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English War Bride
Ile de France
Spring 1946



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So you want to know what it was like to be a WAR BRIDE?

Some background first:

I was just 13 and in my second year of High School when WW II broke out. We had previously been issued with gas masks and when the sirens sounded for the first time we all rushed to put these masks on as we figured there was an air raid coming. These masks were in a round yellow canister and from that day on until almost the end of the war I never left the house without mine. If we arrived at

school minus our gas mask we were sent home to get it. I had a three mile walk so I made sure I never had to do that.

Now that we knew we were in it for real we began to dig an air raid shelter in the garden. We lived on the outskirts of Brighton just a few miles along the South Coast from the White Cliffs of Dover and beneath the top soil was the same solid chalk so most of the digging was done with a pick axe. I remember the first night we spent underground - The German aircraft had set the gorse bushes (prickly shrubs) which covered the South Downs, on fire and we thought we were going to be bombed for sure so we grabbed our blankets and pillows and took shelter.

Fortunately nothing further happened, but it was a cold drafty night, the first of many.

Quite often when we were at home we would take refuge in a cupboard under our stairs. This was supposed to be the safest place in the house because there was nothing above us. One night when my Mother and I were in there we were so hungry that we demolished a tin of Nestles Condensed Milk. Our ration Books did not allow for growing teenagers appetites.

Blackouts were part of life now - all windows had to be covered with heavy curtains or plywood at night so that the German planes could not see the lights. If a chink of light showed through there would be a knock on the door with the Air Raid Warden telling you "PUT THAT LIGHT OUT" and there was a fine if you didn't. Bus windows were darkened and had very little light just enough to find your seat. Car headlights were shielded over the top and just had slits for lights to show through. I remember being hit in the back by a bicycle I couldn't see, while crossing a street on my way home from skating one night.

The Air Raid Shelter at my Secondary School (Varndean School For Girls in Brighton) was built in herringbone fashion. It was about six feet wide with benches along each wall and just long enough between each bend to hold a class, the pattern was to control a blast. When the air raid sirens sounded we gathered our

books, pens and blankets then filed out to the shelters to resume classes there. Later when the Germans changed their tactics they would fly in low off the sea to miss the radar and then 'Pips' would sound to warn us that enemy aircraft were directly overhead. There was no time to head for shelter so we got down on the floor and hid under our desk hands over our heads. We remained there until the "all clear was sounded". Our school was on the top of a hill, a long white building, which looked like a hospital so it was a target for the machine guns. Often, looking through the windows we would see our Spitfires fighting the intruders and sometimes a parachute descending from a plane spewing smoke and we would be thankful it was a Messerschmit and not a



Spitfire. The boys in those planes saved us during the Battle of Britain. I know several young men from this area flew those planes and we were for ever thankful to them.

By this time we had graduated from the underground shelter to an Anderson shelter in the house. This was a steel table with steel wire nets around the sides and was where I slept so that I didn't have to get up in the night during air raids, my folks would come under with me if the bombing got bad.

While I was still at school it became necessary that all teenagers had to take training in one of the armed services because manpower was becoming short during the campaign in France. All the young men were off at war and there was no one left to defend us except young people, and older Men who were in the Home Guard or served as Air Raid Wardens. I joined the Women's Junior Air Corps and we were trained how to shoot by the Home Guard who were also Vets of the first war, Tip of the Foresight in the Centre of the U lined up with the lowest central point of the target - A German tin hat. Fortunately I never had to use this knowledge I don't know if I could have, but you never know it might have been me or him ! I was a Sergeant because of my schooling and had to train others in my group, marching etc.

Almost every street corner had tank traps installed and there were Air Raid Shelters built every few blocks to protect people caught out on the streets during raids. We were expecting a German invasion after the capitulation of France. There was only 21 miles of water between us, and the German army. We had always enjoyed swimming in the English Channel but this came to an end when the beaches were mined and barbed wire entanglements lined the sidewalks.

Because of the arrival of Canadian Troops in Brighton, a Swimming Pool had been converted to an Ice Rink and during my last year of school I had learned to skate.

