Travelling for love: journeys of WWII war brides
By Robyn Arrowsmith

My talk today will be based on research for my PhD thesis at Macquarie University. My study is focused on the experiences of Australian WWII war brides of American servicemen, who went to live in the United States. However, I will present this talk within a broader context, to highlight some of the shared experiences of thousands of war brides worldwide.

In the 1940's love was certainly in the air! Well over a hundred thousand young women around the world fell in love and married servicemen from other countries. Midst the chaos and uncertainty of wartime, women from countries including Australia, Britain, Europe, Canada, New Zealand and Japan made the courageous decision to follow their hearts across the sea. They sailed to join their husbands, who in many cases, they hardly knew. Prepared to leave the country of their birth, their families, friends and all things familiar, they travelled for love to start a new life in a new land.

It has been estimated that more than 100,000 American servicemen alone, married brides from fifty countries.1 Between 12,000 and 15,000 Australian women2, and at least 50,000 brides from the United Kingdom married US servicemen.3 In addition, 40,000 brides, mostly British, followed their husbands to Canada.4 Thousands of women from Britain and Europe, and many from Japan married Australian and New Zealand servicemen. Also, many Australian women married British servicemen they met in Australia and sailed to the UK.

In the early 1940s here in Australia, the real threat of war on our doorstep had a huge impact on society and the lives of women. Marriage rates soared for all age groups.5

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1The fifty countries included the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia, Africa, China, Japan and other countries. Marion F. Houstoun, et al, ‘Female Predominance in Immigration to the United States Since 1930: A First Look’ in International Migration Review, Vol. 18, No.4, Special Issue: Women in Migration (Winter, 1984) p.920.; also, Elfrieda Shukert and Barbara Sciibetta, War Brides of World War II, Presidio Press, Novato, California, 1988, pp.1, 2, and 7; also see Appendix A, p. 265
2Estimates vary as follows: Geoffrey Bolton, The Oxford History of Australia, Vol. 5 (Oxford University Press) Melbourne, 1991, p. 17, states ‘more than 10,000 Australian brides were seeking admission to the United States’; John Hammond Moore, Over Sexed, over-Paid and over Here: Americans in Australia, 1941-1945 (University of Queensland Press), St. Lucia, 1981, p. 161, states ‘15 000 Australian women married US servicemen’; Annette Potts and Lucinda Strauss, For the Love of a Soldier (Australian Broadcasting Commission) Crows Next, 1987, p. 47 state ‘up to 12,000 girls married…and probably a further two or three thousand travelled to the US as fiancées’; E. Daniel Potts & Annette Potts, Yanks Down under 1941-45: the American impact on Australia (Oxford University Press) Melbourne, 1985, p. 362 states it was ‘the generally accepted figure of 12,000’.
5Peter F. McDonald, Marriage in Australia. Age at first Marriage and Proportions Marrying, 1860-1971, Department of Demography, Institute of Advanced Studies, ANU, Canberra, 1975, p.203; Patricia Grimshaw et al, Creating a Nation 1788-1990, McPhee Gribble, Ringwood, Vic., 1994, p.265, The increased incidence of marriage, was accompanied by a younger marrying age for women, and childbearing earlier in married life, leading to the post-war baby boom. Wartime marriages were popular but not so stable, with many taking place in haste before the groom was transferred to the battlefront, which was evidenced in the 1950s by the divorce boom which followed on the heels of the marriage boom.
In an atmosphere of uncertainty and social upheaval, some women who were already engaged formalised their relationships with marriage. Others married in haste before their loved-ones were shipped off to fight. By the end of the war, thousands of Australian girls had married ‘a glamorous Yank’.

Following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, Queensland became an important base for American forces. Over just six days, the city of Brisbane saw a massive influx of 45,000 US troops and the establishment of Camp Ascot at Brisbane’s Eagle Farm racecourse.6

With the bombing of Darwin, and the presence of Japanese submarines in Sydney Harbour in early 1942, invasion seemed imminent. The arrival of thousands of American troops in Melbourne, under the command of General Douglas MacArthur, was warmly welcomed. By June 1942, 89,000 American troops were based in Australia, this number escalating to 140,000 by August 1943.7 US bases were established in Western Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. A large concentration of troops camped around Townsville, Cairns, Rockhampton and Mackay.8 Brisbane became the headquarters for MacArthur’s South-West Pacific Campaign. At the peak of the war, Brisbane’s population of around 300,000 was increased by almost 80,000 American troops who were stationed in the city.9

Australian women were encouraged to contribute to the war effort in any way they could, and many volunteered to wait on tables at canteens and clubs. Young women were expected, as part of their patriotic duty, to welcome the American troops at dances run by the Red Cross and other groups. The opportunity to dance and have fun with young men, while serving their community in wartime, gave these women a new sense of freedom. However, restrictive ‘red tape’ was quickly introduced to prevent girls leaving the clubs with any servicemen.10 This was to avoid liaisons and prevent hasty marriages between Australian girls and Americans. Despite strict opposition to such marriages, from both state and church authorities, it was not surprising that the huge presence of American troops in Australian cities resulted in many liaisons being formed.

