

## *Women at Cominco During the Second World War*

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When German troops swept across Europe in the fall of 1939 Canada rallied to the support of Great Britain in its declaration of war against Hitler and initiated a policy of restraint on the manufacture of luxury items and a channelling of the production of all strategic materials needed in the war. As a major producer of lead, zinc and chemical fertilizers, the Consolidated Mining & Smelting Company of Canada (Cominco), to give it its legal title, contracted to sell to the British government all its zinc in excess of Canadian requirements and about sixty-five percent of its lead, and to increase production by building extensions to lead and zinc plants. The Company placed at the disposal of the British and Dominion governments its technical and engineering information as well as its construction facilities and its operational skills. This resulted in the erection of the coke ammonia and nitric acid plants for fertilizer expansion, as well as an ordnance-grade ammonium nitrate plant in Calgary for making munitions. Cooperation with the United States government led to Cominco engineers building and operating a heavy water plant which supplied an essential ingredient for the Manhattan Project of manufacturing the first atomic bomb. More hydro-electric power was essential so Cominco undertook further harnessing of the Kootenay River with a dam at Brilliant.

All these projects called for an increased labour force and for the next few years every annual report of the Company would mention serious labour shortages. Adding to the heavy demand for workers was the question of security--guarding the plants from sabotage. According to the *Report* of 1940, President S.G. Blaylock wrote: "It is difficult to decide how far to go in this direction and perhaps we have overdone it. No part of the boundaries of any of our plants is out of vision of at least one guard, day or night. Guards are all sworn in as special constables (Tadanac Police) and have special uniforms and must have a loaded rifle at all times. The Company has an armoured tank carrying four machine guns and six rifles ready for action at

any moment.”

To cope with general labour shortages, the Canadian government passed a Selective Service Act (NSS) which regulated where individuals could work and excused from military duty those who worked at something needed in the war effort. The Cominco solution to labour shortages was to close down its gold properties in northern Canada and to move employees to more essential work at Trail or Kimberley. Older employees were persuaded to keep working beyond pensionable age and women were encouraged to enter the work force. Seeking to inspire all eight thousand employees to an all-out drive for accelerated production, Blaylock said: “Let us all remember that nothing avails unless we win the War!”<sup>1</sup>

The women responded with alacrity, concerned to do their share for the war effort and in many cases replacing husband, brother or boyfriend who was overseas in the Armed Forces. To facilitate the introduction of women to the workforce the Company appointed two supervisors: Mrs. Edith Jure for women in the clerical and stenographic staff, and Jean Thomson for women in plant operations. Hiring new employees to fill the requirements of increased production and to replace enlisted men was an important part of their job. According to wartime laws, they could not hire anyone directly; instead they had to do it through National Selective Service which ruled on each applicant. However, this restriction did not prevent the supervisors from moving Cominco employees to other positions in the Company. In Kimberley, women were not hired to work the Sullivan Mine. Undoubtedly this was not because of the old superstition that a woman working underground meant the death of a miner, but because Kimberley women were hired to replace men in the concentrator. In Trail, women rushed to work in a multiplicity of departments hitherto the undisputed preserve of males. Files of *Cominco Magazine* for the 1940s describe the impact of their entry. Jean Thomson, of the Industrial Relations Department, summed up the situation: “There’s something very exciting and romantic about...women marching to their war jobs every day and swarming home at night. Girls who never dreamed of a job outside a department store or an office are getting grease on their hands and liking it. Women who have never followed any routine except their own flexible household schedule are hearing the precise rhythm of conveyor belts.”<sup>2</sup>

On a trip through the hydrogen and ammonia plants in November 1942, a reporter found two young women using testing equipment while other women were scrubbing dirty cathode plates, and two hydrogen workers were shovelling sand for concrete cell covers. Hearing the sound of a hammer tapping metal, he discovered another young woman shaping plate clips. In the assay office “beaker girls” were learning how to assay metals, while in lead and zinc tank rooms women took over light jobs such as testing acid thickener samples.<sup>3</sup> In the Central Research department women did testing in the materials division, the plant lab, the instrument division stores, while they also worked in the radio and legal departments and in the Central Technical Library. High school physics and chemistry were put to good use in many places. Dressed for efficiency in slacks or coveralls, women also wore burlap aprons, rubber boots and leather mitts. Inevitably, hair was tied back and held in place with a colourful scarf. This once led to a limerick:



Private Collection

CWTC members: Anne Jackson (l), standing "at ease," and Mollie Jory (r), standing "at attention," Trail, BC, c.1940-1943.



Private Collection

CWTC First Aid Team (l to r): Ida Cullen, Mollie Jory, Anne Jackson, Gertrude Rutledge, Lila Ollis, at the Blaylock residence, Trail, BC, c.1940-1943.

A cute little lady named Hannah  
 Who discarded her scarlet bandanna  
 Got close to a pulley  
 And her hair, though quite woolly,  
 Was shorn in a horrible mannah!<sup>4</sup>

Women also were prepared as emergency volunteers. In March, 1944, five women from the SO<sub>2</sub> Division won second place in the Tadanac First Aid Competition. Each woman had won her St. John Ambulance Association certificate the year before and had continued studying under the tutelage of Art Bickerton in order to enter the competition. In September of that same year, the Ladies' First Aid Team from the Sullivan Concentrator at Kimberley won first prize in the East Kootenay Mine Safety Association Competition held at Fernie.

