

Margaret Chase
Huxford
Canadian War Bride
Bayano
1944

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM
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On September 3rd I was in Times Square, New York. I saw the declaration of war spelt out on the moving letters on the top of the clock. I should have been overwhelmed with dread at the news and perhaps taken the next train home. But this was the trip of a lifetime, my first bit



of independence and the chance to study art in summer school in this huge cosmopolitan city. I felt the British could get on without me for another three weeks, and so I stayed.

What I do remember with warmth was the fact that everybody I had met and had become temporary friends with in the college and the hostel was feeling so anxious for me, as if I was the only one in the entire United States whose native country was at war. I felt a little guilty that I was not feeling more anxious myself.

When I did return home I found Halifax coming to terms with its special role in the new war. With the enormous Bedford Basin, and its position on the eastern-most point of the

mainland, Halifax became the starting point for the all-important convoys that supplied Britain with food, materials and personnel throughout the war. Watching, from Citadel Hill, the gradual growth of the convoys in the Basin and their eventual departure, became a regular

occupation for local people. As I watched, I had no idea that, before the war was over, I would watch my future husband set sail and then follow him myself a year later with our baby daughter.

In the meantime we, like many Halifax families, wondered how best we could contribute to the war effort. With two daughters in their mid-twenties, a small house and a piano, we decided we would offer hospitality to the sailors as they waited for their ships to be re-fuelled and re-loaded for the return journey. A local committee had been set-up to coordinate this and my mother would phone each Friday to see who they had that needed some home comforts for the weekend. We could offer a hot meal, friendly conversation, the chance to show off at the piano and the opportunity to flirt with my sister and I as we did the dishes. Above all it was the glimpse of normal family life after so many weeks with the danger and discomfort of life on board.

With no pubs and only one cinema that I can recall, Halifax was never the most lively of towns and with troops waiting to embark and sailors waiting for the turn-around the population grew fourfold. Most of our guests were English sailors, up to six at a time, and it took us a while to get it right. At first my mother would provide large helpings of wholesome home-cooking before we realized that, after the meager rations they were used to, on board and back in England, they simply could not face so much. Indeed it was almost offensive.

The other main attractions were the bath and the piano. I can still recall the heady atmosphere of heavy wool uniforms, lived and perhaps slept in for nine days at sea in crowded quarters, as we sat around swapping tales in easy chairs in the living room. Also the number of Englishmen who thought they could play the piano was legion, it must have been part of their naval tradition of military training and they made enthusiastic use of my brother's upright. It was pretty horrendous but they enjoyed it and it was our contribution to the war effort.

The other attraction was washing up after the meal. It is wonderful what flirting can go on around the kitchen sink. They would offer to wipe as we washed, and the arms would accidentally come round our waists as they reached to turn off the furthest taps. Sometimes we liked it sometimes not, depending on who was doing it, but we learnt to deal with it graciously.

Over the years we entertained all ranks, shapes and sizes and varying degrees of homesickness. Sometimes we would see our visitors only the once, some being sent on other duties others being lost at sea. This was sad but in those days it was a part of normal life and not too much was said. One group we saw more regularly was from the HMS Revenge

which was a frequent visitor to Halifax. When they no longer came it was particularly noticeable.

Another regular visitor was a Petty Officer who I recall as looking rather like Harry Secombe. He left behind in England a young pregnant wife and liked to sit quietly in a corner in an easy chair and knit little jackets and 'soakers'. Each visit we would hear the latest exploits of the new baby.

From time to time we also put up any relatives who were passing through, including the Patterson boys, not to mention any friends or acquaintances who had been given our address.

This weekend hospitality was strictly war work. Halifax in those days had a clear social structure and even these restrained activities were frowned upon by some. During the week we would pursue our own social life and this would tend to be with the officer classes. Officers and other ranks rarely moved in the same social circles and although my mother was among the more liberally minded of the time, to ignore this division would have only cause awkwardness.

