

# AMERICA's *First War Bride*

The term 'War Bride' is generally associated with the approximately one million women who married American and Canadian GI's and came to America after World War Two ended. While the SS AMERICA (at the time serving as a naval transport – the USS WEST POINT) did bring hundreds of War Brides from Europe shortly after VE Day, she did so almost three years after AMERICA's *First War Bride* first stepped ashore here.

That title rightfully belongs to a beautiful brunette, **Mary Ellen Gallagher Jenkins**. Born and raised in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, she met and married an American civilian, Charles Jenkins, in her hometown. Officially neutral, he and hundreds of others were there to construct military bases.

After his work was completed, the two of them (along with 487 other passengers) journeyed across the U Boat-infested Atlantic in late August/Early September of 1942 onboard the WEST POINT. And if that wasn't exciting and unsettling enough, this twenty-two year old 'petticoat pilgrim' was in an advanced state of pregnancy by then.



The saga of AMERICA's *First War Bride* really began when America's Lend-Lease Program was initiated, long before the United States' official entry into World War Two. That program had many facets, some better known than others. One of the program's lesser-known activities involved the construction of military facilities in the United Kingdom by American contractors who employed United States citizens and then put them to work in an active war zone.

On June 12, 1941, almost six months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that plunged America into the war, the British government signed a contract with an American consortium of construction contractors (the G. A. Fuller-Merritt Chapman Corporation) to begin construction of military bases in Northern Ireland and Scotland. This was not a minor effort; it involved building four large naval bases for destroyers, submarines and seaplanes. Over \$50 million in Lend-Lease funds were utilized in this endeavor.

Later that same month, the first of 350 civilian contractors, all volunteers from America, began to arrive in Northern Ireland to augment a severe shortage of skilled construction workers there. Their arrival and presence was not widely publicized, since America was – at the time – still officially neutral. Theirs was tantamount to a secret mission. They were accorded the same benefits that enlisted men received at the time, but as unionized workers they undoubtedly were paid more handsomely than army privates.





One of these craftsmen was **Charles Francis Jenkins**, a skilled carpenter. Born in Scituate, Massachusetts in 1915, he had been employed in the greater Boston area before accepting an overseas assignment with the government. By the time Charles and his workmates arrived there, Londonderry had experienced several devastating air raids. Throughout the spring of 1941, multiple attacks there and at nearby Belfast had resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians, and thousands of homes had been destroyed or damaged.

Charles and his co-workers were provided lodging at the Barrington Barracks, a military installation in the port area of the city. As evidenced by this driver's license, Charles quickly became acclimated to the local community. His Irish heritage (his Mother was originally from Cork) undoubtedly helped.

And then...he met Miss Mary Ellen Gallagher. The exact date, place and circumstances are now lost in time, but what is known is that she had briefly been a member of the British armed forces, so perhaps they met 'on the job'. In any case, by the end of the year, they were in love and were married in Londonderry's famed Saint Eugene's Cathedral on December 31, 1941. Little is known about their first months of married life together. Once Charles' work assignment was completed, arrangements were made for him and his fellow workers to return to the United States. By that time, Mary Ellen was pregnant, but that didn't prevent her from being allowed to also sail to America in August of 1942. One consideration, perhaps, was that she had lost a sister in a massive air raid on Belfast the previous year.



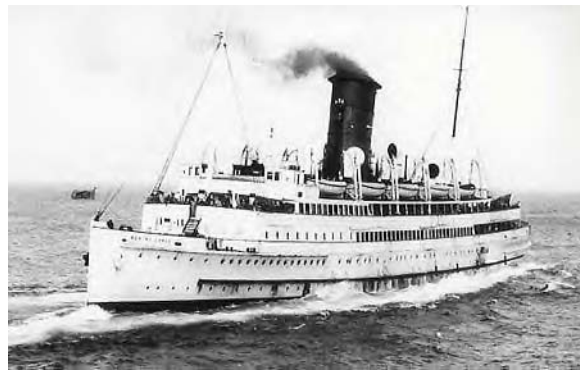
They were assigned passage on the USS WEST POINT and afforded the same privileges as army officers. WEST POINT had delivered over 7,400 military personnel to the port of Liverpool on August 17<sup>th</sup>. Two days later, she had completed a relatively safe, 200 mile Irish Sea passage from there to Scotland, where she anchored in Berth B-05, Firth of Clyde, near Greenock. For several days thereafter, preparations were made for the ship to sail back to North America in convoy. These activities included embarking passengers for the trip, who came onboard from a succession of small British coastal steamers. Her handwritten deck log for Wednesday, August 26, 1942 starts off... *"Anchored in sixteen fathoms of water (mud bottom), with 90 fathoms of chain to the starboard anchor."* The log for that day also documented the presence of several other ships, including the USS ARKANSAS, a vintage American battleship and other units of the U.S. Fleet.

