

# 'Athene's Pipers'

CANADIAN WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS PIPE BAND

**“LAST** night the ghosts wore tartan,” records a faded newspaper clipping of 20 January, 1949, that has been carefully kept by Doris Wallace, a former member of the Canadian Women's Army Corps Pipe Band, “for the skirl of a lament was trembling along the empty, darkened corridors of old Hotel Vancouver. It was the Scots' farewell and it came from the pipes of a girl keeping a midnight tryst with a wartime memory.

“Her name is Lillian Grant,” the newspaper recorded: “Pipe Major Lillian Grant to the Canadian Army, one-time ‘Miss Vancouver Island’ who gave up being Victoria's official greeter to form the first women's military pipe band in the British Empire. Then after the war, Lillian Grant returned to the turreted brown brick building, not as a piper this time, but to work in the office for the veterans who made the old hotel their home. So last night, as she marched slowly and knowingly through the halls, illuminated only faintly by the beam of a night watchman's flashlight, it was like coming home.”

On the eve of the demolition of the old hotel in January 1949, Pipe Major Lillian M. Grant played her piped tribute to the birthplace of one of her life's great achievements. During the Second World War, the Hotel Vancouver had been converted into the Vancouver Barracks, and it was there that she had brought together the first members of the Canadian Women's Army Corps Pipe Band.

The ensemble's members — who had performed to great acclaim in several countries for civilians and soldiers, prisoners of war and royalty — were by then scattered throughout Canada, working or raising families. While their scrapbooks were filled with news clippings attesting to the precision and musicality of the famous Canadian Women's Army Corps Pipe Band, life had gone on, and Lillian Grant alone



PIPE MAJOR Lillian Grant formed and led the Canadian Women's Army Corps Pipe Band. Her first job was to recruit its members... “Having been in the army only four months I couldn't relate many experiences to them, but I was authorised to promise my prospective band recruits a trip across the country and that they would be ‘the toast of Canada’.”

remained to commemorate the passing of the once-grand and fashionable building.

In the early days of the Second World War, inspired by women in Britain who had begun to work in various paramilitary organisations such as the Auxiliary Territorial Service, many women across Canada expressed their keenness

to play some active part in the war effort and began organising voluntary women's corps in order to train and serve in whatever ways might be needed.

The Canadian government was initially hesitant but, faced with personnel shortages and incessant pressure from women in volunteer

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# made history

THE CANADIAN WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS PIPE BAND attracted an estimated 250,000 people when it paraded at the Arc de Triomphe then marched down the Champs Élysées in Paris at the end of the Second World War... "It was amazing. We were the only ones in that parade, so it was downright amazing."



corps, it finally authorised the formation of the Canadian Women's Army Corps on 13 August, 1941. The Corps chose Athene, the ancient Greek goddess of wisdom and of warfare, as its symbol and adopted the motto *Dulcit Amor Patrice* ("in love of country, we serve"). Encouraged to "Free a man to fight!", women enlisted

to serve both in Canada and overseas.

The Canadian Women's Army Corps Pipe Band and the CWAC Brass Band (which, in fact, included woodwind instruments as well) were authorized on 8 August, 1942, in an effort to support recruiting and war bond drives, and to bolster morale.

Pipe Major Grant [later Davis], who had been selected to lead the pipe band, enlisted in September of 1942 but was not given permission to recruit band members until several months later. When word finally came, she set off on a recruiting trip across Vancouver Island.



THE CANADIAN WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS PIPE BAND was kept very busy at times, touring Canada and then playing for numerous occasions in Europe at the end of the Second World War, often for Canadian soldiers awaiting repatriation... "I was never so popular in my life. I had five and six dates... all the guys from my neighborhood, or my buddies, my brother's buddies who were there. Some of our guys had been overseas five and six years, you know. They'd come and they'd want to talk to you about the neighborhood or the family or the school... Oh yeah, sometimes three and four dates in one night, all parked up the front. It was great for your ego."

