

ROWING AGAINST THE WIND

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PO Box 3531

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www.hellgatepress.com

email: sales@hellgatepress.com

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When I pray, I pray for strength... to be able!

To be able to endure pain and suffering

To be able to overcome challenges and obstacles

To be able to stay focused on my goals

To be able to do the work

I pray for the strength to do what I need to do on my own,
not for a miracle or for someone to do it for me.

This is my life.

I am not waiting for it to change.

I am not waiting for the world to change;

I am changing what I can.

Vita mutatur, non tollitur: Life is changed, not taken away.

ROWING
AGAINST
THE WIND



ANGELA MADSEN

C O N T E N T S

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Thanks go out to everyone who did an article or interview and to everyone who forwarded an e-mail and said, "Check this out."

For all of my friends on Facebook, Twitter and the World Rowing Network, I am appreciative and grateful.

Huge thanks to all of the naysayers and people who went out of their way to make it more difficult because without all of you it would just feel too easy!

Also to my three granddaughters, and everyone really: remember that no matter how bad things get you are not totally powerless, you always have choices. Situation and circumstance should never be allowed to oppress you and dictate who you are and what you are able to achieve in your lifetime. I want you to be happy and successful, to dream big and set higher goals for yourselves and to always realize the possibilities and potential for success. Always be hopeful and willing to do what is necessary to achieve whatever goals you set for yourselves.

I want to thank everyone for their support and for liking the dedicated Facebook pages "Military & Veteran Tribute Row" and "Angela Madsen."

I would also like to express my thanks and appreciation to the following: Abilities Expo, Star Cushion, Swiftwick, Rock Tape, Shared Adventures, Perky Jerky, West Marine Long Beach store #00012, Team Kehei, Action Advocates, Paralympic Sport Clubs (Menlo Park, Sacramento, Santa Cruz and Silicone Valley), AccessSurfHawaii, Equality TV, Orlando

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Thank you all so much,
Angela & your *Old Glory* catch of the day, *Spirit Of Orlando*

“There can be no really pervasive system of oppression without the consent of the oppressed.”

— FLORENCE R. KENNEDY

“Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

— ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

I N T R O D U C T I O N

I did not choose this life; this life was chosen for me.

No one chooses to be disabled or to endure a life of pain and suffering. But like everyone else on the planet, disabled or not, we have a choice to either live and walk in truth... or not. The famous jazz singer Pearl Bailey once said, "You never find yourself until you face the truth." I've had to face my share of truths more than once in my life.

As I collected my thoughts and memories to write this book, I wished that I had spent more time walking in the truth. No matter how hard or easy it was to pull those thoughts and feelings together – some tragic, some victorious – I had to stay on the path of truth. You'll find the pages in this book to be filled with honesty – there is no sugar coating, no wistful wishing, just the honest truth.

For most of my life, I did not allow myself to believe that things really do happen for a reason. It is my experience that our life's purpose may or may not be revealed at a later time. From time to time, I get bits and pieces that keep me on the correct path. I've come to realize that I may never get to see the big picture or realize my true purpose.

I do know that whatever my purpose is in this life, my differently-abled, physically-challenged, broken-down, beaten-up body seems to be the vehicle required for me to achieve it. When I go to church and the healers come upon me, I politely ask them to go away. I think it's funny that they don't seem to understand. It's not because I like pain and suffering, and it's not because I don't have faith, but rather, it's because I do have faith that I choose not to seek their services. Don't they get it? I am a spiritual person and I am this way for a reason. I am purpose-driven; I may suffer pain and not walk upright in this life, but when I go home, I will not suffer the walk through the gate. I can live with that. If I could go back and change things,

I would not. It would be nice not to have to suffer so much pain but, hey, that's just the way it is.

I am blessed to have the abilities that I have and I am doing exactly what I am supposed to be doing with those abilities. In the beginning, I was angry but now I completely understand. Everything really does happen for a reason. I am doing exactly what it is that I am supposed to be doing and I have to be this way in order to do it!

