



Making Waves

A tribute to Fern Blodgett Sunde - a true trailblazer

by Lynn C. Bilton, Cobourg, Ont

If ever there was an ideal plot for a blockbuster movie, it is the life story of Fern Blodgett Sunde. There is little mention of her in history books, yet she blazed a bright path for future generations of women to follow.

Fern Blodgett was born in 1918 and moved to Cobourg, Ontario with her family at a young age, from Regina, Saskatchewan. She was drawn to the Lake Ontario shoreline, where she was fascinated by passing boats. When war was declared in 1939, her sense of duty compelled her to sign up for a wireless operator course. She was refused admittance to the first two training schools she applied to but was accepted by the third.

Upon the completion of her course, after eighteen months of night school (Fern worked as a stenographer during the day in Toronto), she travelled to Montreal and applied for a position as a wireless operator aboard the M/S Mosdale, a Norwegian merchant ship / food carrier. Captain

Gerner Sunde was surprised to discover a woman among the applicants. Fern was a qualified and determined young woman, with her Second-Class Wireless Operator's Certificate in hand. Once hired, she became the first woman to ever hold that position. Canada and Britain did not allow women aboard warships at sea. Norwegians, however, did not have that restriction.

There were many hurdles she faced along the way. Not only was she working in cramped quarters and learning a new language, she was the only woman aboard - and seasick to boot. The nickname for any operator was "Sparks", and it so perfectly described Fern.

Her work consisted of "listening" non-stop on the ship's radio for coded messages received in different combinations of short, medium and long waves. Accuracy was es-



sential. The pay for this life-threatening occupation was \$170 per month, plus her board. Her home was a tiny cabin in a three-thousand-ton freighter. Her travelling companions were a crew of 35 men and from time to time, up to twelve passengers. Eventually two more radio operators were added to the crew.

The Mosdale sailed a total of 96 transatlantic voyages. Fern travelled on a staggering 78 of those sailings. We will never know the number of times the Mosdale was threatened and how many times their voyage through dangerous waters would lead Fern to re-consider her life's work.

Now here is the fairy-tale twist: When Fern and Captain Gerner Sunde first met, she was twenty-two and he was thirty-one. He was tall, blonde and Hollywood-handsome. Fern and Gerner fell in love and they were married in Saint John, New Brunswick, one year later. No white picket fence for this young lady, however, Fern moved into the Captain's quarters and they set up their first home - at sea!

In 1943, Fern was the first woman to receive the Norwegian War Medal. In 1952, she retired and settled in her husband's hometown of Farsund, Norway, where the couple would go on to raise two daughters. Sadly, Gerner died in 1962.

Fern's accomplishments at sea, during World War II, caught the attention of Cobourg resident Leona Woods, who assembled a dedicated committee to honour Fern's legacy. In the midst of a global pan-

demic, a statue was unveiled on the beach in Victoria Park, a location chosen with considerable care.

"Making Waves," The Fern Blodgett Sunde Monument, created by Ontario sculptor Tyler Fauvelle, is an inspirational tribute to this valiant woman. During the solemn ceremony held on Saturday, October 17, 2020, a Canadian Coast Guard vessel (anchored just off shore), and its entire crew, stood at attention.

Leona Woods states "Fern was a Cobourg girl whose story is of national and international importance. She connects Canada with her ally Norway. She represents the veterans who participated in the Battle of the Atlantic. She speaks to the need for us to continue working for gender equality, and respect for all people in our society."

Bravo to the courageous Fern Blodgett Sunde, who indeed did make waves! ■

From left to right: Fern and Gerner on board the M/S Mosdale; The beautiful couple photographed at their wedding in 1942; The Fern Blodgett Sunde Monument at Victoria Park, Cobourg.

