

# Mail From Hell

A package bomb cost Janet McWilliams her hands. BUT she refuses To give up.

by Master Sgt. Tim Barela

photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

Janet McWilliams is no longer afraid of the dark. She no longer panics if she has to go to the grocery store by herself. She no longer trembles when she opens her window blinds in the morning.

But she's still not entirely at peace. There are too many painful reminders. Brandon Walters made sure of that when he sent her a package bomb July 31, 2001, that blew off her hands and nearly killed her. Nevertheless, Jan, a master sergeant at the time, made sure Brandon, then a senior airman, did not win.

She survived.

"I'm sure that wasn't in his plans," said the former first sergeant, who retired from the Air Force in July 2003. "I wasn't going to let Brandon beat me."

## The nightmare begins

Sergeant McWilliams has never had any illusions about her career as a first sergeant.

"It's a calling," but it's also often a thankless job, said the first sergeant, who was with the 342nd Training Squadron at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, at the time of the attack.

"First sergeants don't get people in trouble; they get in trouble all by themselves," she said. "But they need someone to blame for their



problems. [Since first sergeants are the people they see when much of the disciplinary action takes place], we often get the blame. It's the 'shoot the messenger' mentality."

Enter Brandon Walters.

Airman Walters walked into her office May 8, 2001. He was prior military — Navy — and he was

entering the Air Force to attend the electronic principles school at Lackland.

"He was unkempt. He needed a haircut, a change of clothes and a shower," Sergeant McWilliams said.

Lack of personal hygiene wasn't his only quirk.

"I'd try to talk to him, and he wouldn't respond," she said. "It took me three attempts to get his attention. Even then, he wouldn't make eye contact. He was also touching things that weren't his. He was very fidgety. He started talking to himself and giggling. Just very odd behavior."

His antics didn't stop there. Every place the airman went, Sergeant McWilliams got a telephone call. He was rude; he complained bitterly about having a roommate; he stole food from the dining facility.

Then came the straw that broke the camel's back.

Airman Walters automatically became a class leader because of his prior military time and his age, 29. One day, his instructor left the classroom for a moment. No sooner had the instructor left than he ordered the class to "swab the decks." Everyone looked at him like he was joking.

"Swab the decks!" he repeated more forcefully and obviously agitated. The other students refused for fear they would be electrocuted since they were working with electronics. Incensed, Airman Walters began yelling so loudly that another class leader came running.

"Most of the students are 18 or 19 years old," Sergeant McWilliams said. "They were petrified of Brandon. When I heard about the classroom incident, I knew I had a powder keg here."

### 'Beware, beware, beware'

Sergeant McWilliams called her commander and told him that Airman Walters was a "time bomb waiting to explode." Little did she know how prophetic those words would be.

"We felt like Brandon had become a threat to the other students and the staff," she said. "He had issues, and this is a guy who was training to eventually work on nuclear weapons! My commander told me, 'Shirt, I want him evaluated.'"

Airman Walters spent nearly three weeks in the hospital. Doctors diagnosed him with narcissistic personality disorder, which is characterized by a grandiose sense of self-importance and a lack of empathy for others. They recommended he be medically discharged.

June 22, 2001, Sergeant McWilliams handed Air-

man Walters his discharge package and a ticket home to Utah.

"That really set him off," she said. "He lost it."

Ranting and raving, he blamed the first sergeant for his trouble.

Then, almost as suddenly as the tirade began, he stopped yelling and became eerily calm, she said. In almost a whisper, he said, "Beware, beware, beware."

It was one of the few times he looked her in the eye. She described his eyes as dark and piercing, like those of a shark.

"It gave me chills," she said. "To be honest, it scared the living crap out of me. I had a bad feeling about this guy. After I'd left him, I literally sat down and trembled."

Security forces drove him to the airport the next day, but he never got on the plane.

According to Sergeant McWilliams, one of the last things he said was that he wasn't going to Utah. He had unfinished business in San Antonio.

"When my commander told me that Brandon hadn't got on that airplane, I wasn't surprised, but I was scared," she said. "Dan [her husband] and I went on full alert."

### Malicious mail

Sergeant McWilliams never relaxed after that.

"I was always looking over my shoulder," she said. "I'd never park in my parking spot. I drove different vehicles."

In July 2001, Sergeant McWilliams asked for a transfer. July 21 she got her wish and transferred from the 344th to the 342nd Training Squadron.

The first shirt had been at her new job only 10 days and was working on some award packages in her new office when she spotted a parcel sitting on the end of her desk.

