



**Survivor Story: Amanda Parr (White)**  
**Acting Lieutenant, Camilla Georgia**  
**Diagnosed with Thyroid Cancer**  
**2022**

My name is Amanda Parr (White). I am 37 years old, as of this writing in 2022. I am an Acting Lieutenant with the Camilla Fire Department, and have been with the department for just shy of a decade. 2022 started out much like any other, with the exception of Covid still obnoxiously hanging around. I can't lie, and say I didn't feel slightly more tired this year than last. I can't say that the South Georgia heat didn't feel a little hotter, more draining this last summer. I also can't say that anything I now look back and consider to have probably been a warning sign, was anything other than "me just getting older". I am pushing 40, after all.

I reluctantly participated in my annual physical in May of 2022, just as I do every year. If I do not, my gynecologist will not prescribe my Adderall for me. So, it is what it is. The last five or so years, he had really "encouraged" me to lose a little weight. This visit was no different. And for the 5<sup>th</sup> year in a row, I explained to him that my dietary habits continued to improve every year. I again explained to him that I did not consume bread, pasta, and sodas. I rarely consumed any dairy product other than cheese. I wasn't throwing back Honey Buns and Dr. Peppers for breakfast. The only things I ate that came out of a package were probably rice and tuna. I grew a lot of my own vegetables, as well as produced my own chicken and pork. Did I eat too large of portions...probably. But I certainly wasn't living off of processed junk. In fact, some of the foods I prepared were strange enough to earn gawks from the fellows at work. The reason for the way I ate was two-fold. I desired to lead a healthier lifestyle, and the gastric symptoms that refined sugar, flour, and most dairy gave me had grown to the point of horrendous over the last couple of years. I'll spare anyone reading this the gory details of that, but let's just say, I assumed I was lactose intolerant and at minimum had a gluten sensitivity.

Rather than continuing to insist on me consuming two Slim-Fast shakes and half a chicken breast a day, he took a different approach. He felt my neck again. I am no stranger to the thyroid check. My mother had Follicular Thyroid Cancer. Several other members of my family have had various degrees of thyroid disorders over the years. But my mother's cancer was not overly famous for being hereditary, as some others are. He said let's do an ultrasound. Um, ok. No other explanations. No lumps or bumps felt.

Later in May, I went in for the ultrasound. Routine enough. I also had blood work done. I always had blood work done annually, and every year, my thyroid levels were always normal. They checked for something different this time; they were looking for thyroid antibodies.

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While waiting for the results of my ultrasound and lab work, I did what I assume most people do. I drove myself insane Googling medical conditions, reading articles in medical journals, and in general preparing for the worst, but in denial, knowing the best-case scenario was all it would be. After all, I was only in my 30s. I didn't have any symptoms of anything...or did I?

I work with people that could be missing half an arm, and will say they'll get it checked out "if it doesn't go away, or get to feeling better". I, myself, apparently had a knack for ignoring things when it came to my health. That sore throat I'd had on and off for about a year was probably just from snoring or too much acidity from the massive amounts of coffee I was consuming because it made my throat feel better. Could also be this crazy South Georgia weather. I have had bouts of tonsillitis on and off my whole life. It was probably just that. Or it was something serious, and I was being stubborn and making excuses for that "half an arm I was missing."

On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, I met with my Endocrinologist for my results. I was told that I had an enlarged Thyroid, as well as Hashimoto's Disease. Thyroid antibodies had been detected, although my thyroid levels were still within normal ranges. Although not mentioned by any of my doctors, my Lymphocytes were ever so slightly elevated. Nothing that threw up a red flag, though. I was also told that two nodules were seen on my thyroid. I was told that they wanted to biopsy the larger nodule.

Well, that didn't go as I had planned. I'm young. I'm in pretty good health. I'm not having any symptoms. I left my appointment confused, angry, and terrified. Biopsies are to check for the "C" word. I scoffed at the idea that this was actually happening to me. I then went home and continued the Googling. I'll be honest. Even as an EMT, I guess I still didn't fully understand just how vital the thyroid was to literally every function in the human body. It's amazing actually; when it's working.

