

# Canadian Women in War: Deeper Explorations for Students and Teachers



*Warmuseum.ca*



## **The Empire Club Foundation**

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# **Canadian Women in War: Deeper Explorations for Students and Teachers**

## **Introduction to the Resource**

Whatever challenges we face using technology in the classroom, one advantage is its flexibility. The format can be shaped and reshaped to fit classroom needs. Sections can be shaped and reshaped to match curriculum goals.

The content of *Canadian Women in War* can be used as a stand-alone unit or divided into lessons or parts of lessons based on:

- Timelines, such as before the First World War, WW1 itself, between the wars, and WW2
- Specific roles women played in warfare
- Biographical studies of individual women

Given the options, how can we make choices based on the various Canadian history courses from grades 7-12 through the provinces and territories? How can we ensure that students - both male and female - recognize the value of women's contributions?

Something that might make you wonder, is why this resource on the roles of Canadian women in war is authored by a male. I have experience looking at women in history as a classroom teacher, as well as leading curriculum projects on such topics as women's suffrage help, but the most important message I offer, is that women's history is more than an add-on.

Women's history is history for all for us.

"Isn't it obvious?" you might ask.

Here is a little experiment you can use in your class as a diagnostic assessment at the beginning of any study of the roles Canadian women played in war.

Ask your students to write as much as they can in one minute when you give them each of the following words as prompts - one minute for each:

SOLDIER

NURSE

Follow this with a brief discussion about the words written for the prompt "soldier ". Do the reactions assume that the soldier is male? Then follow with a discussion about the words written for "nurse". Do the reactions assume that the nurse is female?

How can we move beyond stereotypes and false assumptions toward a more complete and inclusive view of the past.

## **The Challenge of Incorporating Inclusive Curriculum**

The Peel District School Board (2000) produced a document that offers a clear approach to identifying and situating current and proposed curriculum changes suggested in Canadian Women at War.

The implementation model comes from the American educator James Banks (1995) and offers a way to incorporate new content that better represents the diversity in our classroom and human population. He offers four approaches to give you a framework for your course, unit, and lesson planning.

### **The Approaches**

**Contributions** - heroes and heroines are added to existing curricula: in this project, we add heroines.

**Additive** - within the basic curriculum structure additional perspectives and concepts are added: in this project, equity and the struggle for equal treatment and recognition of women's contribution to the war effort.

**Transformation** - in which the curriculum structure changes so that diverse perspectives are explored: in this project, the work in war is more than just white men.

**Social Action** - in which students shape curricula: in this project they can engage in designing codes, interview a female who served or is currently serving in Canada's armed forces, or write curricula on this topic for students in the future.

Banks has advocated for a sequence with the goal of getting past the additive stage.

### **Going Deeper on War**

One resource to explore war more "inclusively" as a phenomenon shaping all of us, is Margaret MacMillan's *War: How Conflict Shaped Us*. (2020). Although she does not cite Canadian events, she offers detailed examinations of many aspects of war. She notes the histories of women in both combat and supportive roles as well as the impact of war on women as civilians, victims, and survivors. Reading this work might suggest future ideas for extending the ideas from this project. One topic that may get us as teachers thinking more deeply, relates to the myths and realities of Amazons. Here we are NOT speaking of the giant company, though perhaps their choice of name says something. Were the Amazons of Greek mythology based on real women warriors?

Women in war in history included non-combat roles too. Many of us have heard of Florence Nightingale whose work led to significant improvements in the health of soldiers and the quality of care in military hospitals. But have you heard of Mary Seacole? Her story, and how her work was forgotten for a century, offer another lesson in promoting a more inclusive curricula that recognizes global diversities in courses stressing global history.

Going even further back, we have a Canadian heroine involved in the War of 1812. Although she is not directly related to the chocolate company, you might think of her when you have a Laura Secord!

In addition to more inclusive content, we can use a variety of teaching and assessment strategies to help students think more deeply about people, events, and ideas about and from the past.

