

Jean Laffin nee Shephard  
English War Bride  
Drottingholm  
August 15, 1944



PIER 21: Recollections by Jean Laffin (Nee Shephard), War Bride 1944

Prologue



My association with Canadians started before the Second World War began. When I was still going to school, my Mother belonged to a women's group called, The Women's Own. They had their meetings on Wednesday afternoons. We children would go in after school just in time for a cup of tea and a sticky bun. The President was a Canadian whose name is Mrs. Bleech, and in the Parish Church yard, were over 300 Canadian WW I Graves, every year on the Sunday nearest to

July 1st, there would be a Memorial Service, with Canadian and British Legions in attendance.

In those years the Grave Commission hadn't taken the graves into their care. So the Women's Own members would go around to the big houses and mansions to ask permission to collect red white and blue flowers. These flowers were then made up into hundreds of little bunches and put onto each Canadian grave for the memorial service. I had often gone along with my Mother and helped her on these occasions.

There had been a Canadian Army camp on Bramshott Common on one side of the main London Portsmouth Road, and a hospital on the other side. So when the war broke out in 1939, that camp and hospital were rebuilt again for the Canadian Army.

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I had just left school the year before. School leaving age in those days was 14 years old. Unless parents were well off enough to pay for high school fees, or smart enough to pass the entrance exams. (I guess I wasn't.) Anyway, I had just started work at the Boy's Private Boarding

school at a place called Grayshott. It was a 4 mile bicycle drive away from home, along the main road.

Well, when war broke out, there was a big shortage of drivers, and my Dad had volunteered, and joined up. Well when he was home on leave, and found out what was going on with the camps being built etc., he was insistent that I leave my job. He was against my riding by bike past the camps - too dangerous, even when I only got to get home every other weekend. But then I was only 15 years old, so I suppose in retrospect, it was understandable.

There was a rumor going around that Sainsbury's, a company like Sobeys, was locating their warehouse facilities to a place near home, and in the opposite direction to the camp. So I applied for work there, it was going to be a while for the move, so I got a temporary housework job with another Canadian lady, her name was Mrs. Dodd. She too, of course was interested in the Canadians coming to Bramshott, and so she started a canteen, getting me and another girl to help. Mrs. Dodd also advertised, darning of clean socks and mending of gloves could be done.

Well, one evening there was this soldier who came and gave me a pair of gloves to be mended. There wasn't very many holes, and I didn't take much notice him, in fact, I was rather shy (and not an easy mixer, well, perhaps he was too, I didn't know) But perhaps Mrs. Dodd seen something pass between the soldier and me, and we weren't aware of it, I couldn't say for sure, but anyway she asked me if I would mind going to her house for some more milk, as the stores close at 6 o'clock, and she was running low. She asked the other girl to go with me, and then told the soldier that he might as well go along too. And that's how I met my husband.

It just seemed to be a mutual affair; I had just turned 17 at the time and had gotten the job at Sainsbury's when they got their plant up and running. Steve had met my family by this time and they had all taken to him, so that when I got home from work, he was often there waiting for me. Quite often after we had tea, I would fall asleep in his arms. (Great company for him, wasn't I?)

Anyway a couple of years later, Stephen asked my Dad permission to marry me. Dad argued the fact that I didn't even know how to cook! (Reason being during the war food was rationed very tightly and couldn't waste anything) But Steve was persistent, told my Dad that we all had to crawl before we could walk. So my Dad relented.

On the 24th of June 1944, a lovely day, and after Steve having to bail his best-man, George Nelson, out of jail, (apparently he had a little too much

to drink and got too rambunctious!) we were married in St. Mary the Virgin in Bramshott, where all my 4 sisters had been married before.

