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RELEASE #2009-03-16-3

2009: THE YEAR OF THE NCO

March 16, 2009

Sailor-turned-sergeant, 48 going on 32, inspires other Soldiers to 'do anything you set your mind to'

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WIESBADEN, Germany -- If you're wondering how it would feel to be young again, ask Staff Sgt. Cynthia D. Mills, who is 48 going on 32...or even younger.



SPC FABIAN ORTEGA

1st Armored Division's Staff Sgt. Cynthia D. Mills takes a morning run near the Wiesbaden (Germany) Army Airfield. Mills is a former sailor who made two life-changing decisions: to become a long-distance runner and to join the U.S. Army at age 45.

Mills enlisted in the Army in 2006 as an intelligence analyst with 1st Armored Division after a life-changing makeover reinvigorated her zest for life.

The 5-feet-1-inch-tall sergeant set her mind on a course that led from her away from an unhealthy lifestyle in Kentucky to running half-marathons in Spain.

Mills's story begins in 1981 when, at the age of 20, she joined the Navy with no official job.

"I worked on tugboats, worked as a deck hand on a naval ship and drove boats in Hawaii," said Mills. She called her five years in the Navy fun, but with two girls to raise and a husband on active duty, she said she wanted a more stable home life.

Mills left active duty in 1986, pursued a degree in nursing and joined the Navy Reserve as a hospital corpsman. In 1994 she completed her obligation to the military and concentrated on a full-time job as a licensed practical nurse.

With motherhood and a profession in full swing, Mills said she let her physical fitness deteriorate. It all came to a head in 2002.

Long work hours and very little personal time often led to fast food and large portions. While working as an LPN and caring for an ailing mother-in-law, Mills said, she realized she had gained a significant amount of weight -- more than 60 pounds over her recommended body weight.

“The weight came on ... as a nurse I should have known better than this,” she said.

It was then, the sergeant said, that she dedicated herself to a new lifestyle and a workout routine that would shape the next seven years of her life.

It began with jogging at the high school track near her home. The first week she ran just one lap. The next week she added another.

“I just started adding lap after lap. Then it just became a question of, ‘How far can I run?’” said Mills.

With running and a modified diet Mills lost the added 60 pounds -- and then some -- in less than a year. She went from a size XL to a size four.

“It took about nine months. I cut down on my portions and gradually increased the exercise,” said Mills. “Portion control and exercise; it’s a lifestyle change. I feel like I’m in my 20s.”

After losing the weight, Mills took her regimen a step further.

“I entered my first 10K that year,” she said.

Before long 5- and 10-kilometer races sparked an interest in serious long-distance running. In spring 2005, two-and-a-half years after setting foot on the high school track, Mills entered her first half-marathon.

Next, Mills said, she set her sights on rejoining the Navy.

With her experience as a sailor and a burning desire to return to the fleet, she said, she contacted a Navy recruiter, only to find out there weren’t many job opportunities for her on active duty. She joined the Reserve a second time, but yearned for more than being a part-time sailor.

“I wasn’t happy with being in the reserves. I know that I wanted to be on active duty,” she said.

She stuck with the Reserve a year, then contacted an Army recruiter hoping to change direction and find some adventure.

“I thought about it and discussed it with my husband ... I kept thinking I wanted to go on active duty,” Mills said. “There were so many opportunities for training and a new career.”

Mills knew there was one problem -- her age. For prior servicemembers entering the Army, the age limit was just shy of 42. Mills was 45. But as luck had it, the Army didn't see it quite that way.

“They take the time you already served, and subtract it [from] how old you are, and that's how old the military sees you,” Mills said.

A recruiter did the number-crunching, and the Army recognized Mills's age as 32. Just like that, she was a Soldier.

“She rejoined the United States military when most would have been content to remain comfortable in a known environment. At an age when most are set, she joined and stepped forward once again to serve our country in the United States military – in particular during a time of war,” said 1st Armored Division Command Sgt. Maj. Roger Blackwood.

The sergeant major said Mills was unquestionably qualified for her Military Occupational Specialty -- her chosen field in the Army. “But as everyone knows,” he added, “there is more to being a good noncommissioned officer and Soldier than just MOS competency [and that includes] the physical condition Soldiers must sustain to fully perform their full duties, especially during combat operations.

“She did not use age or make excuses that she could not become and remain physically prepared. She took her own initiative and responsibility to physically condition herself to a level of performance that was above expectations.”

Since rejoining the military, Mills, who now works in the 1st Armored Division headquarters here, has run two marathons, three half-marathons and two Army Ten Milers. Her most recent race was a half-marathon in Barcelona, where she shaved four minutes off her 13-mile time.

“This is an exciting time for me,” Mills said. “Not only am I getting older -- I'm getting faster.”

She also scored perfect on her most recent Army Physical Fitness Test.

At the age of 48, the Michigan native proclaims that she wants to be a walking -- or running -- example of the adage that “you can do anything you put your mind to.” She said she has been told she's an inspiration to those around her.

“I had some Soldiers who weren't fond of running and I told them my story; about how I run marathons and how I started so late in life,” said Mills. “Some of them told me afterwards how I inspired them to actually enjoy the sport of running.”

But Mills is definitely not all talk. The sergeant said she routinely pushes the Soldiers in her section to run farther, and they return the favor by making her run harder.

“They keep me in my 20s,” Mills said.

Her success also backs up her leadership style as a noncommissioned officer, she said.

“My leadership style is, lead by example,” she said. “I think that leadership style is effective 95 percent of the time. Most people will follow. There are a few people that won’t fall into that group and you have to try a different tactic. I think that if you can inspire them to be more, then I think that’s all you can ask for.”

“At times it just takes seeing another Soldier doing things as an individual to motivate others to do the same,” Blackwood said. “One of the pillars of leadership development is self-study and self-development. Staff Sgt. Mills fulfills part of her self-development to continue learning as an NCO through her ... initiative, responsibility and commitment to better herself and remain physically conditioned by her own motivation. [She is] an example for others to emulate as we all continue to grow and make ourselves better as noncommissioned officers and leaders in our United States Army.”

So, given her military history, which service does the sergeant root for these days during college football season?

“I quietly root for the Army. My husband and daughter root for the Navy at home. I’m definitely Army,” she said.



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