She didn't know it at the time, but a student had found it in a restroom on base. The package was addressed to Sergeant McWilliams, so it eventually made its way to her office.

"The return address indicated the package was from the Air Force Sergeants Association," she said. "There was really nothing suspicious about it."

She opened the package.

"I thought, 'This is odd,'" she said. "Inside there was a canister of Martha Stewart hand lotion with wire and some nickels attached."

A strange "pssssssst" sound drifted from the package.

"Brandon was no dummy," she said. "He designed the bomb to allow me to peer in the package. It was just enough time to let me figure out what the package was, but with no time to react. Brandon wanted me to know what was coming."

In the split second that she understood the horrible truth, the hissing noise abruptly stopped.

The bomb exploded in her hands.

Sergeant McWilliams described the explosion as surreal, as if it happened in slow motion.

"I saw my left hand fly off; I saw the fingers from my right hand fly off," she said, recalling the terrifying scene in detail. "I fell hard to the floor and immediately felt sick."

Her hands weren't the only things injured. The explosion filleted her torso. Her lungs suffered damage as she inhaled flash burns. A piece of shrapnel bounced like a pinball inside her right eye. The blast blew both of her eardrums out. And powder burns covered her body.

As a matter of fact, her body still smoldered when Chief Master Sgt. John Wharton, who had the office next to hers, ran into her office and found her lying there, clinging to life.

Chief Wharton picked her up and carried her out.

**Sergeant McWilliams spent several months going through occupational therapy** at Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, relearning how to do simple day-to-day tasks. She persevered and impressed her doctors with her progress. "Her function is beyond what I expected and hoped," said orthopedic hand surgeon Lt. Col. (Dr.) John Ingari. Known for her optimism and sense of humor, Jan McWilliams shares a few lighter moments experienced during her tenure as a first sergeant with occupational therapists Staff Sgt. Nathan McAlister (left), Tech. Sgt. Dennis Fulmer and Tech. Sgt. Renda Hilliard.



## How to survive

Learn what to do if you encounter a suspicious package so you can survive first contact at [www.af.mil/news/airman/0404/McWilliams.shtml](http://www.af.mil/news/airman/0404/McWilliams.shtml).

The entire building had to be evacuated, as no one was sure if there were other bombs present.

"By all rights, I should be dead," she said.

That's where, perhaps, her luck changed. For her new training squadron also was home to pararescue trainees and instructors — PJs — who are experts in sustaining the lives of war wounded. They began providing first aid.

All of her wounds had been cauterized by the flash burns, which kept her from bleeding to death. So the PJs concentrated on keeping her from going into shock.

Amazingly, through the bombing, the first aid and the speedy ambulance ride to the emergency room at nearby Wilford Hall Medical Center, Sergeant McWilliams stayed conscious and alert.

"As everyone was providing first aid, I suddenly realized who did this to me," she said. "I told one of the [Office of Special Investigations] agents, 'Brandon Walters did this.'"

Sergeant McWilliams also asked one of the PJs to go back and find her missing fingers and hand. The PJ did, but doctors later determined they were too mangled to save or reattach.

"I was in so much pain and just wanted some 'sleepy juice,'" she said. "I knew I was dying."

### Long road to recovery

When Dan McWilliams arrived at the emergency room, he didn't know what to expect.

"When I saw Jan, I could barely recognize her," he said. "I'd never seen so much devastation to a body."

While a citywide manhunt began for Brandon Walters, Jan clung to life.

With the help of morphine, she had finally gone unconscious.

"I knew I was in bad shape," she said. "While I was passed out, I saw my dad. My father has been dead since 1998."

In those first touch-and-go days and ensuing months, she underwent 15 surgeries.

She had three surgeries to repair her damaged eardrums. Another to close her opened torso. Capt. (Dr.) Michael Jumper, brother to Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John Jumper, put her right eye back together, though her vision in that eye still remains impaired.

She also had seven surgeries to her hands. Emotionally, those were the toughest.

"Patients suffer the loss of limbs just as if they'd lost a loved one," said Lt. Col. (Dr.) John Ingari, chief or-

thopedic hand surgeon at Wilford Hall at the time.

After the hand surgeries, the doctor set a six-month goal for Sergeant McWilliams to squeeze together her thumb and index finger on her right hand.

"Jan did it in six weeks," he said. "I do what I can, but my part [the surgery] is only step one. Steps two through 10 are up to the patient and therapist. [Her] function is beyond what I expected."