Little did I know then that this would change my life. I had a pair of second hand black figure skates, new ones would have used up six months clothing coupons, and learned how not to fall down. The first Canadian troops to arrive in Brighton had enlisted after the depression, and for those not familiar with England there was a Pub on every street corner open from 10 in the morning until 11 at night and you can imagine what occurred. I was still in school and my mother warned if she ever caught me skating with a Canadian she would burn my skates. She reinforced this by coming to sit in the gallery to watch , eventually she put on skates and joined me, until she had a fall which finished her skating.

I left school in the summer of 1942 and had planned to continue with chemistry which was my favourite subject, but with the war situation we

had to put in some time in one of the Armed Forces, Women's Land Army, or working on munitions. My Dad was in the Engineering business and during the war they added a factory to make parts for Radar. They were in need of a Book Keeper to work in the Pay office and I was conscripted, my dreams of becoming a chemist were put on hold. Now my Granddaughter has followed these dreams in Canada.

Skating had become my favourite pastime and during the Sessions they would have 5 minutes Speed Skating for Men, then for Ladies, followed by 10 min. Pair skating. This mixed up the crowd and one evening Les invited me to skate with him - I don't think my Mother could have been there that night. He asked me how old I was - 17 and he said he was 19, this story will be continued later ! Les could not believe we were skating in the middle of summer, if one fell it was a very wet landing, one slid along with a wave of cold water! The rink was very crowded and one had



to dodge in and out to get around with any speed. I had quite a few digs in my shins from the back end of skate blades.

It took quite a few Candy Bars sent home from the Army Canteen before I had nerve enough to invite Les home for supper. Canadian soldiers could get some things we could not. My Dad said "Poor beggars, coming over here to fight for us the least we can do is give them Fish & Chips." That was the only thing we could get that was not rationed. So Les and his friends would often come home to Patcham for supper after skating - Supper in England was at 10 pm.

Les often rode his Harley Davidson to visit me, my Mother made him park it out

of sight and when he left he had to coast down the road so the neighbours would not hear him. Then one day he arrived with a huge army truck, which she insisted, he park between the two houses - it would barely fit. I still don't know how he managed to get it in there but

he did. I never got to ride with him as it was not allowed so we took the bus home or his friends drove him in a station wagon and I took the bus.

Then one day Les stopped by on one of his dispatch riding excursions and he had his head shaved ready to leave for the battle zone in Europe. It was easier to keep clean that way. Although I didn't know it at the time, that was the last I would see of him for over a year, May 44 - July 45.

The Germans had been sending over their new weapon the Flying Bombs for quite a while. It was indeed a Bomb with wings and a motor. When the motor quit the bomb would fall. We would hear the thing coming and wait for the engine to die then we took cover. Spitfire pilots became very good at flying alongside and tipping the wings of the bomb so that it would fly back from whence it came hopefully to Germany. This was followed later on by the VII, which had a jet engine and we would hear a bang when it broke the sound barrier but nothing more until it exploded. These caused a lot of damage and casualties.

D Day came and the sky overhead was black with planes going over in droves hour after hour, we knew something was up. Les was with the Service Corps so did not cross the channel until the ground troops had secured a beach head large enough for tanks, big vehicles and supplies

to be taken over. For a long time I did not hear from him just listened to the news to learn what was going on. There was no TV coverage in those days! Mail was a long time reaching us but we wrote nearly every day so we would feel connected .



The war had ended in May but it was July 1945 before Les had any leave and that was when we became engaged and made wedding plans for September or whenever he could arrange another leave. When we went to see the preacher to make arrangements, he asked Les how old he was and Les said 23. I nearly fell off my chair because according to what he had told me when we first met he should have been 21 !!! I was marrying an old man - but I held my tongue !

Les had to get permission to marry from his Commanding Officer because so many Canadians had married English girls only to find afterwards that they had a wife and family in Canada ! Then we both had to have blood tests and medical exams before permission was granted.

