



From Iraq to the Octagon,
Liz Carmouche is blazing
her own trail to the top.

BY SAMANTHA L. STEWART

READY TO RUMBLE



Liz Carmouche is the “Girl-Rilla” of our dreams. At 29, this former Marine is one of the top mixed martial arts (MMA) fighters in the world. Not to mention the first openly gay female fighter in the history of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC)—a feat that only two years ago would have been impossible. You might say Carmouche is a born fighter. But then, you don’t become one of the most highly ranked athletes in one of the most dangerous forms of fight competition by backing down.

She grew up on a military base in Okinawa, Japan, surrounded by military culture. Her best friend’s father was a Marine. “I really respected him,” recalls Carmouche. “He had a great reputation in the military and he was a father figure to me, someone to model myself after. I asked him a lot of questions before I finally decided to enlist.”

The decision to join the Marines was driven by a desire to compete at the highest level. To be the best and the strongest she could be. “In the Marines, you are expected to be a brute. To give everything you have. And I hadn’t been pushed, up to that point, so I went in,” says Carmouche. She thrived in the Marines. She served honorably for five years, doing three tours of duty in Iraq as a helicopter electrician.

Whenever there was a strength challenge, she would take on the men and excel. She always wanted to be the best of the best. Not just the best of the women. This was a trait she possessed even as a little girl, when she insisted on playing football and baseball with the boys. And when it was necessary—to defend her little sister, Cynthia —she would occasionally have to punch out one of those boys.

Needless to say, Carmouche has always been a competitor. This made the military a good fit, except for one minor detail. She enlisted during the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” era, and it wasn’t until she was 22, a year after she’d enlisted, that she finally understood she was a lesbian. “I was a late bloomer. Up to that point I would

question myself. I’d watch a movie and wonder why I pictured myself as the guy kissing the girl. But I still couldn’t put two and two together.”

Finally self-aware, Carmouche found herself trapped between the euphoria of realizing who she was and the dread that if anyone found out, she’d be dishonorably discharged. “Once I realized I was gay, I had to make two phone calls, one to my sister in Alaska and one to my mom in Okinawa. When I told them I was gay, they were both

like, ‘No duh!’ laughs Carmouche. “My mom said she just wanted me to be healthy and happy in life. I felt like doing a dance. The biggest weight had been lifted from my life...I had found peace.”

But the freedom she gained from her family’s acceptance would be tempered, for the next few years, by the need to live in the closet, thanks to U.S. military policy. “I spent the next four years looking over my shoulder. It was a very unhappy and uncomfortable place to be. People were always trying to out me. And if you get kicked out, with a dishonorable discharge, you can’t get a job after that—for the rest of your life. That was a big fear.” Carmouche adds, “I was finally happy, but couldn’t come out and actually be happy.”

It was during this time of uncertainty that Carmouche was introduced to mixed martial arts fighting. One night in Iraq, around 2 a.m., while she was sitting around watching TV with her fellow Marines, a Strikeforce MMA event aired on one of the few channels they could receive.

Strikeforce has been described as the NFL of mixed martial arts. Carmouche still recalls of her first impression of MMA: “Everyone was enthralled! But I was like, ‘Why would anyone do that?’ I just saw the person bleeding all over the place and didn’t realize all the skill and discipline it takes to do it.”

But she also remembers someone saying to her, “Hey, you are exactly the type of person to do that. Watch some more fights before you dismiss it.”

And she did.

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Before long, Carmouche was hooked. She knew that when she got out of the military she wanted to pursue a career as a professional MMA fighter. That day came in 2010, when she was honorably discharged from the military and joined the San Diego Combat Academy for MMA training.

There, she hooked up with Manolo Hernandez, her trainer and sparring partner. "I met Liz at the tail end of her Marine career," says Hernandez. "She came and told me she wanted to fight, so that week I had her sparring. She was a natural. Five months later, she turned pro."

Carmouche's first experience of training in the ring with male professional MMA fighters was unlike anything she'd dealt with before. She admits that it was the first time she "had my butt handed to me."

"The first week as a professional, they bloodied my nose!" says Carmouche. "I was bruised from head to toe. I looked like a rotten banana. But I loved it. I was meant to do it."

Carmouche has come a long way since that first week in the ring. Today, she is one of the top women fighters in the UFC. She gets up at 7 a.m. to train, six days a week, in a grueling regimen that includes boxing, kickboxing, wrestling and jujitsu classes. Along with morning roadwork, sprints, swimming and whatever else Coach Hernandez has planned.

