

Joan Reichardt nee Fisher

I was born in Richmond, Surrey in 1928 and my childhood memories are of a comfortable and almost privileged childhood in the '30s. My family was not wealthy but we were certainly not poor and I grew up always having a car, nice holidays, party frocks, picnics, plenty of good food, lots of visitors and visits, theatre, music and amazing Christmases. Laundry left the house dirty and came back in large wicker baskets, washed and ironed; many things were delivered to the door; a 'daily' did the cleaning; twice a year we made a trip to Kensington High Street, to Barkers and Pontings, and Derry and Toms to buy clothes and linens and dress material, and, of course, to have tea in the roof garden.



**Joan Fisher
Age 2**

All this ended with the outbreak of war in 1939, but we were thought to be far enough out of London to be designated a reception area in the event of bombing. We did not have an air-raid shelter in our back garden, but rather, a reinforced covered alleyway, paid for by all the neighbours, thus creating a 'private' shelter for about four families.



Joan in Devon 1934

I clearly remember the terror I felt when France fell and invasion seemed imminent, and the fear engendered by the constant air raids. After one of the first heavy raids on the London docks, bombed-out people were brought out to Richmond, but we were soon on the receiving ends of bombs ourselves. Several family members sustained considerable bomb damage to their houses and some were made uninhabitable. We had windows blown out, ceilings knocked down and doors blown off, but were able to stay put. The worst was one day in 1940 when the Headmistress, her usual dignity and control shattered, announced that a family of three girls and their mother had been killed the night before by a land mine dropped by a German bomber. All three girls were my schoolmates.

As a family we carried on. Various members were called up and sent here and there, all the young men in the neighbourhood were in uniform but we were a group of optimistic patriots who never doubted the eventual outcome. One thing we all noticed, however, was the increasing number of foreign servicemen. Marrying someone from overseas was not something I ever dreamed of. I loved England, the countryside, the traditions. I recall saying to a friend 'all these girls marrying Canadians and Americans, that's fine, leaves more English chaps for us'. But marry a Canadian I did and even moved to the wide-open spaces of Saskatchewan.

The spot dance that changed my life

It all started on December 2nd, 1944. I had endured over five years of war. I had survived the blitz and the little blitz, we had all learned to cope with the blackout, the queues, the rationing, the make-do and mend. But now the invasion of Europe was going well. I was working in London despite V1s and V2s, and everyone felt the end was not too far away. And it was Saturday night and I was off to the regular dance at the Royston!

The Royston was a very small dance hall – no bar, a small live band and a couple who acted as M.C. and pianist. During the week dancing lessons were offered to members, but the Saturday night dances were open to the public. I had gone with my two girlfriends, as usual. We were wearing our best utility frocks (mine was green) but most of the young men – many from overseas, although no Americans; I think it was the lack of a bar that kept them away – were in uniform. As we stood watching people come in, my friend commented on a very tall, red-haired Canadian soldier, saying ‘He looks so young’.

The evening proceeded, I danced almost every dance, including the usual array of ‘specials’ like the Palais Glide, and of course the Paul Jones and the Excuse Me – then the M.C. made an announcement that was to change my life: ‘The next dance will be a spot dance.’

We waited to hear the details and he went on, ‘You can all see the tall Canadian...’ We all looked, but he was not on the floor. Undaunted, the M.C. recruited a partner for him and he was up and dancing. We were instructed to watch him when the music stopped, and so we did. By now blushing red with embarrassment, this hapless young man was told to ‘take four steps this way and ten steps that way’, ending up facing the row of chairs around the hall, at which point the M.C. told him to turn around and then said ‘There will be a prize for the first lady to kiss him!’

I said to my friend ‘I could do it’ and she said ‘I dare you!’ And off I went, across the hall, ahead of the other girls running and jumping up at him, pushed him down onto the chair behind him, sat on his lap and gave him a kiss! There was a great round of applause, and one very shocked young Canadian, wondering who this pushy little English girl was.



The next day our family went for our usual Sunday afternoon walk and who should we meet but my victim of the night before. We stopped and chatted, and he asked if I would be at the dance next week and could he meet me there. I agreed (easy for me, as the spot dance prize had been two free tickets for the next dance) and soon after that John and I became a couple. He came up almost every weekend, different members of my family offered what hospitality they could, and we got to know each other.

The date was brought forward . . .

