

# BOMB GIRLS

## PRODUCTION NOTES

### FROM IDEA TO SCREEN

“We loved the idea of Bomb Girls from the moment we heard a pitch about it because it was an incredible piece of historical drama that hadn’t been told before,” says Muse Entertainment’s President and CEO Michael Prupas. Novelist Maureen Jennings and Makeup Artist Debra Drennan came up with the idea for a television miniseries about women in World War II munitions factories. They approached Janis Lundman and Adrienne Mitchell co-owners of Back Alley Film Productions, who then brought it to Muse. “What set it apart from other projects is that it’s a historical drama that explores social issues still relevant today,” Prupas says.

“This is such a fascinating period in our history and it’s a story that hasn’t been told this way,” says Mitchell. “It was a dynamic and fulfilling time for many women since they were contributing to the war effort, and many of the women experienced a kind of freedom and independence that they never had before.”

“It was also a very difficult and challenging period,” says Lundman. “In many ways, this era presents the struggle that women today face in balancing their work and families.”

Drennan says that the story of bomb girls has to be told: “Every World War II film and TV show has been about men; soldiers, pilots, sailors, marines. No one’s ever made a film about the unsung heroes - the women who supplied the armed forces with equipment, weapons and ammunition. Without the jobs that the women were doing we could have lost the war,” she says.

Many people have heard about *Rosie The Riveter*, the American female icon of World War II. But how many are familiar with Joan the Canuck? Or *Veronica the Bren Gun Girl*? They were Canada’s “women of war,” and each was based on real life girls who worked on the assembly line making Bren Guns, a type of automatic rifle, or building planes, 4X4 army vehicles, bombs and bullets.

How Jennings and Drennan came upon the concept of Bomb Girls is an interesting story in itself.

“We were both on a film set and chatting about what we were up to. I was writing a World War II novel set in an English munitions factory,” says Jennings. “Then Deb said she’s been working on a similar project and why didn’t we share our ideas. So we did. We worked out some story lines and the setting, which we based on an actual factory called GECO (General Engineering Company of Canada) located in Scarborough, Ontario in 1941.”

Drennan has a familial relationship to GECO as both her grandmother and godmother were bomb girls at the plant. “The factory had built emergency housing for the out-of-town women and my grandmother and her eight children moved into two rooms. My mother grew up there until she got married. I’ve always wanted to do a story about kids growing up in a munitions

# BOMB GIRLS

factory,” she says. “My godmother was 20 when they offered her more money to work there than she had ever made in her whole life. Her income helped feed her family and siblings for four years.”

Jennings and Drennan also gathered the personal stories of real life bomb girls. “I should have started the research 10 years ago as there are not many who are still with us,” Drennan says. They did locate Louise Johnson, now in her 90s, who worked at the D.I.L. plant in Ajax, Ontario. Johnson came from the Prairies drawn by government and factory advertisements appealing to young women to ‘Come and join the factory!’ and ‘Do your bit for the war!’

Johnson had to weigh gunpowder on a scale and it had to be absolutely exact, a repetitive task she performed for hours and hours. “Sometimes they got tired and there would be mistakes that caused injuries and damage,” Drennan says. Johnson loved the freedom that employment offered her although she quickly lost her job when the men came back after the war.

Once Muse and Back Alley decided to develop the concept into a six-hour miniseries, they needed to find a writer who could bring the historical drama to life and give it a contemporary sensibility. “We read scripts and interviewed various writers but when we met Michael MacLennan, we clicked creatively,” says Executive Producer Janis Lundman. “He wrote the pilot and we pitched it to Shaw’s Global Television who enthusiastically came on board. Then we hired other writers: Shelley Eriksen, John Krizanc and Esta Spalding. They sat in a room for weeks with MacLennan and Co-Creator and Director Mitchell to break the characters and stories. Each writer wrote a script with Michael, as Co-Creator and Co-Showrunner, writing three of the scripts.”

MacLennan says that the writers’ first step was to create an array of characters. “We really had to think about the people we were putting together, to see how they would create sparks and stories. I call it orchestration of the cast.”

