

## The War Brides

<b>Country</b>	<b>Wives</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Total</b>
Britain	44,886	21,358	66,244
Holland	1,886	428	2,314
Belgium	649	131	780
France	100	15	115
Italy	26	10	36
Denmark	7	1	8
Germany	6	0	6
Norway	1	0	1
North Africa	1	0	1
South Africa	1	0	1
Greece	1	0	0
Algiers	1	0	1
Hungary	0	3	3
Russia	1	0	1
India	1	0	1
Malay	2	0	2
Australia	24	2	26
Newfoundland and Carribean Area	190	0	190
Totals	47,783	21,950	69,733

**Ria Conroy**  
**October 10, 1946**

Ria was born Maria Antonia Brukner on June 6, 1914 in the town of Groningen, the Netherlands.

During the Second World War Ria worked as a nurse, and was able to give help and comfort to many of the casualties who passed through her ward. On occasion Ria was obliged to treat German soldiers, an occupational hazard as Hengelo was occupied by enemy troops. Like many war brides Ria was an integral part of her country's war effort.

One evening in May, 1945 Ria was invited by a friend, Christine, to a private bar owned by Christine's father, the brew master. Mr. Merling had invited a group of Canadian soldiers to the pub for an evening of socializing, and had asked Christine to be the hostess. Ria remembers, to this day, almost every detail of the pub's décor. Blue delft tiles, copper and brass fittings, and a large pit in the floor with a built in fireplace.

Ria had no idea that night would change her life forever. Being an attractive woman, Ria had no trouble finding dance partners, however, with her very basic English social repartee was not easy. Midway through the evening Ria was approached by a Canadian soldier who spoke French, a language Ria knew fluently, and so their friendship began. Actually, for Bob, it was love at first sight and he proposed after just four days.

Two months later, on July 23 1945, they were married, giving Ria the distinction of being the first war bride in Hengelo. When Bob and Ria left city hall there was a crowd of townspeople waiting for them. Bob, thinking it was some kind of demonstration, left his bride of two minutes to go back and find out what was going on. The officials from city hall told him the people of Hengelo were there to show their support and to celebrate Ria's marriage to one of the Canadian soldiers who had helped to liberate their town from the Germans. Their daughter, Edith Sandra, was born 13 months later on August 29 1946.

Ria, Bob and baby Sandy arrived at Pier 21 on October 10, 1946 aboard the Cunard ship the Aquitania. It was a memorable landing for the small Conroy family as Ria was stricken with appendicitis and taken off the ship on a stretcher. During Ria's convalescence she was introduced to Canada from her hospital room window. The magnificent fall colours of the maple trees will always stay in her memory and was probably the reason why she wanted to buy maple furniture when she got her first home.

Two weeks after their interrupted journey Ria, Bob and Sandy were on their way to Bob's hometown of Montreal. There Ria was introduced to Bob's brother Larry, a crime reporter for the Montreal Gazette, and Bob's sister Marcelle, a housewife from St. Andrews East. The photographer who accompanied Larry to take pictures of Bob's triumphant return from seven long years in Europe, ended the session with a picture of Larry looking through the window of his new niece's straw travelling basket.

In the spring of 1953 Ria took Sandy back to visit her family, travelling to the Netherlands via Le Havre, France where their ship docked. Three months later, when they were due to return to Canada, there was a dock strike at Le Havre, forcing Ria and Sandy to travel to Southampton, England to get to their ship. The irony being, by the time the ship left England the strike was over and the ship ended up leaving Le Havre to pick up more passengers before sailing on to Canada. Both Ria and Sandy enjoyed their trip, but were very glad to see Bob waiting for them at the pier in Quebec City.

Ria and Bob were happily married for twenty-three years, when sadly Bob died of a massive heart attack. Even now, after thirty some years and many memorable moments Ria still misses Bob and the closeness they shared. Today Ria enjoys travelling and visiting family and friends.

A small note of interest: On St. Valentine's Day, 1948 Ria's sister Ida followed her to Canada and also landed on Pier 21.

