

Margaret Burt
Hamilton
British Evacuee Child
Antonia
August 19, 1940



Margaret Burt Hamilton

Speech made to Glencoe Rotary Club on November 8th, 1990



Remembrance Day nears. A time when we think of the horrors of war and remember particularly the men and women who served this country in the armed forces. We have a deep sense of gratitude for all these men and women.

Tonight I want to bring to you another aspect of war as it personally affected me.

I was a schoolgirl at the time, living in Middlesbrough, Yorkshire. We lived on the edge of town in a community called Brambles Farm Estate. As you can guess, brambles, in season were plentiful and a summer past time was to go as a family picking them for jams and desserts. The word Estate should not be confused with a Lord and his manor, it could better be described as a sub-division.

With the declaration of war, great fear descended. We had to create an air-raid shelter in our back yard. We helped our parents dig a big hole large enough to hold a double bed, a single bed and a chest containing food, water, candles and matches. Over this went an arch of

corrugated steel. The base outside was built up with sand bags and earth piled upon the top. We were all issued with gas masks. Horrible things that we had to carry everywhere in little cardboard boxes, slung over our shoulders by a strap. Every school day we had air-raid practices. We put on the masks, they smelled terrible of rubber. They quickly steamed up over the celluloid-like goggles. Talking produces an

awful distorted sound. Breathing was not easy and if you exhaled air quickly a raspberry sound erupted as it escaped through the rubber. Then we had to march out into the shelters, crowded and usually cold.

Barrage balloons started to occupy the skies. These were apparently in place to discourage low flying enemy aircraft.

In the fields on the way to school you could see soldiers at work setting up barracks and anti-aircraft gun positions.

Many uniformed people appeared in the neighbourhood. These were local who had joined the armed forces. Another type of uniform appeared. Women who did their part in the Land Army, meaning farm workers. And then there were the A.R.P. wardens and Red Cross Workers.

The coastlines were being covered with cement blocks and barbed wire to discourage enemy troop landings. Fortified cement pillboxes appeared at the side of major roads. Blackout had to be observed in every type of building and on every type of vehicle.

Then ration books for food and clothes. Even now I find it hard to read restaurant menus that offer steaks weighing 6 oz., 8 oz., or even 16 oz., remembering that our ration of meat was 6 oz. Per person, per week. I must add that rabbit and fish were not rationed, but not always available.

And so it was at the beginning of the war. It was not until about January that we saw an enemy aircraft. A lone, large aeroplane flying very high. We played guessing games. The general consensus was that it was probably a reconnaissance plane, not many weeks later the bombings started. Iddlesbrough was an easy target, on the river Tees and with oodles of railway lines, both so easily seen in the moonlight. The I.C.I. which produced all kinds of chemicals and paints and the Dorman Long Iron and Steel Company were perhaps the larger targets of industry. The steel from Dorman Long can be seen as girders in many schools in Canada and the name stood out on the ferry that I travelled to Nova Scotia on. The bridge at Sydney, Australia is also made with steel from that company.

The bombings took place at night. The sirens would wail and out of bed we tumbled with extra bedding and our gas masks to the air raid shelter. I had two brothers and a sister and we all shared the double bed. The noise was frightening and one was tempted to look outside and see what was happening. Frequently my Dad was absent doing his duty as an air

raid warden. Another problem we had was that when it rained heavily the water seeped up the ground into the shelter, occasionally reaching our bed mattress.

Walking to school one would see craters where the bombs had dropped. Incendiary bombs were mostly used at that time, so the craters weren't too big, but seeing them made you thankful that they hadn't landed on your house or shelter.

And so it was in this climate that our parents must have feared for our lives and unknown to us became part of the scheme called C.O.R.B., Children's Overseas Reception Board. It was an offer of help from private citizens in the Dominions and the United States of America.

