

Mary Cumminskey
Gero nee Hardie
Scottish War Bride
Georgic
July 31, 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:

Mary Cumminskey (nee Hardie) Gero

Parents:

Helen (nee Cumminskey) and James Hardie

Home:

Edinburgh, Scotland

Wartime memories:

"I grew up in downtown Edinburgh. The oldest child in the family was a daughter and I was the youngest, with five brothers in between. My father died when I was six months old.

My school was in the Royal Mile.

Ours was a regimental family. My grandfather, father and uncle were all in the Royal Scots Fusiliers. My uncle died in France during World War I. I had five brothers and they were all pipers and dancers in the Regiment. One of my brothers danced for Queen Mary, the Elizabeth the Queen Mother and Queen Elizabeth II. Another brother piped the troops ashore at Dunkirk. He was injured but reported dead. His wife began to receive a widow's pension but in fact he was a prisoner-of-war at Stalag 13 in Germany. No one notified us that he was alive, he just returned and shocked everyone after the war.

Three of my brothers left the piping and two went into the Royal Artillery, the other into the Royal Scots Grays. Most of their lives were spent in the services.

There were air raids every night. You could almost count on it about nine o'clock. We had to have a suitcase packed at all times so you could go down into the shelter if you heard the sirens. One shelter was under Edinburgh Castle and another was under a big factory, I think they built furniture. My mother only went one night in the shelter. It used to upset me that she wouldn't come. I had to go and help my sister-in-law every night because she had two small children and couldn't cope with them on her own.

A lot of people lost their homes in the bombing.

I also remember the rationing. My mother and I got two strips of bacon a month, one each. She worked in the school and I'd get up at five in the morning to get in line to purchase something, perhaps two potatoes. Sometimes I'd wait until nine and then find out they were all gone.

I finished school, Grade X, just before I was fourteen. I began a four year apprenticeship to become a specialty printer. Our firm, Waterasons, did a lot of regimental printing.

I joined the Royal Navy when I was 17, on July 5, 1944. All of my brothers were gone and I wanted to be part of the war effort. As a wren I did clerical work and served in Liverpool, and at the Fleet Air Arm (naval and air force) at Abbotsinch, which was close to Glasgow. I was demobbed from there on January 1, 1946.

My greatest moment was meeting General Montgomery, Monty. I was going up the steps to Saint Gilles Cathedral and he was coming down with his guards. He came over to shake my hand and we talked for a few minutes. That's something I'll always remember."

What was the attitude to Canadian servicemen in your home community?

"People throughout Britain were good to the various servicemen."

Husband:

"Albert Kitchener Gero from Truro who served with the Cape Breton Highlanders. He was part of the Italian campaign and was wounded twice in battle."

How did you meet your husband?

"Albert was in Edinburgh on leave and was billeted in an apartment in the same building where my sister-in-law lived. He struck up a conversation with me on the stairs in the building and asked me if I would like to be a pen pal with his sister in Nova Scotia. Later he suggested that I write to him."

Wedding date:

Friday, October 12, 1945

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

"My mother liked Al but she was upset that I, her youngest, was moving so far away."

Can you tell us about your wedding?

"Albert just arrived two days before the wedding. I had a white dress, made by a family friend who was a dressmaker. My two flower girls, daughters of my oldest brother, wore pale lilac and my best friend wore mauve. The best man was Phillip Fontaine, a friend of Albert's from the service.

The minister who married us was Rev. Cecil Thornton and I had been the first baby he baptised and the last war bride he married.

Our reception was at Tollbooth Hall, which is part of the Royal Mile. Formerly it was John Knox home. We had a sit down meal for nearly two hundred guests. We spent one night together at my mother's house and we both had to leave to report for duty the next day.

Albert returned to Canada on January 3, 1946."

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

"I came on the SS Georgic. Formerly it had been a British battleship and there was only one funnel, the other two had been blown off during the war. Only married women were on board, no children on the ship. It took twelve days to get from Liverpool to Halifax as we were stopped for two days in the middle of the Atlantic. The staff on board was Canadian and they were very nice.

The youngest of my brothers had travelled at sea a lot and he gave me some advice for the trip and some pills to stop sea sickness. I didn't need them. A lot of people were sick on board but I wasn't. The food was beautiful. There were no bath tubs, showers only, and only salt water in them."

What was the date of your arrival at Pier 21?

July 31, 1946

What were your memories of your arrival?

"Albert's brother-in-law had a new truck and they came to meet me. Albert had written to me and asked what had I missed the most during the war. I told him a banana, because they were impossible to get in Britain at that time. He had some waiting for me in the truck."

Children?

"We had two daughters and three sons."

Where did you live when you first arrived in Canada?

"We stayed with my mother-in-law for two nights. Albert had bought a house but had a bit more work to do on it. We stayed in Truro for about a year, until my first son was born, but Albert went to Montreal to get a better job and we followed.

We lived in Montreal for seventeen years. My husband decided he wanted to move back to Nova Scotia in 1963 and he died three weeks after we moved back here. I didn't work outside the home in Montreal but I had various jobs after he died.

I have nineteen grandchildren and fourteen great-grandchildren."

Tell us about the adjustments you had to make.

"I had a difficult time with outdoor toilets, coming from Edinburgh I'd never seen one."

Did you have trips home?

"The first time I went back was in 1982 and after that went to Scotland every second year."

Did your family come to Canada to visit?

"My mother came for a month in 1947 when my son was born and later, when we lived in Montreal, she came and stayed for two years."

Did you or your children have difficulties obtaining Canadian Citizenship?

"None at all."