

From *Family History (1850-1950) of a Doctor's Daughter*, posted 2025 by the author Diana Walstad—along with the rest of this 2017 book—on her website: <http://dianawalstad.com>

Chapter Nine

Australian War Brides

War-time Romance [1, 2]

Time was precious for lovers during World War II. Every minute counted before returning to their ship, plane or battle station.

Between 1939 and 1945, almost 16 million Americans, mostly single young men, were on the move. Many were living in foreign countries. Lonely and disoriented, these young men made contact with their foreign hosts while boarding in their houses, working together, meeting on street corners, or socializing at Red Cross events. Many foreign women were attracted to American GIs for their good manners, easy-going attitude, generosity, and good teeth.

Almost 1 million foreign women married U.S. servicemen overseas and then immigrated to the U.S. after World War II. Most of these "war brides" came primarily for the love of an American soldier. The post-war (1946) transport of 70,000 British war brides attracted the most media attention, but no one knows how many brides were

secretly slipped onto U.S.-bound ships during the war itself.

Transport wasn't the only challenge. The U.S. government discouraged servicemen from marrying foreign women overseas. It considered the marriages a distraction from the war effort and prone to failure. Many unfortunate British and Australian women discovered that their GI husbands already had wives back home!

Not surprisingly, official restrictions were imposed. In Jan. 1944, the Australian government passed a bill requiring a 6-month waiting period, a letter from the woman's parents, permission from the soldier's commanding officer, and a "certificate of singleness." Soldiers who married without permission risked court-martial or a quick transfer to the war zone. One Australian woman, who married an American sailor boarding in her parent's home, expressed her thoughts:



Marge Walstad (1946)

After the new bill passed, you waited 6 months and if the papers were cleared and everything was OK, then you could marry. My lawyer told me that since they introduced this bill that only a third of the people ever came back to get married, so I guess it was a good bill because it stopped all these hasty marriages. They had time to think things over, and some decided not to get married. It did save a lot of heartache. [3]

By October 1945, there were roughly 6,000 women in Australia and New Zealand anxious to reunite with their American husbands. Some had been waiting as long as two years. In Dec. 1944, 1,200 war brides and children were stranded in Sydney after being told their ship to the U.S. would be delayed by one to twelve months. Some of the women

had traveled thousands of miles across Australia on crowded trains. They were in financial distress, couldn't return home, and were distraught by the long separation from their husbands.

When the war ended, getting American troops—like my father—home took precedence over transporting

war brides to America. All available shipping space was supposedly reserved for returning GIs. However, mix-ups were inevitable. A calamity ensued in Brisbane, Australia when 236 war brides were unexpectedly off-loaded to make room for servicemen. While the authorities eventually relented and allowed the women to board, some of the ship's Army nurses resented the fact that 97 servicemen had been bumped to accommodate the war brides.

In the meantime, GI husbands of the war brides prodded a reluctant U.S. government to help bring their loved ones to America. One ex-seaman from Oregon wrote a letter to his Senator complaining about the delayed transport of Australian brides. According to him, the Matson company, which the U.S. War Department had contracted to transport troops and war brides, was giving preferential treatment to businessmen:

*How endeared, they are to me,
These gleams of love upon the sea;
That fall from God's jewelled hands tonight—
Those myriads of starry lights—
The deep, dark waters hold so fast.
These, I, too, would long to clasp,
Since far across these ocean tears,
They sparkle on the one most dear.*

*7 May, 1946
(Ducan Time)*

Paul's Poem to Marge while serving as a medical officer aboard the SS *Hermitage*.

I feel it is my duty to inform you of some of the repugnant conditions which are occurring (in the shelter of our State Department) in Brisbane, Australia, where

thousands of American citizens, and their mothers, namely wives of ex-GIs, are becoming desperate due to unfulfilled promises and lack of financial assistance.

