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Eleven Injured Veterans Set Their Sights on the Finish line of IRONMAN® 70.3® Oceanside

*Challenged Athletes Foundation's Operation Rebound Program Allows Injured Troops
to Heal Through Sport; Charity Race Entries Still Available*

OCEANSIDE, CA – (February 19, 2020) – Just south of the nation's largest marine corps base, eleven resilient Challenged Athletes Foundation's (CAF) Operation Rebound® athletes will compete at IRONMAN 70.3 Oceanside on April 4, 2020. The Operation Rebound competitors will compete alongside over 5,000 athletes to swim 1.2 miles in Oceanside Harbor, cycle a 56-mile bike route through San Onofre Bluffs State Park and Marine Corps Base at Camp Pendleton and run 13.1 miles through Oceanside. Some will participate as individuals and undertake the whole race while others will participate as part of a relay team.

CAF's Operation Rebound (OR) program is a sports and fitness program for American military personnel, veterans and first responders with permanent physical challenges. "Operation Rebound athletes are not defined by their injuries, but rather by their heroic spirit and determination to overcome them." said Nico Marcolongo, Senior Program Manager for CAF's Operation Rebound program. "Our continued partnership with Ironman 70.3 Oceanside, allows our athletes to reignite their competitive spirit and strengthen community."

For the past 12 years, CAF has been the official charity partner of IRONMAN® in Oceanside and has helped bring the power of healing from the frontlines to the finish line. This year, Team CAF is comprised of eleven Operation Rebound athletes and seven CAF athletes including **Roderick Sewell**, history's first bilateral amputee IRONMAN World Championship finisher, and paralympians **Rudy Garcia-Tolson** and **Willie Stewart**.

ESPY award winner Sergeant **Kirstie Ennis**, USMC (ret.), Lance Corporal Mike Duke, USMC (ret.) and the current female amputee 70.3 record holder, Colonel **Patty Collins**, U.S. Army (ret.) are among the 11 Operation Rebound challenged athletes competing at IRONMAN 70.3 Oceanside:

- **Sergeant Omar Bermejo, USMC (ret.)**, Casper, WY- Omar is a US Paralympian and Marine Corps veteran who served four tours in Iraq. While driving back to the military base he was stationed at in 2008, he crashed on his motorbike, which ultimately caused the amputation of his right arm. Since his accident Omar has become an accomplished athlete in the realms of Nordic Skiing and Biathlon.
- **Lance Corporal Mike Duke, USMC (ret.)**, Boise, ID - Mike is a husband and father who has lived an active lifestyle. In 2004, Mike contracted a flesh-eating bacteria during Marine Corps Training (MCT) that put him in a 10-day coma and destroyed the entire left flank of his upper body. The extensive damage caused by the infection ended his career in the Marine Corps and resulted in the amputation of his left arm above the elbow. A lifelong athlete, Mike did remain committed to staying active after his amputation, though he found it difficult at times. He has been a recipient of multiple Operation Rebound grants for many years and for many different sports. Operation Rebound's support has helped him stay focused on his health and has given him renewed confidence. Mike works in the benefit regional office in the Vocational Rehabilitation Division at the Boise VA and is a husband and father.
- **Captain Eric McElvenny, USMC (ret.)**, Pittsburgh, PA - McElvenny excelled in both baseball and football throughout high school and went on to major in Mechanical Engineering at the U.S Naval Academy. Following graduation and Marine Corps training, Eric deployed three times to the Middle East. On his third deployment to Afghanistan, Eric was working with Afghan soldiers and stepped on an IED, suffering the loss of his right leg below the knee in the explosion. Eric used surfing as part of his recovery and from there, started competing in triathlon. In 2013, Eric completed the IRONMAN World Championship in Kailua-Kona, HI and has gone on to complete a number of IRONMAN and IRONMAN 70.3 events since that time.
- **Tom Perez**, San Marcos, CA - Tom attend West Point, where he boxed. Back then, boxing gloves did not have sewn in thumbs, increasing the risk of vision-threatening injuries. Sustaining frequent hooks from his opponents' thumb socking Tom square in the eye caused severe vision trauma. He was medically discharged from the military and has dealt with deteriorating vision since, being diagnosed legally blind in 2010. However, Tom preserved and did not relinquish his athleticism. He found the sport of cycling and has been tandem riding for nearly 10 years now.
- **Oz Sanchez**, San Diego, CA - Oz Sanchez is a three-time Paralympian who has won six medals. He is also a veteran for the Marine Corps Special Operations forces. Oz served

six years with the Marine Corps before he decided to transfer to the Navy to serve as a Navy Seal. During the time of transfer, Oz was involved in a hit and run that caused him to become paralyzed. The life he has lived has been one of relentless perseverance and his legacy is truly inspiring.