The following offers an overview of the teaching strategies used:

STRATEGY	PURPOSE	EXAMPLE from PROJECT	OTHER POSSIBILITES
Connect, extend, challenge	Assess any presentation from the audience point-of-view through active thinking and reacting rather than passively absorbing information	Art of Molly Lamb Bobak	Any reading, presentation in which learner is the “audience”
I used to think...now I think...	Assess changes in student thinking and perspectives about an idea, person, or event in history	Women’s roles in World War One	Any topic to be examined
See, think, wonder	Thinking about visual images	Photograph of G M M Wake	Any visual image
Headline	Summarizing the essence of an idea, event or topic	Youtube of funeral of G M M Wake	Any topic or event
Think-pair-share	Deeper discussion about any topic	How did WW1 influence the campaign of women getting the right to vote?	Any question with a possible range of answers
Snowball/consensus	Student input into and commitment for doing a study or unit	Women at war as a general topic	Any topic
Making history triangle	Determining the role individuals play in “making history”	The life and career of Edith Anderson Monture	Any historical figure

The next big question related to ideas from the chart above is: “How do we know our teaching is having an impact on student learning?”

### **A Visible Thinking Approach to Assessment**

A decade ago, *Making Thinking Visible* came out of the work of Harvard University graduate school of education’s Project Zero. It currently consists of a rich website with links to downloadable articles and videos as well as a book with its own DVD (Ritchhart, R, Church, M and Morrison, K. (2011).

A key implementable feature of this approach is the use of “thinking routines”. Routines exist in all classrooms; they are patterns we use to operate our classrooms with our students. Classrooms have routines that serve to manage student behavior and interactions, to organizing the work of learning, and to establish rules for communication and discourse. Visible thinking routines structure the way students go about the process of learning. These learning routines can be designed to promote students' thinking, such as asking students what they know, what they want to know, and what they have learned as part of a unit of study. These are simple-to-use strategies that through observations and conversations bring the products of thinking to the surface by making them visible both to you and to your students. They often serve as a pre- and post-test with student group

discussion in between as they share ideas and perspectives. Repeated use of a few routines can become thinking “habits” for students they consciously use when the occasion merits or when you offer a prompt.

Each routine:

- is goal oriented in that it targets specific types of thinking
- gets used over and over again in the classroom
- consists of only a few steps
- is easy to learn and teach
- is easy to support when students are engaged in the routine
- can be used across a variety of context
- can be used by the group or by the individual

Some routines promote understanding by making connections between old and new knowledge. Some promote fairness through examining different perspectives. Some encourage students to find the truth behind competing claims. Some are creative by encouraging students to look for new takes on ideas.

You can begin with the following short video.

<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/thinking-routines-video>

One of the ideas it promotes is judicious use of a few routines so that teachers and students get familiar with them and learn to use them effectively. We do get better with practice! At this stage when they have become “routine”, they can then be adapted and built upon.

The routines we use in class for this and other topics in history and beyond, include those below. These can be found when you return to the website above, and click on Resources where you will find the Thinking Routines Toolbox. There are many choices for many purposes, along with tips for introducing them to you class.

The following section offers some routines to try with this and other projects. Some of these you may already know and use such as “think-pair-share” for active reasoning and explanation of an idea. The website describes the routines, offers tips and ways to introduce “launch” them, then shows them in action. In many of the routines, student write individually to help them focus their thinking.

We begin with a routine that can be used with the project as a whole or with parts.

**“Connect, Extend, Challenge” for Assessing ANY Reading, Presentation or Workshop:**

Here is an overview of the routine for the entire project or a specific part such as the art of Molly Lamb Bobak in a Canadian War Museum online exhibition. Go to [www.warmuseum.ca](http://www.warmuseum.ca) and search partway down the page to online exhibitions to find her work Women in Service – the Art of Molly Lamb Bobak.



Courtesy of the Begbie Canadian History Contest Society  
<https://www.begbiecontestsociety.org>

For both students and busy teachers.

- **CONNECT:** How are the ideas and information presented **CONNECTED** to what you already knew? Students may know something about events shown in World War-2 described and shown in the exhibition.
- **EXTEND:** What new ideas did you get that **EXTENDED** or pushed your thinking in new directions? If students see new connections, new knowledge or new ways of thinking about the period, people or events in question they have learned.
- **CHALLENGE:** What is still **CHALLENGING** or confusing for you to get your mind around? What questions, wonderings or puzzles do you now have? World War 2 was, and still is, full of puzzles we solve with new evidence and information. The project offers many ideas, especially biographies of women in war for students to explore in an effort including puzzles to solve and questions to answer.

