



OTTAWA CITIZEN

TV series honours work of Canada's 'bomb girls'

By Hilary Duff, Postmedia News December 13, 2011



Former 'bomb girl' Helen Rapp attends the screening for the upcoming six-part series Bomb Girls in Ottawa, Dec. 6, 2011.

Photograph by: Jean Levac, Postmedia News

Helen Rapp was just 15 when she moved from the small, northern Ontario town of Schumacher to work at the General Electric production factory in Hamilton. It was 1940, and Rapp had just finished high school and decided to enrol in a military drafting course.

She spent the next year and a half working in the factory, helping to produce the barrel portion of the Bofors anti-aircraft gun.

"It was exciting and we felt like we were really doing something for the war effort," she says.

It is this excitement and the atmosphere in a factory filled with young women that a new six-part television series is hoping to capture.

Bomb Girls is a fictional look at the lives of female factory workers during the Second World War. When the first episode was screened at the Canadian War Museum last Tuesday evening, Rapp was an honoured guest.

The action takes place in East Toronto's Victory Munitions Factory, a fictional amalgamation of two wartime production plants.

Rapp, 86, now lives in Ottawa and has fond recollections of her factory life.

"The place was really a huge, huge barn," she says.

"They had this crane up on the ceiling that we had to bring over by whistling. My foreman taught me to whistle and he would get me to call the crane. I still think that's hilarious."

Rapp says there was never a shortage of noise and laughter. The factory was also a diverse work environment that brought together women from all over the country.

Her best friends were a group of five women who had moved to Hamilton from Prince Albert, Sask.

Rapp described the relationships she formed while working in the factory as "really something" and hoped the miniseries will emphasize this sense of camaraderie.

It wasn't just female friendships that were made, either. Since there was a Commonwealth Air Training Centre in the city, there was never a shortage of men to date, Rapp says with a mischievous smile.

After her stint in the factory, Rapp moved to Toronto and joined the Canadian Women's Army Corps, serving as a section sergeant.

Regardless of the fun that was had, Rapp said, there was always an underlying, sombre tone.

"War touched everyone and there was no avoiding it. It was a sad, sad time."

Rapp remembers when five young men from her small hometown died in one incident.

"When you had a soldier that died, you'd put a black wreath on your door so people would know you were in mourning. After this accident, everyone in the town had a wreath outside their house," she says.

The War Museum has sections of its permanent display dedicated to honouring the role women played in war, says Yasmine Mingay, the museum's manager of public affairs with the museum.

Mingay's own grandmother was a bomb girl and says she thinks the story will resonate with a lot of Canadians.

She also thinks the project is a good match with the ideals of the museum.

"We take a look at the human dimension of war in all its elements," she says. "We hope this series will help people learn more about their military and cultural history and we think it's a wonderful endeavour to bring to the forefront of Canadian minds."

Two Canadian production companies, Back Alley Films and Muse Entertainment Enterprises, co-produced the series with Shaw Media.

Muse Entertainment was the studio responsible for creating the *The Kennedys*.

The episodes are directed by Ken Girotti, Adrienne Mitchell and Anne Wheeler and the series stars Oscar-nominated Canadian actress Meg Tilly as the munitions factory supervisor.

The first episode of *Bomb Girls* is set to air Jan. 4 on Global Television.

While the producers did consult the War Museum about the factory workers' uniforms, Rapp says she is certain of one inaccuracy. The publicity materials show the young girls dressed in white coveralls.

"I would have gotten awfully dirty if I had worn a uniform that colour," she laughs, adding that their coveralls were a practical shade of blue-grey.

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