

# FERN BLODGETT

## THE MERCHANT MARINE

### PIONEER AND CAPTAIN'S WIFE

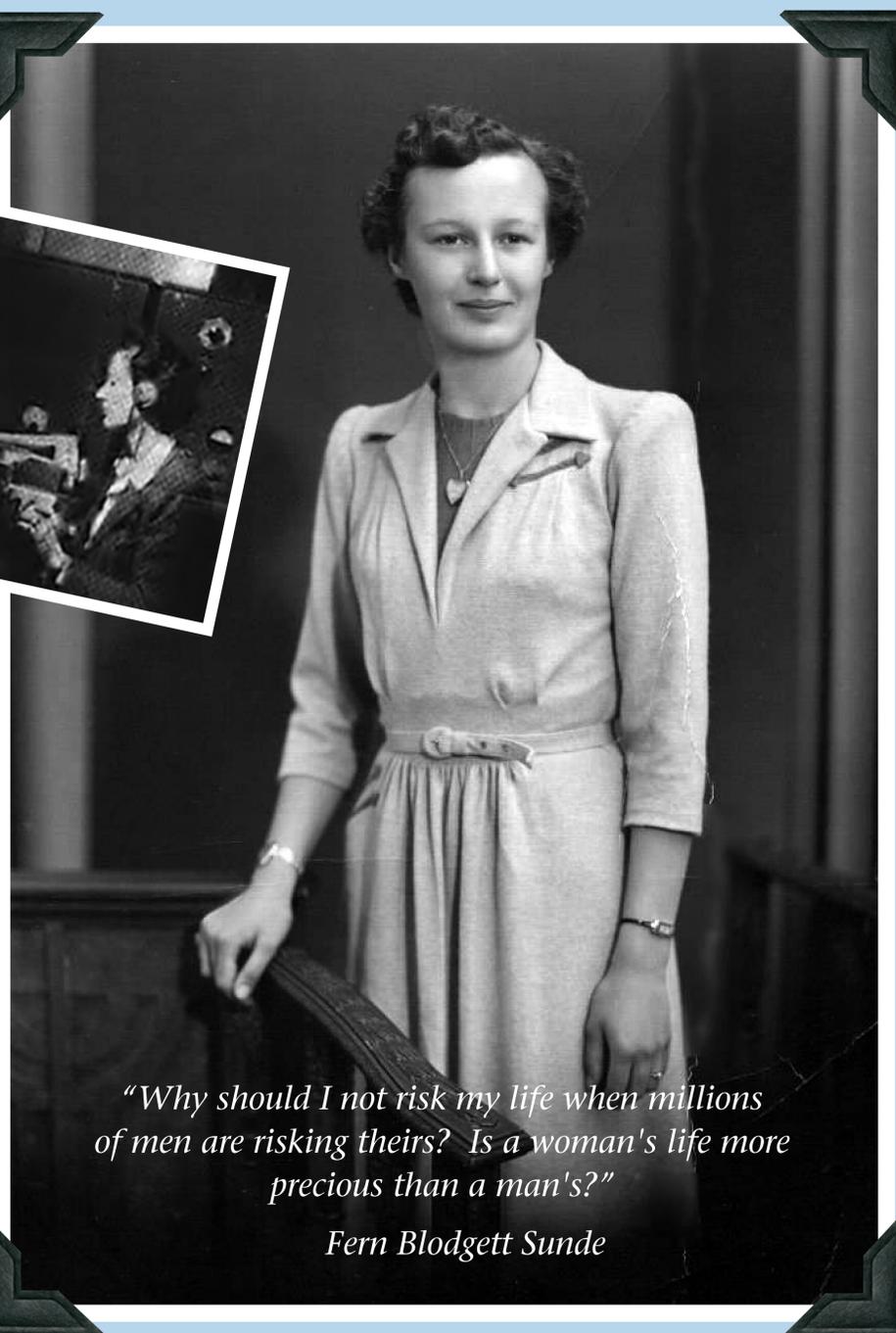
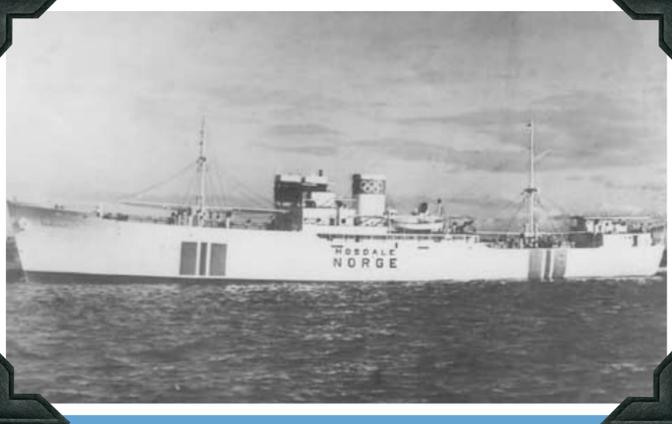
As she watched the ships sailing on Lake Ontario in Cobourg, Fern Blodgett dreamed of becoming a sailor and travelling the world, a career path not an option for women growing up in the 1920s and 30s.

When the war broke out in 1939, Fern was working for a large manufacturing firm in Toronto as a stenographer, but she never gave up on her childhood dream. She heard that the Merchant Marine was looking for wireless radio operators or Sparks (named after the spark-gap radios used to transmit Morse code). Determined to obtain the necessary training, she applied to three schools before being accepted. Taking night classes while continuing her employment as a stenographer, it took Fern eighteen months to complete the training, but on successfully writing her exams she became the first woman in Canada to get her wireless radio operator's license.

Fern had shared with the principal of the radio school her dream of sailing. On the very day her license came in the mail, the principal called. He asked if she was serious about being a radio operator aboard a ship because there was an opening on the fruit vessel *Mosdale* docked in Montreal. Fern didn't waste any time and was on a train to Montreal that night. You can well imagine the shocked reaction of the authorities when they saw F. Blodgett was a woman! Captain Gerner Sunde was desperate for a radio operator and decided to accept Fern on board. On June 13, 1941, aboard the *M/S Mosdale*, Fern Blodgett became the first Canadian woman in the Merchant Marine.

Romance flourished on board and Fern married Captain Gerner Sunde in 1942. Also in 1942, Fern was presented with the Norwegian War Medal, the first woman to receive this prestigious award. She finished the war as the *Mosdale's* Mrs. Sparks and stayed with the ship another 6 months before settling down in Kjorestad, Norway.

*The Mosdale was a 3,000 ton ship with a crew of 35, capable of speeds of 15 knots, a real benefit when being chased by German U-boats. This ship made 98 Atlantic crossings and Fern Blodgett was on board for 78 of them. Of the six Norwegian fruit carriers, the Mosdale was the only one to survive.*



*"Why should I not risk my life when millions of men are risking theirs? Is a woman's life more precious than a man's?"*

*Fern Blodgett Sunde*

When Captain Sunde died suddenly of a heart attack, she was left with two daughters to raise. Fern remained in her adopted homeland and earned a medal from the city of Farsund for the distinction she brought to it. She died in 1991, a true Canadian heroine.