By what right have the Matson people, or anyone else for that matter, the power to take these businessmen in preference to the wives of we ex-GIs who gave everything we had for our country. [4]

On Dec. 28, 1945, Congress passed the War Brides Act, which facilitated the entry of foreign women married to U.S. servicemen by temporarily lifting immigration quotas. Also, the U.S. government would pay for transporting the women to America. About 30 ships, the "family fleet," was set aside for war brides and their children. [1]

In 1946, 4,541 women from New Zealand and Australia were brought to the U.S. under the War Brides Act [5]. Among the five ships used for transporting women from "down under" was the SS *Monterey*. Paul was the Transport Surgeon on one of its voyages in 1946. His job was to provide medical care for the women and their children while aboard the ship.

The SS *Monterey* began her life in 1931 as a luxury liner ferrying tourists between the U.S. and Pacific ports (e.g., Hawaii and Australia) for the Matson Company. During the war, the *Monterey* had been retrofitted for transporting U.S. troops. After the war, the ship had gotten a second makeover to accommodate war brides and their children.

Bringing War Brides to America

In mid-June 1946, the ship's commanding officer (Major Gracie) and the retiring officer explained to Paul his new duties as Transport Surgeon. (Paul had recently returned from a trip to Guam providing medical care for troops aboard the SS *Hermitage*.) As Paul toured the *Monterey* with the two officers, he was pleased with what he saw. The ship had a nursery for infants and children, a hospital, an operating room, a medical dispensary, etc. In addition to Paul, the medical personnel consisted of an assistant transport surgeon, 9 nurses, and a dentist. Helping them were 9 enlisted men and 6 WACs (Women's Army Corps). [2]

Paul brought Marge and their infant daughter Diana aboard the ship where they had dinner. Diana began to cry, as the strange surroundings apparently frightened her. The ship was set to sail on June 14, but its crew suddenly went on strike and walked off. Prospective passengers were unable to get on board and had to spend the night elsewhere. Annoying. However, the strike was settled, and on June 15 at 12:30 p.m., a small tugboat pushed the *Monterrey* out into San Francisco Bay. Once released, the ship took off at full speed. From the ship's stern, Paul waved goodbye to his wife and daughter. The ship was almost under the Golden Gate Bridge, when Marge's view of Paul faded from view. As the ship entered the Pacific Ocean, it faced "choppy seas."

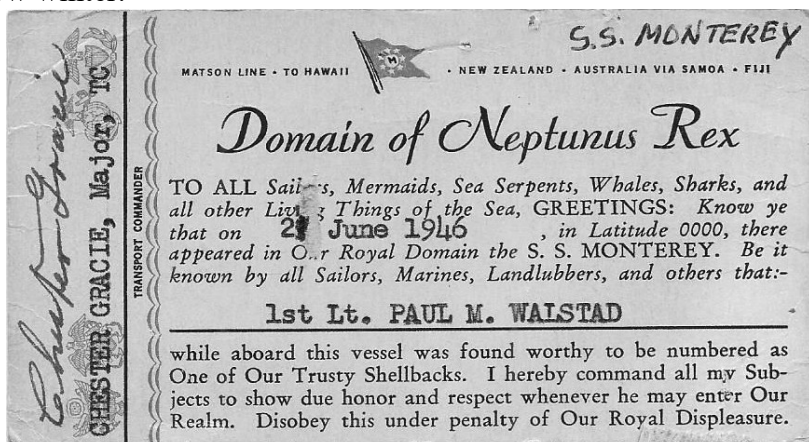
With 5,712 miles to go and at an average speed of 22 knots, the *Monterrey* took two weeks to reach its first stop—Auckland, New Zealand. In the meantime, ship life settled into a quiet routine. Paul cared for patients, inspected the galley and food handlers. He and Major Gracie reprimanded an enlisted man who was drunk while on duty. Then a passenger bound for Australia showed up drunk in the dispensary. Paul aspirated the infected foot of one sergeant. He used the



Paul and Diana (1946) at the dock in San Francisco with his ship the SS *Monterrey* in the background

new wonder drug—penicillin¹—to successfully treat a case of tonsillitis and a bone infection.

When the weather was good, Paul was up on deck playing volley ball and sunbathing. In the evening, he read books, played chess, and discussed religion with the ship's chaplain. He and his assistant listened to recordings of the "sad and plaintive" songs of New Zealand's native people, the Maori. When the ship crossed the International Dateline, Paul dropped a day from his diary. The weather turned cold and stormy as the ship entered regions below the equator where it was now winter.