In sports like diving, skating, and snow boarding, the higher degree of difficulty, the greater the score. And I've scored pretty high. Living with a spinal cord injury could be considered a major difficulty, but the goals I've set and reached are phenomenal. And I'm proud and honored to say that achievements such as mine are shared by only a few and are revered and celebrated by even the most physically capable non-disabled athletes in the world.

P R E F A C E

According to the Census Bureau, 51.2 million Americans have some level of disability; that's 18% of the population.

But those are just numbers on a page. When the disabled person is also a veteran there is an added disadvantage. People seem to be under the impression that our government takes care of all of the needs of veterans and that we are given everything. At times I didn't want to admit I was a veteran, especially in the disabled community.

I hold no animosity or ill will towards any of the doctors, students or nurses who were responsible for my care or lack thereof at the Veterans Hospital. I was recently asked, "If you could be face to face with the people responsible for your current medical condition, what would you do?" Believe it or not, my answer's always the same, "Forgive them." And I have, in fact, forgiven them. The public knows very little about the medical care we receive as veterans or that our medical centers are teaching hospitals. It is the system of benefits adjudication and claims that separates them from other teaching hospitals. I hope that my experiences as I described in these pages will shed some much-needed light on what goes on in these places and how veterans are treated.

I am sure the medical students, interns and nurses who were following orders may also have suffered. Any human with any kind of conscience could easily be affected negatively with guilt and remorse over the inhumane treatment I, and others like me, have received. It would do no good for me to be angry with them. Plus, it would not change anything for me even if everyone involved felt nothing. I think it would probably be good for them to see that the outcome of my life and its many accomplishments has proven that I am not "a waste of human life."

Medical mistakes happen in all hospital settings. It is the culture or policy within the Department of Veteran's affairs that forces staff to cover

up their mistakes and avoid taking responsibility in the claims process. What needs to be called into question is the policy or motivation of those who issued the orders.

In moving on, it is to encourage employers and educators to see the value in people and what they have to offer in the job market and in society regardless or even in spite of a physical or mental disability.

It is about inspiring and motivating disabled people to have hope and be secure in the knowledge that they can set goals for themselves, not limitations!

It is to say that we do not have to accept limitations set down upon us by those who think they know what a person can or cannot accomplish because of a physical or mental disability.

CHAPTER 1 : AT THE CORPS

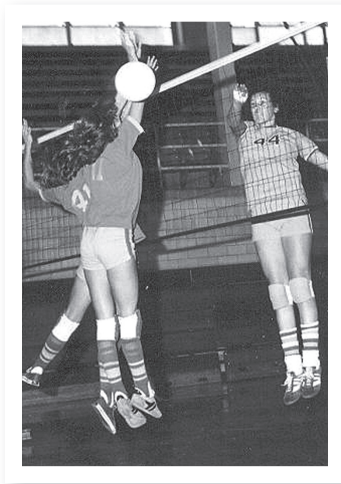
It was second night of the “World’s Toughest Rowing Race” and we had over 2,550 nautical miles of Atlantic Ocean left to row. I was surrounded by miles of ink-black ocean, engulfed by pitch-black darkness. The winds increased and the sea exploded, sending wave after wave, invisible in the darkness, crashing down upon me. Being that low to the water with the waves thundering over the boat, there is always a risk of being knocked overboard or even of the whole boat capsizing. I wore my life jacket with the built-in harness, which was attached to the safety cable that ran the length of the boat. Nearing exhaustion after having rowed all day and half way through the night, I knew I was going to have to stop rowing and rest. But with no one being on the oar, the risk of capsizing in the unpredictable waves increases.

