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News: 1,650 miles to International Falls: 79-year-old retired Marine runs from New Orleans to Canadian border

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NEW ORLEANS- Four thousand miles from Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, where he ran his first around-the-island marathon for charity, 79-year-old Tom Knoll stood astir shifting conversation left and right among a handful of supporters May 28 in the final seconds before he kicked off his latest endeavor.

The man who spent the past three decades running to raise donations for charities was at it again, this time embarking on a 1,650-mile trot from New Orleans to International Falls, Minn., on the edge of the Canadian border.

"This one here is just to show that senior citizens can do stuff too, and also to make some money for everyone" said the slender 5-foot-8 philanthropist.

Knoll started running to make money for charities when he was stationed at Kaneohe Bay in the mid-70s. Then Master Gunnery Sgt. Knoll, who had picked up long distance running a couple of years earlier, was asked to donate money for a charity drive. The Marine had a more ambitious idea in mind.

"I said to hell with this, I'll do a charity run around the island instead - 133.6 miles - and you'll make money and it's going to be a lot better than my \$25 donation," he said.

He circled Kaneohe Bay and raised \$500. From then on, Knoll was hooked.

In 1978, the 56-year-old Marine deployed to Okinawa. There, Knoll plotted on running the 250-mile perimeter of the island to raise money for crippled children.

"He's one of the most committed people that I've ever met and he's very imaginative," said Laura Murray, Knoll's girlfriend. "He likes to do things that have meaning. Instead of doing a long run just for the heck of it, he likes to do it for charity."

Double the distance of his Hawaii feat, Okinawa would test Knoll's commitment and mark a turning point in his mindset.

Ten miles from the finish line and 57 hours already committed, the effects of a 250-mile run began to amass his brain.



Cpl. Nana Danansaappiah

Seventy-nine-year-old retired Master Gunnery Sgt. Tom Knoll runs here May 24, 2012 to train for his 1,650 mile run from New Orleans to the Canadian border to raise money for charities. Knoll began running to make money for charities in the 70s; he has since ran more than 75,000 miles and made more than a million dollars for charities.

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"I'm never doing this again," he told his friend who was running with him at the time.

Knoll finished the race. At the finish line stood crippled child Megumi Nakata who donned a wide smile hovered over her crutches, awaiting her hero.

"She changed my mind," he said of Nakata. "She gave me a big kiss and she said 'I love you Tom'."

The run generated more than \$8,000 for the crippled kids. This is when Knoll asked himself, "Why not a million?"

Why not a million?

"Little did I know at the time her show of appreciation would bring me back from various places throughout the world to Okinawa for nine more Christmas holiday runs," according to *Why not a Million?*, a book he wrote about his running adventures.

On his second Okinawa perimeter run, Knoll set out to circle the island twice in less than a week. He completed the 500 miles within ten minutes of his projected goal and his efforts has made half a million dollars for crippled children.

The contributions for the Okinawa runs and how it aided crippled children propelled Knoll to imagine what other worthy causes he could run for, he said in his book.

"He does it for those who can't do it or have the opportunity to do it," said retired Sgt. Maj. Dave Danford, who served with Knoll and has known him for more than half a century. "If you want somebody in charity working for you, he is the guy."

In 1979, Knoll was stationed back in the United States. He continued to run several marathons and ultra marathons stateside and across the globe for various causes.

In addition to jogging in 135-degree weather in Afghanistan, Knoll has completed 197 marathons all over world to include places such as: Vietnam, Greece, Istanbul, Bangkok, Wales and 40 states in America.

Knoll has amassed more than 75,000 miles in his runs, enough to circle the world three times. He's also been recognized for his humanitarian efforts to include a prestigious award from the Japanese government, having a day named after him in Colorado and receiving the Golden Shoe award from *Runner's World* magazine.

Knoll is also an original Ironman. He came in sixth place in the inaugural multi-sport event that had fifteen competitors swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles and run 26.2 miles around the Hawaiian island of Oahu in 1978.

