the name was changed to the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division. The responsibility for establishing the RCAF Women's Division fell to Kathleen Oonah Walker. Already familiar with the RCAF's military structure through her husband, Colonel C. C. Walker, who died in May 1941, she immediately began recruiting. For the women who enrolled at that time, duties were fairly limited: administration, secretarial work, nursing, equipment maintenance, meteorological observation, telephone switchboard, photography, radio, sewing, laundry and cooking. In those days, women were still kept away from the dangers of flying. Women rarely participated in flights and when they did, it was mostly as

passengers. In fact, their motto was, "We serve that men may fly." Nevertheless, in the first months following their engagement, many positions opened to them as the war effort expanded. It was now possible for women to consider working as drivers, hairdressers, musicians, pharmacists or lab assistants. They could even choose to enter fields that had previously been reserved solely for men, such as the mechanical or electrical fields. Women were making strides in the right direction.

The perseverance, commitment and devotion of the members of the RCAF Women's Division opened the doors to women who would later serve their country. This attitude in turn helped banish biases and popular beliefs regarding "a woman's place" in society at the time.

## A few interesting dates:

**In 1974, Major Wendy Clay, a doctor, became the first woman to qualify for her pilot's wings, six years before the pilot classification was opened to all women.**

**1974 also marked the first time a woman, the Honourable Flora MacDonald, was authorized to take classes at the National Defence College. It was only in 1980 though, that women were finally allowed into military colleges on an official basis.**

**In 1981, Second Lieutenant Inge Plug became the first female helicopter pilot in the Canadian Forces and Lieutenant Karen McCrimmon became the first female air navigator.**

In 1982, an event took place that would forever change the course of our nation's history: the signing of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Charter forever changed the future of the nation and, notably, that of minority groups, especially women. The Charter made discriminatory acts or decisions based on race, ethnic or national origin, colour of skin, religion, gender, age or disability illegal in our country. As a result, every military position was opened to women serving in the Canadian Forces, including that of fighter pilot.

More recently (in 1990), Women in Aviation International, a global organization with chapters in Canada, the United States, Europe and Africa was established. Its goals are simple, specific and, above all, legitimate: to encourage women to seize opportunities in the field of aviation. Among other activities, the organization is involved in championing the Pioneer Hall of Fame, founded in 1992. Its objectives include honouring influential and innovative women and celebrating their many contributions to society. Of those serving in the Air Force today, we cannot ignore Major Dee Brasseur who was one of the first women to pilot a fighter jet, the CF18 Hornet, for the Canadian Forces in 1989. She was also the first woman to investigate accidents involving military aircraft in Canada. Major Brasseur was inducted into the Women in Aviation International's Pioneer Hall of Fame on February 17, 2007, in Orlando, Florida. She enrolled in 1972 and has accumulated over 2,500 flight hours as a fighter pilot in both North America and Europe. Now working for the Directorate of Air Strategic Planning, she has not forgotten about women's issues

in the Canadian Forces: she demonstrates her continuing commitment by acting as co-chair of the Defence Women's Advisory Organization in Ottawa.

About 10 years ago, in 1998, Lieutenant-Colonel Karen McCrimmon, the first female air navigator, became commander of the 429 Transport Squadron in Trenton, Ontario. Two years later, in 2000, Major Micky Colton became the first female pilot to accumulate 10,000 flight hours at the controls of a CC130 Hercules. The following year, Captain Maryse Carmichael's name was listed among 11 acrobatic pilots that would be part of the Snowbird team in 2001. The following year, for the second consecutive year, she was part of the team of pilots, this time holding the rank of major.

These are but a few examples of extraordinary women who have each contributed in their own way to building an Air Force that is strong and proud and in which all the members share the goal of fully and effectively fulfilling their duties, and thus building an organization that is unique and richly diverse. ■

**Second Lieutenant Keven Lachance graduated from the Canadian Forces Recruit School in St. Jean in December 2007. After taking a second language professional development course, he was assigned to the Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre in CFB Trenton. Second Lieutenant Lachance has been working there ever since, and expects to begin the air navigator course in Winnipeg in February 2009.**

*Captain Lisa Reimer  
Credit: Sergeant Frank Hudec*

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