

RCAF Airwoman ‘Wouldn’t Have Missed It for the World’

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Eugenie Francoeur Turner served at a bomber base in Yorkshire, where she witnessed horrific crashes, dodged bombs, and worked around the clock on D-Day. It was the most exciting time of her life.



I recently attended the Royal Canadian Air Force Airwomen's Reunion in Whitehorse, Yukon. There I presented my slide show, outlining the research for my novel, to a captive audience.

(My wartime novel [Bird's Eye View](#) is fact-based fiction, the story of a Canadian woman who joins the air force and works as a photo interpreter. To read one thrilling chapter, click here: [Bird's Eye View Excerpt.](#))

I loved chatting with these veterans, who are so rightfully proud of their service to Canada.

The association is composed of peacetime women, but of course it welcomes those who paved the way for them in wartime – sadly, most of them are gone, or too old to travel.

So it was a special honour to meet the only wartime veteran present, Eugenie Francoeur Turner of Kelowna, B.C., particularly since she was one of the few Canadian women who served on an operational bombing station in England – just like the heroine in my novel!

(A reporter from The Whitehorse Star also interviewed Eugenie, and the newspaper photograph above is such a good one that I have used it instead of my own.)

Although she is 92, Eugenie's memory is crystal clear. A striking woman with strong features and a slight French accent, she gave me a copy of her written memoirs.

Eugenie is Determined to Enlist

Eugenie Francoeur was born on November 30, 1922 and grew up in Lachine, just outside Montreal. When the war broke out, she was attending a Catholic convent school as a lay student.

“All the boys were enlisting. My own brother joined the navy. I was quite upset that I wasn't a boy, because I wanted to be a pilot so bad.” (This was a common complaint among girls from 1939 to 1941, when the Canadian government finally relented and let them in).

“When the air force started enrolling women, then I decided that was for me; I had to do that.”

At the time she was commuting by train to her job with a Montreal insurance company. She enlisted at the Montreal recruiting office on October 12, 1942.

Eugenie told her brother, who was supposed to keep it a secret, but he informed their parents. So her mother went down to the recruiting office in Montreal and told them that Eugenie was not allowed to enlist!

The following week, Eugenie went back to the recruiting office and lied. “I said, it's all right now. I talked to my parents and I can go.”

As a new recruit with the RCAF Women's Division, called WDs for short, Eugenie did her basic training at Rockcliffe in Ottawa, followed by a three-week course in teletype operation.

There she earned the wartime nickname of “Frankie” since most English Canadians couldn't pronounce her last name, Francoeur. Here's her official RCAF photograph taken when she was nineteen — doesn't she look happy?

(Notice that Eugenie is wearing the original cap, modelled after the British women's air force, with a gathered crown. Later this was changed to a sleeker cap. Read more about this by clicking: [Hats, Helmets and Headgear](#)).



Eugenie is Posted to Newfoundland

“My first posting was Gander, Newfoundland. Even though I had asked for Vancouver, I ended up on the other side of the world!”

At the time Newfoundland was an overseas posting, and Eugenie sailed there from Halifax. “It usually took a couple of days, but we were chased by German subs and it took us four days in a real rough sea. The corvettes surrounding our ship were dropping depth charges and disappearing from sight behind high waves and rocking our ship pretty bad at times, when we were thrown around. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t scared!”

Although she hadn’t asked for Newfoundland, Eugenie enjoyed her time there. It was no longer a sleepy island, but a vital jumping-off point for ships and aircraft heading toward the war raging overseas. During the war, Newfoundland was one of the most highly militarized places in North America.

“Gander was interesting. We had the RCAF base on one side of the perimeter, the RAF at one end, the American base on the other side, and the Pictou Highlanders (a Canadian Army infantry regiment) also had a base there. Our base was the only one with women. So there were 250 of us, and whenever one of the group would give a dance or something, they would come and pick us girls up at our base. So we were treated like royalty, really. And you know, there was so much respect, I was surprised, and the fellows were really good with us.

