

## THERE ARE RACES – AND THERE IS THE MARINE CORPS MARATHON

Even though Marines are known for making statements, one of their most emotional statements came with the help of thousands of civilians. Just seven weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, over 30,000 people ran in the Marine Corps Marathon through the streets of Washington, D.C.

DET 260 Marine Rick O'Reilly was there!



“It was an emphatic statement to the nation and the world that America’s will was not broken,” according to Dr. Roger Robinson, author and elite master runner.

That signature event wasn’t missed by Greensboro running enthusiast, Rick O’Reilly, but running in a future Marine Corps Marathon would have been beyond his wildest dream.

In 2018, that wild dream caught up with O’Reilly, a Marine who no longer wears the uniform.

O’Reilly admits that the situation wasn’t exactly well in hand when he first thought about entering the MCM, “For starters, my wife did not want me to participate.”

Sandi O’Reilly was too kind to list the logic behind her position. Her husband was 69 years old and still working for a living. Although he had run several half-marathons, he had never run a full marathon.

The wild dream remained in O’Reilly’s mind as entry windows ticked away. “Fully aware that I would never enter the marathon without Sandi’s approval, I applied as a lottery runner – mostly, just for kicks.”

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He received a large kick when his lottery draw came back positive, “I knew my wife and I would have a large laugh over the time I almost ran in the Marine Corps Marathon.”

It was not a, “What goes on at the O’Reilly house stays at the O’Reilly house moment,” but O’Reilly began praying and preparing for his first marathon – with the approval and support of his spouse. “In addition to Sandi, members of my local running group, The Streakers, were very supportive and encouraging.”

There were other positive prompts – O’Reilly would run the Marathon in memory of Sandi O’Reilly’s father, a U.S. Navy veteran of World War II, and O’Reilly’s father, a purple heart Marine veteran of Guam. O’Reilly’s mother and father are buried in Arlington National Cemetery, just a few feet from the Marathon’s starting point.

“After Saturday runs of up to 20 miles, I was still freaked out by 26.2-miles. My coach is Jen Goff, of Fleet Feet Greensboro. She suggested I break the race into segments of running four miles and walking two minutes. That made the race much more manageable in my mind!”

Even so, O’Reilly had a mind-crash three days out. “My devotional readings took me to Psalm 18:32-33 – with the strength and enablement from those verses, I couldn’t wait for the starting gun.”

Actually, it wasn’t a gun that started 22,000 runners in the 2018 Marine Corps Marathon – it was a M101A1 105mm howitzer that O’Reilly claims, “shook the whole earth.”

The Marathon route took runners past historic landmarks and monuments of our nation’s history – not that O’Reilly noticed any of them. “I grew up in Washington, D.C. and have seen everything the city has to offer. More importantly, my focus was on running four miles and walking two minutes.”

Even though 150,000 spectators cheered the runners on, O’Reilly was most impressed with the huge number of uniformed Marines along the route, “There were just enough ‘Semper Fi’ shout-outs to keep me going.”

The Marine who impressed O’Reilly the most was the Grand Marshall, Woody Williams. “I was humbled and thankful to have finished the race, but to receive a handshake and ‘Semper Fi’ from the only surviving Marine Corps Medal of Honor Winner of World War II was an incredible honor.”

O’Reilly has a few reflections about the MCM, “I never ‘hit the wall,’ during the race, but the training program was extremely stringent. Even so, I could cut 45 minutes off the next full marathon.”

He reemphasized, “I said could, not would!”

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Contestants were advised not to carry any extra gear during the race. Two items of extra gear O'Reilly would not have run without – his dad's Marine Corps dog tags.

*Harry Thetford is a retired Sears store manager and author of "Remembered," a book about 99 former students of Greensboro Senior High School (Grimsley) who were killed during World War II. Contact him at [htolharry@gmail.com](mailto:htolharry@gmail.com), 336/707-8922 or 336/681-0545*