

## Ep. 17: A personal experience with Breast Cancer

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Welcome to another episode of the Sword and Shield. I am Chief Master Sergeant Christopher Howard, superintendent in 960th Cyberspace Operations Group. And today with me, I have, - Second Lieutenant Adriene Mallow from the 426th Network Warfare Squadron - Welcome ma'am. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today. Today, this podcast is going to go over breast cancer awareness month, the month of October. And Lieutenant Mallow is been gracious enough to sit down and talk to me about her experiences with breast cancer. I was wondering if you can kind of help our audience understand what the point of October might be and then share your story if you could. - Yes, Chief. So the month of October is extremely important, growing up as a young child, it was always a month, where we could really focus and look at the importance of breast cancer, especially in my family, but amongst women and other families throughout the community. So as a young child, we were always involved with different walks or fundraisers to really bring awareness to the cause. And the month of October, now as an adult, really still has that same foundation for me. And I really focus on spreading awareness and getting this cause at the forefront for this month and for anyone who will really listen to me regarding my history and my story. - Gotcha. And you made a point that this month is very important to you. Can you expand on why it's important to you specifically? - Yes, Chief. So when my mom was 27, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and she actually fought breast cancer as she was going through school to be a nurse. She was raising three children and she ended up passing away at the age of 32. So relatively young, especially now being in my thirties, early thirties, I should say. (Christopher chuckles) I see how young that really is and when she passed away, one of the things that she wanted was for my dad to always keep in mind that we had the risk of inheriting breast cancer. And I think a lot of people are shocked to hear that it's potentially inherited. Not all women who have breast cancer or men who have breast cancer is inherited. But in our genes, which make us who we are and as individuals, everybody has the BRCA one and two gene, now, this is the breast cancer gene. When the issue exists, is when there is actually a mutation in the gene. And that is essentially broken for someone. Now, this affects only 0.25% of the population globally. So about one in 400 individuals is going to have this mutation. - Okay. - Now, the earliest you can get tested is when you're age 18. So when I got to be the age of 18, I was really excited to go to school, start college and my dad brought up, "Hey, we really need "to get you tested." This was something that my

mother found to be very important. So during the summer, I decided, "Okay, let's do this, "let's get tested." And it's a simple test. It's just a blood test that gets sent off to a lab. - Okay. - It takes about a month to return. So after this test came back, it was positive. So I did have the genetic mutation in my BRCA two gene and this raised my predisposition for breast cancer to about 98%. That I would develop it before the age of 30. So at that point, we met with the genetic counselor to discuss my options. And there are a lot of options for people who have this gene mutation. They can do prophylactic surgery, which is preventative, they can do different medicines, they can do monitoring, there's a lot of options for someone. - Right. - I decided at the age of 18, that the best option for me would be a prophylactic double mastectomy. And that was somewhat difficult, because at 18, I was a child. I wanted to start my life. But knowing that the surgery would take two years away from my childhood essentially. So we started the process, the initial surgery and all the tests roughly took about two months to get scheduled and the surgery itself was about nine hours. - Wow, that's insane, I mean, that's a lot to endure, right? I mean, that's a traumatic event, not just from the knowledge, the history, the decision, but just the surgery's traumatic as well, right? Nine hours of just going through that as well as all of the emotion pieces to that. I mean, obviously when you talk about it now, it seems like it was well, matter of fact decision, but I can imagine now, going through that, that it had to be kind of tumultuous, right? I mean, how hard was it for you to get to that point to make that decision? - Yes, Chief. So I think I explained this to a few people, but I couldn't even have pictures taken of me. And it was somewhat embarrassing. I felt damaged, I felt like I was supposed to be enjoying my life and I could not find anybody who really understood what I was going through being 18. There were women who would reach out and we would talk about some of the effects of this, but they were much older in their life and they already had children. And it was hard for me to really relate to anybody. And I struggled quite a bit, I was alone quite a bit. - Okay. - I dropped out of college, so I was at my parents' house. And they were really supportive, my family was really supportive. But for a long time, I just felt really alone and I didn't have anybody to really talk to, and I didn't have my mother to talk to. And I think some of that was being 18 and having this diagnosis, but it was also just not feeling like I had a strong community around me to really help me. So, I think that that definitely impacted me at a young age. - Right. Well, I mean, you start putting those barriers up, right? And you start seeing all of these things that were not necessarily ideal for the situation. So how did you work through that? How did you get to where you're at today, where at least in conversation on the surface, I would say that you're very energetic about it, passionate, which is I can imagine a byproduct, but also, somewhat positive about the story. How did you get to that point? For those that may be dealing with something similar? - Yes, Chief, I would say it probably took six years. I did not tell anybody about this except close family and friends until 2017, 2016. - (Christopher chuckles) Three or four years ago. - Honestly, like I said, there are people in my life who probably didn't even know that I went through this. And I took a long time to really feel comfortable with who I was. I developed a strong sense of community around me and a lot of it was the Air Force. I mean, at the time I just felt extremely empowered. I had just been selected for joining the 854th COS and I was on this new path in my life and I just felt extremely