That something was happening dawned on me when a couple of new suitcases appeared in the house and we weren't going anywhere, were we? And so it happened one night in the air raid shelter that my mother told me of plans to send us to Canada and gave me a talk about menstruation and the need and use of sanitary napkins. That next day we didn't go to school but were prepared for that long unfamiliar journey. My thirteenth birthday had just passed and my youngest brother was five. We were taken by our parents to the train station where we met up with many other children. Only one face was vaguely familiar. There were officials and counselors on hand, we were all required to wear nametags and personal particulars around our necks and eventually we boarded the train. Goodbye, we love you, write when you can, the war will soon be over and you'll be back home.

We had no idea where the train was going. It was an adventure and we got to meet so many other kids. None of us knowing for sure what was going on. We ended up at a big school in Liverpool. Well, that figured because ships sailed from Liverpool. We slept in large empty classrooms on little mattresses. We didn't sleep for long. The sirens went and we had to get up and, with our gas masks, go outside to a large underground shelter. It was very noisy with the sound of planes, bombs and guns. We wondered if our ship had been hit. During the day we had games and exercises and organized walks. After a few days we were taken by bus to the train station. Where to next? The boat? No, that was not to be. We were anxious to continue our journey. It was a very long train ride. Eventually we arrived at a school near Greenock, which is the port of Glasgow. What was going on? On reflection, one has to admire the tremendous organization of channeling so many children, and there were hundreds of us; to meet their basic needs and to maintain some sense of order. We were examined by English and Canadian doctors and all four of us passed our physical. Still, there was a sense of adventure. Again games, exercises and walks and always volunteers who

saw that we had food. Again we had to heed the air raid siren. After two nights, we boarded the liner Antonia. It was very windy. Inside the ship it was very hot. Our brothers were berthed with all the other boys separate from the girls. We were assured we would have time with them every day. My sister and I were in a cabin with twelve bunks. We went to a large dining room where men waited on us. That was a new experience. We also had lots of food. We were all assembled for lifeboat drill and along with our gas masks had to get used to carrying life jackets also with us, wherever we went. Finally, on August the eleventh, the Antonia set sail. We exited the estuary of the River Clyde through



protective booms and saw the pilot of the ship disembark onto a tender and return landward. We were now on the Atlantic Ocean.

We were only a few days at sea along with several other vessels which formed a convoy when my youngest brother, Peter, started running a fever and was put in sickbay. He eventually developed German measles and was in isolation. Being young, mischievous and concerned, we must have horrified the health officials for my sister Doris and brother Kendal would arrange to meet and go to the upper decks and visit Peter. When we were found out, we were severely reprimanded. The days passed with lifeboat drill, games, entertainment, good exercise and watching the sea for U-boats. Bathing was different Salt water was used; it had its own peculiar odour and left you feeling sticky.

We were discouraged about going on deck after dark; the blackout arrangements to exit onto the deck were interesting. To pass through any door you always had to get over a high step but to get outside you had to turn right and walk a few steps, then left and walk a few steps and then right again and a few steps further you'd find yourself in the open air. The danger of light emerging was very slim.

Though we missed our homes, parents and friends, there was still a sense of adventure.

Most of our counselors were Red Cross ladies and most were Canadian, they did their best to keep us happy and were always accessible if we had a problem.

On Monday, August 19, we drew into Halifax. Newspaper representatives were busy with pads, pencils and cameras. Trains were waiting near the docks and we were eventually put on a train for Toronto. Such a big train and so very different from an English one. For the first time in our lives we met black people and they were very kind to us as were the rest of the trainmen. We slept on the train and woke up to see Quebec City. The sights were so new and awesome. People visited us on the train and gave us gifts of chocolate. All of a sudden we didn't post letters but mailed them. I had a letter ready to go knowing my parents would be glad to know we had safely arrived in Canada. Not long after this, the S.S. City Benares was sunk off the coast of Ireland by a U-boat as it headed for Canada. 73 evacuees lost their lives and the program was cancelled.

Eventually we arrived in Toronto, we had slowly regained our balance, which had been a little uneven with the roll of the ship and a lesser motion to get used to on the train. We were taken by bus to Hart House at the University of Toronto. The bus drove on the wrong side of the road and the steering wheel was on the wrong side of the bus.

