

This Month in NCO History: April 14, 2004 — A Running Start on the Long Road Back

By Pablo Villa - NCO Journal

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Editor’s note: A previous version of this article included an incorrect image of Staff Sgt. Michael J. McNaughton. It has since been removed.

Staff Sgt. Michael J. McNaughton was met by a crisp breeze and an overcast sky when he stepped outside for a run the morning of April 14, 2004. The occasional drizzle magnified the chilly conditions. But the weather was not a deterrent. This run was 15 months in the making and McNaughton wasn’t going to disappoint his running partner — President George W. Bush.

McNaughton’s run took place after a private workout with the president at the White House. The pair ran a mile around the South Lawn. Bush did it on aching knees. McNaughton did it on a prosthetic leg.







President George W. Bush runs with U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Michael J. McNaughton on the South Lawn on April 14, 2004. The two met Jan. 17, 2003, at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where McNaughton was recovering from wounds sustained in Afghanistan. The President wished McNaughton a speedy recovery so that they might run together in the future. (White House photo)

McNaughton lost his right leg after he stepped on a land mine Jan. 9, 2003, near Bagram Air Base in the Parwan province of Afghanistan. McNaughton was part of a Louisiana National Guard mine-sweeping unit at the air base nearly 30 miles north of Kabul. That fateful morning, he learned his Soldiers would be sweeping a nearby field for trash burning. McNaughton emailed his wife before walking onto the field with a Polish officer to assess what the job would require. On the way back he triggered the explosive device and was sent hurtling into the air. His right leg was gone and his left leg was severely injured. But McNaughton was alive. He was flown to Germany and then to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, then located in Washington, D.C., where he began an arduous road to recovery. Eight days into his stay, McNaughton met Bush during a visit by the president and first lady.

“I was on morphine,” McNaughton recalled in a video for the George W. Bush Presidential Center. “Once I saw him and his wife come in, it was pretty darn cool. He came over and kissed me on the forehead. Really nice, really nice to my wife. ... We just started talking about what I was going to do. I just told him one day I was going to run again.”

McNaughton made the pledge despite not knowing about the extent of his injuries or how he would adjust to a prosthetic limb. Even so, he upped the ante on his bold claim.

“As a matter of fact,” McNaughton told Bush, “I’m going to outrun you.”

Bush told him he’d be glad to allow McNaughton to make good on his promise and pledged to keep in touch with the wounded Soldier until he became well enough to hit the pavement. McNaughton underwent a dozen surgeries and extensive rehabilitation throughout the following year. Ultimately he lost a piece of his left leg and two fingers as well as his right leg as a result of the blast. He had only been able to run on his newly fitted prosthetic leg for two weeks before he called the president the following spring.

After the visit, McNaughton said the president wished him well. He said it was an honor to spend time with the commander-in-chief and a moment he knew the future would be bright. Less than six months later, McNaughton ran his first 5-mile race. He ran as often as he could while he completed his Army career, leaving as a sergeant first class in 2007. He then began work with the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs. McNaughton eventually gave up running because of the discomfort, but he continued his athletic forays through cycling and

parlayed that into a managerial stint with Ride 2 Recovery, a cycling-based veterans program. He resumed working with the Louisiana VA in 2011.

McNaughton is a native of Yonkers, New York. He originally enlisted in 1990, spending 10 years with the Army before deciding the toll of his absences on his family was too high. He left in December 2000 after spending time in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bosnia. He watched the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, unfold on television from his home in Denham Springs, Louisiana, and seethed. His ties to the New York area pulled at him and he joined the Louisiana National Guard in November. When he learned the Army needed volunteers to clear mines, he asked for the assignment without hesitation — it would change his life forever. But McNaughton's resolve has never wavered, and it all started with that visit from the president.

"He can do other stuff with his time," McNaughton said. "He was the president, so he can do million-dollar speeches but he's taking the time to do this. It's really good that he gives us the opportunity to see each other. We've all been through hell. Now, we just want to have a good time and enjoy ourselves."

— *Compiled by Pablo Villa*