

Former special forces member adjusts to new lifestyle after accident

By Fiona Green



I met Jason Morgan at an event in McKinney this summer (2008). He had just completed the 5K using his new state-of-the-art racing chair and was comparing notes with his sons who had also run the event.

All race participants have their own stories with some unique reason why they decide to get out of bed early on the weekends and pay \$15 or \$20 to push themselves to the limit. Often it would be easier to stay home, to take the soft option of sleeping in and enjoying a hearty breakfast. But that would mean missing out on the whole race experience. Whether we win or lose, whether we run a PR or a PW, racing teaches us about ourselves and also about others. At races, we often meet people whose reason for running is very similar to our own. They somehow help us feel connected and provide encouragement when our motivation is low.

We also meet others whose stories are so unique and inspirational that we know we will never forget them. Jason Morgan is one of those people. His spirit and courage make him a modern day hero and give a new understanding to the words of the National Anthem, reminding us that the United States is in fact the 'Land of the Free because of the Brave.'



Jason is 39 years old. He grew up in North Dallas, but the military kept him away from the Dallas area for over 10 years. He moved to McKinney five years ago. Here is Jason's story in his own words.

By Jason Morgan

In 1989, I enlisted into the United States Air Force where I trained to become a meteorologist. I chose meteorology because I was also working on my private pilot's license, which I received in 1991.

It didn't take long before I was bored briefing weather to pilots and working behind a desk. A few years later, I volunteered to work for the Army Special Forces (Green Berets) as a combat weatherman. My job was to deploy with the Special Forces and also provide weather behind enemy lines. There are only 72 men in the Air Force that are qualified in this job.

I went through over a year of intense physical and mental training that also included airborne school. There was over a 90 percent failure rate, but I was able to make it through all the training and began my new career working with the Special Forces.

Jason Morgan is shown ready to compete in a 5K and showing his skills on the water. In bottom photo, he's shown in a helicopter on patrol when he was in the Special Forces trying to control drug activities in South America.



My dad never figured out how I went into the Air Force and instead of flying the planes, I was parachuting out of them. I told him I must have gotten in the wrong line.

Every time we had a mission I suggested to the commander the best methods to enter and exit the area based on the weather. Some

of our methods were parachuting in from high altitudes based on winds, water operations based on my forecasts of tides and wave conditions, repel from helicopters, etc. I also had to make sure that immediately after our operations, we could get out quickly and not be held behind enemy lines because the weather was too bad to pick us up.

In 1999, I was deployed to South America to combat drug farmers and terrorists that used illegal drugs to supply them with money. During a mission, our vehicle went off a cliff. I was in the back of the vehicle and I fell out as it was flipping down the cliff. It rolled over me, smashing me face down into the muddy water. I sustained numerous injuries, which included a broken back and some internal injuries.

Shortly after our accident, an American missionary came across the accident and was able to pull me from the water. Because I was face down in the water, I had one lung 90 percent full of toxic water and was barely able to breathe. We were in the Andes Mountains and the only way an ambulance could be called was by short wave radio. Because the missionary worked as an engineer for a Christian radio station, he had a short wave radio in his van and was able to call for an ambulance. He was told the response time was three hours.

As he could tell that I would not be alive in three hours, he decided to take out the back seats of his van, which he left on the side of the road, and meet the ambulance half way. When I was placed into the ambulance 1½ hours later, I stopped breathing and they had to insert chest tubes. My other lung had collapsed and had to be inflated.

The military did a great job and had me back in the states within 24 hours. I spent the next six or more weeks in critical condition and in an induced coma because I was in a life-threatening state. I was being fed through a tube and on a breathing machine.

I still remember when I woke up a month later and the doctor told me that I would never walk again. My immediate response was, "Yes I will" and I refused to believe it. I just couldn't believe I went from being in the best physical condition one could possibly be in and parachuting out of airplanes to a wheelchair. And I will walk again.

As you can imagine, the next four or five years were the worst of my life. Everything seemed to crumble around me. including my family and I was divorced shortly after. I would wake up almost every morning and want to throw my wheelchair across the room. There were many days that I never even got out of bed. I also dealt with very severe nerve pain. I went through eight surgeries that were unsuccessful and the pain not only continued but became progressively worse over the years.

