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Maj. Megan McClung Memorial Race Ran in Afghanistan

8/14/2010 By [Sgt. Heidi Agostini](#), I MEF

CAMP LEATHERNECK, Afghanistan — United States service members, British troops and civilians at Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan ran a 5k race in memory of Maj. Megan M. McClung, Aug. 14.

More than 425 runners participated in the first ever satellite running of the event in Afghanistan.

"My inspiration to have this race came to me during one of my morning runs," said Maj. William Conner, race coordinator. "I think it's important to honor those who gave the ultimate sacrifice."

McClung, who served as a public affairs officer with I Marine Expeditionary Force (FWD), was 34 years old when she was killed by a roadside bomb in Ramadi, Iraq, Dec. 6, 2006. She was the first female Marine officer to be killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The 1995 Naval Academy graduate was known to her friends as an avid runner and six-time Ironman competitor. In October 2006, McClung organized and ran in the Marine Corps Marathon's satellite race in Iraq's Camp Al Asad. One year after her death, the casualty assistance officer for the McClung family spearheaded the first Maj. Megan McClung Memorial Race at Naval Air Station, Whidbey Island, Wash. McClung's father, Dr. Mike McClung and her mother, Dr. Re McClung, continued the event to honor their daughter and raise funds for the Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund.

"What we get to do with this race is keep her memory alive," Re McClung said. "We're carrying out the things she wanted to do, which was contribute to the health and welfare of her fellow Marines."

Conner, McClung's Naval Academy classmate, contacted her parents in early August to ask if they would be interested in having a shadow race in Afghanistan. The race would be held on the same day as the race on Whidbey Island.

"Our operational tempo is very high right now, and we're all very busy," Conner said. "But there's always time to honor one of our fallen comrades, in my case a friend. Megan gave her all to the Marine Corps and to her country. It's important for us to remember her."

McClung's parents gave Conner permission to organize a shadow race in Afghanistan. He had two weeks to coordinate and advertise it. The response was overwhelming.

"When Maj. Conner told me he wanted to do this I was thinking he might get 40 to 50 people," Mike McClung said. "When he told me he passed 300 and was on his way to 400 I asked him if he was going to have enough Marines left to guard the perimeters."

In a befitting tribute to a fallen Marine, the same unit McClung deployed with to Iraq in 2006, sponsored the first memorial race in Afghanistan. Several Marines who were privileged to serve with McClung ran the race in honor of their fallen comrade.

Sgt. Maj. Walter O'Connell, sergeant major, I Marine Headquarters Group, I MEF (FWD), met McClung prior to their deployment to Iraq. He remembers her as a fast and quick athlete as well as a Marine dedicated to her mission.

"I never forget the Marines that go before us and made the ultimate sacrifice, and Maj. McClung is one I'll never forget," said O'Connell, who also ran in the race. "The turnout was exceptional. It just goes to show that Marines are thinking of each other."

It wasn't just the race that carried McClung's memory. Even her sense of rewarding true effort was carried forward for the race.

When Maj. McClung organized the Marine Corps Marathon (FWD) in Iraq in 2006, she asked her parents to send her a stuffed penguin toy. She had read a book by John Bingham, who called himself the penguin because he loves to run, but takes it slow.

"He never wins, but he just loves to run," Re McClung said. "And so Megan always believed that it doesn't matter how long it takes to run the race, what's important is that you finish the race."

The McClungs mailed the penguin out to their daughter who then awarded it to the last marathon runner to cross the finish line. In the years following their daughter's death, the McClungs have been invited to the Marine Corps Marathon to award a penguin to the last runner. Mike McClung decided to send a gift to the final runner in Afghanistan.

Lance Cpl. Gina Sandwith was the recipient of the Cpl. Stan Dillo award for her perseverance and crossing the finish line.

"We decided you needed something armored," Mike McClung said. "That's why Stan the armored-dillo is on its way."

First Lt. Adam Crandall, I Marine Expeditionary Force (FWD) came in first with a time of 16:28 and had enough energy to run the course again. The first female to cross the finish line was 1st Lt. Angelica Valdez, 3rd Marine Air Wing, with a time of 20:00.

The McClung family expressed their appreciation for those who ran and volunteered for the event. They said their daughter would be thrilled to know that she is loved and remembered by her fellow Marines while the mission continues in Afghanistan.

"We think they're phenomenal," said Re McClung about the runners. "We know about the long days they put in and the mission there, and how tough it is. For them to come out and be willing to run and think about our daughter while they're doing it is just phenomenal."