

Sheila Peterson nee
Figgins
English War Bride
Letitia
1946



Memoirs of Sheila Peterson

War Bride

As related to Dawn Chapman in November 2006

I was born on the 17th of May 1925, in a small village called Pilley in the New Forest in Hampshire, England. My parents moved when I was very small to the town of Lymington on the south coast, directly across the Solent from the Isle of Wight. We lived on the outskirts of town near the Lymington River, which was a tidal river, where my father taught both my brother, Robert Jr. and myself, to swim.

We had a very good childhood, considering it was during the depression. My father had a job as a chauffeur with a wealthy family and he also exercised their two guard dogs. My mother, who was an exceptional cook, was much in demand on the weekends. She was allowed to take leftovers home, so we always had nice food during those times. We had a few neighbors with children and so they and we roamed the woods and fields. We used to play near a landmark, the 'monument', which was on a hill overlooking the town.

I started school when I was five and my dad rode his bicycle with me on the crossbar to school each day. The school, a parochial one, was at least two miles away. Here, they taught classes to grade eight, which, at that time, was considered a full education. At aged fourteen I was finished school.

About six months later, just before World War II began, I went to work for Mrs. Lacey. She lived in a huge house next door to us. I looked after her little girl, Susan, who was three years old. There was a lot of responsibility considering my age. I lived in, did all the child's washing, kept the nursery clean, took her for walks, made breakfast and so on. Mrs., Lacey was divorced and re-married. She followed her husband around different coastal areas as he was in the Navy. So, I ended up going to places on the coast of Wales and then Fairlie, on the Firth of Clyde in Scotland. Our bungalow was on a hillside and we could look out over the water and watch the ships and submarines and fishing boats

coming and going. In fact, in the summer the little girl and I would get up very early and go down to the docks when the fishermen came in. We would get fresh herring and mackerel right off the boat. There wasn't a lot of action from German bombers up there, but I remember one night they dropped mines by parachutes and they came fairly close to the village.

In the meantime, my father had to go to work for the war effort so my parents and my brother moved right into Lymington. Two days later, a bomb demolished the house they had just moved out of. What a lucky escape! At this time, anyone who was physically able between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five had to work somewhere to help the war effort. I suppose I was away for a year and one half in Scotland; but I'll never forget my trip home when I turned sixteen. The train left Glasgow in the evening and sometime during the night we came into Crewe Station in the Midlands with sirens going, 'ack-ack' guns firing, searchlights cutting into the sky, and planes overhead dropping bombs. This was during the blackouts. The train slowed to a crawl because a lot of sparks from a coal-fired engine would have been a dead give-away to the bombers. We made it without any casualties.

I got home, caught up with the news very quickly and rushed off the local factory to apply for a job. I was scared I would get sent somewhere far away if I didn't have a job already for the war effort. As it happened, this place, Wellworthy's, turned out pistons for airplanes and tanks. I was hired. The first job was menial, but I was promoted to press drills, and then to bigger machines and lathes. The best time was night shift, not so many bosses around. We could sing our hearts out. Of course, there were lots of times we were shut down by air raids but we were lucky and never got a direct hit. If we had a weekend off a bunch of us girls would either go to a movie, or, if it were summer we would walk out into the country where we would stop at a pub and have a shandy. We took our dogs with us and sometimes we rode our bikes. By this time there were a lot of troops stationed in and around our town. First the French Canadian Unit, The Chaudieres arrived. They were a real wild bunch. All the parents were saying, "My daughter is not going out with any Canadian!" These guys were always fighting and throwing one another through shop windows. Can you imagine? Our quiet little village on the south coast of England was no longer quiet. Then The First Hussars Armored Regiment arrived. I was still living at home and my parents, especially my dad, refused to let me go dancing. Well, on Christmas Eve, 1943, one of my cousins and I were at the the Red Lion Pub. Here was this tall, good-looking Canadian soldier standing there and another was holding a piece of mistletoe over his head. The soldier holding the mistletoe was saying, "kiss him". No one else moved, so I did. My fate was sealed. We saw each other as often as possible after that until he was

moved to Lee-on-Solent to ship out for D-Day on June 6, 1944. I never saw him again until January of 1945 at which time he had ten days leave and we got married.

Our wedding took place in the Catholic Church just off the High Street. There were very few guests, just a few relatives. Earl was in uniform and I wore a light blue suit with a white collar and a dark blue hat. I'm not sure of my flowers, but I believe they were blue chrysanthemums. We had a very nice reception in the upstairs of a big house along the High Street. I'm not sure who the owners were but they would let out their reception rooms for these types of things. We had a bit of a sit-down meal, but not a hot one. I believe it was sandwiches and cakes with tea of course.

