

The War Bride

During the Second World War, thousands of American troops were stationed overseas, particularly in Great Britain, or the United Kingdom. Even before the enormous buildup of troops prior to D-Day, the U.S. Army had a large Air Force based there to fly bombers and fighters over occupied Europe and Germany from the middle of 1942 through the end of the war. Together, the U.S. and British constructed or improved over 140 airbases in Britain. That effort led to joking descriptions of the island nation as “the world’s largest aircraft carrier.”

Most of the young Americans stationed on those bases were in their late teens and early twenties, away from their homes for the first time, in a country that shared their language. Naturally, that they met British, Scottish and Irish girls, fell in love and married them. After the war, they brought their wives home to the U.S. where the newspapers, radio and movie-news greeted them as “War Brides. “

Norma was a recent widow just beginning her recovery from a diagnosis of terminal cancer. She and her husband had both moved to a local nursing home where they expected to die. When her husband died, Norma phoned her son and told him she was leaving the nursing home. If she was going to die, she did not want her life to end in a nursing home. Her son came that day to take Norma home to live with his family.

I met Norma on her first day outside the house. Spring in the Valley is warm but the temperature had dropped into the high seventies after the sun went down behind the palm trees. Because she hadn't been out of chemotherapy long, she still avoided direct sunlight. She wore a robe, and I could see only a little bit of reddish hair on her head. She took careful, hesitant steps with a walker in the cul-de-sac in front of our home. I walked out to meet her, introduced myself, and we talked. My wife came out to join us and to meet Norma as well. The two women took to each other instantly and in a short time became good friends.

Norma suffered a moment of embarrassment when she realized she was meeting new neighbors in her bathrobe. She pulled the robe a little closer around her and said, "I don't usually meet new neighbors in my bathrobe!"

A warm, mischievous look sparkled in her eyes. She realized this was a new experience, and the old rules didn't matter any more. Her life had been turned upside down and she was still righting it. Now she could make new rules. "But why not?"

I thought that in that moment she stopped being a cancer victim and started being a survivor. In reality, the process probably took longer, but it was a moment I remember.

After all the years of raising and caring for her own family, Norma was now on the other side. She was the one being cared for. Her son, his wife and their three children, Norma's grandchildren, had taken her in and were looking after her, helping her with her recovery. The youngest grandchild, Katy, about ten, seemed very close to Norma. She spent a lot of time with her grandmother, especially that summer. They would come over together to visit my wife, and Katy would sit quietly taking in the conversation. Norma and my wife drank coffee and talked about nearly anything. My wife noticed how Katy watched for the signs and knew when her grandmother was tiring. She would touch her grandmother's hand gently and say, "Grandma, maybe we should go." Then Katy would take her grandmother's arm and walk her home.

This quiet Katy bore no resemblance to the Katy I had seen play basketball with her dad in the driveway. At once she charged him with the ball, trash talking, pivoting with a bump, then under his arm and up to the basket. Quick. Tough. Only ten, but with Norma she was quiet, gentle and very protective.

By May, Norma walked without any assistance. Her red hair grew out and her health improved dramatically. I found that she had a quick, happy smile and a mischievous sense of humor. Soon she began driving again. We would often see Norma and Katy at the local HEB grocery.

Over the next six months, Norma and I had a lot of conversations there in the cul-de-sac. Not long after we met, I had told her that I was doing research, interviewing people over sixty. I asked if I could interview her.

"Of course!" She appeared delighted at the prospect. The conversations started immediately. In one of our conversations she said teasingly, "I once knew a celebrity."

She left the thought hanging, so I asked.

“I joke about it, but it is true,” she said. “Sean Connery delivered coal, milk and fish to our home in Edinburgh. He’s a lot better looking now!” Then she added, “When my son was young I took him to a movie starring Sean Connery. Afterward, I explained to my son that this man had once been a deliveryman in Scotland and was now a movie star because he had worked hard to change his life. I told my son he could be anything he wanted to be if he was willing to work hard for it.”

