

# The unsung photographer: Irene Ogilvie chronicled the far-reaching effects of the war years

BY ELIZABETH PAYNE, OTTAWA CITIZEN NOVEMBER 10, 2013



A wartime portrait of Irene Ogilvie.

**Photograph by:** Chris Mikula, Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — She had worked as a shop girl at Harrods and as a censor for the British Ministry of Information, but in 1943, Irene Lockwood, later Irene Ogilvie, a former prairie girl living in London, wanted to do more to contribute to the war effort.

The Royal Canadian Air Force offered her a choice: she could train to be a meteorologist or become a photographer. She chose the latter, was handed a Speed Graphic camera, and became one of a group of women who chronicled the lives of Canadian troops on film for the RCAF during the Second World War.

Her work took her to weddings, to funerals, to watch the arrivals of Canadian troops off ships, to hospitals and special events, anything that could be photographed and sent home to keep Canadians informed. She worked in London and around the United Kingdom. Women were not sent to the front lines, or anywhere close, something that, 70 years later, she is still wistful about.

“Oh yes, I would have loved to have been a war photographer,” she says.

“I said, ‘I think that’s a shame. I am going to do something about that,’ but I never did.”

Ogilvie’s photographs, some of which are displayed at her room at Ottawa’s Perley and Rideau Veteran’s Health Centre, and her experiences, paint a vivid picture of the mix of anxiety, excitement, sadness, intensity and, high spirits that marked the Second World War years in London.

Ogilvie plays down her contribution to the war effort.

“I’m not sure I took it all that seriously,” she says, with a smile. But her experiences, like those of thousands of women who went to work during the war and those — like Ottawa’s Squibs Mercier — who were married and widowed during the war, tell the story of the far-reaching effects of those years and how they are still felt today.

Mercier was married at 18 and widowed by 19 when her first husband was shot down. She met a second pilot after the war and now is a widow for a second time. Her second husband, Johnny, was a resident of the Perley and Rideau health centre for three years before he died in 2000. It wasn’t until 2010 that Mercier, now 89, got to visit the grave of her first husband, Reuben, in Ortona, Italy. She covered it with maple leaves she had pressed in a book and laid a wreath with the caption: “Dear Reuben, have I told you lately that I love you?” from a favourite Eddy Arnold song.

On the other side of the Atlantic in London, Irene Ogilvie, a glamorous Canadian with a camera, was often close to the centre of things.

Ogilvie’s speech is slow and halting these days. At 94, she is wheelchair-bound and a widow since 1989 when her husband Alfred Keith Ogilvie died. Skeets, as he was known, was a dashing young RAF pilot from Ottawa when he became a German prisoner of war and later was involved in the much chronicled Great Escape. Many were shot, but Ogilvie was among those sent back to the POW camp, a lucky fate he never really understood. Later, he returned home to marry his wartime sweetheart, Irene. “That is who you should really be writing about,” Ogilvie tells a reporter.

Keith Ogilvie’s story has been told in books (and movies) about the Great Escape. (Ted Barris’s *The Great Escape: A Canadian Story* is among the most recent). Keith Ogilvie also kept a thorough diary of his experiences that adds detail and colour to his wartime exploits. Both of their stories are combined in an unpublished family memoir written by their son, Keith. Both his parents’ experiences, he notes, tell the story of the war years.

“Although she was right there in London, working with the RCAF as a photographer and living under the falling bombs as the Blitz and all that followed unfolded in history, she has always stepped out of

the light of my father's experience and downplayed the contribution she made and the things she did as unworthy of mention," writes her son.

"To me, it is all of a piece," he writes. "The adventures in the flying diary and the stories of hiding naked under the grand piano as the bombs fell are punctuation marks in lives that flowed and came together and ended up bringing my sister and me with them."

In fact, Irene Ogilvie's wartime experiences did include hiding naked under a grand piano as bombs rained down nearby. Ogilvie lights up as she recalls the night she had to be dragged from a long-awaited bath by her flatmates as bombs fell around their building.

Ogilvie said she had money ready and had been looking forward to a rare hot bath. The bath was full of water when the sirens began, but Ogilvie decided she was not going to miss out on such a luxurious treat. "I got in and it was just beautiful." She waited for the all-clear but it didn't sound. Soon her two roommates were begging her to get out of the bath, but she stubbornly remained. Eventually, their pleadings got to her "They were so concerned about me, I thought I'd better think about them."

The roommates made it out of the bathroom and hid beneath a grand piano in their apartment while bombs rained nearby. Every window in the apartment was blown out, Ogilvie said, including one over the bathtub. "I consider that they saved my life."

The role of an RCAF photographer was often to photograph happy scenes — weddings, arrivals, special ceremonies. But her job was not far from the sadness and harsh realities of the war. She recalls travelling to Greenock in Scotland where Canadian troops were getting off ships.

"It was so sad, because the men were all yelling and happy and you knew in another couple of weeks they wouldn't be so happy. Some would be underground and I would be taking pictures of their funerals."

Ogilvie was also privy to information about the war that the general public was not. She was shocked when pictures from the Belsen concentration camp arrived in her office. That is when she thought twice about her wish to be a war photographer.

"(The photographs) were so awful ... (they) had these bodies lined up like matchsticks. I remember looking at them and thinking it was just terrible. I never dreamed Belsen was as bad as it was."

Against the backdrop of anxiety and sorrow, wartime in London was also a time of high spirits, nights out and romance.

Ogilvie met the man who would become her husband at a nightclub where she had taken her mother. An acquaintance asked if he could bring a Canadian airman over to talk to a fellow Canadian.

“It was love at first sight,” she said. Not long afterward she and Keith planned a night out at the American Eagle Club. Ogilvie was dressed to the nines. She had collected all her clothing coupons and “felt like a million dollars,” but her date didn’t show. Later she received word from Keith’s commander that he had been shot down and was presumed dead.

It took months to learn Keith was in a POW camp, and years to eventually hear his story, to reunite and for the two to meet again in Canada where, in 1946, they married and began a life raising two children, Keith and daughter Jean.

“Irene is one of the last connections to a generation who paid so much and to whom we, their successors, owe so much,” wrote her son, Keith.

“During a visit with her family she wistfully observed that ‘Everything I see nowadays seems so much smaller than it did then, seems so tiny’.”

Meanwhile, Squibs, the twice widowed war bride, remains busy and philosophical.

“I don’t know about staying calm, but you carried on or you sank. Whatever happens in life, you have to deal with it and carry on.”

[epayne@ottawacitizen.com](mailto:epayne@ottawacitizen.com)

[twitter.com/egpayne](https://twitter.com/egpayne)

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