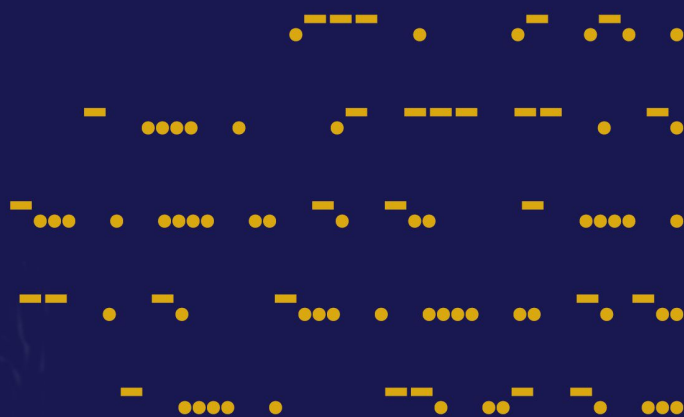


A WREN at War

Female Codebreakers of
the Royal Canadian Navy



Womens Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS)

The Beginning

As in many areas of the war effort, women began replacing men in jobs on the home front. As more and more men were required to fight, women were targeted to fill their places and keep factories, transit, offices running. During the Second World War Canadian officials asked for representatives of the Women's Royal Naval Service (British Wrens) to help set up a similar organization in Canada. By July 1942 the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service was established, the last of the three services to recruit women.

Service in this organization was popular and two thousand applicants applied for seventy spaces in the first WREN class. On September 19 1942, twenty-two women were passed as officers in His Majesty's Royal Canadian Navy. They were the first women to ever carry the King's commission in any British commonwealth navy. The graduates of the first class were to organize a service that would eventually have over six thousand members.

The first basic training centre was established in Galt, Ontario and carried the name HMCS Conestoga (all training centers were named as ships because they were part of the Navy). Women who were destined to be coders, visual signalers, teletype operators, switchboard and radio operators, plotters and telegraphists were trained at St. Hyacinthe, following their basic training at Galt.



Collingwood Division, HMCS Conestoga Feb-Mar 1944, Wren McDonald fifth from the right, back row
Military Communications and Electronics Museum

WREN Signals Training

St.-Hyacinthe Naval Signals School

HMCS St Hyacinthe began operations as a naval signals school in October 1941 after the realization that the school would need to expand beyond its current capacity. It was deemed economical to use the already built Militia Training Centre No 46 in Saint Hyacinthe Quebec instead of building onto the existing school in Halifax.

The school grew quickly, eventually training 2600 sailors and WRCNS in a variety of signalling trades. These included visual signalling, telegraphy, coding, radar and as radio artificers. The WRCNS arrived in 1943 to this training base and took part in all of these courses except for radio artificers.

Their training was specialized to allow them to serve as Signals Officers on shore bases. The Wireless Telegraphy (W/T) Special Operators course required 160 days of instruction for the women of the WRCNS to gain proficiency in receiving coded transmissions. Eventually St. Hyacinthe would become the largest communications training school in the entire British Empire.



St.-Hyacinthe, Quebec Naval Signals School.
Maruo Collection, Military Communications and Electronics
Museum

Naval Intelligence

Special Wireless Station at Gordon Head

Gordon Head is a quiet seaside community on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. During World War II, a secret Special Wireless Station was established in June of 1940. It was a vital outpost in the Royal Canadian Navy's radio intelligence operation against the Japanese.

Messages were intercepted and bearings on enemy transmission were provided. These messages were in Wabun (also called Kana) Morse Code. Wabun Morse code is a form of Morse Code used to send the Japanese language in Katakana characters. The Wrens and other signals personnel used specialized Kana keyboards, which translated Japanese characters into Roman letters. Around 85 Wrens were trained on Wabun Code and by early 1945, the station was operated by the WRCNS.

After the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, Gordon Head became part of the US Navy West Coast Network, as the US, UK and Canada rationalized their intelligence operations. All raw messages intercepted at Gordon Head went through the Seattle headquarters and were then relayed to Washington. This cooperation was vital for the war's eventual successful outcome. The station was closed in 1946 and the building that housed the station is now on the University of Victoria's campus.



Group Photo - Wrens stationed at Gordon Head Special Wireless Telegraphist Station
Military Communications and Electronics Museum



WRCNS Profile

Wren Isabel McDonald

Isabel McDonald, a native of North Bay, Ontario, joined the Women's Royal Canadian Navy Service (WRCNS) in 1942. She completed her basic training at HMCS Conestoga (also known as the Stone Frigate) in Galt, Ontario. When this training was complete Wren McDonald was selected to train at the Naval Communications School at St-Hyacinthe, Que. It was here that she was trained to read the special Kana Morse symbols used by the Japanese Navy.

