



Marine runs, rides her way through recovery

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Mom. Marine. Survivor.



Gunnery Sgt. Barbara Brown in Afghanistan prior to her diagnosis.

Gunnery Sgt. Barbra Brown joined the Marine Corps in 1994. She spent the next 16 years dedicating her life to her family and the Corps. What she didn't know was those experiences were preparing her to face the biggest challenge of her life.

In February 2011, Brown, an aircraft maintenance administration specialist from Jermyn, Penn., made a life-changing discovery.

"The lump started out small and within a short time frame, it grew from the size of a grape to about the size of a lemon," said Brown. "There were about three lymph nodes that were also swollen under my left arm. At that point, I was more than concerned that something was wrong – I was sure."

Brown was medically evacuated from Kandahar, Afghanistan to Germany, where medical personnel had the equipment to conduct a mammogram and a core needle biopsy.

"When I initially found out that I had to leave my Marines, I was more distraught with that than the cancer," said Brown. "I couldn't bear the thought of leaving them. I felt like I let them down and abandoned them."

The single mom, used to putting her own needs aside to ensure the wellbeing of others, now had a new mission, to survive for her son.

"I was mostly worried about the outcome," she said. "All I wanted was to be able to see him graduate high school. At that point, I know he will be able to stand on his own and not depend on me."

Once the biopsy confirmed that it was cancer, Brown was immediately sent to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., to undergo further tests and scans. Despite her situation, the Marine refused to let cancer get the best of her.

She began four months of chemotherapy in March 2011; then went on to have a bilateral mastectomy, the removal of both breasts, and 11 lymph nodes removed from her left arm in August. During the six weeks of radiation that followed, Brown, an avid runner, completed the Marine Corps Marathon.

"I started doing marathons seven years ago, on my 30th birthday," she said. "During treatment, I decided to continue running because it was the only thing I could control in my life. The doctors and cancer dictated everything else."

Although it took her more than seven hours to complete the 26.2-mile trek, and she came in last of 30,000 participants, Brown refused to give up.

“My body is constantly giving up, but in my mind, I could never quit. It is not in my nature to give up; I need to finish what I start no matter how much time it takes or how difficult it is.”

In January 2012, Brown had her ovaries removed to prevent ovarian cancer from developing.

“Although the cancer has taken my breasts and my ovaries, I still feel feminine,” said Brown. “My body didn’t betray me. Once I knew it was cancer, my breasts became alien to me. I wanted them removed immediately.”

Coping with the loss of one of the most prominent signs of womanhood hasn’t been easy for Brown.

“I am not sure if I have completely coped with it,” she said. “It is different to not look like a typical woman, but I don’t feel like any less of a woman.”

“It becomes more visible when I have to dress up or put on my uniforms,” she added. “All my uniforms are tailored for the old me. I have to adjust my whole closet now to conform to the new me.”

Although very uncomfortable, Brown chooses to wear breast prosthesis in uniform since the shirts are pleated.



After her sister’s diagnosis, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Tammy Perkins was tested for the Breast Cancer Gene (BRCA2) that predisposes an individual to breast and ovarian cancer.

Perkins received a positive result and chose to undergo the recommended preventative surgeries to reduce her chances of getting breast or ovarian cancer.

Brown accepts the challenges life throws her way in true Marine fashion.

“You have to have a sick sense of humor to deal with certain things that come with cancer,” she said. “I don’t feel very brave and strong. I have been doing whatever I need to do in order to beat this. I think that is why I might look strong. It is important not to stress out or be negative. There is nothing I can do about the cancer so I might as well make the best of it.”

“In a way, her cancer diagnosis saved my life.”

Brown's diagnosis was not only disbelief for her, but her family as well.

"My initial reaction was shock," said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Tammy Perkins, Brown's younger sister, an ordnance maintenance officer at Ordnance Maintenance Section, Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va. "Why her? She was a marathon runner and very healthy. How could this happen to her?"

The sisters, who joined the Corps two months apart, tried to be stationed near each other as much as possible throughout their service.

