

# D-Day: Stories from the Walls



## The Ships of Operation War Bride:

Embarking War Brides and Dependents to  
America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand

During the Maritime Archaeology Trust's National Lottery Heritage Funded D-Day Stories from the Walls project, volunteers undertook online research into topics and themes linked to D-Day, Southampton, ships and people during the Second World War.

Their findings were used to support project outreach and dissemination.

This Research Article was undertaken by one of our volunteers and represents many hours of hard and diligent work. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all our amazing volunteers.

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## Introduction

The *Courier and Advertiser* of 25 June 1945 carried an article headlined “*EYE-OPENER CLASS*”. The newspaper reported that the American Red Cross were to provide classes for British wives of American personnel who were planning to travel to America, designed to familiarise them with American expressions for common American items and culture generally. The *Manchester Evening News* of 6 July 1945 quoted an American Red Cross official stating that “*54,000 British girls had married US Servicemen*”.

“Operation Diaper” was the code name given to the anticipated transportation from Southampton of some 45,000 war brides to America, including at least 40,000 British dependents. Certain ships were to be specially equipped with children’s paraphernalia, and nurses and Red Cross personnel would be added to their crew. The first departure was aboard the SS *Argentina* on 26 January 1946 followed by the RMS *Queen Mary* the following month, and this operation required a fleet of eleven vessels including hospital ships. But it was not all plain sailing, as troops and wounded service people were given priority, encapsulated by: “*Many of the British women awaiting Army transport hadn’t seen their husbands since before D-day, and in June 1945, when they were warned that ships might not be made available for 10 or 12 months, they were furious. Some brides expressed their frustration at being made ‘wallflower wives,’ as they were known in the American press, by protesting outside the U.S. Embassy in Grosvenor Square, which was receiving 500 visits from war brides daily. And when the recently widowed Eleanor Roosevelt visited London in November 1945, her hotel was besieged by an angry mob of brides and their babies, carrying placards reading ‘We Demand Ships’ and ‘We Want Our Dads’.* Finally, the level of pressure led to action in Washington, with Congress passing the War Brides Act in December 1945. The law offered non-quota immigration status to the wives of U.S. servicemen, meaning that they could enter the country freely and without a visa” [Los Angeles Times]. Thus potential difficulties with immigration of war brides and dependents into America were eased by the Act [Wikipedia: War Brides Act] which includes reference to the Alien Fiancées and Fiancés Act of 1946.

There are many websites on related subject matter and a selection is enclosed below for further reading. This narrative focusses on some of the ships used to carry War Brides and Dependents to America from Southampton, but there were also many similar voyages to Canada, and to Australia and New Zealand.

29 American ships are listed [Troopships: 361] as having been adapted to carry War Brides and Dependents, although not all sailed from Southampton. Other ships including *Aquitania*, *Queen Elizabeth* and *Queen Mary* from Britain, *Ile De France* from France to Canada, and British ship *Atlantis* assigned to New Zealand from Southampton.

In this narrative except for a few selected ships, significant detail of the featured ships has not been detailed but is available via the quoted websites. But to emphasise the logistical difficulties, we start with a transcription of item 10 of the minutes of the US Army Headquarters United Kingdom Base dated 30 November 1945, meeting held 27 November: [Fold3: War brides]

*"10. War Brides: The State Department wants a backlog of 6,000 brides ready and waiting for 1 January 1946. The Red Cross hostel at Bournemouth and staging area at Southampton will probably have to be used. The UK is in a flexible position and will be able to handle the shipment. Hospitals will be set up at either Netley or Kingston Lacey or both as the occasion arises. It may be possible to close Aberton Hall and set up a 50-bed hospital in the Liverpool area if suitable accommodation can be found. Stockbridge will be closed February 1946. 162<sup>nd</sup> General hospital will move to Kingston Lacey and Netley sites". (Aberton Hall in Cheshire was used briefly by 306<sup>th</sup> Station Hospital for six weeks until 31 October 1945)*

## Southampton to America

### *SS Argentina*

An American ship originally named *Pennsylvania* and renamed *Argentina* in 1938 when refitted, it was built in 1929 for the American Line Steamship Corporation, ownership in 1938 changing to the US Maritime Commission although operated firstly by the Panama Pacific Line, from 1938 by the American Republics Line, and from 1942 by the War Shipping Administration. Between 1942 and 1946, *Argentina* operated as a troopship, calling at Southampton five times [Wikipedia: *Argentina* (1929)].