At this time I was a Director of the College of Art in Halifax, the development of my career having been assisted by the enlistment of some of my colleagues. As an artist, and having visited New York, I must have been considered rather bohemian by some, certainly by my rather better behaved elder sister. We were no part of Halifax 'society' but the influx of eligible young men in their elegant uniforms was a heaven sent opportunity as partners were in short supply. Many of the grander families or organizations (I remember the Masons in particular) ran committees that organized dances and parties. Entrance was easier for engaged couples no one wanted to be seen to be encouraging loose living so I became 'engaged' almost on a weekly basis. Drinking too was forbidden so we smuggled our own bottles in and kept them under the table. I am sure we fooled no one, but appearances were up held.

I don't even remember the names of my numerous 'fiancées' and our relationships were strictly proper, but when I did eventually genuinely get engaged it was through the Art College rather than these social events.

The College was next to the City Parade and beside Moirs chocolate factory. As part of our war effort we offered evening classes for these soldiers and sailors with time on their hands. I remember the Governors insisting on full blackout and I had to arrange for huge rolls of black cloth for the high studio window. Among the students was a Captain in the British Royal Regiment of Artillery who had great talent in sketching

but tended to sketch me rather than the model or still life that was the subject for that evening.

Pat was in Nova Scotia to set up coastal defenses and in fact was going to set up an anti-aircraft battery on the lawn of my grandmother's house in Port Williams. It was after Dunkirk and the contingency plans were underway to relocate Churchill's government and the Royal Family in Canada. So he was there long enough to ask me out and eventually ask me to marry him.



We were married in Halifax in June 1942. Ostentatious weddings were of course out of the question but I had set my heart on lilacs for the Church, St. Andrews on Coburg Road. Pat's colleagues borrowed a jeep and drove round Halifax begging a branch wherever they saw a lilac tree in bloom. The church was full of lilacs and I carried them in my bouquet. General Elkins, who was Pat's Commanding Officer in the barracks at Sackville Street, and his wife were asked to act as Pat's parents at the wedding as Pat had no family in Canada. In fact I remember Pat telling me how he spent the previous

HUXFORD-HIBBERT

Widespread interest will be shown in the marriage of Miss Margaret Chase Hibbert, younger daughter of Mr. and Mrs. K. T. Hibbert, 9 Vernon Street, Halifax, and Captain C. P. H. E. (Pat) Huxford, Royal Regiment of Artillery, elder son of Colonel and Mrs. H. J. Huxford, Woodbridge, Suffolk, England. The ceremony took place at 12 o'clock Saturday in St. Andrew's Church, Rev. Dr. J. A. MacKeigan performing the ceremony. A large gathering of relatives and friends was present to witness the ceremony. The church was beautifully decorated with mauve lilac by students of the Nova Scotia College of Art, where the bride had been on the teaching staff for the past four years. Dean Collins presided at the organ.

Entering the church with her father, who gave her in marriage, the bride wore a smart semi-tailored white street length silk jersey dress with small white flower hat with veil, accessories in all white, and a corsage of Johanna Hill roses and mauve lilac.

The bride's older sister, Miss Louise Hibbert of Ottawa, was her only attendant and wore a ciel blue semi tailored silk jersey with small blue flower hat and white accessories, and wore a corsage of scarlet carnations and lilac.

Lieutenant Douglas MacDonald, R. C. A., was the best man, and the ushers were Captain Bruce Munro, and Lieutenant Charles Wise.

Mrs. Hibbert was attired in a navy blue silk jersey dress, navy hat and matching accessories, and wore a corsage of purple gladiolas and mauve lilacs.

Captain Huxford and his bride left immediately after the ceremony on a trip through the Province, and on their return to the city will reside at 9½ Vernon Street. Among the beautiful array of wedding gifts were an engraved silver tray presented by the officers of the Atlantic Command, and a sterling silver carving set, the gift of the staff and students of the Nova Scotia College of Art.

Wed At St. Andrew's

CAPTAIN AND MRS. C. P. H. E. HUXFORD

whose marriage took place in St. Andrew's church, Halifax over the week-end. The bride is the former Miss Margaret Chase Hibbert, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. K. T. Hibbert of Halifax. The groom is the son of Colonel and Mrs. H. J. Huxford of Woodbridge, Sussex, England.

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Christmas walking the streets watching families enjoying their Christmas meals behind half drawn curtains.

