

## **Another first time**

**By Mike Donahue**

Like many athletic individuals, the question has often been asked “why do you do it?” I am sure that every runner reading this has been asked this question. Although I do not consider myself super-athletic by any means, never have and never will; I am the typical “Type-A” kind of guy; highly competitive, adventurous, ambitious, aggressive, and certainly a bit curious about the unknown and is willing to try anything once or, at least, twice.

Being a U.S. Army Paratrooper, I have done many physically and mentally demanding and sometimes humbling tasks over the past 14 years. Most of them involved 50-90 pounds of gear strapped to my body and either jumping out of a perfectly good airplane at 130 mph or patrolling some sketchy road or questionable village in Iraq or Afghanistan with no AC or heat in my truck at a grueling 5 mph. I have come a long way in the past 18 months since I first moved to the Burg’ from Fort Bragg, NC. Like with every new Army adventure, Lynchburg being one of them, I asked myself as I arrived “what can I accomplish in my short time here”?

### **Where I’m coming from**

My first registered race in my entire existence was the Lynchburg 5k in Aug 2008. I ran it with my 12 year old son who showed an interest in trying out for the cross country team at his new school. After that, I quickly learned about Jeff Fedorko’s Riverside Runners and the monthly races in which were offered locally and, from that time on, I then set out to challenge my mind and body to see what I was capable of. Josh Yeoman’s Bald Mountain and Deep Hollow races in the Liberty Mountain Trail Series; the Va 10-miler; Clark Zealand’s’ Terrapin half marathon; and then the Richmond Marathon all intrigued me as I set out for bigger and better adventures. I told myself after the marathon that I would set a goal for 2010 to run an Ultra. The only question that I wanted to answer was “what am capable of accomplishing physically and mentally”? I always wondered what it would take for my mind and body to either quit or shut down. I hoped to have this answered after I completed to the 2010 Holiday Lake 50K++.

### **First training run**

I bumped into Dr Horton in January and mentioned that I was interested in running my first Ultra. He invited me to a 16 mile training run at HL one Sunday afternoon. As I was sitting in the LU campus bookstore parking lot a little early on a cold and rainy afternoon, I actually hoped that nobody would “show up” because to be honest, I was a little nervous with running that distance. Although I’ve done one 26.2 just 4 months prior, my anxiety was apparent with this training run being my ‘second longest run ever’. Nevertheless, about 20 people showed up and we ran. It was a great feeling to quickly learn that, there’s no shame with walking. A technique that I was not accustomed within the smaller races that I have competed in.

### **The Snow in the Burg**

I was able to squeeze in 2 HL training runs and then another one with Josh and one of my students the week before the snow started hitting the Burg’. The lull in the training runs the two weeks prior to race day and the freezing temperatures and snow accumulation started to get into my head. “What was my strategy going to be during the race”? I had to laugh the day prior to the race when I seen the forecast on the weather channel; 25 degrees with light snow. God certainly has a sense of humor! My wife questioned my sanity and asked if I was going to make a common sense decision with actually following through with running because of the weather. Being the guy that I am, I lightly snickered and told her that “I’ll be alright”. After all, I had bib # 82 and that was my motivation from being in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division for almost 8 years.

### **Race Day**

My goal for the race was just to finish. Bottom line! No stress of time, placing, etc.. No matter what I completed the race in; it would be a PR for it being my first. I started off slow chit-chatting with the boys but quickly became impatient after about a mile with the single line of runner traffic slowing down to a 12-13 minute pace. I told my buddies that I would see them later and started to pick people off one at a time. I did not do very much walking like we were doing in the training runs and I hit the halfway point in just about 3 hours. At one point, I wondered what possible place I could have been in since I was just crossing the dam when I seen Whitlock and another runner heading back. After I changed the shirt, sunglasses, socks and shoes and tossed on my Red Sox cap, I moved out feeling pretty good because the sun had poked through the clouds and the sun felt good on the face. I think around 22 miles after much slipping and sliding in the snow, my hips started to irritate me. I started grimacing trying to maintain my balance and control on the 12-inch wide trail that was forged by hundreds of hardcore runners just an hour earlier. I knew I was slowing down as LGOR's (little groups of runners) started to pass me more and more, especially along the power lines. I did my best to fall in behind each person in a feeble attempt to draft them and stay in their stride. Very rarely could I hang more than a few hundred feet at a time. Twice during the second loop was I filled with motivation; the first time is when Josh Yeoman came up behind me and told me what Dr Horton quoted in his film "*The Runner*", and that was "pain is inevitable, suffering is optional". I will forever share this quote with others in my next 6-8 years of military service. As I starting to complain to myself about the little cramps that were festering in my legs, I imagined running the AT, PCT or the TransAm day in and day out for months at a time. The second time I was filled with motivation on the home stretch was when I approached each aid station. The feeling was incredible and the hospitality that I received, like all the runners I am sure, was top notch. It only took a few steps after departing the aid station did the feeling of loneliness come back to hit me. I would do quick mental math with what I thought was left remaining in the race and kept on keeping on. I forced myself throughout the race to not look at the ol' Garmin just so that I would not be emotionally disappointed with the actual distance covered. I don't know what it was but just about the time that I got back to the lake (as Josh would say "once you smell the barn") did I start picking up the pace. The ol' legs are back!! At that point, and as I passed the last aid station, I knew that I was close to crossing that finish line. The excitement drew closer as I approached the beach, crossed that last snow covered wooden bridge, and made it up through the firebreak to the steps by the road. I don't recall the runners' name that was in front of me but I remember him saying "come on; we can get in less than 7 hours". No idea what Mr Garmin was reading at that point because I couldn't see past the "Low Battery" message! You got to love a run that out lives your battery life. As the cheering of the crowd could be heard at a quarter mile out, I did my best to stretch it out so I could look good for my wife who was eagerly waiting for me at the finish line with the kids. 6:58:03, a PR that I hope to beat at the Terrapin. What more can my mind and body handle. I look forward to the personal challenges in the future that I give myself and those that you give to me.

### **Final thoughts**

As Dr Horton stated in "*The Runner*", "What can I do, what can any one person do, we need people, we need each other, we need the Lord, we can't do much by ourselves"! My question to everyone is this "Who are we reaching out to"? Each one of us can contribute something to someone out there in order to coach, teach, and mentor"? I challenge you to find that person and commit to helping them like so many runners have done for me over the past year. I have learned much in a short amount of time and I am committed to reaching out to challenge my students and my friends just like many of my new running family has done to encourage and mentor me. Run, and bring someone along with you! In Him, Mike

Psalm 144:1