



FROM HIGH FASHION TO ARMoured VEHICLES

BY HEATHER PILOT

My path to the defence sector was circuitous. In the '80s, Affirmative Action was launched and I grabbed the opportunity to apply to train in Toronto at the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development & Trade (MEDT as it was known then) as a Business Consultant offering programs to assist Ontario companies.

There was a catch: it was a one-year contract and if I did not prove myself, I had to come back to London, ON to my previous position as a secretary. Excitement and fear battled inside me when I was accepted but I was not going to let fear hold me back.

While there were many ups and downs that year, it quickly raced by. With only 2 months left on my 1-year contract, and the encouragement of Affirmative Action, I applied for a permanent position at Queen's Park in the International Marketing Division. That was when my life changed.

I was hired as a Junior Business Consultant and little did I know I had found my *métier*. It was the first time MEDT had hired women as business consultants. There were eight of us hired, all young, bright-eyed and eager. Of the eight, one was male. We very quickly became known as "The Harem" as we were all working in the U.S. Section.

FASHION

After a year, I was assigned the Fashion Sector and my role was to find the designers in Ontario, educate them on export marketing, and organize trade missions, mainly to Manhattan. My counterpart at Ontario House in New York, Brigid Greene, would find the fashion reps who would take on the clothing

lines. Brigid quickly became an important mentor and our work together led to a lifelong friendship and to the front page of *Women's Wear Daily* featuring very talented Ontario designers with the caption "O Canada, Look What's Happening to the Girl Next Door."

A few years later I had grown restless and left to head up the State of North Carolina's Office in Canada handling trade and investment attraction for four years and then as Director Canada for New York State, both based in Toronto. The short time I lead the New York offices in Canada was a true New York story with all the twists and turns of *The Game of Thrones*. Eventually they let go of all of their international directors in Canada, Japan, and the U.K.

I ended up coming back to London and was hired to work with the newly formed London Economic Development Corporation which was the first Public-Private Partnership for economic development in Canada.

With a background of business development, investment attraction and international marketing, I had the tools to work with international and domestic companies on their site selection plans and had learned how to drill down into a sector to understand its strengths and weaknesses and who the competition was.

A PASSION FOR DEFENCE

While in that role, a large Norwegian defence company reached out indicating they were interested in establishing a facility in the region even though they did not yet have any defence contracts with Canada. Working closely with them, I put together the business analyses for London and researched and created the profile of the

defence cluster in Southern Ontario. And that was my introduction to – *and the birth of my passion for* – the defence sector.

Around that time, the Southern Ontario Defence Association (SODA) was founded, and I became a member. Eventually, I would become the President of SODA and it morphed into Defence Ontario.

Concurrently, I decided to host an LEDC defence conference in London, Ontario with a focus on Small to Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and to showcase Southern Ontario's strong capabilities in aerospace, defence and advanced manufacturing, as well as our deep competencies in innovative technologies.

Thus, the Best Defence Conference was born. I am thankful to the many people who generously provided their insights and advice from the inaugural phase of this conference to date. As the conference grew, I left the LEDC and formed Pilot Hill Ltd. to take the conference into the private sector.

The Best Defence Conference is now in its 14th year and continues to be an important networking event for SMEs and international companies new to the Canadian defence and security marketplace allowing them to meet prime contractors, military and procurement specialists and to forge strategic partnerships. I am very grateful for the growing Indigenous participation at the conference and will work with them to make it even more meaningful for them.

What I have learned over my career is to always do the work, to seek and embrace diverse mentorship, to not be afraid to take risks, and to treat people the way you want to be treated – with fairness and respect.

The Best Defence Conference is scheduled for October 22-23, 2024.

Heather Pilot is President of Pilot Hill Ltd., which hosts the annual Best Defence Conference in London, ON.

The views expressed here are her own and do not necessarily reflect a CDR editorial position.