‘We decided early on that we would shoot the entire six hours in Toronto because the historical material that was brought to us by Drennan and Jennings was about the women who had worked in munitions factories that existed in the Toronto area. It made sense to come back to this place,” says Prupas

The next step was having Mitchell, MacLennan and Lundman bring on board the heads of the creative departments who would work collaboratively with them to define the look of the series. An A list crew was gathered together including, Production Designer Aidan Leroux, Director of Photography Eric Cayla and Costume Designer Joanne Hansen.

Prupas, Lundman and Mitchell then reached out to Wendy Grean, a producer with a wealth of experience who then gathered together the remaining crew. Locating a space for the bomb factory was the next step. “We happened to be driving in the Toronto suburb of Etobicoke and came upon this old furniture factory for rent. Built in the mid 1930s, it had 100,000 square feet of space with high ceilings and windows. It was a perfect skeleton for us to build in,” says Grean.

# BOMB GIRLS

“Once we’d found the building, the difficult part was how do we build a bomb factory?” says Mitchell. “We looked at historical photographs of factories that had conveyer belts, hanging bombs of different sizes, cordite filling stations and so on. I knew absolutely nothing about bombs or guns ... but it became an incredible learning experience.”

The producers had the good fortune to meet Dean Owen who has a World War II museum in his home basement in Ajax. He knows a lot about bombs and bomb making and became the production’s historical advisor. “He brought us an old 3.7 bomb that had been manufactured at GECO and from that we made all our vacuform prototypes,” says Lundman.

Production designer Aidan Leroux says building the factory and the bombs was very expensive and was his most challenging task. “We bought the conveyer belts in the USA. They were shipped to us in pieces and our crew assembled them. We had to bring in specialists to sync the gears and the four motors that run the conveyor belts. It was a difficult process. As for the bombs, we looked at various ways to duplicate them – we needed so many – and decided fiberglass was too expensive so we went with vacuform, a type of plastic.”

While Leroux’s carpenters and decorators built the factory set, the rooming house, the manager’s office, the hospital and other smaller sets in the studio space, Costume Designer Joanne Hansen researched 1940s fashions in books, old catalogues and pictures, then scoured costume shops, rental shops and vintage clothing stores in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, New York and Los Angeles. When she couldn’t find enough costumes, her seamstresses made them from 1940s-style fabrics Hansen purchased or from silks and wools that the wardrobe department dyed. “Military costumes from World War II were the hardest to find and they had to be altered to fit our actors,” she says. She also had to gather many pieces of vintage shoes and accessories such as hats, handbags and costume jewelry from collectors, vintage shops and rental houses.

## THE CASTING

Working with Casting Directors Lisa Parasyn and Jon Comerford in Toronto and with Libby Goldstein and Junie Lowry Johnson in Los Angeles, the executive producers auditioned dozens of actors for each role. “When Meg Tilley auditioned I had no idea what it was going to be like because she had not acted for about 18 years,” says Mitchell. “Within 5 seconds I knew we had our Lorna Corbett. She *was* Lorna.”

Charlotte Hegele, who plays Kate Andrews, was brought back a couple of times to audition because she is young and doesn’t have a lot of experience as an actor. Mitchell says she is so glad they chose her because “Charlotte’s own persona is so perfect for the role. She has so much raw talent and a singing voice that is haunting and bewitching...There’s also something about her that says 1940s.”

# BOMB GIRLS

“We were searching so hard for our character Gladys Witham and we were only a week away from the start of production,” says Lundman. “Then Jodi Balfour sent a tape from Vancouver.” Impressed, Mitchell flew there. “Jodi just sparkled and shone. We found our Gladys,” she says.

Similarly, Ali Liebert, who is so wonderfully outgoing, nailed the part of Betty McRae, the tough and confident bomb girl who teaches new employees how to work the assembly line at Victory Munitions.

Antonio Cupo was the producers’ choice for Marco, the factory’s complex Italian materials controller. “He is humongously talented and has a quality to him that just fits the period,” says Mitchell. “What I love about Antonio is that he’s able to exude sex appeal with gravitas, so you feel that this is a guy who has a lot of pain in him and trying to find a way to be a man.”

## THE FASCINATING 1940s

The 1940s was a fascinating decade, says Creative Consultant Debra Drennan, because it brought so much change for everyone. “It was a growth period for women and it was a life changing experience for men.”

