

A Diary of Breast Cancer

By Marjorie K. Olmsted

Forty years ago, a mastectomy was an awkward subject that did not come up in conversation. It was definitely hush-hush

It has been 36 years since I had a mastectomy.

Back then, breast cancer did not receive the publicity it gets today – in fact, it was almost an unmentionable malady. Gradually, thanks to many prominent women, movie stars, women’s groups and cancer societies – it has assumed its place in the light of day. High time, too.

In 1960 my husband, a member of the Canadian Army, was transferred to Madison, Wisconsin. We were posted to the Truax Air Base.

While we were packing that November, I discovered a lump in my breast. I went to an Ottawa doctor, who said that because I had had three previous benign breast biopsies it would be all right to have the lump checked after we had settled in the States.

Bad advice.

We arrived in Madison on New Year’s Day 1961 with our four children (two girls and two boys) ranging in age from five years to 16. We checked into a motel after a long, tiring winter drive from Ottawa. It would be about two weeks before our furniture arrived to fill the large house we had rented.

Then we started “getting settled” – organizing furniture, cupboards, groceries, schools, services and so on – something we had done many, many times in the course of army life. More time went by and I experienced no pain in my breast.

Although early diagnosis and treatment are crucial, it wasn’t until four months later that I made an appointment with doctors at Truax. After that, things moved swiftly. The air base doctor booked an appointment with a prominent surgeon in the city. Surgery was scheduled immediately, although it took three weeks to find me a bed in the Madison General.

Spring is beautiful in Wisconsin. That year, a huge crabapple tree on our front lawn was in full bloom. We had a large property and garden at the back, with 30 feet or well-established strawberry plants, blooming shrubs and huge poplar trees marking off the back of our grounds.

On Mother’s Day we had a little “party” at which my daughters gave me some pale blue beads and earrings. Very small details, as is the fact that when I left the next morning for the Madison General, I took a branch from the flowering almond bush at our front door, for moral support. I hoped I would have a benign biopsy.

I was not to be home for three weeks.

When I woke up from the anesthetic I was told that my breast had been removed. (The test results left no choice.) The surgeon had also removed all lymph glands in the area. I remember everything as though it were yesterday – including the many visitors who checked up on my roommate, who had been thrown through a car window. Because I was a newcomer to the city, I received few visitors.

This is not the end of my ordeal. One day my doctor stopped in to tell me that a day or two later I would be “going up for more surgery.” I thought he was joking. One week

after my first surgery he performed an ovariectomy and an appendectomy. (Removing my appendix had not been a necessity. He merely said he had removed it “because it was in the area.”) I was relieved, I told him later, that at least he had left my tonsils. He had felt, at my age, that surgery was necessary to curtail any further hormonal action. Although I was thrust into menopause at age 44, I was not allowed to receive any hormones for the side effects. I have had no hormones since. Blood transfusions and intravenous feedings were followed by soft foods and then a diet that included the famous Wisconsin bratwurst. At the hospital, I began radiation treatments.

Summertime in Madison proved most therapeutic. My family and the garden looked mighty good after my hospital stay. The long rows of strawberry plants kept us busy. Asparagus was great, and we had a bumper crop of black currants and red ones, too. Flowers spilled over our pathways and were a constant delight.

My new neighbours were also fantastic. In no time I was “the new Canadian wife who was just out of hospital.” I will never forget their many kindnesses.

During the long weeks of radiation treatments I found I was really among friends, despite being so far from home and relative.

In the 1960’s breast cancer did not come up in conversation. I didn’t discuss it except with a few close neighbours – and with one especially who had recently undergone breast surgery. I didn’t feel very chatty about it, anyway. It is an awkward subject – even my own family avoided direct mention of personal details. The situation was definitely hush-hush.

At a checkup for months after my mastectomy, the doctor detected a small lump in the same area. I had to return to the hospital. It turned out to be adhesions from the initial surgery – nothing ending in “ectomy,” thank goodness.

Nor will I forget Dr. Fred Joachim, to whom I owe my good fortune in recover. It was a stroke of luck that I was put into his care – he led my life from darkness into sunshine. I later heard him described as one of Madison’s finest surgeons. We became “bosom pals” during my frequent checkups. He told me to treat myself to some new clothes, and grinned when I said I would by a “single-breasted suit.” He prescribed golf games, in addition to a list of recommended exercises. No “slow boat to China” for convalescing. He also suggested I find a new interest or hobby.