The conditions were so bad and I was so cold that I decided to put on my one-piece survival suit. Sitting on my rowing seat I struggled as the boat was violently tossed around. I managed to get both legs in and then it became necessary to remove my lifeline leaving myself unsecured. Immediately, I was struck by a big wave and was knocked up to and over the bow of the boat. The strap on my survival suit got hooked on the spare oar stanchion long enough for me to get a hand hold on the boat. I quickly secured my line to the cable and curled up at the bow with the suit only half-way on. This was my worst night of the trip but certainly not the worst night of my life. My life did not slowly flash before my eyes. Thinking about all that had transpired in my life leading up to this challenge was all I could do while huddled up on the bow of the boat not knowing if I would see another sunrise.

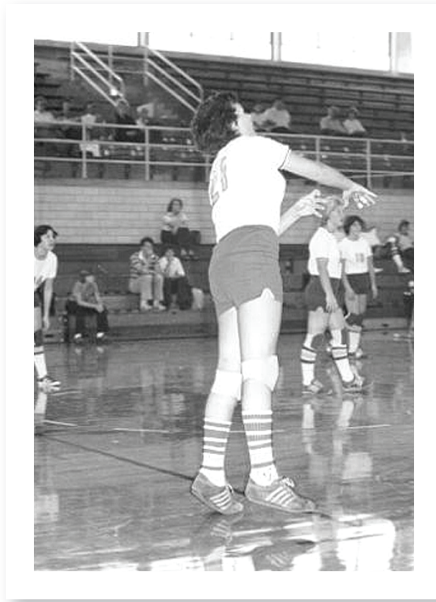
Born and raised in Ohio-the cornfields, cows, pigs, woodlands and creeks that surrounded my sister, five brothers and me, gave our lives a “Little House on the Prairie” sort of appearance. But my childhood wasn’t exactly easy.

With so many brothers, it was normal to be considered “one of the boys” and I ended up being pretty good at most sports, fighting and defending myself; in fact, sucker punches from out of nowhere were pretty common. Early combat training! I excelled at sports all through high school – volleyball, softball and basketball, and had a scrapbook full of ribbons, medals, awards and countless newspaper articles. Sports motivated me to keep my grades up and kept me out of trouble, well not all trouble...

During my junior year in high school, I got pregnant and decided to keep the baby girl I named Jennifer when she was born in June of 1977. And I continued to play sports until I graduated a year later. There I was with a baby and a high school diploma and I asked myself, “Now what?” Although I was good enough at sports to get a volleyball scholarship to college, I tried Ohio State for Volleyball but was turned down because I was a single parent. They mistakenly believed that I would not be able to keep up with the practice schedule, be a full time student and be a single parent. I was never even given the opportunity to try.



