

1945 December 3-9

Bringing Home a War Bride

Signal Corps Veteran Returns From Pacific; Wife In Australia To Come To U. S. In 1946

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 9, page 8)



Wilbur W. Spreiter

(Courtesy of Robert & Lori Spreiter)

With American men stationed all over the world away from their homes and loved ones, loneliness was something they dealt with in a variety of ways. It was inevitable that men far from home would develop

relationships with women in their host countries. These relationships ran the gamut from one-night stands, temporary flings, long-term relationships, and even many marriages.

In November 1945, it was estimated that "as many as 100,000 GIs may have married girls in foreign lands." The State Department estimated that there were 60,000 English war brides of American servicemen, 5,000 to 15,000 from other European countries, and 20,000 to 25,000 from Australia and New Zealand. At that time, 22,000 of these women had applied for permission to come to the United States. Beginning in January 1946, an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 GI brides were scheduled to come to the United States each month, depending on the availability of shipping.¹ After the war, the United States provided transportation to this country for 70,000 war brides just from Great Britain alone.² After arrival, they could become an American citizen in two years.³

One of these women was Yvonne (Lewis) Spreiter, the Australian bride of Wilbur W. Spreiter of Onalaska.

Wilbur (Bill) Spreiter was born on September 12, 1913, in La Crosse, to Walter and Ethel Spreiter.⁴ His father was the La Crosse County agricultural agent for many years.⁵

Wilbur Spreiter was one of the thirteen graduates in the Onalaska High School Class of 1931.⁶

Following high school, he attended the La Crosse State Teachers College⁷ before transferring to the University of Wisconsin.⁸ Spreiter graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1937 with a bachelor of science degree from the College of Agriculture.⁹

He left Onalaska on June 27, 1937, for Marshall, Minnesota, where he started working for [Swift and Company](#), the meatpacking giant.¹⁰

Two years later, Wilbur Spreiter was a salesman for the New York Life Insurance Company, with an office in the Frank J. Hoeschler Building in La Crosse.¹¹ In 1940, Spreiter was a 26-year-old single salesman making \$1,200 a year and living with his parents on North Third Street in Onalaska.¹²

Spreiter enlisted in the Army Reserve in June 1942 and entered active duty on March 5, 1943, at [Fort Sheridan, Illinois](#). At the age of 30, he was older than the average recruit. He trained in the [Signal Corps](#) at [Robins Field in Waycross, Georgia](#), before shipping out to the South Pacific with the 1037th [Signal Company](#).¹³

His company maintained and repaired radio and radar equipment for the Army Air Force. They were stationed in Sydney, Australia. Later they moved to [Cape Gloucester](#) on New Britain Island, [Hollandia](#) in Dutch New Guinea, [Leyte](#) in the Philippines, [Lingayen](#) on Luzon in the Philippines, and finally to [Ie Shima](#) in the Ryuku Islands.¹⁴ He was on Ie Shima when the war ended.

While he was at Ie Shima, Spreiter saw the Japanese peace delegation that was headed to Manila. Two Japanese aircraft landed at the airfield, and then the Japanese were transferred to an American C-54 transport plane for the flight to Manila with an escort of about 40 to 50 American aircraft. Spreiter said at the time, "The Japs' first offer of surrender was not only a surprise . . . but we were suspicious of it from the start. We wondered what they were really planning. Everyone in the outfit got out (sic) gasmasks and made sure that they were ready for use. Ack-ack [anti-aircraft] gun batteries readied an unusually large supply of ammunition in readiness for a surprise attack."¹⁵



Map of Australia; Sydney circled in lower right

(Classroomoutlet.com)

By 1943, there were 250,000 Americans stationed in Australia, primarily in the large cities of Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane.¹⁶ For rest and recreation, dance halls and USO-type clubs were popular with American soldiers.¹⁷ There they got to meet Australian women, and romances inevitably developed.

It was at one of these venues that Wilbur Spreiter, United States Army, met Yvonne Lewis of Sydney, Australia.



