



OBON SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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Pearl Harbor Stories

J.C. England: Part Three

As soon as the ship docked in Los Angeles, Helen grabbed baby Vicky and her luggage and hurried to her in-laws' house. She was eager to hear the latest news from J.C. but was shocked to learn that he hadn't sent any telegrams.



Baby Vicky

The family complained to the Navy, questioning why J.C.'s messages weren't arriving and whether he was even receiving their telegrams. The Navy had no answers.

Days passed. A week passed.

The newspapers were filled with news about the war, but there was no word from J.C. These were grim days.

Their worst fears were confirmed the day a letter arrived from Admiral Nimitz. He informed the family that J.C. was missing and presumed dead.

The gloom and grief that filled the house throughout December of 1941 was nearly unbearable. The first couple months of 1942 felt like living in a mortuary. Helen and baby Vicky were loved and well cared for by the Englands, but their world was turned upside down.

Helen's life had already been tragic—she was orphaned by the age of sixteen, and now, before she was even 21, she was a widow with a child.



J.C.'s mother with baby
Vicky

One day, a college friend of Helen's visited the house. Her bright smile, beauty, and warm presence brought a much-needed ray of sunshine. Seeing Helen's need for a break, she invited her to a "girls' night out."

J.C.'s parents welcomed the idea and offered to care for baby Vicky.

Helen's friend was stunning, a model for department stores in downtown Los Angeles. With Helen at her side, the two women turned heads wherever they went. For the first time in over a year, Helen felt alive. They had a ball that night.

The friend informed Helen that she had an invitation to model in New York but was hesitant to go there alone. Helen was intrigued. J.C.'s parents encouraged Helen to go; they would watch baby Vicky for several weeks so she could accompany her friend on a cross-country railroad trip.



New York City; c. 1942

Helen felt so alive. She was seeing new things that she had only seen in magazines. In New York, these two California women turned every head exactly like they had done in L.A. It was not long before Helen caught the eye of one special young man whose father was a top executive at Standard Oil.

Things happened quickly. Bill Jennings was smitten. He immediately broke off his engagement and married Helen.

From now on, Helen wore only tailored clothes and had manicures twice a week. Domestic servants did the cooking and cleaning. Helen's job was to accompany her husband and be charming, well-mannered, and a perfect conversationalist at frequent social events. With her Hollywood-starlet looks and the prestigious Jennings name, Helen quickly became part of New York's high society.



Helen

Bill and Helen had decided to keep Helen's past life a secret from his family, but this plan was turned upside down in the autumn of 1943 when a car full of Navy officers appeared at the family house.

The officers were there on an official mission: to deliver a message to the widow of J.C. England. Helen was invited to the christening of a new Navy ship, the *USS England*, named in honor of her heroic first husband.

The Jennings family was shocked by the revelation but felt honored and proud that Helen had been married to a Navy hero. When they learned about baby Vicky, they insisted she be brought to New York to be part of the family.



USS England



Vicky

Vicky soon forgot her early years in California, embracing life in New York's high society. Her memories were filled with weekends in Cold Spring Harbor, summers at camp in upstate New York, and boarding school in Connecticut.

During one spring break from school, Vicky was alone at their New Jersey estate admiring her mother's large closet full of silk and fur. She was 15 and exceptionally tall for her age. She stood in front of the mirror holding up each dress from the large collection of gowns and dreamed about the day she would wear such finery.

She noticed several old cardboard boxes in the corner of the closet. They seemed out of place. Upon inspection, Vicky discovered old photos and letters between her mother and another man.

It was at that moment when Vicky discovered the existence of J.C. England. She was horrified to discover that Bill Jennings was not her father. This changed everything between Helen and Vicky. Their feelings would never be the same.

Vicky remained in New York to finish school, but her trust and relationship with Helen was severely damaged and would never be the same.



Vicky finishing private