*SS Argentina* had the distinction of being the first ship in "Operation Diaper" to set sail with dependents from Southampton departing 26 January 1946, carrying 452 women, one war groom, and 173 children to New York, "greeted by New York Mayor William O'Dwyer, a band, news cameras and 200 reporters". Returned to private control, *Argentina* called at Southampton twice again, in July 1946 and its last "dependents" voyage was in August 1946. The ship was scrapped in 1964.



**Figure 1: War Brides aboard SS Argentina**  
Life – Issue 18 February 1946

Source: <https://jhgraham.com/2017/10/08/war-brides/>

### *SS Jarret M. Huddleston*

Following alterations from its hospital ship service during the early part of 1946, it was used under a temporary assignment for three months from April 1946 to carry dependents, re-rated from 589 hospital patients to 326 women and 150 children. Two of the three voyages to New York were from Southampton.

An anecdote from Robert W. Tody, who was the transport Commander of the ship in April 1946 confirms that the *Jarret M. Huddleston* brought 471 war brides, of whom 80 were infants, from Southampton to New York. He also notes that the "captain had been an aviator in the Polish Army in the First World War"! He continues: "One of my greatest triumphs with the Brides was in telling them what to expect from sea sickness, and what to do about it; everyone gets it, so it is normal; lie down



*and relax, and keep eating. We had essentially no troubles in this regard on our voyage to New York”* [Allies in War].

Another anecdote, describing in detail the voyage from Southampton which departed about 20 April 1946 for New York arriving 3 May 1946 can be found at <https://wwiitracings.wordpress.com/page/5/>. This refers to it still being a hospital ship and the image of the ship arriving at New York displays the Red Cross markings but the image is undated. The anecdote includes a period before including the Tidworth camp and after the voyage.

### *RMS Queen Elizabeth*

The *Queen Elizabeth* was not used to convey war brides and dependents from Britain, concentrating on repatriating troops but in 1950, it did return to Southampton with English wives and children of American soldiers for a visit, portrayed in a short video. [British Pathé]

### *RMS Queen Mary*

Launched on 26 September 1934 and completed in March 1936 by John Brown & Co., Clydebank for Cunard White Star Line, Liverpool, the *Queen Mary* was a passenger liner of 80,773grt. It was 310.7m long with 36.1m beam, 20.88m deep with 11.98m draught, capable of a service speed of 28.5kts driven by four screws powered by four sets of steam turbines. It was built with cabins for 776 passengers, 784 in tourist accommodation and 579 in 3<sup>rd</sup> class accommodation. Registered at Liverpool with ON164282, it voyaged between Southampton and New York until requisitioned as a troopship in 1940, conversion being carried out in Sydney, and carried Australian and New Zealand troops to Britain [Scottish Shipbuilding Database].



**Figure 2: RMS Queen Mary. War Brides departing Southampton February 1946**

Source: <https://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/11810160.look-back-bon-voyage-to-brit-wives-and-children-of-american-servicemen-as-they-set-sail-for-a-new-life/>

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Two events are notable – on 2 October 1942, off Ireland, the *Queen Mary* sliced through escort HMS *Curacoa* with loss of 239 lives, and on a voyage 25 to 30 July 1943, it had on board an enduring record 16,683 persons, of which 943 were crew [Curacoa]

As a troopship, the *Queen Mary's* conversion facilitated 5,500 troops to be carried, which by September 1946 totalled 765,429 military personnel including repatriations and wounded personnel. Alterations were made to carry war brides and dependents from late 1945, and between 3 February and 19 May 1946, six voyages comprising 12,886 European brides and children were carried to Canada and America. A further seven voyages up to 18 September 1946 were sailed to Canada. One of these crossings was completed in record time, three days, 22 hours and 40 minutes. After September, Southampton hosted a refit for return to commercial trans-Atlantic crossings. [WW2 Troopships] Another source states that the *Queen Mary* carried “12,886 G.I. brides and children to the US and 10,000 to Canada” [Time].

