

CONTENTS

Prologue

xi

Oral Histories:

BETTY PATRIQUIN

"My dear young lady, do you know what you're doing?"

1

CONNIE RUST

"Mother was horrified, she really was"

11

JOAN BRACE

"Blackouts and no more lights!"

19

HILDA ROSS

"I've never gotten over the wooden sidewalks"

27

SYLVIA WILKES

"We can't wait until you finish milking the cows"

37

ISABELLA FRENCH

"I have to go or I will fade away to nothing"

44

AUDREY ANDERSON

"Take cover—that's a close one"

55

JOAN CORNEY

"We had to pitch in just like the men did"

60

VIOLET GIROUX

"She was alive when she was put into my ambulance"

70

MARGARET MITCHELL

"Have you anything else to wear but those jodhpurs?"

77

JOAN CHARTERS

"Just imagine if you had stayed in England"

88

EVE MITCHELL

"I'm sorry, but I just can't get on another boat!"

95

ANN PICARD

"When we woke the next morning we were in convoy"

104

MARGARET PRESLEY

"Everything that's different sort of hits you"

113

MARJORIE STEPHENSON

"He seemed to be all hat and tie"

120

VI PEARN

"Goodbye London, I hope I'll see you again"

124

DORIS JOHNSON

"Bananas and white bread were wonderful to have again"

133

AUDREY WADDY

"It's one of those Canadians, he's come for water"

142

BARBARA WALSH

"It was a bit of a shock when I came to Canada"

155

ANITA FROCKLAGE

"Remember, it means you will become a Canadian"

161

TERRY BELL

"I can still see those hundreds of women"

169

EVELYN ASHMORE

"There's the Canuck holding up the bakery"

177

LILLIAN AMBRUS

"I thought, 'Oh God, where am I going?'"

185

MAUREEN EGGIMAN

"The ceiling started coming down into our ice creams"

191

BERYL TANNER

"There was no question that I would go"

198

NANCY PITTET

"It's all an adventure when you think about it"

208

MURIEL CLARK

"The only thing that gave me away was the accent"

216

MARGARET BROWN

"Move all the way forward, right down to the front, please"

223

MAVIS WATLING

"We all have that thread that runs right through us"

236

JOAN BEDFORD

"I walked in, took one look and cried and cried"

244

AUDREY SAWCHUK

"Gee, you know everything is bigger here"

249

Personal Narratives:

YVONNE WISEMAN

"I was blissfully unaware of what lay ahead"

260

JEAN MCLEOD

"We dropped our bikes and rolled into the ditches"

272

JEAN KIRKOFF

"Valerie? There's no Valerie here"

280

JEAN SHARLOW

"We were afraid to go too deep into the tunnels"

282

ROSEMARY BAUCHMAN

"You lucky girl, I wish I was going with you"

288

Epilogue

297

PROLOGUE

The stories in this book offer a passport to another time and place through the eyes of World War II war brides. Their stories describe how it felt to be a young woman coming of age during a war that resulted in a level of destruction and suffering never before experienced by a civilian population. They also demonstrate the conflicting emotions of fear and pride, the dark memories of bombings and deprivation along with proud recollections of the important work they accomplished as part of the war effort.

The war brides' stories point to the vital new roles and responsibilities that women assumed to assure their nation's survival in the midst of war. Before and after meeting their future husbands, these war brides were ambulance drivers, balloon barrage workers, nurses, fire fighters, air-raid wardens, factory workers and members of the armed forces, including the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service), Land Army (farm work) and Air Force.

Some of the war brides were as young as twelve or thirteen when the war began, but their childhoods ended abruptly as the bombings began and the harsh realities of blackouts, rationing and civil defence preoccupied their lives. These young women met and fell in love with Canadian soldiers. In doing so, they encountered a whole new set of problems: first, the lengthy bureaucratic procedure required before approval was granted to marry a Canadian soldier and emigrate to Canada; then the emotional turmoil of saying good-bye to family and friends before embarking on a journey to a strange new country.

Over 48,000 war brides came to all parts of Canada during and after World War II. With them they brought their children—some 22,000. Many of the war brides settled in cities or towns where they coped with postwar housing and furniture shortages. Others travelled to remote regions of Canada that placed them in the midst of isolated living conditions and long cold winters. Wherever the war brides went, they displayed a pioneering spirit

that grew from the determination and creativity they developed during the war years. And throughout their stories these remarkable women—whether they wrestle with balloon barrages in the United Kingdom or wood and coal stoves in Canada—display great courage, spirit and humour. The narratives of these extraordinary war brides are histories which have become an important part of our Canadian heritage.

