

April Berezowski nee
Vaughan
English War Bride
Aquitania
June 28, 1946



Editor's Note: The following memoir is based on an interview that was



conducted by Elinor Maher and Beverly MacLellan for the Colchester Historical Society Museum & Archives as part of the museums Year of the War Bride research and exhibit of 2006. The Pier 21 Society would like to thank Ms. Maher, Ms. MacLellan and the war brides that contributed to this collection by sharing their experiences and impressions of the war years and their early days in Canada.

Name:

April (nee Vaughan)
Berezowski

Parents:

Charles Joseph and Louisa May Vaughan

Home:

Uckfield, East Sussex, 18 miles inland from Brighton.

Birthdate:

April 8, 1926

War time memories:

April was the oldest child in the Vaughan family with one sister, Audrey , and eventually four younger brothers. Before the war the Vaughans lived in Bexley Heath, Kent, near London and attended an excellent large school. They moved to Uckfield in December of 1939 where the children attended a three-room school. April went to a girls school until May of 1940. A high class shoe store in town approached the head master of the school looking for a 'polite, willing young lady' to hire as an apprentice clerk. April got the recommendation and the job. Her duties included operating the shoe-fitting fluoroscope (X-ray) devise found in many shoe stores in the 1940s. Sadly, three of the four ladies who worked at this store and operated the machine daily have developed breast cancer. April worked there for nearly four years, although toward the end of the war open hours were restricted because of a shortage of shoes.

When young women in Britain reached the age of 18 they had to do 'work of National importance'. At that time April then went to work as a clerk for the East Sussex County Council.

What was the attitude to Canadian service men in your community?

April's father didn't harbour negative feelings for the young Canadian servicemen who appeared in the area but because of her young age, sixteen, he told her "I don't want you going out with those Canadians."

Shortly after the young Canadians appeared in the area, 'f's' mysteriously were added to signs bearing the name of the community, Uckfield.

Husband:

Steve Berezowski was a Dispatch Rider with the R.C.A.S.C. 2nd Infantry Brigade of the Canadian Army. Before the war he worked for a General Motors subsidiary in Ontario. He was born in 1919 in Janow Corners (now Meath Park) Saskatchewan, north east of Prince Albert. His parents, mother Ukranian and father Polish, had homesteaded and Steve had worked with them to clear and crop the land.

How did you meet your husband?

"My friend Joan and I didn't go to halls near the pubs as the dances held there were noisier. Usually we went to dances at the Yonder Tea Rooms where social events were quite sedate and the owner gave dance lessons. On August 22, 1942, just after the raid at Dieppe, a friend from the shoe store convinced me to go to the dance at the Boy Scout Hut for the first time."

"When we got to the Scout Hut everyone was jitterbugging and it was very different from what we were used to. I hoped no one would ask me to dance." However a young Canadian dispatch rider, Steve Berezowski, did. He was an excellent dancer and convinced April to try. He wanted to take her home but she said no, she had to go home with the girl she arrived with.

April had mentioned they usually went dancing at the Yonder Tea Rooms and, as he was very familiar with the area, he soon found his way there. When he showed up he brought a friend for Joan. They continued to see one another but she didn't introduce him to her parents until just before Christmas. During this time April used to take her younger brother to the movies and Steve would meet them there. Amazingly young Gordon never told anyone.

Steve received a Christmas cake from Canada and gave it to her when she was on her way home from work. Her father worked for the British railway and was working nights. When she arrived home he was there so she had to explain where the welcome treat came from. April thinks they knew she was seeing a Canadian but it wasn't discussed. Her father said, at least half joking, "If he's got any more cakes like that you'd better bring him home."

In March Steve asked the Vaughans if he could marry their daughter. On May 1, 1943 he gave her an engagement ring. He left with the 2nd Infantry Brigade at the end of his leave for the invasion of Sicily... of course he couldn't tell her where he was going. He sent a postcard from Scotland before they disembarked.

From Italy the Canadian forces went through France, Belgium and Holland with Steve on a motorcycle delivering dispatches.

"I wrote every day and Steve's commanding officer said he got more mail than everyone else combined. I numbered my letters to Steve in succession so he knew in what order to read them. I usually got some letters once a week. The mail went through censorship and servicemen couldn't say where they were but people at home could follow the stories in the newspapers."

On January 1, 1944, April was at work and had a feeling of unease. She felt something was wrong. Several days later she got a telegram that read "All safe and well, fondest love and kisses, Steve." He had been in a motorcycle accident on January 1 and wasn't found for several days. He ended up in a New Zealand field hospital at that time.

Steve was injured again on Friday, April 13, 1945 in Cleve (Germany) so he was in the hospital in Apeldoorn, Holland, on VE day. He arrived back in England on sick leave in May 1945.

Date married:

July 24, 1945

What was your family's reaction to the news you were marrying a Canadian?

Once they met Steve, April's parents made him feel very much at home. At Christmas he suggested marriage to her but April wasn't sure she could move so far away from home.

Can you tell us about your wedding?

There were many forms to fill out for the military before the wedding and the banns were read out in the Anglican church. April had to travel to an out-of-town appointment with a military-approved doctor for a physical examination.

They were married on a Tuesday as her friend Joan, a nurse, was off work that day. Joan's mother was the town's florist so she had a lovely bouquet with roses and a silver horseshoe for good luck. April's mother wrote to relatives for clothing coupons and they travelled to Brighton to purchase a new dress for the wedding, which April still has. It was taffeta with embossed pansies. The two bridesmaid's dresses were pre-war and had been borrowed.