Swollen ankles and pesky insects

In 1983, Knoll had six months to kill between retiring from the Marines and going to work for a government agency in Washington D.C.

"I said, I'm going to run across the United States for charity," he remembered.

He took off with a couple of friends from the Marine Corps Iwo Jima memorial in D.C. on a mid-80s July afternoon. Traveling at a speed of 46 miles per day, he arrived in Los Angeles 64 days and 3,100 miles later.

In 2008, he reversed the course and with his son, they trekked from San Diego back to the Iwo Jima memorial in D.C.

Knoll recounted his daily running experiences in *Why not a Million?* He shared some of his odd encounters such as snakes, coyotes, downpour, swollen ankles and pesky insects.

"Mother nature is going to get you one way or another," he said. "It's either the heat, the cold, the wind or tornadoes."

Knoll has been dodging Mother Nature's bullets so far with success. Just last month when he was training by the river, a guy about a half-a-mile away was struck and killed by lightning.

He said on his second cross country venture, 19 people were killed by a tornado in Missouri only a day before he ran through state.

On the first day of that same cross country run, he tripped and fell onto hard concrete cement which left his head bleeding profusely. He had to get 26 stitches above his eye.

“That’s not the way you want to start off a run, but for the next 3,000 miles no incidents occurred whatsoever,” he said. “My son was running with me, he thought the run was over. I said don’t worry about it. The next day I went out and ran 30 miles.”

Victory lap

Knoll made his million for charity last July. An avid racing spectator and in adhering to an old racing tradition, he wanted to do a victory lap. His victory lap will cover 1,650 miles from New Orleans to the Canadian border and gather donations for a host of different charities, including wounded veterans and cancer research.

“I’m lucky,” he said. “I’m a Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan veteran, but I still got two legs and two arms. I am doing it for the guys and gals that lose a leg, lose an arm, get fixed and are ready to go back.”

Knoll’s causes may be noble and personal but an escapade of this caliber defies human nature. Most people, if they make it past age 70, are in fragile health and choose to spend their remaining days relaxing, but not Knoll. His friends say he’d rather be out running than sitting around enjoying a beer and shooting the breeze.

“You call him and he’s on the track running!” said Danford.

“He’ll probably put something in his that’ll require his casket to be moved a certain number of miles,” joked Carolyn Danford, wife of Dave Danford and also a friend of Knoll.

In Knoll’s calculus, unbroken promises trump the obstacles, giving is better than receiving, and running keeps the mind and body healthy.

“My trick is I tell a lot of people I’m going to do it, then I can’t quit,” he humored.

His training for the victory lap started with 100 miles a week accumulations in January and February, but he has since tapered it down to approximately 15 mile daily runs as the time inches closer to the start of his latest heteroclitic undertaking.

He said his current diet consists of no breakfast, hardly any lunch, pasta for dinner and no supplements.

“It’s pretty mindboggling,” said his girlfriend. “He just has this incredible physical endurance and he seems to be in very good health. “

Surrounded by media and a small crowd, he spoke a few words about his charities, then took off on his third and last border-to-border endeavor.

He plans to continue a slow long distance pace of 30–35 miles per day as he heads for International Falls. Knoll prefers to begin his daily accumulations predawn and finish by noon. The early day runs provides for less traffic, he justifies.

He suspects that along the way, he might be joined by children, senior citizens or wounded warriors, with whom he’ll walk or run a few miles.

He is scheduled to conduct numerous publicity events with newspapers, TV and radio stations as he travels.

“I can’t overemphasize the importance of media participation in facilitating a successful event,” he wrote.

He also plans on speaking at Marine Corps Leagues, Veterans of Foreign Wars centers and children’s hospitals among many other stops to raise awareness and donations for his charities.

He ran 30 miles his first day. He says he does it for the people who can’t do it or have the opportunity to do it. His friends say his dedication far surpasses the average human being. His record defies the norm. Can age stand in the way of original Ironman Tom Knoll and International Falls?

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