

Stella Higgins  
Scottish War Bride  
Mataroa  
January 25, 1945



I was a war bride from  
Scotland who arrived in  
Halifax on Saturday 25 January 1945.

We docked at 6 p.m. at what we were told was pier 20 - not 21. Is this possible? Our ship was a terrible old former frozen mutton ship of 13,000 tons called H.M Transport Mataroa. On January 10th we boarded the ship right in Glasgow at what we called The Broomilaw. I came from that area so was familiar with the dock. I was shocked as I thought nothing that small would be going across the Atlantic. On board were also some fire fighters from Calgary who had been fighting fire in Bristol. Also there were many soldiers somewhere down in the hold returning home as well as three army nurses from Toronto. I remember them as our ship was NOT equipped to look after so many women and children as we had been promised. When many became ill the poor nurses had to pitch in and work the whole way home.

We sailed down the Clyde and anchored off Gourock waiting, I suppose, for the convoy to collect at Liverpool. On Saturday 13th at 2 a.m. we left Gourock and soon were in the midst of a vast array of ships. We were instructed not to take all our clothes off at night and to leave things ready should we be forced to flee the ship. I was in a space formed obviously by knocking down walls of a few cabins and it had to accommodate 20 women and 20 children! There were bunks with small mesh metal rimmed cradles for our babies. I was glad nobody was above me. This was officers' wives quarters!! There was no baby food and no facilities for washing ( in the days before Pampers) so there was much washing in the hand basins. The engine room men took our wet baby things to their area and brought them up dumping them in what was called a lounge. It consisted of beaten up furniture and was quite small. We managed to get canned milk for the babies but that was all.

We thought the journey would never end especially after the first week when the weather turned very bad and we were no longer allowed out on the tiny deck. We had sat on the deck floor previously as there no benches but it was good to be in the air. All this time I was carrying about an 8 month old daughter even when I tried to eat. I would feed her small items off my plate when I thought it was suitable. As our journey

progressed the food became very poor in quality and quantity and with everything sliding about in the rough sea it was not much fun.

When we first were in the centre of the convoy all the vessels were scattered out and for 360 degrees all we could see were ships which was very impressive. However, once the sea was very rough the ships closed in but one tiny little ship kept close to us on the port side. To begin with I wondered what such a little thing was doing out there as it was not a naval vessel. ( Years later I found out!) One morning we found ourselves alone - no more convoy or navy ships and discovered they were off to New York for supplies and we were alone to run up the Eastern seaboard - all except our little companion on the port side. It had been apparent the merchant ships were empty when they were with us as in rough weather their propellers could be seen coming out of the water. This made for a slow crossing. It was a worrying time for the few days we were alone and I learned much later for good reason as the U boats were still active in that region.

When we finally saw land we were all so happy that our ordeal was coming to an end at last but unfortunately some were so ill they need hospitalization with my baby being one of them. We docked at 6 p.m. and looked out at the snow and some men on the dock with fur hats. Representatives of the different services came on the ship to interview the girls and give the latest information about their husbands. Mine, I knew, was in Canada but some still had husbands fighting in Europe which I thought was not too wise. One girl was actually informed her husband had been killed. The next day, Sunday, we were taken from the ship some to the train but in my case to the Immigration huts as I could not get my landing papers until my baby was fit to travel. She was admitted to the Children's Hospital and I had to leave her there. By the end of the second week I was the last person in the Immigration hut and they were preparing for the next group. At this point I made arrangements to fly all the way to Victoria and signed my daughter out of the hospital. I knew how to access my own money which had been transferred to Victoria and paid my own fare. I could not envisage being on a train for days with no Red Cross help as that would have been the case for me left behind so long. I was met by the Red Cross when I got off the plane in Vancouver and later at a home by my husband.

The tiny ship that dogged our Atlantic journey was our rescue ship in the event of us being torpedoed! We had heard the boom boom of depth charges near the start of the voyage but we travelled safely thanks to the navy. A former classmate of mine had been first mate on the rescue ship but that is another story. Stella Higgins