Yvonne Lewis

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 2008 April 3, page B-3)

Yvonne Lewis was born July 7, 1918, in Sydney, Australia.¹⁸ Her father, Warwick C. Lewis, was born in England, and he was a hotel manager in Sydney. Her mother was a seamstress and fashion designer.¹⁹

Yvonne attended the [Julian Ashton School of Fine Art](#) in Sydney.²⁰ The daily commute to the school involved several bus rides and a lot of walking for Yvonne.²¹ After she graduated from art school, Yvonne Lewis "worked in the advertising department of the largest department store in Australia." She also created fashion illustrations for an art studio. Later she started her own art studio specializing in fashion illustrations.²²

Something between Wilbur Spreiter and Yvonne Lewis clicked, and they got together whenever Spreiter could get a leave from his unit. They were married by a justice of the peace in Sydney on March 12, 1945.²³ Wilbur Spreiter was almost 32 years old, and Yvonne Lewis was almost 27 years old when they were married, so these were not immature young people doing something rash that they would later regret.



Yvonne (Lewis) and Wilbur Spreiter, 1945

(Courtesy of Robert & Lori Spreiter)

Even though they were married, Wilbur and Yvonne had to defer being together because of the war and the aftermath of the war. Wilbur was still beholden to the Army, and then transportation to the United States was at a premium.

When the Japanese were signing the formal surrender in Tokyo Bay in early September 1945, Wilbur Spreiter was on his way to Kyushu, Japan, to be part of the occupation force. He was stationed at Konoya until November 1st when he got orders to return to the United States for discharge from the Army. The next day, he left on a plane to Osaka. After landing in Osaka, Spreiter and his companions rode a crowded Japanese train with wood board seats to an Army replacement center. Following a five-day wait, they boarded the [USS General Sturgis](#) on November 7 and sailed from Yokohama to the United States.²⁴

It was an 11-day voyage through some very rough weather before Corporal Spreiter arrived in Vancouver, Washington. Following a few days at [Fort Lewis, Washington](#), Spreiter traveled to Wisconsin.²⁵ He was discharged at Camp McCoy on December 1, 1945, after 26 months of service in the Pacific Theater.²⁶

Wilbur Spreiter was home, but his wife was over 9,000 miles away in Australia.

Yvonne Spreiter was preparing to leave her home to live in a country she had never seen. Her mother insisted that she buy a fur coat before leaving because it was certain to be cold in Wisconsin.²⁷

With thousands and thousands of military men and women heading back to the United States after the war, shipping priority went to them.

It was five months before Wilbur and Yvonne were reunited. Yvonne sailed on the [USS David C. Shanks](#) from Sydney to San Francisco, arriving on April 29, 1946.²⁸

At least when Yvonne Spreiter came to the United States, she spoke the language. In Australia, she had been taught "very proper English."²⁹ Coulee Region colloquial English, however, may have taken some getting used to.

The bigger adjustment was the relative size and amenities of their home communities. Yvonne was raised in Sydney, Australia's largest city, with a population of 1.5 million in 1945.³⁰ She left the bright lights of the big city and "came to Hooterville," as her son put it.³¹ The difference is obvious in the following population statistics:

1940:

La Crosse County = 59,653

City of La Crosse = 42,707

City of Onalaska = 1,742

1950:

La Crosse County = 67,587

City of La Crosse = 47,535

City of Onalaska = 2,561³²

Sydney is located on the Pacific Ocean, more specifically the Coral Sea and the Tasman Sea. All Wilbur Spreiter could offer for waterfront views was Lake Onalaska and the Mississippi River.³³ What Yvonne Spreiter thought of our local bodies of water is not recorded.

Yvonne Spreiter, however, was not one to get upset about things she could not control. She knew she would have to be the one to adapt to her life in her new country because the country was not going to change just to please her.³⁴

She made the pages of the *La Crosse Tribune* for her adaption to drinking coffee instead of tea at tea-time. The article included a recipe for her Polo cake.³⁵



—Tribune Photo
“It’s Tea Time” but contrary to convention Mrs. Wilbur Spreiter, Australian bride living in Onalaska, serves coffee to her mother-in-law.

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1946 December 1, page 9)

One thing that made adaptation a little harder was the fact that Wilbur was an only child, and so was Yvonne.³⁶ They did not have the support system that siblings can often provide. Wilbur had his parents in Onalaska, but Yvonne's parents were over 9,000 miles away.³⁷ Overseas telephone calls were expensive, so she communicated with them regularly via airmail.³⁸

A visit from Beryle Jackson, a good friend from Sydney, in 1948 had to be a welcome bit of home for Yvonne. Jackson had worked for the United States Army in the Philippines for the past two years, and after leaving La Crosse planned to see as much of the United States as she could before returning to Australia.³⁹

Because of her unique situation, Yvonne was sought out as a speaker for local organizations. She was the featured speaker at the Worldwide Observance Dinner for the YWCA on March 11, 1947.⁴⁰ One year later, she also spoke at a meeting of the Houston (Minnesota) County PTA.⁴¹

Meanwhile, Wilbur Spreiter was working as a route man for Dolly Madison Dairies.⁴²

**Wilbur Spreiter
Says . . .**

**"I'm happy and
proud to be selling
Dolly Madison
products
because . . .**



" . . . The name Dolly Madison is synonymous with the very finest in dairy products.

