

Canadian Women of Valour Challenge:
CYNTHIA OAKLEY, Canadian Women's Army Corps

When the Second World War broke out Canadian women were eager to help but had few opportunities to do so. Observing that there were more options for helping in England, Torontonion Cynthia Oakley booked a ticket on one of the last ocean liners and found work as a secretary at Canadian Military Headquarters in London, England. After her brother Rupert was killed at the battle of Dieppe in France, she enlisted in an officers training course and became the first Canadian woman to serve as a **staff officer**.



An outdoor billboard with the recruiting message: Women Are Needed – C.W.A.C. “This is our battle too -”

(Credit: LAC M# 3604399)

By that time the Canadian Government had authorized the creation of the Canadian Women's Army Corps (C.W.A.C.). While most of the 22,000 women who joined C.W.A.C. served in Canada, Oakley was placed in charge of the first female unit to be **stationed** in mainland Europe. Her unit encompassed seventeen women from across Canada who were trained as wireless operators, **stenographers**, clerks, and **switchboard** officers.

C.W.A.C. personnel at the firing range.

(Credit: LAC M# 3405631)



The creation of the Canadian Women's Army Corps was authorized by the Canadian Government on August 13, 1941. Initially, C.W.A.C. personnel were assigned jobs that aligned with traditional **notions**

of femininity such as office work and **domestic** tasks. Over time, however, they began to adopt more active roles and became mechanics and radar operators. The work of C.W.A.C. members such as Cynthia Oakley proved that women could play an active role in the military and paved the way for today's female soldiers.



Members of the C.W.A.C. entering a gas chamber during basic training at Vermillion, AB, in July 1943.

(Credit: LAC M# 3205994)

Privates Brymer and Lowry checking their vehicle in England, 7 July 1944.

(Credit: LAC M# 3405623)



Archery with the C.W.A.C., date unk.

(Credit: LAC M# 4232653)

For more about the C.W.A.C., visit the [War Museum's Backgrounder](#) or the [Library and Archives Canada Blog](#).

Key Vocabulary:

Staff Officer: a soldier (officer) with authority and rank

Stationed: assigned to a location

Stenographer: a person who takes notes in shorthand

Switchboard: an electrical unit that allows an operator to connect phone calls manually

Notion: a general understanding, often vague and imperfect, of something

Domestic: relating to the home