

OUT OF THE FIRE, BACK INTO THE FIGHT



Coming back from the edge of losing a battle with cancer

Soldier battles cancer (twice) and continues to inspire fellow Warriors during her extended battle to get, stay healthy

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At 114 pounds, she was the thinnest she'd ever been; she knew that she was close to the edge of death.

"I was just going, and I knew I was going," said Staff Sgt. Sandy Prouty-Lemley, a Soldier assigned to the Warrior Transition Battalion's Alpha Company. Her battle with cancer was flailing in September 2010—the avid food lover couldn't keep on weight and had a severe drop in blood pressure.

"When you have come that close to dying and you have to face it, you have a choice. You have to be in it to win it," she said.

Just how intense that battle would be, or that it would even occur, was completely unknown when she first experienced flu-like symptoms in Iraq in 2008.

That spring when she returned to Fort Riley, Kan., though, the full brunt of the breast cancer diagnosis fell upon her. (More than a year later she would be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer as well.) After that initial diagnosis, a CT scan, a biopsy and surgery, the doctors gave her some time before chemo started.

"They said we'll give you some time to heal—do what you've always wanted to do before chemo," Prouty-Lemley said. So she took her three kids to her favorite place in the world: Big Sur, Calif. A world traveler who has 43 countries under her belt, Prouty-Lemley took them to the state she grew up in.

"What do I want them to see? I want them to see home," she said.

During that time, the food service specialist realized she had to turn down her dream job of culinary arts noncommissioned officer-in-charge; she simply couldn't do all that was asked.

"It's extremely hard to accept, but you can either look at it like you're a failure, which you emotionally will do, or okay here are your options, and there are plenty," she said. "I'll find something new I can be best at."

Prouty-Lemley transferred here in September 2008 to live with her daughter Christina and friend Sharon Santos while coordinating her treatment in the Warrior Transition Battalion.

"(Sharon) just told me, Sandy, you're going to make it," said Prouty-Lemley.

It turned out that "making it" included getting used



Staff Sgt. Sandy Prouty-Lemley, center, walks with her company in a cancer walk in Tacoma Oct. 9.

to a basically new body after the treatments.

"It's like I have a whole new anatomy. You have to pretend like you're a baby and try one new food at a time," said Prouty-Lemley.

With this trial-and-error method, she's gained 16 pounds. Her successful climb has been a laborious one, and she quickly points out all of the help she's received along the way, tearing up when she mentions her squad leader, Staff Sgt. Sijer Harder.

Harder bought her a walker when she was still on the waiting list for one. He brought medications to her home when she couldn't go outside in the snow. He even promised to paint the outside of her house this summer.

"He's a Soldier's Soldier, that kid. He really is," said Prouty-Lemley, 50, who joined the Army in 1990.

Prouty-Lemley receives help from outside of the Army as well. Two of her neighbors check on her daily, fellow church members help out, and she's received occupational and physical therapy at home to gain independence.

"I'm very grateful; you don't get people like that anymore," she said. "They give you hope, and if you

don't have faith and you can't have hope, you'll never make it."

Still she gives back to others.

"She believes she's a leader and her job is to take care of Soldiers. She can't stop doing that," said Neville Lewis, Alpha Company training manager and her former sergeant major.

Despite her health issues, she led last year's WTB Thanksgiving meal, volunteers with her church and teaches junior Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets.

When she leaves the Army, she'll still teach and keep up her work of helping her church's food locker and contributing to their garden.

"The big community garden has been a life-long dream," Prouty-Lemley said.

She also hopes to climb part way up Mount Rainier one day. She could see it during chemo, and swore she would climb it when she got out of the hospital—a dream that requires a little faith. The kind of faith she also inspires in fellow Warriors.

"Have faith in yourself. You can do it," she said. "It's a choice; it truly is. It's so simple. Once you get there, it's extremely simple."