

The Marathon Memoirs

One graduate's struggle to take on pilot training and the 2011 Boston Marathon

By Caroline White, '07



I reached a major milestone in my life after the Twin Cities Marathon in 2009. With a time of 2:45, I qualified for the Olympic Trails. Not long after, I faced yet another milestone when I moved to Wichita Falls, Texas, to begin my long-awaited ambition of pilot training. Saying good-bye to all my Colorado ties and hitting the road to Texas, I received a lot of resistance from friends and colleagues. “What do you mean you’re going to pilot training? You qualified for the trials! I thought you were going to stay and train if you met the standard!” After hearing this for the hundredth time, I started to think, *do I really want to leave the Colorado utopia along with my dreams of becoming a professional athlete for a life I know little about?*

It was an uncomfortable decision, but as my long-trusted mentor, Col. James Parco, '91, explained, “Caroline, think about the conversation we are having: you are deciding between being a national caliber athlete and a pilot. Most people would dream to be in either situation. But the reality is, you have to close a door. You must make a decision; you can’t have optimum training and still become a pilot. Recognize that one choice will come at the expense of the other. Whatever you decide, go on that path, do it well, and stick with it.”

One of the two paths involved a lot of uncertainty, a lot of sacrifice and a lot of Texas. But the decision was already made. At the age of

12, I determined that flying would be the coolest disguise of a career anyone could have. As I matured, I recognized it would also be a fulfilling life, allowing me to serve others. Although there were many unknowns, I had to pursue the chance of being a pilot. Otherwise I would always live my life wondering what could have been.

PILOT TRAINING

It was necessary to embrace this change of priorities because pilot training would accept nothing less. I was not only starting pilot training, I was starting EURO-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training (ENJJPT). Only the top candidates for pilot training who are selected by a special board go to ENJJPT, and that is not limited to the United States. Other NATO countries send their best candidates to ENJJPT as well, including Italy, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands, to name a few.

ENJJPT is a 13-month program that trains 250 students to become combat pilots for their respective countries. Students are evaluated constantly throughout the program with academic events, simulators and flights. Students fly the T-6 (a turbo-prop) the first half of the program and a T-38 (a dual jet trainer) the second half. At the end of the course, students fill out a “dream sheet” where they list their preferences for aircraft. Between their rank in the class and what planes the Air Force

has available, students are then given an assignment which they will fly or support the remainder of their career. Assignment trends change class to class, but the top half get fighters.

Although the statistics were intimidating, I tried not to let it phase me and went in as confidently as possible. *Hey, if I can swim 2.4 miles in the Pacific Ocean, bike through 110-degree Hawaiian lava fields and top it off with a marathon, I can do this right? Bring on pilot training!*

Having a good attitude goes a long way, which allowed me to excel in T-6s. My assigned instructor (a Norwegian) and I got along great. He was strict and held me accountable for my mistakes, but at the same time was encouraging. It took an incredible amount of dedication. Students are bound by “crew rest” where they are not allowed to be in the squadron more than 12 hours (as a safety rule to make sure they have enough rest to safely operate a million-dollar aircraft). This 12 hour rule became a hindrance to me, as I wanted to work longer. The simulator technicians knew me by name as I was consistently practicing until closing. I sat in on every debrief I could, learning from others’ mistakes and trying to get ahead of the game.

Twelve-hour days also made running a challenge, but I seemed to fit it in (a typical wake up would include rising at 4 a.m. to get a ten mile run in before report time). I found running to be a necessary release from flying and was still averaging

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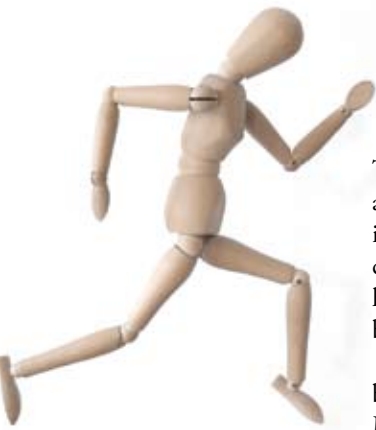
60-90 miles a week. No matter how overwhelmed I was with pilot training, I had the roads to look forward to. My legs and the concrete would fight out my pilot training frustrations, and I was always ready to face a new day’s challenge.

