

## **BYRON SHIRE ECHO BOOK REVIEW No 6**

**Publisher:** Hachette Australia

**Book Title:** **Swing By Sailor: True Stories from the War Brides of HMS Victorious**

**Author:** Catherine Dyson

**Reviewer:** Emma Peters

I'm going to New York next week and was amused to find out that my trip coincides with 'Fleet Week'. This is an annual event that sees the streets of New York littered with sailors and allows the public opportunities to meet them. I've never been in a town littered with sailors, but have heard some great stories about the overseas servicemen, on leave in Melbourne towards the end of WWII, from my Grandmother. *Swing by Sailor* tells the stories of 18 Australian women and the sailors they fell in love with and married, during a time when the streets of Australia were littered with sailors.

WWII impacted on many parts of the world. With Australian defence personnel stationed overseas, many young women were mobilised in order to offer support services and provisions that were needed to support the war effort. Young women from small-towns, like my Grandmother, were sent to big cities to work and live in an independent way that had been uncommon previously. In 1945, Australia saw the arrival of hundreds of British seamen who were stationed or on leave from the British Pacific Fleet; this is where the wildly swift love affairs in *Swing by Sailor* begin.

With the backdrop of war looming, the tone within Australia, was a mixture of uncertainty, concern and desperate merriment. When servicemen took leave on shore they were happy to be alive and making the best of the free time available. This desperate merriment saw many of the servicemen wooing local women. Dancing venues popped up everywhere and were a popular social gathering point for people wanting to forget about the dangers in the world. One of the brides, June Wilkes, explains 'there was dancing everywhere. I used to go dancing on Saturday, Tuesday and Thursday...jazz, waltz, quickstep, foxtrot.'

During such jovial times whirlwind romances with sailors were widespread and relationships intensified quickly. With so many servicemen around during the time, the local women dated vigorously. Eileen Powlesland tells us that the attitude amongst the women was that they where 'not desperate for a date...there were plenty to chose from. I think it makes you a bit like, Well, if I miss this tram I'll catch the next'. However, this nonchalant attitude was quick to change once it was clear that most of the men were due to be sent back to Britain.

Many couples who had only recently met became engaged and married quickly. Eileen Powlesland and her husband Jack had only known each other

six months before they were married. Jack proposed to Eileen once it was known that he was due to be sent back to Britain. Lots of marriages were hastily arranged with mixed reactions from families. With all these new brides marrying British sailors who were on their way home, the navy discovered they had a logistical dilemma ensuing – just how were they to get these brides to their husbands in Britain?

Perhaps the most interesting aspect to the war bride story covered in the scope of *Swing by Sailor* is the remarkable journey that 669 Australian women found themselves on. During the early part of 1946 the British navy set out converting HMS Victorious from an aircraft-carrier into a vessel suitable to house 700 women, crew and demobbed sailors. There was to be a total of 1854 passengers on board the warship that left Woolloomooloo wharf on July 3, 1946, bound for Britain. Dyson writes that Captain John Annersley 'had no idea how unruly a warship of brides could be'.

The voyage took five weeks and with such an assorted mix of passengers, dramas and infidelities were quick to develop. The brides were from all walks of life and some of the more naïve amongst them were shocked by some of the behaviour they witnessed. Affairs between brides and crew members became increasingly apparent. Edna Monk tells us that it was 'like a smorgasbord to some of the girls – so many lusty young men available'. Some of these infidelities were discovered by waiting husbands, and telegram warnings that they wouldn't be there to be meet the bride where sent.

When they finally arrived in Britain, the HMS Victorious brides were faced with the coldest winter in many years. Many of the wartime marriages lasted lots of happy years. In *Swing by Sailor*, Catherine Dyson records a captivating subplot in the war. For most of the book we hear the stories of the brides through their own voices. I thoroughly enjoyed this book and congratulate Catherine Dyson for capturing the circumstance and feeling of a unique time.