

'I Was Spared for One Reason or Another'

An Afghanistan War veteran and Purple Heart recipient finds purpose in competitive hand cycling and para-triathlons

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The path that led Purple Heart recipient Zach Stinson toward a para-triathlon national title in 2021 began on the outskirts of an Afghanistan village on Nov. 9, 2010.

As a 21-year-old Marine attached to the 2nd Bn., 9th Marines, in Marjah, southern Helmand Province, Stinson was conducting an after-action damage assessment when he would take a step that changed his life.

"We were on foot walking along a north-to-south wall that ran the length of the village when we came to an opening," Stinson said. "I was initially third or fourth in line, but when we got to that opening, I stopped my lead guy and jumped first."

Stinson began leading his unit down a trail riddled with IED explosives, though they did not know it at the time.

"I was probably like 10 or 15 meters on the other side when I stepped down with my left leg," Stinson said. "And it was like, BOOM. It felt like a pogo stick. I was in the air, and I knew what I did immediately."

Following the mental haze caused by the explosion, Stinson regained consciousness, confided a prayer in God and urged his team leaders to let his wife, Tesa, know how much he loved her.

Awake during the airlift to Bagram Air Base for emergency surgery, Stinson could not compute the totality of his injuries, but he knew it was not good.

"I knew it was bad," Stinson said. "I kept asking my guys, 'Do I have my legs?' But no one

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would give me a straight answer. I was pretty sure that I had at least lost one leg because I couldn't move."

Following surgery at Bagram Air Base, Stinson woke up six days later at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. With Tesa at his bedside, he would drift in and out of consciousness for the next two weeks, forced to receive the news about his life-altering wounds in intervals.

Stinson, a Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, native, returned home after more than 35 surgeries. He lost both of his legs above the knee, his right thumb and parts of several other fingers. When he began rehab, he weighed 110 pounds, about 60 pounds less than his average weight, forcing the doctors to urge him to eat enough food to regain strength.

"I took that literally, so I ate and ate," Stinson said. "I remember being at a baby shower for my oldest daughter and looking in the mirror to notice I had gotten huge, to around 225 pounds, and needed to get back in the gym."

Stinson joined a hand cycling program in 2012 through Achilles International, a New York-based organization established in 1983 to encourage people with disabilities to participate in mainstream athletics.

Through Achilles International, Stinson soon discovered he had a knack for hand cycling. He competed in renowned events that included the Marine Corps Marathon, as well as the Boston, Detroit, Chicago and Disney marathons.

Stinson has since won the Boston Marathon, Chicago Marathon and the Disney 1/2 Marathon in Orlando, Florida. He also has placed second in the Marine Corp and Detroit marathons.

But Stinson was just getting started. In 2019, he wound up giving para-triathlons a try, and he realized he had a knack for those as well.

"A Marine friend of mine was doing these Ironman competitions, and it interested me," Stinson said. "I signed up on my 30th birthday without any prior practice. I had never heard of any other amputees doing it, so that's what got me started."

In a few years, Stinson quickly established himself as an international para-triathlon contender, winning six events at the national and global levels, respectively, catapulting him to a rank of 14th in the world.

The instant success, however, is not without merit.

"Settling down and listening to what God was telling me is what has helped me the most,"

Stinson said. “I feel I was spared for one reason or another, and in trying to find what that reason is I found something I enjoyed and was good at.”

While wholly devoted to his faith, Stinson also attributes his success to a relentless support system led by his wife and two daughters.

“We’ve had our ups and downs like anybody, but my wife has been with me every step of the way as I chase this athletic dream,” Stinson said. “In some ways, she’s the most important piece I have with me everywhere I go. We’ve been very blessed to pursue this thing together.”

With his wife coordinating travel, rentals and handling of an assortment of equipment for competitions, Stinson also relies on donations and sponsors, who often ease the burden of excessive travel costs along the way.

Fueled by his faith and a growing support system, Stinson is in the midst of a busy 2022 campaign slated with many events in hand cycling and para-triathlons. Through it all, his sights remain fixed on the upcoming 2024 Paralympics in Paris.

“I still have races coming up, so to get stronger for those races and continue to climb the rankings are big short-term goals, but the long-term goal is Paris in 2024,” Stinson said. “Being a national team athlete for cycling and para-triathlon would be a dream come true.”

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