The *Queen Mary* retired in September 1967 and was subsequently docked at Long Beach, California as a tourist attraction which fell into disrepute amid financial wrangles with the then owners [Wikipedia: Queen Mary].

### USAT *Santa Paula*

(Not to be confused with at least three ships of the same name)

This ship was one of the most active transports of the Second World War, completing 28 voyages overseas commencing early 1942 from the American east coast to diverse destinations such as Australia, Africa, India, Argentina and England, including Southampton in late 1945 [Troopships: 252].

*Santa Paula* sailed only once from Southampton with war brides and dependents, but had the distinction of being the second ship to depart after SS *Argentina* on 3 April 1946 when it carried 285 adults and 16 children. It made four more such trips from Le Havre with one stop at Bremerhaven, the last being voyage departing Le Havre on 17 June 1946 [American War Bride Experience].

SS *Santa Paula* was the second of four identical ships built by the Federal Shipbuilding and Drydock Company of Kearny, New Jersey for the Grace Line, and was completed in December 1932 as a passenger and cargo steamer. Requisitioned and operated by the War Shipping Administration between 1941 and 1946 as USAT *Santa Paula*, it was of modest size at 155m long and 9,135grt, with a speed capability of 19kts driven by twin screws powered by two steam turbines with double reduction gearing. [Wiki Military] It was returned to service in 1947, sold in 1961 to Aegean Steam Navigation Co (Typaldos Line) and scrapped in 1971 after being laid up for five years.

Only two of the four sister ships survived the war, the *Santa Paula* and the *Santa Rosa*.

### MS *Saturnia*

Previously named USAHS *Frances Y. Slanger*, the name was reverted back on 28 February 1946 to MS *Saturnia* for transporting war brides and dependents in 1946, as well as repatriating troops and exchange of prisoners. There were three voyages to America from Southampton with war brides and dependents: 8 March 1946 with 505 adults and 207 infants, 19 April 1946 with 973 adults and 267 infants, and 24 May 1946 with 693 adults and 209 infants, totalling 2,996 [American War Brides].

The *Saturnia* was the largest and fastest hospital ship, and was, in its commercial days, one of the opulent passenger liners. The *Belfast Telegraph* of 22 December 1945 carried a report based on an article in the *New York Times*, that *Saturnia* would inaugurate the “GI Bride Service” between

Southampton and New York in the New Year, 1946, but in the event, it was not deployed for this service until March. Another report, from the *Northampton Mercury* of 10 May 1946 reported that a “Wendy Lunn, nine-weeks-old daughter of Mr and Mrs Richard Lunn (formerly of Isham), shared the award for the prettiest child in a popularity and beauty contest for the children of British wives of former US Service men aboard the ss *Saturnia* which landed in New York”.



**Figure 3: MS Saturnia at Halifax, Nova Scotia**

Image by Russ Lowdnes

Source: <https://pier21.ca/content/black-and-white-photograph-of-ms-saturnia-1949-1955-no-restriction>

### **USAT *Zebulon B. Vance***

Initially SS *Zebulon B. Vance*, a type EC2-S-C1 “Liberty Ship”, it was launched on 6 December 1941 by North Carolina Shipbuilding, Wilmington, North Carolina and delivered on 17 February 1942 to the War Shipping Administration and assigned to American Export Lines. [North Carolina Shipbuilding] 134.6m long with 17.33m beam and 7.31m draught, the ship was 7,933grt – a relatively slow ship, its service speed was only 11kts driven by a single screw powered via two boilers and a triple expansion reciprocating steam engine. Following participation in the invasion of North Africa where a torpedo narrowly missed it, as did floating mines, on 22 November 1943 it was sold to the War Department [NavSource Online] and converted to a hospital ship by July 1944 by the Bethlehem Steel Co., Boston, Massachusetts.

