



Jeanette Holm sits in her suite at Sokol Manor. Holm came to Canada 70 years ago, in 1946, at the age of 20 as a war bride. (Tim Smith/The Brandon Sun)

» 'WE DON'T WANT TO FORGET OUR PAST,' HOLM SAYS

War bride marks 70 years in Canada

BY EVA WASNEY

In the summer of 1946, Canada was faced with an invasion on the home front.

However, instead of guns and tanks, the invaders were armed with wedding bands, bouncing babies and lilting accents.

Seventy years ago, the country welcomed home roughly 39,000 British and European war brides from the Second World War.

"When you fall in love, you go to the ends of the Earth, and we kind of felt like maybe we had," said Jeanette Holm, who travelled from England to Manitoba when she was 20 years old.

Like many war brides, Holm met her future Canadian husband, Albert, at a dance in her hometown of Brighton. Jeanette says the soldier made an immediate impression on her.

"He was a wonderful dancer — not like the usual Canadians who jigged — but he was nice and smooth," she said.

Shortly after the two met, Albert was sent across the English Channel with the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade, and Holm joined the Women's Auxillary Air Force.

Because communication was near impossible, Holm took advantage of her job in transport control at the Down Ampney Royal Air Force station to figure out where Albert might be fighting.

"Being a manifest clerk, I would go down the columns of the planes that had come in before I came on shift," she said, adding that when planes came into the base they were often carrying wounded soldiers. "I came to one that was just a few numbers short of Albert's number and my heart just stopped — because then I knew they were in a pretty dicky spot."

The couple made it through and were married in Brighton on June 8, 1945, after they had both been discharged. She was 18 and he was 25.

Wartimes being what they were, Holm borrowed clothing coupons from her family to purchase a dress and shoes for the wedding and a friend sewed her a negligee out of white parachute silk.

Today, Holm says she only has one regret from her wedding day.

"I often wish I had been married in my uniform," she said.

Albert returned home to his farm near Arborg and Holm, along with



A young Jeanette Holm waits for an ambulance next to an injured airman at the Down Ampney Royal Air Force station in England, in 1944. Holm enlisted with the Women's Auxillary Air Force during the Second World War and this photograph appeared in a 1945 edition of Harper's Bazaar. When a senior officer saw the photo, Holm was written up for having a button undone on her uniform. (Photo by Cartier Bresson/Supplied by Jeanette Holm)



Jeanette Holm's Canadian husband, Albert Holm, poses next to a truck during the Second World War. He served with the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade and the two met during a dance in Holm's hometown of Brighton, England, and came back to his farm in Arborg in 1946. (Photo supplied by Jeanette Holm)

thousands of other English war brides, boarded a ship called the RMS Aquatania in London and landed at Pier 21 in Halifax in 1946.

Plenty of war brides came to Canada after the First World War as well, but during the Second World War the federal government decided to provide a free one way trip to Canada for dependants of soldiers.

"(The government) looked at the immigration of these war brides and

they realized it would strengthen our ties to Britain," said Judith Grierson, who is a committee member with the Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum's Women of the War Years project.

War bride groups were set up in England during the war, and the young women were given literature to study about their new country — everything from how to cook Canadian cuisine to how to deliver their own baby.

Still, the books couldn't capture the alternate universe many of them encountered when they arrived.

"Our society here was all on the farm and their society, even if you were on a farm you were probably in a small village, so all of a sudden there was isolation, no plumbing," Grierson said. "It was cultural shock ... their heads must've just exploded."

Grierson says some of the men were also less than honest with their new brides and many of the women discovered their husbands were dirt poor when they arrived. However, Canadian hospitality prevailed in most situations.

"A lot of them were welcomed with open arms — even widows with children — the families just embraced them," Grierson said.

Holm says she didn't have a "hot clue" what to expect when she came over, but was excited to join her husband.

"I didn't have a clue about farming and I was so homesick," she said.

Brighton is a large seaside town and Holm had a hard time coming to terms with being landlocked — even though Lake Winnipeg was nearby, it wasn't easily accessible in the vehicles of the day.

"When the flax was blooming and the wind would ruffle the blue flowers and I'd will it to be the sea — I'd just stand there bawling my eyes out," she said.

The couple had three boys in their log farm house in the Interlake before moving to Stockton and then Brandon in 1955. Albert worked at the former Pioneer Electric company for many years before he passed away in 1997.

While in Brandon, Holm joined the Manitoba War Brides Association and met regularly with a group of local women who had gone through the same transitions.

"It was wonderful, lots of chatting, 'Do you remember this and that? Did you do this or that?'" she said, adding that the group disbanded in 2006 due to its aging membership.

Now 90 years old, Holm says it's important to remember the war bride experience.

"The fact that this is the 70th year, that's a long time and we've lost quite a few," she said. "We don't want to forget our past."

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