

LUMBERJILLS

70 years after the start of WWII we take a trip down memory lane

So desperate was the need to maintain timber production in Britain during the Second World War that not only were lumberjacks brought across the Atlantic from Canada and Newfoundland to help fell trees, but thousands of young women also took to the forests to replace the native loggers.

It is only very recently that the bravery, hard work and superb efforts of these women have become widely known. Mostly from the big towns and cities, they quit their homes and jobs, many with great trepidation, and ventured into the countryside to wield the axe and saw, becoming members of the Women's Timber Corps.

Some of them were as young as 14 years of age, although the official minimum age for entry was 17. The women, who were nicknamed 'Lumberjills' like their North American counterparts, had to set up camps in forests throughout the land and set about logging operations after a brief period of training.

Women carrying out logging operations was not a new idea; there was the Women's Timber Service during the Great War, which was disbanded after it served its purpose at the end of that terrible conflict. Those in charge of governing this country by 1942 had determined that there was a need to form a similar force and the Women's Timber Corps came into being.

By April of that year in England,

and a month later in Scotland, the Corps was officially part of the Women's Land Army, which had been formed after a call to service by the Minister for Labour and National Service, Mr Ernest Bevan. After this women aged between 20 and 40 had to register for war work.

On its initial formation the Corps had one thousand recruits who quickly answered the call and left the comfort and security of their previous lives to train to become forestry workers. By the war's end this number had swollen to a figure that was five times the starting level.

The beige shirt, green pullover, jodhpurs, beret and tie soon became a familiar sight throughout the countryside where the Lumberjills were sent to work. The Corps cap badge was a distinctive combination of a fir tree surmounted by a royal crown.

When the women joined up they were allocated to training camps throughout the country, including Shandford Lodge, near Brechin, and Park House at Banchory. Both locations were old stately homes but the nearest the women got to the opulence of these wonderful houses was when they ate. The rest of the time they spent in wooden huts enduring the very basic conditions that they were to become used to in the camps that they worked in.

There is no doubt that working in the forestry industry in those



Picture by kind permission of Margaret Angus

A 3-ton Bedford lorry loaded with timber. It was driven by Margaret Angus (née Stewart) (left) to carry logs and pit props to Riddoch's Sawmill, Alford, or the railway station. Loading was by hand off skids. Headlamp covers reduced visibility to enemy aircraft – and made it impossible to drive in the dark!

dark days was a challenging and dangerous occupation. It is no surprise then that the training that the women received was rigorous and very intensive; effectively they had a few short weeks to learn the basics of being a lumberjack.

The wielding of a 6lb axe was the first major hurdle that most of the women had to overcome before they could progress to learn the skills required to be effective in the forests of Britain.

There was also a major psychological barrier to overcome as well; these young women had to be informed of just how important the role was that they were being trained to carry out.

They were told how vital timber was to Britain in order to maintain its industrial output. The coal mines required an insatiable amount of pit props to allow mining to continue. Timber was also needed for telegraph poles, railway sleepers and even crosses for soldiers' graves.

Five trees, it was reported at the time by the Forestry Commission, were required to keep each British soldier fighting during the war.

The four- to six-week training period saw the women being taught all aspects of logging operations, from felling, snedding and loading right through to working with the more complex machinery located at the sawmills. Some of these city girls had to come to terms with working with animals, in the form of horses, to drag felled trees off the hillsides. Others had to learn how to drive tractors and lorries to move the timber.

The women soon became used to working in all sorts of weather. Sou'westers allowed them to stay dry in wind, rain and snow! They also worked from dawn to dusk, simulating the actual hours that they would work when they started working in the camps for real.

Sustained by a hearty breakfast it seems that the women were able to



Pictures copyright Forestry Commission Scotland

(Left) The Lumberjills during their initial training learned not only to work with horses, but also with the latest caterpillar tractor machinery. (Right) Whilst the Lumberjills toiled all day in the forests, self sufficiency (in this case, knitting!) remained the order of the day.

work as well as the men that they were replacing. Lunch consisted of bread, cheese and tea which they ate in the forest clearings close to where they were working. They also demonstrated real physical strength by not only working all day in the forests but also, in a lot of cases, walking to and from their place of work.

On completion of the training period, the women found themselves being sent to forest camps throughout England and Wales but in the main to Scotland. Working camps in Scotland ranged from Glen Etive and Inverchaolain in the west to Advie in Morayshire in the north.

