

INDOMINABLE

TOMMY Ferguson

The One-Armed Skydiver



The world's first one-armed skydiver to ever jump without a prosthesis, Tommy Ferguson shows off how he gets it done.

Photo Credit: Clasp Life

By Joy Blackburn MSA Staff Writer

On a gorgeous Saturday afternoon in April of 2011, life as Tommy Ferguson knew it came to a sudden end. He was 49 years old and on his 343rd skydiving jump. He had never had an accident and had no reason to think today would be different. He knew a majority of his jump team, from the pilot and fellow jumpers to the guys on the ground — all of them bound to each other by their shared passion for flying free above the earth. This was Tommy's element. Every part of his mind and body was charged to 100% as he turned on his helmet camera and shouted through the final details with the other jumpers. He then stepped out under the wing of the plane and, with a whooping holler of pure joy, dropped into the air.

There are people who amazingly live through accidents that would have killed almost anyone else. Out of that small group, there's a tiny fraction who don't just survive, but thrive. Tommy Ferguson is one of those

very few. Everyone who watches the helmet-cam video of his crash that day, who reads his autobiography^[i], or has the opportunity to hear him speak, instinctively know they are in the presence of someone truly rare. I felt the same recently as I interviewed Tommy about his accident.

Jump 343

He had been pushed unexpectedly off course by a shift of wind at low altitude, driving him south of the drop-zone and toward the ground at accelerating speed. He saw the trailer growing in front of him faster than he could maneuver away, then everything went black. He suffered a concussion and a large gash in his forehead where his helmet gouged into his skull. But his left side took most of the impact,

[i] "What the Freak Did I Hit?" by Tommy Ferguson and Kisi Thompson, Wandering Bard Press, 2012



Photo Credit: Tommy Ferguson

breaking three bones in his foot, his left wrist, several ribs, his collarbone, his left scapula, and the coracoid process – a hook-like projection on the scapula where key muscles and ligaments attach. The shoulder joint itself was dislocated and his left lung painfully bruised. But the worst was his brachial plexus, a dense collection of nerves connecting his brain to his left arm and hand, had been ripped out of his spinal column. There was no recovering from this final injury, and his lifeless arm would eventually be cut off. The blinding pain caused by his “phantom arm” would never go away.

Tommy said, “My first thought in the hospital was, ‘When can I jump again?’”

Tommy in the emergency room the day of the accident.

“You’re kidding!” I found myself laughing.

“No! Well, I thought of my family, of course. And my business. I had a small computer firm called Techno Doctors that did sales, service and networking. I had to get back to work. But yeah, I wanted to go skydiving.”

As it turned out, he would be back up in 8 weeks – dead arm taped to his belly – as the first non-prosthesis-wearing one-armed skydiver in the world.

But Tommy’s problems didn’t end with his injuries. He and the three contractors working for his company were all self-employed and uninsured. He not only couldn’t afford to have his useless arm removed, he had no medical leave. He couldn’t lay around a hospital waiting to heal; he had to get back to work. He had a wife and 5 kids to take care of.

Tommy founded Clasp Life so that no one would ever have to go through what he did.



Photo Credit: Clasp Life

So, Tommy returned to work, chock full of broken bones and a dead arm, hopping, flopping and tool-dropping, like a one-man dark-comedy routine. In his autobiography, “What the Freak Did I Hit,” Tommy describes a client’s reaction:

“He watched me work... with only one hand, and the other in a sling. While I was crawling around under the desk, that dead arm kept falling out of the sling. I would reach for another screw for the power supply and the arm would fall out of the sling again.” Eventually the client couldn’t stand it anymore, and blurted, “We gotta do something, that arm is terrible!”

His statement began a miraculous chain of networking that would have people raising money, achieving discounts and justifying some emergency coverage, so that Tommy’s dead arm could be removed. Tommy was so grateful and inspired by the outpouring of

help that he started Clasp Life, a non-profit dedicated to paying this kindness forward. “I didn’t want anyone to have to go through what I had gone through.” Tommy noted, “I know so many people and have such a huge network that anyone who calls me, I can either help them directly or get them to someone else who can.”

Tommy and Nikki met through Kisi Thompson, the co-author of Tommy’s book. Kisi, who has MS, pitched Tommy as an MSA guest speaker back before Covid. Nikki and Tommy, two high-energy Executive Directors, hit it off immediately. “She runs the MSA like I run Clasp Life,” he told me. “Everything is done to help someone else.”

Tommy spoke again last August at another well-attended MSA meeting. “He’s so inspiring,” Nikki said after Tommy concluded. “We could have listened to him for hours!”

Tommy, dressed as a superhero, hams it up for the Fox21 news team on the morning of his 1000th jump.

Photo Credit: Annelise Williams



Photo Credit: Tommy Fergerson





Tommy and his team prepare to compete in the World's Toughest Mudder race in 2023. The competition goes for 24 straight hours and includes over 40 miles of grueling obstacles.

Everything Tommy earns as a motivational speaker goes right into Clasp Life to help another person. It has become his life's passion, perhaps second only to skydiving. As of this writing, he has 1071 jumps under his belt, and at 63 years of age, he's still going. "The point is to never stop pushing forward." He said, adding, "God didn't give you another day because you need it. He gave you another day because someone else needs you."