In the waning daylight hours of August 26<sup>th</sup>, a little steamer with the intriguing name of Ben-My-Chree (which translates as ‘Girl of My Dreams’ from the Manx language, native to the Isle of Man) took her turn in coming alongside WEST POINT’s port side. Arriving there at 1842 hours, the coastal steamer’s passengers commenced embarkation at 1906. By 1950 hours, all of them plus their baggage were onboard the transport, as the former SS AMERICA became a temporary, transient home for AMERICA’s *First War Bride*.



The WEST POINT deck log for that date has several passenger manifests attached, including a two-page list of passengers that were to be embarked from the steamer Ben-My-Chree. Charles Jenkins is #10 on this particular list; Mary Ellen is #73 on what is also annotated in pencil as a ‘gangway check-off list’. The portion of that list which includes their names and passport numbers is reproduced on the next page.

A total of 155 souls were transferred to the WEST POINT from the Ben-My-Chree. In peacetime, this handsome little coastal steamer was utilized to carry visitors and vacationers to the Isle of Man. During World War Two, her service was exemplary. She participated in the Dunkirk evacuation and in the D-Day operations. In between, she was put to good use as a military transport in UK protected waters.



The total passenger list that includes the Jenkins reads much like an Irish telephone book, with names like McBride, O’Malley and Duffy much in evidence. WEST POINT’s total passenger count for that voyage was 489, making it easy for her approximately 785 member navy crew to take good care of their charges.

When the WEST POINT departed her Firth of Clyde anchorage on August 27, 1942, several of her civilian passengers were mothers with small children. Also onboard were members of several branches of the American military, plus the Royal and Dutch navies. A unique group embarked included American and British merchant mariners who were survivors of some twelve torpedoed cargo and tankers. Surely, this latter group was not anxious to return to the sea-lanes where the Battle of the Atlantic raged.

**CONFIDENTIAL**

10. In accordance with request of the Council General of the United States at Belfast, the following civilians will be transhipped on the coaster, "Ben-My-Chree", to be embarked on the G-2 (at 0730 hours, 26 August 1942).

<u>NAME</u>	<u>PASSPORT NO.</u>	<u>NAME</u>	<u>PASSPORT NO.</u>
✓1. Eugene W. Barden	691025	58. Patrick Roche	135
✓2. David Brown	713042	59. Christopher Ryan	158
✓3. David Clarke	177	60. John Sullivan	162
✓4. Stephen Craig	36	61. Daniel Twomey	149
✓5. Francis Crowcock	695705	62. John W. Warren	161
✓6. James J. Dougherty	353	63. Muriel H. Barden	L-0608
✓7. John Dougherty	352		V.No. 233
✓8. Beverley Dupuis	700305	64. Annie I. Bessette.	L-0834
✓9. Samuel A. Effron	140		V.No. 124
✓10. Charles Jenkins	692210	65. Sara M. Brown	L-0912
✓11. Tudor Jones	700270		V.No. 3
✓12. Michael McEllin	392	66. Isabell Browne	48
✓13. John W. McIntyre	348	67. Ellen I. Callahan	46
✓14. John McKeague	44	68. Janet Craig	18382
✓15. Joseph Maginn	33		V.No. 266
✓16. John Quinn	7	69. Ethna Crowcock	L-0903 (V)
✓17. Wilfred William Wilcox	691020	70. Catherine Dupuis	No. 234
✓18. George Edward Carroll	404		L-0554
✓19. John Conneely	Ir. P.P.No. G-17152 Q.V. No. 33	71. Mary J. Donovan	V.No. 235
		72. Mary E. Duval	L-0717
✓20. James Connolly	400		V.No. 183
✓21. Stephen Corrigan	387	73. Mary E. Jenkins	L-0866
✓22. William Deary	183		V.No. 265
✓23. William Drum	259	74. Mary R. Johnston	L-0483
✓24. <del>Thomas P. Ryan</del>	388		V.No. 236
✓25. John H. Greene	397	75. Nora E. Jones	41
			L-0980
			V.No. 173

Other information appended to the deck logs for that voyage indicates that the passengers were somewhat segregated. Single women, and women traveling with children were quartered in Upper Deck staterooms. Single men and enlisted military personnel were concentrated on Main Deck, and married couples and high ranking military personnel were assigned the best quarters; on Sun Deck.

Throughout the daylight hours of Thursday, August 27<sup>th</sup>, the WEST POINT's passengers settled in, perhaps a bit apprehensively. Certainly, Mrs. Jenkins had every right to be nervous. In addition to sailing from home for a far-off land through 3,000 miles of dangerous waters, she was taking the first extended trip of her life; coupled with the uncertainty of being at sea for the first time, in a war zone, and in an advanced state of pregnancy.

As the transport's crew made final preparations to sail, other American ships joined the WEST POINT and the ARKANSAS in the anchorage. Mostly American, they included the cruiser BROOKLYN, the transports WAKEFIELD, MONTEREY and BARRY and the several 'tin cans' that constituted Destroyer Squadron 7.

