

Ann E. Miller  
Wartime Visitor to Halifax  
Duchess of Richmond  
June 1940



Editor's Note: See the stories of John Tribe and Bill Pineo for additional information.

39th Story Competition, Submitted by Ann Miller, VX 104358.

Gone on Ahead

Early in 1939, prior to WW2, my father who was in the R.N. Reserve, being a 1914-1018 veteran, was re-commissioned and posted to Singapore, leaving behind my Mother and four children, aged, a few months, three, six and ten years old, at home in Sussex England.



In April 1940, he cabled my mother, in code to join him in Singapore, via Vancouver, The Atlantic at that time being considered the safest way of getting there. He

considered she and their children would be more secure in Singapore, with him for the duration of the war.

So with sounds of Dunkirk for background 'music', my brave Mother made the necessary arrangements. Stored furniture, packed precious belongings, obtained our passage and with a suitcase each, we set off on a voyage, which should have lasted about 8 days.

After saying our good-bye's to relatives and friends, many of whom we were never to see again, we proceeded from London to Liverpool, whilst en route on the train, I, by then, just eleven counted the barrage balloons, some 400 in all..!

On the afternoon of May 30, 1940, we boarded the Duchess of Richmond and sailed, together with the Duchess of Bedford and His Majesty's frigate H.M.S. Revenge, in convoy across the Atlantic to Canada .

The Atlantic may have been considered safer than the Mediterranean but by then Germans had 'found' the Atlantic and we spent the first eight days or more sailing, not directly West, but in a North and South direction, dodging, who knows what, the enemy had in store for us. Some days it was very cold and stormy and on others it was fine and warm..

There were many children on board, mostly with their mothers and also a very gracious woman, named Gracie Fields, who very kindly (having none of her own) and to give the mothers a welcome break, entertained the children for about an hour or more each day.

Gracie formed a Children's Choir, for the ships concert and we were taught the songs of the day. War songs and hits from Pinocchio, a film which had just been released/..

After about eight days, I noticed that one of our convoy, The Duchess of Bedford was missing. I asked my mother, where she was and she replied, "Do not worry about it dear, it has gone on ahead". In my eleven year old mind I knew it had been sunk and that my mother was, as all parents were doing in those days, shielding me from the horrors of war. For sixty years I mourned those people, but at the same time glad, the enemy did not get us and the Gold Bullion we were carrying to safety in Canada.

On about the 11 or 12 th June, our ship berthed in Halifax. Those who were going on to Montreal were not allowed ashore. We children amused ourselves watching the loading of a troopship alongside. Hundreds of soldiers in their khaki uniforms with their packs on their backs, climbing the steep gangplank.

Late in the afternoon there was an announcement over the loud-speaker for all children to join the Captain on the bridge. Naturally we all raced up and there we found our friend Gracie and the Captain, who had decided it would be nice if we sang to the soldiers on the other ship.

We did not need to be told, that they were going to England to fight and perhaps die for us. We sang 'Pack up your troubles' 'We'll Meet Again' 'Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Good-bye' and then in the late afternoon as the troop ship sailed, Gracie sang "Red Sails in The Sunset", her beautiful voice resounding across the sea.

I was only just eleven and was really saddened by it all. It was something I never forgot and through the intervening years. I have often wondered at the fate of those brave young men. Never ceasing to think of them whenever I heard Red Sails in the Sunset.

Approximately a month later my mother received a newspaper clipping and a photograph of Gracie, The Captain, myself and the other Children, singing as the troops sailed overseas. Being war-time there was no mention of when or where they were headed to or from. Neither do I know the paper it was in, England or Canada.

I treasured the clipping, but unfortunately as it became worn I trimmed it from time to time and through the years I even lost The Captain and the caption underneath.

My father meantime was transferred back to England and because children were now being evacuated to Canada, we were not allowed to go home. We were stranded in Canada. We never did get to Singapore (just as well) and after eight, mostly wonderful years on the West Coast of Canada, we settled in Australia in 1948.

I did meet Gracie again, when she came to Melbourne in 1964 and she autographed my tattered newspaper clipping.

After the death of my Australian husband, a T.P.I ..I set about searching, newspapers, micro-film and archives, trying to find a better copy of THAT PHOTO.

In September 1999, during a trip to Canada, I visited Pier 19 in Halifax, which is now a museum and has memorabilia of all those who landed there between 1930 and 1970.

There I was told of a soldier, who only days before, had written saying that Gracie Fields had sung to him whilst on a troop ship bound for England in June 1940. And he never forgot it..

I was overwhelmed to say the least and three weeks later in British Columbia, we met. Together with his charming English (War Bride) wife. We shared several outings and lots of talk, before I returned to Australia. We now correspond regularly.

In general conversation, I asked, "On what ship did you sail to England,?" he replied, "The Duchess of Bedford". So she really had, "Gone on Ahead"

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