On the Home Front

War had traditionally been viewed as a male “contest,” too savagely violent for the participation of women. During World War I, the resistance against acknowledging the abilities of women was gradually set aside. This happened partly because women joined the workforce in larger numbers than ever before to replace the men who had gone to fight. During the war, Canadian women participated in a host of activities that aided the Canadian cause. Among other things, they
- replaced men in banks, factories, offices, schools and transportation centres.
- formed the nucleus of the workforce in the new war munitions industry.
- raised millions of dollars for the war effort and the support of soldiers’ families.
- managed farms and harvested crops.
- made thousands of dressings for battlefield wounds.
- organized knitting clubs and sent warm clothing to the soldiers shivering in the trenches.
- sent packages of soap, candy, and cigarettes to the soldiers.
- carefully rationed food and manufactured goods so that more products were available to the armed forces.
- bore the loss of loved ones and attended to the needs of wounded soldiers.

The Hardest Loss

On a personal level, thousands of Canadian mothers, wives, and daughters bore the terrible pain of losing sons, husbands, and fathers to the war. Many others had to deal with the problems associated with men who did return home but were broken in body or spirit. Some soldiers faced a long and difficult convalescence. Disfigurement and loss of limbs were not easily treated at this time. Also, many families that were deprived of their main salary earner were condemned to years of poverty.
The Fight for the Vote

By the time World War I began, there had been an active women's suffrage movement in Canada for more than 25 years, but women still did not enjoy the right to vote. For the suffragists, the war presented an opportunity to demonstrate the full abilities of women. As more and more women took over positions vacated by men fighting in the war, it became harder to resist the logic of extending the franchise to women. Under the continual pressure of suffragists like Nellie McClung, Dorothy Davis, Emily Murphy, and Flora Denison, the walls of resistance began to crumble.

The final push came during the federal election campaign in 1917. Robert Borden's Conservative government was mired in the Conscription Crisis and found its popularity plummeting. Desperate for votes, Borden promised to extend the franchise to women if he was re-elected. His party won the election, and in 1918 the government passed the bill that finally granted Canadian women the right to vote.

Figure 13-3 A funeral with military honours was given to Canadian nurses who died when German planes bombed their hospital. More than 2500 women left Canada to serve as nurses during the war. They endured shelling, aerial bombardment, and the dreadful conditions in the field hospitals. Over the course of the war, 46 Canadian nurses lost their lives.