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## CHAPTER ONE

# FROM STUDENT TO SOLDIER

**I**T IS EARLY JANUARY 1943. We have been in London two weeks. I'm walking along the Strand with two of my friends, and two Canadian soldiers who have offered to show us around and take us to their favourite pub. The street is completely dark but the night is cold and clear, perfect for us. We don't know yet that this kind of night is also perfect for enemy bombers.

The siren begins its sudden, loud, piercing up-and-down wail. The soldiers don't react. They are used to it. Besides, one of the fellows is in the midst of an intriguing story, and we all just continue walking. Then we hear the roar of approaching bombers. The noise of their engines grows louder and louder. Searchlight beams criss-cross the sky. Two beams intersect, trapping an enemy plane in brilliant light. Ack-acks

(anti-aircraft guns) boom. Flak bursts and crackles all around the plane. More planes zoom overhead. The din of bombers and guns is deafening.

The few people left on the street start to run. We run, too, to the closest air-raid shelter. Not very far underground, just a basement, it offers limited protection, but at least shields us from flying debris. The shelter provides standing room only for a mix of military and civilian people, mostly the latter. We have trouble taking our eyes off one middle-aged man with a huge balloon-like growth on one side of his neck. Every few moments a bomb explodes somewhere in the distance.

“The docks,” a woman says.

The man with the growth on his neck starts to sing “There’ll Always Be an England” and we all join in. The atmosphere becomes quite jolly, but the air is close and we welcome the high-pitched steady note of the “all clear,” heralding our escape back into the frosty air, its freshness sullied by the smell of cordite. The next day a headline in the newspaper reads “Barrage Shells Kill Twelve.”



People say we must have been very brave to join up. That’s not the way it was, you know—not for me, at least, and I suspect not for a lot of us. Many may have been prompted by a sense of duty, especially those with boyfriends or brothers or other relatives in the forces, but I doubt we were truly brave. Brave is doing something you believe in despite being frightened to death. I, for one, was too young and giddy and foolhardy to be scared. Carefree and blessed with that conviction

of invincibility common to the young, I never considered the possibility that I might not survive this incredible adventure.

Once, on the first day of the Atlantic crossing, I did experience a strange sensation in the pit of my stomach—guilt rather than fear. Two male officers had stopped me while a friend and I were walking the deck. Although our own officers had warned us against tossing anything into the sea, I had thus thoughtlessly disposed of an apple core. The two young lieutenants were very pleasant when reminding me of the rule, but I felt a pang of remorse. The feeling recurred later in the day when a couple of girls related stories of U-boat sightings. Had my tiny apple core bouncing about on the waves alerted the enemy? It took only a moment or two for me to realize the absurdity of that idea. I shrugged off the feeling and dismissed the girls' stories as unfounded rumours.

During our first lifeboat drill on the Atlantic crossing, we were warned: "If you have to jump, pull down on your life jacket or it'll come up and hit your chin and knock you out when you slam into the water!" Balancing on the sharply tilting deck, I gazed down at the cold grey sea and made up my mind. No one would last more than two minutes in that. Better to be knocked out and get it over with. Decision made, I then relaxed and enjoyed the rest of the voyage, delighting in the pitch and roll of the ship as it zigzagged its way across the U-boat-infested ocean. Only years later would we find out just how badly infested it had been. At the time of our crossing, the U-boat crisis was at its height.

People asked why I joined. I gave them the simple answer: I wanted adventure, travel, to be a part of the action. But there were other compelling reasons, which I shared with

no one. I was too embarrassed. First, I needed desperately to get away from home. I had no independence, no freedom to make my own decisions, no privacy, not even a room of my own. What young woman wants to share a small bedroom with her mother, even if the relationship is a happy one? In my case, it was anything but. Although essentially a good person, extremely hard-working, well-meaning, and often generous and self-sacrificing, my mother was also extremely controlling. She loved me when I was little, but by the time I reached my teens, she became so caught up in her own emotional distress that she had little love to give. Moody and unpredictable, swinging from bursts of generosity to stinging verbal attacks, she kept Dad and me on edge. My brother, seven years my senior, was the only one permitted to stand up to her, but even he was forced to tread gently. I had to get away.

Another reason for my flight was the acute disappointment I had suffered at university. Aiming for a career in journalism, and there being no such program at the University of British Columbia (UBC), I had devoted much of my time during second year to writing for the campus newspaper, the *Ubyssy*. I worked hard, loved it, and was gratified to find many of my stories making the front page. One item, especially, caused quite a stir.