Having students write, discuss, and share their connections, extensions, and challenges can help them learn even more deeply. Here is a routine to help such thinking and sharing:

**“I used to think.... Now I think.... ”** can assess the thinking of students on this project as a whole and any course, unit or lesson that introduces new ideas to students. Here is a sample script you can use:

*“When we began this study of women in war, you all had some initial ideas about it and what it was all about. In just a few sentences, I want you to write what it is that you used to think about the roles and contributions women have made to Canada’s war effort during World War One. Take a minute to think back and then write down your response to “I used to think...”*

*Now, I want you to think about how your ideas about Women’s roles and contributions in World War One have changed as a result of what we’ve been studying/doing/discussing. Again, in just a few sentences write down what you now think about Women’s roles and contributions in World War One. Start your sentences with, “But now, I think...”*

### **Think-Pair-Share: A Basic Co-operative Structure for Pairs Work**

There are many versions of think-pair-share, a cooperative structure developed by Frank Lyman (1981) in which:

1. You pose a question or problem; for example, how did World War One influence the campaign for women getting the vote?
2. Students are given time to think (30-60 seconds).
3. Students pair and discuss their responses.
4. Students share their combined insights in a whole class discussion or question-answer sequence.

This technique helps students process the information they are learning through wait time and discussion of their ideas.

There are many ways to “think”, “pair” and “share” including,

- Think-Write-Pair-Share has students jot down their ideas before turning to a partner to discuss them. This version increases individual accountability, since you can walk around the room to ensure that students do not just sit back and let their partner do all the thinking.
- Think-pair-square has pairs pair with another pair before sharing with the class.

Think-pair-share can be used anytime in a lesson.

- at the beginning, to assess prior knowledge or opinion on the topic to be explored in a unit,
- within the lesson, to check for understanding,
- at the end of the lesson, to assess understanding

I found that student teachers as well as veterans used think-pair-share as a management tool. When they are not sure about where to go next or what to do with the responses they have received in a discussion or in question-answer, they use the structure to gain thinking time for themselves, as well and offer students time to process what they have learned.

For more on this versatile structure go to [www.kaganonline.com](http://www.kaganonline.com) for ideas.

## **Structures for Extending the Pairs**

“Snowball”, sometimes called “Consensus” (Craigien and Ward, 2004) is a way to help students acquire skills in designing powerful questions for an inquiry. Such questions should:

- be engaging to students,
- be connected to important curriculum goals, and
- require an informed, reasoned answer based on evidence and clear criteria for making a judgment.

Here is an example based on this project.

The class is introduced to the topic of Canadian women in war.

1. Individually each student writes down three questions they would like to answer about this topic?
2. Students pair and compare questions. They come to agreement on three questions they both consider important to answer.
3. The pairs combine with another pair. The groups of four come to a consensus on four questions they want answered.
4. The groups of four combine and come to agreement on five important questions.
5. Each group puts their questions on the board.
6. With the teacher’s help the class comes to an agreement on 5-6 important powerful questions they want answered about the roles and contributions of Canadian women in war. As individuals, pairs, or small groups they use these questions as anchors for their studies.

An added benefit for the teacher is that students have contributed to potential assessments, including test questions for which they are motivated to achieve since they shaped their learning goals. In addition to increased commitment by students in answering their own questions, you can use these powerful questions as you plan end-of-unit tests or other culminating tasks.

An element that links many of the teaching strategies is the role of student talk.

### **Why Talk?**

Talk allows students to

- take risks with colleagues
- try out ideas through hypothesizing, verifying, adapting, and revising
- gain deeper insights and understandings when the talk is purposeful and in pairs than can be attained by one student working alone
- promote quality writing and/or quality whole classroom discussion after students have talked through the ideas, issues, concepts, and information.

The more we talk the more we learn!

### **Why Pairs?**

- easier to set up than larger groups
- can be combined and divided when appropriate
- easier to monitor and manage to ensure individual accountability



It's hard to hide in a pair!

The next section provides an overview of the roles that women played from Confederation through World War 2. Then we will follow with some examples of individual contributions for students to explore.

