

Hired 1974

In April of 1974 I left my beloved job as a civilian dispatcher in quest of my *suit of blue*. As a civilian, I was a records clerk in Peel Headquarters. It lacked the excitement of Communications in Toronto and I must admit I lingered on my breaks, looking longingly into the communication centre in Peel.

Happily, June 17, 1974 I was sworn in as a police officer. I was fitted for a uniform, my *suit of blue*. There was an orientation course that included firearms training, a self defense course (they wanted the police women to have an edge I guess), information on rules and regulations, bylaws and more. I thought my brain was going to explode, but, I studied hard and also learned how to spit polish shoes, gun belts and more.

The next step was completing a six week course at the Ontario Police College in Aylmer.

Recruit Training Part A, Ontario Police College

The Ontario Police College was located near Aylmer Ontario. I did not even know where Aylmer was, but, followed the provided directions.

I pulled into this old air force base that still had an airplane mounted at the entrance. There were white wooden buildings with green trim. The Town of Aylmer was not within walking distance... nothing was, except horses and cattle and huge fields of crops.

There were buildings that included a huge drill hall where we learned to march and took physical training and police holds; an outdoor range where we took our firearms training; a dug out building where we experienced tear gas; and classrooms for subjects like Criminal Code, Courts, Arrest, Search, Seizure, English, Evidence, Highway Traffic Act, Liquor Law & Procedures, Miscellaneous Acts & Methods. The mess hall was buffet style and the food was actually pretty good. Because women were new to the Police College, temporary 'women' signs were placed on some of the men's bathrooms throughout the college.

There were very few women in the program. We lived in one of the small wooden buildings and shared a bathroom.

Evenings were spent working on assignments, studying and practicing police holds as well as polishing our shoes and other leather equipment.

There were daily inspections of our quarters so it was important to get up early, prepare the bed (with hospital corners and bedding tight enough to allow a dropped coin to bounce), locker, uniform and do personal grooming well before breakfast started.

Daily inspections of our uniforms took place after marching across the entire campus to the drill hall. Despite the fact that there were dirt roads and mud, our uniforms were to be spotless and our shoes gleaming for inspection. We all carried spare panty hose to polish our shoes and clothes brushes to perk up our uniforms.

On weekends we could go home. There was an 11pm curfew so we had to return by 11pm on Sunday night. Weekends for me were spent washing and ironing my uniform shirts, etc. and studying.

My fiancé and I had set a wedding date in October. All of the invitations were out, the deposits on the hall and catering were paid and the church was set. Our bridesmaids' dresses were being made and my mom had just finished crocheting my wedding gown and veil. Then, we learned that my future father-in-law had to go overseas for business and would not be available in October. So, we planned two weddings: a civil ceremony in August, for a few family members to attend so he could see his only son marry; and, the one that had already been arranged for October.

To remain a Peel officer, I had to get a higher average than the class average. I squeaked through with 83%... the class average was 81%.

Soon the first part of our training was over and we were sent to our respective police services for further training before we could complete the second part of recruit training at Police College.

My mother had remarried when I was in elementary school. She and my step father were apprehensive about my career choice, but, remained supportive. My siblings joked and teased me about my career choice, but, were also supportive.

My whole family came together to celebrate my completion of Ontario Police College Part A Recruit Training. I was the youngest of five with two brothers and two sisters. All had married when I was in elementary school and had children by 1974. Our summer family gatherings were outside in my mom's large yard.

There was usually a great deal of teasing and horseplay, especially for this gathering, because the 'baby' was a police officer. My brother-in-law was a great teaser. He taunted that there was no way I could ever "take him down". Everyone was laughing as he continued his taunting. As he turned to walk

away, saying something to the effect that he knew I couldn't do it, I used a police hold and brought him effortlessly to the ground. When he got up, I used another police hold, and made him 'do the chicken'.

My oldest brother was laughing. He was bigger than my brother-in-law. The taunt then became that there was no way I could ever take my brother down. Once again, in seconds, I had him face down with his hands behind his back. My family was stunned. No one ever challenged me again.

Five Blue Ducks In Bowler Hats

The Monday after we left Police College, we reported to Peel Headquarters. An article in the local papers indicated that 5 Policewomen boosted the compliment of female officers to 20. It indicated that the duties and salaries for women would equal their male counterparts along with opportunities for promotion.

It went on to say, "For the first time in this area, Peel Regional Police women are allowed to carry firearms, regularly".