Norma spoke with a charming accent that I won’t attempt to imitate here. Our interviews took the form of long casual conversations. During one she told me, “I was a War Bride.” She said she had met her husband during the war. They married in Scotland when she was nearly twenty. Two years later, they had a daughter and not long after, her husband’s tour of duty was over, so the small family left Scotland and came to Harlingen.

She said it so simply, “...left Scotland.” Yet she left everything she had known for over twenty years.

But something was nagging at me. I hesitated to say anything, but realized I had to. “I’m sorry, Norma, but something isn’t adding up for me. We’re nearly the same age, but at the end of the War, I was only twelve.”

I was a little embarrassed about bringing this up, about questioning what she had told me. But her eyes twinkled and she laughed. I knew I was missing something important here, but I didn’t see it coming.

“Wrong war!”

The phrase burst out of her with unconcealed glee. She had set me up! I joined her in laughter.

“During the Korean War, my husband was stationed at the old RAF air base near Edinburgh. It was like he was in charge of this whole run-down old air base, because he was the only one there! In fact, I learned later, he was working on a secret project, installing radio equipment in one of the abandoned buildings. It became a secret listening post.”

“After work and on weekends, he’d hitch a ride, borrow a bike or walk into town. We met at a dance, fell in love, and married. He’d bring me candy and flowers, something no Scotsman would ever do!”

Even fifty years later and after the harsh effects of chemotherapy I could see why he was attracted to her. She was charming and intelligent, had an easy laugh and a gentle, teasing manner.

Norma didn’t talk a lot about family life in Scotland, but she remembered that other war, World War II with blackouts and air raid warnings and the very real fears of a German invasion.

“My parents had already decided that if the Germans invaded, none of our family would be taken alive.”

What a terrifying bit of knowledge for a little girl who was only five or six years old then. Even without an invasion, Norma’s family endured a war related tragedy. Norma especially suffered, and the memory still troubled her.

Norma and her younger brother, Thomas, both early school age, were walking along a road on their way home from school when a Polish military truck lost control and swerved into the two

children. Norma tried to pull her brother out of truck's path, but not in time. He died instantly. "I can still see him," she said quietly, her eyes glistening. "My mother always blamed me. She brought it up again and again"

When the war ended, the military pulled out. The town settled back into its own ways. "When the Korean War started, we didn't expect the airbase to reopen, and actually it didn't. Just one American airman came. And I married him!"

Again, the happy eyes and the easy laughter. "We talked for more than two years about going to Texas when his time came to be discharged, but the reality was almost overwhelming. In all of Texas and the United States, I only knew my husband and our daughter. I had never thought about starting out with no friends and no family close by. But my husband had family in Mercedes, and they welcomed us to Texas, to our new home."

Once settled in the Valley, Norma and her husband worked hard and saved diligently,"... like thrifty Scots," she said, smiling mischievously.

"When my husband died in the nursing home, I was in the hospital in some kind of coma. Something brought on by the chemo. My son came to the hospital and even though I looked like I was asleep, he whispered into me ear to tell me that his father had died. The strange part is that I sat up in my bed as though I had been jolted with those electric paddles they use for heart patients, and told him we had a lot of things to do!"

"I remember going to the wake and being upset that my husband didn't have a six-pence in his hand. The six-pence is Scottish tradition. It's symbolic, meaning 'I will always be with you.' I

must have made a fuss, because one of my son's friends gave me her lucky silver dollar that she always carried with her. I'll never forget that."

Norma was getting her strength back now, her hair had grown out a much darker red, almost auburn, and she laughed more when we talked. She sold the family farm and bought a car. A small sports coupe. Bright red. She would back out of the driveway, wave if she saw me, then accelerate out of the cul-de-sac with enthusiasm; as though she couldn't wait to see what the world had waiting for her today. During that summer, I saw her and Katy and the little red car all over Harlingen. When Katy went back to school in the fall, Norma's friend from the next street traveled with her. We would see them at restaurants or events, and Norma was always happy and in a bit of a hurry. She seemed to be thoroughly enjoying her new life. Yet, she still had time for our cul-de-sac conversations. Her articulate insights and perspectives on aging and nursing homes became solid contributions to my research.