## **CANADIAN WOMEN IN WAR**

Canadian nurses served during the North-West Rebellion / Resistance of 1885 (note the names given to the event: What perspectives do they reveal? Whose voices from the past count as history?). Nursing Sister Loretta Miller opened the Saskatchewan Field Hospital during this time (The Marr house below was one of three buildings in Saskatoon that served as a hospital in 1885.). She became the first woman to serve in the Canadian military. She was one of 12 nursing sisters in this conflict and all were formally recognized for their contributions.



Canadian nurses also rallied to the British flag during the Boer War between 1899 and 1902. In 1901 the Canadian Nursing Service was established and women were, for the first time, part of the regular Canadian military in a formal way.

### **War and the Progress of Human Rights**

How does history work? Is it just a line of progress in which things get better or does it proceed in fits and starts with some events helping us move “forward” (whatever that means) and some moving backwards?

The two world wars of the 20th century mobilized the whole nation. Women were on virtually every front.

Women were mobilized by war.

Women's lives were transformed by war.

In the case of women how does the history in this project work from 1914 to 1945 and beyond? What are the significant “turning points” and do they make things better or

worse? This can be the major question if this project is tackled in its entirety. These questions can serve as focus points for student enquiry.

## World War One

In the First World War over 3000 “nursing sisters” as nurses were called, served in the Armed Forces and over 2500 went overseas. Due to their blue uniforms and white veils they were given the nickname “bluebirds”. The sisters served on hospital ships, as ambulance drivers sometimes on dangerous runs, and in hospitals behind the front lines dealing with the men who were wounded and/or dying. Some of the nurses were close enough to the fighting to be injured or killed and 53 Canadian nurses died in the war: 21 of them were killed by direct enemy action - long-range artillery, the bombing of hospitals by aircraft, and gas attacks. The government of Canada has a website [www.veterans.gc.ca](http://www.veterans.gc.ca) where pictures of women in war such as this one, can be found.



Here is an account of one of the women who served. Her photograph can introduce several visible thinking routines: each of which can be used in many ways and places.

**See, Think, Wonder** is a routine for use in looking at images from war or any other topic that shows artistic or photographic information about a topic.

- What do you **see**?
- What do you **think** about that?
- What does it make you **wonder**?

This routine encourages students to make careful observations and thoughtful interpretations. It helps stimulate curiosity and sets the stage for inquiry.

Use this routine when you want students to think carefully about why something looks the way it does or is the way it is. Use the routine at the beginning of a new unit to motivate student interest or try it with an object that connects to a topic during the unit of study. Consider using the routine with an interesting object near the end of a unit to encourage students to further apply their knowledge and ideas.

Ask students to look at an object—it could be an artwork, image, artifact, cartoon or topic—and to follow up with what they think might be going on or what they think this observation might be. Encourage students to back up their interpretation with reasons. Ask students to think about what this makes them wonder about the object or topic.

The routine works best when a student responds by using the three stems together at the same time, i.e., “*I see..., I think..., I wonder...*” However, you may find that students begin

using one stem at a time, and that you need to scaffold each response with a follow-up question for the next stem. The routine works well in a group discussion but in some cases, you may want to ask students to try the routine individually on paper or in their heads, before sharing out as a class. Student responses to the routine can be written down and recorded so that a class chart of observations, interpretations, and wonderings are listed for all to see and return to during the topic study. The work on the class chart can serve as a visible demonstration of student learning to students, as well as to teachers.

Here is a WW1 photograph, courtesy of the Begbie Contest History Society, that can lead to an inquiry about women's roles.



Here is another photograph from World War One on another important role women played. Encourage students to ask questions and suggest answers to such questions as “Who was this person?”, “What role did she play?” “How did she die?”



Related to the photograph the following ten-minute video <https://youtu.be/AEUugEPvAnU> can be shown. You might check with the class to ensure that they are prepared for the scenes of destruction that are shown. You can use the visible thinking routine “**Headlines**”: a synthesizing routine to get students to capture the core or essence or core of an event, idea, topic or concept. The stress is on its essence, not coming up with a catchy headline. This can be combined with a think-pair-share routine to get contributions to the thinking.