“The 1940s was the decade when women in Canada had the opportunity to get out of their homes, to get jobs that paid them money, to socialize with other people and to experience the world at large,” says Executive Producer Michael Prupas. “The 1940s was the great precursor to the women's liberation movement that happened in the 1960s.”

“In the 1940s political and social issues around sexual politics, race and class –which still exist today but the edges are taken of – came to the floor,” says Co-Creator and Writer Michael MacLennan. “Before the 1940s, people were really just living in their own bubbles. Women basically socialized with their friends, sisters and people in their church. But suddenly, in 1941, people from different walks of life began cross-pollinating and discovering their powers and fighting for a toehold in a place where they had never been before, and that brought with it issues of power in the workplace and sexual politics.”

The decade was a complex time filled with paradoxes. Co-Creator and Director Adrienne Mitchell explains: “Women were given the opportunity to work and make money, yet they still had to deal with rationing and restrictions on what they could buy. If they bought something too expensive it would be looked down upon because that money could be going to help the war effort. They couldn’t buy silk. They also couldn’t eat certain foods because they were conserved for the soldiers on the front.”

It was also a very romantic era and love blossomed easily. “We talk about the 1970s as being the

# BOMB GIRLS

era of free love but really the 1940s was the beginning of that. A woman would meet a guy and not know if he would still be living weeks from then. The men felt the same emotional tugs. 'What if I die and I've never been with a woman?' That led to romance all over the place," says Drennan. "There was also so much music and dancing at this time."

The music of the 40s was another alluring aspect of the era and plays a big role in *Bomb Girls*. "The music was so distinct and helped define the times," says Executive Producer Lundman. "People didn't have TV back then and everyone listened to radio. Music was everywhere. There were these huge dancehalls and people would go out and dance as that was the fun thing to do. A lot of people played their own instruments. If they had a violin, an accordion or a trumpet, they would take it with them. They would go to house parties and play music. Music was the energy of that era."

Big band music led by such notables as Glenn Miller was popular. Jazz was making a splash with Billie Holiday, Sara Vaughan and Dinah Washington. Frank Sinatra was starting out. Swing music was everyone's favourite in the dancehalls.

Music Composers Robert Carli and Peter Chapman recreated the 1940s music genre, its mood and vibe, but they put a contemporary spin on it. "We wanted a vintage throwback but performed by contemporary artists," says Mitchell.

Beautiful ballads were popular in the 1940s and created to inspire soldiers struggling on the battlefield. "We have Kate, one of the bomb girls, sing 'It's A Lovely Day Tomorrow,' which was

a very popular Vera Lynn song during the war," says Mitchell. "Part of Kate's storyline is the transformation of her voice. She goes from singing gospel songs to singing music that is rooted in the underground jazz movement of the times."

## THE LOCATIONS AND PRODUCTION DESIGN

*Bomb Girls'* character Gladys Witham lives in a mansion on a grand estate with her parents Adele (played by Kate Henning) and Rollie (played by James McGowan). The Witham's wealth comes from their ownership of a large grocery chain. Production was fortunate to be able to rent one of Canada's finest and last remaining grand estates to stand in for the Witham mansion. Built in the 1920s and 1930s, Parkwood, located in Oshawa, Ontario, was once the home of auto baron R. Samuel McLaughlin, founder of General Motors of Canada. Parkwood's unique architecture enabled Production Designer Aidan Leroux to set the Witham family into elaborate historical splendor as the mansion came filled with original furnishings, draperies, art works and well preserved gardens and landscaping. His team did have to remove all the authentic furniture and carpets in the rooms the production used, however, in order to protect them. He replaced them all with beautiful vintage pieces he found in local antique stores.

# BOMB GIRLS

On the third floor of Parkwood are the servants' quarters with wide hallways, an interesting layout and architecture. "We fell in love with it but knew that we couldn't shoot scenes there because it would be hard getting the camera and crew up to the third floor and we'd have difficulty lighting it as well. So we decided to duplicate it on our stage in studio and configure it to our own needs," Leroux says.

The rooming house that Leroux's team built is a real counterpoint to the bomb factory built in the same studio space. While the factory is a cold, monochromatic industrial space, the rooming house is a domestic environment decorated with 1940s wallpaper and vintage furniture. "Even though each woman has her own bedroom, we saw the rooming house hallway as a social space where they would gather, hang their laundry, listen to radio, to records and have parties. The hallway is their living room," Leroux points out.