The concept for this book began with Eve Mitchell whom the editors first met in 1993. As President of the Vancouver Island War Brides at the time, she invited us to record the war brides' oral histories and publish them in book form. During the past year the editors have had the pleasure and privilege of listening to war brides as they remembered times past. We tape-recorded their reminiscences of participating in the war effort, meeting their Canadian husbands, leaving their home countries and adjusting to life in Canada. We then transcribed their spoken words into written life histories that highlight their individual voices.

The war brides featured in the oral histories of this book have played an integral role in the proofreading and editing of their stories. The editors thank them for their invaluable assistance and generous sharing of their experiences as well as the photographs that enliven each of their stories. Five of the war brides chose to write their own stories, and these narratives are presented in the final section of the book.

These stories are truly representative of the war brides who emigrated to Canada during the 1940's. Although all the war brides in this book now reside on Vancouver Island, most of them initially lived in other parts of Canada, including the Maritimes, Ontario, Quebec, the prairies and the Yukon. Thus these women's stories reflect the Canadian war bride experience from coast to coast.

This year marks not only the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II; it also represents fifty years of memories for the war brides in Canada. Many of them have recently celebrated their

fiftieth wedding anniversaries or are about to do so during the forthcoming year. Their memories will always be double-edged with joy and sorrow, because their promising partnerships with their new husbands began in the tragic context of World War II. The life stories of thirty-six of those war brides are recorded in this book for future generations to cherish.

Barbara Ladouceur and Phyllis Spence
January 1995

Betty Patriquin



“MY DEAR YOUNG LADY,
DO YOU KNOW WHAT
YOU’RE DOING?”

Betty Patriquin was born in Croydon, England. At the age of sixteen, she attended an art college to study dress design for two years. She was nineteen years old and still living with her family when the war started in 1939.

You really can't explain how bad it was. It was very serious, really. But I think when you're young—eighteen or nineteen—you think the war is all sort of a lark. It's an adventure. My mother would say, "It is not funny—it's very upsetting and worrying." But there were all these troops around, and young people had lots of fun.

At this time, the air raids took place every night. It wasn't just the bombs but the shrapnel from the guns as well that was dangerous. It was a funny sort of life but when you're young, you adapt more easily. My brother and I used to sit up and play cards in the air-raid shelter in our garden. We had lights and a radio down there as well. We used to take a little hot plate down too so we could make tea. If there was a lull in the air raids, one of us would run up to the house if we needed anything or had to go to the bathroom.

If we could manage to go to dances, my friends and I would do so. When the air raids were heavy, of course, we couldn't go. But anytime there was a few days respite from the bombing, we would go to dances. Otherwise, the bombing was so heavy that you couldn't go anywhere. It was a difficult time for everybody. You look back now and you're amazed that you survived it so well.

In 1941, I was to be called up because they now had conscription for women from the age of eighteen to thirty. They said that I could only go in the Army or into munitions at that time. I moved with my family down to Bognor Regis which is on the south coast of England. We got the upper unit of a furnished duplex right on the seafront, which during peacetime had been a very, very good area—usually very expensive. But, of course, most people had gone from the coastal towns by this time.

My father continued to go back and forth by train to work in London. I went to find out what kind of work I should do, and I was told that I could go in the Land Army because they needed girls for farm work all around there. I thought, "Well that would be better than being cooped up in a factory." They sent me to this place in Sussex, but it was twenty-five miles away from where we

now lived. So I had to live there during the week and go home on the weekends.

I was billeted in a little cottage in a village. It had no lights and no toilet. I was staying with a young couple, and the wife was very kind to me. She did her best for me. But it was lonesome for me because I'd always been with my family. This was the first time I had ever lived away from home. At night, I had to just sit in the kitchen with the young couple or go to bed. During this time, I went to bed earlier than I ever had in my life.

On the farm, another girl and I spent most of our time planting vegetables and digging up potatoes. We worked at a market-garden farm, and our main task was to bed tiny plants in the greenhouses. We also had to clean out the barns which were where the farmer kept his cattle. The cattle were kept mostly for the manure they provided. We did all sorts of dirty jobs, and all this work got to be rather boring. Then one day, the farmer asked us, "Which one of you girls knows how to drive a horse and cart?" So I said, "Oh I do!" I was thinking it would be a nice change, but the problem was that I really didn't know how to drive a horse and cart. I just decided that there couldn't be much to it.

