

Living For Christ Not Comfort

Story by Gary Howell



Despite the familiar, formidable pain in his legs and lungs that runners describe as “the wall,” Randy pressed on. “At about mile nine, I felt I couldn’t go on,” he said. “My right foot had been in a lot of pain since starting. It had never completely healed from a recent church outreach event that had kept me on my feet all day.”

Associate Pastor Randy Pitman of Calvary Chapel Gulf Breeze, FL, was born with extreme club feet. “After several operations, the doctors said I would still never be able to run,” Randy said. Despite this and other physical limitations, Randy completed the half-marathon and then bench-pressed 325 pounds. His goals were to gain a platform to share the Gospel, to encourage those feeling defeated by physical ailments, and to raise awareness for the Wounded Warrior Project—an organization that supports soldiers who return injured from combat. At the race’s finish line, several local television news stations interviewed Randy. “I told them about the Wounded Warrior Project and about my faith in Jesus Christ,” Randy said. “I explained that He was the ultimate wounded warrior, Who took our sins and was punished on the cross on our behalf. They aired the entire thing on TV, without cutting out the Gospel!”

Randy leads CC Gulf Breeze’s ministry to the military, called FrontLine. The church is in western Florida surrounded by five military bases: Naval Air Station Pensacola, Corry Station, Hurlburt Field, Naval Air Station Whiting Field, and Eglin Air Force Base. Together, these stations are populated by more than 50,000 personnel. Randy began FrontLine in 2008 after, he recalled, “Some of the young guys stationed on these bases came to our church. Many had come to Florida temporarily, just for training, and had left their vehicles at home. When we learned these students were spending \$30 or \$40 each week to come by taxi, we were shocked.” In response, Randy continued, “We pulled together families from the church to pick them up. This made things personal. The students got to know the families, and many invited the guys home for dinner afterward.”

Randy soon contacted several base chaplains to see if he could help them in any way. Upon meeting one chaplain, Randy said, “I explained that we didn’t want to steal his students, and we weren’t trying to fill our church—Jesus Christ does a perfectly good job of that. We just wanted to be used by God to reach the lost.” Randy met regularly to pray and plan ministry opportunities with the chaplain, who obtained permission for Randy to hold an outreach in an empty hangar. About 50 volunteers from the church helped by cooking hamburgers, hosting a skateboard demonstration, and showing a Christian-themed movie. More than 30 people made commitments to Christ.

The event led to an on-base Bible study called Eighteen Hundred, the military reference to 6 p.m. Randy taught the study and brought some CC Gulf Breeze musicians to lead worship. Eventually a praise team of military personnel was assembled, and soon nearly 100 people came to study God’s Word weekly.

Earlier, in 2007, Senior Pastor John Spencer had asked Randy to lead the church’s ministry to young couples. Randy soon noticed that nearly half the attendees were in the military, and many of the men were frequently deployed. This created a need Randy hadn’t previously noticed. “It’s tough on families when husbands and fathers are away for extended periods,” Randy said. A military couple named Bret and Margie Warren began to help Randy minister. “Margie gathers deployed men’s wives for prayer, and they support each other while their husbands are gone,” Randy said. “They send encouraging cards and care packages, and Margie helps women apply for government services offered to spouses left behind.”

Pastor John loves watching God reach military personnel through these ministries. “Randy has a passion for young military couples,” John said. “Because they move quickly from place to place, these men and women can have a hard time connecting to others. They sometimes feel they don’t belong

anywhere—except around each other. They find opportunity for that in the ministries Randy leads.” John and his wife Lynn began CC Gulf Breeze in 1983, and the church is now attended by about 2,000 people.

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Randy was always zealous regarding the military, but his feet prevented him from joining. Though 11 childhood operations gave him surgically-constructed toes and heels, pain and limitations continue. Then at age 29, intense pain in Randy’s right hand led him to doctors who discovered he had a rare bone disease. Randy, an avid bodybuilder, was told he would never lift weights again. “I was already miserable and nearly suicidal because I was running from God,” Randy said—seeking a life of comfort and ease, rather than one of servanthood to the Lord and His people. “I was a successful businessman with a wonderful wife, great house, and travel opportunities. But I had no joy,” he continued. After quitting his job to have surgery and reclaim use of his hand, “I moped around, depressed,” Randy recalled. “Then I finally surrendered and quit wrestling with God.” Years prior, Randy had been a pastoral intern at CC Gulf Breeze, and he expected royal treatment upon returning to church work. His expectations were not met; there were no paid positions available at the church, and Randy was initially asked to serve in volunteer roles. “But in the end, those were some of the happiest times,” Randy said. “It felt like a fresh start.” He eventually became a chaplain at a homeless shelter and then re-joined CC Gulf Breeze’s staff in 2005. In the future, Randy said, “I would love to see Bible studies and Christ-centered marriage counseling on all five area bases.”