The attraction of young Australian women to the glamorous, well-paid American soldiers was encouraged by Hollywood films which presented the American visitors as romantic heroes. With more money to spend, the Americans delighted their Australian girlfriends with taxi rides and flowers. They were chivalrous and knew how to give compliments and seemed more sophisticated than the average Australian male.11

Australian war brides were first attracted to their American husbands by their good looks, good manners, soft accent, quiet demeanour, lovely smile, good personality, or a combination of these attributes. The couples met at dances, in cafes, on public transport, at skating rinks, on the beach and simply in the street. Persistent in their romantic quests, a lot of Americans won the hearts of their Australian girlfriends.

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7 Annette Potts and Lucinda Strauss, For the Love of a Soldier. Australian War-Brides and Their GIs, ABC, 1987, p. 18
10 Interview with Jean Fargo, 30 September 1999.
11 ibid.; also see Campbell, Heroes & Lovers, p. 67-8
Like war brides from other countries also embarking on the long sea voyage, they had experienced long and frustrating delays in obtaining transportation. Newspaper reports claimed that the delays were simply due to ‘the necessities of wartime shipping’ and while the war was still being fought, the war brides’ transport came second to the war effort. They had no choice but to wait.12

Tears flowed on the ships’ decks and on the wharves as Australian brides and fiancées finally sailed away. Feelings of overwhelming sadness at leaving their families were mixed with excitement at travelling to a new land to rejoin the man they loved. Few had travelled outside Australia before. One war bride describes her sea voyage as ‘like going to the moon!’ She says:

Nobody travelled. I didn’t know anybody that had been outside Australia! Nobody flew anywhere, only the forces went in planes. So it was like going to Mars, to the ends of the earth!13

It was at least six months since some women had last seen their husbands or fiancés; for others it was as long as four years. Many were apprehensive. Would they still be in love? Would they even recognise each other after such a long separation? Many doubted that they would ever have the opportunity to return to Australia. Some were optimistic about a return visit; others gave little thought to what lay ahead; they were simply anxious to be reunited with the loves of their lives.14

This mixture of emotions also was experienced by war brides from other countries who journeyed to different destinations. For all these young women, the journey across the sea was a major event which was to have a great impact on their future lives. The voyage is still, in most cases, clearly etched in their memories.

Conditions on board the ships varied greatly. Some were converted troop ships; some were luxury cruise-ships re-fitted to accommodate war brides and their babies; others were ordinary passenger liners; and a few were cargo freighters.

Lola Atkins, a war bride from Western Australia, has vivid and happy memories of her sea voyage from Sydney to San Francisco on the converted troop ship, SS Lurline. She recalls: ‘the food was good’ and ‘it was just like travelling on a cruise ship’, except for the addition of bunks. Fritz, the cabin steward, told her that Dorothy Lamour, the famous Hollywood film star, had been in the cabin on the last voyage. ‘But’, Lola comments, ‘she had it all to herself! Now we were six women, and we had to get up and figure out who was going to take the first quick bath.’15

Other women remember little more than the daily routine and survival in uncomfortable and crowded conditions. It was worse for those with babies and small children to care for with no special facilities. Their discomfort was exacerbated by seasickness and outbreaks of measles.

Dorothy Bourne sailed from Fremantle on the Fred C. Ainsworth, which she describes as ‘an awful… liberty ship with no portholes’. She shared a cabin, dormitory style, with 17 women and 22 babies. She recalls: ‘I was seasick the whole way. I had my little girl tied by her harness onto my wrist, sitting up on the deck for ninety percent of the way’.16

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12 The Sydney Morning Herald, January 4, 1945, p.4.
13 Interview with Joy Shaddle, Forestville, Sydney, NSW, 4 October, 2002
15 Interview with Dorothy (Mary) Bourne, Sacramento, CA, 29 September, 2001.
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Whether consciously acknowledged or not, for all war brides the sea voyage represented a threshold between two worlds through which they had to pass to continue to their new lives. It was a liminal\(^{17}\) space between the comfort of a lifetime of familiarity on one side, and everything that was new, unknown and unexpected on the other. Feelings of grief, sadness, discomfort, nervousness and apprehension were combined in an uncomfortable mix with excitement, anticipation and hope as they crossed this great divide between their homeland and their new country of adoption.

