

OUR JOURNEY TO CANADA (May 1946)

(A WWII War Bride's letter to her parents recounting her voyage from England to Canada with her 17-month old daughter, Margaret Ann, to rejoin her new husband, John Cameron (Jack) Archibald (S/Ldr RCAF) in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan)

by

Mrs. Nancy Belle Archibald (nee Chester)

On Wednesday, May 22, 1946, we left Lancaster on the 10.20am train. At Preston I managed to see Geoff (*brother*) on the platform for a little while. We were very glad to arrive at Euston Station in London as it was a very warm day for traveling and we were getting stiff with sitting so long. (I forgot to mention that three other wives traveled with us from Lancaster.)

We arrived at Euston about 4pm and hoped that we might get a cup of tea but instead we found ourselves unloading our baggage and reporting with it to the Canadian R.T.O. who checked us in and then bundled us all into a London transport bus which took us to a Red Cross Hostel in South Street. We were immediately told to report to the Medical Officer, the Pay Officer for our last cheques and finally for our insurance policies. It was 7pm before we got that long waited for cup of tea.

We learned that we were to spend one night at this Hostel and would have to be up at 4am the next morning as breakfast was at 5am and we had to be ready to leave soon afterwards for the train. As Margaret had to sleep with me in a narrow three- tier bunk, neither of us slept well and we found it hard to be up at 4am. But the noise of all the other wives and babies soon had me out of bed.

We were taken by bus to Waterloo Station and on arrival we were assisted to the train by Canadian Army and Air Force personnel, then Red Cross workers came round with a lovely cup of tea which was more than welcome at that early hour.

We left Waterloo about 7.30am. Traveling on the train with us were trained nurses, Army and Air Force officers who checked up on all the details etc. As all the wives with children traveled together on the train, I lost touch with the girl I knew at Morecombe. I certainly missed her as she helped me with my hand luggage.

It was a lovely sunny morning after we left London and the countryside looked fresh and green. It was almost 9.30am when we arrived a Southampton and as the train pulled into the docks, we caught our first glimpse of the Queen Mary looking very clean with a nice white coat of paint and three bright red funnels beside the grey dock sheds.

We pulled up right inside the sheds and here the officials were waiting to check us off on their lists of passengers. As we were dealt with alphabetically, I was one of the first to go through the barriers. A Red Cross worker carried Margaret and my hand luggage whilst I received my passport, medical cards and cabin and meal cards. None of my baggage was inspected as I thought it would be, then I went up the gangway and to my amazement we were taken up in a lift to 'M' deck.

It was just like walking into a hotel as stewards stood about in their white coats waiting to assist you. The long corridors were beautifully paneled and the floors shone like water. Well, our cabin was M122 and in peace time it was a first class cabin, but it had been converted with four double tier bunks and on each of the lower berths they had fitted cots with what looked something like hammocks for the small children. There were five girls and four children in the cabin so we had quite a lively time.

Our first meal on board was lunch: tomato soup, white rolls and butter, pork chops or cold roast beef, peas, spinach and potatoes and apple pie with coffee to follow. The meals were really grand and I didn't miss any of them. There was plenty of fresh fruit, ice-cream, turkey, chicken, salmon and for the children they had separate menus of specially prepared children's food.

The Dining Room might have been that of the Ritz or Dorchester and high chairs were provided for the children, meals were served at 7am, 12pm, and 6pm and there were two sittings for each meal. Soft drinks could be obtained in the lounge which we shared with the private passengers.

There were ironing and washing rooms provided and a day nursery. Here you could leave your children in the care of a trained nurse and the children had plenty of lovely toys to play with, some they would never have seen before. The sleeping nursery was one deck lower and here the babies slept in the care of a nurse. Mothers would leave their children in either nursery usually when they wanted to wash and iron.

We were able to hire rugs for the trip and each morning Elsie and I would go up on deck, find a sheltered spot and sit all morning. Margaret would be asleep under my rug. I was only sick the first morning at sea. After that I only had that light-headed feeling.

(I see I have forgotten to mention that we left Southampton at 4.30pm on Thursday afternoon. There were a few relatives on the dockside and a few Canadians to wave us good-bye. Someone put on a gramophone record of Bing Crosby singing "Thanks for Everything" and this came through over the loud speakers. I didn't like this moment at all and was very glad when we were all told to report to the lounge.)

The crossing wasn't very rough but when we approached Nova Scotia we ran into a fog and so we could not longer sit up on deck. It was then I was glad our journey was nearly at an end.

At about 4:30pm on Monday, May 27th we sighted land. As we approached Halifax we were escorted in by fighter aircraft which swooped down over the ship several times. By this time everyone was up on deck and waiting for us to dock at Halifax. It was just 5pm when we pulled into the dockside and here they had a band playing "Here Come the Brides". I wasn't very impressed by what I saw at Halifax but the hills about were very green--this I didn't expect as I thought Nova Scotia to be rather barren.

We were very busy that night packing up our cases, which were to be collected during the evening, and we were once more left with only hand luggage. Only wives going to Nova Scotia were allowed off the ship that night. Wives left the ship according to the group number they were given. Customs inspectors came aboard and as our group numbers were called we proceeded to the Lounge and here we received our railway and sleeping berth tickets. Soldiers were there ready to take the hand luggage and any children you might have down to the dock-side to identify all your luggage, which was then marked off by the customs officer.

We then proceeded to the train and to our seats. The trains are large and heavy looking, high up off the ground, in fact just like the ones you see on the films. All the girls in the coach were traveling to Saskatoon and district so we soon made friends and there weren't many children in our coach. Some coaches seemed overrun with children and they were noisy. All the meals on the train were very good. They didn't cater for children very well, but as Margaret wasn't at all well as she had a cold and diarrhea badly she didn't eat very much.

The first night we traveled through country not unlike parts of England and our first stop was a place called Moncton. Here we bought some oranges and papers. The berths were made up after supper at 6.30pm. Margaret and I slept together in a lower berth. It was nice to wake up in the morning and pull up the blind and see the countryside flying past. The countryside all the way to Montreal was very nice, rather like the English countryside, many of the houses are painted white and have gay, coloured roofs.

We stayed an hour in Montreal but as we were in a siding we saw nothing of the town and as it was a very hot day we were glad to get back into the air-conditioned train. I don't think they can beat our main line British trains and these here rock so much from side to side, at least ours did.

The journey from Montreal to Winnipeg was rather uninteresting after a while as it was mostly forests. Now and again there would be a large lake and then more

forest. I have since learned that we came through the worst part of Ontario and that Southern Ontario is very nice. We were glad to see Winnipeg. The countryside is very different, quite flat and plenty of the wide-open spaces.

It was a lovely sunny day all the way to Saskatoon (12 hours away from Winnipeg) and we were beginning to get very excited and were ready hours before we were due in at 8:30pm Friday, May 31st. There were crowds of people at the station. Margaret was fast asleep in my arms until we got off the train and went half way down the stairs. I was feeling very nervous and wondered if my hat was on straight.

I remember seeing Jack dash out from the crowd and then I seemed to meet a hundred and one other people. The streets were gaily lighted and neon signs everywhere. These I noticed as we drove to the Hotel where we were to spend the night.

Jack's Dad was there as well and next day after meeting many, many people, we drove 135 miles to St. Brieux where Jack's Mother and Dad were living. This was a long journey and quite an experience as the roads are rough and dusty and the villages are miles apart. We arrived at St. Brieux in time for tea and it was nice to feel that we had finally reached our destination after eleven days of travel.

I will try and type another letter about the country here and all its new ways.

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