



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, 1st Lt. Ryan P. McGuire, '08, earned his spot among the elite group May 20, 2011, along with the rest of Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training class 11-09. Needless to say, this 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 a 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," McGuire said. "But then it started to get progressively worse. Tissue started to die very slowly after the accident, but we thought everything was going to be ok. 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, Texas, where 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. 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 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," McGuire recalled. "I will never forget

Against All Odds

Laughlin AFB amputee earns his wings

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

“I will never forget that moment and the amount of hope I gained.”

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,” 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. “First, it was a big obstacle to stay in the Air Force,” McGuire said. “When we found out I could remain in the Air Force, my mom started screaming she was so happy.”

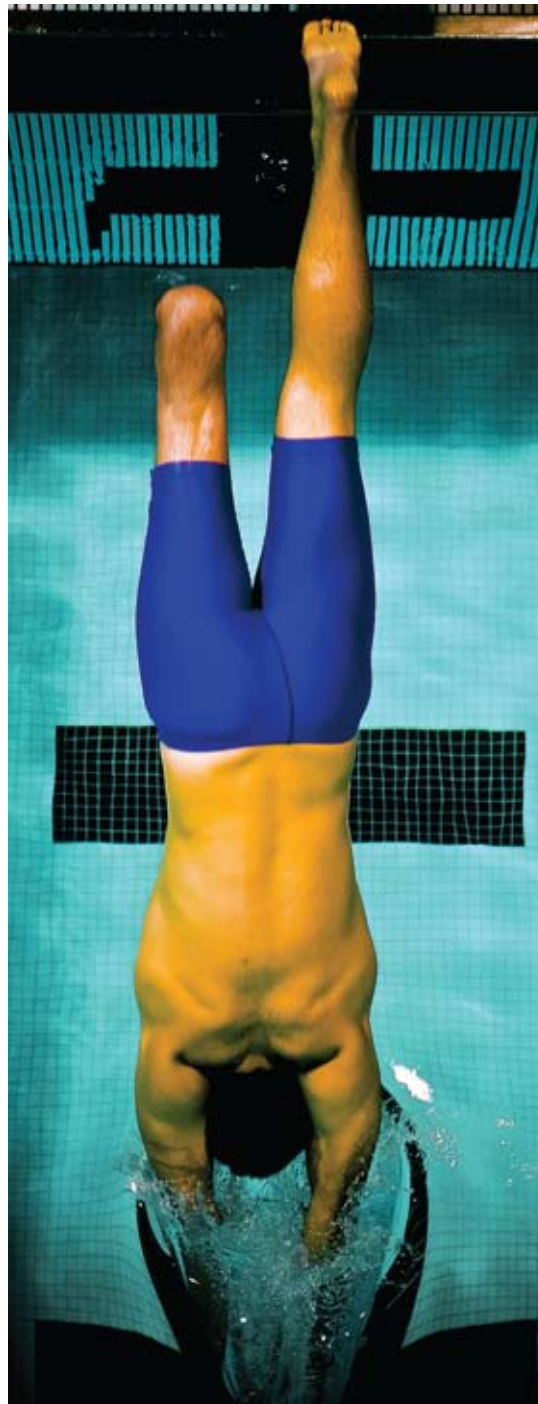
Two months after being notified that he was able to stay on active duty, McGuire got a phone call from his flight doctor with more good news. “I was at work when he called and told me I was able to go back to pilot training,” he said. “They were always a step ahead and it was nice to know that I was not forgotten.”

Fighting for a second chance to fly was a no-brainer for his mother. “I remember asking specifically if he would ever fly, and they said no,” said McGuire’s mother, Debbie. “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.”

McGuire had airplanes on his mind since he was young, his mother recounted. “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!’ 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, the young lieutenant set out to accomplish some major milestones before completing the year-long course.

“Shortly after learning to walk on my prosthetic,” McGuire explained, “my therapist and I walked 26.2



Previous page: 1st Lt. Ryan McGuire, '08, trains for the Air Force Marathon. (U.S. Air Force photo/Deborah Silliman Wolfe)
Right: Lt. McGuire dives into the pool to compete in the 100m freestyle where he earned the bronze medal during the Warrior Games May 12, 2010, in Colorado Springs, Colorado. (U.S. Air Force photo/Tech. Sgt. Samuel Bendet)

miles together. It was a ten 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, Colorado, 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 McGuire to be the first amputee to ever complete pilot training. “We made sure that we proved the argument that I can do this,” 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,” the new pilot 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 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. 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, Oklahoma, and then to McChord Air Force Base, Washington, where he will be stationed. “I hope this shows people to never give up on their dream,” 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.” ✓



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