

IDEAS

WE ALSO NEED POLITICAL SOLUTIONS TO REPAIR OUR DEMOCRACY SO THAT ORDINARY CITIZENS COUNT ALONG WITH THE AFFLUENT. — NICHOLAS KRISTOF



Ronnie Egan as a WREN when she was 20 years old.

YVONNE BERG FOR NATIONAL POST

THE STORY OF A FEMALE NAVAL OFFICER STATIONED IN HALIFAX DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

REMEMBERING RONNIE EGAN

In 1942, 19-year-old Ronnie Egan read an advertisement that said, “You too can free a man to serve at sea,” and she knew the Royal Canadian Navy was the right place for her. She served in Halifax during the war and left an indelible mark on the city and the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service (WREN) there. Historian and Centennial College professor Ted Barris offers a wartime glimpse of WREN Ronnie Egan.

Her equivalent male rank living across from the women’s barracks at HMCS Stadacona probably resented being posted to the Halifax naval base during the Second World War. Either that or Royal Navy Chief Petty Officer Gordon really was a chauvinist. For whatever reason, early in Ronnie Egan’s military career as a member of the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service in 1943, CPO Gordon blurted out his discontent in front of her.

“The Navy is no place for girls,” he said. But he couldn’t have fired his put-down of women across the bow of a more formidable female officer, because CPO Egan made sure it cost him. Gordon was soon reprimanded for his outburst and quietly posted somewhere else.

“I saw to that!” Egan added years later.

Not that the then 19-year-old naval volunteer from Victoria went out of her way to hurt fellow officers, but Egan had a special place in her heart for the Navy. Her father had been “a Conway boy,” a member of the Royal Navy during the Great War. So, when Canada joined Britain in declaring war against Germany in 1939, Egan followed in her father’s footsteps by enlisting in the Royal Canadian Navy. And if the Royal family felt it was best that hundreds of thousands of Canadian women should serve in the naval armed forces, nobody was going to make a mockery of the King’s Regulations.

But Rodine Doris Mary Buckley-Beevers Egan proved just as ardent a commanding officer to the 300 women in her charge at the HMCS Stadacona barracks in Halifax in 1943-44. For example, regulations called for all WRENS to wear lisle stockings while on duty. Cotton-threaded and not nearly as flattering on women’s legs as the seam-lined silk variety, lisle stockings were, however, Navy issue and, as far as CPO Egan was concerned,

the only leg wear allowed. And Egan had ample opportunity to notice such things. She regularly led marching drills on the barracks parade square; her WRENS had to look and march by the book.

“I even drilled the men,” she said, “putting (male) sailors through their paces — close-order drill — marching and all the rest of it. I really enjoyed that.”

Stories of Egan’s colourful career as a WREN during the Second World War were recounted in her eulogy and displayed in photographs during a celebration of her life on Jan. 15. She died nine days earlier of a heart attack in Uxbridge, the Ontario town where she and her Canadian Army veteran husband Willis Egan had raised four children following the

FOR HER, DOING THINGS RIGHT WAS ALL IN A DAY’S WORK.

war. Not content to leave her service life behind, though, Ronnie Egan gave time and expertise to the local hospital (recognized by Ontario in 1999 as a lifetime member in the Hospital Auxiliaries Association), to Community Care of Durham Region (in 2007 she was presented with its highest achievement award) and to the Royal Canadian Legion (in 2010 she was acknowledged for her lifetime of support). In 2012, Egan received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for service to Canada. At the medal presentation, she blushed over the superlatives applied to her service, preferring to call it duty and responsibility.

The Second World War brought both excitement and challenge to Egan’s several years supervising 300 WRENS in Halifax. Among her more unpleasant duties was informing a wife or girlfriend when a male relative or friend in the Navy was

in hospital for treatment of venereal disease. In contrast, it was a thrill working in the busiest wartime harbour on the eastern seaboard of North America. During off-duty moments, she said she would walk to Bedford Basin and see “the most beautiful sight of all,” the armada of ships assembling for the next North Atlantic convoy heading to Britain. Egan’s wartime adventures in Halifax lasted right up to, and including, the last days of the war.

It was May 7, 1945. The next day, Victory in Europe Day (VE-Day), the Germans would surrender and the Second World War in Europe would be over. But the rumour of victory in Europe had spread quickly to Canada and to Halifax. And despite the good news from Europe, May 7 was not a good day in Halifax. Bad relations between Canadian naval personnel and the citizens of Halifax boiled over and riots overwhelmed the city’s downtown core.

CPO Egan’s final obligation that day was to make sure all 300 women in that

Navy barracks were safely accounted for and in their rooms, away from the riots in the streets. But by that evening, with her day’s responsibilities met, Egan had to leave the barracks. Because she was married to army chauffeur Willis Egan, she had to cross downtown to get to their apartment. Ronnie Egan saw many strange sights that night — streetcars overturned and burning, breweries broken into and booze flowing in the streets, civilians and servicemen looting stores, and even some comical behaviour.

“A group of sailors (was) running around with mannequins they’d stolen in their arms,” she said. “(They) put them down on the cobblestone street and used them like toboggans to slide down the street.”

Oddly, even though most merchants had closed their doors, Egan and a WREN friend found a Zellers store that was still open. They

went in to shop, but as they emerged from the store, they were confronted in the doorway by a couple of drunken sailors carrying burning torches.

“And exactly what do you think you’re doing?” Egan challenged.

“We’re going to torch this place,” they said.

Egan remembered that she braced herself in the doorway and with her hands on her hips, she said defiantly, “Oh no you’re not!” There was a tension-filled pause, but the crisis ended as quickly as it began. The drunken sailors figured there would be easier targets for their frustrations somewhere else and disappeared into the crowds.