For two weeks we were in quarantine, brother Peter was now very fit but others had come down with German measles. After more medicals and the usual occupation of games, exercises and walks we got to meet our Canadian families. Each of us went to different families but we were close enough to visit and to telephone. We didn't have a phone in our house in England so that was a novelty.

My Canadian mom and dad were Laura and Walter Carter. They lived in North Toronto on Bedford Park Avenue. They had one married daughter Saydie and a daughter Mary who was in high school. For a while I felt very much a showpiece and I didn't like that. They pulled my leg a lot, as did my schoolmates who had fun imitating my broad Yorkshire accent.

Bit by bit I felt more comfortable and they really were very kind to me. In a way they were overly protective of that and me is reasonable when you think what a responsibility I was for them. The family pet was a highland terrier called Guest. That name stimulated some funny conversations. Guess was my confidant when I was feeling down and nothing fized her, she was forever optimistic and happy. Pop Carter`s hobby was stamp collecting. He`d buy shoeboxes full of stamps and together we would rummage through them looking for Beaver stamps. I`d get a dime for everyone I found but I didn`t find that many. He also grew prize Dahlias and so I learned a little bit about the storing of tubers etc. There were so many new things to be experienced. Mom Carter was a real homebody. She loved to cook, sew and knit. I used to love going downtown with her; we always ended up in simpsons for a lime sherbet.

Halloween trick or treating was a new experience. The boys in the neighbourhood were adept at removing furniture from front porches and putting it in trees. The streetcars were much different from the English trams, they even had heaters in them which the conductor had to refuel from time to time. The winter snow was something else. Mary introduced me to skiing and skating. The skiing was allowed at a nearby golf course and there were a couple of outdoor ice rinks within walking distance. One of Mary`s friends was a hockey player, you might recall his name Bobbie Goldham. He left school to join the navy. I liked it when he needed help to hold his collar down while he put on his overcoat.

The war seemed far away except that Mary`s school friends were putting on uniforms and going away. Sunday afternoon was letter writing time, a pattern which was honoured in our home in England. I looked for letters every week from my family. My school teacher in England had my classmates writing letters to me for composition classes, that was fun getting such a stack of mail. Twice during my stay in Canada I got messages over the radio from my parents. It was good to hear their voices. The teacher I referred to is still a friend and visited us in Glecoe about four years ago Alice Atterton. I looked forward also to getting pictures from my parents and Mom and Pop Carter made sure they got a pictorial record of my progress.

Food rationing in Canada was no burden at all. I`d never seen so much food in my life. I ate corn on the cob for the first time. Pumpkin pie was a new experience and I learned to love it. We had a tiny earthquake which was another new experience. It was a strange thing. It happened during the night and I dreamt that my bed and I were riding on top of an elephant. Next morning we learned there had been an earth tremor.

I got Gracie Fields autograph in Toronto when she came to promote the sale of War Bonds.

I learned to look forward to the Weekend Star. Always there was a novel in it. All the ladies in the house read it. The family enjoyed the radio. We'd listen to the Happy Gang, Ma Perkins, The Shadow Knows and Amos and Andy.

Valentine's day was a new experience too and I was thrilled to receive cards. Not all were anonymous. One very fat boy in my class gave me one. We were never really friends but I feel proud when I see his face or name on T.V. and he has made a living as an actor in Canada on stage and film. He isn't fat anymore but he doesn't have as much hair as I remember. David Gardiner.

Anticipation of news from home dominated my mind. As long as I was busy it wasn't too bad. My brothers and sister seemed to be doing OK. Their families were nice caring people.

Strangely enough we were all with UC families. Mine didn't go to Church but saw that I did. I joined the CGIT and when there were special special events Mom Carter would come along but I had a hard time introducing her as my Mom. As much as I cared for her I felt an outsider.

We had an interesting neighbour but weren't socially involved with him. Arthur Lismer, one of the group of seven Canadian painters.

Ice fishing on lake Simcoe was another adventure. I was scared stiff just being on the ice but then to be around the edge of a hole in it. I was sure it would crack. Added to that we were in a little hut and had a little heating stove in it. On the other hand it was beautiful to look down into the clear water and if we were lucky we could see the fish, luckier still if it took the bait.

