

Fighting the Odds

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“You go through every emotion you can think of, and when you find yourself going down that mental slide, you just suck it up and say, ‘Nope, I’m going to survive.’” That’s how 18-year Coast Guard veteran BMCS Mel C. Emond, Jr., once described his battle with lung cancer, an enemy that claims the life of 15,000 Americans every day.

As a reserve, special-projects officer at Coast Guard Group Long Island Sound, the late BMCS Emond was no stranger to life-or-death situations. During Operation Desert Storm in 1991, he was a raider-boat coxswain for the first American boat to land in Kuwait. The crew’s mission was to sweep for mines and booby traps. He also served two tours with the Navy in Vietnam during the 1960s.

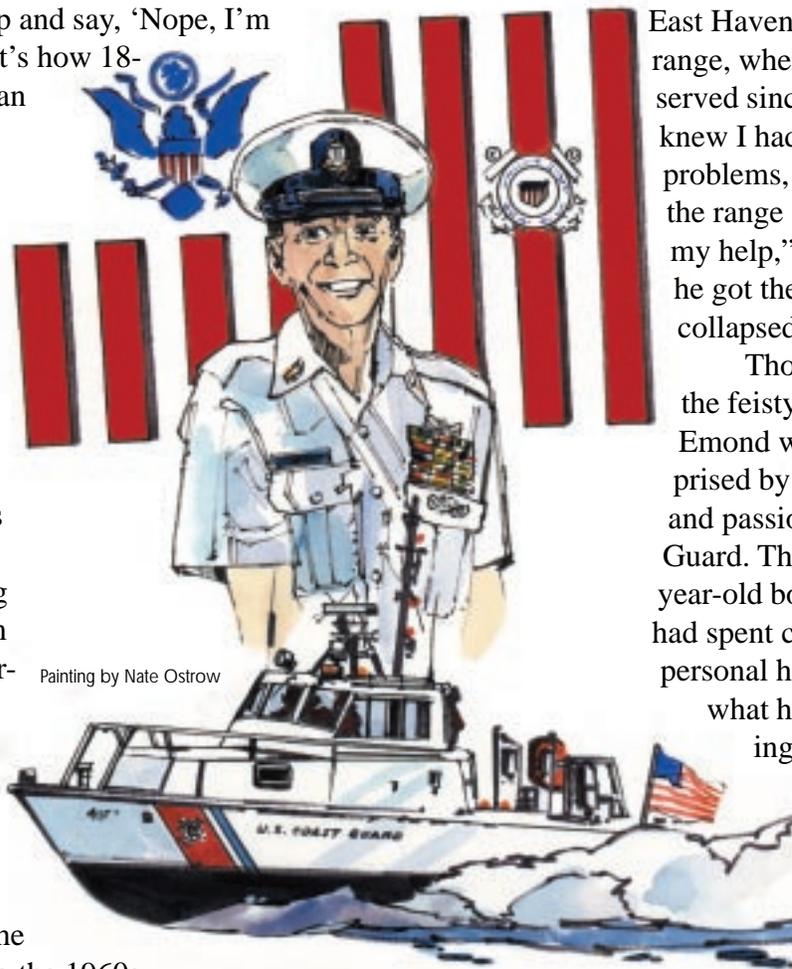
Senior Chief Emond’s greatest battle began the last week of September 1999, while serving on active duty. Known for his high energy level, he suddenly developed an extreme case of fatigue. Doing even simple tasks, such as walking up or down stairs, left him exhausted and panting. Shipmates encouraged him to schedule an appointment with his family doctor. The diagnosis from that appointment was lung

cancer, a collapsed lung, and a tumor.

Three days later, the exhausted and physically ill BMCS Emond went to his job as a small-arms instructor at the East Haven, Conn., firing range, where he had served since 1993. “I knew I had serious health problems, but I also knew the range staff needed my help,” he said. When he got there, he almost collapsed.

Those who knew the feisty BMCS Emond were not surprised by his dedication and passion for the Coast Guard. The salty, 55-year-old boatswain’s mate had spent countless personal hours doing what he loved: training people who wanted to become coxswains or boat-crew members.

“I don’t know where he got his energy level,” said Senior Chief Petty Officer Robert G. Jefferey, command senior chief for Group Long Island Sound and BMCS Emond’s friend for 14 years. “He came over and drilled without pay; he was the pulse that kept things going around here. When necessary, he was the first one to throw on coveralls, and he was the first to take a new member under his wing,” said SCPO Jefferey.



Painting by Nate Ostrow

BMCS Emond's wife of 34 years, Alberta, a cancer survivor, said the Coast Guard was more than a passion for her husband. "It was a part of our family. He was made for the boats," she said with a smile. "He always did extra drills, and he often missed family functions because he knew the guys needed him. When Mel became a coxswain, he became a father to his boat crews."

When BMCS Emond had surgery in November 1999, the crew of Group Long Island Sound returned his dedication by supporting him in his hour of need. "They were unbelievable; they called so much I finally had to tell them to just e-mail me," he said. "While I was in the hospital, five or six people would call on the speaker phone, cheering and encouraging me. They knew if they called individually, I couldn't talk to all of them."

After his six-hour surgery, BMCS Emond was unconscious for four days, and doctors placed him on life-support machines to help him breathe. Once he was able to return home, he quickly thanked the crew at Group Long Island Sound for their support. "His first day back, we weren't sure if he would be able to stay because it was emotional," Alberta said. "People could not believe he was there; he still had staples in him from the surgery."

Although BMCS Emond went to work to thank his fellow crew members for their support during his surgery, he also had an ulterior motive. "He was picking up files for an upcoming RFO inspection," said Alberta, shaking her head.

Then came the news no one wanted to hear. The surgery had been unsuccessful. The family doctor told BMCS Emond his only hope for survival was radiation and chemotherapy.

At the end of November, he began the grueling procedure. After he had received the usual 4,000 units of radiation (about 1,000 a week), however, the cancer still was present. The doctor recommended another 1,000 units. By now, BMCS Emond's weight had dropped from 165 to 118.

After the 5,000th unit of radiation, he still was fighting for his life. The family doctor then

said, "I know I'm asking a lot of you, but if you can take another 1,000 units, I may be able to cure you." Senior Chief Emond agreed to go for it.

He endured the 6,000th unit of radiation and then began the process of chemotherapy. Now, the cancer was in remission. "I remember getting my first haircut after the radiation and chemotherapy," he said. "This might sound funny, but sitting there and seeing that first lock of hair fall down the cloth made me so happy. It's a shame something like this has to come along before you wake up and stop taking so much for granted."

The first person to admit that 30 years of smoking caused his cancer (two doctors told him so), BMCS Emond hoped his story would be an example to others. He especially felt a certain responsibility to make young military people think carefully about their choices in life. ■

Despite his gallant battle with cancer, Senior Chief Mel Emond succumbed to the disease in June 2001, a few months after the author had done this story.—Ed.



The late BMCS Mel Emond, Jr., with his wife, Alberta.

The then-BM1 Emond, Jr., raises the national and Coast Guard ensigns during Operation Desert Storm. He was a raider-boat coxswain for the first American boat to land in Kuwait in 1991.