After the completion of her training she was first sent to Esquimalt, then to a secret signal outpost in Gordon Head, British Columbia. As part of McDonald's service, she signed the Official Secrets Act. The Wrens worked in shifts, mostly at night, and their work location was secret, being transported there in canvas covered trucks. Wren McDonald and her colleagues helped to capture and decode valuable intelligence from the enemy and discover the points of origins for the intercepted messages.

Wren McDonald left the navy in 1946 and studied at the University of Toronto. She married Rudy Mauro and the couple later wrote a book on the RCAF airmen from their hometown of North Bay who died during the war. In 2016, Isabel Mauro (nee McDonald) was awarded the Bletchley Commemorative Badge for her service at Gordon Head. She passed away on August 22, 2018 just before her 96th birthday.



Isabel McDonald (far left) during her naval service
Maruo Collection, Military Communications and Electronics
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A WREN at War

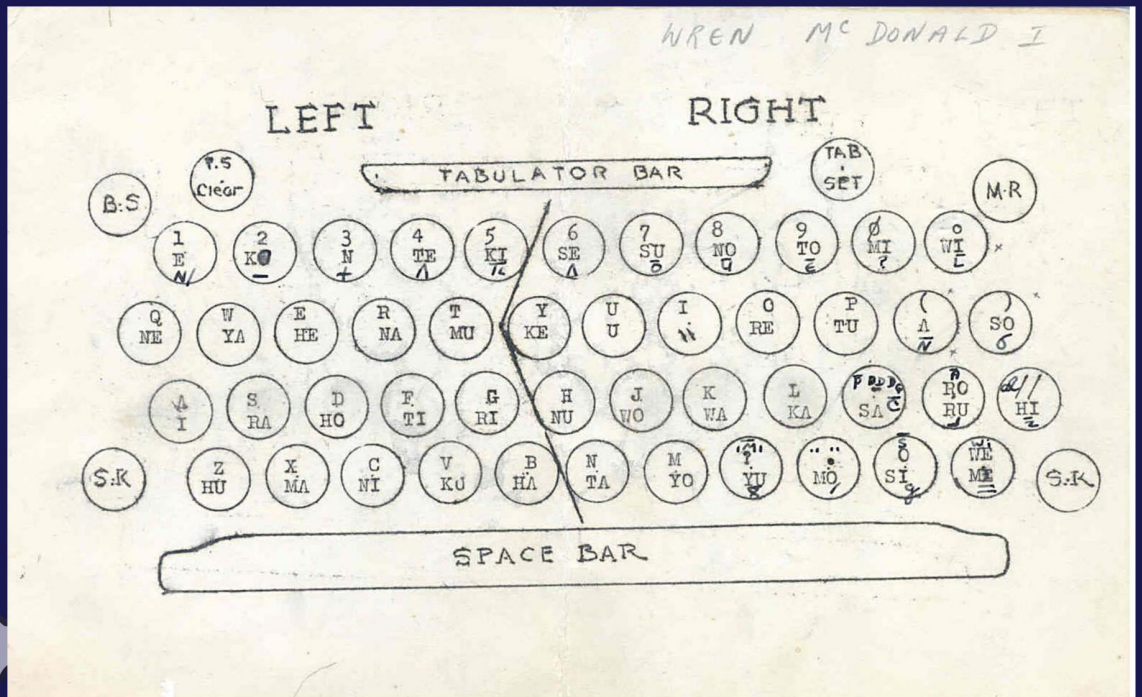


Wren Naval Issue Beret/Tam. This particular tam was worn by Wren Isabel McDonald throughout her service
31 January 1944 to 13 December 1945

Below: Portrait of Isabel McDonald in her tam
Photo Credit: Military Communications and Electronics Museum



Wabun (Kana) Code Training



Above: Student Kana Keyboard Diagram, belonging to Wren McDonald
 Below: Japanese Morse Code Alphabet
 Photo Credit: Military Communications and Electronics Museum



Japanese Morse Code

·	^	He	····	又	Nu	····	5	5	-----	6	6
-	△	Mu	····	夕	Ku	····	4	4	-----	×	Me
··	ラ	Ra	····	チ	Chi	····	×		-----	毛	Mo
··	ウ	U	····	ノ	No	····	3	3	-----	ユ	Yu
··	ナ	Na	····	カ	Ka	····	ト	ト	-----	キ	Ki
··	ヤ	Ya	····	□	Ra	····	ミ	ミ	-----	サ	Sa
··	ホ	Ho	····	ツ	Tsu	····	。	。	-----	ル	Ru
··	ワ	Wa	····	ヲ	Wo	····	2	2	-----	エ	E
··	リ	Ri	····	ハ	Ha	····	オ	オ	-----	7	7
··	レ	Re	····	マ	Ma	····	キ	Yi	-----	ヒ	Hi
··	”	”	····	ニ	Ni	····	ン	N	-----	シ	Shi
··	イ	I	····	ケ	Ke	····	テ	Te	-----	ア	A
··	タ	Ta	····	フ	Hu	····	エ	Ye	-----	8	8
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A WREN at War

Photos from the Mauro (McDonald)
Collection

