



A group of war brides and the captain of their ship

# Canadian War Brides

*Decades after leaving The Netherlands, their stories return*

BY TIFFANY JANSEN

Most women start dreaming of their wedding day during girlhood. Fragrant flowers, friends and family gathered round, the perfect mood music, a handsome groom beaming back at her as she floats gracefully down the aisle in a stunning gown.

Let's just say, Elly's wedding didn't happen quite like that.

Her wedding dress and shoes – a gift from her in-laws-to-be – were never delivered. Instead, she wore a suit made from an old army blanket, completing her look with ribbons and a head scarf. She'd known her groom for just a few short months, yet she would soon be leaving behind everything she knew in order to follow him across the ocean. Elly is among thousands of women known as war brides – women who married foreign soldiers during and shortly after wartime.

It was the tail end of World War Two and The Netherlands

had just been liberated by the Allied Forces. Elly and her countrymen were finally free from Nazi occupation. As is to be expected, relief, celebration, and young men in uniform made the perfect recipe for a little wartime romance. These whirlwind romances led to shotgun weddings before the boys were shipped back home. The ships would then return for the brides, carrying them away to a land they knew nothing about and were anything but prepared to live in.

After the Second World War, an estimated 44,000 women made the voyage to Canada. Some 2,000 of those were Dutch. Elly was among them. Each of these women has a fascinating story to tell. Stories of strength and endurance, of adaptation and resilience, of courage and resistance, of love and loss. They are stories that often go untold; either overshadowed by the heroism of the soldiers they married, or ignored by the

women themselves, who often tend to shrug off their own heroic acts as 'nothing special'.

But with most of these women (now in their late eighties and early nineties) it is becoming imperative that their stories be told. And this is where Canadian artist Beverly Tosh steps in. "There's a saying, 'Needs be.' It's a wartime saying," Tosh says. "And the way this has all come about is needs be – chance, a leap of faith."

That's precisely how she came to meet Elly.

"One of the first war brides I came in contact with said, 'You'll have to meet Elly. She lives on an acreage just south of Calgary,'" Tosh recalls, smiling fondly. "She said 'She's wonderful, you'll have to meet her.'"

Though Tosh had been interviewing war brides for a long time, Elly was the first Dutch war bride to cross her path. What made Elly's story – and those of the Dutch war brides Tosh would later befriend – so compelling, was the fact that she had gone through an occupation.

"Those stories were tough," Tosh admits. "Tough stories that came from really hard times. They were strong women."

Elly introduced Tosh to a wealth of incredible stories from Dutch war brides.

There was Petronella, a teenage bride who routinely cycled past German soldiers with what she thought were suitcases filled with sweaters and wool, only to find out later that she was being used by the underground to transport guns. Or Anne, who was sent to prison after having been betrayed by her roommate for refusing to hang a photo of Hitler in her clothes locker. Following months in prison, she was sent to a concentration camp. She wore a wig on her wedding day to hide her shaved head. They spoke of occupation and oppression, they spoke of fear and courage, they spoke of strength and survival. But they also spoke of intense love.

"I once asked Anne, 'What do you miss the most?' thinking she would say something from The Netherlands," Tosh's voice cracks with emotion. "She looked at me and said, 'My husband.'"

Over the last two years, Tosh has been working diligently to bring these stories to life through oil-on-plywood portraits of the Dutch war brides on their wedding day. The result is twenty-one portraits which are now on display at the *National Liberation Museum 1944-1945* in Groesbeek, The Netherlands. The portraits of these brave women are displayed together with silk panels imprinted with those parts of their stories that made a particular impression on the artist.

The exhibit, *Canadian War Brides: A One-Way Passage to Love*, also includes rare film footage, Elly's ribbons and head scarf, photos, audio clips, a veil made of handkerchiefs bearing the names of the ships on which the war brides sailed, and wedding dresses worn by two of the Dutch war brides.

This marks the first time Tosh's work has been displayed in The Netherlands and, according to the museum's curator Rense Havinga, it couldn't have come at a better time.

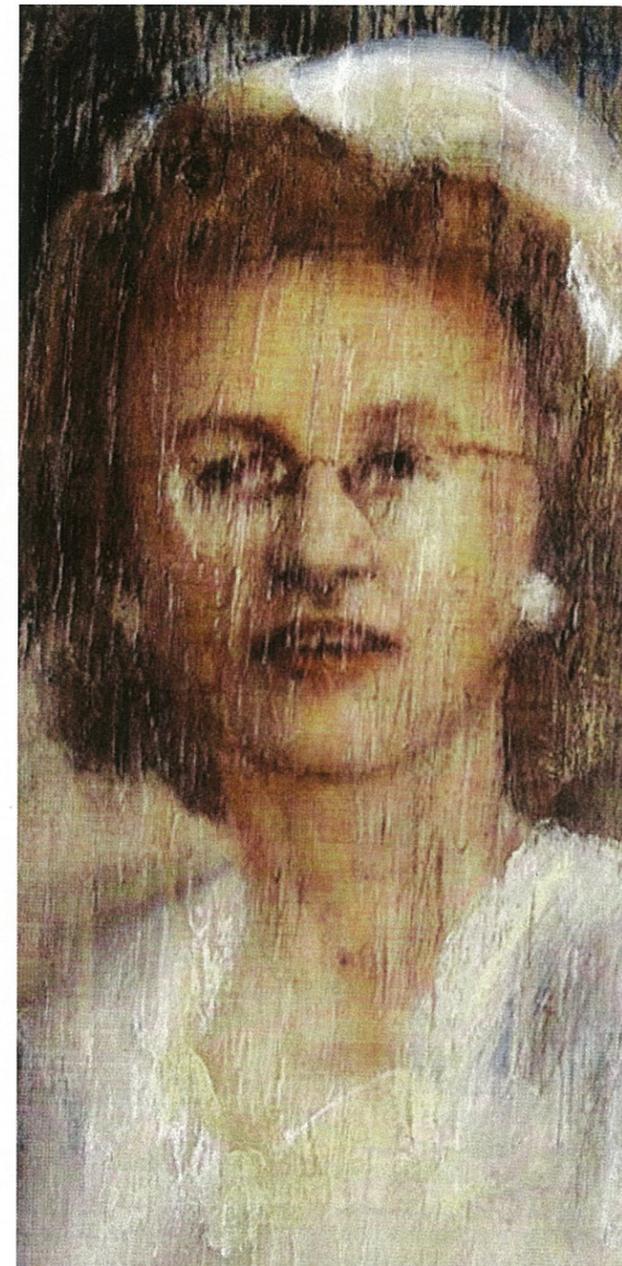
"There have been quite a lot of negative stories about the Canadians and about these women," Havinga said. "This is

completely different. These are positive stories about strong women and the soldiers who married them."

Tosh is no stranger to the war bride phenomenon. Her own mother was a war bride, having left her home in Canada to follow her Kiwi husband to New Zealand. The artist's first war bride portrait was that of her mother, Dorothy. Since then, Tosh has interviewed close to five hundred war brides and painted roughly 150 war bride portraits.

"I knew I needed to [bring this to the Netherlands]," Tosh says with immense passion. "I promised Elly that I would, but it was more than that promise. It was something else really pushing this. I had to do it. And, eleven years later, it's here."

The current exhibition opened in The Netherlands on June 6 and runs through November 17.



Canadian war bride Hendrika Lukkien