empowered, and I felt strong, and I felt, "Hey, it's time "for me to share this story." - Right. - And I was seeking a commission at the time and I felt like I don't need to hide this anymore. I don't need to be ashamed of this anymore, because there's somebody else out there who is struggling with either this in their family or something else. And I just used social media platform to kind of spread the word and just say, "Hey, I went through this, "but if you need somebody, you can reach out to me "and other resources that we have." - Right. No, I mean, it's one of those things that nobody really feels comfortable discussing. So, I mean, I'm really appreciative that you're willing to share your story. Obviously, I've no idea of what that looks like or that experience, but I know that there's plenty of people out there, especially when you look at a one in 400 rate, let's just do the math real quick. If we have roughly 1400 people, right? There's three or four people out there that's highly probable that are dealing with this particular type of cancer, let alone any other types of cancer and issues, right? I've started with a number of people who have been diagnosed with different things. But this is the first time I've really been able to get into a story with an individual of, "This is how I found out, "these are the barriers I had to deal with, "here's the history that goes with it. "And then how do I get moving forward?" And I think that it can be very inspirational. And the fact that here you have a history, so you grew up living with this and the ramifications of this disease. Then you get it put on your plate personally as dealing with you and having to make those hard choices. And then making that decision and moving forward. So I commend you in the fact that you're willing to share it and I can only imagine what kind of a battle that's been and even to take. But that you sharing the story is key to helping other people understand, how can I, one, identify that I may have this, what does that look like, and the hardships of making those decisions, right? I mean, because wasn't easy, right? 'Cause here's these different options, right? And it's going to be life changing no matter what. Being an 18 year-old, that's a crazy time in our lives, right? We make a lot of decisions from just general life decisions. Am I going to college? Am I going to serve my country? Am I going to do vocational? Am I just going to work? And now we throw this major life decision on top of that. What kind of resources did you use to help you work through that? - Yes, Chief, thankfully, when I was on the civilian side before entering the military, I had a good friend who started a hereditary cancer foundation. And she created a social media page, where we could reach out to others globally. Because I grew up in a small community and there just wasn't a lot of us, relatively my age who were going through this. So thankfully, through different social media platforms, we were able to reach out to those who had kind of similar issues. But also genetic counseling, getting a mental health professional to speak to also. And even the military, there are a plethora of resources that we have. Military OneSource, the local 960th mental professional here, the base resources. I mean, we are extremely fortunate to have a lot of individuals that we can talk to about these kinds of issues. And this took a lot of time to get where I am today and being able to have a conversation about it. I was even emotional on the ride over. - Right. - Because I've had the initial surgery when I was 18. But since that time, I've had six surgeries since. Because your body, you have to constantly ensure that there is not a development of cells or everything is working and everything is working like it should essentially. So, not only reaching out to the

mental health professionals that we have available to us, but even the actual doctors to really provide some guidance and develop a treatment plan for you. - Right, it's a long-term battle, right? So yeah, having to constantly go back and deal with reoccurrences or just potential reoccurrences. I mean, that's gotta weigh on you quite often. How do you kind of prepare yourself going into that each time you go to the doc, I guess? - That's a great question, Chief, because I did the prophylactic surgery, but that doesn't mean I won't get breast cancer some day. They can't get every single cell out, it's just not possible. - Right. - So it greatly reduces our chance by 90%, but there is the ability that we will develop a breast cancer or a different type of cancer in regards to the mutation. So thankfully, the base has developed a plan for me and they've referred me to the appropriate clinics that I need. And thankfully CMC, here local at the JBSA has an awesome treatment facility for individuals who have this kind of issue. And it's something that my family is prepared for. My son is a little too young to kind of know what this means, but my spouse, my close family, my friends, they're aware that this is a possibility for me. So I feel extremely lucky that I hit over the 30 hill, if you will, without a legitimate breast cancer scare. Because if that would happen, we'd go through a lot of the treatment with chemo, et cetera, to battle that. But I feel extremely positive that I'm not there yet. I don't know what next year will look like, but I know right now that I don't have it and that's something to celebrate - Right. Now, I definitely don't want to get rolled up into the negative. Obviously, when you look at some of the healthcare initiatives and you look at what's definitely push forward, positivity is one of those key pieces in any kind of treatment plan or recovery plan of keeping that hope up and helping individuals have that positive attitude because there's a mental aspect to recovery and health, right? And I think that you hit some good points there with using mental health care, using counseling, and then the conversations with the family so that we understand what is a truthful scare, right? And what are the realities of the healthcare system when we talk about what options are on the table so that we can reduce some of those fears and keep that positive outlook on it, right? So with that said, you said that locally, the military medical facilities helped you build a plan. Can you talk a little bit more about what they offer to individuals that may be looking at some of these issues coming up in their life? - Yes, sir. So the local medical treatment facility, they can do enhanced screenings, they can do mammograms, they can do different exams to make sure every six months that you go back in and you're checked regularly. And I think that's the most important part, is just being regular and developing that schedule for yourself. So I know at the end of the day that I have done everything that I can to really prevent myself being in this situation, or I'm able to prevent it early before it gets to a point where I can no longer manage it. And I feel like we are extremely fortunate as military to have this type of resource available to us. Not only you mentioned, Chief, the mental health side, but just the medical professionals local to really assist. And I went through a surgery here in 2018 for again this situation and I was able to work with the doctors at CMC and the level of care and treatment that I had was just outstanding. I feel like they were really able to help me and they understood what it was like to be a young female going through something like this and they understood the sensitivity of the situation. So I feel that it's a unique