Just a couple of weeks before we were to be married Les had the chance to take some trucks from Holland over to Czechoslovakia. He thought



that would be a good experience and he should be back in plenty of time to catch his leave group for England. The trip took longer than he expected and when he arrived back in Holland the Leave group had already left, this took several days because of the destruction of railroads etc. Fortunately there had been storms in the channel which delayed the crossings and he was able to catch up with

them. There was no way of getting in touch so I just waited & hoped he would arrive in time. The best man, his cousin

Bob Johnson, arrived Saturday afternoon and Les finally called from the railway station at 7 o'clock Sunday night and we were married at 1 o'clock Monday afternoon. So there was no rehearsal! The ceremony was held in St. Peter's Church Preston a part of Brighton. It is an old Church of England built in 1260, part of Preston Manor back in Feudal times. We had a nice reception with scrounged food

... were entertained lavishly in the great rooms of the Pavilion. The seal was set on Brighton's fame, while the court itself was the centre of political intrigue and social scandal.

Mrs. Fitzherbert, morganatic wife of the Prince, lived at 55 Old Steine, not far from The Lanes, the maze of narrow alleys running between flint-

... each generation since the beginning of time has helped in the making of Brighton's history, but to the Doctor and the Prince goes the honour for shaping its destiny as the happy play-ground of millions.

To-day the rateable value of Brighton is almost £2,000,000—a far cry from the 4,000 herrings of Dome day Book.



followed by a Dance. After a week's honeymoon Les had to return to Holland and was there until he got leave before returning to Canada in January 1946 on the Ile De France.

I had applied to follow Les to Canada and went to several meetings of War Brides to learn about Canadian customs and what to expect when we arrived here. They told us some queer things, gave us a cookbook so we were familiar with Canadian measurements and terminology. But they didn't warn us that certain words and phrases had different meanings in Canada. I got caught several times.

Finally in May 1946 the word came I was to go to a gathering place in London to begin my journey overseas. My parents drove me there and we said our tearful goodbyes on the street. When the group had gathered, 300 of us, we went by train to Southampton shipyard where this enormous ship towered above us, The Ile De France, the same one that Les had returned on. Wherever we went the band played 'Here Come The Brides' and they piped us on aboard. We went up on deck to watch as



7,000 Canadian troops also boarded. Guards were placed at all entrances to our quarters - fraternization was forbidden or you would be sent back to England. With so many on board ship there was no place to sit down, and having nothing to do, we walked the decks stepping over the soldiers who had no place but the deck to sit on either. We could not believe the food on board ship, White Bread, even bananas that we had not even seen for five years and oranges. At first it was smooth sailing until we hit the

Bay of Biscay when food was not at all interesting. We saw icebergs when we neared the Canadian shore but otherwise an uneventful trip. I sent Ship to Shore cable to my Dad for his birthday on May 13th there was no phone connection.

When we got to Halifax we were held up by fog and couldn't come in to port. The emigration people came out to the ship to start proceedings and save time. We finally landed at Pier 21 where a lot of brides went last week. We picked out our luggage, which was arranged alphabetically, and soldiers carried it to the train for us. I had shipped a bicycle and someone had written on it 'Mind My Bike' which was an English comedian, Tommy Handley's bye line. Several of the Brides found their

husbands waiting for them and I looked in vain hoping to find Les, not realizing how far it was.

Then we boarded the monstrous train. English trains were quite small in comparison and mostly electric they had just a shrill whistle, but the train here seemed to be blasting what sounded like 'Here Come the Brides'. I thought it was special for us but found later it was the regular warning at road crossings. I could not believe the way kids climbed over the train every time we stopped to let off one of the Brides. We wondered how they would make out in such barren country. The countryside seemed very uninteresting until we arrived in Montreal and were set off on a siding for the night while they were making up trains to head to different parts of Canada, mine just went to Toronto. There we changed to another train headed for Woodstock parts around. Our luggage followed later.

It was midnight when I stepped on to a DESERTED Woodstock station - 3000 miles from home and all alone. I had heard of Brides arriving and no one showing up to meet them and my first thought was "Oh No not another one!" Pretty soon the Red Cross showed up and they were just going to take me to a hotel for the night when along comes Les - very apologetic he had gone to sleep while waiting at home. If that had been me I would have gone to the station and had my sleep there!