*Bomb Girls'* characters Betty McRae (played by Ali Liebert) and Kate Andrews (played by Charlotte Hegele) live in the rooming house. Leroux says their rooms were inspired by a series of photos of English workers' housing during the war taken by Bill Brandt, one of the most important British photographers of the 20th century. Betty's and Kate's bedrooms have a tiny sink with shelves below and above hidden by curtains and a small kitchenette area. "What I loved about these bedrooms is that women slept here, cooked basic food, made tea and also hand washed their laundry and hung their washing to dry. The bedrooms became a one room apartment where they would live and socialize," Leroux says.

Set Decorator Enrico Campana ran around the greater Toronto area looking for World War II decorative items such as square wood pegs with which to hang laundry, coin operated room heaters, vintage radios and phonographs. One of his finds was a Western Electric 302 model telephone, which was prominently placed in the rooming house hallway. Designed in 1937, the phone, nicknamed the "Lucy Phone" because it was shown on the *I Love Lucy* show, was only in production until 1958.

Leroux's construction team also built the hospital in the studio where Vera Burr (played by Anastasia Phillips) and Archie Arnott (played by Billy MacLellan) come after their accidents at the bomb factory. "We designed the hospital based on a little illustration that we found in a 1940s ad placed by a flooring company," Leroux says. "We didn't want a typical white-walled hospital because we decided from the outset that the palette for *Bomb Girls* would be bright, fresh colors. We started with a painted floor in salmon and then chose blue for the walls. We picked the shade of blue from the wardrobe of the nurses who had blue aprons. Costume Designer Joanne Hansen and I worked together on the color scheme as we wanted the sets to offset the wardrobe," Leroux explains.

Leroux also had window panes put into the hospital rooms to allow the camera to shoot through layers of glass to create distance. When the vintage furniture for the hospital arrived it was all mismatched so the design team painted it all and reupholstered the chairs and the privacy screens. "I really wanted this space to be different from the factory and rooming house. The factory has its grittiness and industrial quality, the rooming house its domestic clutter and the hospital is a place of nurturing."

# BOMB GIRLS

## THE CAMERA AND LIGHTING

When Co-Creator and Director Adrienne Mitchell looked at photographs taken in the 1940s, she was struck by the colours of Kodachrome film stock. “The colours really popped and some of the images had a certain translucence, as if the subjects were glowing from inside out. I really wanted to capture that in *Bomb Girls*,” she says. “Women didn’t wear eye-makeup back then and their beautiful white skin and red lips had a lot of vitality which I also wanted to depict.”

Director of Photography Eric Cayla says he wanted to achieve “a little vintage look to the miniseries but also have some colours, such as reds and blues, stand out as in Kodachrome film stock.” The Makeup and Wardrobe departments lent a hand. “Makeup helped by accentuating red lips, and wardrobe helped by providing strong colours in the costumes. We faded out the other colours so those reds and blues would stand out,” says Cayla.

He also controlled the colour through the lighting. “Lighting can add colour and warmth, lighting can also be very cold or a mixture of both. We can also adjust the temperatures in post-production with digital processing. We can accentuate just the reds or just the blues and fade out the greens,” he says. “But when we control colours it does affect skin tones so that’s where it becomes more difficult. Our work has to be very subtle.”

Cayla used a mixture of lights and lighting styles on locations. At the Witham House he used Fresnel light “to give it a texture of classical Hollywood ‘film noir’ lighting,” he says. Fresnel light is a focusable spotlight which casts soft, even illumination across the light’s beam. “It worked well in the Witham house which has a very rich and detailed décor. But in the rooming house and the other poorer homes, which have more simple décors, I used paper-kind of lighting, like Chinese lanterns with a lot of smoke, to make the atmosphere very soft yet moody.” When the production shot outdoors on the streets, Cayla made the lighting as realistic as possible. At night he used strong shadows on the walls and on people’s faces. At the bomb factory, Cayla made the lighting realistic by using the natural light from the windows as much as possible. “Our gaffer and key grip could operate the natural light coming in by cutting half of the windows and opening another half and also supplemented them with our artificial lights. We had a system but it was certainly the most challenging set to light because of its size.”