I was in the yard, cutting old fronds from a palm tree when Norma hailed me, waving vigorously. "I'm going to Scotland!" Her enthusiasm bordered on exuberance.

"How soon?" I asked.

"Next month, and I'll be gone two or three months. I'm staying with my mother in Scotland and I'll see all the family and friends that are still alive. Then we're going to the continent to see more friends that I haven't seen in years." She had not only returned to good health, she was radiant. She was excited about every facet of the planning and preparation for the trip, even making the airline reservations. "This time I'm flying First Class! Very un-Scottish!"

During the weeks before she left, Norma's daughter flew in from California to spend some time with her mother; then a flurry of excited preparation and Norma was gone. It seemed very quiet in the cul-de-sac.

Nearly two months later Norma returned to Harlingen. She told me about the wonderful time she had enjoyed in Scotland and Europe. The time spent with her aging mother, family and friends. She showed me photos she had taken of her mother and her home town. She had thoroughly explored the places she had left so long ago. She was still excited about the trip, but her manner seemed a little subdued.

Norma had seen a doctor while in Scotland. "At first it was stomach problems. Then, somehow I came down with pneumonia, so they put me in the hospital."

She had stayed in the hospital in Scotland for several days and was still not very strong. She had cut her trip short by nearly a month and come home to see her own doctor. Although there seemed to be something unspoken there, she recovered and told me she was flying out to California to see her daughter and grandchildren. The happy laughter was back.

She loved living with her grandchildren, but Norma began to feel she had stayed with her son's family long enough. She felt she was becoming a burden. She started thinking about a home of her own, and a few weeks later she invited my wife and me to see the two-story condo she was going to buy. It was just a few blocks down the street. Far enough to be independent but close enough that the grandchildren could visit easily. She gave us a full tour, enthusiastically explaining her plans for changing or updating each room and the back patio. She was excited about going furniture shopping because she didn't have anything for the new condo. When she'd

sold the farm, she'd sold everything. Now she seemed to relish the idea of starting fresh. Her own home. Her own things. Her own time.

She started with a blue awning. Rounded and just a little wider than the door, it set her home apart from all the others. The new awning gave her new home instant identity.

When we visited her several weeks later, she was settled and clearly content. Norma seemed to have caught up with her life now and didn't have to hurry any more. The twinkle was still in her eyes, the easy laughter that was almost musical, but with less urgency. She seemed very comfortable with her life.

Every evening, on our walk around the two-mile loop, we would pass Norma's home.

Occasionally we would see her out front, or she might call to us from a window, but after a few months we felt like we were seeing her less often. I saw Katy in the cul-de-sac one afternoon and asked about her grandmother. "She's been in and out of the hospital a few times lately. I think she's pretty sick."

We took flowers for her patio, but no one answered the bell, so we left them at the door, under the blue awning, with a note. A few days later, Norma called my wife and thanked her for the flowers. They had a long, easy visit. No rush now, just two friends catching up with each other. A few weeks later, we heard she had a full time nurse staying with her now.

Occasionally, when we walked by in the evening we could see the curtains parted in her upstairs bedroom window above the awning, but only once again did I actually see Norma in the window. She smiled widely and waved.

Then she was gone.

We were out of town when the funeral notice and obituary appeared in the *Valley Morning Star*.

Today, we think of Norma every time we pass her blue awning. No real sadness, just the remembrance of a friend that we still miss. The young woman who left her home in Scotland to start a new and different life in the Valley had become the Norma I met when she was struggling with her recovery from chemo treatments. She had blossomed and lived a new and different life for two years. Our lives had been enriched by knowing her.