It was a beautiful wedding, and I was lucky enough to be married in a white wedding dress, because they were in such short supply during the war, so I was fortunate enough to borrow a wedding dress from a friend of mine. My head dress and veil had been my sister Connie's. Steve's Mum had sent butter and fruit for the wedding cake, which my sister

Freda made and iced. She did a wonderful job. I had three nephews and three nieces in attendance. The bridesmaids dresses were all hand made. A friend of mine was to be my chief bridesmaid,



but she was in the air-force, and couldn't get away, so my 10 year old niece filled in. Everything went very well, and I thought that with such a wonderful start, everything would be alright.

Almost a year later, the war was over in Europe! There was dancing in Liphook Square (which was in the same Parish). The square also boasts of having a large horsechestnut tree, where, there really was a blacksmith forge from days gone by, where horses were changed for the stage coaches. Behind that is the Royal Anchor Hotel, where Royalty was said to have stayed at one time or another in the past.

Steve left for Canada a few days later, and I followed on the Drottingholm about 3 months later.

I suppose when you are young and in love, one doesn't think of what lies ahead and I guess I didn't. I don't remember much about the actual trip over, I guess I was too sea sick to give it much attention.

But what I do remember, is my first impression, when we reached Newfoundland (I found out later that Newfoundland was not yet a part of Canada), where we sailed into St. John's Harbor to let some of the passengers off, the view amazed me!! It looked as though the houses were clinging to the rocky cliffs for dear life, as if a gale or strong wind might sweep them all off into the sea. The sight gave me a feeling of apprehension.

Was Halifax going to be like that?!

It was with some relief to find next morning on August 15, 1945, as we glided into Halifax Harbor, how very much different everything was. Why, we even saw a band playing on the docks and the ships in the harbor were spraying water in the air and all sounding their horns and whistles. What a grand reception they were giving us!!

However that was short-lived. There was an announcement over the loud speaker that war was over with Japan. You guessed it - we had arrived on V-J Day.

After we docked, it was women with children first, and those who had a further distance to go by train. So since I wouldn't be going very far, I thought I'd have quite a wait, so was watching all the activity going on from up on the deck. Then I noticed this fellow walking across the deck towards me.

I couldn't tell who he was, dressed in an overly large brown suit, and a floppy rimmed hat, for all I knew, he could have been one of those gangsters one would read about.

But to my surprise and delight, I realized it was my husband Steve!! He had come to take me off the ship. He then introduced me to his Uncle



Bert, who was working for the Harbor Commission at that time. After retrieving my trunk and getting it cleared through customs, and I got my papers stamped Landed Emigrant.

Pier 21, the portal to my next step in my life's journey; I didn't know what to expect, from one moment to the next. Coming into this new land partly full of dread and partly full of hope for the marvelous future I had prayed we would have together.

The place was bustling with porters pushing trolleys filled with baggage, servicemen anxiously looking for their wives & children. There people all over the place. We finally made it to the doors and to Uncle Bert's car. We were then whisked off to Uncle Bert's place, which was not very far away, and we arrived just in time for lunch.

The house was full of people waiting to meet me. I felt so nervous, and out of place. Would they like me? What will they say to me? What do I say to them?

There were mostly Uncle Bert's family, his wife and two daughters and another Uncle, and friend. Well, anyway the main course of the meal was baked beans. I was so embarrassed, I didn't feel very hungry, and I never had that kind of baked beans before, with molasses in them, and they were much too sweet for me, not having hardly any sugar during the war. After lunch Uncle Bert and Aunt Gertie took us to Stephen's home in their car, Uncle Albert drove Steve's car which was a model A Ford. Well the drive was lovely for the first 50 miles or so, but then when we reached Shubenacadie, (I wondered what kind of name is that?! But I was too shy to ask.) Then, we turned off the main road on to a dirt road. For the next 15 miles we were jounced and jostled on this rutty and dusty old road. It was narrow with tree branches reaching over the road to almost touch each other. It was as though we were traveling through a leafy tunnel. I was wondering where on earth this meandering trail of horrors was taking us.

