

Annette Brunton nee
Van der Vegt
Dutch War Bride
Queen Mary
July of 1946



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.