In high school, I was a power hitter on the volleyball team, 1978

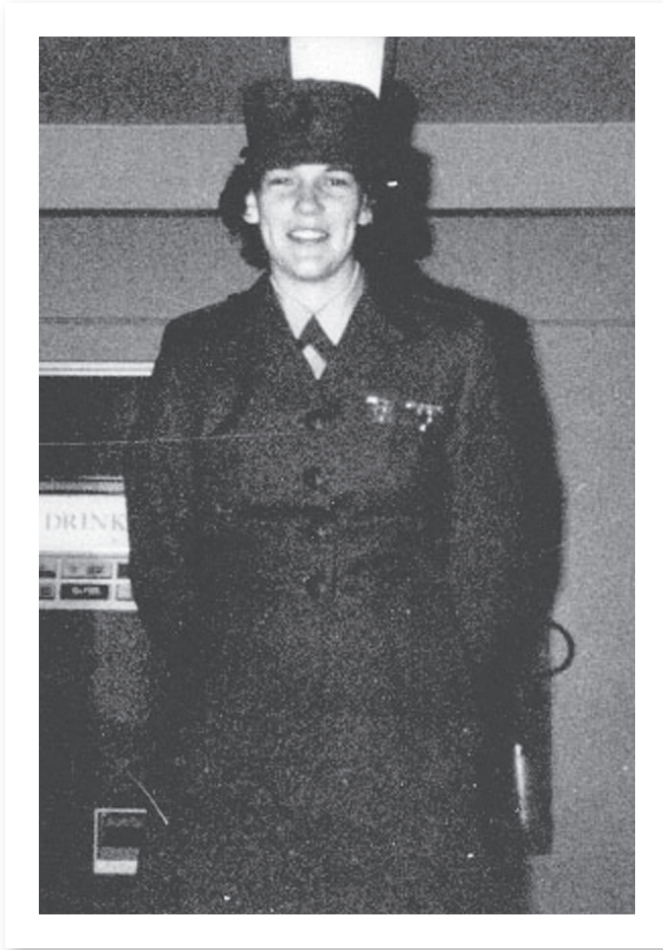


I had an especially wicked serve

I crossed college off of my list—a list that happened to include the Olympics. But with a new life that included a baby, I felt that I had to give up my Olympic dream and tried to set a more realistic goal.

As I look back, I don't know if I really planned on a military career or if it was something that was considered a logical next step in my life. My dad was a Navy veteran, my oldest brother was in the Navy and two other brothers were in the Marine Corps. My younger brother Clifford wanted to enlist in the Marine Corps so we enlisted together in April, 1979. Being a single parent, I had to get a waiver and accept an open contract when I enlisted. This meant that I was not permitted to choose my military occupational specialty but would be placed where they needed me. After my basic training at Paris Island, South Carolina, I was sent to Fort McClellan in Alabama for training as a Military Police officer. The Military Police Academy wasn't my idea. I was always interested in mechanical things and engineering. But good test scores and no criminal record made me a more qualified candidate for the roll of 5811(a specialty military occupation service number) or, in other words, Military Police.

The Academy was physical and I always excelled at anything and everything physical, I thoroughly enjoyed it.



A proud Marine in her uniform

After I graduated from the Military Academy, I was stationed in El Toro, California. Decommissioned in 1999, El Toro was the home of Marine Corps Aviation and could handle the largest military aircraft. (Probably the most little-known details about El Toro include the fact that the Marines were actually featured in the 1953 movie *The War Of The Worlds*, and between '57 and '59 Lee Harvey Oswald was stationed there as a radar operator). I loved being an MP and it was all going well.

I arranged for my base housing and had my daughter with me. I took up surfing and fell in love with the ocean, the Marine Corps & life.

I began playing basketball in my spare time for my El Toro Base recreational women's basketball team. I was good – damn good. The entire team excelled and after winning a number of games, our El Toro Women's Team went to the West Coast Regionals in Barstow, California and I was transferred to play on the Women's All-Marine Corps Basketball Team. I was back participating at a sport that I loved. It felt great and I was highly motivated. Okay, it wasn't the Olympics but the dream in me was alive and well and I was maintaining a physical state of combat readiness! My commanding officer was not a very willing participant in my transfer but the coach who outranked him insisted. I was 6' 1" tall, aggressive, very coordinated, and the best person for the job. I was selected to play center position.

All that changed during a simple practice game. As I went up for a rebound, someone tripped me; I fell forward, hit the floor and someone landed on top of my back. The paralysis and pain was immediate and shot through my entire body; it felt as if I had been struck by lightning. Players and coaches quickly surrounded me. My first reaction was to get up, shake it off and get back to the game. I tried to pull myself off the floor, but was unable to move my lower body. Everyone knew something serious had happened, but they were ill-equipped to treat me. I was transported to Camp Pendleton in Southern California. My parents were called and informed that not only had I been injured in an accident and suffered two ruptured discs and a damaged sciatic nerve, but the doctors did not know if I would ever walk again.

Now, you have to ask yourself – how can women who are supposedly trained Marines and elite athletes be so uncoordinated as to trip a player? One side of my brain said, "Accident." But the other side couldn't help but feel a little paranoid. I was an MP after all. Similar to the disdain many civilian police feel for the Internal Affairs department, most armed services members don't feel a particular affection for the military police. It was also the duty of the Military Police to report gays and lesbians. This was 1980,

long before the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was enacted by President Clinton in 1993. If you were gay in the military you were considered “not fit for duty.” (Unaware of my orientation when I enlisted and believing myself to be straight, I still didn’t see the need to report anyone for being gay. I viewed the policy as being hypocritical. The oath I swore to God and country was to protect and defend all Americans both at home and abroad. I discovered I was gay during my service but dared not come out so my teammates had no idea.) Most of my fellow teammates were lesbians who didn’t know about my orientation and were afraid that I would report them. In their minds, I’m sure that having me on the team put them at risk. Having a young child, being a single parent and having non-military male friends led everyone to believe that I was straight. I knew about my teammates but they did not know about me.