Finally we had arrived at our destination. I was surprised, shocked and couldn't say a thing. I couldn't believe it. Homesickness came on with a vengeance when I gazed upon a rather poor looking house, which later to my chagrin lacked the finer amenities - no in door plumbing!! Steve's parents were kind enough, but quiet towards me. But they were really pleased to see Uncle Bert and Aunt Gertie.

Steve showed me where our room was. It took ages to get used to the place, and to try to fit in.

Steve wanted to take me around, to meet his family, but his old car was something to be desired. He took me to Maitland, a small village about 5 miles away, and took Uncle Albert along with us. Why did he do that?



I soon found out, he would need the help. After 27 flat tires going down to Maitland and back, we finally made it back to Steve's parent's place. It was hard to get new tires back then, but Steve finally got some.

Then Steve wanted to take me to Trenton to show me off to his relatives, his Uncle Laurie and Aunt Clara. They were very nice people, and asked us to stay for lunch. And guess what we had - yes you guessed it - baked beans. Is that all these people eat over here? Oh well, I did get used to them eventually.

I enjoyed going out with Steve, and quite often his parents would come along and we would go visiting his kinfolk, and taking in the lovely countryside.

But Steve's gratuity was running out and not much other income coming in from any other source. I guess it was time to settle down. He had helped the local farmers getting their hay in, and then went to cutting logs, to make a little ready money.

Hunting season came, which was quite new to me. They'd go out for hours and then arrived home empty handed and with an empty gut to boot. However, when they did get a deer; that was something else again. I came to like deer meat, rabbit etc.

Christmas was also very different. Before



hand, mincemeat would be made. Taking the neck of the deer, I was showed how to make real mincemeat, (Mustn't forget the rum or sherry!) apples, raisins etc. Then we made Xmas cake. I was in seventh heaven, all these ingredients; I didn't have to scrimp on anything!! There were lots of fruit (raisins, currants, mixed peel etc. But it seemed I might have forgotten to add the rum, so I put the called for amount in. Turned my back to do something at the stove, and then turned to catch someone adding some more. (I

wondered how many times that happened?) I was beginning to think that Steve's folks really liked getting into the Christmas spirit!

Getting the Christmas tree was another family tradition of theirs. We'd go tramping through the woods, generally in deep snow (up to the knees or more). I remember I found a pretty little tree, good shape as well, but no, that wasn't big enough. They got one that really was too big. After trimming some off the top and the bottom - they finished up with a tree about the same size as the one I had pointed out in the first place. Decorations for the tree etc., were mostly home-made.

Then Steve taught me how to make bread. Yes my husband knew how to make bread. Apparently when he worked with the logging outfits, Steve learned how from an old woodsman, until Steve got better at it than he did, and wanted Steve to make the bread from then on. Now back to me making bread. Steve told me what ingredients went into the bread, and how to put it together. Well, I don't know what happened, but it didn't turn out the way it was supposed to. I started to cry for I tried so hard to do a good job. What a waste. Steve chuckled, and told me to throw it out. Throw it out?! He must be mad! But he took the pan and threw out the dud dough, which made me cry more. He got the ingredients ready and said to try again. Well that got me so mad, throwing things out, the very idea! So I took out my frustrations on that poor dough, pounding it from pillar to post and back again. When the bread was finished I was amazed at how wonderful it turned out!!



Missing out on going to Church was most disappointing to me. The nearest Church was at Maitland 5 miles away and the other one to which they were affiliated was 7 miles in the other direction over dirt roads and generally clogged with snow in winter, and up to the axles with mud in the spring thaw.

I had relatives (which probably came through Pier 21 as well), in Ontario. My grandmother, passed away when my Mother was 2 year old, and her Dad married again when she was 5. They had quite a large family and moved to Canada, after my Mother was married and had my first sister. So my Mother had given me the address of that

Family; and I had written to them. They invited us to go to their place. Steve agreed to try it, so we left for Waterloo February of 1946.

