

Marine Private Darren Chambers

Darren Chambers, from Warren Grove, New Jersey, joined the Marine Corps on November 16, 2009. One of the main reasons in joining the Marines was to serve his nation and learn discipline. He entered Fort Dix for MEPS, where he was later assigned MOS-3521 to be an Automotive Maintenance Technician. Chambers felt that the training and skills receiving could be a trade that he could bring back home and support his family.

Darren initially went to boot camp at Parris Island and became the first member of his family to join the military. His first duty station was overseas in Japan in 2010. In addition to his National Defense Service Medal, Global War on Terror, and Overseas Service Ribbon, he earned many awards. Due to his service in cleaning up radioactive sites, he received a letter of appreciation from then Vice President Joe Biden for his contributions and volunteering at local orphanages in the area in September of 2011. His recognitions demonstrate his positive relations with the local community.

Camp Fuji, Japan / Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster

In December 2010, Darren arrived at Camp Fuji, Japan, as an E1. After four months of his station there, a 15-meter tsunami occurred following a major earthquake. As a result, three Fukushima Daiichi reactors were disabled as well as their power supply, which caused a nuclear accident beginning on March 11, 2011. All three cores largely melted in the first three days of the accident. Soon after learning that the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant was destroyed due to the tsunami, Chambers and his unit was sent to assist in cleaning up the wreckage as part of the mission named "Operation Tomodachi."

The initial safety brief stated that nuclear risk was "minimal." Darren was given iodine tablets and radiation monitors in response to this risk, although the unit did not wear MOPP gear but only the standard MARPAT service uniforms. Darren, as part of the second group of Marines sent to the cleanup site, was stationed at a destroyed airport just outside the reactor site. This group slept on the southside of the airport facility, which was the side closest to the nuclear reactor. Darren spent most days clearing debris by hand, cleaning out the Sendai airport and surrounding roads, or going into town to search for survivors and hand out food, decontaminated water, and other supplies.

After a few days into this operation, Chambers began to experience symptoms of mental and physical fatigue. He cannot remember leaving the destroyed site but only remembers returning sick and mentally unwell to the base. Symptoms of anxiety and PTSD-like symptoms were present and constant, but Chambers could not explain or verbalize these feelings after leaving that airport. Upon his return, his radiation monitors were checked. Although the monitors indicated that his radiation exposure levels were elevated, his concern was not addressed, and the response was merely to the effect of "You will probably be fine." And yet, despite these words, he was told that he would be at risk for cancer due to this exposure to radiation.

The mission has a technical success rate of 100 percent, as no persons received injuries. Following his mission there and even though he voiced concerns for his health to his family, Chambers lived in denial about the extent of how severe the radiation exposure was. Darren suffered mentally every day. He drank alcohol, because he struggled with constant fatigue, mental cloudiness, and increasingly severe depression.

Given his use of alcohol as a coping mechanism, Chambers then faced disciplinary issues, as his use of alcohol began to interfere with his military duties. He was then discharged, Other than Honorable (OTH), for misconduct, both for leaving his post and for possession of a substance.

Cancer Diagnosis

He learned that, as a result of his radiation exposure from over ten years prior, he had inflamed lymph nodes, which had since grown in size. This first diagnosis indicated potential cancer. In November 2022, Darren was diagnosed with Metastatic Melanoma, indicated that the initial cancer had spread throughout his entire body.

Chambers has been receiving treatment. Given that the cause of his cancer was radiation exposure, he was not able to receive radiation treatment, as it would significantly decrease his chance of survival. Darren continues to endure the pain every day.

Darren Chambers Today

Chambers has struggled to make bill payments since learning of his cancer. The hospital and a Go Fund Me have provided Chambers with assistance. New Jersey Reentry Corporation (NJRC) has consistently advocated for upgrade of his discharge status to qualify for VA healthcare benefits. NJRC is also working to provide wraparound services to assist Darren and his young family.