He credits that success to Sergeant McWilliams' drive and "pushing the envelope." Still, the first sergeant has had to learn to do previously simple tasks all over again.

"I'm left-handed, and all of a sudden I have no left hand," she said. "I couldn't write, open a door, feed myself or tie my own shoelaces."

Occupational therapist Staff Sgt. Nathan McAlister assisted in her accelerated progress.

"Nathan wouldn't let me quit, and I'm sure he endured some choice words from me because therapy was excruciating," she said. "He stuck with me and never complained. I owe him a lot."

She reserves most of her thanks, though, for her husband, Dan.

"Think about all the stuff you can't do without hands," she said. "Dan had to help dress me. He now knows more about women's clothing than most women do. He also changed my bandages. He replaced all the door-knobs in the house with handles, so I could open them. He even had to help me go to the bathroom. Now, that's love!"

Then, in one of the few moments she has allowed herself to tear up, she said softly, "Dan McWilliams is a good man."

### The capture and trial of Brandon Walters

In all, Sergeant McWilliams spent a month in the hospital, first recovering from her massive injuries, then going through painful therapy every day for three hours.

"I was far from quitting — I wanted to go back to work," said the first shirt, who even wore a hospital robe with squadron patches, master sergeant stripes and her nametag. "I needed to fight, to persevere. I wanted to finish my career on my own terms."

Three and a half months after the bombing, she resumed her duties as first sergeant.

She also kept a close eye on the case against Brandon Walters.

San Antonio police captured him Aug. 1, 2001,

only 31 hours after the bombing, at an \$8 a night rooming house in downtown San Antonio. Investigators searching his room found incriminating evidence — materials matching those of the bomb.

The case went to trial June 24, 2002. On June 27, after four days of sometimes graphic and emotional testimony, it took a 12-person jury only 90 minutes to find him guilty of five federal crimes. Among the criminal counts included "assaulting a federal officer in the performance of her duties" and "maliciously damaging a federal building."

In an ironic twist, sentencing took place Sept. 11, 2002, the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the twin towers in New York and the Pentagon.

"The sentencing date was appropriate because Brandon is a domestic terrorist," Sergeant McWilliams said. "What he did was a terrorist act." During sentencing, she finally got to face her attacker. She told him, "Mr. Walters, you are nothing but a coward."

"I also got up in front of the judge in full military dress, but I didn't wear my prosthetics that day," she said. "I looked at the judge and he looked at me with my injuries, and I asked him to give Brandon the maximum sentence."

The judge obliged. He received life imprisonment with no possibility of parole.

"Brandon Walters will never see the light of day," Sergeant McWilliams said. "I can finally sleep better at night."

### Losing the battle but winning the war

Today, she still goes through painful occupational therapy three times a week. She still faces a cosmetic surgery on her abdomen to reduce the scarring and replace the belly button she lost in the explosion. She still has shrapnel in her body that sometimes surfaces, like a piece that recently popped through the skin on her face. She still needs an eye surgery, as well as another one on her right hand.

"I don't need an alarm clock anymore, because my hands wake me up every morning," she said. "It's nerve pain."



**Back in the saddle again,** Jan and Dan McWilliams enjoy a ride around the neighborhood on their tandem bicycle. She led an active lifestyle before the bombing and doesn't plan on giving that up. "Brandon Walters will never define me," she said. In addition to purchasing household items like gardening tools, door handles and kitchen appliances that are ergonomically friendly, Dan McWilliams used his ingenuity to outfit their new tandem bike with specialized brakes, a gear shift and padded rear handle bars. "It's a great arrangement because I can take rests without him ever knowing about it," she said with a wink.

And then there's the psychological damage. "Do I have post-traumatic stress? Yes," she said.

"But it's more moderate now. I don't live in fear any more, but I'm more cautious. I'm moving on."

The retired first sergeant is going back to school. Her goal is to teach special education.

"I want to make a difference to disabled children," she said.

She also wants to continue the active lifestyle she led before the bombing.

"I love to garden and bicycle," she said. "And I'm going to water ski again someday. And somehow, some way, I am going to play softball again. Next to gardening, softball is my passion."

"Jan is a hero," her husband said. "She looked death straight in the face and said, 'I'm not gonna quit.' And she hasn't."

"I still have my good days and my bad days," she said, "but Jan McWilliams is OK."

Then, she added in terms perhaps only her military brethren could understand and appreciate: "Status of first shirt? Sierra Hotel." ☺