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Posted 5/25/2011 Updated 5/25/2011

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by Senior Airman Scott Saldukas
47th Flying Training Wing Public Affairs

5/25/2011 - **LAUGHLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Texas (AFNS)** -- Earning the coveted silver pilot wings is a long and difficult journey allowing only a small percentage of officers to earn the right to be called a pilot in the U.S. Air Force.

By becoming the first amputee to graduate from pilot training, First Lt. Ryan McGuire earned his spot among the elite group May 20, along with the rest of Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training class 11-09, but his dream didn't come easily.

Lieutenant McGuire's injury occurred Labor Day weekend in 2009 during a boating trip. After getting a tube-tow rope tangled around his leg, he was yanked from the boat while jetting across the lake at 40 miles per hour. He dislocated his hip, fractured his pelvis and mangled his right foot.

"At the beginning, when it first happened, it wasn't that bad," Lieutenant McGuire said. "But then it started to get progressively worse. Tissue started to die very slowly after we got there, but we thought everything was going to be ok. After it was getting worse and once the realization set in that I was going to have something amputated, it was pretty devastating."

Doctors at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, where Lieutenant McGuire was admitted, tried to prevent the dying tissue from spreading.

While in the hospital trying to stay optimistic about what his next step would be, one moment stood out that gave him hope.

Lieutenant McGuire and his mother were in the hospital before beginning rehab when they saw a Soldier walking down the hall. The Soldier stopped to ask Lieutenant McGuire when his amputation had taken place. The lieutenant revealed that it had been only a few weeks. The Soldier said his was just a year prior, and walked away.

"He was wearing pants and I had no idea he had a prosthetic," Lieutenant McGuire said. "I will never forget that moment and the amount of hope I gained."

About five days after his surgery, he began his rehabilitation process, which was the first of many feats needed to reach his goal of staying in the Air Force.

"It's really difficult before you get your (prosthetic) leg to keep up the motivation and it is really frustrating to be on crutches or in a wheelchair," Lieutenant McGuire said. "My therapist and I developed a plan to get me out of the hospital as quickly as possible but still rehab at 110 percent."

He noted that his injury was always in the front of his mind and he thought being a pilot really wasn't attainable because there were so many boundaries he had to overcome.

Photos

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First Lt. Ryan McGuire and his family put their best foot forward May 20, 2011, at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas, after the lieutenant's graduation from Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training. Lieutenant McGuire became the first person to graduate Air Force pilot training as an amputee. He is assigned to the 47th Operation Support Squadron. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Blake Mize)

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"First, it was a big obstacle to stay in the Air Force," Lieutenant McGuire said. "When we found out, my mom started screaming she was so happy."

F-15 :
effort

Two months after being notified that he was able to stay on active duty, Lieutenant McGuire got a phone call from his flight doctor with more good news.

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"I was at work when he called and told me I was able to go back to pilot training," he said. "They were always a step ahead and it was nice to know that I was not forgotten."



Fighting for a second chance to fly was a no brainer for his mother.

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"I remember asking specifically if he would ever fly, and they said no," said Debbie McGuire, Lieutenant McGuire's mother. "It just showed that you have to keep trying. Never, ever give up. And this is the combination of that and I know he has wanted this for so long. It's just amazing."

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The 2008 Air Force Academy graduate had planes on his mind since he was young, his mother said.

"I remember way back when he was little, when he was about four, and you asked him 'What do you want for your birthday?', and he would just say 'airplanes,'" his mom said. "We would ask him what else he would like and he said 'just airplanes.' He always wanted to fly. That's all he ever wanted to do."

While staying positive and not taking no for an answer allowed him to get back to pilot training, he accomplished a few things before completing the yearlong course.

"Shortly after learning to walk on my prosthetic, my therapist and I walked 26.2 miles together," he said. "It was a 10 hour and 57 minute hike through the White Sands Missile Range (in) New Mexico. When I crossed the finish line, I started to see what focus and hard work can do."

Still, within a year of receiving the below-the-knee amputation, he also competed in the inaugural Warrior Games at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., and completed the Air Force Marathon at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. The combination of those feats and the fact they were accomplished on one leg earned him the Air Education and Training Command Male Athlete of the Year title for 2010.

"He has the stubbornness from both his dad and me to go out and do what it takes to get it done," his mother said. "I think he is more like his dad in that he can stay so focused and see it through to the end. When there's a lot of other things going on around him, he can just stay right on task."