Leaning Into the Light

The absolute positivity that radiates through Tommy Fergerson's speeches stands in sharp contrast to — and may indeed be driven by — some of the darker stories of Tommy's life, each of which could be an article all its own. He dropped some of these stories in my interview with him, and other stories appear in his autobiography. Each one pops up casually, merely a brief aside, before Tommy moves on with his main point. Collectively, the picture these stories paint — particularly of his childhood — is grim. I will not go into them; his book is available for any who is interested in reading more. I mention them, though, to help underscore what Tommy is saying to us all: No matter what afflicts us, no matter what we may have lost, no matter how bleak things look to

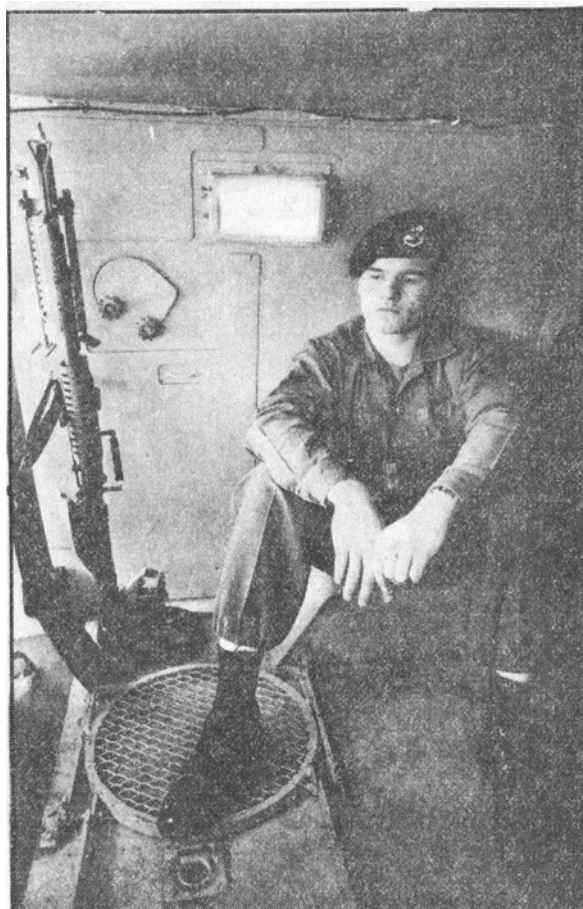


Photo Credit: Tommy Fergerson

Tommy joined the Air Force at the age of 17. Experienced with firearms since childhood, he was put on the competitive shooting and endurance team. Tommy helped lead the team to victory against other branches of the U.S. military and then against other military teams from countries around the world.

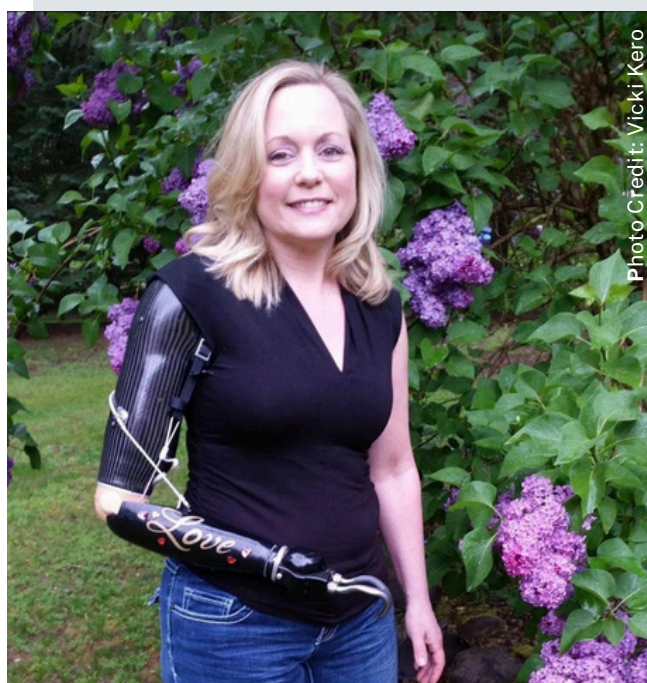
any of us right now, there is true joy in living. Our hardships bring us new opportunities, some that will astound us

if we take the time to see them. In his autobiography, Tommy writes, "... People see [my amputation] and say, 'I'm sorry,' but I'm

not. This arm has opened so many doors for me, and I have met so many wonderful people." ✨

The Yin to Tommy's Yang

One of the wonderful people Tommy has met is right-armed amputee, Vicki Kero. Tommy had seen her on the cover of Thrive magazine before the two met through the Amputee Coalition. He sought her out on Facebook and sent her messages every now and again. "I noticed she was checking me out," he told me. "But she basically just said, 'Hi.'"



Vicki Kero models one of her two beautiful prosthetic arms. "Finding Tommy and our being together is like a miracle," she told me.

"It's funny," Vicki said during our interview. "My friends told me I needed to find someone else." They were likely trying to cheer her up after her life-changing accident. "Well!" Vicki giggled. "I told them I wasn't going to look for him, but hey, if someone fell out of the sky..." ✨

Vicki and Tommy, in coordinated "Steampunk" costumes, enjoy a Halloween party in 2024.

Eventually Vicki warmed up to Tommy and began chatting with him online. "She lived in Washington and I lived in Colorado," Tommy said, so they met in Arizona while Vicki was visiting her grandson. "We just clicked and fell in love," he told me. As of this writing, Vicki and Tommy are engaged to be married.

Vicki was boating on the 4th of July, 2015, when a drunken boater rammed into her boat at high speed, nearly killing her.

Vicki writes, "I lost my arm above the elbow, had a severe fractured clavicle and a skull fracture... My life has changed dramatically, to say the least, over the ten years. Getting a second chance at life has opened up new possibilities and opportunities for me. The most exciting adventure was meeting Tommy Ferguson, the one-armed skydiver."