“I was there for 11 months. At the time, all the aircraft going overseas from Canada and the United States had to stop in Gander to refuel, so I got to see all the bombers, all the new planes coming in; got to fly in a few of them, as a matter of fact. We had a few Hurricanes, PBVs, Harvards but we also had B-24s and B-17s and other transport planes.”

This photograph shows a smiling Frankie, still wearing the old-style cap.



When she left Gander, Eugenie experienced a hair-raising incident.

“I was transferred back to Montreal in October 1943, but the weather was so bad nothing was taking off. Finally several of us were told that an RAF B-24 was leaving for St. Hubert, Quebec, and we could go with them.

“We took all our gear to the hanger, were fitted with parachutes, and were ready to leave the next morning. That evening I was in the canteen saying goodbye to my friends, when a young man I had never seen before told me that one of our own B-24s was leaving for Montreal in a couple of hours, and they were willing to take me. He drove me in his little truck to the RAF hanger to pick up my gear, and within an hour we were on our way to Dorval, the airport near Montreal.

“I was sitting in the front gun turret, the transparent bubble on the front of the plane. There was no seat for me, so I was sitting on a parachute. What a view – especially when we hit a thunderstorm like I had never seen before. Talk about bouncing around – I never thought we would make it! Coming down at Dorval, the flaps were malfunctioning and with the slippery tarmac, I thought to myself: ‘Well, at least I will die close to home!’ We had a rough landing, but we made it.

“The next day Dad came home for lunch, and while we were listening to the news we heard that an RAF B-24 had left Gander that morning and crashed on the coast of Labrador and there were no survivors. That was the plane I was scheduled to take. I still get goosebumps when I think about it.”

Eugenie Posted to England

Eugenie remained at home for the next few weeks. “Since I was working out of the Montreal office, I was allowed to stay home and commute to work. This was very nice but it didn’t last, since in November I received my orders to go overseas! You weren’t allowed to go until you were twenty-one years old, but fortunately my birthday was in November and I left in December.

“My parents and brother, who was on leave from the navy, saw me off at the train station in Montreal. As he was saying goodbye to me, he said: ‘Sis, if you are ever cornered, use your knee!’

(“I didn’t even know what he meant until I was cornered in the blackout in York one night after a friend had taken me to the movies. Up came my knee, this fellow’s hat went flying, he doubled up, and called me some pretty choice names which I won’t repeat!”)

“I left for overseas in December 1943. We left as a convoy and hit a terrible storm on the way. After four days, we noticed that we’d lost the convoy and we were all alone. It took us eight days to get to England. I have never seen so many seasick people in my life. I was never sick, never even missed a meal. But the cabins smelled something awful and the bunks were full of bedbugs, so I spent most of the trip in the bathtub with my blanket and pillow!

“When we arrived in Bournemouth, there was no hot water in the hotel where we were billeted. We were allowed to send one telegram each home to tell our families that we had arrived safely.”

Here’s a photo that Eugenie sent to her parents, marked “Papa and Mama.” You can see that she is now wearing the new RCAF cap with the sleek brim.



Life at Linton-on-Ouse, Yorkshire

Eugenie was posted to No. 6 Group, Bomber Command in Linton-on-Ouse, Yorkshire. This was one of six Canadian stations with a total of fourteen Canadian squadrons flying nightly bombing missions into enemy territory.

“We had two squadrons at Linton: 408 and 426, flying Lancasters and Halifaxes, 15 bombers for each squadron.”

Here’s a wartime aerial photo of Linton-on-Ouse, which still serves as an active Royal Air Force base today, showing the three long runways where the bombers took off and landed. (Photo Credit: RAF)



“I spent almost two years there in Telecommunications as a teletype operator. My duties were working with Operations – receiving weather reports and orders from London, deciphering messages and so on, getting all the information for the air crews to receive at their briefing, before their next operation.