Staying on track is what he did while wrapping up the final phase of his pilot training just like any other graduate.

"Before I became his flight commander, I flew with the flight for about four months," said Capt. Calford Morris, the 86th Flying Training Squadron K flight commander. "I didn't even know Ryan was an amputee. I heard the story, but I didn't put the face with the name. I actually flew with him for the first time before I found that out. You could not tell at all."

His seamless execution during his training allowed him to be the first amputee to ever complete pilot training.

"We made sure that we proved the argument that I can do this," Lieutenant McGuire said. "I am just as capable as anyone else. We did all the training excessively to prove I can do this and that gave me the confidence to get back in the plane. My first instructor, I don't even think he knew I had a prosthetic. I wasn't graded any easier. I was graded like everyone else."

On May 20, after beginning pilot training in 2008, Lieutenant McGuire graduated pilot training and his family was there to pin on his wings.

"This is probably the best day of my life," Lieutenant McGuire said. "Unfortunately, I had some of the worst days over the last couple of years and this is a complete 180 and something that I thought that was impossible. It hasn't sunk in and I don't think it will for a while. It's been a long time coming."

His hard work to earn his wings did not go unrecognized during his time here. Lieutenant McGuire was also awarded the Daedalian Award during class 11-09's graduation ceremony.

"It is an award based on performance and character as they relate to the tenets of the Order of Daedalians," said Lt. Col. John Binder, the 47th Operations Support Squadron commander. "The tenets are military aviation, integrity and patriotism. It's a whole person award when it comes to military aviation."

Lieutenant McGuire will be moving on to C-17 Globemaster III training at Altus AFB, Okla., and then to McChord Air Force Base, Wash., where he will be stationed.

"I hope this shows people to never give up on their dream," Lieutenant McGuire said. "I worked extremely hard to get where I was before the accident and had to work even harder to get where I am now. You have to keep your goals in mind and have faith in yourself."

5/31/2011 9:49:47 PM ET

I must say, this story gives me my motivation to continue my education. I will be going to grad school so I can become a certified prothetist and orthotist to help people like this LT. I wish him the best. All amputees can accomplish anything they want as long as they just try. This is the best motivational story I have heard in a long time. Good luck!

Jackie Adams, OKUS

5/30/2011 12:16:30 PM ET

Truly an inspiration to others, you never gave up and that quality will serve you well in life as well as in combat. May you enjoy a great career and have fun flying the C-17.

Lt Col Harold Coghlan, Ft Rucker AL

5/28/2011 2:32:25 AM ET

What a great story. I wish Lt McGuire all the best.

Bob Bitchen, Washington

5/27/2011 6:49:12 AM ET

Fantastic news both that you wouldn't give up and that the system actually took in the big picture and put you in the best jet in the fleet. I've been in C-17s since 1998 myself. Hope to see you in the system

Lt Col John Tringali, Charleston AFB SC

5/26/2011 2:43:03 PM ET

From a U.S. Air Force veteran: What an inspiring story! As a young lad growing up in the North of England, my heroes included WWII and Battle of Britain RAF airmen like Douglas Bader. Your experience, stamina and prevailing positive attitude cannot fail to encourage others battling physical challenges similar to your own. Per Ardua Ad Astra.

Capt David Mac McLay Pan American World Airways Ret., Clearwater FL USA

5/26/2011 8:39:09 AM ET

This young lieutenant is truly one of the Air Force's best. I am very proud to have leaders like him wearing officer's rank. I worked next to him day after day after his accident and I can tell you that his spirit, honor, and sense of determination are unparalleled. Best of luck to you, Lieutenant McGuire, and I hope to cross paths with you again someday.

MSgt Brian Potvin, 47CS Laughlin AFB TX

5/25/2011 11:38:58 PM ET

An inspirational story that I will share with my 6-year old son, also an amputee from osteosarcoma bone cancer. As a retired C-141 loadmaster at Travis AFB and a 7th AS alumni, say hi to all my fellow 7th squadron airmen up at McChord.

SMSgt Dave Bell Retired, Maumee OH

5/25/2011 4:41:14 PM ET

Congrats LT. I had no doubts that you would succeed, especially after competing with you at the Warrior Games. Your determination and will power is admirable and encourages many. I pray that you will continue do so in your many leadership opportunities to come. God Bless.

SMSgt Mike Sanders, JBER AK

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