When built, it had quarters for 44 officers and enlisted men, but none for passengers. It was recommissioned as USAHS *John J. Meany* rated for 582 patients and sailed from New York on 27 July 1944 [WW2 US Medical] for the Mediterranean reaching Oran by early August. The ship served several Mediterranean ports until it left Gibraltar late December 1944 reaching Charleston early January 1945. A voyage to Bermuda to take patients off USAHS *St. Michael*, [Troopships: 346] which had gone aground, was undertaken before six voyages from Charleston to England and Cherbourg. On the sixth voyage, it departed from Southampton in September 1945 to New York, followed by two more voyages from New York, one being to Cherbourg and Southampton, arriving back on New Year’s Day 1946 was it withdrawn from hospital duties, being decommissioned on 25 January 1946. Demand for transport for war brides and dependents resulted in the ship being quickly altered at Bethlehem Steel’s 56th St. Yard at New York in January 1946 to carry military dependents whereupon it reverted to its former name but as USAT *Zebulon B. Vance*. It then operated in this role until 10 December 1948 being

transferred to the Maritime Commission, declared Army surplus on 16 December 1949, and was finally scrapped in spring 1970 by Cantieri Navali, S. A., Italy.

In its role transporting dependents, the *Zebulon B. Vance* sailed from Southampton with war brides and dependents on 27 June 1946 with 266 adults and 89 infants. Prior to then it is recorded as sailing twice from Le Havre on 19 March 1946 with 426 adults and 43 infants and again on 7 May 1946 with 370 adults and 56 infants. [American War Brides] It is possible that the Le Havre departures stopped briefly at Southampton but confirmation has not been found.

The following information and recollections of the crossings present opposing opinions of conditions aboard. [East Carolina University], [NCpedia] and [UsWarBrides]

*"I came to this country as a GI bride on the Zebulon B. Vance. It docked in NY on April 4, 1946. Mayor LaGuardia came and welcomed us to this country. It was a very bright sunny day. The voyage had taken 15 days and 15 nights because we had to come the great circle way to avoid mines possibly still in the ocean. It was a great ship".* (This would be from Le Havre, its first trip).

*My daughter and I came to the US on the Zebulon B. Vance arriving July 10th 1946. (she was 10 months old). We were supposed to be on the Queen Mary, but it became rat infested or something so bad that we were transferred to the ZBV. We left England on June 24th. from Southampton. The story of our crossing is upsetting in many ways, not the least of which were the living conditions on board (non-functioning toilets, excrement covering the floors, missing railings on decks so all were more often confined below decks in dark and stink of vomit and contaminated water.) There were profound losses too. It was not just a challenging crossing as so many war brides experienced on various ships—it was a catastrophic crossing for some of the mothers and their babies. Will never forgotten that voyage and has always given thanks for the good fortune that allowed us to survive it. In response to your question of 'Is this the ship that some babies died?', YES, that was the ship and the voyage. It was absolutely avoidable. Most of us War Brides were green young women, used to "doing as we were told" during the War. I was perhaps a bit more fortunate, since I had a little money, and strong encouragement from my parents to listen to my inner voice. The first day of the crossing, we were told we had to turn all our baby formula over to "Them". Most did. I and a young woman I remember only as Flo, did not. I think that helped save our babies during the crossing, many went to the ship's hospital, (which I never saw) but never returned. We were told nothing when we inquired. We slept in 3-tiered bunk beds, and since the ship was un-stabilised, (It was actually a Liberty ship) many of us were sea sick, which remained in the aisles between the beds all the way. The so-called bathrooms had a row of back to back toilets down the center of the room, no walls or door or anything for any kind of privacy, the toilets naturally overflowed for the entire trip, horrendous! Flo and I got up in the middle of the night to take turns showering and cleaning our babies. The food was indescribable, I lived on O'Henry Bars and Ritz crackers from the PX. I cannot stand them to this day. My hands are trembling as I type this, some of the memories have been repressed all these years. (This would be from Southampton, although the dates are a few days different, and its third trip).*

