

Betty M. Ryckman
by Lynn Cairns
English War Bride
Letitia
August 1946

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM
PIER 21



Betty M. Ryckman

"Area resident graciously shares 'letters of a young war bride' written to her parents during her journey to Canada"



Bill and Betty on their wedding day in England, April 24, 1945.

by Lynn Cairns

Last year when Betty Ryckman was in England and going through her father's effects after his death she came across a packet of letters that had a familiar look. They turned out to be letters she had written to her family more than 50 years ago detailing her journey to Canada as a 21-year-old war bride with a 5-month-old baby daughter named Linda. As Betty said, "There aren't too many of us left" and she kindly offered to share these memories with us.

In order to understand the references to food and menus some background may be necessary for people who were not around during the war years.

Towards the end of the war food had become very scarce, especially in small towns such as Betty lived in, with only one store. The mothers who did the meal preparation started to line up at the store door, but even with food coupons in hand, often the food was gone before the line-up ended. Betty recalls one occasion when Rick (her husband) came home on leave and brought a partial bottle of ketchup that he had 'liberated' at the rail station. It became a 'feast' for the whole family who spread it on toast.

The 'nappies' referred to were what we now call diapers. Disposables or even Curity gauze had not yet become available. These nappies were made of white terry cloth toweling and extremely hard to keep clean, especially when washed in salt water. The ship that carried the war brides to Canada was called Letitia and left Liverpool in August 1946.

The following are excerpts from Betty's letters to her family.

August 5th, Monday.

Dearest Mum, Dad & All,

Linda is asleep and I have a few minutes to spare so I thought I would start and write you a diary of my travels. So far it hasn't been so bad but not as good as I had expected, especially the food part of it. We had a cold salad I couldn't eat when we got here (Liverpool) – it was terrible and cold tea, already sugared. For supper, we had a piece of cake and more cold tea. For breakfast, we had cold tea, cold porridge and about two inches of fat bacon.

There are about fifteen of us in this house which is about a ten-minute ride from the station. All told there are about 2000 of us in various parts of Liverpool and the food is cooked in an army camp and brought in a van. I think they must call here last and we get the leftovers.

Everything is fine for the babies. There is a huge kitchen and always several kettles of boiling water for feeds. Also there is a bathroom with hot water and I washed Linda's nappies and dried them round a huge fire. She has been as good as gold - best baby in the room but I have been busy keeping the other babies quiet so she can sleep.

The girl in the bed to one side of me is dopey. She didn't even bring any food for the baby with her or even a nightdress. It's a lovely baby but as thin as a rake. There were cots and bedding provided for the babies and very narrow beds for us and she put the baby in bed with her. She says she always does but I couldn't sleep much for her snoring and I kept putting my lighter on to see if she was lying on the baby. So you can see, dad, your lighter has come in useful already.

We handed in our clothing books yesterday and they just threw them in a box – didn't even look at them, so had I known I could have cut the next issue of coupons out. Also, they gave us a present of a cheque for \$47 to cash in Canada, which is about 13 pounds. I found out too that I could have claimed 3 pounds a month for Linda's allowance if I had written but they will back pay me when I get to Canada.

There are no end of rumours going around here about when we go to the boat and I asked the woman who is here to wash up and set the tables. She has to say to serve lunch so we are here for that for sure.

Linda is rousing now and there is nothing more to tell so I will close - I miss you all already.

August 6th, Tuesday.

They kept us hanging around at the hostel 'till 6 o'clock last night and then a bus came and took us to the dockside. We got off and Canadian nurses took the babies and we were given exit permits and passports, etc., and a few yards further on we gave up our ration books. Lastly, we showed our passports to the English authorities and got on the boat. All this took less than 10 minutes.

We taken to our cabins, a nurse carrying Linda and a soldier carrying my zip bag and my suitcase was waiting on the bed. I got a terrible cabin on the bottom deck under the water line, no port holes and not much ventilation or electric lighting and I had to climb a ladder to the top bunk. Daphne had a swell cabin on top deck, which is usually first class on private lines. But I also got a bunk for Linda's cot and my baggage. I dashed around to find the berthing officer and spun him a tale! I told him the baby and I were used to sleeping by French windows and we couldn't possibly manage. Also I said the optician insists that I don't stay too long in artificial lighting. He was very, very nice and he said he would move me if I promised not to tell anyone else. I got moved this morning so I only had to spend one night there.