At that time, classes in second-year English at UBC were segregated by gender.<sup>1</sup> What made this arrangement especially unfair was the fact that the course, mandatory for all Arts students, discriminated against the female students by assigning them to teachers on the lowest rungs of the academic ladder. Second-year English was a survey course, ranging from the Elizabethan to the contemporary era. In the male-only class,

the literature of each era was taught by the professor who specialized in that field. These senior professors were all male, the juniors female and/or much less experienced.<sup>2</sup>

I had been looking forward to the course, and so I was acutely disappointed and disgruntled during the fall term when I became aware of this situation. My fellow students, however, seemed not to even notice, except for ten girls who had a course conflict. Their problem was resolved when Dorothy Mawdsley, then Dean of Women, persuaded the two male professors involved to make an exception for them, allowing them into otherwise exclusively “male” lectures. In January, however, Professor “Freddy” Wood, teaching Victorian Drama, refused to follow suit.

A couple of girls then complained to me in my capacity as a *Ubysey* reporter. Incensed by this additional injustice, I in turn complained bitterly to my editor, Pierre Berton.<sup>3</sup> “Go and crash the men’s class,” he urged. The next day I did so, taking the ten excluded girls and another ten female sympathizers with me. We arrived early and sat in the top row of the tiered classroom. The professor walked in, placed his notes upon the lectern, and began to speak. A few words into his first sentence, he glanced up and spotted us. He stopped abruptly. His jaw tightened. “I am not accustomed to lecturing to young women in this course.” He spat the words out through clenched teeth. “Such young women will kindly vacate this room at once.” A male chorus of hisses and boos followed us out.

“Freddy Wood threw us out!” I complained to Pierre.<sup>4</sup>

“Great! There’s your story. Write it up!”

We ran it on the front page, complete with the professor’s picture. I had forgotten my exact wording until more

than sixty years later when a young man in the Development Department at UBC dug the article out of the archives and sent me a copy. What a diatribe! Especially the last line, which suggests that if nothing were done to appease these enraged young women, Professor Wood might “not find it safe to walk across the campus without a bodyguard.” Fortunately Pierre had not given me a byline.

Today the last line of my article might warrant a charge of “uttering threats,” a criminal offence, but as my daughter suggests, even had such a law existed at that time, we women might have been considered so powerless and ineffectual as to pose no threat to anyone. She’s probably right.

Within hours of the paper coming out, Pierre sent me over to the professor’s office to get his reaction. Professor Wood ushered me to a hard-backed chair while he settled into an easy one.

He glared at me. “I demand a retraction.”

“Sir,” I ventured to ask, “are you saying this event didn’t occur?”

Like a seasoned politician, he avoided a direct answer. “There are very good reasons for segregated classes in second-year English.”

“Sir, would you please tell me what some of them are?” I asked timidly.

“There are certain things in English literature that simply cannot be taught in mixed classes,” he hissed.

I wanted to ask, “Sir, would you please tell me what some of those things are?” but restrained myself. Instead I thanked him for the interview and took my leave.

“We’ll give him his retraction,” Pierre told me and grinned,

“but we won’t have room right away.” I don’t remember exactly what happened to the retraction. We did consider burying some non-apology in an obscure spot on the back page, the common fate of retractions. In any case, it would not have received nearly as much attention as the original article. Canadian University Press, a news service that distributes stories from campus newspapers, had seized on my report, with the result that university newspapers all across Canada, including that at Queen’s, the professor’s alma mater, picked it up.<sup>5</sup>

That article, and others less sensational, brought me a promotion to the rank of associate editor. I thought I was on my way. The following year I would surely advance to the position of senior editor, the usual next step. Despite the fact that I was not part of the “in group” that partied together and often socialized at places like the Georgia Hotel beer parlour, I expected my hard work to pay off. Instead, the next year I was relegated to a minor role, along with the task of editing the student handbook and student directory, tedious chores no one else wanted. Pierre having graduated and gone off to war, along with a couple of other male staff members, the atmosphere at the *Ubysey* office had changed completely. I concluded, doubtless correctly at the time, that my personality did not suit the career to which I aspired. Thus, the spring of 1942 found me at loose ends.

Almost immediately after my birthday, I went down to the old Hotel Vancouver at Georgia and Granville, newly taken over by the Army as part of Military District 11, to enlist in the Canadian Women’s Army Corps. I had just turned twenty-one, minimum age for acceptance.