“One of my duties was sending to Headquarters a list of all the bombers that were leaving with all the crews. So this meant seven air crew in each of the bombers leaving, that meant around 200 names. I had to send a name and the serial number and position aboard the bombers and their rank and their age, which was never older than 25.

“And then when they came back, I had to send a list of the casualties, which I abhorred. I really never got used to that.

“One incident that happened on the base was watching one of our Halifaxes crashing into the motor pool, of all places. (A motor pool was the parking area for all the vehicles on the base, including jeeps and trucks). The explosion was horrific! Seeing the members of the crew being pulled out and taken to hospital, some still on fire, is a scene still vivid in my memory. I can still smell the burning flesh. Only one man survived the crash.”

Here’s a photo of something that Eugenie saw every day: a Lancaster being loaded with bombs at Linton-on-Ouse.



“Another incident happened when I was coming off duty one afternoon. The bombers were in the air waiting for the last one to join them before taking off on a sortie, when a fighter plane collided with a bomber in the air.

“There was a terrible explosion, with pieces of aircraft and bodies coming down all over the place. I was on my way to the chapel to attend mass, as I did quite often after work, when this happened. Father Monahan, our chaplain, was saying mass with tears in his eyes, as he had just given communion to some of those boys before takeoff.”

Dodging Bombs in London

“In 1944 I was sent to London for an advanced teletype course. We were billeted in a hotel in South Kensington, right next to the park where they had anti-aircraft guns. We were bombed every night for a month, and I think those guns made more noise than the bombing itself!

“I remember once I was on leave in London with a girlfriend of mine, Joan Reeves from Vancouver. We were coming out of the theatre that night and we were being bombed. The wardens, you know, ushered you into the shelters, but I never went into a shelter because my fright was to be buried alive. We were near Piccadilly Circus, so we headed for the escalators to go into the Underground, but somebody fell at the bottom of the escalator and people were piling up on top, so we went out again.”

This wartime photo shows people sheltering from the bombs in Piccadilly Circus underground station.



“We didn’t stay there; we hid in a doorway somewhere until it was over. You could see the bombs coming down and people running, some of them were being hit. That was a very scary time for me.

“Since I would never go into the shelter, being afraid of being buried alive, I spent my nights on the hallway of the third floor wearing my tin helmet. A week or so after I returned to Linton-on-Ouse, the hotel in London was hit and several of the girls were killed. Another close call.”

Eugenie Worked on D-Day

Eugenie remembers D-Day, considered the turning point of World War Two, when the Allies successfully invaded the continent. "I was working around the clock. The bombers were taking off on operations fully loaded, coming back to refuel and reload with bombs, and then taking off again. This went on for twenty-four hours.

"We in Signals and Ops had been told a few days beforehand that the invasion was about to happen – of course we were sworn to secrecy, but we knew enough not to talk, since all of our work was secret."

True Love Began With a Slap

"One evening my girlfriend and I biked into the nearby village of Linton, and we passed a pub where the airmen from our base went on their time off. We were sitting around at tables on the grass outside, listening to music played on a portable phonograph, like Glen Miller and Tommy Dorsey.

"My friend was drinking too much, and she started to get really high. I was embarrassed, because I was so proud of my Canadian uniform. There were civilians in the pub and I didn't want them to think badly of us Canadian girls. So I was trying to persuade her to go home. Behind me, I heard one of the airmen say: 'Just leave her alone, she's having fun!'

"I was so angry that I swung around and slapped this guy across the face! He said: 'Listen, lady, if I get slapped, I need a reason!' So I told him how upset I was about my friend, and he helped me take her back to the base.

"Hal Turner was from Winnipeg, a Direction Finder operator on our base. He didn't fly combat but he guided the bombers home. After we got my friend settled, he said: 'I have two fresh eggs in my locker, would you like one?' A fresh egg! That was a special treat, as we never had them. I couldn't resist, so we went to his barracks and I waited outside while he brought out the egg.

"Then he said to me: 'I think I'll marry you someday!' And I replied: 'Well, whenever you're ready, let me know!'"

