

Len and Joan King  
WWII Veteran and  
English War Bride  
Letitia  
February of 1946



Len and Joan King celebrate 60 years

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They met at the beginning of the Second World War when Len and his buddies were on leave from the 1st Division, Royal Canadian Service Corps in England and asked Joan and her friends for directions in London.

Since that chance meeting, Len and Joan King of Listowel have enjoyed a lifetime together and are now celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary. I was with a bunch of girls across from the underground, Mrs. King recalled, when those poor soldiers with no overcoats came by. I really didn't want to speak to soldiers from a different country, but we showed them around, and they took us out to dinner, and I thought that was the end of it.

But Len kept coming to see me. I was young and not thinking of getting married, but the war was starting to get bad. So we decided to be married in June and then got a special license because Len was being sent to France.

They were married May 25, 1940, in Working, Surrey, in the south of England. Mrs. King remained in London throughout the Blitz, in a one room apartment with the windows all shattered. She spent little time in bomb shelters, for she found them more terrifying than bombs.

Mr. King, who had gone to London, Ontario, to see his brother off to war and had signed up there himself, soon went off to France, where he drove transport trucks carrying food, supplies and ammunition in England and in Europe.

We were going in from Paris, he said, to take the pressure off the troops there, but we were kicked out. Instead of Dunkirk, we went the other way and came out through Brest. We threw everything away and set the trucks on fire. My sergeant got back to England three months later; he had got on a cruise ship.

War is a terrible thing, Mrs. King said, "You knew it was coming. I was in church when they said war had been declared, and the hair on my neck stood up, but we didn't really know how bad it was. There was machine gunning, and one of Len's friends was killed, but we were young, and we thought it wouldn't happen to us."

Still, with all the bad, there was a lot of good. Dunkirk was amazing, all these people, from the oldest to the youngest, with any kind of boat went out to help bring people out.

To Canada

In February 1946, Mr. King returned to his home in Gorrie, and in June Mrs. King and their two children left Liverpool for Canada on the Letitia which landed at the famous Pier 21 in Halifax. To welcome the war brides, a band was playing Here Comes the Bride.

What I remember best was recovering from sea-sickness and going to the ship's canteen. I can still see it, a box of Rinso, green and yellow, and I remember thinking, 'Isn't that wonderful soap!' And there was white bread and fruit.

Like most war brides in Canada, she was astonished at the vastness of the open countryside: Len said Gorrie was a village, and he didn't lie; but I was used to buses in villages, and I asked where they were. And then 1947 was the year of the big storm when the roads were all blocked.

Kindness

There was little work in Ontario after the war, and both Mr. and Mrs. King remember folks being very kind to them. "I was homesick at first but the people in Gorrie were so good to me. They even had a lovely shower for me" Mrs. King said; and when Len had to go to hospital in London, everyone was very good to me. Neighbours and people we didn't even know helped us through times of sickness.

We had a wartime house on Davidson Avenue, but not much money. I will always remember the kindness of Reg Tompkins who asked if I would like a job at Imperial Cloth. I bawled my eyes out leaving my children, but it was a good place to work.

Len recovered and worked at Spinrite. I heard Imperial Cloth was closing and got jobs at Spinrite, the bake shop and Campbell's Soup. I like Listowel, I've made a lot of friends here, and the town had been good to both of us.

Mr. King recalled, When we thought we should move to Listowel, I was having a cup of coffee in Pop Weston's restaurant on Main Street West, and I said we had nowhere to live. Pop Weston said he had a place upstairs, and we moved in.

"Then we had the flood. I had a 1934 Hudson. I had paid \$600 for it, and it went under the river. It cost \$50 to pull it out and I got nothing for it. Back then we had no insurance, no nothing."

Mr. King later decided he preferred to work outside and became well known in this area for the fine quality of his house painting, both exterior and interior.

His son, Len Jr., worked with him and has continued the business. In the winter, the whole family helped Mr. King build houses in Listowel, Walkerton, Mount Forest and other towns. In 1966-67, they built the comfortable Alder Street home where the Kings reside.

#### Family Comes First

Mr. King has been an excellent bowler and remembers his big win on Bowling for Dollars in 1988, when he and his pinpal, Maria Michielsen of Parkhill, shared \$4,300 after he got three strikes in a row. Mrs. Michielsen sent him a trophy with their names inscribed.

He has also enjoyed the races at Mohawk, Hanover and Flamborough Downs, as well as Elmira, where he still likes to watch for a winner.

Mrs. King belongs to the War Brides Association in Kitchener and tries to play bridge with friends every week. She always enjoys meeting friends from Campbell's who were new to Canada, who didn't yet speak English well, and who found in her a sympathetic listener.

The Kings have enjoyed travelling, including a trip to Europe. "We found out in other countries that we don't know how good we have it here," they said. Mr. and Mrs. King have a family of four children, Pat and her husband Don McIntosh of Atwood, Len and Donna of Fordwich, Greg and Jeannette of Wingham, and Dana and Barb of Waterloo, as well as 10 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. Their family has been their pride and joy, and they agree their greatest accomplishment has been instilling in their children that family is everything and that they should always be there for each other.

"And they have been," they said. "Our family has been wonderful. They have always helped us in any way they could."

Although she likes to joke that she was homesick enough to go home except her husband couldn't afford to send her and it was too far to swim, Mrs. King has no regrets about her life in Canada.

"During the war you could pick and chose," Mrs. King said with a smile, "but I'm glad I got Len. He's a gentlemen and he tells me he loves me, and he has always told he I looked lovely, even when I didn't."

Asked if they had any advice for young married people hoping to achieve a 60th wedding anniversary, Mr. and Mrs. King agreed on three rules: "Try not to go to bed on your anger, try to give each other space and tell each other, 'I love you,' every day."