Lillian Grant recalled, "Having been in the army only four months I couldn't relate many experiences to them, but I was authorised to promise my prospective band recruits a trip across the country and that they would be 'the toast of Canada.'" In spite of a concern among potential recruits that the band would not actually materialise and they would be left scrubbing floors, three pipers joined within the first week. Shortly thereafter, Grant agreed to train three CWAC clerks and a runner as drummers. Within a few weeks, the band's nucleus was formed.

Piper Lorna [Doull] Normand, who left the Highland Lassies Pipe Band to join the CWAC Pipe Band, and men from the Edmonton Fusiliers and the 1 Battalion Seaforths helped Lillian Grant train the fledgling group. They practised in the pipe band's new home, the Hotel Vancouver, which had been temporarily converted to an army facility.

Unfortunately, the bagpipes were loud enough to disturb sleeping shift workers and other personnel and the women were shuffled from space to space in the old hotel for weeks. Bass drummer Joan [Turner] Blomquist recalled the unusual challenges of learning to play in the converted hotel: "I was trying for the side drum, but then they needed a bass drummer and guess who got stuck? Me. So here I'm above the old Vancouver Hotel ...BOOM boom BOOM boom ... and then they complained so I had to go and play down in the coal bin." The search

for a suitable rehearsal space continued until the pipe band was finally transferred to the Glebe Barracks in Ottawa.

The CWAC Pipe Band made its official debut on 22 May, 1943, leading a CWAC parade of roughly 600. The day was scorching and the route was long: the women suffered blistered feet and the bass and tenor drummers' fingers became bloodied and raw, yet the women finished in good spirits and made a favorable impression on those watching. Three weeks later the band left Ottawa on what they were told was to be a weekend recruitment trip, but which was extended to last more than four weeks. Although orders for a coast-to-coast tour were not officially issued until August, this period of travel marked the beginning of an exhaustive recruitment drive that would take the pipe band, and its sister brass band to 105 cities and towns in just five and a half months.

The women worked long hours to keep up with the hectic performance schedule. Maintaining instruments, keeping uniforms pressed and looking sharp, and frequent travel consumed much of the "spare" time the women had. Lorna Normand recalled: "It was continual traveling. Banquets, parades, radio shows ... you didn't get enough rest. I can remember us being in Toronto, going out real early in the morning and getting back at one or two in the morning and going again the next morning. Just continuous, day after day after day." In spite of the difficult and tiring conditions, the band

members generally held very positive memories about this first tour.

After a much-needed winter break, the band's second Canadian tour began in March, 1944, from St. John, New Brunswick. Lasting more than eight months, this tour took both the pipe band — with a roster that had grown to 25 members — and the brass band to even more cities and towns across Canada.

"Going across Canada was quite an experience," said side drummer Bernice [Magness] Horn, the band's only American member. "[We met] wonderful people." The bands played hundreds of concerts and parades, performing in band shells and auditoriums, at picnics, sports rallies and street carnivals. People flocked to see the female bagpipers, and towns often saw a sharp rise in recruitment following their visit.

While the band's repertoire of memorised music had expanded to more than 50 tunes. Old favorites such as *The Road to the Isles*, *Highland Laddie*, *Bonnie Dundee*, and *Scotland the Brave* remained popular with listeners, perhaps due to their familiarity. Tenor drummer Jessica [Anderson] Clayton pointed out the difficulty many people had in differentiating between pipe tunes.

"Very few people could tell what the hell you were playing," she laughed. "[Male military band members] used to say 'play *Road to the Isles* and that other one you know.'" Piper Doris [MacDonald] Wallace also recalled this

phenomenon with amusement. “We’d just finished playing *Road to the Isles* ... and [audience members would] run up to us and say, ‘would you play *Road to the Isles*?’ We figured, well, if they didn’t know *Road to the Isles* when we played it a minute ago they won’t know that we’re not playing it next.”

Unlike the first hectic tour, this tour allowed some time for the members to explore, and the young women experienced much of Canada for the first time.

