



Air Combat Command NEWS SERVICE

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Ellsworth 'Bone' pilot donates marrow

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ELLSWORTH AIR FORCE BASE, S.D. (ACCNS) -- It was almost a year ago when Capt. Ryan Hollman, the 37th Bomb Squadron flight commander, decided to donate bone marrow.

When he signed up for it, he was told that his odds of being selected were 40,000-1. About six months later, his odds were 100-1, and by November, his odds were 1-1.

Captain Hollman said he decided to sign up as a donor while attending Squadron Officer School at Maxwell AFB, Ala.

"I heard about other people donating bone marrow but hadn't really thought about it myself," the 31-year-old Wisner, Neb., native said. "When I signed up, I was told that realistically, the odds of being selected as a donor were pretty small."

However, in June, the Department of Defense Bone Marrow Center contacted him, saying he was a preliminary match for a person who needed a donation.

At that time, he was told the odds of being a match were still only 10 percent.

The process continued, and other potential donors were weeded out. Captain Hollman got the nod.

In early October, he received another call to say the recipient wasn't ready at that time to receive a transplant. Captain Hollman was then placed in a standby mode, which didn't last long.



Capt. Ryan Hollman, the 37th Bomb Squadron flight commander, climbs the ladder into a B-1. Captain Hollman recently donated bone marrow to a stranger in hopes of saving his life. (Air Force photo by Chap. (Capt.) Richard Tatum.)

Note: Click on image for higher-resolution copy.

At the beginning of November, he was told the transplant was back on schedule.

“The staff from the center told me that I was the best match -- not necessarily the only match, but the best match,” Captain Hollman said.

According to Captain Hollman, it's at this stage that the center often has problems.

“They said a part of the problem is with people who sign up thinking that they'll never be called for a donation. When they're called and told that they're a match with someone rather than saying, 'I really didn't think I'd be called' or that 'I'm not really interested,' they make excuses and try to put the center staff off,” he said. “I really didn't want to do that, especially if I'm the best possible match for the person. Even if they only live for another few months at least I've had the opportunity to help someone else out.”

In order to complete the process, he had to make two all-expenses-paid trips to Georgetown University Medical Center, Washington, D.C.

On the first trip, he had to undergo another physical examination, including an EKG and chest x-rays, to ensure that he was in good health.

The donating procedure had to be done the day before Thanksgiving, but he didn't mind.

“We didn't have any plans to go see anyone for Thanksgiving or anything, so it actually worked out for us,” he said.

Captain Hollman, his wife, Dawn, and their infant son, would spend the greater part of Thanksgiving week in the nation's capital.

“Dawn has been there for me and encouraging me every step of the way,” he said.

The DoD Bone Marrow Center flew them first-class to Washington D.C. and even paid for his mother-in-law to fly to Ellsworth to take care of their 3-year-old son.

Captain Hollman said if there was any personal benefit to this process, it was getting the royal treatment of a donor.

However, the royal treatment wasn't completely without cost. Captain Hollman gave 1.5 liters of bone marrow from his hips.

“As for my recovery, I was pretty sore for a couple of days and had a headache,” he said. “That was the extent of my pain. My legs were tired and felt like I had run a long distance more than I'm used to.”

He added that the quickness of his recovery surprised him. “I could barely walk that night after the surgery, but by the next morning I was able to walk fairly normal, but didn't rush,” he said.

The center's staff recommends donors take it easy for 10 days to two weeks and not try to over exert themselves. Most people are back to normal in two to four weeks.

When it was all said and done, at 10 a.m. Thanksgiving Day, Captain Hollman was released from the hospital with the satisfaction of knowing that he'd helped someone, although it was an anonymous someone. The only information he received is that the recipient was a 50-year-old male.

"I know they couriered the bone marrow to the recipient the morning they got it out of me. I haven't had any more updates other than he's received it," Captain Hollman said. "I know that one year after the donation we are both eligible, if the recipient and I agree, to receive information about each other and then we can contact each other."

Part of the reason for making the donor and recipient wait a year to meet is because the odds of the patient surviving long term is only about 40 to 50 percent on an average.

The younger the recipient is, the greater their chances of survival. However, for Captain Hollman's recipient, the odds of surviving more than a year are 30 to 40 percent because of his age.

"Nevertheless, I feel good about it. The process is quite involved, but I'd do it again," Captain Hollman said. "I don't see myself as a hero or anything. I'm just lucky to be able to match with this person who needed my bone marrow so that he can hopefully overcome whatever it is that he has."

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