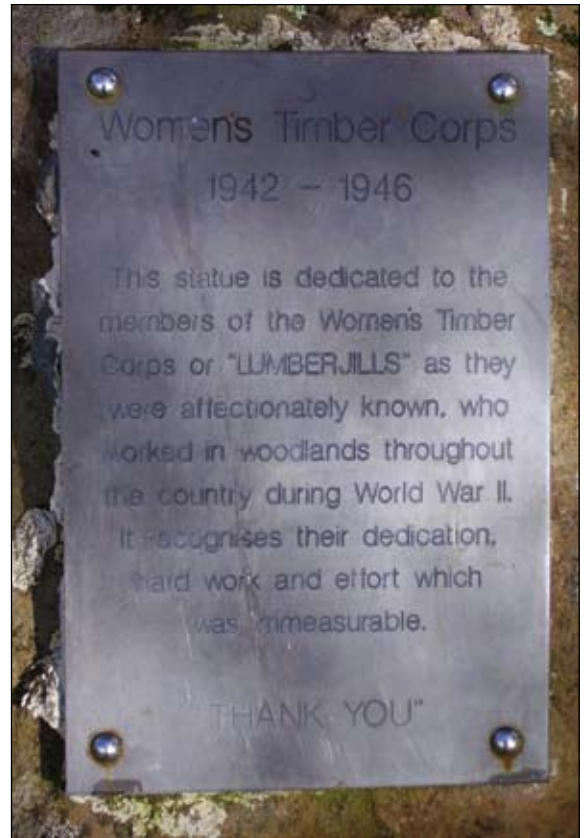
The camps were usually sited in clear ground and normally consisted of six huts, most of which provided the sleeping accommodation for the women. The 40 or so women that worked out of these camps also had huts for cooking and recreation, as well as a shower and bathroom hut. To protect the women from the chilling wind and rain of the bleak countryside where most were located, they had a fairly basic and primitive metal stove in each hut.

They were not well paid for their efforts – 46 shillings was the wage that could be expected by those that were over 19, while those aged between 17 and 18 only received 35 shillings.

The women, perhaps surprisingly from this meagre income, had to pay for their food and accommodation. They could, though, look to increase their wages by the princely sum of a shilling per week by becoming team leaders or by double that if they became supervisors.

On payment of their National Health Contributions they qualified for sickness benefits and could obtain free medical treatment. Women could also benefit from full pay if they were only off ill for a week or less. If they were laid low for any longer their pay was scaled back to be enough to cover only their board and lodgings. A week's holiday per year along with customary bank holidays allowed them some time away from the rigours of this hard manual labour.

The women may have lacked facilities but they stuck together throughout the whole of the conflict and it seems they developed a wonderful camaraderie, all having the common aim of supporting their country in its hour of need. Even today many Lumberjills still retain friendships made and forged from those war days. While the winter



(Left) The Lumberjill statue located in the Queen Elizabeth Forest Park at Aberfoyle was unveiled in 2007. (Right) The plaque at Aberfoyle that recognises the Lumberjills.

months may have been challenging, the summer months offered the women a chance to work outdoors and enjoy the healthy conditions of fresh air and long summer days.

Even in the remote camp locations the women, more often than not, made their way into the bigger towns and villages at the weekends to enjoy recreation time at the cinema or local dances. They sometimes met up with the Canadian and Newfoundlander lumberjacks who too were working the forests and some of these wartime meetings led to longer term romances and even weddings!

It took until the August of 1946 before the Women's Timber Corps was officially disbanded, as a lot of women worked on after the war's end, both here and abroad, to help keep timber production going until the local loggers could resume their duties.

Bizarrely the women had to hand back their uniforms, not being allowed to retain any part of it as a memento of their wartime efforts. They did, though, each receive a personal letter signed by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother thanking them for their efforts.

Most of the women were obviously very honoured to receive this royal recognition. However, as the years moved on from the end of the war, a lot became unhappy at their lack of formal recognition. It was the lack of participation at

Remembrance Day Parades, lack of gratuities and medals, that led many women to believe that they were 'The Forgotten Army'.

It's only recently that a medal has been struck, not just for the members of the Women's Timber Corps, but for all members of the Second World War's volunteer forces. This has spurred on local councils and authorities to host commemorative dinners and functions to thank the women belatedly for their wartime efforts.

The members of the Corps were exceptional women who carried out an extraordinarily important role during the war years. They were just

ordinary young girls in many cases, who sacrificed so much to support their country. Had they not flocked in their thousands to the recruitment offices to join the Corps, it is doubtful whether Britain could have sustained its war effort.

The women excelled in doing very tough work in very difficult conditions and learned the skills of forestry working in a very short space of time. They showed what could be achieved with determination and motivation.

James Hendrie

Many thanks to James McDougall, Promotion and Events Manager at Forestry Commission Scotland, for his assistance in the research for this article.



The women who served in the Corps had to learn how to use both the axe and the cross-cut saw.