We got engaged in May and planned to marry in late September, but when the war in Europe ended and John learned he was being sent back to Canada to train for the Japanese campaign (he was in the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, despite the fact that he was the most mechanically disinclined man who ever lived!), we decided to get married right away. The date was brought forward to June 29th, 1945.



**Joan & John on their
Wedding Day – June 29, 1945**

We had already begun the process of obtaining the Canadian Army's permission to marry but speeding things up was not easy. I had to go to the army base to be interviewed by John's commanding officer; it was the only time I ever saw my soldier boy salute!

Weddings in those days of everything rationed or unobtainable required much advanced begging, savings and scrounging which we had not been able to do and we were at the end of a clothes coupon period as well! So it was borrow, borrow, borrow!

My powder blue dress with matching jacket (tastefully embroidered with beads) had been a relative's going away outfit – and fit me perfectly. Not so my elegant navy blue shoes however; they belonged to my girlfriend whose feet were two sizes smaller than mine. Forget stockings; my legs were carefully painted complete with seam done with eyebrow pencil – a steady hand was needed for that job. The ensemble was topped off with a gorgeous navy straw hat, pre-war – with the flowers removed!

Off we went by train to the nearest Registry Office in Norbiton to add the small spray of white roses provided to the begging groom by a sympathetic florist. The ceremony went smoothly, and then it was off to the photo session. By this time I had a very pained expression. Having changed my shoes, we went on to the reception, a very modest affair featuring a few speeches, fewer toasts and Spam sandwiches.



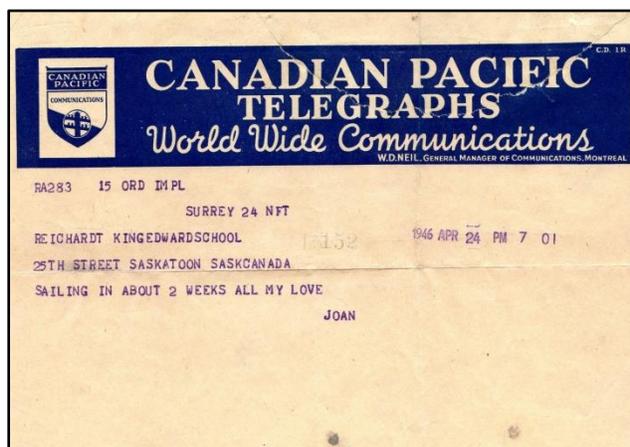
**Joan on her Wedding Day after
changing into some `sensible shoes`**

We then left, on foot, for our honeymoon – one night at a small private hotel. When we arrived, we discovered there had been a slight oversight by the best man and they weren't expecting us. Our host, a very silent and serious man, obviously didn't think we were married but eventually found us a room. After he had escorted us to our accommodation, he intoned, with great solemnity, 'The W.C. is down one floor, but there is a chamber pot behind the screen'. This reduced me to repeated, and most unromantic giggles.

The following day the groom went back to camp, I went home and back to work. Over the next two weeks we saw each other a couple of times – without knowledge or consent of the Canadian Army – and in mid-July, I watched as he clattered away, going back to camp and then on to Canada.

I`m ordered to Canada

Soon after John returned to Canada, the war in the Pacific ended, but it was the following May before I was able to join him. I was notified of my imminent departure at the beginning of May, 1946, and received my final `orders` on the 12th. I was to take the train from Richmond Station and proceed to Waterloo, where I was to contact the Canadian Railway Transportation Officer (RTO) for further instructions. I had been ready and anxious to go for months. I had my trunk, duly marked with my name, and a few meagre new bits of clothing carefully packed. My traveling outfit was all ready – a brown and white herringbone tweed suit with matching brown blouse and hat. All very `utility` except for the hat – no coupons required. It was very stylish, very expensive, and totally unsuitable.



Going up to Waterloo was no big deal; it took about 20 minutes and I had done it daily when working in London. So, having said goodbye to everyone – all very stiff upper lip – I was on my way. Arriving at Waterloo I found no RTO, Canadian or otherwise, and so stood, all forlorn, with my trunk and other luggage, waiting to be called for. Eventually, I spotted the British RTO and he took charge of my belongings while I waited. By then I had been joined by another girl so I didn`t feel quite so all alone.

The Canadian RTO eventually appeared, along with several other war brides, and we were put on a bus to wait.

