

# The Long Journey of Joana Brown

BY ALLEN PIERLEONI

**In a complicated two-year case, OMVA was there every step for a surviving spouse**

**D**avid Brown had served in the U.S. Army Reserves for nearly 20 years, simultaneously continuing what would be a 25-year career as an engineer with Marriott Hotels, first in Boston, then in San Diego.

In February 2003, after pre-training with the reserves for a year, he was transferred to active duty status and deployed for three months to Camp Udairi in Kuwait as a commander in the 1394th Transportation Brigade. After further deployments to Virginia and Alaska, he was released from full-service duty in December 2003 and resumed his position at Marriott, which the company had held for him during his service.

By late 2014 Brown began to complain of pain. "At first we thought he had sciatica, but then he got very sick," says his surviving spouse, Joana Brown. "It turned out he had the highest stage of multiple myeloma, so aggressive that he passed away in nine months."

When her husband was first diagnosed, the Browns reached out to the Office of Military & Veterans Affairs, where they were connected with Senior Veteran Services Representative Christopher Gunn and his team.

The Browns wanted to "accrue his veteran's benefits (especially medical insurance)," Joana Brown says. "Keep in mind, we thought we were looking at the future of a surviving veteran, not a passing veteran."

David Brown passed away during the process—in July 2015—before his case had been fully documented. "When he passed, the process turned into surviving-spouse paperwork and what I was entitled to as a veteran's wife," says Joana Brown.

Ultimately, an amendment was added to David Brown's death certificate that helped settle Joana Brown's case. In part, it described how her husband's duties in Kuwait

included regularly checking a storage facility holding "tons of radioactive depleted uranium munitions."

Joana Brown received her backdated Veterans Administration entitlement at the end of her two-year journey. Along the way, she joined several women's grief-support groups where she met and helped recently widowed surviving spouses, who didn't know how or where to begin the benefit process.

"Even though our office at OMVA represented Joana Brown, the accolades for the approval of her entitlement belong to her for her time, patience and perseverance," Gunn says.

"Now she routinely helps other surviving spouses as well as veterans and their families apply for their VA entitlements. Her dedication and humbleness do not go unnoticed."

"I feel honored that I'm able to assist people," she says. "Mr. Gunn and his team are really the key to the success of my story, which I feel truly blessed to share."



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**JOANA BROWN**  
Surviving spouse, U.S. Army

## HOW TO GET BENEFITS

Each year, more than 300,000 military veterans receive personalized assistance from the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs, and other veteran-support groups.

In OMVA's case, they are guided through the step-by-step benefits process by Veteran Service Representatives, who help expedite each case.

Adonis Relieve, Assistant Director of OMVA, outlines the process:

### BENEFITS PROCESS

- 1 The OMVA Outreach Office receives an inquiry from a veteran or a dependent.
- 2 The office establishes contact and makes an appointment with the client to review the claim for benefits.
- 3 A Veteran Services Representative (VSR) assists with the claim preparation and gathering of supporting documents, including medical and service records, and military discharge documents.
- 4 The VSR completes the claim with the veteran/dependent and submits it to federal (Veterans Administration), state and local agencies for adjudication.
- 5 The VSR follows up and contacts the appropriate agency for the decision. A claims decision may take a few months or longer, depending on the complexity of the case and the number of claim issues.
- 6 The VSR helps the veteran/dependent appeal a decision, if necessary.

As the surviving-spouse of an Army veteran, Joana Brown was entitled to VA benefits. She now helps other surviving-spouses with their bereavement and casework.

PHOTO BY CHARLIE NEUMAN