Then, as darkness descended, Convoy TA-18 commenced its departure...

In the terse language of selected entries from the WEST POINT's deck log for that day (hand-written and too faded after over six decades of storage for reproduction here):

*2100: All hands to General Quarters*

*2120: Anchor Aweigh. Underway and proceeding on various courses at various speeds to conform to channel. Pilot at the Conn. Captain (Frank Kelley – depicted on the left) and Executive Officer (Commander Paul Talbot - right) on the Bridge.*



*2132: Standard speed 16 knots. 85 R.P.M.*

*2200: Passed through submarine net entrance.*

*2230: Stopped all engines.*

*2238: Pilot left the ship. All engines ahead, standard speed.*

*2350: Destroyers taking formation as screen.*

*2358: Passed Holy Point Light abeam to starboard, distance 4.9 miles.*

WEST POINT was back in her element.

The next day, the convoy set a standard speed of 17 knots, and followed the USN's Standard Plan #11 for zig-zagging. As a result of this somewhat reduced speed (WEST POINT was capable of 23+ knots) and following a zig-zag course; what normally would have been a four day transatlantic passage for her required almost nine days, total.


Undoubtedly, constant changes in course, the equally-constant fears of U boat activity – accentuated by the occasional use of depth charges by escorting vessels, antiaircraft gun practices with live ammo, darkened ship conditions at night and the frequent and often unexpected call of *All Hands to General Quarters!* weighed heavily on the minds of the passengers throughout the voyage. Then, a frightening incident near the end of their memorable voyage became forever etched into their memories; witness to fire at sea.

After seven days of what was considered a pretty uneventful voyage by the ship's experienced crew, the convoy was about 350 miles northeast of Boston. Early the evening of September 3, 1942, the convoy was proceeding in accordance with zigzag plan #18 at 15 knots, when – at 1834 hours – heavy smoke was observed pouring from the forward part of the WAKEFIELD. The WAKEFIELD then signaled “I am on fire.”

The convoy slowed, but did not stop. With most of her superstructure ablaze, the stricken WAKEFIELD dropped out of formation at 1848 as the BROOKLYN and two destroyers protected her. Unable to do more than watch, the rest of the convoy resumed its speed and zigzag course at 1852, leaving crews and passengers alike to wonder at the fate of those that had to be left behind in the midst of what appeared to be a catastrophic fire.



The sight of this hapless ship on fire, with hundreds of people clustered helplessly on her extreme bow and stern, awaiting rescue, remained a vivid memory for Mary Ellen Jenkins. It was foremost of the stories of her voyage to America that she eventually shared with her children. Much later, it was learned that the WAKEFIELD, almost completely burned out and abandoned, had been saved by rescuers out of Halifax. The gutted vessel was towed to Nova Scotia, then to the United States. Subsequently, she was completely rebuilt and returned to troop ship service in mid-1944.

But soon after seeing such a massive fire at sea, AMERICA's *First War Bride* enjoyed a much happier experience. On Saturday morning, September 5, 1942, Mary Ellen got her first glimpse of what would become her adopted land. By 0800 hours, WEST POINT was steaming at a reduced speed, but on a steady course for New York Harbor. At 0931 the ship stopped briefly, just off Staten Island, within sight of Lady Liberty. At 0955 hours, with the assistance of four harbor tugs, the WEST POINT proceeded to Pier 12 at the Staten Island Army Base. By 1120 the ship was moored, marking the end of her mission. 

Shortly thereafter, disembarkation of passengers commenced and the Jenkins family was able to go ashore. How they were processed by Immigration officials and traveled from Staten Island back to Massachusetts, where Charles had a job waiting for him at the Hingham Shipyard, is unknown. But what is known is that their first-born, Charlie Jenkins, arrived less than a month later – on October 2, 1942.

Three additional Jenkins siblings followed; Dan in 1945, Rosemary in 1946 and Paul in 1955. Their adventurous Mother, Mary Ellen Jenkins, previously unheralded as AMERICA's *First War Bride*, became an American citizen in 1960. After a lengthy illness, she passed away in 1977. Her husband, Charles Jenkins had predeceased her in 1975. They are buried side-by-side in a family plot in Scituate.

Together, Mary Ellen and Charles Jenkins overcame the challenges that a hard prewar life and the horrors of wartime presented to them. While theirs is admittedly an unusual story, it is not – in the context of what untold numbers of the Greatest Generation routinely accomplished during World War Two – all that unusual. God bless them all!



*Postscript* – The basics of the Jenkins' tale was introduced to me when their son Dan contacted me in 2005, seeking pictures and more information about the WEST POINT. Through a series of electronic conversations with him, some Internet-related research on my part and the extra-kind assistance of a National Archives staff member; I was able to weave this expanded version of their great transatlantic adventure. The vast majority of what I have related is hard fact. A very little is conjecture, based on logical assumptions.

All of it is a celebration of the Greatest Generation in which I stand in continual awe.

*Bill Lee*

July 2006