It wasn't until 2 1/2 years ago that my life began to change. I was now a single father with three boys and was constantly in and out of the hospital. Things finally changed when I met Christina. She saw me for who I was and soon after didn't even notice the wheelchair. She always jokes with me, saying that she didn't notice the wheelchair, she just thought I was short. Even as a personal trainer, she never pushed me into training, just encouraged me to get into shape, showing me the benefits that followed. She is an incredible coach and trainer. She not only improved my health, but taught me how to be a better father, and I've learned so much from her. She has been a huge part of my success both in sports and in life.

With my three sons and her son and daughter, we have a large happy family. Eight months after we met, we were married.

Her son Will, who was only 9, decided to run The Trails 5K at the Cooper Clinic a year ago. At the last minute, I decided to run with him. I had not done any distance in my wheelchair, but he motivated me to at least try. This was his first race, too. I didn't have a racing chair and 37 minutes later I came across the finish line feeling like my shoulders and arms were going to fall off. Will had run it in 32 minutes and it was his first time to run any long distance, too.

I was then able to borrow a racing chair until I was able to order one through the VA. For 100 percent of disabled veterans, the VA will buy a sports chair because they believe that it is the best form of physical therapy.

Since then, I've run about seven races and I'm now running for Run On. My times are now in the low 20 minutes for the 5K and Will has dropped his time to the mid-20-minute range. Now, all of our four boys run with me at the local races and it's an amazing feeling to have all of us run together. I was planning on running my first marathon in Vegas but had a major setback and spent four months

in the hospital recovering from surgery this summer.

My pain had become so unbearable that I had all of my nerves cut to stop the pain. It caused my paralysis to increase from my waist to mid chest. I was also able to start taking a few steps with intense physical therapy, but because of the surgery, I'm unable to do so now. But the important thing is that it reduced the pain by 50 percent and my pain is now manageable. Eventually, I will be able to start taking steps again as my feeling and movement continues to slowly move down my body.

The biggest adjustment I had to make is to learn to focus on my abilities and not my disabilities. I realized that everyone has a disability, mine is just more visible with my wheelchair.

I have to overcome so many obstacles every day from a wheelchair, and I used to let it bother me. Now, I've learned not to sweat the little stuff and I don't worry about the things I can't change. I realized that there are many more things I can do because I'm in a wheelchair. The biggest thing is that I feel I can inspire people by my attitude and my stubborn ability to overcome every obstacle I'm faced with. I've spoken at schools and churches trying to encourage and inspire people. I want people to know that everyone can make an excuse that could keep them from accomplishing something big or small. The real winners are the ones who overcome despite all the obstacles that are against them.

I've tried to inspire people to build their life on their character, their family, by helping others. When I was injured, I felt like I lost everything. My job was who I was. It was my identity. I soon realized that that was a big mistake because all of that disappeared in one instant. I wanted to be known as a good father, a good husband, a good friend to anyone who needed me -- not some hotshot in the Special Forces.

Racing is not the only sport that I compete in. I have competed in two winter games and won gold medals in the downhill slalom both years. I have also won four gold medals, one silver and one bronze in the summer games in California and Ohio competing in hand cycling, swimming and the wheelchair obstacle course.

I have an adaptive water ski and spend most of my weekends skiing in the summer waters. I also spend my time coaching my sons in different sports through the YMCA.

Recently, I was honored to be asked to be on the YMCA's sport's committee and be on the board of directors in McKinney. Before I was injured, I was a pilot and now I've learned to fly with hand controls. I also volunteer with Challenge Air, which puts on fly-days all over the country. They have all sorts of great activities for special needs children. They have a ground school at each event that teaches the basics of flying. There are many volunteer pilots who take the children up in their planes with their parents and let the special needs kids fly the planes during these fly-days. It's a wonderful thing to experience.

In the airplane, the wheelchairs are left on the ground and they get to experience the freedom of flight.

Asked about what has helped him through the tough times, Jason had this to say:

``It's the love and support of my family that keeps me focused and strong. I also have my parents, my brother and twin sister who live nearby and are extremely supportive.''

As for his future goals, he explains that he plans on walking again very soon and running a marathon. Jason's courage can be summed up by the following statement "I may not be able to stand tall, but I can sit proud." He is a man who has no regrets. "I love this country and I would do it all over again if I had the chance. It means a lot to me when people appreciate my sacrifice for our country and tell me thanks. I loved serving our country."