The ship sailed at 2 a.m. so I was asleep and saw nothing. We couldn't even tell the ship was moving 'till this afternoon it was so smooth. I got moved into the same cabin as Daphne - right into the next bunk and it's just fine here. Sheets and blankets are provided for the babies each day are spotlessly white, but ours have to last the whole trip. We also have to use the ship's feeding bottles which are sterilized after each feeding. The water is always boiling in huge glass flasks and the kitchens are wonderful - just like you see in magazines. Linda is as good as gold; I hardly have to pick her up at all.

There is an elderly man named Joe who looks after us and waits on us hand and foot, nurses babies while we go out on deck, hangs nappies up and scrounges odds and ends of all sorts. We are given four soluble nappies each day but he manages to get more so there isn't much nappie washing done.

The food on board is wonderful. We've had: halibut, lamb, pork, ham, oranges, apples, grapefruit, raspberries, peaches, and cream already. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the bread; it is so white. And Players cigarettes are 1/5 per 100 and we can take ashore as many as we wish.

I guess you have been wondering what has happened to my writing! Well, at lunch time the ship started to roll like nothing at all on earth. When you walk down the corridors, you just keep walking into walls on each side. Some women are ill with it but I don't seem to be affected at all. It just makes me feel as if I'd had a drink or two and I find it good fun. I have bought four souvenirs with T. S. S. Letitice on them, one for mother, one for me, one for Jenny and one for Delma and I will send them as soon as possible. I have been trying to send a cable but everyone has the same idea and I can't leave Linda long enough to queue.

Tonight I'm going to play Bingo with the berthing officer (he's a bit of O.K.). Goodness knows what it is but he says it's something like Lotto. About 50 people play and there are chocolate and cigs for prizes. The ship is rolling more and more so I shall have to pack up for tonight – it's just useless.

XXX

August 7th, Wednesday.

Today, everyone in the cabin except me has been seasick. You never saw such confusion in your life. The ship is rocking like blazes. I don't care if it stays this way all day as Linda has been as good as gold all day. I have her cot hung in a square carry cot container and it is rocking backwards and forwards and she sleeps all day. I don't even have to give her water between feeds and I have to wake her for them. I'm seriously thinking of buying a boat and living on it.

I found a beauty parlour on board where you can have facial treatments and perms and sets and a tuck shop where you can get ice cream and sweets and drinks. There's a shop where I bought Lux flakes and Persil, Johnson & Johnson baby cream and powder, nail varnish, hankies and everything you can think of. I wish you were here – it's just like a dream. I still can't get over the bread though, it doesn't look real.

There is a different picture show on every night and a sing song but as yet I haven't been; I've been too busy helping the sick folk with babies. Out of eight at our table I was the only one to turn up at each meal so I had the waiter all to myself. For breakfast, I had grapefruit, porridge, ham and eggs and coffee. For lunch I had soup, lamb and mint sauce,

potatoes, then I had a fancy dish which was bacon chopped up, then wrapped up in a slice of bacon.

One snag though – I have rubbed the backs off my fingers washing and we have to wash in salt water so they're pretty sore. Also, the water is a bit brown and things aren't quite as white as they were back home. I have talked the steward into taking stuff down below by the ovens though so Linda's washing is aired.

I'll sign off now and start my book before lights out at 11:00 o'clock. Then at midnight the clocks go back an hour so we get extra sleep.

XXX

August 8th, Thursday.

Nothing much has happened today except a school of flying fish has been following the ship. Most interesting to watch.

I went to the ship's flicks to see Bing Crosby in "The Bells of St. Mary's" but had to come out as it was so hot. I was glad I did as Linda was crying when I got back to the cabin – the first time she has cried while I've been out so the steward says.

We put back the clocks another hour today. It doesn't seem to bother Linda as she sleeps 'till six o'clock.

I kept a menu for each of today's meals to send home for a souvenir for you. That reminds me, I have left my letters from Rick at home in my souvenirs. You can burn them all except for my telegrams, Christmas, Birthday and Valentine cards from Rick. These I want you to send to me as soon as possible. When you look around at some of the things that folks have forgotten such as baby food and nighties and such I can't grumble at having forgotten a few old letters.