As for the cameras, Cayla chose to use Arriflex’s new Alexa, “Mainly because these digital cameras work well in low-light situations. They also have a lot more latitude, in a dark room against windows; for instance, the camera gave us more room to work with. It also worked well outside at night.”

The camera movement was in the style of classical filmmaking. Sometimes it moved very close to its subjects, “to bring it into the women’s experiences viscerally,” says Mitchell. “I wanted the viewer through the camera to identify with the women in their experiences and in their moments, to see what they were seeing, feeling and smelling.”

# BOMB GIRLS

## VICTORY MUNITIONS AND FACTS ABOUT WORLD WAR II

With British plants bombed out by Nazis, Churchill begged his Allies for help, since without sufficient artillery and ammunition; they'd lose the war. Prime Minister MacKenzie-King swiftly built munitions factories in Ontario and Quebec to produce the arms (worth \$100 billion in today's dollars) that kept overseas soldiers alive and fighting. Without Canada's backing the Allies, Hitler would almost certainly have overtaken England.

In the series, Victory Munitions factory was hammered up to build the bombs that will keep our boys alive — and kill the enemy. Victory is a fictional amalgam of the Ajax DIL plant, and Scarborough's legendary General Engineering plant. In buildings linked by a dangerous, dirty tunnel system, workers assembled every imaginable shell, fuse and tracer. After awaiting delivery in turf-camouflaged warehouses, weaponry was shipped to war-ravaged Europe.

VicMu is a microcosm for the various wars fought — between countries, traditions and sexes. From its shiny new front-offices to the gunpowdered "floor" full of half-built killing machines, **Victory Munitions forms the series central milieu**. From the moment they're inspected for combustibles in the morning, to their final shower off at shift's end, our women face all kinds of conflicts and struggles. There's the blistering pace quotas demand. There's the dangerous work conditions where mistakes cost lives. There are the sexual politics of harassment and sabotage. There's the impossible requirement to be "feminine" while performing exhausting, strenuous labour. And there's the undeniable fact they're building bombs that will kill women and children an ocean away.

Men who work at Victory Munitions are disqualified from duty or have valued skills. While as virile and sexy as any red-blooded men, they also face unfamiliar dynamics. **Most are threatened by the arrival of their new lipsticked coworkers**, shutting down these women's attempts to succeed, even if it means they compromise the war effort.

- During World War II, 1.1 million Canadians put on uniforms and went to serve in the Army, Navy and Air Force out of a population of about 11 million. More than 45,000 lost their lives and 54,000 returned home wounded.
- Before the war, women worked outside the home, especially if they were from a minority group or working-class. Women worked in service industries and men in heavy manufacturing.
- During the Depression, most people resented women working because they took jobs from unemployed men. But by 1941, with men away fighting in the war, factories needed workers and began recruiting women.

# BOMB GIRLS

- 250,000 women worked in Canada's factories building bombs and ammunition.
- Unlike men, women suffered from the "double shift" of work and caring for the family and home. Working mothers had childcare problems and the public often blamed them for the rise in juvenile delinquency.
- The John Inglis Company in Toronto manufactured Bren Guns. Their icon was *Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl*. "Ronnie" was a real factory worker named Veronica Foster.
- For the first time, provinces established day-care facilities for children of mothers employed in war industries – but closed them once the war ended.
- 50,000 Canadian women joined the Armed Forces. They were placed in support jobs so that men could be released for combat duty. Their pay was 66% of that for men then rose to 80% in response to a public outcry led by the National Council of Women. The mottoes of the women's services tell the story: *We Serve That Men May Fly; We Serve That Men May Fight; We Are the Women Behind the Men Behind the Guns*.
- There were classes in personal grooming using substitutes for makeup – such as beet juice instead of lipstick. The message was how to look good for one's husband when he came home.
- Because it was considered a fast and easy way to dye hair, some women deliberately exposed a lock or two to cordite to turn it an orangey yellow.
- Campaigns told women that the war would end sooner if more women worked. Women were also warned that if they did not work then a soldier would die, people would call them slackers, and they were equivalent to men who avoided the draft. Women who took war jobs were praised.
- The magazines portrayed working women more positively than in the prewar years. They praised them for bravery, intelligence, steadfastness, competence and loyalty to soldiers. While negative images still persisted, in characterizations of women as slackers or as driven to their downfall by ambition or bitterness, these were counteracted by characters with positive qualities. To a significant degree, negative stereotypes of women gave way to images that showed them possessing strength, dependability, and compassion. *However the majority of the readers of these fictions were women. Therefore, this new, positive image of the working woman was for women only, to convince them to go work in factories, and not a signal for men and society at large that roles were shifting.*