In the First World War, on the home front women took over roles that men going off to fight had vacated – working on farms, in munitions and armaments factories, banding together to fund raise for the war effort in such organizations as the Red Cross, growing food in victory gardens, sewing, and knitting clothing,

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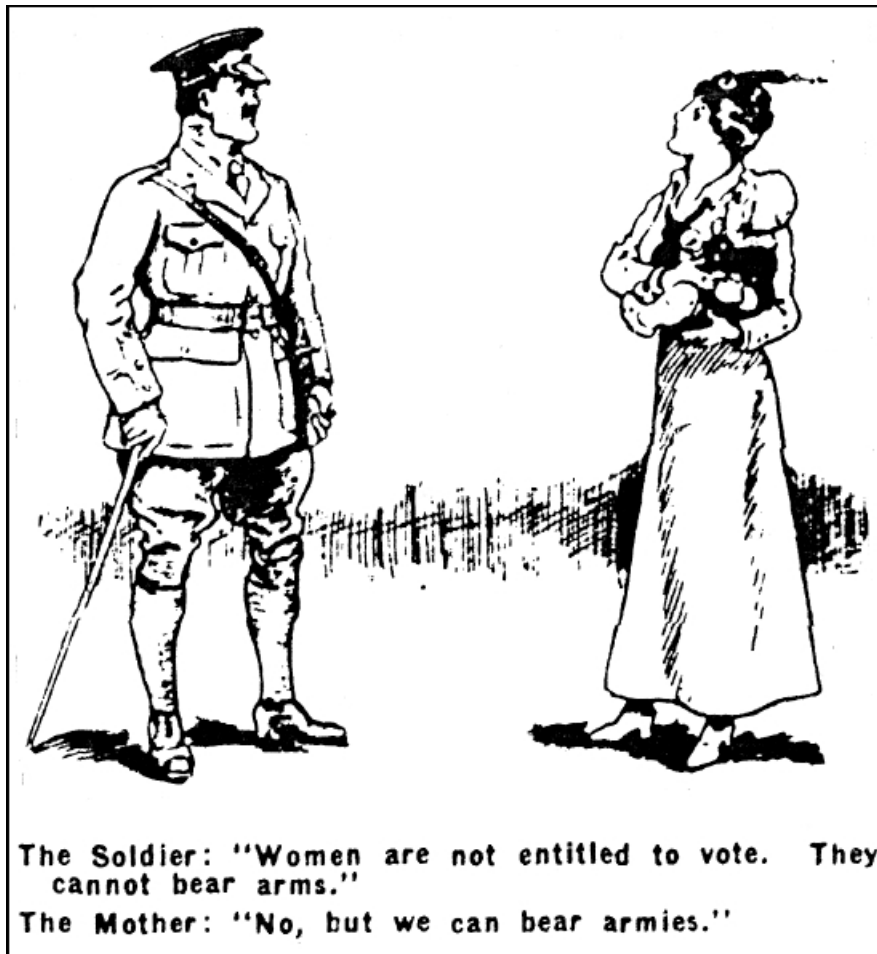
THE LAST LOAD FOR 1918

Courtesy of the Begbie Canadian History Contest Society

## **The Inter-war Years**

The two decades after the First World War brought dramatic changes in women's lives. Some of these were campaigns that started before WW1 but were strengthened as seen in the following (courtesy of the Begbie Canadian History Contest Society).





*The Grain Growers' Guide, Winnipeg, 26 May 1915*

These included the right to vote, an increased ability to work outside the home, and increased access to education and higher education. Fashion and social norms changed too; and women – wives and mothers, sisters and lovers, daughters and friends – were faced with an absence – tens of thousands of men killed or missing in action – and with trauma – many of their men returning home physically injured and mentally damaged. To the impact of the 1914-1914 war was added the great flu epidemic of 1919 that killed an estimated 50,000<sup>1</sup> Canadians, and here again women, as nurses and mothers and wives, were in the front line. And after the boom time of the “Roaring Twenties,” came the Depression of the 1930s, a decade that hit families and women very hard.

## **WOMEN IN WORLD WAR TWO**

The numbers and roles that women played greatly increased from the figures of World War One. They worked in communications, in telephone exchanges, and they did coding and cypher work. Canadian women also worked in military intelligence such as Britain's MI-5. Historian Roach Pierson estimated that by October 1943, some 261,000 women were employed either directly or indirectly in war industries.

<https://legionmagazine.com/en/2012/05/womens-work/>  
<http://www.lorimer.ca/adults/Contributor/7920/Pierson-Ruth-Roach.html>

According to the Veterans Canada website <https://www.veterans.gc.ca>, "Out of a total Canadian population of 11 million people, only about 600,000 Canadian women held permanent jobs when the war started. During the war, their numbers doubled to 1,200,000.