Six months later we were engaged, and four months after that we were married, on March 24, 1945.

My husband was a wonderful guy, and when he found out that I wanted to raise my children in the Catholic faith, he went to the priest on our base without even being asked and converted to Catholicism.

We were married in the Catholic church in York called St. Wilfrid's, just across from the big York Minster. It had been raining for a month, but on that day the sun was shining and it was beautiful.



It was a small wedding, but our friends had organized a surprise reception in a pub with flowers, and a wedding cake baked by a lady in Linton. The best man was Don Schmidl and my matron of honour was Gladys Rennie.



“We spent our wedding night in London, on our way to our honeymoon in Brighton. We were no sooner in bed than the bombing started and we spent the rest of the night in the basement, drinking tea. We had other things on our mind, believe me!

“Once we were in Brighton, a resort on the south coast, we had a great honeymoon. The beaches were covered with barbed wire, but the V-1s and V-2s (the jet-propelled weapons being fired on London from behind enemy lines) and the bombers went overhead, heading for London, so it was relatively safe.”

Victory At Last!

“My husband had already served for five years in North Africa and England, and the war was drawing to an end, so he was repatriated back to Canada and I was granted permission to go with him.

“On May 8, 1945 we were both in Manchester at the base there, waiting for a ship, when the war ended. The place went absolutely wild!”

A few days later the newlyweds sailed for home on the Ile de France, along with 20,000 other happy people.

Hal and Eugenie moved to Winnipeg for one year, then to Montreal, where Hal worked for the telephone company.

“By 1962 we had five children ranging in age from two to sixteen. There was a terrible ice storm, and Hal came home the next morning after spending the whole night repairing telephone lines, almost frozen stiff, and said: ‘We’re not staying in this country!’

“I thought he was kidding, but the next week he went down to the U.S. Immigration Office and took out papers for all of us. We sold our house and packed up the kids and drove to California. Hal found work immediately and we stayed there for the next twenty-five years.”

Eugenie Returns to Canada

Eugenie has suffered some terrible losses in her life. After almost forty years of marriage, her husband died in 1983, while still in his sixties.

Her oldest child and her only daughter Valerie was born in 1946 and passed away of cancer in 2001, at the age of fifty-five. Married to John Meek, she had two sons, Daniel and David.

Two of Eugenie’s four sons, Richard and Gregory, served in Vietnam – being Canadian citizens, they were not drafted but they volunteered – and both were exposed to Agent Orange, a deadly pesticide used by the U.S. military to destroy crops, since proven to cause cancer and birth defects.

Richard, born in 1947, is married to Nancy and they have three living children: JoAnna, Jonathan, and Nanette. Their daughter named Nicole had spina bifida and died in 2014, a result of her father’s exposure to Agent Orange.

Gregory, who was born in 1949, died prematurely at the age of sixty-four in 2013, also as a result of his exposure to Agent Orange. He was married to Kathleen, and had a daughter Amanda Lynn and twin sons Michael and Brian.

Lennard, born in 1952, has two children: Lindsey Marie and Matthew.

Finally, Eugenie's youngest son Mark, born in 1960, also died of cancer in 2012. He was married to Denise, and his two sons are Justin and Christopher.

Of her five children, Eugenie has only two surviving sons, Rick and Lennard, and both live in Whitehorse – another reason she decided to attend the RCAF Airwomen Reunion there.

After her husband died, Eugenie decided to return to her homeland and in 1987 she moved to Kelowna because she had a sister living there at the time. She became very involved in community activities including the 883 Wing of the Royal Canadian Air Force Association, and has made many new friends.

Of her time in the service, she says this:

“I wouldn't have missed it for the world. As a matter of fact, if I'd been a man, I would have stayed in the forces. Yeah, I enjoyed the military very much. I think it's wonderful. You know, they have so many more opportunities. Now they can be pilots, they can do anything they want to, where we couldn't in our time. Oh, I think it's a wonderful opportunity. I'm amazed that not too many of the girls are taking advantage of it.”

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