The word “prosthesis” also came up – and the need to fill the other half of my bra. At no time during our discussion did my doctor hint about an “implant.” No doubt, in 1961 such things had not been heard of – a blessing in disguise.

Discussing the assortment of “stuffings” I used is like a Highlander revealing what he wears beneath his kilt. They were makeshift, but did the trick. To go home from the hospital, I used a small bundle of soft tissues. Not long after, I managed to get a plastic breast form that was filled with air. I was forced to carry a straw, just in case the wind went out of my sails, so to speak.

The air-filled breast form was useful, in more ways than one. On hot afternoons, I had to accompany my youngest son to the nearby beach. I was forced to wear a bathing suit so I could join him in the water. With a few well-placed safety pins in the cotton covering of the air form, I wiggled into my bathing suit and faced the world. Wonder of wonders, I

found I could float better than ever before. An extra bonus: The cool water and sunshine helped me immeasurably.

Later I was fitted with a heavy glubby shaped fabric pouch. It was rumoured to be filled with birdseed, but this was never proven. This was soon replaced by a nicely shaped rubber product, which was very hot in summer.

Over the years, there have been great improvements in the breast prosthesis. Fittings may be had at friendly little shops, listed in the Yellow Pages. I have found the forms to be most comfortable when worn with a proper-fitting bra – or a special bathing suit if need be.

During my ordeal, I struggled with very lonely, very sad days. My doctor had warned me about depression, thank God. Hot flashes mingled with warm summer breezes, day and night. By the time the dark gloomy days of November arrived, I found it helped to turn on extra lamps and keep music playing on the radio. A few daytime TV programs like I Love Lucy and The Bob Cummings Show helped immeasurably. Evenings at the movies also provided a great escape, especially during radiation treatments.

Phone calls and letters to relative in Canada helped a lot. Freelance writing had been my hobby, now I found it too solitary and lonely an occupation. I no longer enjoyed spending time with my portable typewriter. By a wonderful quirk of fate, an American wife at the air base invited me to evening art classes. A terrific art teacher soon had us enthralled, and it proved to be great therapy.

I remember looking out the kitchen window one winter day after the children had gone to school. As I wondered which shade of blue would be best for the shadows on the snow, some of my own shadows began to disappear. I made new friends in my new world of pastels, inks, oils and acrylics – and later, water-colours. I was one of the first in the class to sign up for the next semester.

I spent many happy and productive hours painting, and it continues to be a source of delight. Gradually I resumed writing, my first love. I tried children's stories, poetry, women's articles, travel pieces (from army postings) and it was fun to see them published. Humour and poetry became my favourites, and as a result I did considerable public speaking and tried my hand at standup comedy. At no time did I ever feel self-conscious about my breast. I considered myself extremely lucky. Contrary to current thinking, I did not feel that breasts and self-esteem were linked.

No long ago it was announced on TV that a "harmless" oil was being used in breast implants. Within a few days I heard that a number of women had volunteered for this new procedure. I wish them well. "Structural enhancement" is not for me. It puzzles my why a woman who has had a mastectomy would consider having an implant for a breast or any part thereof. I have never seen a woman who has had this type of surgery – nor do I know such a woman. Apart from vanity, who would want one? Quit while you're ahead, I say, health should be the only consideration.

I must admit that being in a sauna or shower room with other women is not my best effort. Towels come in an assortment of gorgeous colours, and I can use one to advantage. Fortunately I am rarely in these places, nor am I the type to enter a wet T-shirt contests.

Needless to say I had many, many checkups before we left Wisconsin in the summer of 1963. It had been our last posting away from Canada after many army assignments since

the beginning of the Second World War. It was not easy for my family to have an invalid mother, during their formative years. I was not always able to give them support or guidance. We all missed family and relatives and old friends, but Madison did become a home away from home.

I like to think the breast I lost helped medical researchers at the University of Wisconsin in their long, long search to end what is a scourge to women everywhere. Many wonderful women have been lost through breast cancer to their families, to their friends and to the world – and to me personally. This article is for them.