**Annette Brunton**  
**July 1946 – Queen Mary**

Whenever I have talked about this trip later on, I have always mentioned how well this journey was organized. It must have been a mammoth job for some Department and yet it all came off so very well.

Ever since George and I got married in November 1945 I could hardly wait to find out when I would travel to Canada. I don't remember being very apprehensive, it never occurred to me that maybe my future would not be a bed of roses. I can only remember how anxious I was to go. I visited the Canadian Wives Bureau in The Hague once, only to be told that it still would be quite some time before my turn would come. So when I received a telegram from that Canadian Wives Bureau on July 9, 1946 that I should be ready to leave on or after July 11 1946 I was very happy indeed. I immediately telegraphed George: "Darling, I am leaving home for Canada on Thursday July 11. All my love Netty" and got a very enthusiastic telegram back from him. I don't think my parents were that glad. My mother was very sad and upset. Although we all knew I would leave some time, the time was getting so close. I don't think I shed one tear; to me it was all wonderful.

On the 13th of July at noon a large military bus stopped in front of our house and picked me up. The driver was a confused young Canadian who really could not find his way around Amsterdam. He asked me if I would sit beside him and translate for him since I knew my way around the city very well, I was glad to be of such help. We drove around in that bus all afternoon; after we had picked up a lot of Amsterdam girls, we went to Hilversum and gathered up a few girls there. At every house it was pretty well the same scene; whole families had gathered together, all mothers cried, all fathers looked very solemn and little brothers and sisters screamed and wanted to talk to the driver. Much luggage was hauled aboard and away we went to a rather charming hotel in Scheveningen. I don't think the hotel was very luxurious, but nothing was luxurious in Holland yet, so shortly after the war. But I had belonged to the Dutch Youth Hostels and to me it was just another Youth Hostel with rather large bare rooms that you had to share with many other girls. My parents came to visit me in that hotel, it was rather nice for it was right at the seacoast and we could walk on the promenade. I don't remember being able to walk on the beach, I suppose they were still afraid for mines.

After a few days we went by bus to Hook of Holland, and then by boat to Harwich, a train was waiting to bring us to London. A large "bobby" was standing near the part of the train where we were to embark and he kept on saying "The Canadians [sic] have to go here" we thought it was hilarious, we had never heard such an accent.

When we got to London Waterloo Station it all looked so different than it had been in Holland. There was so much more damage from bombing than we had in Amsterdam, but somehow there were many more vehicles: buses and cars and motorcycles. Everything we once had in Holland had been stolen by the occupiers, while here they had a lot left. It was the first time I had ever driven on the left side of the road and I found that quite terrifying in all that busy traffic. Again, we stayed at a hotel or hostel. This time we were not allowed to leave the hotel unless somebody signed for us, I had friends working for the Dutch Embassy in London and they came over, signed for me and I was able to see a little of London. How times have changed when you consider how obediently we did whatever they told us, we were married women after all. Nowadays we would have said that we would do what we wanted and not what they wanted. But we happily stood in line

for our meals, shared rooms with other girls, ate whatever was put in front of us, etc. By that time we were told we were going to Canada on the Queen Mary from Southampton to Halifax. We took all this for granted but it really was quite wonderful and we were very lucky. I just loved the Queen Mary. Having lived in Amsterdam, with a harbour that had a lot of the large ocean liners in it before the war, I was accustomed to large ships. But when our train arrived on the harbour front in Southampton, beside the Queen Mary, we could not believe our eyes, we and the train were dwarfed by the ship.

The Queen Mary was still a troopship, cabins had to be shared and each cabin was full of bunks but even so, we thought she was quite beautiful. I have never seen her in real peace time but even under these circumstances I thought she was stunning. We loved riding the elevators and we loved walking the decks. I was very lucky, I had been assigned a cabin on the Main Deck (cabin 112) in the middle of the ship. I shared it with 4 English war brides, and one French war bride.