Upon arrival we found that their place was like a summer cottage - 2 rooms and a sunporch. He was a small man and his wife wasn't much taller, but bigger the other way. They had one small son. We couldn't very well stay there, so my Uncle found renting accommodation with friends of theirs. Steve and I soon found work at a shoe factory.

We also met my Aunt Edie and Uncle Jack. I liked Auntie Edie and took to her right away. She reminded me so much of my Mother. We would meet them every Saturday at Kitchener and have a fish & chip lunch with them and I thought at last things were working out for us, but sadly, we still had no children, and I began going to a doctor in Waterloo to find out why, and she told me I was just a bundle of nerves, and it was no wonder I couldn't get pregnant. She gave me some hormone tablets (the size of horse pills!). Well about that time, things weren't going very well with the people we were renting from.

The old fellow was a really nice man, but his Missus was different matter. It seemed I couldn't do anything right for her, and one day came home from work to hear her complaining to her neighbor loud enough that I couldn't help but hear her. Then to top that, I get news from home that my Mother had been taken to the hospital very ill - the next thing I knew she had passed away.

Well, that I suppose was the last straw. I was so devastated that the Doctor I was seeing told Steve to take me out of that environment. Well, he took me out of there alright. Before I knew it, we were back in South Maitland again. Not that I really wanted to be back here again, but due to circumstances out of his control, he was only doing the best he could do. At this time, I didn't really care what happened to me. One day just followed another.

When Steve had come home after the war, he had bought a pretty piece of land at South Maitland, and had given it to me as a wedding present. It was only 2 acres, without any house on it, although there was a house on it a long time ago, but long since gone. So Steve thought it was about time he put one there. Further down the road the other side of Maitland had been an RAF station, now they were clearing the site, so Steve got most of the building materials from there. By the time he had the place boarded in and the roof on, I was beginning to feel better. Then wonders upon wonders, found myself to be pregnant! With the outside of the house finished, we moved in.

I felt so much better in our own place. (If only it had been better) Anyway we've done the best we could with the inside. We had the wires for the electricity in, the bath fixtures to put in, lots of good water in the well.

When our baby was due to be born though, we still had to go to Shubenacadie, over that rough dirty old road, and then 22 miles further to get to the hospital in Truro. I started cramping Saturday May 21st. But the baby wasn't born until the next day at about noon.

The delivery was quite difficult. They had to turn her and help her out with forceps, so that she was a true 'Bluenoser', being blue all around her nose, mouth and chin. I didn't get to see her for a couple of days. But she soon got rid of all the blue, and was quite healthy a week later. When we arrived home the little place was full of the beautiful scent apple blossoms wafting in from the orchard.

Steve's sister Winnie came and stayed with us for a couple of weeks, 'til I got used to handling Mary, and I got stronger. Then we thought about our position. We were in the same one we were in before we went to Ontario, so what to do.

We decided to try Ontario again, but going to a different place, and a different relative of mine, namely Aunt Celia and Uncle Bill. We got along with them alright, although Uncle Bill was not working and Aunt Celia was. She was also one for going to Church, and so I was glad to go along with her. We liked the Church very much, it being like the one over home. We got Mary baptized. Steve wanted to call her Jean, and I wanted Mary, so he said Mary Jean sounds nice. Aunt Celia was her Godmother and Aunt Edie from Kitchener was her other Godmother, and their husbands were the Godfathers. It was a lovely celebration.

Steve soon got a job at the Aluminum Company Plant that was almost across the road from Aunt Celia's place. But I am afraid things didn't work out living with them, so we got an apartment nearby. For now everything was going along so well, he thought his Mum & Dad would like to come there as well so sent them train fare, and got them a place to stay. But they didn't like the place Steve found them, so they found quite a large place over a store then talked Steve into moving in with them. I really didn't think much of the idea, especially when I found out that part of their plan was for me to get a job. But I just wanted to have a nice place to ourselves and enjoy looking after Mary. She was getting to be such a joy.

