

This is a third newsletter in a series of ONCORG Community Conversations. They're focused on relationships between doctors and patients, and the complexity of cancer.

February 2026 – Early Edition: The Enemy Soldier. 'It's Camouflage.'



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Mr. Thomas is a military veteran who served 8 years in the USAF. He also spent 11 years in the automotive industry, 10 years in healthcare and 8 years with Apple Inc. supporting customer needs.

So he has a unique insight into what it takes to enhance the customer experience and obtain strong customer feedback, which is essential to a company's reputation.

In our January newsletter, we talked about the relationship between the doctor and the survivor. In this newsletter, let's talk about why cancer cells are so difficult to detect and treat.

If you ever saw the 1987 movie Predator, Arnold Schwarzenegger covered his body in cool mud because he realized the alien's infrared vision would not detect his body heat, and he avoided being detected. It's how he initially survived to fight back. Cancer cells camouflage themselves in numerous ways to avoid being detected. Arnold cleverly camouflaged himself.

My friend Kelli has cancer but the Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and the Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scans cannot detect them. Some cancer cells especially very tiny, slow growing or low activity tumors are not detected and result in false negatives. But cancer cells are like enemy soldiers who avoid detection with deception, blending in (like Arnold did in Predator) their surroundings, while hiding in plain sight.

To better understand how cancer cells hide, we should first know how PET scans and MRI's work. A PET scan uses radioactive tracers that are consumed by our body cells to highlight compromised cells. MRI's use magnetic fields and radio waves to create very detailed images revealing abnormal tissue and cell activity. Now let's look at a few examples of how cancer cells avoid detection from diagnostic devices.

Do you remember the mythical story where the Greek soldiers hid inside a giant wooden horse, tricking Trojans into bringing it into their city? We all know how that ended. Cancer uses a similar technique to hide inside some type of structure bypassing the immune system.

Advanced military uses stealth technology to minimize or avoid detection from radar. They reduce their radar, infrared or acoustic signatures. Cancer cells can go unnoticed by disguising their 'signatures,' another strategy to remain undetected. MRIs or PET scans sometimes cannot detect these disguised signatures.

Oddly enough, to avoid detection cancer cells can assimilate and induce surrounding healthy cells and use those healthy cells as a protective barrier, feed off of them and hide. As an ex-military veteran, we were aware of our soldiers or enemy soldiers found ways to blend inside a community or village, or make friends to avoid detection.

To me, this next example is disturbing. Our lymphatic system maintains fluid balance, supports our immune system, and drains unwanted ‘stuff’ via our lymph nodes. However, the enemy cancer cells do not cooperate with the lymphatic system. They mutate and change their *genetic code*, which makes detection impossible. This is unconventional warfare where the enemy changes strategies, position locations and other signals to avoid detection. Why is this disturbing? It’s as if these cancer cells have a ‘mind’ of their own. It feels like they intentionally want to be avoided being detected.

In summary, we just reviewed some examples of how cancer is complicated, But here’s some positive news. Cancer 5-year survivorship has improved significantly and evolved into ‘manageable chronic condition.’ And this is because of the new cancer team structure that communicates more efficiently, have access to better information, and work like a *multidisciplinary* group to battle the enemy cancer. We also have better more precise technology to detect previously undetectable cancer cells.

In our next ONCORG newsletter we’ll describe how these teams operate and communicate more efficiently with the individual during their survivorship journey. And how these professionals treat undetected cancer.

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