Earl went back to Holland and fought through the German lines until the surrender, and then he came back to England in July of 1945. He went to a repatriation camp and waited for orders to go home. We wanted to come to Canada together, but I was pregnant and slated for a ship with pregnant wives and those with young children. I eventually miscarried but still came to Canada three months after Earl.

It was the beginning of May and the day arrived for me to leave. Of course everyone was crying. We caught the train to London at which time we were briefed about what to expect on the boat. The next morning we got back on a train and went to Liverpool and then boarded the SS Letitia and sailed for my new home. The SS Letitia, an old boat, was originally a troop carrier. We didn't care, it was wonderful and it was now home to us all: women, kids, medical staff and crew, for the next ten to twelve days. I'll never forget our first meal. It was overwhelming! We had been on rations for so many years and now here was white bread and fruit, and milk! We ate, slept, and walked the decks. At nighttime our beds were turned down for us and there was another piece of fresh fruit on our pillow! We thought we had died and gone to heaven! Then, quite a ways out from Newfoundland we ran into a spring gale. The ship was rolling around, babies were crying, some women were seasick - ugh. The smell! To top it off, there were several babies born that night. I'll never forget what my father told me before I left England. He said to eat lots of strawberry jam because it tasted just as good coming back up as it did going down. Wise advice! I only got sick once! After surviving the high winds and heavy seas, as we approached Newfoundland we ran into heavy fog and icebergs. That was scary. We finally made it into Halifax with no further problems and, after having my twenty-first birthday on the boat; I stepped onto Pier 21 and officially was now in Canada.

From Halifax we got onto a very long train. The food was good but the water was terrible. We had to get drinking water separate from the tap

water. The porters on the train were absolutely terrific. They made us feel very much welcome and were finding little treats for us to eat all the time because they knew we had had nothing for many years in the line of sweets and fresh foods.

We also had army personnel on board and they prepared us for our lives in Canada. They told us what to expect and taught us how to use Canadian money. We crossed the St. Lawrence River near Montreal and then swung into northern Ontario. It was a wilderness, nothing but little lakes, bush and outcroppings of rock. Of course, we missed a lot at nighttime, maybe northern Ontario wasn't all lakes and trees and rocks! A bit further on during a stop at a station we were allowed off the train so we could walk up and down the platform. When we arrived in Winnipeg they let us go down Main Street for a few hours. It was hot and I did a little shopping. I bought a cotton dress and some sandals. The train continued on to Calgary and Edmonton, where someone from the Red Cross met me. I was taken to a house, fed, had a bath and some sleep and then to another train which took me to Grande Prairie.

Somehow the railroad had changed the timetable, and then changed it back and Earl didn't know about it. His mother, his sister Toots, brother Raymond, cousin Hazel and some other people whose names I can't recall had the old schedule and were there to meet me. We found Earl and Tiny Voshall at the Murray Hotel in Grande Prairie. Was he ever surprised!!! We stayed in Grande Prairie for a few days then went out to Debolt to his mother, where we lived until we had our own home about a year later. I must tell you now; I had the best mother-in-law ever. She taught me how to care for the fires, use coal-oil lamps and how to bake bread in a wood stove. She was wise and wonderful and I don't know how I would have managed without her. There are many terrible stories about how girls came from England not knowing what they were getting into and having relationships from hell with their husband's families, but I knew exactly what to expect; Earl did not sugarcoat anything. He told me while we were still in England there would be no electricity, running water or gas where I was going in Canada. There would be no vehicles (or very few), no paved roads and no hospital anywhere near. He said we would be living in an isolated area, quite unlike the little picturesque village and countryside I was used to in England. I was very grateful to him for being truthful with me and I did not consider my life in Debolt a hardship; everyone was in the same boat.

Earl worked at Bickell's Mill. We took out a homestead northwest of Debolt and started to develop the land. We would live in Debolt for the winter, then move to a small house at the homestead each spring. That was a lot of brutal work. I picked roots and rocks, planted a garden and looked after three children up there on that homestead.

