



HAILEY KINSEL IS RUNNING FOR MARINE CORPS CAPT. KATHERINE HENDRICKS THOMAS

REMEMBERING KATE THOMAS: MARINE CORPS VET, CHAMPION OF BURN PIT LEGISLATION DIES FROM BREAST CANCER

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<https://www.coffeeordie.com/kate-thomas-marine-corps>

The week before she died from stage 4 breast cancer, Marine Corps veteran Kate Hendricks Thomas considered attending a press conference in support of burn pit legislation. She had frequently testified about the issue, shared about her own struggles with cancer, and tirelessly advocated on behalf of other veterans.

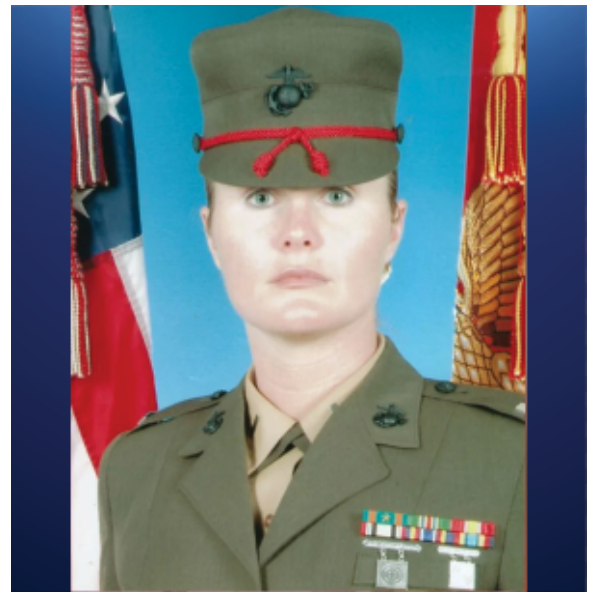
One of Thomas' best friends, Sarah Plummer Taylor, smiled as she recalled Thomas' joyous presence and the effect it had on those around her.

"People fangirl her," Plummer Taylor told Coffee or Die Magazine. "Everybody wanted a piece of Kate."

Even as she was entering the ER on Sunday, April 3, Thomas answered texts from friends who wanted to know if they could come visit.

"No, not now," she replied. "I'm on my way to the hospital. Maybe later."

Thomas died Tuesday, April 5, at the age of 42, leaving behind a husband, a son, and a legacy of resilience that has inspired countless others and is poised to change the way future generations of veterans receive care.



Marine Corps Capt.
Katherine Hendricks Thomas



Plummer Taylor met Thomas in 1999 during Air Force ROTC at the University of Virginia. Thomas was a year older, but the pair clicked right away and became roommates the next year. Thomas was like the idealized version of a big sister: protective, fun, and willing to dish out some tough love when necessary.



Thomas, who came from a Marine Corps family, decided to switch to Marine Corps ROTC, and she completed Officer Candidate School. When Plummer Taylor followed a year later, Thomas gave her a present. It was a cassette tape of Marine Corps cadences, the call-and-response work songs Marines belt out while they march.

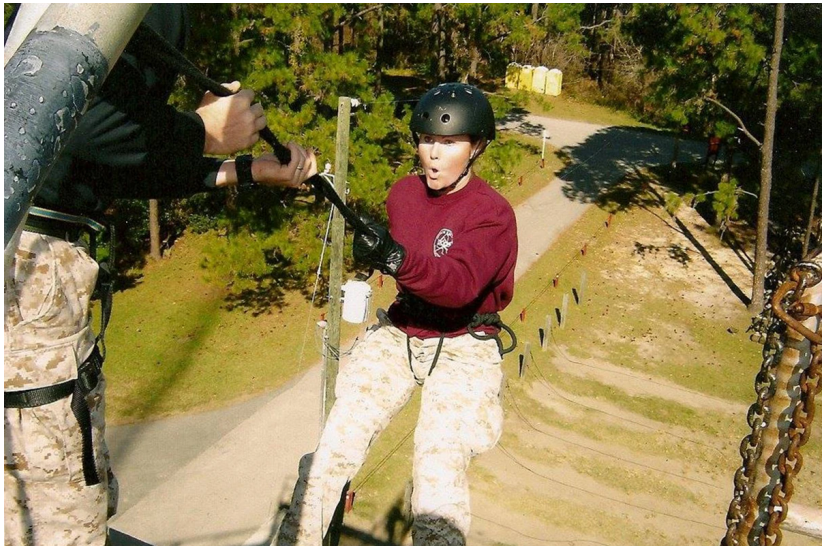


“You need to listen to this tape every single time you run,” Thomas said. “This is the one way you can come in and just hit the ground running, because they’re going to ask you to call cadence, and everybody’s going to fumble. If you can come in there on day one and sing these cadences, you’re going to crush it.”