I really enjoyed high school. Though I didn't have much schooling at the piano I was eventually to become a pianist in the orchestra. We were always practicing for some upcoming event and of course weekly assemblies. I was happy to be transcribing and putting music to paper for other instruments. There was always some new thing to learn. One summer I was allowed to borrow a school trumpet and tutor book and I struggled along with that making horrible noises. That Christmas our conductor played the piano for two numbers and allowed me to play first trumpet.

And so the years passed, happy in so many ways yet never quite feeling whole, I was an outsider.

1945 arrived and the war was changing much in our favour. The school was planning a big show around the music of Irving Berlin. It was in early April, in a practice session that Mr. Dow asked me if I was going back to England soon. I was surprised at the question. I hadn't heard of any children going home and the war was still on. He emphasized how much he counted on my being at the piano. He must have known more than I.

Before the school show we were told we were going home. What excitement. Before we knew it we were packed. Surprise farewell parties and tears for I had come to know and love so many people. I was going to miss meeting the gang at the dairy bar for malted milks. I was going to miss the weekend job I had at the corner meat store. The pocket money that came from that, the people I worked with and the customers. I was going to miss my Canadian family who had given so much of themselves to me. They urged me to come back to them.

But I was going home! And so the long train ride from Union Station to New York where we boarded a converted merchant ship Rangitata and along with many other ships, set sail for England. At one time we counted 83 ships in the convoy merchant ships, tankers, troop ships, navy aircraft were strapped to the decks of some ships. We thought they were Merry Widows but it was hard to tell as their wings were bent in an upright position.

We still looked for U-boats but there weren't many left in the Atlantic. We had a couple of very stormy days and one night there was a terrific explosion. We never did know for sure what happened. It would seem that in the rough seas and tight convoy formation, two ships had collided. The sea around the two ships was aflame and explosions kept bursting on the one ship. One of the naval escorts stayed behind and the convoy kept moving on. Some ships had also left us going North and others South but there were about fifteen left in our convoy. We had a hard time sleeping after that terrible explosion.

The days passed again, games, exercises, lifeboat drill kept us busy. A famous actress was on board Gladys Cooper and she planned with others to put on a concert. One girl had a beautiful voice and I was able to accompany her at the piano. She sang 'Please give me something to remember you by'. Another lady sang 'Indian love call' It didn't go down too well. She was a powerful singer and the ceiling was very low making the acoustics poor. Added to that the piano had taken a beating during the storm and the loud pedal was stuck.

And so we neared England feeling joy at the hopes of seeing Mom and Dad and being a family again. We approached the river Mersey – our joy

was put aside. The river was a litter of sunken boats and aircraft. some partially exposed and others marked by a little boat with the word "Wreck" written on it. – a terrible reminder of the horrors of war. Here I was alive and well and so many others dead. It was very sobering. Liverpool had been badly bombed also and we saw many buildings that had been reduced to rubble.

The rest of our journey seemed slow. My Dad`s job had caused he and my mother to move to Newcastle while we were away and so it was into that railway station that our train finally arrived. There were lots of tears of happiness. Mom and Dad hadn't changed but in the years and months that we'd been away we had grown a lot. In the weeks to come we were



able to celebrate VE day and VJ day. Prior to these dates I had gone to see if I could join up but they weren't interested in me because I wasn't yet eighteen.

We were soon a family again

even though all four of us had lived with different families we all brought that experience together and it made life all the richer.

I want to thank you for letting me share this part of my life story with you. It is only a brief outline. What does it have to do with Remembrance Day? For me, it was my reality of war. Everyone is affected by war - quickly we think of uniformed personnel but I think they would quickly refer you to others whose roles were also very important. The families who supported them. The volunteers who tried to meet so many needs. The farmers who had to produce food for so many in such difficult circumstances. The clothing manufacturer - the parachute maker... the list is endless. And so we give thanks to all who were a part of that great struggle and we pray always for peace in our hearts, in our homes, in our community and in the world.

I want you to know that I had the same problem when I returned to England as I had when I arrived in Canada ... they teased me about my accent.

Thank you and SHALOM

Margaret Burt - Hamilton