At the peak of wartime employment in 1943-44, 439,000 women worked in the service sector, 373,000 in manufacturing and 4,000 in construction."<sup>2</sup>

In July 1942, Dominion-Provincial Day Nurseries Agreement, which provided for subsidized daycare for mothers employed in essential wartime industries.

Women worked as nurses in virtually every operating theatre.

Before we offer sources for exploring the lives of many women in this war, and roles they played we offer another strategy for deepening student understanding.

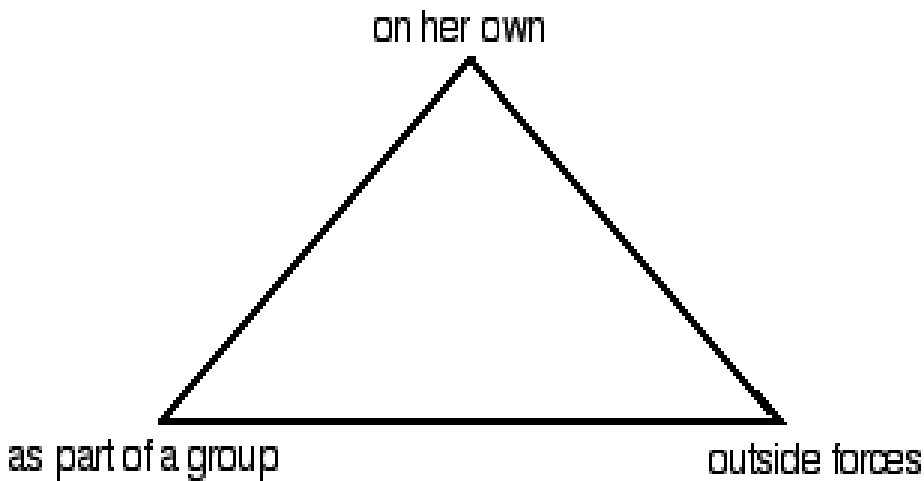
### **Exploring Women at War**

People make history, but why?

- Were they born great and made history all by themselves? Did they have the "right stuff"?
- Were they made great by working with others? Were they the leaders or figureheads representing a larger group? Can any leader do it all?
- Did they have greatness thrust upon them by outside forces- the right person at the right time? Would someone else have come along?

These questions and possible answers can be investigated using the following triangle as a graphic organizer.

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Such diagrams can help students organize their thinking.

The project names and provides a little information on many women who contributed to Canada's war efforts over the decades. Further research on any of these people can be enhanced using the following procedure based on the triangle.



We can use Edith Anderson Monture: a First Nation Canadian nurse who served with the American Army Nurse Corps because racial barriers prevented her from being accepted by a Canadian nursing school to get her diploma.

Students in pairs, conduct research into Edith Monture's life. As in many cases there is more information online than in traditional school textbooks. The pairs identify, record and number in chronological order significant points in her long life (She lived to the age of 105!), form your pairs and try to reach a consensus as to whether Harriet alone, as part of an organization, or as a passive agent of external forces played the greatest role in each of the events described in her biography. Below is a worksheet in which key events have been numbered for you. Place the number of each event in the appropriate place in the triangle. For example, if you agree that the creation of the Underground Railroad was largely her creation (event #4), place the number close to "on her own" in the triangle.



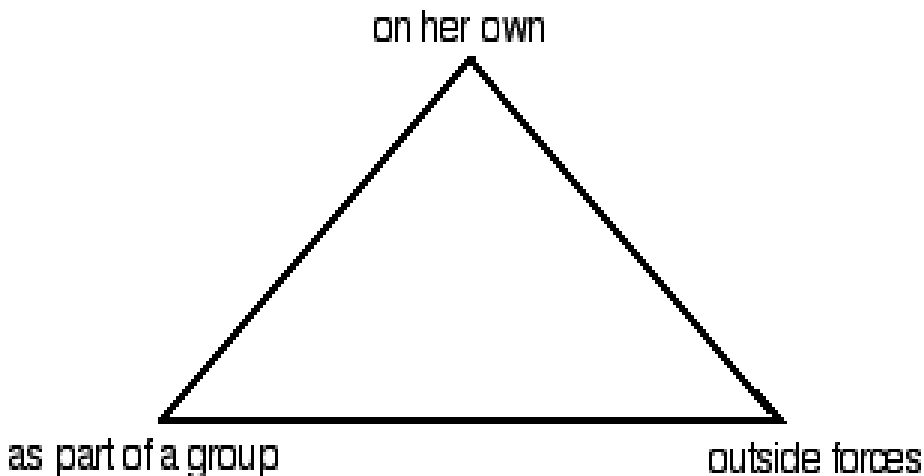
Some highlights to be classified include:

