

Any hour, any day

After two remissions, Briana Menendez's T-Cell Lymphoblastic Lymphoma had a dismal prognosis. Her only hope for a cure was a stem cell transplant. As Briana and her family pray for a miracle, the Marine Corps welcomes her into its ranks. Now, the family watches her bear the title, "Honorary Marine," a title held by even fewer and yet, ever proud.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CPL. KYLE T. RAMIREZ // COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

EDITOR NOTE: Shortly after this feature was written, Briana Menendez passed away peacefully in her home Jan. 27 due to her leukemia.

The Young Fighter

FORT WORTH — Each of the women in the Menendez family is staring at the father, Larry, his hands clenched tightly around the handles of a wheelchair in front of him. He speaks into a microphone for reporters. Briana, the youngest daughter, is turned almost all the way around in her wheelchair just to see him. A warm grin travels slowly across her face as she listens to him recite the same story she's heard him tell for weeks. She is perhaps the only one smiling in the large venue as Larry tells reporters that his youngest daughter is closer than ever to dying — rightfully so. At least for the moment, she's content.

Briana wore a special pin on her chest after the ceremony, where the United States Marine Corps officially made her an Honorary Marine Jan. 25. The short event at the Naval Air Station Joint Reserve



Briana poses at age twelve. (Courtesy of family)



Briana Menendez gives a high five to the Mayor of Fort Worth, Mayor Michael J. Moncrief, moments after she is made an Honorary Marine during a ceremony at Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base here Jan. 25.

Base would seem to many to be a happy ending to the 13-year-old's miraculous story. Though Briana, her family, her friends and followers will say that it wasn't much of an ending at all.

The title, "United States Marine," is earned by roughly 40,000 young men and women each year — less than one percent of Americans. Since 1992, only 68 men and women have earned the title, "Honorary Marine" — a title held by those whose actions are honorable, whose character is courageous, and whose lives are steeped in commitment. In 13 years, the Marine Corps believes Briana has exhibited these traits.

"She's a combat veteran, too, in her own battle," said Col. Mark Toal, commanding officer of the 8th Marine Corps District, during Briana's ceremony.

Briana waited at her mother's side as her credentials were read off in front of a crowd of servicemembers and civilians. She frequently gave cameras and attendees a gentle wave and "Hello." In a few moments, she would have a special badge pinned on so she could finally call herself "Marine." Like many of the servicemembers present, Briana came in wearing a matching outfit. She wore pink sweats with "Marines" across the

chest complete with a matching pink cover and slippers. After her citation was read, Briana and her family accepted the framed letters, challenge coins and coveted Eagle, Globe and Anchor. As the National Anthem, Anchors Aweigh and The Marines Hymn played, signaling the end of the ceremony, Briana's hands pressed tightly across her heart. It was an uneasy but well-deserved victory for her to be seated where she was.

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—MASTER SGT. LARRY MENENDEZ

Attendees lined up to shake hands with the new Marine as her father, Master Sgt. Larry Menendez, looked on proudly. Reporters began their interviews as some waiting in line to greet Briana were in tears. There wasn't a tremble in Briana's voice or a tear building up in her eye. This was her moment and she exhibited the same bearing her father had come to respect.

"(The doctor) went to talk to her and said, 'Your life is going to come



After returning from the hospital early January, Briana spends the majority of time at home resting in her room, which is decorated much to the tastes of a young teenage girl. Along with an oxygen tank and hospice supplies, the room is complete with dozens of balloons and stuffed animals.

to an end,'" Larry told reporters of Briana's last visit to the hospital Jan. 10. "She looked at him and said, 'OK. Thank you,' and that was it."

A Family's Risk

It had been a while since some of Larry's fellow Marines had seen their master sergeant. He had been away at Briana's bedside by request of physician Richard Howrey, M.D., the assistant medical

Medical Center in Fort Worth. He is currently one of the oncologists working toward Briana's health.

On Mother's Day, 2008, Briana's smiling face was the first image her parents, Larry and Stephanie, saw as they woke up to her bouncing on their bed. It was the day after Briana's last track meet where she competed in the 400-meter and 1600-meter dash. Larry recalled her feeling less than her energetic self that day. As the family embraced that morning, Stephanie, a former

rushed to the local emergency room. It was then they learned of her condition. Doctors diagnosed Briana with T-cell lymphoblastic lymphoma, an aggressive form of blood cancer usually found in children. Since the battle began, each member of Briana's family has stayed at the front lines, nobody losing hope or energy.

Larry came to Fort Worth just four years away from retirement. After being in the recruiting sector for nine years, he was looking forward to a change of pace by working at the district headquarters. Now, more than half of his tour here would be spent fighting desperately alongside Briana and his family to save his most precious investment.

"We've had a lot of close calls since it all started in 2008," said Larry. "In August 2008, she went into remission. In March of 2009, the cancer relapsed and came back as leukemia. That's when doctors told

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—HOWREY IN A LETTER BEFORE THE TRANSPLANT

director of the Stem Cell Transplant Program at Cook Children's

Marine, noticed Briana had a baseball-sized lump on her neck, which Briana failed to notice. They

us that her only hope for survival was a stem cell transplant."