Back then, everyone was so fearful and afraid of being outed or falsely accused that it affected behavior. Everyone stayed to themselves and were forced to live very separate lives, fearful that they will come out to the wrong person and they’d be reported. Gays and lesbians who were open about their sexual orientation — or who were outed — faced punishment and expulsion.

So was there something sinister behind a practice game of b-ball? Was it a result of the policy of not allowing gays to serve openly and honestly? Did my commanding officer, harboring a grudge against my transfer, have something to do with it? Or was it just an old-fashioned, “oops, I’m sorry” accident? I’ll never know for sure but what I did know was that I was in agonizing pain. It would begin in my lower back, radiate down my leg and travel all the way down to my toes. Fortunately, the initial prognosis of permanent paralysis from this incident did not materialize, although I had to temporarily use a wheelchair. Though the pain was unbearable, I learned to live with it. I worked hard in physical therapy and was able to recover enough to walk but basketball was out of the question. After being released from my orders to play ball for the Marine Corps, I returned to my unit, Released on light duty at El Toro three weeks after my hospi-

talization and ordered to continue to receive follow up care at my duty station.

After my release from the hospital, I knew that I could no longer meet the physical requirements of an MP; my career was over. I could no longer perform, let alone *pass* a PFT (a highly emphasized physical fitness test). My Commanding Officer had a reputation as a manipulator and I had already had a few run-ins with him. He would bring me into his office at the end of my shift and make me sit there while he made comments like “I do not have children” and “I have all night,” while the people at the day care were waiting for me to pick up my daughter. At first I thought he was putting pressure on me to turn people in for being gay, asking me personal questions about everyone and about myself. But after my request, he let me know that the condition of my duty status and or my discharge could be determined by my willingness to do “certain things.” He made inappropriate sexual remarks and his actions were offensive. He would brush his hand across the back of my shoulders and tell me how my life, “would be so much better if I cooperated” and that I knew what he wanted. His intentions were clear. More than once I got up and left his office under threat of disciplinary action. The more I resisted, the worse it got. When I received orders for a temporary assignment of duty to play basketball for the Women’s All Marine Corps Basketball Team, he was livid. Now I was back and he made my life a living hell.

Not only would my commanding officer assign me jobs that were surely not light duty and constantly change my work schedule, but he would block my attempts to get medical care and rehabilitation for my service-related injuries and block and prevent me from getting medical care for my child.

I took my complaints to my Master Sergeant and asked to be transferred to another base or a change of duty or military occupational specialty. But my commanding officer denied my requests. I requested an occupational transfer to a job that was less physically challenging. Again, I was denied. I asked about a medical discharge, and was again denied. I said no, so he said no. According to my Commanding Officer, if I did not perform the

“duties” he requested, then my only options were a Less Than Honorable Discharge or a Dishonorable Discharge. There was no way I was going to submit willfully to the options presented. He went so far as to change my schedule and then tried to have me detained and arrested at the gate charging me with unauthorized absence. My babysitter who was an MP's wife tipped me off. It was so dramatic, like right out of a movie and could not be really happening... or could it? Since my Master Sergeant could find no solution, I phoned the Headquarters legal department. I made arrangements to turn myself in to the officer there at the legal department. I took my daughter with me and went to the back gate by base housing. The Military Police officer at the gate was new and we did not know each other. He did try to stop me, I told him I had orders by an outranking officer to report to the legal department. He let me go. I made it about a half way there before I had MP vehicles following me trying to prevent me from reaching the headquarters building. My commanding officer did not want me to make it to legal and wanted to discipline me “In house”. I did not stop and I did not break any regulations. They did not turn the lights on until I was 1 block from the building. I parked close to the door, got out of my car and quickly got my daughter out of her car seat. It happened so fast.