During sparring practice, Carmouche goes at it 100 percent, fighting with the men. And these days, it's usually the men who end up black and blue. "Nobody takes Liz lightly," said Hernandez. "She's sent plenty of guys to the hospital. Including me. She's sent me to the chiropractor, she's moved my ribs around, hurt my back. I've been injured by her a lot, and I weigh 300 pounds. She's just 135 pounds! She's a wolverine."

A wolverine who spends a lot of time in the gym.

It was during her days at the Combat Academy that Carmouche managed to catch the eye of Elisa Lopez, a young boxing student who was also training there. "I saw her from a distance," said Lopez. "There weren't a lot of women taking MMA classes—it was pretty much just her. So I would sit around wrapping my hands, seeing what everyone was doing. Then I saw her. And I was like, 'Who is this girl?'"

Contrary to her aggressive persona in the ring, Carmouche is rather shy anywhere else. So is Lopez. Thus, it took a little strategy to get the girls together. "We were both really shy people. So we were very passive with each other," recalls Lopez. "One time, I found out I was sitting next to her gym bag. So when I realized it was hers, I made it a point to always sit next to it, in case I could



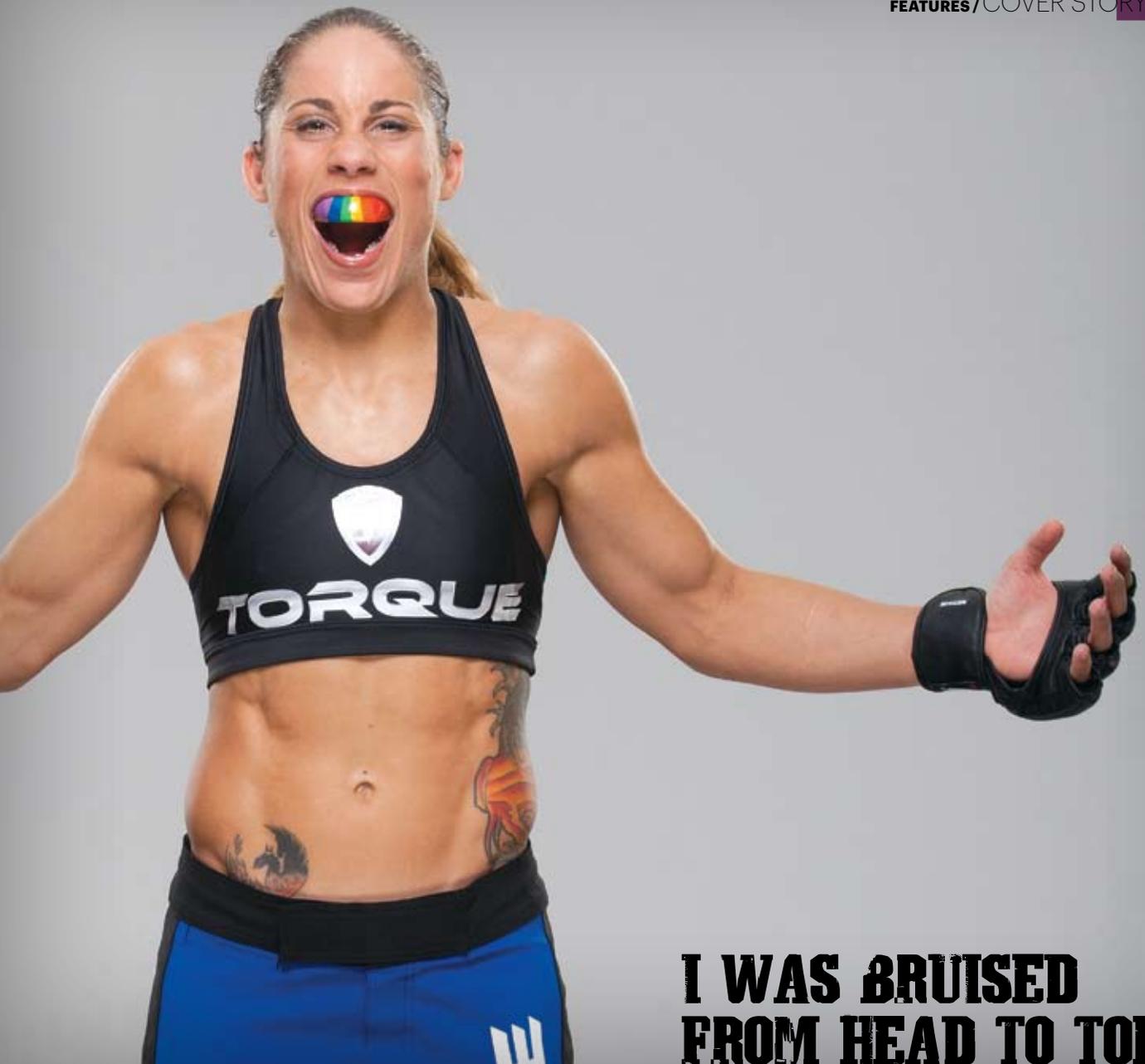
talk to her. I kind of got in her way!"

