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News

Brain's Flight: Flying helped Brian Kissinger beat a brain tumor. Now he's ready to help others

Michael W. Michelsen Jr.

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Several years ago, while stationed in Okinawa, Japan, former U.S. Air Force Major Brian Kissinger, along with the rest of his comrades, was given a hat with his first name stitched on the back. On Kissinger's hat, instead of "Brian," the word "Brain" was stitched. The nickname stuck.

"For some reason, everybody misspells Brian," he said. "I get mail all the time for Brain. I must admit that it was pretty funny at the time, but it was prophetic too."

That's because in July 2003, while stationed at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois, Kissinger collapsed during a game of tennis. What was first thought to be heat stroke turned out to be oligodendroglioma, a cancerous brain tumor the size of a baseball.

"When I was first diagnosed, I was scared to death," he said. "At that point in my life things were going so well. The news of my tumor was devastating. I couldn't get it out of my mind. I kept thinking, 'hey, I'm an athlete. I run marathons. I'm in great shape. Not only that, but I have a wife and family. This can't be happening to me. This isn't fair. I was heavily in the denial phase, as most cancer patients are after they're diagnosed, and I wasn't so positive that I could get through it. But there comes a point where you just start doing whatever it is you can and attack it step by step, and that's what we decided to do."

Kissinger soon found himself in the hospital, undergoing surgery to remove the tumor. He was released two days later.

"I had my surgery one day, but the second day all I was doing was sitting in bed, and I decided that I could do that at home, so I was discharged," he said. "My doctor told me that I was the fastest recovery he ever had.

"I have to credit my doctors for a lot of my success," he continued. "They were the best, and after they removed the tumor, they used a drug that targets the cancer and only the cancer, leaving the healthy cells untouched. It really is amazing."

After his surgery to remove the tumor, Kissinger underwent 20 months of chemotherapy.

Kissinger, 37, who lives in O'Fallon, Ill., with his wife, Priscilla and three daughters, Alexa, 16, Gabriella, 14, and Isabella, 11, feels fortunate to have beaten his cancer.

"I'm very lucky that the tumor I had was where they could reach it and that I responded to treatment," he said. "It was rough, both on me as well as my family, but now it's in remission."

Fighting cancer has even become a family affair as the five Kissingers participate in the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life events. Kissinger also runs in the Air Force Marathon, taking pledges that benefit the American Cancer Society. On the most recent run, he raised more than \$2,000 for the organization.

While he credits his family with helping him through the toughest time of his life, he also notes that aviation helped him pull through.

"When I was in the hospital, all I could think of was flying," he said. "Flying has always been a passion in my life. Flying became my reason to recover."

A CELEBRATION

Kissinger began flying when he was 19. Lessons cost more than he could afford, so he began washing and waxing airplanes in Gainesville, Florida, in exchange for flight instruction. At 18 he enlisted in the Florida National Guard as a heavy equipment operator while attending the University of Florida. In 1990 he graduated first in his Air Force ROTC class and moved to Mather Air Force Base to attend navigator training. He eventually served in the Special Operations Command flying MC-130s (Combat Talons) as a navigator and electronic warfare officer. Airplanes became the focal point



of his life. Medically retired from the Air Force in 2005, he now works for General Electric Healthcare.

The pilot, who holds commercial and CFI ratings, has owned a variety of airplanes, including his first, a 1946 Luscombe.

"I enjoy every minute of being in the air and tinkering with airplanes," he said.

So it was no surprise that, after recovering from his life-threatening illness, he was ready to fly again. "It's a great way to celebrate life," he said.

That gave him the idea for "Brain's Flight," an around-the country flight starting in St. Louis to raise money for brain tumor research.

Kissinger is restoring a 1942 Piper L-4 "Grasshopper" to use for the mission.

"As soon as I was able, I went out looking for an airplane for the flight," he said. "I came across this aircraft in the back of a hangar. Its restoration was stalled, so I bought it. It was perfect."

The plane was built for World War II transport and for observation of enemy artillery, he said. According to an Air Force historian, it was delivered to the Army Ground Forces at Post Field, Oklahoma, in 1942. In 1946 it was declared excess and placed in storage at South Plains Army Air Force Base in Texas. It was removed from storage in 1947 and transferred to the South Carolina Wing of the Civil Air Patrol.

"The restoration should be finished by the end of the year," said Kissinger. "It will take several weeks to make the complete trip, so I really want to take my time and make sure that everything is right."

As in all things, Kissinger enjoys the support of his family in the endeavor. "They see it as a wonderful way for me to focus on something besides cancer, even if it does benefit research into cancer," he said. "Aviation is something I love, and building something that has been dormant for so long is a great diversion. It's fun to know that an airplane like this is getting to perform its first mission in more than 50 years."

All expenses incurred from carrying out the mission Kissinger is paying out of his own pocket, including restoration of the airplane.

Kissinger hopes to raise at least \$100,000 from the flight. His lifetime goal is to raise \$1 million for brain tumor research and education. All donations will go to the National Brain Tumor Foundation.

"They were very helpful to me at a really difficult and scary time in my life," he said.

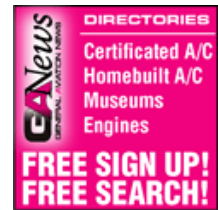
"What Brian is doing is so important, not only to those diagnosed with brain cancer, but their friends and families who are trying to understand and help," said Ron Tufel, executive director of the National Brain Tumor Foundation. "There are over 120 different types of brain tumors, both malignant and non-malignant. Secondary brain tumors — those that spread from a cancer in another part of the body — affect 15% of all cancer patients. What is needed is more focus on this disease."

According to the foundation, more than 190,000 brain tumors are diagnosed in the United States each year.

"Few of these patients will be as fortunate as I have been fighting my brain tumor," Kissinger said. "I am flying and fighting for them."

For more information:

<http://www.BrainsFlight.com>



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