I had my back to the MP and I ignored his requests right up to the point where he raised his voice to shout PFC Madsen halt or I will fire, I thought I heard the sound of a shotgun being pumped, I lunged for the door. I had made it inside with my daughter safely. I reported all of the abuse and harassment to the Base Commander. The only solution he offered me was a Hardship Discharge. Well, I thought, at least it would be a discharge under honorable conditions; I submitted, under duress, as I saw no other options. I was young and naïve. I thought I had gone as far up the chain of command as possible, and that this was my final option. Take it or leave it. So I took it.

I wasn't in any position to turn it down. Now, all these years later, I finally know better. It was the Marine Corps' way of washing over the sexual harassment. Incorporated in the health care system at the VA hospitals are sexual trauma counselors to help women deal with the sexual

abuse they encounter during their service to our country; I was so naïve at the time, I didn't even know I had someone else to turn to.

In the meantime, I was transferred to the civilian fire station on base, where I performed secretarial work until my discharge had been processed. My Commanding Officer continued to harass other females in the unit but was ordered to stay away from me. Although I received an Honorable discharge, I was not allowed to discuss the circumstances of my discharge and he could no longer cause me any harm, so I thought.

The legal department made all of the arrangements, from obtaining statements (true and untrue) from people associated with me to obtaining statements regarding the inability of my parents to take custody of my daughter. Legal told people what I needed to have on paper to make a good case for a hardship discharge, and they did it. I complied, too.

There was enough documentation and confirmed diagnoses at the time to warrant an evaluation for a Medical Discharge. I did not find out until 1993, fourteen years later, that the statement, "Line of duty and misconduct status undetermined" was written in my records and may have led to the medical discharge process being halted and denied. My DD214 (Official discharge paper) seems to contradict those words as it says that I received a good conduct award and was given a hardship discharge. I am not aware of the details of who, when and how the "misconduct status undetermined" was added to my file. It could have been my commanding officers doing or it could have been added years later by someone adjudicating my claim for Veterans benefits. It does not matter. The result and damage it has done would be the same either way.

There was no misconduct involved in my injury. I played basketball for the Women's All-Marine Basketball Team. I was under orders, on duty, and doing my job. I went up for a rebound during a practice game. I was tripped and someone landed on my back. I fail to see how anyone could conceive misconduct from what happened. So why is that statement there? Was it my Commanding Officer because I refused to have sex with

him? Was it the Legal Department at the base trying to justify the circumstances of my non-medical discharge and their cover up of the sexual harassment? It's another mystery.

Eventually, I did win my case and did receive the correct disability rating and all of my benefits; however, this does not change the type of discharge I received nor does it remove the false accusation or implication of misconduct in my file. It has taken me a long time to come to terms with the circumstances surrounding my discharge. I did what many women do under the circumstances. I was open and honest about it at base legal and I was punished for it by being wrongfully discharged. My Commanding Officer not only was able to continue to engage in conduct unbecoming, he continued to receive promotions.

My discharge should have been a Medical Discharge – but I felt as long as it was under honorable conditions it would be okay. It wasn't. I had two ruptured disc which caused difficulty walking, sitting and standing for any period of time—I couldn't lift anything or perform tasks needed to be employable. I could not get medical care from the VA because my discharge was not medical. I had trouble finding a job because of my medical condition. It was bad enough being physically broken, 3,000 miles from my home with my daughter, and knowing that a Dishonorable Discharge would make me even more unemployable than my medical condition had made me. How would I have a future raising and providing for my daughter? *Welfare*? I don't think so! This man thought he could use his power over me to make me do whatever he wanted. I don't think so!

In 1981, at the age of twenty-one, I was honorably, but wrongfully, discharged from the Marine Corps.