The Army distributed scrapbooks to service people, and the pipers and drummers filled them with snapshots of their adventures — smiling in raincoats at Niagara Falls, sight-seeing on a stopover in the Rocky Mountains, meeting the Dionne quintuplets in Callander and Princess Alice in Toronto. The reputation of the two bands gave the women a degree of celebrity, which they enjoyed immensely. Their success was due in no small part to the leadership of Pipe Major Grant. Said Doris Wallace: “She was a driving force, and I think that she pushed us to greater heights than we would otherwise have seen. She was ambitious and wanted us to be the best.” Jessica Clayton agreed. “We were good,” she said. “But we had to be ... you didn’t have any choice.”

The New Year brought rumors of a trip overseas. The women practised with renewed energy, added more tunes to their repertoire and polished their renowned marching, all the while hoping to receive official word that the trip would be a “go.” The order finally came in May, much to the elation of the musicians. It was soon discovered, however, that only the brass band would be going. The pipe band was to stay behind and assist the United States government in its Seventh War Loan drive.

On the heels of this disappointment came another. A new uniform for the pipe band had been in development for some time. The design was completed and approved, measurements taken, and, finally, the uniforms were issued. The women were thrilled with the new ensemble, which featured a beech brown kilt and knee-high socks, a leather sporran and both summer and winter doublets.

The uniforms were in the process of being tailored when a surprising memo came from headquarters. “Are personnel of CWAC Pipe Band ... wearing a sporran and bare knees?” headquarters wanted to know. “In view of certain negotiations to provide a ladies’ kilted skirt for this band, it is desired to know whether

the quasi-kilt reported presently in wear is one which comes below the knee as a skirt, or is being worn above the knee in the manner of a man’s kilt.” Headquarters considered the latter style incorrect and unacceptable, and much debate followed as to what might be done.

Although negotiations continued for some weeks, no compromise was reached. The women proceeded to the United States outfitted in their old khaki kit, and the new uniforms were never worn.

The Seventh War Loan Tour, co-ordinated by the United States War Finance Committee, saw the women perform in 25 cities and towns in Western Pennsylvania and in Washington, D.C. The women were paid five dollars a day, almost five times their usual salary. The American people received the band warmly and with much excitement and interest. When the pipe band, by then an international success, returned to Canada the musicians were surprised to get the news that they would be traveling to Europe after all.

The Canadian Women’s Army Corps Pipe Band’s five-day voyage to Europe aboard the *Ile de France* was smooth and uneventful, and the women entertained fellow travelers with the occasional performance, piping up and down the deck. They landed in Greenock, Scotland, in July, 1945. “They took us off the ship first,” Bernice Horn recalled. “We got our instruments out and we paraded up and down the pier. The people in this little town just swooped in on us. They couldn’t believe that they were seeing women playing the pipes and drums.”

The women traveled by train to England and eventually made their way to their new residence in Holland where they were reunited with the brass band. Doris Wallace described the band’s accommodation: “...it had been an old folks’ home that the Army had taken over — actually the Germans had taken it over — and we arrived in this building just six weeks after the Germans moved out. I remember writing home to mom and saying “I don’t think the beds are cold yet.”

The war had ended, but it would take some time before all the soldiers could be brought home, and the CWAC bands now shifted their focus from recruiting and fundraising to entertaining the thousands of men and women who waited for return transport to Canada.

The women performed at numerous hospitals, ceremonies, sports meetings and military parades throughout Holland, France, Belgium,

Germany, and England. The two bands traveled, sometimes together but often separately, and usually returned to the house late at night.

“There was still a lot to do because the soldiers were waiting to be sent back home as soon as possible,” said CWAC Brass Band leader Nadia [Svarich] McKean. “They had only so many troop ships and it took a couple of months or more to move them back to Canada, so it was for that difficult time when they were waiting and doing nothing for weeks at a time.”

As much as the soldiers enjoyed the music, they were just as eager to talk to “girls from home.”

Said Jessica Clayton with a laugh: “I was never so popular in my life. I had five and six dates... all the guys from my neighborhood, or my buddies, my brother’s buddies who were there. Some of our guys had been overseas five and six years, you know. They’d come and they’d want to talk to you about the neighborhood or the family or the school ... Oh yeah, sometimes three and four dates in one night, all parked up the front. It was great for your ego.”