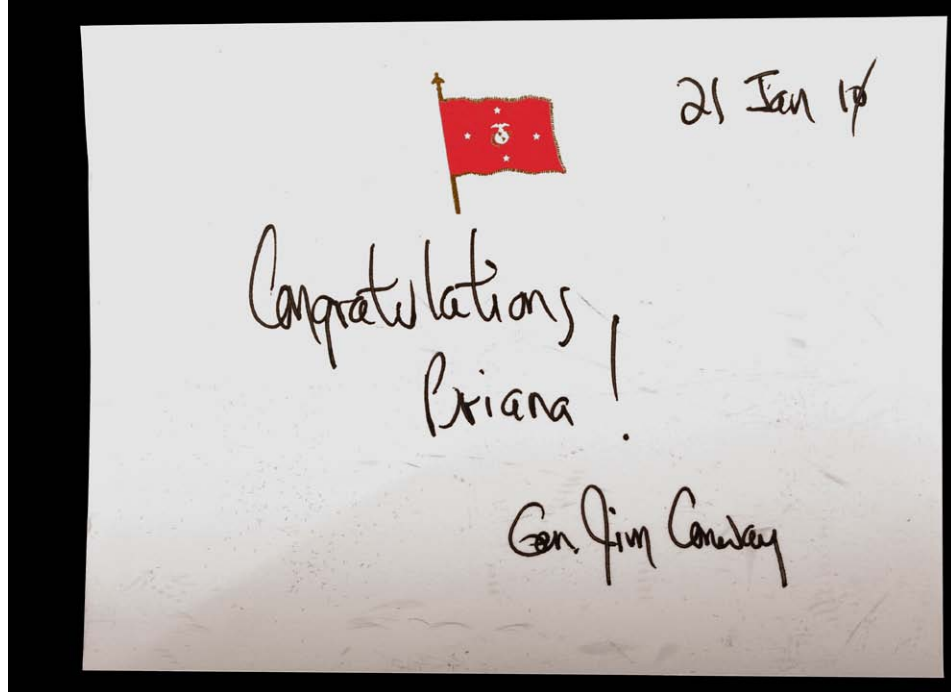
Relapsed T-cell diseases cause concerns for oncologists. Physicians typically use a stem cell transplant as a way to eradicate fluid-type tumors including lymphoma and leukemia. White blood cells or lymphocytes are migrated to the bloodstream in hopes of them maturing into specialized type B or T cells — cancer fighters. If the stem cells fail to eradicate the tumor fluids the cancer is still alive and it is likely to come back more aggressive than ever.

"We anticipate that she will be in the hospital approximately 6-8 weeks which will be her most critical time," wrote Howrey in a letter to Larry's commanding officer, talking about Briana's transplant preparation. "Briana's transplant preparative regimen of radiation, high dose chemotherapy, followed by her cord blood transplant will cause her to have significant serious side effects; therefore, we ask that Dad be at her bedside 24 hours a day."

Larry and Stephanie said they noticed a bothersome change in attitude in Briana in the months surrounding her transplant in August 2009. Larry said she assumed a listless expression and was no longer of the same energy she had projected for years. Stephanie recalls it being the most difficult time for the family, realizing that this exhausting fight was far from over.

By Jan. 10, Briana was back in the hospital. This time, doctors at Cook's Medical Center found a liter of fluid in the pericardial sac that surrounds her heart. This would keep the heart from beating as efficiently, causing a dangerous drag of energy.

"They told us that usually after 500ml of fluid is drained, it's clear that the heart is attacking itself," said Larry. "They said that she could go at any hour, any day. We took her out of the hospital. We wanted this time with her to be spent being happy and with the people and things she loves. So far, she's made it two weeks, which surprised even the doctors. She's fighting it with everything she's got."



A signed message from Gen. James T. Conway, commandant of the Marine Corps, was included in Briana's Honorary Marine package.

Healing the family before the cure

Despite Briana's physical condition being at its worst, her parents began noticing again the young fighter inside her — a personality trait they say changed both of their lives. Briana has been a fighter since she started walking, Larry said. In October 2000, the family was living in South Carolina. She and her sister attended Kiddie Crucible at Parris Island, an abridged recruit training for children and she attacked the obstacles with vigor. Larry keeps a thick white binder with all of Briana's life accomplishments. Full from certificates and photos, he shows it off proudly, including her graduation certificate for the Kiddie Crucible.

"One of the things she always said is that she wanted to be a Marine, just like her mommy and daddy," Larry boasted. "She's been around the Marine Corps her whole life and always talks about how much she loves it."

"We would sit down and have talks about what this all meant to her and how she was feeling," said Stephanie. "She seemed to have

this positive relationship with God that I had never seen in anyone. She would say simply, 'God is in control,' or 'Whatever happens, God wanted it to happen.' She has a very strong relationship with him. I always tell her that if she knows his plan, I'd like to know what he's up to."

Larry said life hasn't been as gloomy as one might imagine after leaving the hospital. The past weeks have been spent in warm adoration — a family clinging closer together than ever before.

The family attended a unit party

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—MASTER SGT. LARRY MENENDEZ

in Briana's honor. The Honorary Marine ceremony, visits from family and friends of Briana have given the young fighter a lot of energy and willpower, Larry said.

"She's shown us not to be afraid," said Larry. "The moment we got the final news from the doctor, she told us immediately, 'It's gonna' be OK.' She's comfortable knowing that we are going to do everything in our power to keep her around. All of our strength, we get it from her."