We were told that we had 2000 British girls aboard, 51 Dutch ones, 29 Belgians and 3 French. But we also had 1000 babies and children aboard. The organization for so many must have been staggering. They had set up large rooms to do the laundry for all those small children and the mothers were constantly washing and cleaning these kids and their diapers. But we, the Dutch girls, were quite carefree. One of our girls who came from the South of Holland, which had been liberated not too long after D-Day, had a small baby girl and one had a 7 year old boy from her first marriage, but the rest of us simply not had time yet to have children, although several girls were pregnant.

We were handed seating cards for the meals, and I had a place for the second seating on table number 6 and we very obediently always sat at our own place.

The British girls were much more in touch with what was going on than we were, they talked to the ship's personnel and asked lots of questions, and we really did not dare to do that. I remember we were all astounded that all the British girls wanted to buy Kleenex. We had never heard of Kleenex before. It took us a little while to figure out what they were. We all were instant friends! We showed pictures of our husbands, we talked of the places we were going to, and the places we had come from. Some of the girls already had fights on that relatively short trip. It only took four days and nights to get to Halifax. It was cold at sea and we had to dress quite warmly.

I found travelling on a ship rather dull, there was not much to do and the constant noise of the engines was very unpleasant, since then I have crossed the Atlantic Ocean twice more and I never really liked it any better. Therefore I really have never been able to persuade myself to go a cruise; I find it all too confining. I remember one day we saw flying fish, I loved that and it is now something my grandson envies me for, he has seen whales but never flying fish.

When they told us that we would be able to see Halifax Harbour very soon we got on deck and waited (in our heavy coats) at the railing. It was July 23, 1946 and it was very hot. Everybody had always warned me that Canada could be very cold but nobody dared to leave, we were much too afraid to lose our place. It was a wonderful sunny day and Halifax looked lovely, so green and so well kept, I really liked that. George had sailed out of Halifax when he went overseas and he had warned me that the city was rather dirty looking and neglected. I did not find that at all, I found it cheerful and green and pleasant, maybe he had been there in terrible weather. I now know that our ship docked at PIER 21

and I hope sincerely that some day soon, I will have a chance to travel to Halifax and see PIER 21 again.

When the ship docked there was a large crowd at the quay, quite a few husbands had travelled to Halifax to meet their wives, and there was much shouting and rejoicing. We were told that we could not leave the ship immediately, large lists were shown and we were told when our trains were leaving and when we could leave the ship. And again, this was wonderfully organized, the trains stood very close by, and one could walk from the ship to them. I was not allowed to leave the ship for more than one day, and when our time to leave came, we were to report with our hand luggage to the dining hall. There each of us was given an escort of a volunteer Red Cross girl and a soldier. They took us down the gangplank into a large building; (really a shed) and we had to identify our main luggage. The soldier carried everything to the train and we were allotted a certain seat in the train, the Red Cross girl brought us to this seat and only then left us. The girls with babies had a lower bunk and the girls without babies an upper bunk. I think we traveled two days and a night to Montreal through Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Quebec.

I made friends with a girl from Hilversum called Gerry and we were able to be together on that trip until Montreal. We were simply astounded by the large expanses of land without a building on it; we were really not very impressed and longed to see a city.

One of my vivid memories is getting to Moncton. The train stopped and we were allowed to get off. In Europe the platforms of train stations are elevated and you can only get on with a special ticket. We were astounded by this platform that was even with the road, it was in an open area and we could see ordinary streets nearby. To us it looked so dilapidated and unkempt, just like the wild west. We were quite sure a bunch of cowboys and Indians on horses would come galloping out of one of those streets towards us.

The porter told us that Quebec City was a large city so we were anxiously looking forward to that. I don't know if this is still so, but at that time, the part of Quebec City where the railroad station was situated was a real slum. We were bitterly disappointed when the porter announced that this was The City of Quebec. We had started to become very discouraged about all this. After that, on we went again through practically no-man's land, with very few towns. We had been talking to some of the English girls and we knew that a lot of them came from cities. Every now and then, in the middle of the night, our train would stop at a small little station and some fellow with a horse and cart would be waiting and some English war bride, who may have come from London, was let off, baby in her arms, and there was her husband on the cart. We were just horrified by that! How were these people going to manage?