situation to be in, but people really handle it with care. - Gotcha, right. It's really important to be a team at that point, right? So you and your healthcare provider coming up with a solution and building a plan together, and then being committed to that plan with some adjustments available, right? So it's like any battle, right? You have a great plan and then you meet the enemy. (Christopher chuckles) In this case, it's that cell, right? - Yeah, and I think that brings up a good point, Chief is that I was extremely hesitant as a young airman to share this with my supervisor or my military leaders at my first assignment. I wasn't ready to talk about it. - Okay. - And the first time again in 2016, 2017 timeframe, I was at the 834 COS and that's where I knew that I have to go through some more surgeries coming up. And I sat my leadership team down and I said, "Hey gentlemen, this is kind of where I'm at right now." And that was a hard conversation to have, but they were extremely receptive, they were extremely helpful. And I bring this up because you mentioned team and if you're hesitant to share this with your leadership or your supervisor, it can actually hinder you a little bit on the support that you need. Because I was going to need some time off, I was going to need a little bit more care, I was gonna need to take it slow in the office. So they were there to support me on that and it's important that I communicated that to them. - No, I think that makes a great point, right? So, and when we talk about the wingman concept and how do we embody wingman ship, right? And that team building, it's not an easy subject. You as a member coming to a leadership and saying, "Hey, here's the situation, "I've got something that I'm dealing "with, which is affecting me emotionally, "it's affecting me physically "and I've managed to keep that at bay, "and now it's going to affect me professionally." So how do I go pass that barrier and talk to my leadership not knowing how they are, right? I mean, we have an idea, we've interacted but when it comes to something of this sensitive nature, am I going to get the support? And that's scary, right? So I can only imagine. Can you tell me how you felt before walking in there and talking to 'em? - Yes, Chief. I mean, thankfully at that stage where we were, we had developed a really professional relationship and I felt very comfortable. But you did mention there're some who might not feel comfortable, they might not know their supervisor well enough. So I fully encourage you to leverage the first sergeant, some available resources in your squadron, if you feel more comfortable going to them or finding somebody that you do feel comfortable going to and just letting them know that this is what I'm going through and then maybe they can develop a plan with you to talk to your leadership or your immediate supervisor on that. But I can tell you, I was really nervous, especially they were two gentlemen and I was just not sure how they were gonna respond. But I was like, "Well, I'm gonna have to finally communicate "this to somebody and I guess these are the two "that I will have to tell." But it was very difficult. It was very hard, I feel like I had worked out things that I wanted to say and my points I wanted to hit, but I can tell you it's not easy, it wasn't easy, it still isn't easy. - Well, from a leadership perspective, right? Being a guy in leadership, I can't say that it's super easy for us either, right? So here's a subject matter that A, we're very uncomfortable with. And here we have an airman that comes to us and says, "Here's the problem." There's a lot of things that come into that decision. You obviously, as a good wing then you want to just, "What can I do? "I want to be the hero, "I want to be able to support as much as possible." And then also there comes