The reception was at the Youth Centre, a first for them, because she volunteered there. It was catered by the baker and they had to provide two pounds of sugar to ice the cake and all Steve could get was two pounds of sugar lumps.

They went to London for a short honeymoon, Tuesday to Sunday. April's going away suit was tan herringbone with a cranberry blouse, hat and matching shoes.

Steve went back to Holland after the honeymoon and ran a bus service for the military. In November of 1945 Steve came back to England to the repatriation camp at Sheffield Park which was not far away from Uckfield. He was able to get a pass and a drive on the laundry truck to see April. The first time he came was a complete surprise to her. She heard his hobnail boots on the cobble stones and she knew it was him coming. He rode April's bike back and forth daily between her home and

the camp until Dec 20. Joan was being married on Dec 19 so he just managed to get to her wedding.

Steve came back to Canada in December of 1945 on the Queen Elizabeth to New York city, arriving in Toronto on January 1, 1946. He was discharged in February but waited in Toronto for her arrival on July 1, 1946.

How did you come to Canada and what are the memories of your trip?

April travelled on the Aquitania. She recalls, "The hardest part of leaving was saying goodbye to my little brother Jeffery, who was not quite four, and my friend Joan."

A widowed mother in Uckfield came to the Vaughan home and said her daughter, Dorothy, was to sail on the Aquitania at the same time so the two girls travelled together by train to London. The Canadian government paid all of the expenses and put the girls up in a posh hotel, in bunk beds. They were served sardines on toast for breakfast at the hotel. The parents came to see them off from Southampton.

Once they got on board the ship Dorothy was assigned to a lower deck, with a hammock not a bunk. In spite of being separated on the ship Dorothy and April took their meals together. April wasn't sick at all during the crossing and remembers the joy of white bread and good jam.

April was assigned a bunk bed in a stateroom with seven other women and a washroom containing a sink and toilet for their use. There was also a bath tub but they weren't allowed to use it due to a water shortage. The four wives in the bottom bunks were pregnant and those in the top bunks were asked to help look after them. One of the wives was quite snooty and wouldn't help the pregnant woman in her bottom bunk.

What was the date and memories of your arrival in Canada?

June 28, 1946

At Pier 21 Canadian immigration officials came on board, gave us landing cards and fingerprinted us. It was a Friday but we were not allowed off until Saturday evening. Pier 21 looking like an old barn and Halifax was very hot and not very impressive.

The ladies had only been allowed one bag for the trip on board and one larger suitcase or trunk. April watched in horror as her large suitcase went into the ocean and had to be fished out. There was water damage to the books inside and some china things were broken.

April was among the last off the Aquitania and therefore got into the last car of the train. The train trip to Ontario seemed to last forever. April was agile so she got the top sleeper.

The train finally arrived at a siding in Toronto at 6 a.m. on July 1, 1946. She recalls the wives were all dressed up. April was wearing a wool suit, a white blouse, a hat and gloves while they were kept waiting on a siding. It was a very hot day and gradually hats, gloves and jackets were removed. It was after lunch when the train pulled into Union Station which was much more impressive than Pier 21. Then they had to wait until each name was called.

When April finally got into the train station there was Steve in civies. All of his family in the area were there to meet her. Not realizing July 1 was a holiday in Canada, she thought "Isn't it nice they all took the day off work to meet me?" She particularly remembers Steve's seven year old niece Barbara who was all dressed up and very excited to meet her new aunt. Everyone was very welcoming.

When they returned to Steve's sister Lucy's house April had never seen so much food. Many things were new and different to her: potato salad, lima bean salad, green peppers, black and green olives, feta cheese and pasta salad. April had only seen pasta used in a milk pudding. Soon other neighbours, including another war bride, arrived to visit.

Where did you live after your arrival in Canada?

After a month at Lucy and John's home they moved to St. Catharines into one rented room, with a stove in the room, due to the terrible housing shortage. They had to share a bathroom with two other units and the tub was in such terrible condition no one would use. Steve worked for MacKinnon Industries, a GMC subsidiary. They still lived there when their son was born in April of 1947.

Steve and April tried hard to find a better place to live and eventually they rented a basement apartment. They built a wooden floor over the concrete in some rooms and had linoleum over the concrete in other places. They had a problem with mould so they had Tony live with friends while April went to work in a shoe store. Steve began to build a house In 1948. They were very fortunate they found a lot of land for sale and the owners let them pay for it on time, \$250 in total. They built the garage first and lived in that while they built the larger home. Peter was born while they were living there in 1952. They had running water and a toilet in the garage. Steve dug the basement by hand and April wheeled the earth away.

Children?

Tony - 1947

Peter - 1952

Did you have trips home?

April and her two sons were back in England in 1953 at the time of Elizabeth II coronation and they were able to watch it on TV at a friend's

.

Did your family come to Canada to visit?

April's mother visited Canada once in 1961 but after his wife died in 1969, her father came every year after 1971, for 14 years.

Did you have difficulties with Canadian Citizenship?

No.

Looking back:

Following Steve's retirement from General Motors in 1979 the Berezowskis moved from St. Catharines, Ontario, to Maitland, Nova Scotia. One of their sons, Peter, was in the Navy and stationed at Halifax and Tony, their other son, also lived in Nova Scotia. In 1999 Steve and April moved to Truro to be closer to medical services.