Eventually, Carmouche and Lopez became Facebook friends, and the rest is history.

They have been together for three years now and are the proud parents of Elvis and Yume, a bull terrier and a cat. On their Sundays off, they go to the beach and soak up the sun.

Still, they spend most of their time together working out in the gym. Occasionally, Carmouche and Lopez will hop in the ring together to spar for a few rounds, making for some interesting girlfriend moments.

At 6 feet tall, Lopez, who is 6 inches taller than Carmouche, would normally have the advantage. Fortunately for Lopez, Carmouche would rather make her laugh than put her in a signature Girl-Rilla chokehold. "For some reason, she loves to hear me laugh. So she'll go out of her way to try and make me smile," said Lopez.



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Content in her personal life, Carmouche ramped up her training to compete full-time in MMA. She had a dream. She wanted to compete in the first-ever UFC women's fight. But that seemed a near impossibility.

In 2011, UFC president Dana White stated on the record that there would never be a women's MMA fight in the UFC. "The thought of it was just a dream, like going to the moon or the deepest part of the ocean," says Carmouche. "But I had to try."

Soon she drew the attention of world-class managers who sought to represent her, including MC Hammer. Yes, *the* MC Hammer. His management company now represents several UFC fighters, both male and female, including Carmouche.

"I have to give credit to my partner, Lex McMahon. He is the one who first started talking about this young woman with a ton of talent and personality, and this compelling story of being a Marine," says Hammer. "When I met with her, she was an

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extremely focused and impressive individual.”

He describes meeting her for the first time and within minutes seeing “strength in her eyes.” He instantly knew she was a good person, and someone they wanted to represent. “Believe me, living your life in the public eye isn’t always easy. But she handles everything with such love and grace. We are thrilled to have her.”

As she was competing in professional bouts, Carmouche made sure to have a rainbow somewhere near her at every event. Whether it was with a rainbow bracelet or a rainbow mouth-guard, she wanted to represent the LGBT community, making it a point to

be out and visible, a luxury she could never afford during all those years she was closeted in the military.

Thanks to her positive message and her dominance in the ring, Carmouche grew a fan base affectionately referred to by her manager as her Lizbos. Those Lizbos soon began a Twitter campaign aimed at UFC president Dana White, demanding that Carmouche be given a shot at the UFC title.

Then one day a call came in that would change the trajectory of her career forever. Hernandez got a call from the Strikeforce matchmaker saying, “Hey, is your girl ready for a big opportunity? We want her to fight for the UFC World Championship.”

It just so happened to be Valentine’s Day, and Carmouche and Lopez were indulging in a very rare “cheat meal” of steak and cake when Hernandez rang her on her cell. When she heard the news, Carmouche took a few last bites of cake and went back into training that very night.

This past February, Carmouche made history. Fighting hometown favorite Ronda “Rowdy” Rousey, Liz Carmouche became the first openly gay woman to battle for the UFC Championship in the first-ever women’s UFC title fight in the Octagon.

Her dreams were coming true.

Carmouche didn’t win that night. She was defeated by Rousey’s signature “armbar” move, despite almost pulling off a major upset in the



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first round. After the fight, she received a standing ovation for her incredible performance.

Hammer had this to say about that night: "She's following in the footsteps of Billie Jean King. She's already going down in UFC history as a trailblazer, as a heck of a fighter. Yes, she's a lesbian and proud of it...but she's a great athlete first. She almost beat Ronda. We're going to help her get the right fights to ensure she's in a position for a rematch soon."

With the sting of her loss still fresh, Carmouche is training harder than ever to get another shot at the title.

And what does the UFC's Dana White have to say about Carmouche these days? "I hate using this word, because she's a grown woman and I'm not her dad. But I am proud of her," says White. "I am proud we have her representing our company and our sport. She is an amazing athlete and a fighter—she almost caught Ronda in one of the best title fights of 2013. She's got this awesome personality, too. I can't say enough good things about Liz." He adds, "We have over 240 athletes in the UFC. I bet we have more gay fighters, and I hope they come out, too."

As for Carmouche, she is only focused on the task at hand. "I love fighting for the UFC, but for now I will focus on the next woman in front of me—and I will finish the fight." ●



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