

## REMEMBRANCE DAY

by Diane K.

(July 2012)

Sometimes I feel that I am the last surviving casualty of the First World War. One hundred and seventy-five thousand wounded returned from the war to end all wars. My story is unique.

No, I wasn't there. My Dad was.

At the Battle of Vimy Ridge he was a Captain with the 4th. Division, Canadian Forces. At Vimy, during the battle as he lead his troops into the foray, he fell. His appendix had burst.

He had been warned by the medic the night before that he should not go into battle because his appendix was very tender. He said something to the effect "no way. I'm leading my men up the Ridge in battle".

It's a wonder he didn't die.

Somehow they cleaned him up at a field hospital and sent him back to England to recuperate. I remember he was very impressed with the country place he stayed at. He often talked about Blanche Davidson at Bolney Place in Surrey. Anyway he recuperated and back he went to France. He stayed fighting in the trenches and battlefields until the Armistice was signed. There's a picture somewhere of Dad being marched into Buckingham Palace to receive a medal. He won both the Distinguished Service Order and the Military Cross.

Back home he got to work as a book keeper and eventually a traveling salesman. And he got married. Meanwhile he took on the army reserve position of Commanding Officer of the Northern Pioneers. He even had a son. I'm told Mom and Dad made an outstandingly attractive couple. Mom was a lively beauty with dark flashing eyes and thick curly black hair. Only her very fair skin denied a possible gypsy heritage. Dad ( who by now was a lieutenant colonel ) had a tall straight military body, sharp hazel eyes and hair the colour of burnished copper.

However, Vimy caught up with him. He ended up in Christie Street Hospital; the Veteran's hospital in Toronto. The peritonitis from the burst appendix obviously had not been completely cleaned out and was beginning to attack his spinal column.

This began a lifelong series of medical interventions from 1925 to 1952. Perhaps today with stem cells something could have been done for Dad but back then it was just a slow downward slide of physical deterioration, diminishing hope and growing anger. His anger was probably the gist of his indomitable strength. Certainly it overshadowed expressions of love or humor. But there's an exception to everything. Dad could wiggle his ears. On the rare occasions he did it we folded over in laughter.

Dad was not an easy man to live with.

But the Canadian government did its best to make up for Dad's loss, and ours. When Dad became too disabled to work he was given an officer's pension. He was also given funds to hire an assistant to help him get around. And, after he died Mother received a life time military widow's pension from the Department of Veteran's Affairs.

Dad died when I was in first year university. The family had struggled to pull together enough money for my tuition fees. Within weeks of Dad's death I received a letter from the Department of Veteran's Affairs saying that under the newly passed piece of Canadian legislation called 'The Children of the War Dead Act' I was eligible for university tuition and a living allowance as long as I was in university. I was stunned, surprised and terribly pleased. I was able to complete a four year B.A. at McMaster University studying Geography. And, I was able to go on to the University of Toronto and study for my Master's degree in Social Work. Each year in early November as I put folding money in the Poppy seller's box I tell him or her the Poppy Fund paid for my text books at University.

I was always proud of Dad. After all, his medals hung in the front hall in a velvet backed frame announcing 'this is the home of a hero'.

When I was a youngster the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month was known as The Armistice - the day - Armistice Day.

My mind holds precious one Armistice Day when I was about twelve; an awkward tomboy in a piecemeal girl guide uniform (with a run down the back of my black stockings ). I was chosen to be flag bearer for the day's ceremony at the high school auditorium. Chosen, no doubt because Dad was scheduled to be the Master of Ceremonies. So there I stood outside the doors of the auditorium holding the Union Jack on its pole in a leather flag holder slung from my shoulder. At my back were two girl guides standing as colour party guards. Suddenly the auditorium doors opened, a piano played Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance' and we marched down the centre aisle of the hall, in front of Dad who was there in his wheel chair, his medals on his chest. We walked to the side of the stage and I stood at rigid attention prouder than any other time in my life. ( I never walked down an aisle as a bride but I'm sure if I did I wouldn't feel any prouder.)

Back in 1931 during one particularly serious medical intervention at Montreal Neurological Hospital in the hands of Dr. Wilder Penfield Dad and Mom who by then had a daughter too, were told not to have any more children. I don't know if they were told why. In hindsight it is easy to see it was because at the time x-ray was in its infancy and they were using a lot of it on Dad. Even back then they had some ideas of the genetic harmfulness of x-ray.