Steve's parents had brought their youngest with them, she had just left school, and they said she would baby sit Mary. Steve's Dad got work at the Alcan with Steve. And lo and behold soon after that, the rest of the

boys in the family came to Ontario too, and stayed in the same apartment. Of course they all didn't find work all once. Now there were four extra mouths to feed. So I reluctantly found a job.

A little later I got sick, naturally I thought I was pregnant again. But this time was different, I really felt so bad. The doctor said, I'd had a miscarriage, but I knew I hadn't.

At that time the Alcan employees were getting their annual Doctor's check ups and Steve told him about me, and he gave Steve the name of a woman doctor. So Steve took me to see her. Oh I was pregnant all right, seven weeks in the tube! They operated and caught it in time before the tube burst. They had called me the seven week wonder!

So once again I was devastated. I really didn't care about getting well if it hadn't been for having Mary. No one came to see me in the hospital that is, except for Steve of course.

I told Steve that I wasn't going back to that apartment again, and that I



wanted a place so I could look after Mary myself. Well, he did find a place, a basement apartment, it wasn't really finished yet, but at least we were a family once again.

However some time after that, Steve and his Dad were laid off. The Oakville Plant which the orders came from where Steve was working, went on strike, so, no orders, no work.

It seemed like other plants had the same idea of going on strike, so it was so hard to find work. His parents just packed up and went back to N.S. taking their son Raymond and daughter Annie with them. Their other sons, Alvin, Lewis, & Charlie had jobs and girlfriends, so they stayed.

And so, since Steve couldn't find work, he decided to move. That's right, back to good old South Maitland again. He had a van by that time, so we packed up what we could into it and drove back.

When we got back to our little house, we couldn't believe what had happened. It had been broken into, the electric wiring, ceiling fixtures as

well as the bathroom fixtures were gone. The windows all broken out, so sadly, we had to go over to his parents place. But what was the sense of staying there; after all, there was no work to be had. So we went into Halifax. His Uncle Bert had found us a place to rent near his place, and Aunt Gertie had found Steve a job at the Lord Nelson Hotel, where she worked. However Steve didn't really care for washing dishes. I got a job at the Moir's Chocolate Factory, and Mary started school. Annie came to stay with us to look after Mary while I was working.

So we got along ok, but it wasn't the ideal situation, and eventually Steve was getting fed up with dish-pan hands, so left with another fellow and went and rejoined the army. When he came home and told me what he had done. I was so surprised and relieved! It seemed that Steve did things on the spur of the moment, and didn't talk to me about what he proposed to do. But in looking back on it, I suppose he thought with all that I had gone through, and what I was going through; he didn't want to bother me with things like that.

Shortly after that, October (Thanksgiving weekend) 1954, we were on our way again, in his van with the few bits of furniture, to Beaver Harbour, New Brunswick, where we had a small cottage to live in. Steve was stationed at Camp Utopia, not far away. Beaver Harbour was a pretty little fishing village and the people were friendly.

But we were not there very long, when Steve came home to inform us that we were going to Germany, to be in the Army Occupation for a couple of years. What wonderful news!! We would be close to England. Steve left the end of September 1955 with the Advance Party, and they went by air. It was the first time for Steve in a plane. Mary and I went the end of November. I think it was through Pier 21 we passed to board the Franconia.

When Steve went over, he didn't take his disembarkation leave, he saved it and Christmas leave, so that soon after our arrival, the three of us were on our way to England. We had a glorious time there over Christmas with my family. After that, Mary and I were able to spend a couple of summers holidays over there while Steve was on maneuvers.