I remember the drive to Burgessville along what at that time, was a gravel road, and I had never driven on a gravel road. I also remember the maple trees that seemed to branch right over the road especially from Holbrook to Burgessville, where the Buckrell Family were waiting for us. When we arrived we talked for a while, had a snack, and headed off to bed. The next day I met my two new nephews, always remember Ronnie saying "My Mummie doesn't talk like that." I was finally in Canada and Les and I were together for good although I was very homesick .

I had been raised Church of England although my Father was a Catholic (not a practicing one) but he was very broad minded about religion. I was allowed to go to other Sunday schools with my friends so I had a broad outlook on life, but the main religion was The Church of England. My Scripture teacher in Secondary School was Jewish - we got well grounded in the Old Testament. The only Baptist I had ever heard of was John the Baptist and I found it very hard living in the restricted conditions of a strict Baptist home. This was a new religion to me and dealing with this was the hardest part of adapting to Canadian ways. I wanted to go back home many times and know of many others who found it the same. It was a good job I didn't smoke, drink, or wear much makeup -my worst sin, other than being Church of England, was that I had danced since I was 2 years old and it was part of life for me! It

seemed to me like I had gone back to Victorian days. I had never heard of 'Anglicans' and was told they were just the same as Catholics which I knew just ain't so. I was treated as if I was a heathen !

We were married in the Church of England and Les had never indicated any difference he was just like me, willing to get along with those around him. He was telling us all about a night when one of his buddies came back to camp drunk and how he had put him to bed. The family said they would have left him outside. Les replied "Tomorrow he might save my life, or me theirs." Getting away from here and being in the Army had broadened his outlook on life too. It was not easy for Les' family either having a stranger dumped in their midst especially one from a different culture. Language was about the only thing we had in common

We were in a bind because Les had purchased a house in Burgessville across from Roy Deer's Farm, with his money from Veterans Affairs. After doing this he found that because of the Rent Laws he was not able to get the people to vacate, so we were without a place to live on our own. We couldn't get any help and finally had to take them to court when we heard the talk around the village was that they had no intention to move. They were ordered to move immediately but we still had to bring in the Sheriff to evict them. Judge Groom had ruled that because we had not taken any rent from these people the Rent Laws did not apply, and there was no date on the letter they had produced and said was from the old lady they had been looking after who had promised them the house for doing that.

That summer several War Brides had arrived in Burgessville - I was the last to come. The community held a shower for each of us soon after arriving. It was a great gesture but also quite traumatic meeting so many new people in one evening and trying to remember who they were. The parties were held in the Continuation School, which was where Krygsman's now have their business. Peg Smith and Kay Glover, were the two War Brides I came to know and there were a couple of others I never did meet as they moved away.

When I went to the store I had difficulty getting used to Canadian money and converted everything to 'Pounds Shillings and Pence' to get an idea of value. It took quite a while to get used to 'Dollars and Cents'.

I was soon put to work helping Les and Maurice with haying. Being able to drive I was conscripted to use the army truck on the hayfork. This gave me something to do out of the house and be alongside Les. We also helped load bales onto trucks as they were in the business of baling and trucking hay and straw.

It was a long 10 months, and would have been so much easier to adapt were we living in a place of our own. We spent a lot of time visiting relatives Les had not seen for four years, and chummed around with the Rettie cousins which helped a great deal as they knew what we were going through. We went skating whenever we could and I was invited to Judge a Skating Carnival in Zenda that winter.

In the meantime Les had built a new foundation behind the house as it



sat right on the sidewalk and needed a basement, he even had it jacked up before the people would move. It was New Years Day 1947 and during an ice storm when Les, with the help of his brothers, hooked on to the house with his army jeep wagon and slowly pulled it into place across a framework of timbers he had borrowed from a house mover. I would have moved in right then and there but we had no heat or hydro.

We finally moved in about the middle of January and our first baby - Brian - was born at Mrs. Butts Nursing Home in Norwich at the end of February.