But, in their lovingness they had a third child. Me. They thought they had a daughter. Not until - but that's another story.

It was not until I was 59 years old (1981) that the secret began to surface.

All I knew as I grew up was that I didn't menstruate. I was different from any other girl. There was a secret that no one would talk about. I figured it must be the worst of the most awful things. As young kids do, I put it aside deep into my subconscious. But of course even without conscious attention the idea took seed and grew over the decades. I was not a 'real' person. Slowly I began to think of myself as 'throw-away-person'.

The real score we now know is that the extensive x-rays Dad had before my conception damaged his DNA which in turn produced a damaged Y sex chromosome. I was supposed to be born a boy. The result was when I was an embryo about six weeks old the male hormones which were supposed to act upon my body starting my development as a boy found all the cells in my body insensitive to male hormonal action. The condition is called Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome. Thus my development continued without any hormonal input. So at six weeks I started my development in what is called the 'default position'. The 'default position' developmentally is called female 'phenotype'. This means I looked like a female. However, hidden inside were small testicles instead of a uterus.<sup>1</sup>

That was me.

What I didn't know was the doctors removed small descending testicles when I was three years old. What Mom and Dad and the doctors actually knew (then in 1935) I don't know. No one ever talked about it. In those days people didn't talk about such things. Someone called the operation a 'double hernia'.

Eventually, when I was eighteen, my Mother got me to a doctor who sent me to a gynecologist. The gynecologist blurred the diagnosis when talking to me. He referred to something about no ovaries and a miniature uterus and I should come back and see him before I got married. I gather he told Mother more when I wasn't there. I do know that somewhere in the medical records of these diagnostic visits it was written that I should not be told the real information. It stated that the real facts could cause severe psychological problems. I actually saw that record when I was around 57 - - shown to me by a wise and caring G.P. who didn't believe in the 'psychological problems' theory.

But most of my adulthood was dominated by the fact that there was a profound secret about me I didn't know. And with my underdeveloped gynecological situation I shouldn't mess around trying to have sex.

---

<sup>1</sup> AISSG UK commented: "The only thing that worries me a bit is that you talk of the x-rays damaging your Dad's Y chromosome etc. but the mutation that causes AIS is on the X chromosome, usually inherited from the mother. If it was a problem on the Y, then this would suggest a condition like XY gonadal dysgenesis (Swyer syndrome) in which the gonads don't really form at all (just streaks). The tissues can respond but there are no testicular hormones for them to respond to. So in a sense you are mixing two separate diagnoses by talking of a problem with the Y and insensitivity. I don't know what your thoughts are, maybe you have some medical documentation on this?" Diane replied: "Regarding the diagnosis - - no I don't have any documentation. I do know the testicles were more than 'streaks' as they descended and were removed at age 3. Will try to do some investigation however - - the facts whatever they were have been lived and I have come to terms with the results so I have little enthusiasm for the pursuit. But I still have some curiosity for the real facts."

Listing the innumerable ways I manipulated my life to avoid this 'secret' would take too many pages. I took many turns that led me away from living a full life. Like Dad, my 'casualty' led to anger. Whenever I recognized it ( because I held it largely in my subconscious) I called the anger 'angst' That angst led to a strong poetic flair expressed in a collection called 'Silk Purse Poems'. Found at [Silkpursepoems.ca](http://Silkpursepoems.ca). It's an old saying 'you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear'. I hope I proved that saying wrong. Out of confusion and despair can come beauty.

My eventual release from that secret at the age of fifty-seven began when that wonderful G.P. gave me a medical term for my condition. But the real release came through cyber space. My partner found through the internet a world wide support group for women with similar developmental challenges.

Contact with these women blew my mind. I was wild with happiness. I was no longer alone in my physical strangeness. There were other Dianes out there. My happiness went into triple overdrive. And, actually meeting them face to face opened the gates to full person hood - a magnificent sunrise over what once was a seriously troubled life. And at a convention of endocrinological nurses I received a standing ovation after giving a talk on what it was like to grow up with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome. I was no longer a 'throw away person'.

This was my Armistice.

So every Remembrance Day I don a poppy. The most symbolic act of my life.

Dad, I salute you - the hero of our family.

I think I deserve a salute too.