XXX

Before we continue, I would like to tell you what happened 10 days before Bill and Betty's wedding.

Bill had joined the air force on learning that his older brother Jack, a Spitfire pilot, had been killed in the battle of Britain. He became a Flight Sergeant Air gunner and was posted overseas where he was assigned to the Royal Air force to fly in Lancaster bombers.

He later joined the Special Pathfinders Force which were sent ahead to light up the targets for the bombers. Ten days before the wedding, Bill's plane, which was full of flares, was shot down by "friendly fire".

It immediately turned into a ball of fire and the crew parachuted out of the plane. Bill was the target of machine guns but landed safely in a tree in the Black Forest region of Germany.

Because the fighting fronts were changing rapidly Bill didn't know if he were behind enemy lines or not. He hid under leaves that night and eventually managed to find his way back to the Allied lines and then back to his squadron. In the meantime, Betty received a telegram that her fiancé was missing in action.

Bill sent a telegram but Betty only got the message that seven were saved and one missing.

Bill arrived back in England on Sunday and on Tuesday, the wedding took place and "they lived happily ever after".

And now to Friday, August 9th 1946.

We had to spend most of the day in our cabin waiting for the doctor to come round, as there has been an outbreak of laryngitis. We have all had penicillin throat sprays three times – even babies, waiters and crew. It was murder, I don't think I have ever tasted anything like it before.

One girl in our cabin has turned out to be a hairdresser so we have passed the time away reading and having shampoos and sets. There is a hairdresser on board but he is all booked up now.

I nearly had a fight with a Scotch woman in our cabin this afternoon. She keeps bringing a scruffy cat into the cabin and it sits on the beds and in the cots. I told her twice but it was no good so I threatened to throw it out the porthole and she took the hint.

Now she is as nasty as can be and I shall no doubt end up by threatening her a trip through the porthole.

Daphne's baby has been sick all day but I think it was the penicillin. It tastes wicked. Linda is taking it better than any baby I know on the boat.

You will have to sort out my writing as best you can as the boat is still rocking very badly indeed.

XXXXX

Saturday, August 10th.

Life on the ocean waves gets worse. This morning we opened the portholes and got a shower bath. The waves came right in and we are on the top deck. This afternoon however, matters calmed down and we are running into the Canadian weather belt.

The wind is still strong but it is like a hairdrying machine it is so hot. You can hardly imagine what it is like. And still there is no sun, I haven't seen a sign of it since we left England.

Several of the girls on board are being sent back to England for being caught in the lifeboats with the ship's staff. Heaven only knows what they must have been thinking.

One baby in our ward has been taken into the ship's hospital today. He has been so sick that he has ruptured himself. The mother is only eighteen and has no idea of how to go on.

I wonder if this letter is getting boring but there is nothing more to tell really. All we do is get up, bathe babies, wash, eat, and hang around near the cabin in case the babies cry or someone steals the washing.

One girl has had every penny she was taking stolen out of her bag – fourteen pounds altogether. There are some rare sorts of women on this boat.

Sunday, August 11th.

We have run into the Canadian heat wave today and what a heat wave. It even woke me up in the night it was so hot, and as you know that takes some doing.

Linda has come out in a heat rash behind her ears and on her stomach but the M. D. says it's nothing to worry about. 99% of the babies have it.

We had soup for dinner, then halibut, chicken served up with cream, three vegetables, peaches and coffee ices, biscuits and a choice of five types of cheese, an apple and orange and finally coffee – and I ate all that was put in front of me. I think I have gained about two stone (a stone = 14 pounds) in this week.

We have been told we shall land between 3 p.m. and 10 p.m. on Tuesday.

Monday, August 12th.

I had an accident this morning. Whilst I was bending down to put Linda in the bottom bunk I bumped my head on the top one and broke my glasses into pieces. I got some glass in my eyes but went to see the M.D. and I am O.K. now. So now I won't be able to search for my better half among the crowds when I get there. I shall have to wait until he comes to claim me. They definitely do play "Here Comes the Bride" when we walk down the gangplank. I thought it was a leg-pull but it's right.

My train to London doesn't go till Wednesday afternoon so I have to stay on 'till 1 p.m. Wednesday afternoon. Daphne is only going a four hours ride from Halifax so she can get off as soon as we dock tomorrow. I wish I could.