The farmer took me around to the barn to pick up various things that had to be delivered to other farmers. When he showed me the horse and cart, he did try to explain that "you do this and you do that to start and stop the cart." "Oh yes," I said. He piled up the back of the cart with all these big boxes of little chickens and what I think were sacks of flour. Then I set off in the cart with a list of the places to which I was to deliver the various items.

I would get the horse and cart into a driveway, and then I would say to the farmer, "Could you turn my horse around, please?" Because I really didn't know how to do it. The farmers would look at me as if I were a moron but they were all nice enough to say, "Oh yes, sure I'll turn it around." Then there were Canadians everywhere along the roads, and some of them asked me, "Could we come for a ride with you?" I had to reply, "No, you couldn't." Then they asked, "Could you go out with us this

evening?" I answered, "No, I couldn't."

The next thing I knew, one of the Canadians fed the horse some candy which I could have drooled over because it was such a rare treat in wartime England. Then when I tried to go in a different direction, the horse started to follow the Canadian who'd fed him the candy. Suddenly the back of the cart went down in a ditch, and the Canadians had to help me pull the cart out—with all the chickens squawking hysterically.

On the way home as I was going around a corner, the vicar was coming from the opposite direction on his bicycle. I caught the side of his bicycle on the cart wheel, and he fell into the ditch. I was very upset. He didn't hurt himself but I was just horrified that I had knocked over a minister. He looked at me and inquired, "My dear young lady, do you know what you're doing?" And I assured him, "Oh yes, I do. It's the horse that doesn't know!" Then he got up and he was alright but I thought that I better get back before anything else happened.

After that exciting first ride, I took the horse and cart out whenever I was asked to do so, and those outings gave me a much needed break from the usual chores. Obviously I got to know what I was doing. And as I drove the cart around the countryside, I found it both fun and interesting to meet other people, including the other farmers in the area. It was great to do something entirely different from the other responsibilities I had. But then I suppose most of the girls in wartime did different jobs from what they were used to.

I went home on weekends, and eventually I met my husband, Pat, at a dance when he asked me to dance. He asked me where I lived, and I said, "Well we really live in Croydon. Do you know where that is?" He answered, "Oh yes, I've been up there on a course." I explained that we'd moved here because the bombs were so bad in Croydon. Then he declared, "Well, when we're married, we'll live in Croydon, and we'll spend our holidays here." I really didn't take him seriously but I agreed to go out with him on Monday night.

The next day, Pat came marching along the seafront with this

group of soldiers. I think they were marching to the cookhouse for dinner. My mother and I were walking along, and Pat said to the troops, "Eyes right." My mother asked me, "Do you know that man?" I said, "Yes, I do." So she remarked, "Well, he's a nice healthy looking boy," and I responded, "Oh yes, I guess so."

Come Monday evening, it was pouring with rain—just pouring. My mother told me, "You're not going out tonight, dear." But I said, "Yes, I am. I'm going out with that nice healthy looking boy." She protested, "Not tonight!" I assured her, "I really don't think he'll be there." I was thinking to myself that he'd had a few beers the night he asked me out, and he'd probably forgotten about tonight. However, I thought I would go along and see if he did show up. I told my mother, "If I don't come back, you'll know he was there and we've gone to the show."

When I reached the corner where we were to meet, there was Pat waiting for me with the rain dripping off him. So we went to the show and then for a drink afterwards. Of course, in those days, nobody had cars. You had to walk everywhere. He asked me if I would go out with him again. A couple of days later, he told me, "I'm going to London for seven days' leave. I wish I didn't have to go there now that I've met you." But I just said, "Oh well, that'll be nice for you." Then he said, "Oh I do wish you could come too." I informed him, "I couldn't do that—my mother wouldn't let me!" For one thing, she wouldn't let me go to London with all the bombing, and for another thing, girls just didn't run off for a week with their boyfriend in those days.

Finally Pat said, "Well I'll see you when I get back, so don't forget me." When he came back we went for a walk and he asked me, "When are you going to marry me?" I quipped back, "Oh tomorrow!" I thought it was ever so funny—a joke—although I really was very much attracted to him. He was a nice, tall, healthy man. But I didn't know anything about him.

When I returned home, my mother and aunt asked me, "Did you get along alright with Pat?" I answered, "Oh yes, I sure did." Then they asked me, "Does he like you?" I said, "Yes, he's just asked me to marry him!" They laughed and laughed. They rolled