Supplies were almost impossible to get right after the war, everything was scarce we had to straighten used bent nails, got doors and a table and chairs from an army base in Burford that was being torn down. Far different from the start young people expect to have these days. I remember milk would rise out of the bottles in the hall way as the pot bellied stove was not doing a very good job of heating the house. Water came from a hand pump in the basement it had to be carried up stairs and heated on the stove for all purposes, laundry, bathing, dishwashing, etc. One day Winnie Hill came in to see the new baby and she rolled up her sleeves and started in to washing diapers. There was no such thing as Pampers in those days or clothes driers.

Kay Glover lived next door to us and we helped her out quite a bit as she was also having a really bad time - again because of religious differences, she was Catholic. She had a little girl Pat, a year or so older than our

Brian. She had to take Keith to court several times because he would not pay her the money the court had ordered. After a few years Kay could not stand it any longer so gave up and went back to England and stayed out of sight so he could not get a divorce.

My parents came over in April to visit and to see their first grandchild. I never let on to them the problems I had been through because my Mother would have said "I told you so!" She had warned me about the religious difference but I had never known any Baptists and thought she was just trying to dissuade me from leaving home.

I met them at Woodstock Station with Brian in a basket on the seat of a half-ton truck. Typically Canadian. AND I was waiting when they arrived !

My Dad would not go back to England until he had put a bathroom in for us. I remember he called our out back shack 'Adam's House'! We had to hunt around getting a tub here, toilet and washbasin somewhere else. In order to have water in the house we had to have heat and managed to get a furnace but because metal was scarce after the war, we had hot air pipes but no cold air returns until later on.

Hallowe'en night 1949 neighbour kids were told to stay away from our house because a new baby was arriving - Gerald who is now a Civil Engineer in Thunder Bay. He was born at home I think because the Nursing Home was closed. I had a Mid Wife Donnajean Waud and Dr. Carnaghan came to the house. Jean Deer came over to look after Brian.

In 1950 old Will Orth asked Les to take his place as a Village Trustees for Burgessville, along with Edgar Stoakley and Emerson Chant. Later on with Ed McFarland and Jack McCready.

Les and Maurice decided to go their separate ways in 1952 and we took over the farm on the Mc Cready Line.

Michael arrived in 1953, he is now looking forward to retiring from IBM. He was born at Woodstock General Hospital and Wilma Jensen came in to look looked after Brian and Gerry while Les was at work. When we came home from the hospital with Michael we found Gerry inside a huge cardboard box with a black and white collie puppy someone had given him. Tippy was the family pet for many years. When Les made the trip at 5 am. every morning to feed the hogs Tippy was riding herd in the back of the truck waking all the villagers. Les was also driving School Bus for Dalton French in 1956 to keep food on our table.

Our two girls soon arrived, Marilyn in 1955, she became a Kindergarten Teacher, and Carol in 1957 who later became a Pediatric Nurse, made our family complete. Being an only child I had always said if I couldn't have more than one I wouldn't want any.

Les was instrumental in organizing the first North Norwich Volunteer Fire Department in the 1956. He was the first Fire Chief for the princely sum of \$100 a year.

In 1960 Les decided to go into Beef Cattle and went to see the Vets again to try and get a Farm loan. Three strikes against him - we weren't living on the farm, he wasn't a full time farmer - (it didn't count that he was driving a school bus to put food on the table), and they didn't like beef cattle" so he said "To Heck with you."

and went to the bank for a Farm Improvement Loan. If the Vets had loaned him the money they would have taken title to the farm for 25 years even though he only needed \$ 3,000. Our hands would have been tied for borrowing any more money and that is a Farmers first priority – Borrowing money !



Beef needed more care than hogs so Les decided to move to the farm.

Once again the farmhouse had no foundation, was sitting too close to the barn so---- Les had a foundation poured and for \$500 - hired someone this time to move the house. Renovations followed and we moved in ! That is where we stayed for forty years and loved every minute of it . We built one of the first cement swimming pools in the area and it is still functioning today.

About this time we took a Family Membership at Norwich Figure Skating Club as the children were now able to start skating. Gerry had already joined Minor Hockey.

Brian was old enough to baby-sit and we could enjoy an evening out on our own.

This was to lead later on to my becoming an Amateur Coach then a CFSA Judge and Competition Accountant. We helped start Tri County Inter Club for the benefit of the skaters.

