

Sheila O'Shea

BY MAUREEN MANNINGHAM (SHEILA'S DAUGHTER)©

My mother, Sheila Patricia O'Shea, was born in London, England, on St. Patrick's Day, 17 March 1925. She was the youngest of six children and I am sure the whole family danced the Irish Jig in celebration. When war broke out, she was 14 years old. As my mother said, "Things became very disruptive for a while. My parents thought of sending me off to relatives in Ireland, but then thought of what would happen to me if they did not survive the bombings; I would be alone." Sheila stayed in London with her family and continued her studies. According to Sheila, "Regardless of how many times you had to take cover throughout the air raids we still had to have our homework completed." After graduating she worked at a bank in London.

My father, Howard Conroy Jones, was born in Macon, Georgia, USA, on 13 August 1920. How did he end up with a Canadian war bride? It all had to do with the fact that his father, James William Jones, for unknown reasons, in 1916 travelled from Georgia to Windsor, Ontario, to join the Canadian Expeditionary Force during WW I. While in training, he met my grandmother, Gertrude Mae Chamberlain, in St. Catharines, Ontario. She had emigrated from England with her family only five years earlier. They married in 1917, and upon James' return from the war they settled in Macon, Georgia, where my father was born. When Howard was about 9 years old the family emigrated to Thorold, Ontario, where he grew up.

In 1940, Howard enlisted in the RCAF and in 1941 was sent to England as a wireless air gunner and bomb aimer. During a bombing raid over Germany in 1942, Howard and the crew in their Halifax Bomber were shot down. They parachuted out and Howard spent the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp in Poland, Stalag VIII B. Near the end of the war, with Germany losing, Howard was one of the many thousands of POWs that were sent on the "Death March" from Poland to Germany from January to April 1945. Many died on that march due to their weakened condition. He was one of the lucky ones who survived. I have a little notebook that he had with him in which he records the day he was liberated:

On April 11th while marching with a column of Prisoners of War, I was released by American tanks. We had marched 1000 kms in less than 3 months on very little food. I can truthfully say that it was the greatest day of my life. They welcomed us with food and cigarettes. We then went to a small village and stayed overnight in a barn.

He arrived in England on 22 April 1945.

How did Sheila and Howard meet? Well, it was Mum's elder sister, Kathleen, that finally convinced Sheila to go out on a blind date as a foursome. From here I think my mum can tell it in her own words:

I was pleasantly surprised when I met your dad, a blond, good looking guy in his officer's uniform. He had a very pleasant smile and was also very polite. We then went to the Savoy Hotel to get a



Howard Conroy Jones in his RCAF flying gear

Source: Family photos, author

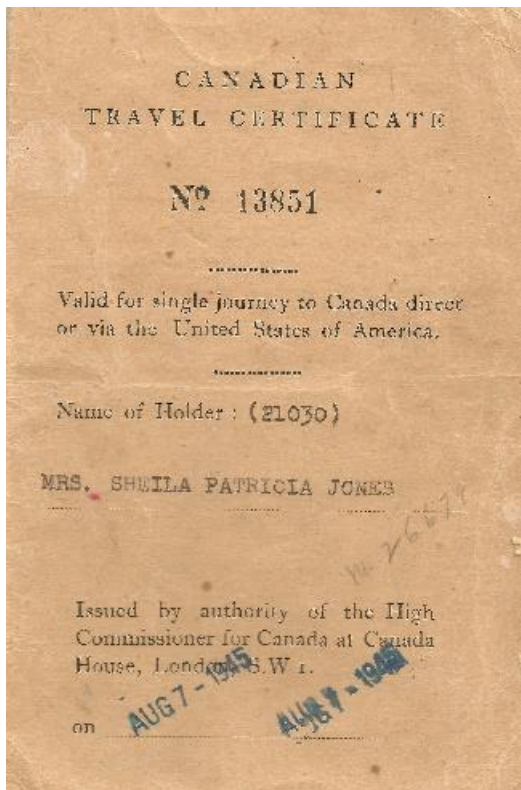
bite to eat and we all had a fun time. Your dad and his friend Fred escorted us to the railway station to catch the last train and he asked if he could see me the next day. I agreed. I really did enjoy his company. Since I was off on holiday that week from work, I met him in London and that was the day they announced that the war was officially over [V.E. Day, 8 May 1945]. There was such happiness everywhere. People were dancing in the street with singing and laughter all around. The lights went on all over the city.

After a very brief courtship, Sheila and Howard were married on 9 June 1945 at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Wanstead, Essex, England. Naturally, Sheila's parents were not overjoyed about their youngest daughter first of all marrying after such a short engagement, but also planning to move 6,000 km away to a strange country. Since Sheila was under 21 years old, she needed her parents' consent to marry. As she told me, "If my parents had said no, I would have obeyed them." Luckily for me, my grandparents really liked Howard and gave their permission.

The newlyweds settled in Bournemouth near the air base. Not long after, Howard was repatriated to Canada, in July 1945. Sheila followed via the war brides' program in January 1946 on the *SS Stavangerfjord*. The war brides were given a Canadian Travel Certificate, "Valid for single journey to Canada direct or via the USA."



**Sheila O'Shea and Howard Jones
on their wedding day**



Sheila's Canadian Travel Certificate

Here is one snippet of my mother's memories of that voyage:

Our first meal was a buffet style dinner that evening, and we were really surprised at the display of food—plenty of everything! I took a slice of some white bread and when I tasted it, I thought it was cake as it was so light. You see in England our bread had become very coarse during the war and I had forgotten what real white bread tasted like.

After Sheila arrived at Pier 21 in Halifax, she and Dad finally reconnected in St. Catharines, Ontario. My mother was fortunate that Dad's family welcomed her with open arms and his mother, who was a great cook, gave her cooking lessons, which my mother as the youngest of six siblings really needed. A few months later, Howard and Sheila went on a proper honeymoon to the southern United States to meet the rest of Dad's family. On their return to St. Catharines they settled into married life and had three girls. Life was not easy during this time—so many men recovering from the war and so many women trying to accommodate to a foreign country as well as to their husband's relatives.

In 1952, my mother sailed back to England with we three girls. We lived with our grandparents in Wanstead, Essex, London, where we started school. I have very fond memories of my time living with my grandparents and playing with my cousins.

Two and a half years later we were on another ocean liner back to Canada with our mother to join our father in Hamilton, Ontario. Howard was now an officer in the Canadian Army, and we all settled into our new life in Hamilton, where my youngest sister was later born. Life went on as it always does.

However, a few years later the military force was drastically reduced by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker. As a result, Howard and many other WW II veterans who had fought and suffered for their country during the war were made redundant. Howard went to work as a salesman, but really did miss his military career. Sheila drew on her earlier banking experience and went back to work as a bookkeeper. Finally, in the 1970s, Howard went back to his roots in the USA, along with my mother. He died suddenly in 1980 of a brain hemorrhage.



Sheila (second from left) with her children and British relatives

Throughout her life, Sheila has remained in close contact with her family in England and visited them from time to time. Her brother and sisters also made visits to Canada. When Sheila remarried in 1991 to Robert Johnstone (another RCAF WW II veteran), her brother and three sisters came to the wedding. Her sister Kathleen was once again her matron of honour and her brother, Danny, gave her away. Sheila and Robert enjoyed travelling and visiting family on both sides of the ocean. Sadly, Robert died in April 2020 at 96 years old.

Sheila is now 95 and still has strong traces of her English accent. She lives in a lovely retirement residence, plays bridge several times a week, and participates in most residence activities. Sheila has seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. She is now the last remaining member of her generation from both her family and Howard's family.