Although the pipe band musicians enjoyed their travels, their eyes were also opened to the hardship caused by the war.

Seeing the destruction first-hand was a very different experience from television newcasts and newspaper reports. The hardship was also made more personal as they interacted with hungry children in their neighborhood. “We had a family next door; he was a bank manager up in Apeldoorn,” said Jessica Clayton. “One of the girls took [crusts of bread] next door to the lady ‘cause they had chickens ... and in no time at all the kids were out eating it. So we shared what we could or what we could steal from the cookhouse. That was hard.”

The performance the CWAC Pipe Band veterans most readily recalled with pride and nostalgia was a parade around the Arc de Triomphe, and then down the Champs Élysées in Paris, France. “It was a victory parade of some sort,” Jessica Clayton recalled. “It was just after the war. Rationing and other restrictions were very strict. It was a nice day ... I imagine [people came to the parade] just to get out, and [for] the novelty of seeing ‘les cornemuses’ with females.”

Indeed, estimates placed the crowd at 250,000 people who turned out that sunny day to see the CWAC Pipe Band. The bands marched and countermarched for the cheering French crowd. “It was amazing,” nodded piper

Isobel [Low] Stephen. “We were the only ones in that parade, so it was downright amazing.”

IN early January it became apparent that soldiers were being shipped back faster than had been anticipated, and that the bands would not be needed much longer. The CWAC Pipe Band boarded the *RMS Scythia* in Southampton and, after a rough passage, landed in Halifax a week later on February 1, 1946.

Although it was clear to the women that their time with the band was drawing to a close, the women were unprepared for the suddenness with which their military careers would be ended. Piper Marion [Gee] Gordon decried the peremptory way they were told, mere days after returning to Canada: “It was the saddest thing, I thought.

“We arrived back from overseas and we were told we were being disbanded. Just like that... it was a terrible shock,” she said. “We knew it

was going to happen but we had no idea that it was going to be that fast and we weren’t told ahead of time that it was going to be over.”

There was little time to linger over goodbyes, and the women boarded transportation for home within 24 hours.

“We were all a little bit disappointed that there wasn’t any fanfare whatsoever about the end of the band,” said Doris Wallace. “I think our noses were a little out of joint because by this time we thought we were kind of important. I think we felt a little let down. I think the officers thought, ‘Thank gosh the war is over — get these people home as fast as possible. There’s your truck’.”

Amidst many tears, the brass and pipe bands were officially dissolved on 14 February, 1946. The rest of the Canadian Women’s Army Corps soon followed, officially disbanding on 30 September, 1946.

Although saying goodbye to their band

mates was difficult, the bonds of shared experience and friendship have endured among the pipe band members. Jessica Clayton echoed a common sentiment when she said, “I guess the happiest parts, the warmest recollection I have is the camaraderie I had with the girls... we were closer than sisters.”

Remarkably, the women have stayed in touch for more than 60 years, sending annual letters to each other and holding several reunions.

Although many of the women have since died, those who remain still proudly display their scrapbooks and mementos, and speak eagerly about their experiences as members of the Canadian Women’s Army Corps Pipe Band.

“I never thought that I would have the opportunity of being with a group like that,” said tenor drummer Lexie Stephen.

“It’s a part of my life I’ll never forget.” ●

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His website, at [www.rodymacleodpiobaireachd.com](http://www.rodymacleodpiobaireachd.com), provides a growing archive of Piobaireachd music performed on the Highland Bagpipe by Roddy MacLeod and it is hoped that this archive will provide a source of enjoyment to piping enthusiasts as well as a valuable learning and teaching resource.

For each piobaireachd we offer a recording that has been compressed using industry standard 256Kb/s MP3 encoding. We also offer an Adobe PDF version of the manuscript which includes the accompanying canntaireachd and a Bagpipe Music Writer file which can be used as an additional learning aid (Bagpipe Music Writer software is required to play these files). You can also download all three as a package.



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