*My mother and I were on the Zebulon B Vance. Conditions on this ship were disgusting. There were far too few toilets for the number of passengers (and absolutely no privacy as they were in open rows) and so they were constantly overflowing and the women had to*



*walk through the waste to get to one of the 4 showers (not curtained) for water or to wash. So many were sea sick that they could not move and so vomit too, floated on the floors was constantly having to be wiped up off the bunks—the bunks were stacked three high and all in one large room (she said she does not recall their being “cabins” unless these were for officers. All their baby food was confiscated upon boarding but she hid some as I had a special need for a particular kind and she was afraid I might not get it. She washed my bottle and nipple in the not tea water she was given and used that boiled water to mix the formula. She says I lost four pounds in 16 days (that was how long the crossing took due to storms). She endured two “flashlight” exams for lice and VD. The humiliation and the outrage of that have never left her. There is a photo of me and my mother taken on the Vance on the day we arrived by one of the New York newspapers that was doing a follow-up story on the Vance because of the scandal on that ship that occurred in May of 1946, the voyage just before ours. On that voyage, many babies died and the mothers and their husbands, one of them an American doctor, another an American teacher, complained that the sanitary conditions on the ship were horrific. An army inquiry followed. The army agreed conditions on board ship were “filthy” but concluded that it was the fault of the war brides and they were responsible for the death of their babies from infectious diarrhoea due to their own “filthy hygiene.” The headline reads: Board of Inquiry Blames Mothers for the Deaths of Babies, Calling Their Quarters on Ship “Filthy,” Hygiene Improper. The war brides on that crossing of the Vance were from Belgium, France, Holland, and Poland and the ship had sailed to NY from La Havre. Odd, that the very next voyage of that same ship brought the same complaints of overcrowding, improper facilities and filth from war brides that this time were from England. (From Le Havre]*

From the Walter Reed Army Hospital:

*By the end of World War II, however, the returning victorious soldiers soon began bringing home war brides, and with them, war babies. The number of dependents cared for by the US Army began to increase dramatically. From the end of World War II though June 5th 1946, over ten thousand infants and children were transported from the European and Mediterranean Theatres (Bull US Army Med Dept, 1946; VI:112-113). In 1946, on the US transport, the Zebulon B. Vance, six of the 19 infants aboard died from diarrheal disease while en route from Europe to Ft. Hamilton, New York. This incident launched an inquiry which called for the institution of greater care in the transportation of dependents to the United States (Bull US Army Med Dept, 1946; VI:112-113).*

It is worth recalling that the ship when built had limited accommodation, it was inherently slow, of modest size, and without stabilisation, all of which in the Atlantic would not be conducive to pleasant conditions. Although it was rated for 582 patients when a hospital ship, this accommodation was probably constructed as open wards but online records of the subsequent alterations have not been found.

## Southampton to Canada

Approximately 60 ships, from various ports worldwide, were involved in taking dependents of Canadian military personnel to Canada [Canadian War Brides] These included the *Queen Elizabeth* and the *Queen Mary*, and one such ship is highlighted. From 1944, military dependents were entitled to Canadian citizenship, and it is estimated that 64,446 war brides and dependents immigrated to Canada in the period 1942 to 1948.