into the management piece of like, "Okay now I'm down, "but how do we support the airmen "get the mission moving forward?" But ultimately, it's first and foremost, how do I support you? And if I can't relate to you, then how do I articulate that, yet still be engaged so that you feel like you have the leadership, and that you have the support, and that my uncomfotability doesn't disenfranchise our relationship, right? 'Cause easy answers like, "Okay we're here to support you "and then let you go." Right? How do we then say, "I'm here to support you, "but then stay engaged without encroaching "into what's really "a very, very personal situation." Right? So hopefully, when we meet that as a leader, that we can say, "Okay, Lieutenant Mallow, wow, "I appreciate you bringing that to us. "What do you need from us today?" Right? "This is what we can do, here's the legal pieces "that we have in play. "But then how do we build our relationship "so that you feel comfortable, like, "Hey, I'm not gonna be doing well for a couple of days. "Is there any way I can get some extra support?" Right? "My spouse has all these things on their plate too. "Can I get a little bit of support here?" In the past, with other individuals, members in my squadrons that have dealt with something similar, we did some meals, we did some outreach, right? We made sure that we had almost like a medical sponsor there that they felt comfortable talking to, to interact with squadron leadership so that we could support that member during that process. It's not easy. It's time intensive to be that level of wingman. But I think then when we come through it on the back end, it tends to be more positive. And from your perspective, after you told your leadership, "This is what I needed to do." And then they did what they did, how do you feel that that relationship from you as a member to leadership? Grew or did not grow? I guess. - Yes, Chief, I feel like it honestly grew to not only a professional level that it needed, but naturally, it develops personal relationships, because you're sharing something extremely important that affects you on a regular basis with those individuals. So I can say today that I still have an excellent relationship with those two. I feel like they can to me, or I can come to them with any issues. One of them's separated now. I mean, I still remain in contact with them and his family. And I think we're doing the right thing as a wing, we're talking about it. And I can say that not a lot of individuals know what this is and the awareness isn't there, but just by us talking about it, someone is going to hear this. And if the situation comes up or something similar, they're going to remember hopefully, what we talked about, and what we said, and a way to support that individual and just be there for them. So by us talking about it, especially during October, really raises awareness for the right cause. And this is going to impact somebody in a very positive way. - Right. Now, some good points, and you bring up the way that we, as a winger are bringing it to the forefront. That for conversation, the willingness of you to share your story. But before we started recording, you told me that there's some other things out there that people can do to support. What are some of those things that people can do to support? - Yes, Chief. There are quite a few things, especially local. If you're not here to JBSA Lackland, there are a lot of things that you can do in your community, especially with the Susan G Komen Foundation, the local base usually hosts a run or a walk to support, to raise awareness, there are several fundraisers that you can be involved in, in your community. I encouraged you to do a Google search, reach out, see how you can support if you're interested in doing that. And it's even just letting

somebody understand that you're there for them. That can just satisfy that requirement to help out if you're interested. So, - Right. And don't be afraid to help, don't feel like definitely that there's no options out there or there's limited options. I know, I've seen a number of banners out there, especially in October for some of these support runs and doing other things for campaigning and charity that can help provide funds. So there's definitely some great avenues out there to help fight this. Because as you pointed out in the beginning, and we don't necessarily highlight it across the board, it's not just women that deal with this problem, right? There's males. And it doesn't just affect the individuals. It affects the families, it affects the teams. So it's widespread, and which means that we as wingmen probably should spend a little bit more time and effort to make sure that we wrap ourselves around these problems and help out. What advice, what final words of advice can you give anybody that may be looking at a similar path that you've had to go down? - Chief, I would say I kind of live by three things. Raise awareness for causes that are important to you, even just by talking about it or socializing it. Just raising awareness for what that means and why it's important to you. Leverage your resources. When I was 18, I was too scared to talk to anybody. And my family saw me struggle and they did the best they could to honestly help me, but I could have leveraged more of my resources to really get some of the thoughts that I had and the frustrations I had vocalized better. And then be involved. Be involved in your life, be involved in your team, be involved with your family. Because when I look at, and I think about my mom passing at 32, that it was extremely young. And I just know that we can give so much to our lives every day. And this disease doesn't have to be the end. It can really be the beginning for a healthy and happy future. - Right, awesome. Now again, LT, I really do appreciate you stepping up and sharing the story, right? It isn't easy to kind of expose that nerve and expose that situation both from a family perspective, that personal level, what it took. So, that's extremely brave. And for that, I commend you. And the fact that we're fighting through getting awareness out there, again, I commend you for the level of effort that you're putting forth to help other individuals. So it's these stories, it's these conversations that help a number of people understand that it is something that I can move past, it's something that's not gonna be easy, it's something that's gonna require some support. And the fact that you were able to find teams that were able to help you even through some of those dark periods, is definitely inspirational. So challenge all of the leaders out there that when approached with these subjects, that we handle it with some poise, and embody that wingman ship and see where we can support our airman. So thank you very much, LT. - Yes, Chief, thank you. - With that said, out to the gladiators out there, obviously, this was a sensitive subject but I appreciate your time for listening. And most of all, I appreciate your support of your nation and of the wing. So thank you very much. Thank you for your time, thank you for your citizenship. And I hope you have a good day. (Bright upbeat music)