On deck tonight we fancied we could see land. Some said yes and some said no and while we were making up our minds it got too dark to see anything. I imagine we should be well in sight though tomorrow.

They speed this ship up at night while the kiddies are in bed and boy does she roll. It's like nothing you can imagine. It will sure feel good to feel the ship stop tomorrow.

Monday August 19th.

Dearest Mum, Dad & all,

It is a week today since I added anything to this letter but I honestly have had no time 'till now. We docked at Halifax about 8:30 p.m. last Tuesday, and as the boat touched the dock the band played "Here Comes the Bride". It made you feel really silly.

Several of the girls had their husbands there to meet them on the docks and it was quite exciting watching them. I wished that Rick had been there.

We got off to go to Ontario about 3 p.m. on Wednesday and sat on the train 'till late evening. I thought it was never going to start.

These Canadian trains are absolutely rotten. They really shake the daylight out of you. We were on it two days and two nights and passed through some beautiful Canadian towns and country. I only hope it won't be long before you can see for yourselves how beautiful.

We had our money changed to Canadian currency on the boat and passing through Quebec, the Frenchies got on the train at each stop selling stuff and trying their best to twist us.

One girl bought a newspaper and was given 75 cents change out of a dollar. One little lad sold me some chocolates and tried to twist me so I was glad Rick had taught me a bit about the money.

We had to change trains and wait about five hours in Toronto but the Red Cross looked after the babies and we had a grand time looking around the shops. Boy, was it fun! I wish you were here.

You can hardly believe your eyes at the sight of the shops. I only wish I were a millionairess so I could send you a parcel every day but you know I will do my best for you all at home.

The train from Toronto to London was as different as could be from the first train – lovely and clean and comfortable. It only took four hours.

London looked the prettiest town I have ever seen; even before the train stopped, I could see Rick, before he saw me, standing there looking worried to death with a little box in his hand with a corsage of roses for me. It was wonderful to see him again. He hasn't changed a bit.

He was thrilled with Linda and took to her as if he had been handling babies all his life. I think she has fallen for him too. She laughs and goes at him no end.

It was half past six, Friday evening, when we got into London. Rick had brought Homer, Marjie, and Bill along to the station with him but his dad was waiting at home getting supper.

Rick had more flowers for me in a big box and Homer had a box of peaches, apples, mangoes and grapes and a big box of chocolates for me.

We had a lovely supper and an iced cake with "Welcome Home Betty & Linda" on it.

His dad does all he can to make me feel welcome here. We shan't see much of each other as he is out all day from eight till five o'clock. Then he comes home, has dinner and goes out till the early hours of the morning every night. Goodness knows where to.

It is a very nice house in a nice quiet district but Rick isn't going to be content till we have a place of our own.

One of the neighbours had Linda on Saturday while we went into town shopping. I had my eyes tested, got two new dresses and some underwear. We got shoes and blankets for Linda. Rick had already got her a cot and a bath.

Last night I undressed Linda, put her in her carrycot in the back of the car, and just drove around London. It's a wonderful place, just like a high-class holiday resort. At night, it's all lit up with neon signs and lights for adverts – just like fairyland. We called in a drug store coming home for a “hot dog”.

Late at night, the young folks sit around on high stools drinking iced drinks and playing jukeboxes just like in American films. I am enjoying every minute of it all.

The kitchen here is a sight for sore eyes it's so big. There is a lovely cooker and an ice-box and bags of room to get around in – and plenty of stuff to cook too.

Rick has been ill all last night. He was up being sick and shivering and such and today he has a temp. of 102 so he stayed in bed. I hope he gets well as he only has a week off work and I want him to show me around.

No end of relations have rung me up and an aunt and uncle have called to see me. She was born in Scotland and was very nice indeed.

Dorothy and ray rang up last night and today I got a parcel from Dorothy. I also got a letter from Jenny and will be writing to her. I hope it won't be long now before I hear from you.

Rick sends his love to you and says you're not to worry about me. He promises he will look after me well. You know he will too, don't you? Don't worry about me at all. As long as know you are well and happy over home, I shall be O.K. too.

Give my love to all and tell them how I got on. I just couldn't sit down and tell them all what I have written to you.

I must sign off now as it's Linda's feed time but I will be writing again very soon.

Good night and God Bless. All our love,

Betty, Linda and Rick.

XXXXXX