1. Attending and graduating in nursing from New Rochelle Nursing School in New York State.
2. Volunteering to serve in the United States Nursing corps in World War One.
3. Returning to her Six Nations reserve to receive ceremonial clothing to serve as burial wear in case she died overseas (as many did).
4. For more than a year, Edith worked as a nurse at Base hospital 23 in Vittel France treating soldier gassed or injured in other ways in the trenches.
5. She kept a diary and described 14-hour shifts. During some of these she walked across battlegrounds looking for wounded.
6. In one case she wrote to a family and kept in touch with them after the loss of a favourite patient Earl King, who had been shot in the neck and later died of his wounds.
7. Edith became the first female status Indian and registered band member to gain the right to vote in a Canadian federal election in 1917, due to the passage of the Military Service Act extending votes to women who served in the military. Indigenous women as a group did not get voting rights in federal elections until 1960.
8. After the world Edith worked as a nurse and midwife in a hospital on the reserve and continued to advocate for better Indigenous health care.
9. She retired at age 65 in 1955 and lived to be almost 106.

As each pair comes to agreement on the highlight of an individual's career/biography you can provide feedback on their ability to recognize significance in historical events. They may even determine an event as significant, that other students or even teachers fail to see.

Once they have written and numbered their highlights, they place the number inside the triangle. The closer to a corner, the more the event is seen as evidence of a person's contribution to the event.

Where would you place the numbers of the events noted above?



In one sense, the placement of the number is not as important as the discussion students have to determine how Edith influenced history. For each event, students must provide reasons to justify their placement.

Once they have completed their triangles, students draw conclusions and write a report interpreting the significance of Edith Monture in history of the struggle for the rights of women as a whole, and indigenous women in particular.

Women were leaders in fundraising and other moral boosting tasks, providing food parcels, writing letters, and acting as entertainers. One example is Veronica Foster, known as "Ronnie, the Bren Gun Girl"<sup>3</sup>. She was the Canadian version of the American 'Rosie, the Riveter'. Or is it the other way around?



There are so many stories that we have forgotten about women's roles in war. Sadly, some of the stories in our heads are not from Canada but from the US.

### Deeper Exploration

Using the strategies illustrated above there are many sources for students to do online searches. We have noted the Canadian War Museum as well as Veterans Canada and the

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<sup>3</sup> RONNIE THE BREN GUN GIRL <https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/military-war/the-bren-gun-girl>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veronica\\_Foster](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veronica_Foster)  
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/veronica-foster>

Begbie Canadian History Contest Society. Each of these offers sample lesson plans and the Begbie site. Helps teachers and students decode the past through the use of visual images such as cartoons.

Other sites include The Canadian Encyclopedia and Legion Magazine. Google searches can reveal more.

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/nursing-sisters>

<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/classroom/fact-sheets/women>

<https://legionmagazine.com/en/2012/05/womens-work/>

[https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/canadawar/women\\_e.html](https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/canadawar/women_e.html)

There are follow-up questions too:

Did Canadian women have combat roles in World War Two?

What roles do women play in Canada's armed forces today? What progress have women made in our military? What steps are still needed for women to attain in the military? What steps are still needed for women to attain in Canadian life?

To conclude this guide, I offer a few directions for going further. Some of these come from a film and guide developed by the Empire Club: *Secret Liberators*. (Go to [www.kingandempire.ca](http://www.kingandempire.ca) for the film.)

Some of these serve as "minds on" lesson openers to get students curious. Some of these can serve as lesson "extensions": ideas for curious and motivated students to explore.

Women from outside of Canada also played important roles. One famous example was Josephine Baker, one of the most famous entertainers in the world during the 1920s and 30s. Her story is fascinating even without her activities in World War 2.



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