So every time she ran — often with Thomas alongside her — Plummer Taylor slid that cassette tape into her Walkman and sang the cadences.

Thomas’ drive to be the best she could be was infectious. The pair ran themselves into the ground and did pullups until their arms trembled.

During endurance courses in OCS, women were provided boxes to make it easier to clear certain obstacles that required intense upper body strength, Plummer Taylor recalled.



“Kate always was like, ‘Don’t you ever have to fucking use those boxes,’” Plummer Taylor said. “In the Marine Corps, one place you could very tangibly prove that you deserve to be there was through physical fitness. If we could do it the same as the guys do, then they didn’t have any right to tell us we shouldn’t be there.”

Thomas deployed to Fallujah, Iraq, in early 2005 as a military police officer. For months, she lived, patrolled, and ran her daily laps around the burn pit on base, unconcerned by the thick, black smoke billowing into the air she breathed.

Her younger brother Matt was also a Marine, and he deployed to Iraq at the same time. Toward the end of her deployment, Thomas received the phone call every service member’s loved ones dread. Matt’s truck had hit an improvised explosive device.

Matt was medevaced and spent months at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. Thomas stayed at her brother’s bedside for weeks, Plummer Taylor said.



Outwardly, Thomas appeared unscathed by the war.

She left active duty in 2008, returned to school, and earned a doctorate in health education and promotion. She married, had a son named Matthew, and in 2015 published her first book, *Brave, Strong, True: The Modern Warrior's Battle for Balance*, blending her personal narrative with wellness research to promote resilience among American service members and veterans. More books followed, examining veterans' mental health and the unique experiences of women in the military.



Then, in January 2018, Thomas got a mammogram. At 38 years old, she felt healthy, but her nurse practitioner recommended she be examined because of her service in Iraq.

She had stage 4 breast cancer. And not just one type, but three.

“They said it looked like I had been dipped in something,” Thomas told ABC News in 2021. “I had metastases throughout my skeletal system from my skull to my toes.”

After her diagnosis, Thomas started noticing how disturbingly prevalent cancer was among other female veterans. She ran into the only other woman from her unit in Iraq, and it turned out she had the exact same type of cancer Thomas did.

Young military women have a 20% to 40% higher rate of breast cancer than civilian women, according to Department of Veterans Affairs-funded research. And a 2015 VA report suggested upwards of 3.5 million veterans may have been exposed to burn pits in Afghanistan, Djibouti, or the Southwest Asia theater of operations. But the VA has historically made it difficult for veterans to prove their illnesses are connected to burn pits.



Thomas said she had no family history of breast cancer and that her oncologist believed it was exposure-related. She went back and forth with the VA for years, but the department denied her benefits claim and all appeals until July of 2021, more than three years into the five doctors estimated she would live.

She started planning for a shorter future and made sure every minute counted, even when her friends and family urged her to slow down and rest.

In February 2020, Thomas and Plummer Taylor printed out all their essays, personal stories, and research papers and spread them out on a table to organize into one seminal work. Thomas figured it would be the last book she wrote before she died, so it had to count. *Stopping Military Suicides: Veteran Voices To Help Prevent Deaths* was published in 2021.



She continued teaching for George Mason University's Department of Global and Community Health as long as she could, and she gave frequent in-person and virtual talks on cancer, research, issues faced by women in the military, and more.

In March, the US Senate unanimously approved the Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas Supporting Expanded Review for Veterans in Combat Environments (SERVICE) Act, which would require the VA to provide mammograms for all women who served in areas known to be associated with burn pits and other toxic substances.

Thomas also recently testified in support of the House's sweeping Honoring Our Promise To Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, known as the PACT Act. While Thomas ultimately decided she didn't feel well enough to attend a March 29 press conference on Capitol Hill in support of the legislation, Plummer Taylor said Thomas' drive to inspire others and contribute to the world endured until the very end.

Thomas died peacefully on Tuesday afternoon, surrounded by her husband, brother, and parents, her husband, Shane, wrote on Thomas' website.

"She accomplished more in this life than many do in a full one," he wrote. "I love you, honey. See you later."



Friends, veterans, lawmakers, and service organizations have publicly mourned Thomas in the days since her death.

Plummer Taylor has lost track of all the stories she's told in the past two days about her kind and "wicked smart" friend who always lit up the room. She has more than 20 years of friendship and sisterhood to look back on, but one recent memory in particular brings a smile to her face.

She always called Thomas on her walks, and the week before Thomas started hospice was no different.

"Kate, how are ya?" Plummer Taylor asked, knowing that her friend had been dealing with increased pain lately.

But Thomas was never one to focus on the negative. Instead, she told Plummer Taylor about going to yoga and having tea with a friend.

"I chose to have a good day today," Thomas said. "So I did."



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