



Mr. Graham Dalton found me performing *Always* in one of the ornate movie theaters where I performed as a ballad singer. The Gates and The Commodore each had a stage, heavy velvet curtains and I sang popular ballads as part of a Lions show. Mr. Dalton saw me perform, called me and asked if I would like to sing in a *show he was putting on*. I agreed. He gave me instructions as to where I should meet up with the group, the date and time, then said he would see me there. And Oh, I was to bring an evening dress and accessories like earrings and necklaces, etc.

A few days later I packed my little case, took the bus to Portsmouth, a ferry to Norfolk, walked through the arcade and the few blocks to Bousch St. where the Navy Y was located. He and the rest of the group were all there and we boarded a bus. I soon realized we were headed to the Norfolk Navy Base. Mr. Dalton came to where I was seated and told me where we were going. "We are a U.S.O. show" he said, "and we're going out on the Bay to do a show on a cruiser for the guys who can't get Liberty – it's fun, you'll enjoy it. I want you to sing *Always* exactly like you sang it at the Commodore. Don't worry, Mickey will follow you (on piano) – she's great!" It was as simple as that!

We reached our destination after the usual security checks, got off the bus and onto a boat that carried us out onto the Chesapeake Bay

to a huge grey ship with numbers painted on the bow. The sailor pulled our boat next to what looked like a huge net hanging off the side of the ship and we were told to "disembark." Well our little craft was filled mostly with girls in high heeled shoes and dresses – the attire of every girl during that period. I'll leave it to your imagination the picture of us climbing up that ladder rope with a bunch of sailors hanging over the side, whistling and shouting! But we did it...much to the satisfaction of all the onlookers!

It was Summer and the show was given on deck. I don't remember whether it was the bow or stern. The girls (dancers mostly) were seasoned performers and very helpful as they explained the routine that obviously they knew well and said I should just wait until they told me when to get ready to sing. We were all hidden from the crew. The girls all danced on the steel deck, a line of about eight and they had two costume changes one for "tap" and one for "hula". I was offstage, then one of the girls they called Evie said, "Ella, get ready, you're next" and I walked to within earshot to hear Graham say, "Here she is boys, Ella Grimes! Now eat your heart out!" I walked out smiling the breeze rustling my yellow gown, to a sea of sailors sitting, standing wherever there was room, even straddling the gun emplacements. They clapped and whistled and yelled until Mickey began the introduction to *Always* on the piano. I can picture this as clearly as if it were yesterday. They quieted down and I began to sing into the microphone...the verse of the song Irving Berlin had written for his wife. Then the mood of the song changes and I began to sing the chorus:

*I'll be loving you...always. With a love that's true, always. When the things you've planned, need a helping hand, I will understand, always, always. Days may not be fair, always, that's when I'll be there, always. Not for just an hour, not for just a day, not for just a year, but always.*

When I finished the song, I couldn't believe the reaction! They whistled, they shouted they stood up and yelled "More! More!" as only servicemen at a U.S.O. show can do! I was completely overwhelmed and all I could do was stand there smiling...until, without thinking, I put both hands to my lips and threw out a kiss, which only made them whistle and clap more. Graham walked over to where I stood, put his arm around my shoulder and said into the mike "Ain't she sumpin'?" I made my way back to where the girls were and they were hugging me and saying nice things while running out to the stage for their next dance number. The rest was a blur, leaving the ship, climbing down the rope to the boat to shore and back to the bus that was waiting for us at the Naval Base. Graham came and sat with me and said he wanted me to be part of their show, explaining that it was a big commitment, but a very important part of the War Effort. Of course, I said, "Yes!" and that was how I started singing in the U.S.O.

I was 18 years old.