In January 2010, I ran the Houston half-marathon and had a big personal record: 1:16:58. In February, I competed in the Armed Forces cross country championship and won for the second year in a row. Both my professional and athletic careers were going well. All the while, pilot training was a challenge, but I loved it. I was feeling positively about the future of my running and my Air Force assignment.

However, in June, we made the switch to T-38s and things changed for the worse. The T-38 was twice as powerful as the T-6 and twice the challenge. I became incredibly frustrated that I was not doing as well as I wanted. I no longer had my

From left: Caroline White, '07, during pilot training. White was assigned the F-15 Strike Eagle.





T-6 instructor, and found my new T-38 IP to be ambivalent to me and to flying. Without my old instructor's critiques and support, I became overly critical of my own mistakes. I grew overly apprehensive about my rank in the class and if I would be good enough to receive a favorable assignment.

There were nights I would lie awake in bed, beating myself over the errors I'd made that day. My parents would call weekly to check in, and at times I wouldn't answer the phone because I could not bear to explain to them how I was not as successful as I wanted to be. Running was also taking a turn for the worse. Texas summer temperatures were consistently over 100 degrees, making long distance training excruciating. I was feeling more and more like garbage on training runs. One day a friend asked me, "So do you think you are faster now than you were at the Twin Cities Marathon?" I laughed with disappointment and honestly answered, "I wish I was in the same ballpark as the Twin Cities Caroline but I am not even close."

In August, my coach, Randy Ashley, brought the idea up of competing in the New York City marathon. I nearly broke down in tears because I so badly wanted to have a good race there, but it just wasn't possible. Flying was overwhelming, my running was deteriorating and things looked bleak. It seemed as though I had not closed one life door, but both.

But the race report doesn't end here. Somehow I made it through. My coach supported me even though I wasn't acting like the steadfast athlete he raised. I kept at it and continued the 12-hour days. In September, I was assigned a new IP and flying really became fun again. Surprise! I started perform-

ing better. I also found a running partner who was actually crazy enough to wake up before 5 a.m.

Finally, assignment night arrived in October. Much to my surprise, it turned out to be one of the greatest nights of my life. After a lifetime of dreaming of being a pilot, and a year of seemingly insurmountable challenges, I was assigned the F-15C. Not just ENJJPT, but out of the entire Air Force, 12 individuals are assigned this yearly! I was out of control happy. It was an unreal moment. Of 250 students, there are usually only five females in the program at a time, and I was the first female in a long time to be assigned a fighter. I was truly honored.

Although my anxieties about flying were alleviated after graduation in November, I still had major reservations with running. I hadn't raced since February 2010 and never felt 100 percent recovered from the summer. My coach encouraged me to look at upcoming races, and the Armed Forces cross country championship was coming up. Athletes from other services had run better marathons than me since Twin Cities, and I did not think I had a prayer of competing again. Much to my surprise, I took the title for the third year in a row. This was a big confidence boost and pushed me to believe in myself again. I set my sights on Boston.

BOSTON

Randy and I met up to go over the course and talk specific strategy. It was at this point he told me, "I think you can break 2:40." *What? Are you kidding me? I haven't raced in a year, let alone run a marathon in 18 months. How could you think that?*

From left: White wins the U.S. Air Force Marathon. After the 2008 Iron Man in Hawaii.



Randy explained, “Twin Cities was different; you had to hit that time to qualify. But now you have nothing to lose. You are already going to the Olympic trials, so don’t be conservative. Give it everything and see what you can do. You need to be confident in yourself and your training.”

I was nervous about this plan because two years ago I ran Boston and the wheels fell off at the end as a result of going out too hard. The gun for the elite women’s start went off at 9:32 a.m. When you have marathoner Kara Goucher and the Kenyans right there enticing you, things can get dicey. I was conscious to keep my strategy.

