



**SUPPLY
LINE**

Wilhelmina “Willa” Walker

Royal Canadian Air Force Women’s Division

Willa joined the Canadian Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (CWAAF) when she was 28, later earning the highest air force rank for women at the time.



Studio portrait of Wing Commander Wilhelmina (Willa) Walker, Royal Canadian Air Force Women’s Division. Photographer: Yousuf Karsh
George Metcalf Archival Collection
Canadian War Museum
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Life Before the War

Willa was born into a wealthy Montréal, Quebec family in 1913. At age 20, she took a job aboard an ocean liner and travelled around the world.

In 1936, she went to Washington, D.C., as secretary to the wife of Canada’s head diplomatic representative.

While there, she met Captain David Harry Walker, Scottish-born personal assistant to Canada’s Governor General, Lord Tweedsmuir.

The two married in July 1939, just six weeks before war broke out.

Highest-Ranking Woman

David Walker was an officer in the British Army. When war broke out, the couple went to Britain where he rejoined his regiment, the Black Watch.

Sent to France in June 1940, he was captured by the Germans at Dunkirk. Willa, who was pregnant with the couple's first child, did not know whether her husband was dead or alive. Overjoyed when she learned he was alive in a prisoner of war camp, Willa's relief was soon overshadowed by the death of her infant son.

Throwing herself into war service, Willa supported her husband's multiple attempts to escape, sending him coded letters and hiding maps in his Red Cross parcels.

When the Royal Canadian Air Force announced the formation of the CWAAF, Willa applied immediately. She was one of the first 150 women selected.

Willa underwent basic training in Toronto, Ontario, under the watchful eye of officers from Britain's Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF).

Starting out as an Airwoman, Second Class, Willa trained for five weeks, followed by examinations and drills. Despite describing herself as an awkward recruit, she won the Brookes Medal as top Airwoman in her class.

Willa became a staff officer in Toronto at No. 1 Training Command. Her first duties involved integration of women officers into the flying training schools that were a part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

Although she encountered hostility from some male air force personnel, she persisted. In February 1942, the CWAAF became the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division (RCAF WD).

Now a Squadron Officer, Willa was posted to Ottawa, Ontario. The following year, she was named Senior Staff Officer in Canada, and attained the rank of Wing Officer. She was the first woman to hold this rank: the highest awarded to any member of the RCAF WD.

Life in Canada After the War

In October 1944, hearing that David was about to be released, Willa resigned from the Air Force, going to Scotland to await his return. Unfortunately, he remained a prisoner of war until 1945.

After David retired from the British Army, they moved to Saint Andrew's, New Brunswick, where they raised four sons.

David became a successful author, and Willa became involved in many community organizations, opened a store and wrote a book.

David died in 1992, at the age of 81. Willa died in 2010, at 97.