

1943 Lorrain Grad – Gracie (Gagnon) MacEachern

Grace “Gracie” MacEachern (née Gagnon) was a pioneer for women at a revolutionary time for women’s roles and rights. She was a “parabelle”, a romantic term coined for para-rescue nurses from the 1950s in the Canadian Forces. That not only made her an asset in redefining gender roles, but also in what would become modern day search and rescue (SAR) in Canada.

In the words of her son, Bruce MacEachern, a major in the Air Force, “she really blazed a trail for women and for the Air Force itself”.

Following the death of her first husband, Cranston Woodward, she enrolled in the Canadian Forces in 1951, where she received a commission as a pilot officer just prior to joining the para-rescue course at the age of 32.

The para-rescue course offered in the 1950s was attended by nurses and doctors, who at the time were the only medical personnel to jump out of airplanes on rescue missions and they did so on a voluntary basis. The course was the foundation of, and at that time the only equivalent to, today’s vigorous and demanding SAR technician training course

While the ground-breaking achievements of all the para-belles are worthy of commemoration, Mrs. McEachern was especially noteworthy for the fact that she was the first woman to do an operational jump in para-rescue. This first jump was in Mount Coquitlam, B.C., and one month after she took the para-rescue course, to rescue a geologist.



Grace MacEachern as a nursing sister.
Photo Credit: Maj Bruce MacEachern