

# Media Release

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## Stratford Recognizes Contributions of Mi'kmaq Sisters

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Today the Town of Stratford unveiled a fourth interpretive panel in a series commemorating wartime acts of significance. The latest interpretive panel tells the wartime story two Mi'kmaq sisters from Stratford, then Southport, who both enlisted during the Second World War.

Rachael (b. 1920) and Blanche (b. 1922) were the daughters of Michael and Mary Ann Thomas, two of eight children the couple raised. Around 1929 the family moved to Southport from Lennox Island to provide their children with a believed to be better education. Both girls attended Rochford Square School after their move to Southport and led similar lives being just two years apart.

Fresh out of college in 1942, Blanche was one of 500 women from the Maritimes enticed to work in a large munitions factory in Ajax, Ontario. At its peak, the factory had 9,000 workers (most of them women) and produced over 40 million rounds of shells. After a few months in Ajax, Blanche returned to PEI and on November 13, 1942, Blanche followed Rachael's lead and signed up with the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC). Rachael, who had joined the CWAC some months earlier, was one of the first from this province to enlist.

The CWAC was a non-combatant branch of the Canadian Army established in 1941 for the purpose of releasing men from non-combatant roles in Canada's armed forces. Women served in a variety of occupations, such as drivers, mechanics, cooks, clerks, typists, and stenographers. Private Rachael Thomas and Private Blanche Thomas both began their service in Halifax as administrative clerks. In September 1944, Rachael arrived in England to serve the CWAC overseas, with Blanche following soon after.

With the German surrender on May 8, 1945, both Rachael and Blanche Thomas were among hundreds of CWAC personnel transferred to northern Europe to work on the complex task of repatriating the army to Canada. Both Rachael and Blanche served with the Canadian Army Occupation Force in Germany. Privately they hoped to be part of any future occupation force in Japan, where the war was still active. However, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki quickly led to victory over Japan, and the war was over. Rachael and Blanche were discharged in July 1946, each with the rank of Corporal.

On periods of leave, the two sisters would travel and sight-see together, visiting Scotland and Paris, coming home with fond memories and humorous stories. Nevertheless, both were impacted by the tragedy of war. Blanche Thomas recalled one of her more vivid memories. "I served overseas with the occupational forces. I have a lot of sad memories. It was terrible to watch the young soldiers all in casts on their way home. One young man was pulling the hairs out of his chest, and he had sores from that. He saw his parents when he came into Montreal and nearly went crazy trying to get to them, but he wasn't allowed out. That was one of the saddest things of my time."

While most Indigenous personnel were treated as equals while in uniform, upon discharge things were different. Despite their service, Status Indians did not receive equal access to Veterans' benefits or the right to vote. Mi'kmaw Keptin John Joe Sark observed, "These great men and women showed exceptional loyalty to Canada...for a country and flag that did not recognize them as citizens."

At the end of their service, both Rachael and Blanche Thomas received two military medals: the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with the Overseas Service Bar — granted to persons who voluntarily served on Active Service; and the War Medal 1939-1945 — awarded to all full-time personnel of the Armed Forces.

Upon returning to Canada, Rachael Thomas lived the remainder of her life in the Greater Toronto Area. She never married, choosing to retain her Indian status, which she would have lost if she had married a non-status man. Rachael took vocational training provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs and ultimately became an Aboriginal Courtworker in Hamilton, Ontario, helping to identify and repatriate victims of the Sixties Scoop. Finding justice for these children was Rachael's greatest pride. She was involved with Indian Affairs as well as her community and was a proud member of the Army Navy Air Force Veterans in Canada (ANAF) Unit 262. Rachael Thomas spent her final years in Mississauga, where she died on November 5, 1996.

Blanche Thomas returned home after the war and moved to New Brunswick to attend Saint John Vocational School to become a beautician. While at a North End diner, Blanche and her friend overheard a Veteran army engineer give questionable administrative advice. Blanche later corrected him, adding "You have no idea what you're talking about!" Blanche and the young man, Gerard Thomas Doucett, were married on June 27, 1947, and had six children: Geraldine (died at 2 weeks), Virginia, Thomas, Dennis Michael, Paul (died at 14 months), and Peter.

After Blanche married, she continued as a beautician, working out of her new home in Saint John. Eventually, the chemicals proved too harsh on her hands, so she decided to become a full-time homemaker and mother. Once the youngest was in school, Blanche returned to the workforce as a clerk at Canadian Tire and then as security at Simpsons-Sears. For many years, she was an active member of The Royal Canadian Legion "Fundy Ladies" Branch 68, and the Catholic Women's League. In 1985, amendments to the Indian Act allowed Blanche, like other women who had lost their Indian status upon marriage to a non-status man, to have status restored and applied to her children. Blanche died in Saint John on September 21, 2009.

Throughout their lives, Rachael and Blanche remained proud of their Mi'kmaq heritage. Their service to Canada lives on in the legacy they left behind, with Blanche's daughter having served in the Royal Canadian Navy, and her granddaughter serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force. Today, thousands of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis are serving with the Canadian Armed Forces at home and overseas with the same dedication and pride as their ancestors.

"Let us continue to remember those who have served our country", commented Stratford Mayor Steve Ogden during the service, "as well as those who continue to do so. Lest we forget."

Residents are encouraged to view the four interpretive panels when they are at Stratford Town Centre for the Remembrance Day service, or anytime. These, along with the walkway installation around the cenotaph ensure that we will not forget the sacrifices made.

The Town of Stratford would like to recognize and thank members of the Heritage Committee for their leadership and assistance with this latest project.

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For more information please contact:

Wendy Watts, Community & Business Engagement Manager

P: (902) 569-1995

E: [wwatts@townofstratford.ca](mailto:wwatts@townofstratford.ca)

W: [www.townofstratford.ca](http://www.townofstratford.ca)