It was all so wonderful in Germany as well, we would get together with other people in our apartment building, playing cards, Auction 45's etc., one couple in particular held special place in our hearts, Carl & Mary Guilderson. Steve always the tease, would call her the Old Crow and she would give back as good as she got, and called him the Old Crab. Well one day Mary G. came down with yellow jaundice, and Steve and I went to see her in the hospital. The first thing Steve said as soon as he saw her was "Mary, this is the first time I've ever seen a yellow crow!"

I think if she had of had something handy to throw at him, she would have! But it was all in fun and she knew it.

We did some traveling around, visiting Holland and the Keukenhof Park, the Wuppertal Zoo in Germany, where Mary had a ride on a baby elephant which she called having a rock and roll ride, the Fairy Woods near the Black Forest, where there were Fairy Tale creatures in little houses. Mary went to a Canadian school, and we had the Naafi where we shopped for groceries, also there was a Cinema.



Unfortunately, two years flew by all too quickly, and we found ourselves on our way back to Canada as a family on the Greek ship, Queen Frederica., and arrived back once again through Pier 21. It was like a new beginning, a second chance to start over.

From Pier 21, we journeyed to Camp Petawawa, where we spent the next 3 years. Steve didn't sign up for another stint in the Army, with no other work prospects; we headed back to Nova Scotia. Since we couldn't have any more children, we decided to adopt. We adopted Marjorie, (who likes to be called Marg,) in 1962, and both girls grew up, married, giving us 5



Grandchildren between them. Mary had a boy and a girl, and Marg had 3, two boys and a girl. So having no opportunities of work, and due to his being in the Forces, joined the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires, and was with them 'til 1984, when he retired.

Over the next 10 or so years we've have a couple more trips back to England, a trip to Texas, and several to Toronto to visit relatives. In 1994 we traveled to England again, where we celebrated our 50th Wedding Anniversary, and when we got back our girls put on a party for us too!!



Lovely trips all told, and I felt that we have done quite well on our limited funds.

Steve lived long enough to see two of his Great-Grandchildren; sadly he passed away in 1999 with a blood disorder, a sort of cancer. We all miss him terribly,

There have been 4 more Great-Grandchildren since then. Making a total of 3 Great-grand sons and 3 Great-granddaughters!

I must admit we really had a good life together on the whole, and Steve loved to go visit England whenever we could manage it, and usually on the spur of the moment!



And we eventually settled in South Maitland, the place he loved. The road had been paved in the late fifties, or early sixties, and a bridge had been put across the Shubenacadie River in 1979, which cut the mileage to Truro considerably.



In June 1999, my Son-in-law Charles, my Daughter Mary, and I went over to England just to get away for a while, since, Father's Day, my birthday, our Anniversary were all in that month; it was good break for us all.



During that month, we had a great time, visiting my two remaining sisters and their families, going over old times and touring the sights and Historic places.

In 2001, Mary and I went back over for my sister Connie was not too good. But we had a good time with her just the same then we went south to visit with Dolly for a little while. I couldn't help but think when we left England; that I don't believe I could ever live

there again. It had changed so much, and so had I.



It is now 2004, as my daughter Mary wheels me around (can't walk too far now, my legs won't let me) the refurbished Pier 21, including seeing the wonderful play they put on in the "ship".

Outside tied up at the dock, there was a Ocean Liner, the Maarsdam from Amsterdam, it too brought back memories of the Drottingholm which brought me here. I could not help but go back in time in my mind's eye to see where I had entered, to start my new life here in Canada.

Postscript: On October 5, 2005 my granddaughter daughter Kerri had a new son. Conner Dion Fricke was born in Red Deer, Alberta.

Postscript 2: In a letter of February 2010 Mary Mansfield wrote, "Dominic Sebastian Fricke was born March 31, 2008 in Red Deer Alberta, granddaughter Kerri's third son; Ryan Daniel James Boutilier granddaughter Angela's son, born June 8, 2007 at Halifax. That makes 9 Great-grandchildren for Mom!"