With few exceptions the women proved to be dependable, capable and willing to learn new skills. "In fact," commented a fellow male worker, "if they become any more efficient some of us mere men will have to look to our laurels!" While management was delighted with their competency, women did not invade the select preserve of the workplace without causing reaction among male employees. It was the subject of an article in the Company's magazine which gave some answers to the question, "How do you like the ladies moving in?"<sup>5</sup> "Great," replied one young fellow. "I've already dated one for tomorrow night and I've got another for Saturday!" One of the older men was not so enthusiastic: "We got along without them long enough and I don't see why they have to butt in now." Further comments included: "Just a fad. They'll soon get fed up and will be gone by Christmas." "Say, what's that blonde's name?"

Women did not share in the same advantages as men. Remuneration for women was based on the fact that they had to be trained on the job because they knew little or nothing of the skills required. Rate of pay at the beginning of employment was eighty percent of the wages paid to men. This increased as the women learned until it reached one hundred percent in *some* cases. Because at war's end the Company was committed to re-employing all servicemen, in recognition of their accumulated seniority, the number of women employees declined sharply.

Trudging up Smelter Hill to put in a day's work at the plant, spending spare time rolling bandages, knitting socks, stitching up shirts and nightgowns seemed mundane jobs, very much removed from participation in "making the world safe for democracy" or "helping to squash Hitler and defeating Nazism." Trail City, nestled in its mountain valley, was far removed from military camps, so the formation of Detachment No. 6, Canadian Women's Training Corps (CWTC) in December 1940 brought a feeling of comradeship among women engaged in the same struggle. Promoted by a group of Trail citizens, including the junior IODE, the detachment was organized by Renee Haweis, an officer from Vancouver. On her way to form a similar corps in Fernie, she stopped overnight in Trail, appointing Mrs. Margie McIntyre commanding officer with the title of Major. Second in command was Margot Blaylock (Major) with Captain Edith Best (Adjutant), Lieutenant Jean Motherwell, Orderly Officer, Lieutenant Dorothy Walley, Paymaster. The titles of the officers had no military significance except

within the local unit where they were used as part of the training program. Members purchased their own uniforms: skirt and jacket of navy blue; buttons, a World War One surplus; and wedge cap worn at an intriguing angle. The Arthur Chapman Chapter of the IODE presented a flag and they were ready for parade.

Drill sessions were begun under the supervision of Lieutenant R. McNish of the Rocky Mountain Rangers and Horace Simpson of the Canadian Legion who also taught them the use of small arms and musketry. The Legion Voluntary Defense Corps granted the CWTC use of their rifle range and after joining the Dominion Marksmen, twelve women earned bronze pins. Training in First Aid was begun: Cominco provided all the instructors and equipment needed. They learned artificial respiration, stretcher drill, the binding of wounds and fractures and the stemming of haemorrhage. A motor mechanics course made the women familiar with maintenance and repair work of cars and trucks. Classes in Home Nursing were also undertaken. Preparation in Air Raid Precaution manoeuvres was also included in their training. They were taught by the police how to drive cars along streets in the blackout and they were to carry out first aid duties on any casualties in Tadanac Hall.

For two and one-half years the members of the spirited unit held themselves ready and responded to demands for help in many fields. They boosted the morale of townspeople and workers in War Saving Drives and all the various campaigns organized to help the war effort. They were part of every parade and festive civic occasion, but in the fall of 1943, the women in the neat navy blue suits and wedge caps disappeared from city streets to be replaced by a group of women clad in the tailored gray uniform dress of the Red Cross Corps. The Canadian Women's Training Corps disbanded to reorganize as a detachment in the Canadian Red Cross Society.

The Red Cross Corps continued in much the same way as the CWTC. It was a trained disciplined body of women in identifying uniforms who practised military drill and physical training with special emphasis on first aid and home nursing. Instructed by nurses on the staff of Trail-Tadanac Hospital, they were required to work a minimum of four hours a week as nurses' aides. After completing two hundred and forty hours of voluntary service, they would qualify as VADs. Margie McIntyre who had been in charge of the CWTC became Commanding Officer of the Red Cross Corps, while Mrs. Molly Jory became Adjutant.

All told, women in Trail and Kimberley made a significant contribution to their community's war effort and in so doing opened a door to wider possibilities of future employment. Although the Training Corps and the Red Cross Corps disbanded after the war, and female employees of Cominco decreased, the belief that women could not competently handle certain jobs had been amply disproved. From that time onwards, many individuals found careers in fields hitherto closed to women. In fact, one chemist, who had been one of twelve women hired in 1943 to analyze ordnance ammonium nitrate for making munitions in the Calgary plant, continued in the labs doing plant analysis. Thirty years later she was still testing effluent and water samples as well as working on hot carbonate and copper liquor.<sup>6</sup>

Footnotes

1. *Cominco Magazine*, September, 1942: 15.
2. *Ibid.*, April, 1943: 25.
3. *Ibid.*, August, 1944: 6.
4. *Ibid.*, October, 1944.
5. *Ibid.*, November, 1942: 4-5.
6. *The Orbit*, December, 1973.