As soon as we had all been accounted for, we trundled off to the hostel that was to be our home for the night. It was close to the Dorchester Hotel and some of us speculated (very briefly) on whether that was to be our destination. The hostel was very basic with long dormitory-style rooms with at least 20 double-decker bunks down each side and only two washrooms. By now we had noticed that our group included no women with children and we wondered why.

I don`t remember our evening meal, but do recall that we watched `How Green Was My Valley`, so there must have been a cinema of sorts. Getting into my bunk that night was an adventure as I was not used to getting undressed and ready for bed in the company of hundreds – or so it seemed to me – but I managed and must have slept. The next morning we were up early and given baked beans on toast for breakfast. Then on to a bus and into Hyde Park where we sat for ages. I now know that they had to prepare for the next batch of brides, but no one told us anything at the time. At last we arrived at Victoria Station, which told us we were sailing from Southampton.

Only little ships dock here . . .

A girl in my carriage on the train got us all excited as she knew the Queen Mary had docked the day before and thought we might be sailing in style. Not so. The bus kept going further and further along the docks, with her saying, `only little ships dock here`, until we were off the bus and boarding the Lady Rodney, one of the smallest (if not *the* smallest) ship being used for transatlantic crossings.



The Lady Rodney

We soon found out why there were no children allowed; the ship was very slow and wasn't equipped to handle medical emergencies. There were only 254 brides aboard and the Rodney was far from a luxury liner. There were a few tears as it drew away, but most of us were happy and excited at being on our way at last.

As we were boarded alphabetically, by the time they got to the Rs I was on an upper deck. The cabin had three triple-decker bunks but only six occupants, portholes we could see out of, and a washbasin, but the toilets were down the hall. The Lady Rodney had been used as a hospital ship and all the doors had been removed from the toilet cubicles, so when using one of them we could observe all the other occupants in the mirrors above the washbasins on the other wall.

Our first meal was memorable: white bread, butter, fruit – utter bliss. The Queen Mary had pulled out by this time and was able to go to New York and back to England before the Lady Rodney got to Halifax. It took us nine days to make the crossing. I have always felt we went so slow that the seagulls were passing us. It wasn't a rough crossing, but the Rodney was not the most stable of ships and I, along with many others, did not feel too well, certainly not able to do justice to the wonderful food we were served.

There were service personnel running the show and everything went very smoothly. We even had a ship's concert and a special song, sung to the tune of `MacNamara's Band`. I still have the programme and remember the song. As we got closer to our destination we were told we would be veering south to avoid icebergs. That created a little excitement.

In my cabin there was a girl named Betty Reid, going (I think) to Calgary. She was a member of the Dagenham Girls Pipe Band and so as we steamed into Halifax on May 24th, we did so with great panache with Betty playing the pipes. There were flags and bands on the dock, which we thought were for us, but were in fact because it was Victoria Day.



Although I had not actually been sea-sick on the voyage, I was quite queasy and hardly ate anything. This was very distressing as my cabin-mates were waxing lyrical about the food. I was quite slim then anyway, so as we prepared to leave the Rodney, I was not surprised to find that the already loose skirt of my herringbone suit was almost falling off. Someone came to my rescue with an enormous safety pin and off I went on to the next stage of the journey to my new home.

Off the ship and onto the train . . .

We were off the ship and onto the train with, as I recall, very little red tape, just Landed Immigrant cards (which I didn't like as I did not consider myself an immigrant). We were given some Canadian currency but warned to be careful with it as there were always people ready to take advantage of strangers. The warning fell on many deaf ears, as we were no sooner out of Halifax and stopped somewhere, than vendors appeared selling little tubs of 'ice cream', which turned out to be sand.

The landscape we passed through on that long journey was so different and wild compared to the little patchwork fields of England and, of course, we all crowded to the windows to see who was being met by whom whenever the train stopped. A couple of us in my carriage discovered that our food was not as good as that in the adjacent carriage and brought this to the attention of our escorts. It turned out the chap in charge of catering for our end of the train assumed we wouldn't know the difference, so was feeding us on the cheap and pocketing the surplus. That was the end of him. I am still a 'righter of wrongs' and have been all my years in Canada.

On Sunday, we arrived in Montreal and those of us going west were taken on a bus tour of the city. What I remember best is how loud and garish the women's clothing seemed in contrast to our sombre utility garb and the extraordinary looking baby carriages, so unlike our English prams. We all agreed we'd have none of those. Then back on the train and on to Winnipeg, where we were again sorted according to whether we were travelling by CNR or CPR. We did lose one girl in Winnipeg; she nipped out to shop and didn't make it back in time, so we left without her. I remember being shocked by the intense heat and the wind (which I would come to loathe during my years on the prairies) when we got off briefly at some little whistlestop in Manitoba, and also astonished at the flat and featureless landscape we were passing through.

