During the Second World War, more than 100,000 British and European women married Allied soldiers from Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Australia. Called "War Brides", thousands of these women were from Scotland. Their stories of meeting husbands and coming to a new country to raise families of their own are a fascinating - but little known - part of Scottish history.

Johan (Hillis) Dewitt was just a teenager in Glasgow and full of spunk when the Second World War broke out. For Johan, it was an interesting, but frightening time to be growing up in Scotland.

German Air Force bombers made nightly sorties over England and Scotland during the Battle of Britain between August 1940 and September 1941. As one of the United Kingdom's major shipbuilding centres, Glasgow was an important target. Thousands of people were killed - and thousands more injured - when bombs rained down at all times of the night and day.

Few families escaped the disaster, and Johan knew many people who had been killed. The bombing campaign worked wonders for government recruiters though. Everybody it seemed, wanted to join up - and Johan was no exception.

At first, Johan wanted to join the Women's Air Force, but her father refused. As the oldest of eight children growing up in Glasgow, Johan was a "Daddy's girl". Like many other Scottish fathers, Johan's dad did not want his daughter to join the Air Force, Army or Navy. That's because there was considerable public criticism of the women's services, most of it unfounded, that innocent young girls were exposed to the "ways of the world" in ways their parents didn't like.

Another reason why her father objected to the Forces was because he had plans for his family after the war which included buying a small piece of land - a small holding as it was known - to start a farm. He felt it would be more appropriate if Johan - who was, after all, a city kid - got some experience working on a farm.

Yes, her father decided, she could join the war effort - but only as a member of The Women's Land Army. The Land Army was the government's solution to a farm crisis sparked by the departure of all the country's young men to war service. In their place were women of conscription age who worked the farms and the barnyards of the country.

But if Johan's father thought he was protecting his daughter by making her work on an isolated estate, he had another thing coming. For it was because of her work with the Land Army that Johan met her future husband, a soldier with the Canadian Forestry Corps named Luke DeWitt.

Johan worked on a section of the Dunira Estate in Perthshire that had been turned into a training area for the Land Army. The Dunira Estate had been given to the government by its owners as part of the war effort. Its main building

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Canadian War Brides - Johan (Hillis) Dewitt

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Johan worked on a section of the Dunira Estate in Perthshire that had been turned into a training area for the Land Army. The Dunira Estate had been given to the government by its owners as part of the war effort. Its main building
became a hospital and the training area was home to hundreds of young women, many of whom had never seen a cow or a hoe in their entire lives.

Johan was one of them. One day, when she was in the barn cleaning up some cow manure, two young Canadian soldiers passed by. One of them was Luke DeWitt, who was recuperating at the hospital. Johan's first impressions weren't too positive. Here she was, up to her elbows in cow manure, and standing in front of her laughing were two young men. "I was a heck of a mess," says Johan now, remembering that moment as though it happened only yesterday. "I don't know how in the name of heaven Luke and I got together, but he must have felt sorry for me." Before too long, Johan and Luke were dating and soon, they were engaged to be married.

It was a difficult decision for Johan's parents to let their oldest daughter marry a Canadian soldier. Like thousands of other Scottish parents, they had to face the inevitability that their daughter would eventually leave for Canada after the war. Johan's mother was dead set against Canada and the thought of her daughter leaving. But Johan's father, an engineer who had lived and worked there during the 1930s, simply loved the country. He thought the marriage presented great opportunities for Johan, and his opinion ruled the day. In February, 1944 the young couple married and their first child, Betty, was born in November. Eighteen months later, Johan started the long journey by train and war bride ship that would take her to a new life and new home in Canada. On May 13, 1946, the day Johan left Scotland to join the other War Brides in London, her parents came down to the Central Station in Glasgow to see their daughter and grand-daughter off. Johan's father, who was always a sentimental sort, lifted little Betty high up in to the air and in front of the large crowd he sang these words to his only grandchild:

"Bonnie, Betty, is noo awa, safely oo'er the friendly main, many a heart will break in twa, should she no come back again." The next day, Johan left Southampton on board the War Bride ship RMS Aquitania. Seven days later, the ship sailed into Halifax harbour at Pier 21 and so began Johan's new life. Johan admits it wasn't always easy. There was the culture shock of living in rural areas with outdoor toilets and no running water, cooking with wood stoves and the endless landscape of Canadian forest. Her husband was a journeyman plumber and in the post-war construction boom they moved around a lot. But he was a good man, and she remembers him with fondness.

Luke died suddenly in 1976, leaving Johan with three teenagers at home. She never remarried. Now in her mid 70s, Joanne has had an interesting life that was shaped in large part by her wartime experiences. She is proud of the decision she made to marry a Canadian soldier and cross the ocean for love. Her Glaswegian accent is still strong, and her wartime memories are as vivid as the day they happened. And although Johan has lived in Canada for more than fifty years, she still calls Scotland "home".

This article was written by Melynda Jarratt and originally appeared on the Gathering of the Clans on November 11, 1999.