Finally we arrived in Montreal, at Bonaventure Station. It does not exist anymore but it was in the middle of Montreal, right near Dominion Square. Again, a Red Cross volunteer girl would take a war bride, a soldier would carry her luggage and we walked towards the barrier where hundreds of husbands and their families were waiting. That was scary, I remember feeling very apprehensive. When you came to the barrier, the loudspeaker would boom: "This is Mrs. Annette Brunton, would Mr. Brunton please come to the gate." And there was George, luckily in uniform, for I would never have recognized him in civvies. We were both very nervous, we kissed each other and the first thing he said to me was: "Let's get out of here", he was as confused by all those people as I was. We stepped outside the station and there was Dominion Square with its beautiful flowers, its parks, its lovely buildings and hotels, I just loved it and have loved it ever since. This was my kind of city; it was like Amsterdam to me minus the old canal houses.

George had booked in a hotel nearby, The Queen's Hotel, where there were flowers waiting for us in our room from George and from my wonderful in-laws.

It was such a long trip, so confusing and yet so many really wonderful things happened and some of the sights were so truly great, but above all, I was at my destination, I was with George and I loved being there. I cannot remember anything going wrong on that trip, nobody was accidentally forgotten, or had no allocated place at the dinner table or in the train, a most marvelously planned endeavor. I wonder if one of us actually thanked anybody for such a good trip. I have always tried to tell this to anyone who wanted to listen.

I have had many good times in Canada and also some very difficult ones, but the beginning was marvelous.

## Reino Tholen

### The Story of a Dutch War bride

On the 22nd of April I met Ross in Holland. The city I lived in had been liberated on the 13th of April. The War was not over until the 5th of May, 1945. My girlfriend and I met these two Canadian soldiers when we were taking a walk downtown. Ross took me home that evening, and I asked him in to meet my parents. After that he kept coming back to visit us. I wasn't that interested in a relationship. I wanted to start a new life; the War had just ended. Every chance he had, Ross came to see me. He was charming and good looking. I saw him as a hero who had helped to liberate my country. When he asked me to become engaged in July 1945, I said "Yes." Just the same I kept doubting if we were meant for each other. Once I broke the engagement, but after a few weeks we were together again. On the 29th of November we were married and on Dec. 5th Ross went to England. In Feb. 1946 he came back to Holland on a three week leave. I became pregnant. Ross went back to Canada and I followed him in June 1946.

I panicked when the day came that I had to leave my country. I had a feeling something awful was waiting for me in Canada. My mother said it was the pregnancy that made me feel that way. After staying four days in an old Red Cross Hotel in Holland, we went with the boat to England. From there with the train to London, where we stayed in a big old house which was fixed up to host the War brides that were going to Canada. War brides from all different countries came together there. From there we were driven to Southampton where we boarded the Queen Mary, which was used to transport troops. There were 12 girls in a small cabin, three beds above each other. There was lots of seasickness.

The first week in July we arrived in Halifax at Pier 21. The band was playing: "Here Comes the Bride." The Red Cross ladies came around with coffee and doughnuts. This welcome made me feel better: it renewed my spirits. After a long and tiresome train ride, I was anxious to see my husband. When the train arrived in Cornwall, where he was to pick me up, I stepped out of the train with my luggage and waited. Ross wasn't there. Just as the Red Cross lady was telling me to get back into the train, a woman came running up the platform towards me, calling my name. She told me that her husband was waiting in the car and that they would drive me to Ross. Tired, frustrated and 5 months pregnant, I was ready to scream, but I didn't. The woman was driving and her husband was singing, they were both intoxicated.

I was so scared that I didn't want to ask questions, so I sat quietly in the back seat. It was in the middle of the night when the car stopped. The man went out and called, "Ross, look who is here." Ross was sleeping in his car and I went over to him and wanted to put my arms around him. He backed up and said "Just a minute." We drove to a big old house on the border of a small town. We were met by an elderly couple. They were the parents of the man who had been driving the car. Ross was also living in that house.