# BOMB GIRLS

- “Single women may have been wooed into the workforce, but they were considered ‘dangerous,’” says historian Elaine Tyler May. “Men were constantly being warned that these single women could take their money and give them diseases.” The stereotyping of young, single women during the war as “dangerous” set up a potential recipe for disaster, with men having the moral upper hand. In the United States, promiscuous girls were commonly called the “Khaki-Wackies,” “Victory Girls” and “Good Time Charlottes.”
- The war propelled young men to focus less on the long-term future and more on the moment. “It was a matter of getting my fun when I could get it because who knew if I was going to be alive the next day,” said one World War II veteran.
- Those involved in recruiting women for war work in munitions factories argued that women doing jobs formerly performed by men were not upsetting the gender order. They claimed that
- Women’s “natural” endowments of “dexterity, patience and keen eyesight” made them eminently suitable for the “deft-fingered” precision work required for aircraft, gun and ammunition manufacture, especially electronics and optics. Such “feminization” and “domestication” of women’s war work was vividly captured in a newspaper photo showing a
- Woman factory worker laying out rows of igniter caps for smoke cartridges as if they were cookies on a baking sheet.
- Cordite, an explosive used in bomb making, would turn fair skin yellow. Fair haired and fair skinned women were usually placed in packaging and in other buildings where they were not exposed to the gun powder.
- Factories had parties in the canteen. They also held talent shows and beauty contests.
- Factories had on-site classes on economic food shopping, cooking, rationing and household management.
- There was zero tolerance for matches and lighters inside. Anyone caught would get prison time. One man got 3 months in jail for having matches and cigarettes in his pocket while on the floor.
- When the war ended, preference for jobs was given to ex-servicemen. Barriers to married women’s employment dropped back into place. What survived, however, were those pictures of women wearing bandanas and pants while handling riveters and blowtorches or sitting in uniform behind the wheel of a jeep. And these images would one day inspire a succeeding generation of women in the 1960s, those who launched the second wave of feminism called “Women’s’ Liberation.

# BOMB GIRLS

## THE STORY OF A REAL LIFE BOMB GIRL LOUISE JOHNSON

During WWII there were almost 50,000 Canadian women in uniform, nearly 250,000 women involved in Canada's war industries, 440,000 in the civilian labour force and hundreds of thousands of farmerettes tending the land.

The story of one munitions worker, Louise Johnson, shows that many women were "drafted" to work in munitions factories such as the Defence Industries Limited (DIL) shell filling plant in Ajax, Ontario. One among many thousands, Louise represents the Canadian women who heeded the call to help Canada in a time of need. "Young people today don't realize that the Battle of Britain was almost lost. In our hearts, everyone knew we had to pull together to do whatever had to be done."

Louise Johnson came from Saskatoon to Ajax to do what had to be done—prepare explosives for war. Louise's family were homesteaders who came from England in the late 1800s. After a time in Ontario, her family moved to Sturgeon River, Saskatchewan, for a land grant. "Our family had to 'prove up the land' which meant cultivating and living on the land we cleared." The community was so small that at age 7, Louise went to Shelbrook, Sask. to live with her grandmother to go to school.

In 1940–41 as the Canadian Government struggled with conscription, every Canadian over 18 years of age was registered with the government. "I received a phone call from Alec Russell in DIL's Personnel Department. With the government's list of 18 year olds, he was calling to set up interviews. They had teams going east and west in Canada to look for munitions workers." After Louise's interview she was offered a position where she would make almost twice what she was making in the hospital. DIL guaranteed transport, comfortable lodgings, a cafeteria and a safety net. If after three months Louise didn't like what she was doing, DIL would pay to send her home. "It was a big decision, but, I figured that I could serve my country in a way that was a piece of cake in comparison to those serving in uniform. I wrote my dad and he wrote back, 'Go for it!'"

