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SPECIAL REPORT**

A RETURN TO THE PAST

WORLD WAR II: Author Sylvia Crooks returns to the Heritage City this weekend to launch her labour of love — *Homefront and Battlefront: Nelson, B.C. in World War II*

By **BILL METCALFE**
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The names on the cenotaph in Nelson are not just names — they were real people with lives as vibrant as yours or mine. Their families at home made inspired sacrifices for the war effort. And Nelson had extraordinary community spirit during those years. Those are the central messages of a new book about the World War II years in Nelson.

Homefront and Battlefront: Nelson B.C. in World War II, by Sylvia Crooks, will be launched in Nelson this week. Crooks is a Nelson native, a 1954 graduate of Nelson High School, and the daughter of former Mayor Thomas Shorthouse who served from 1958 to 1963.

Crooks spent her childhood in Nelson during the war years. This excerpt from *Homefront and Battlefront* explains the origins of her book:

Maurice Latornell... taught me how to skate when I was three years old. He was in his early twenties, fun, and full of life, and his death four years later made that far-off but ever-present war a reality for me. Over the years I remembered Maurice and decided finally to find the answers to my questions of how and where he died. I began with the Nelson

Cenotaph to confirm the spelling of his name, and was struck by the other names of men who lost their lives in that six-year-long conflict we call World War II, family names so familiar to me and anyone else who grew up in Nelson. And so began the quest to uncover who they were and how they lost their young lives.

Crooks says she wanted the 70 young Nelson men who died in the war to be more than just statistics — she wanted to bring them to life.

"People don't know the men on their own cenotaph and who they were and what happened to them," she says. "We remember them because we have a national day, but we don't really remember them because we don't really know who they were, as people."

The following excerpt from Crooks' book quotes from a letter written by Jack Gray of the RCAF to his parents in 1941:

I have been in London twice already now. It is a wonderful experience to see all these places about which we have heard so much. It is impossible to imagine the size of London until you have been there. We are 15 miles from the heart of London yet you can see no spot that isn't jammed with houses all the way. London at night is something too. There are a few weak

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Crooks worked at the *Daily News* while in high school

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lights around to guide you but when an alarm sounds it becomes pitch black here. It is queer when you think of being in the heart of a big city yet there is not a light to be seen. The Piccadilly Circus used to be an absolute blaze of lights but not one is to be seen now.... You never saw anything like the spirit of the people here. They just laugh and say he will get it all back and then some. It looks as though, to me, that the Nazis care little about what they bomb as there are wrecked buildings all over London. Another thing that amazes me is the way they clean everything up after a raid. Buildings which have been ruined are cleaned up and fenced off — it is really amazing. It would do a lot of people in Canada good to see London in an air raid — they would know then what they are fighting a war for.

Jack Gray became Nelson's first WWII casualty in 1942.

The process of discovering the stories behind the names on the cenotaph led Crooks to the archives of the *Nelson Daily News*.

"In the course of looking at the *NDN* from those years, I got really interested in the city itself and the community, and how they were coming together for the war effort.

"What caught my eye was an article about Mayor Norman Stibbs who was organizing an army of service club members who went out and canvassed for one of the Victory Bonds, so he declared a civic holiday. I cannot imagine this happening today, but that is what it was like, and everybody took part. So I started collecting information about the community, and at that point I realized this was an interesting story that should be written."

Crooks tells the story of the millions of dollars that were contributed by people just emerging from the Great

Depression, for Victory Bonds, War Savings Stamps, and other fundraising drives; the thousand of parcels, tons of clothing and tons of jam, sent overseas, how they weathered ration restrictions on everything from gasoline to ice cream cones.

In March 1942, restrictions were put on the sale and purchase of tires. People who were in an "eligible class," such as doctors, nurses and policemen, were allowed to buy a new tire and tube if a used set was turned in. Others must "get by" on the best used tires and tubes they could find. New cars could not be purchased for private use. In April restrictions on gasoline began, and the public street railway system in Nelson became more popular than ever. The annual gas allowance was 120 gallons. Gas stations could be open between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. on weekdays, but closed from 7 p.m. on Sunday until Monday morning. And taxi drivers faced a fine for driving more than 15 miles beyond the city limits.

Brass and bronze articles, such as doorbells, nameplates, hat and coat hooks, were banned. Between sundown and sunrise no verandah lights, neon and other illuminated signs were allowed, including the big illuminated clock on the Medical Arts Building in the centre of town. Only street lighting was permitted.

Crooks says her research showed a strong community spirit in war-time Nelson.

"I came across an article in 1940 by Bruce Hutchison in the *Province*. He talked about Nelson as unique and having a special community spirit, and I quoted him in the book and that is one of the themes, is the community spirit. He said there was a sense of family and that really hit home to me because I have that same

feeling — whenever I get together with people from Nelson it feels like a family reunion. That goes throughout the book because the young men who went overseas had that same feeling."

Crooks worked as a reporter for the *Nelson Daily News* in the summers when she was in high school and university.

"I always wanted to be a journalist," says Crooks, "and that didn't really happen because I got married right after university, and in those days you just went wherever your husband went. But this is satisfying to me now to have written this — this is about my home town which I love very dearly, so it is very satisfying to me to be able to give something back to my community."

Crooks has a B.A. and Master of Library Science degrees from UBC, and was a faculty member of the UBC School of Library, Archival and Information Studies for 16 years before retiring in 2002.

Crooks will take part in two events this coming weekend to launch her book.

On Friday the the Nelson & District Museum, Archives, Art Gallery and Historical Society in cooperation with the Nelson Municipal Library presents the official book launch event which will include the author reading selected passages and showing slides. There will be book sales and signing and the opportunity to meet the author, as well as refreshments and door prizes. Admission is \$4 for adults, and \$3 for seniors and students. The event starts at 7:30 p.m. at the Nelson Municipal Library meeting room.

On Sunday, Crooks will be signing copies at Otter Books at 398 Baker Street between 1:30 p.m. and 3:30 p.m.

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