First mile. 5:47—*Get focused, slow down a touch*

Second mile. 5:58—*little more*

Third. 6:02—*good, keep it here.*

The plan went perfect. The miles rolled along in the 6:00-6:05 range. I was feeling really comfortable here and the strategy was working out. The miles flew by effortlessly. I passed the half marathon point in 1:19:10. *Awesome, if I can hold this pace I will break 2:40. But I can’t let the wheels fall off again. I’ve got to keep rolling.* Before I knew it, I passed the 16 mile mark holding 6:00-6:10s. This is where the real challenge begins.

The race doesn’t start until mile 17, where the course changes from a gentle slope into the unforgiving Newton hills. In retrospect, I probably should have been more nervous given my complete lack of hill training. The only thing resembling a hill in Texas was a 20-foot overpass. I didn’t let that stop me, and I blew through the Newton hills in 6:02, 5:44 and 6:01. *Sweet! Now to deal with Heartbreak.*

Heartbreak Hill is renowned for being associated with pain. But this wouldn’t stop me, I was on fire. I powered through the marathon’s climax feeling awesome. Now it’s all down hill from here. Literally, after Heartbreak it was a gentle downhill slope, and I pounded out the miles. I ran miles 22-24 in 5:41, 5:50, 5:48. The strategy worked. Randy was right. I could do it.

The final mile started to present some issues. It was as though my body calculated the perfect pace for a 25.2 mile race, but not a marathon. At this point though, quitting the race was obviously not an option and I had to block out my body’s complaints. Luckily, there was a girl in the distance I could see and I reeled her in. She was the perfect distraction from my rapidly deteriorating body, and I blew by her with a half mile to go. I ran mile 26 in 6:02 and met the overwhelming finish line roar on Boylston Street.

Approaching the finish line, I was confused by the clock, *is that the normal start’s clock? Or does that 2:37 apply to me?*

It didn’t matter, I cranked it in.

I crossed the finish line, tried to put my hands on my knees for support, but just collapsed and couldn’t get up. In fact, I was wheel-chaired to the medical tent ... yes, I undoubtedly had nothing left to give that day. After being released, I met Randy and my cousin Whitney Hitchcock in the finish area. We were all jumping out of our skin with excitement. I ended up placing 20th overall and was the 5th American finisher. I also qualified for the Olympic Trials.

So what do you do after a major life accomplishment? Move across the country of course! I flew out of Boston and immediately hit the road to move to Oregon. I checked into my new squadron to start the next big adventure of life: F-15 training. I’m enthusiastic to start the next phase of life. When checking in, I was informed (repeatedly) that I was the first female to go through F-15 training here. I’m honored to be given such opportunity and to be blazing a new path.

It’s been a long road, it’s not even close to being over, and I’ve learned some very important life lessons along the way. First, words cannot speak to the importance of confidence. To take on challenges, one must unwaveringly believe in one’s abilities. Second, the past year and a half has showcased the importance of my loved ones’ support. The chances of getting through pilot training without my coach, my boyfriend, Ben Gilliland, and my family was approximately zero. I likely would have stopped running over the past summer if they hadn’t encouraged me through the setbacks.

On the flip side of the coin, I hope to provide that strength to others. Luckily for me, that often happens by mere circumstance. When running errands downtown in a flight suit, people stop me all the time to hear my story. It’s not unusual for a mother to point out “the lady pilot” to her daughters. My first day in Oregon, I got a request to speak to a Girl Scout troop. Others have given me so much strength and support, I find it imperative to give back and to build that in others as well.

I honestly could not be more hopeful about future running. The top American marathoner in the nation for this Olympic cycle, Desiree Davila (2:22), ran a personal best of 2:37 at Boston three years ago. And I am one minute off of Deena Kastor’s (two-time Olympian and bronze medalist) best performance this Olympic cycle. Before, I was honored to even compete at the national level, but now I’m starting to believe I can do more than just compete. These legs weren’t lying to me, they have a future. Now let’s go find it. ■