Nicole Malachowski: Unfit for Duty from Debilitating Tick-Borne Disease

1. Tick-Borne Disease Research
2. Nicole Malachowski: Unfit for Duty from Debilitating Tick-Borne Disease



Nicole Malachowski recently medically retired from the US Air Force as a Colonel after 21 years of service as a career fighter pilot. She was the first woman in history to fly with the Thunderbirds (US Air Force Demonstration Squadron) and went on to be the Commander of the 333rd Fighter Squadron, where she trained more than 200 students to fly the F-15E fighter jet. She later served as the Deputy Director for US Air Force Readiness and Training for the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. In addition, she served in the White House: first, as a fellow for the U.S. General Services Administration (2008-2009), then as the executive director of the White House "Joining Forces" Initiative (2015-2016). Ms. Malachowski was at the peak of a long and promising career.

Her medical retirement, however, was premature. At only 43 years old, **she was deemed unfit for duty due to neurological damage from tick-borne illness**. She first noticed something was wrong in 2012 while serving as commander of the 333rd Fighter Squadron. She began experiencing numerous symptoms, including intractable pain, insurmountable fatigue, cognitive dysfunction, and speech impairment, which would progress over the next four years to include disorientation, confusion, anxiety, and temporary paralysis. These symptoms significantly impaired her ability to serve her country in the US Air Force, as well as her ability to provide for her children, and she became dependent upon her husband as a caregiver. Despite access to both military and civilian physicians, identifying the root cause of these symptoms was exceedingly difficult and prolonged. Her concerns were initially dismissed as originating from being overstressed; however, the symptoms persisted. In the end, it **took over 4 years, 24+ doctors, and multiple misdiagnoses before she was accurately diagnosed** at the Dean Center for Tick-Borne Illness in Boston, Massachusetts. After receiving an accurate diagnosis and available treatment, she was able to regain the abilities to stand, read, and speak. While Ms. Malachowski still deals with lingering symptoms, she now has a quality of life worth living and is again independent.

However, despite moderate improvement after her diagnosis, the battle is not over for Ms. Malachowski, who needs continued medical treatment. She remains concerned about the inadequacies in diagnostic testing and treatment options for patients with tick-borne illness, especially among military and Veteran communities, due to the high risk of exposure for active duty populations and military families as well. Ms. Malachowski is, unfortunately, a **very real example of the shortcomings in both the civilian and military medical systems with regard to tick-borne illness.** As well as a concern for public health, tick-borne illness is a military readiness issue and must be treated as such to do proper justice to the men and women in uniform. **Ms. Malachowski serves as an advocate for patients suffering from tick-borne disease** and for the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs' Tick-Borne Disease Research Program to help the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration take a leadership role in addressing this significant problem.

Links:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAeyjdc39Yo

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicole_Malachowski

https://cdmrp.army.mil/cwg/stories/2018/nicole_malachowski_profile?fbclid=IwAR3RNwOGWBY7_qlHVtCUTaM8q6mnzy6EmLjgqdkg22YneUUfVIraDO4dv3w