Four days after I had arrived in Canada I found my husband in bed with the woman who had picked me up from the station. In desperation I ran out of the house, Ross came behind me, he grabbed me and pulled me into the car. He drove and drove and didn't say a word. Finally he stopped on a parking lot. I said to him, "Don't you think you have some explaining to do?" His answer was, "I am sorry I married you, I don't love you anymore." I was frantic and beside myself with anger and disgust. Ross did not talk to me anymore until after our daughter was born on Oct. 28, 1946. While I was in the

hospital with my baby, I had no visitors at all. Ross rented a part of a house and that is where we lived with our baby daughter. We didn't have a relationship anymore, but I was determined to try and make a go of our marriage. I was willing to forgive Ross and make a new start. I couldn't go back to Holland with my baby!!

My mother sent me a letter, telling me that she was coming to visit us and see her grandchild. Ross started to change and I really believed that our life would be better now. We were beginning to be a normal family. I became pregnant again and our second daughter was born in 1949. After her birth, things took a turn for the worse again. I knew then, that I had to leave him with my children. I couldn't live with him anymore, I had given our marriage a good try, but this was it. I wrote to my parents and they sent me the tickets. Ross did not want me to leave and was watching me every minute of the day and night, he made my life a Hell. I had to find a way to get out of the house with my children. With the help of another Dutch War bride and her husband we found a way.

Looking back now, I don't understand how I ever came through all the difficult times I had to face with my Canadian husband. He never did anything financially or in any other way for his two daughters. Back in Holland I raised the two girls all by myself and today I am very proud to say "I did it all by myself." I enjoy my daughters, my grandchildren and great grandchild.

Reino Tholen

## August 31, 1946 – Queen Mary

I am a warbride. My country Holland was invaded in May 1940 by the Germans. For five years it was horrible, so much sadness and fear; never knowing when fathers or brothers would be picked up in the night to be sent to Germany (some never returning). Then in the spring of 1945 the liberators came - CANADIANS. They rolled into my village on big tanks looking well fed and healthy. A beautiful sight and to this day it stands vivid in my memory. With the end of the war, there was no more curfew. I was then 18 years old. After a few weeks the Canadians settled in and became friends of the Dutch. They had dances and fun, something we did not have for a long time.

On June 25 1945 I met Ken, a kind and handsome man who was stationed in a school. We were married on Oct 27 with permission from the Canadian army. Ken's unit pulled out of the village on Nov.45 and I had to wait for my turn to come to Canada. I left Holland in Aug.1946 after a lot of waiting in a place in Holland for more war brides to go on a ship. The Lady Rodney to England to wait again for more brides to go on a train to Southampton and from there depart on the Queen Mary. The ship was large and the food was so good. I got seasick for three days so that spoiled it.

We landed in Halifax in the evening and stayed on the ship till morning and then while walking down to the train kind Red Cross ladies gave us coffee and I think doughnuts. The train was long. There were a lot of war brides some with babies and small children. Then off to Montreal, that is were I said goodbye to my friends from Holland - they were going to Southern Ontario and four girls, myself included went to Northern Ontario. We travelled for three days and nights on that train, with excelled food and care. Finally I arrived in Port Arthur, three hours late. My husband was waiting. He looked different, no uniform and he took me to his home. His parents had invited some friends over and had a table set up with sandwiches and cakes. They all were so kind.

The next day we went for a drive [my husband had the day off]. He asked me “do you want a hotdog?” I had no idea what a hotdog was, but it was not too bad. So much to learn in such a big country.

My husband built our first home with very little money and after doing a days work. In 1947 a girl was born to followed by two boys. And in 1948 my parents and younger sister immigrated to Canada. My life in this big country was good. My husband and I travelled back to Holland many times to the liberation celebrations. My family has done well and although I love Canada I still love Holland and love to go there. It still has a big spot in my heart and I often think back on how one thing in a person's life can change so many peoples' lives. One thing sitting in that train wondering if I would ever get to my husband I wondered how the woman got their washing on those high clotheslines - we never saw that in Holland. I am now alone again as my husband passed away 2 years ago after a long illness. I miss him but remember all the good times and I am glad I came to this country.