### *SS Aquitania*

Launched by John Brown & Co Ltd., Clydebank on 21 April 1913 and completed on 12 May 1914 for the Cunard Steam Ship Co. Ltd. of Liverpool, *Aquitania* was an impressive passenger liner. Registered at Liverpool with ON135583 at 45,647grt, 274.6m long with 29.56m beam, 15.14m deep and 10.97m draught, it was capable of 23kts driven by four screws from four Parsons steam turbines with 21 coal fired boilers. It served as an armed merchant cruiser, troopship and hospital ship in the First World War, then Armstrong Whitworth on Tyneside during 1919-20 converted it to oil fired. Ownership changed to Cunard White Star Line Ltd. of Liverpool in 1934 [Scottish Shipbuilding Database]

During the Second World War it served again as a troopship. One voyage was from New York on 29 January 1944 arriving at Gourock on 5 February 1944 with approximately 1,000 Navy and 7,000 Army personnel comprising the Special Navy Advance Group destined to be Navy Base Hospital No. 12 at the Royal Victoria Hospital at Netley, Southampton [Wikipedia: Aquitania].

Troopship duties completed having sailed an estimated 500,00 miles and 400,000 troops, *Aquitania* was handed back to Cunard in 1946 but refitted to transport war brides and dependents, primarily to the designated port of Halifax, Nova Scotia where it became a favourite. This episode of its history finished in December 1949 when it was taken out of service and broken up at Faslane in 1950 [Wiki: Aquitania].

## Southampton to Australia & New Zealand

Regarding the Antipodes, approximately 110 ships made 177 voyages carrying dependents to Australia [The QE2 Story] *SS Atlantis* with a colourful history voyaged to New Zealand from Southampton.

### *SS Atlantis*

(Not to be confused with *SS Andes*, a later ship built in 1939 which replaced the *Atlantis*, originally named *Andes* until 1930, both built by Harland and Wolff.)

There is a very detailed resumé of Atlantis <http://www.theyard.info/ships/434.asp> from launch in 1913 to being broken up at Faslane in 1952. This included being heavily armed as an armed cruiser with the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron during the First World War, afterwards resuming its commercial service from Southampton to the River Plate, being renamed *Atlantis* in 1930 when it was refitted as a luxury cruise ship, still mainly out of Southampton. Narrowly avoiding capture at the outset of the Second World War, *Atlantis* was requisitioned and converted in Southampton to hospital ship No. 33 with 400 hospital beds and 150 medical staff. Initially based at Alexandria, it subsequently served in a variety of locations which can be read in the resumé – part of this period was in Europe but during early 1945 was transferring casualties from UK to America through to 1947, some from South Africa. It embarked at Southampton many times in late 1944 [Ships Nostalgia] and on 23 May 1946, it sailed from Southampton for Fremantle, Western Australia. [Brighton and Hove] Another voyage was from Naples to Southampton where it arrived on 8 November 1946 with 106 Polish families including eight babies

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born during the voyage. [Polish Resettlement] Another voyage was from Kingston, Jamaica arriving at Southampton in October 1946 [TNA: Atlantis].

In early 1948, the New Zealand government chartered it for immigrants from UK, several from Southampton, and *"on a homeward voyage in Sane 1950 she transported Dutch families of the Royal Netherlands Army from newly-independent Indonesia. During the twenty-eight-day voyage, sixty-two babies were born. Many of the children were given the first name 'Atlantis' while the ship was given the nickname 'stork ship' by the passengers"*. The following period Atlantis was carrying troops and families due to the Suez crisis. In early 1953, its engines required too extensive repairs so it was laid up in the Clyde and scrapped at Faslane in March 1952.

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- The ODS Story. Accessed April 2020. Available at <http://www.odsstory.com/odsstory.php?topic=6275.msg76678#msg76678>

## List of Websites for Further Reading

This is a brief list only; others can be found on-line and are presented in no particular order.

[illegible]

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Canadian War Brides. <http://www.canadianwarbrides.com/ships.asp> AND

<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/second-world-war/canadian-war-brides> AND

<https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/Pages/war-brides.aspx#b> AND

<https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/movement-of-war-brides-and-their-children-through-pier-21>

BBC - WW2 People's War - The Newfoundland War Brides

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Allies in War. [http://www.alliesinwar.com/facts\\_and\\_figures.html](http://www.alliesinwar.com/facts_and_figures.html)

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THE CUNARD - WHITE STAR LINER 'QUEEN ELIZABETH.

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