

Don't forget women's role in the war effort

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A young woman publicizes the work of Red Cross volunteers in this photo, taken from Halifax In Wartime, 1939-1945: An East Coast Collection. (E.A. BOLLINGER/Nova Scotia Archives)

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. As we gather this Remembrance Day, it is a time to reflect on the sacrifices and contributions made by so many so we, as Canadians, can live in a free and open society. Our veterans are aging and their numbers dwindling but we must never forget the role they played.

We also need to begin to recognize another group who helped win the war, but have never been acknowledged — women volunteer. Women volunteered their time and energy to help win both wars. And volunteer they did — in the thousands. Between 1939 and 1945, women in places like Halifax, and across the country, rose to the challenge. Women volunteers provided medical care, respite and hospitality, working through such organizations as the Canadian Red Cross, the St. John Ambulance Brigade, Women's Institute IODE, WCTU, church groups and other collectives.

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The statistics are astounding. During the First and Second World Wars, women gave hours of volunteer service. They provided nursing care, respite and hospitality. They worked, often unpaid, for national organizations such as the Red Cross, the St. John Ambulance and the IODE. They organized canteens, cooked and served thousands of meals, made bandages and surgical dressings, knitted scarves and mittens, made quilts, arranged blood donor drives, collected salvage and raised money — all in support of the war effort. The Halifax Concert Guild put on 2,300 shows by 1944 to help a million troops and a weekly radio show on CHNS. The Guild had more than 700 volunteers. This work has never been recognized, until now.

On Oct. 29, a group of women launched the A Woman on the Waterfront project. The goal of the plan, the first for the Halifax Women's History Society, is to erect a monument on the Halifax waterfront to honour women's volunteer work. The monument, The Volunteers/Les Bénévoles, will be located on a piece of land generously donated by the Port of Halifax and adjacent to the statue, TI Emigrant.

This is an ideal location for the monument. The Halifax Seaport is a vibrant arts and cultural district and while the monument to be erected will focus on Halifax women's work, volunteerism occurred across the country. Having a public monument celebrating women's wartime contributions on the very well travelled walkway along the Halifax waterfront will be of more than regional significance. It will resonate nationally and also provide international visitors with a view into the exceptional volunteer work that Canadians carried out.

The second goal of the project is to end the invisibility of women in history. There are more than 100 statues in Halifax, fewer than a dozen of which depict women. Most of those are from mythology or are nymphs and fairies. There is a bust of Sarah Howard, a Victorian businesswoman who turned her parlour hat shop into the city's first department store, She is portrayed in a bust at Founde Square on Hollis Street. There's also a modest sign in Camp Hill Cemetery, marking the grave of Viola Desmond, the civil rights pioneer who refused to move from the "whites-only" section of the Roseland Theatre in New Glasgow in 1946. But there are no statues or monuments to women.

The Halifax Women's History Society believes that it is important that this invisibility of women end and that women who were Second World War volunteers be acknowledged while some are living. An opportunity still exists to recognize them for their contributions. A monument honouring women's volunteer wartime service would provide public acknowledgement of their numerous contributions. It also would educate the citizens of today and the future about the work that women willingly carried out.

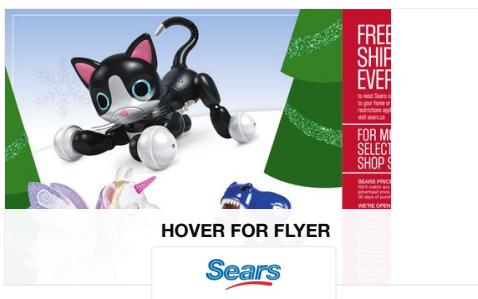
The society hopes to unveil its monument in November 2017. On this Remembrance Day, the society looks forward to the future when the women volunteers of the Second World War will take their rightful place in history.

It's time for A Woman on the Waterfront.

Janet Guildford is a retired professor of Canadian history at Mount Saint Vincent University and chairwoman of the Halifax Women's History Society. A Woman on the Waterfront is its first project.

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