"When she was first diagnosed, I was stationed in Okinawa," said Perkins. "The hardest part was not being able to be there for her in Maryland. It's difficult when I think about what (my sister) has been through.

"Sometimes I wonder, why not me?" she added. "In a way, her cancer diagnosis saved my life."

After Brown was diagnosed, Perkins and their sister Brenda were tested for the Breast Cancer Gene (BRCA2) that predisposes an individual to breast and ovarian cancer.

Perkins received a positive result and chose to undergo the recommended preventative surgeries and remove her breasts and ovaries to reduce her chances of getting breast or ovarian cancer. Brenda, like other women in their high-risk category, opted to undergo screening every six months.

Today, Brown continues to deal with pain, numbness in her hands and feet, fatigue, weakness, hot flashes, depression, anxiety and insomnia. She also struggles with the fear of recurrence and her early departure from Afghanistan.

"I still haven't been able to unpack my bags," she said. "All of my stuff from Afghanistan including my uniform and boots remain untouched. Cancer has only been in my life for the last year. The Marines have been my life for 18 years. Dealing with the Marine part is harder than any treatment I have been through."

Brown is on a daily hormone therapy for the next five to 10 years to mitigate the risk of recurrence. She receives physical therapy twice a week to get her muscle strength back in her left arm, and she also has to pump lymphatic fluid out of her arm daily.

"Most times I don't have the energy to train; I often have to force myself to get out of bed, and if I can't run, I walk."

As Brown recovers, she's determined to keep her son's life as normal as possible. He was living with his aunt while Brown was deployed and remained in Okinawa until the school year was over.

"I waited until June to explain to him what I was going through," said Brown. "He was in Japan so it was easy to hide my treatments and my bald head."

Since their reunion, Brown has tried to find a balance between her treatments and responsibilities at home.

"Having my son around isn't always as easy as it seems," she said. "But he does take my mind off a lot of things. I want to ensure that my cancer experiences aren't his only childhood memories."



In September, Brown participated in the [Young Survival Coalition's Tour de Pink](#) from Philadelphia to Washington D.C. It was her first cycling event and the longest ride she's completed. "I am proud to be a survivor participating with other survivors," she said. "It is important for me to let other young women know that it can happen to them and it is often very aggressive."

While preparing for the MCM, Brown was introduced to Genna Giammatteo, the director of the Achilles Freedom Team of Wounded Veterans, an athletic-focused program that strives to bring hope, inspiration and the joys of achievement to people with disabilities.

She joined the team and began participating in races with other wounded warriors across the U.S. "I could never give up when there are single, double and triple amputees right along side of me completing marathons," said Brown. "Being around my fellow wounded warriors has motivated me to keep moving forward in my recovery."

Be it with the team or individually, Brown sets personal goals to participate in races frequently to stay positive. "Running and riding have given me an outlet to express myself, remain active, gain control and feel a great sense of accomplishment," she said. "It makes me feel like I have my life back, which in turn gives me strength."

Brown's perseverance is no surprise to Marines she has worked with throughout her career.

"It surprised me how passionate she was about marathons when I met her before she was diagnosed," said Sgt. Michael Lopez, a drill instructor at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, who was deployed with Brown and has known her for more than two years. "Now I'm in disbelief because (despite her condition) she has participated in every run she could enter." Lopez said he's learned a lot from observing how Brown lives her life. "Circumstance has nothing to do with attitude," said Lopez. "She handled cancer with a stoic approach and let the rest of herself continue enjoying life and leading by example."

With her Marines, mother and sisters by her side, the young mom said she also looks forward to participating in more sporting events with her son as he gets older. The 10-year-old recently ran a 5-mile event with her in Central Park in New York City.

"I am not ready to die. Yet each day, I have to plan my life as well as my death," said Brown. "The difficult part is trying to get back to the person, Marine and mother I was before; and knowing that person doesn't exist anymore.

"I have a new life and a new normal that I have to accept and adjust to it accordingly. Every day is a challenge."