The train ride, with three carloads of women from Saskatoon, took three days to reach Toronto. "I'd estimate there were at least 100 girls in each car. I didn't know anyone but lots of girls traveled with friends. We arrived on a bright sunny day to see buses lined up to take us to Ajax where we were made very welcome. The residences were great, hardwood floors and all. We were bunked two to a room."

The recruiters had told Louise very little about her job at DIL. All she knew was she'd be filling shells in a plant near Toronto. "I'd only been on a train once before in my life. I didn't want to go on a long train trip just to clean toilets!" Louise need not have worried. She was assigned the Blue Shift, filling 3.7" shells with cordite. There were three colour-coded shifts in the plant that worked around the clock six days a week. The safety bandanas that the women wore to cover their hair were different colours for each shift.

The shell filling wasn't difficult but the threat of static electricity around explosives made the job dangerous. "We couldn't wear rings, hair pins or have safety pins on our clothes. We were

# BOMB GIRLS

issued special shoes. The man from what is now Moody's in Pickering lost an eye and there were some fingers lost but when you consider that there were 9,000 people working, DIL had an excellent safety record."

Louise lived in the DIL residence from November 1942 to September 1943 when she moved to 51 Glynn Street, a "temporary" war house in Ajax. She and her friend Dorothy Bleutt from D'Arcy, Saskatchewan, rented the back room from the Chevrier family. They had moved to obtain kitchen privileges to do their own cooking. "Dorothy wore a white bandana because she was on Quality Control. In June 1944 when she transferred to Toronto, I filled my time by taking a typing course at Lord Elgin School." Louise was working on Line 3 when the floor lady told her to see the area foreman. "Someone took my scale and I went up and along a catwalk. I was worried, as few of us on the line were ever called to the area foreman. Art McCartney said, 'I understand you can type.' The course I'd taken hadn't amounted to much, so I told Mr. McCartney that I only knew where the keys were, but, if he wanted, I'd give it a try." Using an old manual typewriter, Louise started in the Shipped Office typing production reports of what went out of the plant. "It was four cents more an hour." Louise typed until she was moved back to Line 1.

"The Blue Shift had layoffs in 1943 going from three to two shifts. There wasn't as great a need for the shells they were producing. In August 1945 production ceased on Line 1. "That's when my typing came into play again. The Superintendent asked me to stay on to type all the Quit Slips. They were alphabetic but I kept moving mine to the bottom of the pile. There was no point typing mine until they were all done." When Louise finally did type her own Quit Slip, she took it to Selective Service, the forerunner of Unemployment Insurance. "We received some kind of severance pay and were told not to seek work. The men needed the jobs now. It had never occurred to me that there wouldn't be work for me outside the home. I'd been working since I was 16."

In 1946 Alec Russell (her original boss at DIL) and Louise married and took a delayed honeymoon trip out west to see her parents. "We obtained a car and went to Saskatchewan for six weeks. It was a turning point. My roots weren't deep in Ontario and we could have stayed out there. The deciding part was that my 18 year old brother couldn't find work out west, whereas he could get a job in Ontario. We brought my brother back to Ajax and he stayed with us until 1949."

Louise describes the years between layoff in 1945 and the birth of her daughter in 1948 as the worst time in her life. "Women like me were very frustrated. We knew that the men who had sacrificed their youth needed the jobs, but, what about us? One of my friends joked that she was coming to inspect my house because I'd washed the walls so often that the nails probably showed through. Female war workers drifted around without money or activities. Few of us could take courses. It wasn't until the babies arrived that any of us felt that we had a purpose."

When Louise's daughter entered school, Louise's life outside the home re-started very slowly. First she became involved in home and school. Then she sold subscriptions to the local paper. She's kept very busy since then receiving awards from Heritage Canada and the Town of Ajax for her community work.

# BOMB GIRLS

In 1965 Louise Johnson was widowed. She is still an active, contributing member of the Ajax community. The work of women like Louise Johnson turned the tide for the Allies in WWII. Ironically, these women served their country twice. When “drafted” to fire up the machinery of war, they proved themselves capable of anything. When the war geared down, they were offered nothing. War times required that they serve and they did. Immediate post-war society demanded they step aside and they did.

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