I went home to England for first time in 1968 when my Dad passed away. I tried to persuade my Mother to come to Canada to live but she didn't want to.

Surprisingly I was homesick for Canada when I was there so I knew I was really Canadian ! Laws were changed about this time and I had to apply for my Canadian Citizenship Certificate even though I became Canadian citizen when I married Les. If I left it to later on it would have been a more difficult and lengthy process.

When Marilyn was Baptized in Burgessville, just after my Father had died, the Minister of the day whom I would rather forget, told the girls in the congregation never to have anything to do with Catholics and that was the last time I attended a service there except when we had to go to Family Weddings or Funerals. I still feel very unwelcome there even though I was not a Catholic.

After making this speech to the Lions Club Barry Smith said to me "Now I know why Aunt Peggy didn't like going to the Baptist Church".

We took four of the kids over for a visit to England in 1973 and I have no desire to go back again. My mother didn't recognize me. She told Les she had seen him before, but you're not "My Rita", it was hard. (I think she was in the early stages of Alzheimer's) I wished we could have brought her back with us but it would not have worked out living in the middle of corn fields we would always have been looking for her.

I found out then that Les felt out of place too when he came back to Canada and could have easily remained in England - I wonder what our lives would have been like if we had stayed in there ?????

Marilyn had started Square Dancing with the Junior Farmers and she encouraged us to join a Night School Class in Ingersoll so we joined along with Dorothy and Stacey Phillips. Then when Les had his knees replaced it was too risky to skate so we turned to Square and Round Dancing. Now Les cannot dance so he drives me there and enjoys visiting with our many friends in London. I Square Dance as a Man, partnering a lady who lost her husband and I Cue Rounds for the Club. I also Cue and teach for Round -A- Bouts Dance Club at Byron United Church.

Dancers also come to our house for lessons in our basement and I have just started teaching Rounds in the Gym at College Ave. United Church in Woodstock ahead of Thames Valley Squares Dance Club.

Les retired from Farming in 1986 and share cropped with John Rettie until we sold 100 acres to Jeff Buckrell still keeping the back 78 acres. We in moved in 1999 to our present home just north of Norwich which is a brick house and already has a good basement so we didn't move this one!

1960 was The Year of the War Brides. In September I joined two busloads of Brides from London who were invited to Queens Park for a lunch and reception by MPP's in the House of Commons Ernie Hardiman was surprised that I was a War Bride. We sat in the Visitors Gallery and were recognized by the Speaker.

Then in October we were invited to City Hall for a Reception. I had only met one Bride who came from my Hometown Brighton so I decided it was now or never. When I walked up to the first table I asked "Is anyone here from Brighton?" The cafeteria was full and a lady sitting right by me spoke up in a very English accent and said "I am!" I was very surprised and we talked for a while wondering if there was anyone else so I decided to go to each table with the same question and met five more. We all thought it would be great to have a get-together with our memorabilia from Home. A couple of weeks later I was able to arrange a meeting in London at one of the Retirement Homes and we had a great visit. Dolores Hatch who had organized the previous gatherings came along too as she was so interested in our stories. Dolores has since organized the tour to Pier 21 Museum in Halifax. I would have loved to go along with them but it was too long a trip for Les and I was not about to leave him now. I have seen a couple of these ladies on the television pictures of this tour.

In May the War Brides Exhibit is to be opened at the Wartime Museum in Ottawa. All being well we will be there and I hope to touch base with some from my own hometown of Brighton.

All this has been well worth it. We had our 61st. Wedding Anniversary in 2006 celebrating with a Square and Round Dance Hosted by my Club Byron Round A Bouts at Byron United Church followed by an Open House here at home on the Sunday.

We became Great Grand Parents last September with the arrival of Joshua Ryan Black (Heather and Rick's).

When our family all get together we will number 25 + 1 girlfriend, and Gerry has two step daughters and 3 grandchildren in Thunder Bay making 6 more (32 all told).

We are spread from Thunder Bay to Tavistock which is not too bad as there was just two of us to begin with ! We are a Happy Family, The kids all get along well - nobody smokes and they are always ready to help each other out when needed.