Our daughter Lois was born in February of 1947 and Dawn followed in November of 1948. There was a lull of about five years and Michael came along in 1953. Michael's arrival saw the last of the family moving to the homestead during the spring and summer months because Lois was now going to school. My mother-in-law, Elevina, passed away the next spring. I missed her very much. In July of 1956 Julia was born and my mother came from England for a visit. I had not seen her since when I left in May of 1946. We were then living on the old Sheltreau place west of Debolt. Lois and Dawn were going to school at Edson Trail. At any rate, I don't think my mother thought too much about our situation. We had an outside 'biffy', no running water, and no power, just gas lanterns. But, we were happy, had a roof over our heads, lots to eat and most of our friends were living in the same style. At any rate, my mother stayed for three months, then she returned to England

We had a very active social life I those days, much more, I think than people do nowadays.. We went to each other's houses to play cards in the evenings; the kids all played outside, rain or shine or blizzard. We took the kids to movies in the old hall in Debolt and when someone got married, we pushed the movie seats to the outside of the room and had a dance. All the kids came to that as well. I remember one time we had been to a wedding dance and my daughter Dawn (about three or four at the time) must have had a lot of fun, because the next weekend in the curling rink she asked in a very loud voice when her dad and I were going to get married so we could have another dance. Everyone roared with laughter.

We also took the kids to the river to swim and to Sturgeon Lake where we caught lots of jack and pickerel. I planted a huge garden each spring and we would pick berries to put in jars for the winter. I also kept chickens for eggs, and when we needed meat Earl would shoot a deer or a moose.

By this time Earl began working on the oil rigs to supplement the farming. I also had another baby, our last, Nicholas, in 1958. When he started school I began working at the Debolt Hotel for Jim and Jean Pushor. Earl wasn't too happy about me going to work. Then, after being hailed out and dried out for several years in a row we decided to sell the farm and bought a fifteen acre plot just east of Debolt. We built a lovely new house in 1964. I continued at the Debolt Hotel and Earl worked at Moore's Seed Cleaning Plant during the day and built on the house in the evenings and on weekends. Shortly after we moved into the new house in January of 1965 Earl had his first heart attack. They told him it was so severe he would never work again. We struggled along. Thank God for my older girls who were in high school. They kept house, baked bread and washed clothes while I worked out at the hotel. In 1966 the doctors

decided they would do open-heart surgery for Earl. After a very long convalescence it was decided that he should take a cooking course at Lethbridge College. He completed his training and went back to the rigs, except this time he was the cook. I joined him in a few jobs and Dawn stayed at home with the younger kids. Earl eventually went to Ellesmere Island in the Arctic and had another heart attack. He was sent back to the University Hospital in Edmonton where they deemed the first surgery unsuccessful and said he never should have been working. Needless to say, he never did return to work.

We sold our house and acreage, bought a mobile home and moved into Debolt where I could now walk to work. Earl's health deteriorated somewhat rapidly. He developed congestive heart failure and diabetes. In 1985 we celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary, which was a very happy occasion. All of our children were there, as were the grandchildren. Things went from bad to worse and in the fall of 1986 Earl was diagnosed with lung cancer in both lungs. He was a very heavy smoker. He passed away on July 11, 1987 on my grandson Gordon's eighteenth birthday.

The first time I ever went back to England was twenty-three years after I left, in 1969. Since then, I have made several more trips. I was able to see my parents a few times again before they passed away, Mom at eighty-four years of age and Dad at ninety-three. I also made sure to have a walk to the pub where Earl proposed to me, The Burrough Arms. It is right on Avenue Road where his tanks were parked all those years ago. I also try to find time to cross the river to The Wagon and Horses pub and further climb the hill back to the monument where I played as a child. Sometimes familiarity helps bridge the gap between visits. My brother and I discussed in later years what a terrible thing it must have been for our parents when we both left at the same time; I to Canada, and my brother to Trieste, Italy where the fighting carried on long after Germany surrendered. My brother eventually returned safely to England and still lives in the small village where we were both raised.

I am still living at the same place in Debolt at this time. After Earl passed away I got busy with the Library Board, Ladies Auxiliary, the Senior's Center, and the Debolt Beautification Club. Now, it is twenty years later and I am now quite content to let others run the boards while I look forward to coffee each day with my friends at the restaurant. I see Dawn a few times a week, and talk to her on the phone several times a day. Julie and Mike come out from Grande Prairie often on a Sunday morning for brunch and I keep in touch with Nick and Lois on the telephone.

I guess there is not much more to say. I have, at this point in time, fifteen grand children, along with twelve great-grandchildren and two on the way.

In conclusion, I must say my life has been somewhat of an adventure. I feel completely Canadian and could not ever go back to England to live. That said, World War II had a direct influence on my life and I would not have had it any other way. Since Earl passed away I have made two trips back to Holland and France and visited the battlegrounds and cemeteries. It is very sad indeed to go to the memorials and read the headstones and realize how young these fellows were when they gave up their lives for our freedom. I hope future generations continue to celebrate Remembrance Day after our veterans are all gone and that our soldiers in Afghanistan and those on our Peacekeeping Missions may also return to peace some day. God bless Canada and all of those who keep her safe.