After the ceremony a jeep took us to the bus depot where, still in our wedding outfits, we caught the bus to Annapolis Royal for our honeymoon. Back in Halifax we moved into my parents home on Vernon Street in a more or less self contained apartment formed out of two upstairs rooms.

By Easter 1943 the threat to Nova Scotia was considered over and Pat was recalled to work on the development of radar in Britain. My grandmother never did get her anti-aircraft gun. While waiting to embark the troops, including Pat were collected in a transit camp outside of Windsor NS. A discrete tip off gave me his whereabouts and I got a drive out to find him on a hot summers day. The sight of dozens of soldiers in their underwear lying in their bunks in the dormitory as I walked in is one I will not forget. Some days later we watched from Citadel Hill as his convoy sailed silently out of the harbor.

By then I was pregnant and, in November 1943 , our daughter Ann Louise arrived at the Grace Maternity Hospital. It was still considered too dangerous for families to go to England but by September 1944 a growing stream of evacuated British wives and children were heading back across the Atlantic and I decided to join them. The ideal moment seemed to be when Ann was still in a carry cot but starting on adult foods. The very real risk of being torpedoed did not deter me and no one tried to dissuade me from my intended journey.

Only my mother, my father and I knew the actual date of our departure, apart from a slip of the tongue to my best friend, who was sworn to secrecy. Everyone else, Pat in England included, only knew I was due to cross towards the end of the year and I kept up the pretence by accepting invitations to farewell parties set for long after I was actually due to go.

On the night of my departure, and in my first trouser suit, I took a taxi with Ann, my brother Bedford and Pat's friend Charles Wise, who was also in the Royal Artillery. With this military escort we drove through all the checkpoints without difficulty and were driven up to the gangplank. With everything in darkness I had no ideas where I was or what sort of boat I was on but we were shown to a very comfortable first class cabin for four, with a private bath. Only a life belt hanging on the wall in the cabin gave any sign that we were on the Bayano, a Fyffes Line banana boat, capable of carrying 100 passengers.

We had previously invented a code so my sister, who now worked for the Head of Signals in Ottawa, and my friend Faith's husband who was in

the navy in New York would trace my progress. Charles and Bedford then sent a telegram reading "BETTER ACT YOUR AGE NOT OLIVER'S" the first letter of each word spelling out the name of the boat. Unfortunately Faith's husband forgot the code and telegraphed back "WHO THE HELL IS OLIVER !" while my sister, as ever, assumed I had made a mistake and tracked a different ship altogether.

I shared the Bayano with a hundred English mothers and children heading home, some of whom had already traveled 3,000 miles from the West Coast. Sleeping fully dressed, just in case, we would meet on deck every morning and see the convoy spread out around us. It seemed an important one with battleships and aircraft carriers as well as numerous corvettes, but still the U-boats got through and everyday we seemed to have lost more of the convoy. I recall signs on deck stressing "We will no stop it anyone falls overboard".

These mothers were wonderful to me, knowing better than I what it was like to leave family behind and go to a new country. They gave me advice and stuffed my pockets with half-crowns and pound notes so I could tip my way wherever I needed to go. Perhaps misled by the size of my cabin, they suggested I stayed at the Adelphi Hotel when we got to Liverpool. One particular angel was Cecily Lee who, despite having two children on her own and a husband to find, took me all the way to the Adalphi. We queued for rooms and I got the last one, just in front of the Belgian Ambassador who presumably had to find somewhere else. The room was fit for an ambassador too, with separate lobby and bathroom all fitted out in old fashioned splendor. Equally splendid was the housekeeper on our floor who helped out with Ann until Pat arrived.

Ann had been in her 'bunny bag' for several hours and was a bit of a mess so I dumped her fully dressed into this elegant bath to get her cleaned. Once she was clean Cecily got through to Pat's base in North Wales and passed me the phone. A lovely English voice said 'Hello ?'. I assumed anyone with an English accent was Pat so I said 'Darling, I'm here'. The voice said 'I'm not Darling, I'm afraid, but we have been expecting you. Pat's out for a walk but as soon as we can get a hold of him, we'll let you know."