On June 28, the *Monterey* docked bright and early in Auckland. Paul accompanied two patients to the local hospital for X-Rays. As the New Zealand doctors showed Paul around the hospital, they complained bitterly about socialized medicine.

The next day, about 36 war brides, 10 babies and children arrived for medical inspection before boarding the ship. [*Prospective emigrants had to be free of 20 communicable diseases, including TB* [7].] As a farewell bid, New Zealanders had strung colorful streamers from the shore to the dock. Many of the women would never see their homeland again.

¹Fleming discovered penicillin in 1928, but he did not develop it. (In 1942, there was only enough penicillin in the world to treat 10 patients.) World War II spurred U.S. research into mass-producing a chemically stable form. Just in time for the Normandy invasion (June 6, 1944), the U.S. military had 2.3 million doses of penicillin—more than enough to protect its soldiers. [6]

The ship left New Zealand around noon on June 29. Paul began caring for infants and "over-tired, lonely war brides." Rough seas produced many seasick women and children requiring treatment.

Adding to the chaos, Paul was obliged to change the infant feeding methods of the young mothers. Their homespun feeding methods did not always meet U.S. pediatric standards.² Once on board, the women were expected to use the formula and bottles provided by the ship [9]. Many mothers had brought aboard their own baby bottles and infant formulas. They and their babies did not always appreciate the unexpected changeover.

On July 2, the *Monterey* pulled into Australia's Sydney harbor. While awaiting the arrival of the war brides, Paul took a staff car into the city to shop and then a ferry ride to the Taronga Zoo to see Koala bears and kangaroos. "People very friendly." When he returned, he found the ship in chaos. Australian customs officials had raided the *Monterey* and confiscated huge quantities of black market cigarettes and nylon

stockings. Four U.S. enlisted men were charged with smuggling. However, court-martial proceedings were dropped when Australian and American officials reached a satisfactory settlement.

On July 5, trains from Western



Australian War Brides [10] on their long-awaited journey to join their husbands in America.

² Inadequate preparations could have included bottles and nipples that were hard to clean and sterilize, ineffective pasteurization of milk, and not enough Vitamins C and D to prevent scurvy and rickets, respectively [8].

Australia and Perth—loaded with war brides and babies—arrived in Sydney. "Wooden coaches." Paul and his team began inspecting them at the gangway for contagious diseases. The women, many "exhausted and hysterical," flocked to the dispensary.

The *Monterey*, now carrying 700 women and children [11], left Sydney on July 6 bound for San Francisco with a midway stop in Honolulu. For the next several days, Paul got little sleep. Sick calls mounted each day, requiring 5 hospitalizations. One of the babies had a congenital heart problem plus bronchial pneumonia. Paul was up almost all night with a Mrs. A. who was in convulsions. He treated her with the sedative sodium amytal. Another woman (Mrs. P.) tried to commit suicide. After Paul sedated the distraught woman with amytal, he and the chaplain talked with her.

Paul continued working late into the night, often finding it difficult to reassure mothers about the condition of their babies.

Having experienced his own loneliness during separations from Marge, Paul could understand the plight of these brave young women. He was well aware that they had undergone a long and frustrating wait in their home countries, plus they faced an uncertain future. However, Paul was an intellectual man—and one not entirely comfortable in dealing with feelings. Aboard the *Monterey*, he was confronted with an avalanche of raw emotion from distraught and needy women. Later, he confided to his brothers that the experience "almost drove him crazy."

When the ship arrived in Honolulu on July 14, customs and immigration officials began processing the new arrivals. The Navy Surgeon took Mrs. A. ashore for treatment in Hawaii; her convulsions could only be controlled now by amytal sedation.

The next day, the ship left Hawaii and made a bee-line for San Francisco. Paul prepared a Surgeon's Report for the voyage. He gave a talk at a medical forum for the mothers about the latest U.S. pediatric methods. He kept his eye on two cases of measles and a 13-month-old baby with possible leukemia. Paul began discharging patients from the ship's hospital, giving pre-debarkation physicals and getting vaccination readings.

