

The Children's Overseas Reception Board

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British evacuee children disembarking in Montreal, 7 July 1940 (*National Archives of Canada, PA-142400*)

Much has been said and written about many of the communities and peoples who found themselves walking through Pier 21 during its forty-three years of activity. Over 1.5 million people entered Canada through the building in those years, many of whom would end up telling their stories. However, some groups have had less of a voice over the years. Many of the neglected stories of twentieth-century immigration come from the children who immigrated in their tens and hundreds of thousands. One hundred thousand “Home Children” were sent by philanthropists to escape the conditions of Industrial-era Britain; some 3,500 were sent abroad at the start of the Second World War to escape feared German bombings. As well, 22,000 arrived in Canada after the war with their war bride mothers and soldier fathers, and uncountable others arrived with other immigrant families over the years. This is the story of the children evacuated ahead of and during the Second World War.

The idea behind the Children's Overseas Reception Board, or CORB, had its origins in the years before the outbreak of the Second World War. The Great War had taught Great Britain that future wars would involve tremendous air raids and devastation. As early as 1924, London was beginning to discuss how to set about evacuating densely-settled parts of the country in the event of war with Germany.¹ Originally, the plan was to evacuate people to the far north of Great Britain, but with the appearance of long-ranged

¹ Fethney, Michael, [The Absurd and the Brave: CORB – the True Account of the British Government's World War II Evacuation of Children Overseas](#) (Lewes: The Book Guild, 2000), p. 22.

bombers this ceased to be a good enough solution. British citizens began looking overseas for potential evacuation. In 1939, Evelyn Mitchell, a Southern Rhodesian resident, broached the idea of a formal evacuation program specifically for children.² Around the same time, Canadians began showing support for the idea of a children's evacuation. However, the British government was mired in debate over the idea of whether the evacuation was feasible, politically or technically, and little came of a government evacuation program until after the war broke out. However, many *private* evacuations were set up, with as many as 13,500 children sent abroad by 1940.³ With the obvious wish for evacuation, and the looming threat of invasion after the German assault on France, the British government formally began to throw their weight behind the evacuation program in June 1940 when invitations were extended by Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.⁴

In late June, the British government began accepting applications from parents who wished to evacuate their children; they had to close the offices within two weeks due to the volume of requests.⁵ 211,448 applications had arrived during those few days.⁶ Obviously, the beleaguered Allied merchant marine could not cope with the volume of potential refugees; in addition to the fact that war materiel had to be shipped to Britain, some sixty merchant ships were being sunk monthly by German U-boats.⁷ A stringent selection process, combined with simple lack of shipping, put a sharp limit on the amount of children able to be sent abroad. Parents received an official-looking form letter, telling them their child (example: "your child (or children) has (or have) been selected...")⁸ had passed the selection process, warning them not to discuss the fact, and providing a list of things to prepare and a place and time of departure. It was something of a half-measure, but things were finally being done. On Sunday, 21 July 1940, the *Anselm* left Liverpool with 82 evacuee children onboard.⁹ CORB was in business.

Life onboard the evacuee ships was definitely an adventure for the children, many of whom had spent their entire lives in large cities. In addition to the adventure of the journey itself, conditions on the ships were often something of a shock. Early in the war, Allied convoys were poorly-defended – the *Anselm's* convoy was *undefended!* – and passengers spent hours on end in life-boat drills when attacks were expected. At times the attacks actually came, and the anxiety and boredom of drills was replaced by the terror of watching the next ship over in the convoy explode from a torpedo hit. Seasickness was probably the most common complaint by the children: one young evacuee says that "everything reduced to seasickness. I ate half an apple in eight days!" and another mentions spending most of his four weeks on the *Ruahine* hanging over the rail.¹⁰

² Ibid, 24.

³ Ibid, 27-28.

⁴ Ibid, 31.

⁵ Calder, Angus, The People's War: Britain 1939-1945 (London: Trinity Press, 1986), p. 128-129.

⁶ Fethney, p.301.

⁷ Ambrose, Stephen E. and C. L. Sulzberger, American Heritage New History of World War II (New York: Penguin Viking, 1997), p. 167.

⁸ Fethney, 62.

⁹ Ibid, 60.

¹⁰ Ibid, 98-101.

Most of the children got to their host families not without incident, but at least safely. Some were not so lucky, however. On August night in 1940, a convoy of thirty-four merchant ships with only one destroyer escort, including the CORB ships *Volendam* and *Rangitata* with over four hundred children between them. At 11:00pm, the *Volendam* was torpedoed by the *U-60*. Miraculously, there were no fatalities and only a handful of injuries in the attack, and all the children were quickly evacuated to other ships in the convoy. The children returned to Glasgow without further incident.¹¹ They were the lucky ones. Only a couple of weeks later, on 17 September 1940, the *City of Benares*, with ninety evacuee children and several hundred other passengers and crew, was torpedoed six hundred miles from land.¹² Of the ninety children onboard, only thirteen survived. The blast of the torpedo hitting the *City of Benares* sounded the death knell for the CORB program.

The *Benares* disaster was a fiasco in several ways, all of which finally began to impact on the British public. The convoy was undefended; the *Benares* was in the most vulnerable position in the formation; the convoy was traveling in a straight line, not even attempting to zig-zag to throw off U-boats; the list goes on.¹³ The outrage seemed to be equally aimed at the Germans and the British, and a series of inquiries and investigations blasted the Admiralty and the British government for their handling of the situation. Children began to be pulled from convoys preparing to set sail, although two more ships departed Britain with CORB children onboard over the next four days. One departed before the news of the attack became public, and the second, the *Nova Scotia* with 29 children, set sail on 21 September. Although its convoy was also savaged by U-boats – five ships were sunk – the *Nova Scotia* itself and its children arrived at Pier 21 in safety. This would be the final shipload of CORB children to leave Britain during the war.¹⁴

As a result of the “horrifying, but predictable news” of the *City of Benares*’ sinking, the CORB program was quickly brought to a halt.¹⁵ The program itself was very limited in size; nineteen ships set sail with 3,127 children, the vast majority of whom made it to their temporary foster homes in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States.¹⁶ The overwhelming majority of these children arrived in Canada, and many of them entered through Pier 21. Although the CORB children were fewer in number than the Home children of the late nineteenth century, or the children of the war brides during the postwar years, their story is nonetheless worth knowing for its mingled airs of tragedy and hope.

¹¹ Ibid, 126-130.

¹² Ibid, 135.

¹³ Ibid, 148.

¹⁴ Ibid, 156.

¹⁵ Calder, 129.

¹⁶ Fethney, 304.