Saskatoon, John and the in-laws

By the time we arrived in Saskatoon it was dark. Having seen some of the strangely garbed (to our English eyes which had only known our men in uniform) characters who met our fellow travellers as we crossed this endless expanse of land, we were all joking about whether or not we would recognize our husbands. As I had the longest wait since having last seen John, I was delegated to be first off the train. I remember seeing this young man (not hard to spot or recognize since he stood 6 foot 6 inches tall and had red hair) and running madly across the station and into his arms.



**Joan and John
In Saskatoon 1946**

Many years later, I was told by a woman I met in Saskatoon, that I nearly knocked her over. I don't remember that at all. My lovely expensive hat – a brown felt cartwheel not really suitable wear for the prairies – was knocked off my head and I never wore it again. I don't remember what we did with luggage, I took my little carry-on and we got into a cab. As John put his arm around me he stuck his elbow in my eye, which watered profusely. The desk clerk at the Bessborough Hotel probably thought I was in tears. We went up to our room and, anxious to see my new home, I tried to look out the window, only to encounter my first window screen – a heavy-duty one at that – which just about knocked me cold.

The next day it was off to meet the in-laws for the first time. I was naturally quite nervous; the family had emigrated from Holland when John was just three years old and I knew that my mother-in-law did not speak really good English. I don't think they were thrilled that their only son had married an English girl and I was an assertive, empowered woman long before it was acceptable to be that way. I was used to expressing my opinion and can be best described as bossy and outspoken. My poor peace-loving husband knew he would be caught in the middle of course, and I am sure, in retrospect, it was not much fun for him. When we walked up the long front path, his parents and two younger sisters were there to greet me, and I tripped on the bottom step and landed – spread eagle – at their feet!

Despite all this, my mother-in-law and I learned to communicate very well. I learned to appreciate screen windows as a barrier between me and mosquitoes, and John and I stuck together through thick and thin. When we moved from Saskatchewan to BC in 1968 our oldest son was in university, we had two girls in high school, and a girl and boy in elementary school. Shortly after that I started work with a non-profit society providing in-home, community-based services for seniors, and the mentally and physically disabled. At first it was on a part-time basis, but later as the job developed, it became a full-time senior position.



Joan in Saskatoon 1946



**Joan`s first winter in Saskatoon
1946**

It`s not the fairy-tale wedding that counts . . .

John was always very involved with the children – more so than many men of his time – and he was extremely supportive of me when I started to work. He was proud of my success and when my job-related activities required that I travel all over BC, and later all over Canada, he came with me when he could but never complained when he was left to fend for himself at home. He was always there at the airport to meet me with a smile and a kiss, just like in 1946.

As the children grew up and married, we did more and more travelling, spending many wonderful holidays in England as well as on this side of the Atlantic. We enjoyed the same things and agreed on important issues such as child rearing – I was the disciplinarian and dear old dad the one they could get around – but we united when it came to the crunch. Despite the fact that we came from two different worlds and met under such crazy circumstances, we had over fifty years of happy marriage together until John`s death in 1996.

Now as I sit alone in my pleasant house, with the view of the lake and the mountains, I still marvel at fate and that Spot Dance. The most remarkable part of this story is that despite the fact that it was a crazy way to start a life together; many war brides have had good, solid, loving marriages and found it was all worthwhile. If there is a moral to this story it is that fairy tale weddings don`t matter, it`s the `lived happily ever after` that counts.

War Bride Song

Song composed by some of the War Brides on the May 15th 1946 sailing of the Lady Rodney

Oh! The drums bang and the symbols clang,
And the war brides lead the way,
It`s forward into Canada, you can hear them say,
We all hail from a mighty country,
To a lovely one we go,
To our dear Canadian husbands,
The smashers we used to know.

We left the town of Southampton,
On the 15th day of May,
Then upon the Rodney, we were all feeling gay,
We left the shores of Blighty in the afternoon that day,
And some of the girls were crying,
Hurrah, we`re on our way.

We`re feeling fine, That`s a very good sign,
Our spirits rule the day,
To us it`s simply home from home
The old Canadian way.
Where ere we go from east to west,
We want you all to know,
We`ll make the best Canadians,
No matter where we go.