"Over the years, my company has always acted in the interests of a bigger and better La Crosse, has always taken an active part in civic activities, and has always seen to it that its customers receive nothing but the finest dairy products.

"Thanks to the feeling of good will that exists between customer and company, and the extensive advertising

done by Dolly Madison to acquaint the public with the merits of our products, they are easy to sell.

"The sale of Dolly Madison products is ever on the increase, which is evidence in itself that the consumer is getting what he wants in dairy products when he depends on Dolly Madison.

"Many of my customers are leaders in civic projects, and have told me of the fine spirit of cooperation by my company, which is certainly gratifying and encouraging."



At Your Dealer or From Your
Friendly Dolly Madison
Route Man.

**Dolly Madison
Dairies**

Phone 3000

(La Crosse Tribune, 1949 June 19, page 8)

Yvonne Spreiter resumed her career as a freelance artist. She recalled years later, "My mother-in-law suggested I learn how to type so that I could get a real job." She approached G. Heileman Brewing Company in 1947 about creating print advertising for them. This led to steady commissions for Spreiter into the 1990s. Spreiter also created fashion illustrations for Doerflinger's in La Crosse and Yost's in Madison. The first Oktoberfest buttons in the 1960s were her work, and she did the illustrations for the Parade of Homes catalogs in the 1980s.⁴³

Yvonne's parents came for a visit in early 1950. Instead of flying or sailing on an ocean liner, they chose a leisurely six-week voyage on the freighter [Lakemba](#) with 43 other passengers. They made stops in the Fiji Islands and Tahiti along the way. When they docked in San Francisco, they were met by Beryle Jackson (Yvonne Spreiter's friend and classmate in Australia who had visited Yvonne in 1948), now the wife of American William Zuckerman. After some sightseeing in San Francisco, they boarded the Lakemba for the final leg of the ocean voyage to Vancouver. They survived a severe storm on the way and then took a train to La Crosse, arriving on January 17. Wilbur and Yvonne were living at 1316 Redfield Street at the time. Mrs. Lewis said the people in La Crosse were friendly, and she was impressed by American women's clothes, especially their costume jewelry. Yvonne's parents stayed in La Crosse for six months. Then they traveled to England for another six months before returning home.⁴⁴



(La Crosse Tribune, 1950 February 5, page 22)

While her parents were still visiting in La Crosse, Yvonne Alice Spreiter became a naturalized citizen of the United States on May 15, 1950.⁴⁵

Yvonne Spreiter went back to Australia only once, and that was in 1965 to visit her mother. She had planned to come back in April 1965, but the massive flood in La Crosse threatened the airport, so she extended her stay in Australia by a few weeks.⁴⁶

By 1953, Wilbur Spreiter was working as a salesman for Farmers Mutual insurance company of Madison, Wisconsin. They were living at 2219 Barlow Street in La Crosse.⁴⁷



(La Crosse Tribune, 1954 June 23, page 16)

Wilbur and Yvonne Spreiter had married relatively later than their peers, and they also became parents relatively later. Their daughter, Janet Anne, was born in 1954 when Yvonne was 35 years old.⁴⁸ Their son [Robert] was born in June 1956.⁴⁹

Wilbur Spreiter owned and operated his own insurance agency, called Spreiter Insurance Agency, by 1956.⁵⁰

By 1963, they had moved to 211 3rd Avenue North in Onalaska.⁵¹ Yvonne was busy with her freelance artwork, and Wilbur operated Spreiter Insurance until about 1970.⁵²

Wilbur was somewhat of a "bookworm."⁵³ Yvonne was more active in the community. She was a member of the Toastmistress Club, Business and Professional Women, Advertising Club of La Crosse, Onalaska Area Historical Society, Centering Onalaska, Onalaska Area Business Association, La Crosse Society of Arts & Crafts, and Eastbank Artists.⁵⁴

Yvonne was working as an artist for La Crosse Printing and Wilbur was still in the insurance business when they decided to start Spreiter Art & Advertising in 1969.⁵⁵ They operated that business for many years.⁵⁶

While Wilbur and Yvonne Spreiter had created a successful life and business partnership, not all war brides were so fortunate.

