

A Month of Marathons Raises Awareness

Rob Jones, an Iraq and Afghanistan war veteran who lost both of his legs in a 2010 IED explosion, spent 31 consecutive days last year running 31 marathons to raise awareness of veterans' issues

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He earned a bronze medal for rowing in 2012. He biked across the nation during the Polar Vortex in 2013. Last fall, he ran 31 marathons in 31 days.

Rob Jones, a member of VFW Post 9934 in Dana Point, Calif., a double-leg, above-the-knee amputee, has done all of this to raise awareness of veterans issues, show what wounded veterans are capable of and raise money for select charities.

Jones, a Marine, served in Iraq (2008, 4th Combat Eng. Bn., attached to 2nd Bn., 24th Marines) and Afghanistan (2010, Bravo Co., 4th Combat Eng. Bn., attached to Kilo Co., 3rd Bn., 7th Marines).

He began the marathon mission Oct. 12 at Hyde Park in London, England. The last marathon occurred on Veterans Day at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. And Jones intended for the final race to be that “poignant.”

“A veteran fighting for veterans, finishing his mission on Veterans Day at the National Mall around all the war memorials?” Jones said. “I mean, I can’t really think of a better finish or a better ending to a story than that.”

‘Your mind just kind of shuts down’

As a combat engineer in Afghanistan, Jones was responsible for finding improvised explosive devices (IED). On July 22, 2010, Jones said he was in the process of clearing IEDs after someone stepped on one and it didn’t detonate.

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“I was clearing a route through that area because there’s probably going to be secondaries, and that’s when I was hit by the secondary — or the one that worked — and that resulted in double above-knee amputations,” Jones said.

Before the IED went off, Jones said, he was focused on the task at hand. After though, he said nothing went through his mind.

“Your mind just kind of shuts down, I think,” Jones said. “And the body is just reacting in the most primal way possible.”

Once he regained his senses, Jones said, he began to think about what life would be like as an amputee.

“I didn’t really know,” Jones recalled. “What am I still going to be able to do? What am I not going to be able to do anymore? And then, eventually they carried me over to the helicopter. They put me out, and I woke up in the hospital.”

‘The New Way of Moving Around’

Jones, who was medically retired in December 2011, said he was more-or-less self-sufficient after about a year. Being around people who had “been there before” helped Jones through his recovery.

When he first began rehabilitation at National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., Jones saw others who had been rehabbing for about a year-and-a-half and were preparing to leave. One man, according to Jones, could carry a backpack, run and ride his bike. Jones later was transferred to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

The biggest challenge Jones said he faced was acclimating his body to “the new way of moving around.”

“It’s physically taxing and it’s tough to do, but it’s more than manageable,” Jones said. “You look at a dog that’s missing a leg, and he just kind of figures it out.

So it’s kind of the same exact thing with the prosthetics.”

As Jones progressed in his therapy, he realized he was becoming the person who newly disabled veterans looked to for inspiration.

“That kind of made me realize I have to work even harder now because I have to show these new people what is possible,” Jones said.

Running for the Wounded

To prepare for the month of marathons, Jones simply began running. A lot. He built up mileage over one-and-a-half years, doing test runs and back-to-back marathons along the way.

“It just kind of built up slowly, and [I tried] to make my body into whatever it needed to be to do this challenge,” Jones said.

The best part of the experience, according to Jones, was the support he received along the way. At least 20 to 30 people throughout the day ran with him in each city.

“They’re helping me prove to other veterans that they’re not alone,” Jones said, “and all they need to do is ask and there will be plenty of people who are ready to help them.”

Eric Dorre ran a half-marathon with Jones during the inaugural UK race in October at Hyde Park after hearing about the veteran’s mission on the Jocko Podcast, an internet radio show hosted by retired Navy SEAL Jocko Willink. To Dorre, who ran farther with Jones than he ever has before, Jones’ story is one of optimism.

“Rob reminds us of what we can do, and encourages us to go out and do it,” Dorre said.

Before setting off to run with Jones, Dorre said Jones asked his wife, Pam Jones, how long a marathon is.

“She responded, ‘26.22 miles.’ He quipped back, ‘I’ll make sure I do 26.23,’” Dorre recalled.

The most memorable part of the run — aside from Jones’ speed — was that members of Jones’ family were along for support.

“It reminded me that our freedom is held together by ordinary people and their families, who volunteer to make extraordinary sacrifices on our behalf,” said Dorre, who is not a veteran.

First responders, service personnel and veterans also supported Rob throughout his journey.

“He meets these people and embraces them as friends,” Pam said, “and for me and Rob’s mom, Carol, we see the impact it has, and it’s really emotional for both of us, too.”

Matthew Manke, who also heard about Jones’ mission on the Jocko Podcast, joined Jones for the Portland marathon and said the mission “would appear to be an insurmountable task.”

Regardless, Manke, who is not a veteran but whose father served in the Navy, said he sees it as a journey, not a race.

“It’s awesome to see somebody doing something that challenging,” Manke said. “You don’t get that many opportunities to see someone trying to achieve greatness.”

‘A Voice for People’

Though the month of marathons began in the UK for logistical reasons, Jones said what he’s running for also is a “worldwide veterans issue.”

“Veterans have the same challenges whether they’re from the UK, Canada or America,” Jones said, “and we aren’t fighting these wars by ourselves.”

Rob’s mission, according to Pam, is an example of a person overcoming “something really intense and profound in their life.” Rather than letting the loss of his legs “crush him,” Pam said, it has made him stronger.

“He knows he can be a voice for people,” Pam said, “and that’s why I think this story has the capability of pulling people out of some really dark places.”

Rob also wants to provide “inspiration and hope” to other veterans, according to Pam.

“[He wants to show] that you can still have a massive impact in the world around you being with your family, your community, and Rob’s just trying to push himself out of his comfort zone to be an example to other people,” Pam said.

For more information about Jones, including a listing of the charities he supports, visit robjonesjourney.com.

This article is featured in the February 2018 issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor, VFW magazine. Photo by [Ivan Kander](#).