Some Australian wives managed to secure a passage to the United States before the war had ended. They endured a frightening and precarious journey as the ships zig-zagged to dodge mines in the ocean. Near the end of the war, some war brides were able to fly to America, via New Zealand. Most brides and fiancés, however, voyaged by sea to join their partners after the war had ended.

War brides the world over, many by this time with babies and young children, were continually frustrated at failed attempts to obtain passage on a ship to join their husbands. They faced an anxious period of uncertainty, not knowing how long they might have to wait. Troops were generally shipped home in advance of their wives, who were then given first priority to be transported, followed by the fiancées who rated as a lower priority.

In the case of war brides from Western Australia, they first had to cross the arid desert of the Nullarbor Plains to reach the eastern seaports. Nappies flapped to dry on the back of the steam train, known as ‘The Perth Perambulator’, because of the number of mothers and babies on board. The hot, cramped and dusty journey took five days from Perth to Melbourne. Then crowded trains transported the weary travellers to the ports of Sydney or Brisbane. Those who waited in accommodation away from home worried that their money might run out before they were allocated a berth on a ship.

The patience of all brides of US servicemen was finally rewarded by the introduction of The War Brides Act on December 28, 1945 (59 Statutes-at-Large 659) which waived all visa requirements and provisions of immigration law for all foreign brides of members of the American armed forces.\(^{18}\)

This saw the beginning of the mass movement of Australian wives, known as ‘Operation War Bride’, and for British wives it was known as ‘Operation Diaper Run’, which finally brought them to America.\(^{19}\) This legislation, however, made no provision for the fiancées of Americans who resented the favouritism shown towards the brides. They had to wait another six months for the implementation of the G.I. Fiancées Act in June, 1946 which facilitated their entry into the United States.

All over the world, thousands of young women waited for transportation to join their partners. In September 1945, in Britain, there were 50,000 war brides waiting to go to the US.\(^{20}\) In London ‘a thousand angry British wives’ of American servicemen ‘marched to the American Embassy with cries of “We want our husbands,” “We want transport”’.\(^{21}\) The British War Department warned the brides that returning soldiers had first priority, and they would have to wait until ships became available. Then they would be shipped at US government expense.

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\(^{17}\) Liminal: 1. relating to a transitional or initial stage. 2. at a boundary or threshold. Source: Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 11th Edition Revised, Oxford, 2006.


\(^{19}\) Potts & Strauss, op.cit., p.72;


\(^{21}\) “G.I. Brides are told they must wait”, News Chronicle, October 12, 1945. [The National Archives, London, Ref. FO 371/44567 297185]
Those women who were only engaged to US servicemen were to pay for their own transport.22

British wives of Australian servicemen had almost given up hope of ever reaching their husbands. In March 1946 they marched in protest to the Ministry of Transport in Berkeley Square. In Australia, Prime Minister Chifley stated: ‘I am not one to discourage the realisation of love's young dream’, and his Government was anxious to find a solution.23

Eventually, the acute shipping problems eased and by September 1946, thirty-two ships had transported Australian brides and fiancées to England and America.24 Eighteen of these carried Australian fiancées and war brides, many with children, to the United States. The last ship to sail across the Pacific with a contingent of war brides on board was the SS Marine Phoenix, which left Australia in January 1947.25

‘Bride ships’ busily transported war brides and fiancées in all directions around the world. While Australian women were sailing to America and England, other ships were plying the waters of the same oceans in opposite directions. British wives sailed to join their American and Canadian husbands. The wives of Australian servicemen sailed from Britain, Europe, Canada, New Zealand and Japan, to make their homes in Australia. Similarly, brides of New Zealand servicemen in Britain and Europe crossed the ocean to start a new life in New Zealand.

This extraordinarily huge ‘traffic’ of young women, all transplanting their lives from one side of the globe to the other by ship, was a worldwide phenomenon. It caught the attention of the press and was the subject of many newspaper reports and cartoons. The amazing mass movement of more than 100,000 WWII war brides saw an unprecedented number of the world’s female population crisscrossing oceans, all courageously following their hearts as they travelled for love to an unknown future in a new land.

23 Sydney Morning Herald, March 8, 1946, p.4.