Inside Canada’s National Archives in Ottawa lies a nearly forgotten file holding the documents of Supreme Court Justice R.L. Kellock, who led a Royal Commission investigating the VE-Day riots in Halifax. The justice’s records include memoirs, court testimony and assignment of blame in the case. Kellock reported that 564 businesses had been damaged by the riots, more than 2,500 windows smashed and more than 200 businesses looted. Estimates of damage ranged from \$3- to \$5 million. The Commission blamed Rear Admiral Leonard Murray for losing control of his personnel.

Kellock’s files also contained photographs taken during the riots. Several show the damage to merchants’ stores and even Navy personnel openly carrying away looted clothing and other inventory. By coincidence, one photo depicts an inebriated sailor sitting on a cobblestone street; in the background, a Zellers storefront can be seen clearly. It’s the same building Egan successfully saved from being torched on VE-Day.

“It was a black day for Halifax,” Egan said. “We just did our jobs, ordering all WRENS confined to barracks.”

Nothing heroic, she added quickly, unless one happened to be the owner of the Zellers store she saved. Like most things in Ronnie Egan’s peace and wartime experiences, doing things right was all in a day’s work. And there’s no question that she was right where she belonged.

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America’s aristocracy

NICHOLAS KRISTOF

Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders don’t agree on much. Nor do the Black Lives Matter movement, the Occupy Wall Street protests and the armed ranchers who seized public lands in Oregon. But in the insurgent presidential campaigns and in social activism across the spectrum, a common thread is people angry at the way America is no longer working for many ordinary citizens.

And they’re right: the system is often fundamentally unfair, and ordinary voices are often unheard.

It’s easy (and appropriate!) to roll one’s eyes at Trump, for a demagogic tycoon is not the natural leader of a revolution of the disenfranchised. But the populist frustration is understandable. One of the most remarkable political science studies in recent years upended everything rosy we learned in civics classes.

Martin Gilens of Princeton University and Benjamin I. Page of Northwestern University found that in policymaking, views of ordinary citizens essentially don’t matter. They examined 1,779 policy issues and found that attitudes of wealthy people and of business groups mattered a great deal to the final outcome — but that preferences of average citizens were almost irrelevant.

“In the United States, our findings indicate, the majority does not rule,” they concluded. “Majorities of the American public actually have little influence over the policies our government adopts.”

One reason is that our political system is increasingly driven by money: tycoons can’t quite buy politicians, but they can lease them. Elected officials are hamsters on a wheel, always desperately raising money for the next election. And the donors who matter most are a small group; just 158 families and the companies they control donated almost half the money for the early stages of the presidential campaign.

That in turn is why the tax code is full of loopholes that benefit the wealthy. This is why you get accelerated depreciation for buying a private plane. It’s why the wealthiest 400 American taxpayers (all with income of more than \$100 million) ended up paying an average federal tax rate of less than 23 per cent for 2013, and less than 17 per cent the year before.

Conversely, it’s why the mostly black children in Flint, Mich., have been poisoned by lead coming out of the tap: As Hillary Clinton noted Sunday in the Democratic debate, this wouldn’t have happened in an affluent white suburb. Lead poisoning permanently impairs brain development, but it’s not confined to Flint. Some 535,000 children across the country suffer lead poisoning, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Those kids never have a chance — not just because of the lead, but also because they don’t matter to the American political system. American politicians are too busy chasing campaign donors to help them.

There are solutions — more about that in a moment — but a starting point

is to recognize that this public mood of impotence and unfairness is rooted in something real. Median wages have stalled or dropped. Mortality rates for young white adults are rising, partly because so many self-medicate with painkillers or heroin. Blacks have been protected from this phenomenon by another unfairness: studies indicate that doctors discriminate against black patients and are less likely to prescribe them painkillers.

America’s political and economic inequalities feed each other. The richest one per cent in the U.S. now own substantially more wealth than the bottom 90 per cent.

Solutions are complex, imperfect and uncertain, but the biggest problem is not a lack of tools but a lack of will. A basic step to equalize opportunity would be to invest in education for disadvantaged children as the civil rights issue of the 21st century.

“I think any candidate seriously aiming to reduce inequality would have a mild increase in tax on the rich to fund higher school

A NEW STUDY FINDS THAT WEALTHY PEOPLE AND BUSINESS GROUPS WERE ABLE TO AFFECT POLICY — BUT THE PREFERENCES OF AVERAGE CITIZENS WERE ALMOST IRRELEVANT.

spending,” says Nicholas Bloom, a Stanford expert on inequality. I would add that investments in education should begin early, with high-quality prekindergarten for at-risk children.

We also need political solutions to repair our democracy so that ordinary citizens count along with the affluent. “There is no magic bullet that will set things right, but meaningful campaign finance reform must be at the centre of a reform agenda,” Gilens says. “States and cities are leading the way. Arizona, Maine and Connecticut have had statewide, publicly funded ‘clean election’ systems for some time with varying degrees of success.”

One step toward transparency: U.S. President Barack Obama could require federal contractors to disclose political contributions.

Right now, the bitterness at America’s grass roots is often channelled in ways that are divisive and destructive: at immigrants, say, or at Muslims. The challenge will be to leverage the populist frustration into constructive postelection policy. But it has been done before.

“Reforms were adopted in the first Gilded Age, an era similarly plagued by government dysfunction, political corruption and enormous economic inequality,” Gilens notes. “Perhaps they will be again.” For the sake of our country, let’s work for an encore.

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