In late July, I suffered through the biopsy. I was initially supposed to find out my results the first week of August. I cancelled my appointment. Ignorance is bliss, and I had a bad feeling. During a month and a half of reading and investigating every piece of relevant literature I could find on the internet, I was more terrified and confused than ever. I couldn't dare show it though. No one at work could know. I ignored it, put on my everyday face, and essentially forced myself to be in denial, despite the fact that I had started to put the pieces together in my mind. The fatigue. My inability to handle the temperature extremes. Why were my feet freezing sometimes? I love the cold; I've never had this issue, and it wasn't even cold outside! The Hashimoto's, they say, goes hand in hand, with gluten intolerance and Celiac's Disease. All those GI symptoms. The light bulbs were flashing. Sirens sounding. The throat. I still continued to try to rationalize it away. But that gut feeling I had said something was about to go terribly wrong. In hindsight, I also had some almost unnoticeable changes during my monthly cycle, I felt the need to wear my glasses much more than I had previously due some slightly blurry vision, and there had actually been a drastic decrease in my energy level. It was just so gradual, that the red flags weren't waiving. My

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sleep patterns were changing, and not for the better. All of these pieces. I put them in place while researching the condition I had. Maybe that was it. Hashimoto's can cause nodules and an enlarged thyroid too. I still naively held onto hope, but in my stomach, I knew. I bit the bullet and rescheduled my appointment.

I was sitting in my living room with my dog and my 15-year-old daughter within earshot, on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, during a laptop visit with the Endocrinologist. I maintained my composure while she told me that I had Papillary Thyroid Cancer. She told me I needed to start looking into surgeons. She asked if I had any questions; I lied and said no. I just wanted to close my laptop so I could go hide, fall apart alone. My daughter didn't need to see that.

I went on leave from Camilla Fire on 10/12/2022. I chose to have my total thyroidectomy with central neck dissection at Emory's Head and Neck Cancer Institute on 10/14/2022. I traveled back and forth to Atlanta more in two months than in my entire life. Contrast CTs, more ultrasounds, bloodwork galore. I was so terrified through the entire ordeal. And I couldn't show it; that's what we are supposed to do; be strong and show no fear.

The pathology eventually came back. I had a total of three tumors on my thyroid, and three of the eight lymph nodes removed did have lymphatic invasion. I was told multiple times throughout this ordeal, that "Thyroid cancer is the good cancer to have" and "At least it's just thyroid cancer." Sure. But now that I have been through it, cancer is cancer no matter how you church it up. I don't care where it is. I pray no one else is ever told this. I was told that I have about a 20% chance of recurrence. I was also told that I should have radioactive iodine therapy to try to lessen my chance of recurrence.

I know there are a lot of other things I can do too to lessen my chance of recurrence; they start at the station. I can't help but wonder, as I imagine most people do, how I got cancer. Was I genetically predisposed? Did I not wash my turnouts enough? The ladder truck's exhaust pipe is mighty close to the engineer's compartment on the engine. We can all do better. We have to do better. Get that checkup. Have a relationship with your doctor. It won't kill you, and it might just save your life. Encourage your fellow firefighters to get concerns addressed. I've always been taught we can't help if we become part of the problem. An easy way to not become part of the problem is to take care of yourself. I feel like I owe a whole lot to my stubborn, 80-something year old Gynecologist. If it weren't for him, I would without a doubt not have known until it was probably too late.

After six weeks, on November 27<sup>th</sup>, I returned to work. I remember driving my usual 40-mile commute, mad because I can't sing at the top of my lungs anymore. My voice may never fully return, as a side effect from the surgery. I'll give it some more time though. I have issues swallowing, also a side effect that I hope will resolve over time. I'm gradually starting to feel better, like I used to. It's slow progress, though. I will have to have blood work quarterly and take a pill every day for the rest of my life. But I'm alive, at least. I got emotional on that drive. I don't know why. Maybe because I didn't know if I'd make it back. Maybe it was just overwhelming to return to

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some normalcy. Maybe it was because I just might have missed some of those guys at work. They call me “Duh”, and have for years. And it’s time for “Duh” to make C shift put up the Christmas tree.

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