



A Journey From London To Barnesville

From Blitzkrieg to Floods, Doreen Has “Seen It All”

By Michael Stein  
It has been a long journey from London to Barnesville for Doreen Peterson, who resides at Golden Manor Assisted Living in Barnesville.  
Born in London, Doreen was seven when German bombers

began a relentless 57-day “blitzkrieg” on England. Her father was in the British Navy serving on a submarine when Germany declared war on England.  
“London was on fire,” Doreen recalls. “I remember the fires and the bombings all around us. My

grandmother would sit on the roof of our house and douse the burning soot that rained down from the sky. One day I was pushing my younger sister around the block when a German Spitfire flew over. Bullets slammed down against a wall we were walking near. I’ll never forget my mother screaming at me to get down.”

Although bombs dropped all around her family’s house, it never took a direct hit. One day, the ubiquitous sirens sounded and Doreen’s mother hollered at her children to run for the nearest shelter.

“That time the bombing created an updraft in our house, shaking up the chimney,” she said. “As we ran out, I saw soot shooting out of the house—then our piano flew out of the French doors and slid down to the garden.

“I had never seen a flying piano before,” she said with a chuckle. Londoners at the time learned to cope by finding humor in the midst of chaos.

“The girl next door had to climb over a fence every time the sirens sounded. One day she stumbled and fell into the dust bin (garbage can).”

Doreen’s family members did their best to keep some semblance of order as the bombing continued. One day an insurance man came around to collect a premium.

“We heard bombing in the distance so my mother made him stay there until it was safe. He tried to be nice and went into the kitchen to make hot chocolate for us. What he thought was cocoa powder was actually red ochre, which we used to polish bricks and brass. It was a nice gesture, but, of course, we had to dump it out.”

Post-war recovery lasted well into the 1950s. Food rationing continued long after the war’s end. Doreen recalled her sister wanting a pineapple for her birthday, even though she had never actually seen one. Undeterred by the scarcities of the time, Doreen’s mother was determined to find a pineapple—and she did.

“It took her awhile, but she found that pineapple—on the black market,” Doreen said with a twinkle in her eye. “It’s funny the things one remembers.”

War and recovery took a toll on Doreen’s formal education. She left school at 14 and went straight to work and learned the dressmaking trade.

“I was an apprentice for a lady from Paris as a court dressmaker. For the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953, I worked on items for two of the princesses. One day I got carried away and put on one of the ermine robes. I marched all around the work room pretending I was royalty.”

Even though she was a court dressmaker, the closest Doreen came to Queen Elizabeth was seeing her riding in a coach on the Buckingham Palace parade grounds.

Along with the royal court, Doreen tailored clothes that were used in the movies.

“I met a lot of celebrities at the time. It was funny, but sometimes they would give us tips on the daily horse races.”

And like a scene out of the movies, while leaving a phone booth, she spotted an American serviceman in queue waiting to use the phone. The man also saw her and told a friend who was waiting there with him, “I’m going to marry that girl.” He succeeded, and that’s where the London to Minnesota connection began.

Richard Peterson hailed from St. Cloud, Minn. Immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, like thousands of young American men, he went down to his local recruiting station and said, “Sign me up!” And into the U.S. Navy he went.

“Pete,” as Doreen called him, remained stationed in England after the war. A couple years before they met, he was in a serious auto accident and spent two years in recovery.

When the couple met, Doreen was still a minor and Pete was her senior by 10 years.

“At the same time my sister, Ann, who was seven years younger than me, was very ill with polio,” she recalled. “I took another job on Sundays to make money to pay for my sister’s medication.”

When Richard and Doreen married, England was still rationing commodities like sugar



Dorene Peterson holds a very special photograph of her late husband Richard, taken while he was in stationed in England as a member of the U.S. Navy. The couple met in London by pure chance, and later moved to the Grand Forks Air Base when Richard joined the Army Air Force.

and confections. “So Pete bought me a big box of chocolates from the commissary. It was like a box of treasure to me.”

Pete made the military his career. He switched to the Army Air Force and was eventually stationed at the Grand Forks, N.D., Air Base.

“When we moved to the base, my mother said, ‘How can you live where you might get bombed?’ Can you believe it? She was worried about me living on a military base in the states. We had been through 54 straight days of bombing! It was a terrible thing, but I’m still here to talk about it.”

The Petersons had three children, DeAnn, Gayle and David. DeAnn Hedland and her husband Dean moved to the Hawley area about 10 years ago. Dean passed away in August 2016. One of DeAnn’s sons, Dan Hedland, and his wife Stephanie still reside in Barnesville.

Gayle remained in Grand Forks, where she works as a hairdresser. David lives in Florida

Through the years, Doreen never lost her love for fine fabrics

or her flair for design. “I collected yards and yards of fabric. But after I had to move from Grand Forks, there was not much I could do but give it away.”

Although Doreen had worked for a Parisian designer, she never made it to Paris. “Pete and I were planning on it, but then his health began to fail.”

Doreen took a trip to Duluth the week of August 7 with many of her family members. “It’s very beautiful there and a bit like Cornwall, England, where Pete and I spent our honeymoon.”

Still making their home in England are Doreen’s brother David and sister Ann, who recovered from polio and later opened a dance studio in London.

Richard passed away 17 years ago. “I loved the life we had together and I still miss him.”

From blitzkriegs and world war to the 1997 Grand Forks flood, Doreen Peterson’s life has been anything but dull.

“I’ve also been through a hurricane,” she adds. “I think maybe I have a medal coming that says, ‘She’s seen it all.’”





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