Today it seems ludicrous to say this, but, the reality was that until then, in general, police women were not armed in Ontario.

Although there was a great deal of media exposure, there did not appear to be a plan for our new role in policing. Unlike our male counterparts who had already been assigned to platoons, five women were assigned to one sergeant whose task it was to train us in directing traffic, radio etiquette, knowing the general layout of the streets of Peel, etc.

We worked out of the old Cooksville station that was renamed, Peel 11 Division. Each day, the sergeant would take his little ducks, in bowler hats, all in a row, to different intersections. Four would remain on the sidewalk, watching while each had a turn at directing traffic.

This was not an easy task because police women were rare in Ontario. People were pulling off the road and running to take our pictures. It was quite humorous.

Perhaps our uniforms had something to do with the attention we were getting... miniskirts, black stockings, Granny Good Witch shoes, a tunic that was almost as long as the skirt, a gun belt with gleaming hand cuff case, bullet holder and holster, and of course a cross strap. A criss-cross tie and a bowler hat set off the ensemble.

In summer, the tunic and cross strap were not worn. Our oversized men's shirts with pockets that almost reached the gun belt were visible.

We requested a meeting with the chief to discuss our concerns, including our uniforms. We explained that we were hired as police constables, provided with the same income and wanted to do the same work as our male counterparts. Our stand was that they had hired us for the job, so, give us a chance and, if we fail, let us go.

These were pioneer times for women in policing; women had not been assigned to general patrol duties before. Although it was never vocalized, there were concerns held by many senior officers that if a woman were injured in the line of duty there would be a public outcry. I have to give the 'powers that be' credit, they actually listened to rookies, set aside their own concerns and made the necessary changes. Before long, we were assigned to platoons or other duties. We rode with training officers and received the same type of training as our male counterparts.

Our concerns about our uniforms and equipment were addressed as well. We were permitted to wear pants instead of miniskirts. Our 'chief's special' snub nosed five shot revolvers were replaced with the same guns as our male counterparts and our lightweight aluminum hand cuffs (that broke if used to restrain a large, strong prisoner) were replaced with the standard issue. Eventually boots replaced the shoes that were to be worn only for ceremonial occasions. Clip on ties replaced the criss-cross ties and Robin Hood style hats replaced the bowlers.

The standard issue raincoat came almost to my boots, but, being florescent orange, it made me much more visible in bad weather. The hat covers were time consuming to put on... the badge had to be removed, the shower cap type cover was fitted over the hat, and then the badge was replaced.

Now...imagine it is pouring rain and you are at a crash scene where people are injured...your role is to assess the scene, ensure it is safe, assess for severity of injuries and administer first aid until the ambulance arrives, ensure traffic is taken care of, and investigate – take measurements, statements, etc... would you have time to fiddle with the hat cover? The choice was to wear it, just in case, (and risk ridicule) for the entire shift or leave it off and have your hat ruined.

In winter our summer hats were replaced by what we had dubbed "furry buries". These hats were incredibly warm and waterproof, with drop down ear warmers. We had warm Patrol Jackets for winter and leather gloves that were not at all warm. Unlike the men we were issued cloth winter boots that were quite warm, but, were not waterproof.

I once weighed myself after all the equipment was on and realized I was carrying about 30 lbs extra and a brief case loaded with reports, a provincial offences ticket book, a parking ticket book, etc. Like my shift mates, I bought a very large aircraft aluminum flashlight and a very practical aluminum clipboard that was actually a case for storing and writing reports.

In August 1974 I was married by a Justice of the Peace in Brampton. We did not take a honeymoon, because I was not eligible to have any vacation time, but, I was permitted to leave work early for my wedding. My official title changed from Police Woman Brush to Police Woman Hodgson. Much later we were called constables, like our male counterparts.

My new husband had dreamed of being a police officer since he was a child and was applying to police services and he was hitting many barriers too. He was quite supportive of my new career and we were both optimistic about his future.

Train Crash August 19, 1974

While still playing the role of the Sergeant's ducklings, we spent our lunch breaks at 11 Division. One day, at lunch, the sergeant came into the room and pointed to me. "Come with me", was all he said. I jumped to my feet, grabbed my brief case and followed him to the cruiser.

As we raced down Highway 10 (Hurontario St) I asked what had happened. "Train Accident" was all he said.

I asked if anyone was injured and he replied, "Yes, a child is dead"...