In June 1945, several Australian war brides told a reporter that they were going to the United States just to establish residency before divorcing their American G.I. husbands. One of the women said "her husband was moved to a forward area two months after their marriage and since had returned to America. Three months ago he wrote, she said, that he had found another girl and the marriage had been a mistake."⁵⁷

It was not only the American men who sometimes thought they had made a mistake. In December 1945, Harold Carbone, a discharged veteran, and student at the University of Rochester, New York, saw a photo in the Rochester newspaper of his nineteen-year-old British war bride, Jean Gloor Carbone, getting off a plane in Chicago. He asked for help from the Red Cross to get in touch with her. Mrs.

Carbone was located in Dubuque, Iowa, with Capt. Darrel Beschen, a "25-year-old veteran of 65 bomber missions over Germany." Harold and Jean Carbone had gotten married in late 1944 in England before Lt. Carbone had returned to the United States. Mrs. Carbone came to the United States in late November 1945 to ask Mr. Carbone for a divorce so she could marry Capt. Beschen, whom she had met in London in January 1945 after her husband had left England.⁵⁸

Sometimes the homesickness and culture shock was just too much to endure. In October 1945, more than 50 Australian war brides returned to Australia. Betty Schultz said, "The American women resented us and were always saying we pinched (stole) their men." Margaret MacDonald called America "likeable but the people are dreadful . . . Everyone rushes around like lightning and after the quiet life in Australia America is absolute bedlam." "Everything in America is fast and everyone is selfish. . . . The pace of living and playing gets on Aussie nerves," said Joan Balboni.⁵⁹

Other women faced even greater obstacles, including the language barrier and having once been "the enemy." In September 1945, the American military government in Germany policy was no billeting of troops in German homes and no permission for marriages between occupation soldiers and Germans. All the other restrictions against fraternization, however, were lifted.⁶⁰ But fraternization inevitably led to relationships, and the no-marriage policy could not stand. More than 14,000 German women would marry American GIs and come back to the United States with their husbands between 1945 and 1950.⁶¹ The approximately 13,000 Japanese women who married American servicemen during the occupation of Japan and the Korean War came to the racially-segregated United States, so they had an even harder time fitting into the mold of the perfect American housewife.⁶²

Unlike some of the "war bride" marriages, Wilber and Yvonne Spreiter were together until, as the marriage vows state, death did they part.

Wilbur (Bill) Spreiter was 87 years old when he died on June 30, 2001, in the Onalaska Care Center.⁶³



Spreiter

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 2001 July 1, page B-5)

Yvonne Spreiter continued her work as an artist and was well-known in the community for the quality of her artwork. In 2003, a painting that she did in a week, entitled "Cascade of Peonies II," won an award at the Wisconsin Regional Arts Program annual state exhibition. It was the first time she had ever entered one of her pieces in a juried competition.⁶⁴

In June 2007, shortly before her 89th birthday, Yvonne's friends organized a retrospective display of her artwork at the Pump House. It included fashion sketches, commercial advertising projects, and watercolors of flowers and landscapes. Travis Forner of Sage Advertising in Trempealeau called it "the most impressive work I've ever seen . . ." Joan Nee, another La Crosse artist who helped put the show together said, "Everything she executed was awesome."⁶⁵

Less than a year later, Yvonne Spreiter, the big-city Australian artist who married an American GI from Onalaska during World War II, died on April 1, 2008, at the Gundersen Medical Center in La Crosse. She was survived by her daughter, Janet, and son, Robert (Lori), both of Onalaska.⁶⁶



Yvonne Spreiter with her art show at the Pump House, 2007

(Onalaska Holmen Courier Life, 2007 June 21)

The American GIs who went overseas during World War II were thrust into different cultures in far-flung countries far from their homes. They had to adapt to their environs while fighting a war for the survival of their way of life. When they married foreign women and brought them back to the United States, the roles reversed. The women had to adapt to their new environs and create a new way of life. Wilbur and Yvonne Spreiter were a case study in how that could turn out very well.

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²⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2008 April 3.

²¹ Robert Spreiter, telephone interview with the author, 2020 December 12. Robert Spreiter is the son of Wilbur and Yvonne Spreiter.

²² *La Crosse Tribune*, 2008 April 3.

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- ⁵⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2008 April 3.
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