Early on July 19 and in heavy fog, the *Monterey* passed under the Golden Gate Bridge and docked in San Francisco. While the

passengers were taken ashore, Paul talked with the parents-in-law of the woman who had earlier attempted suicide. She had improved.

The ship's captain Major Gracie informed Paul of his upcoming promotion from Lieutenant to Captain. Marge surprised him by suddenly appearing in the hospital area. "Best sight of all!"



"Bride Ship" SS *Monterey* Arrives in America [12]

On March 3, 1946, an army band playing *Sentimental Journey* escorted 562 brides and 253 babies from Australia and New Zealand to the dock in San Francisco [9]. Paul's voyage came four months later.

Epilogue

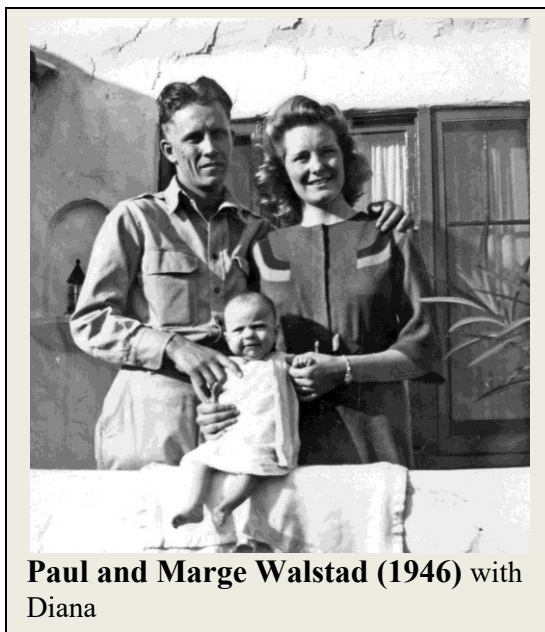
And so Marge and Paul continued their lives with all its joys and sorrows. Their future together was rich and full, their children a little spoiled but reasonably well-behaved.

I owe my life—literally—to those who came before me. My immigrant ancestors came to America seeking a better future. Most of them found it and then shared that bounty with their progeny.

Ancestors are more than a box of musty old photographs, blips in an electronic database, or names on a family tree. They can be our mentors. I saw strength in characters like Oscar and Charles, who struggled to find a social milieu where they were comfortable. I relished the depiction of strong-willed women like Johanna and Martha. Their bristly "independency" reminded me of my own. My grandfather Lambert, who made incredible personal sacrifices for his first two wives, gave real meaning to "In sickness and in health, 'til death do us part." With Anna, I realized that the woman castigated by family lore was mostly a tragic victim of circumstance.

Understanding our heritage can help us reconcile the past to move forward less encumbered. In writing this book, I stopped resenting my father's headlong dedication to his work with the slow realization that I had that same "work drive." I not only learned to accept it in him but celebrate it in myself. I discovered great value in my mother's love, wisdom, and sacrifice for her children.

When my ancestors saved those old photographs, kept those diaries and gave their interviews, they were hoping not to be forgotten. I have tried to give them their due. If life is worth living, then surely it is worth remembering. Hopefully, they are smiling down upon me now.



Paul and Marge Walstad (1946) with Diana

NOTES

Ch. 1. Immigrants (1860-1890).....Pages 1-34

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13. From a short story written by Lambertus' great-granddaughter Gail Newton



John D. Walstad (2015) stands next to the apple tree that Karen Walstad planted on her farm in Norway just before she and her husband Jacob emigrated in 1872.

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37. Probate material translated from Danish and provided by Greg Ramstedt
38. Information provided by Greg Rambstedt
39. In 1872, 2,480 kronen = 1 kg gold, and the U.S. gold price was \$20.67 per oz (or 0.0283 kg). Thus, 65 kronen was worth 0.0262 kg of gold or ~\$19. Because of inflation, \$19 in 1872 would be worth ~\$400 in 2015.
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49. Photo (2013) taken by David Paul Walstad.
50. Interview of Gladys Johnson Harris by Adell Keene in 1981
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In 1943, Lambert married his third wife Lindel, a widow with grown children. She could hold her own with Lambert but do it in a nice way.

During family visits, I remember Grandpa calling her "his little honey dear," and then they would—as if on cue—embrace each other.

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