- **Major Anthony Smith, US Army (ret.)**, Armorel, AR - Smith took a direct hit from a rocket-propelled grenade while on deployment in Iraq. He was put in a body bag before a nurse noticed air bubbles coming up through the blood. Anthony was in a coma for 62 days and only recently regained most of his memory. He lost his right arm below the elbow and underwent dozens of surgeries, learning to write and throw a ball to his child with his left hand. Anthony later started competing in triathlons, did CAF's 620-mile Million Dollar Challenge ride and earned his black belt in martial arts, opening his own studio. He is currently training for the U.S. Paralympic Tae Kwan Do team that will debut at the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics.
- **Sergeant Scott Thorne, US Army (ret.)**, Escondido, CA - Upon graduation from high school, Scott joined the Army and served for four years. On September 14, 2004, Scott was shot in the head by an insurgent while serving in Iraq. Eight days after he was shot, Scott arrived at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. where doctors removed a large section of Scott's skull to relieve the pressure from his swelling brain. After his initial recovery, Scott began getting active through horseback riding. He then started to train and compete in triathlon with the support of CAF Operation Rebound. Scott proposed to his wife at the 2018 San Diego Triathlon Challenge. Scott will be guided by Sgt Major Brian Wilson, USMC (ret.).
- **Colonel Patty Collins, US Army (ret.)**, Alexandria, VA — After returning home from deployment in Iraq, Patty was hit by a car while cycling to work. The injuries she sustained led to the amputation of her leg below the knee. Patty began running and cycling, turning her passion for sports into a career and mentorship opportunities. Patty is the CAF record holder of the half-distance triathlon for female amputees.
- **Scott Leason**, San Diego, CA — When Scott was 20-years old, he joined the U.S. Navy and served honorably for seven years. While working at a convenience store, Scott was shot in the head during a robbery and lost both of his eyes and sense of smell. In 2007, Scott began waterskiing again; this time as a visually impaired athlete. With the help of CAF's Operation Rebound program, he has competed in multiple IRONMAN races, waterski events, and was the sole visually impaired athlete on Team USA at the ISA World Adaptive Surfing Championship presented by Team CAF.
- **Sergeant Kirstie Ennis**, USMC (ret.), Glenwood Springs, CO – A retired Marine Corps sergeant, who was injured and nearly died seven years ago in a helicopter crash while on duty in Afghanistan. Ennis had to work her way back from a traumatic brain injury, spine trauma and shoulder damage, and endure a dozen or so surgeries, one to amputate her left

leg above the knee. Ennis is the 2019 ESPYs Pat Tillman Award recipient, holder of three master's degrees, competitive Paralympic snowboarder, mountaineering conqueror and role model whose life story has the power to change others perspective on life. With the support of a CAF grant, the 28-year-old veteran is on a quest to climb the Seven Summits on one leg by 2021.

- **Corporal Evan Morgan**, USMC (ret.), Bakersfield, CA - While stationed in Iraq on his second tour, Evan's vehicle was struck by an IED and as a result, he lost his right leg above the knee, left leg below the knee and sight in one eye. While in recovery at Brooke Army Medical Center in Texas, Evan became a regular at the gym. He was active prior to the injury, but now activity became a necessary part of his life. Evan became interested in triathlon and competed in CAF's SDTC and IRONMAN 70.3 Oceanside in 2008 and 2009, hoping to encourage others to live an active lifestyle.

CAF's Operation Rebound program funds equipment, training and travel expenses that can help our injured troops and first responders harness the healing power of sport – whether the goal is to win Paralympic gold or simply run around the block with their kids. In 2019, CAF supported a record 367 veterans and first responders with Operation Rebound grants totaling \$490,000. Since 2004, CAF has awarded 2,926 Operation Rebound grants and supported 1,284 individuals, totaling \$4.6 Million in support. To learn more about CAF's Operation Rebound program visit: <http://operationrebound.org/>

CAF is offering athletes the opportunity to support Operation Rebound by raising a minimum of \$2,000 each to race the IRONMAN® 70.3® Oceanside triathlon. The race, is sold-out except for this unique fundraising opportunity. To register for a remaining spot racing IRONMAN 70.3 Oceanside with Team CAF, visit <http://www.challengedathletes.org/events/ironman-70-3-california/>

About the Challenged Athletes Foundation

The Challenged Athletes Foundation® (CAF) is a world leader in helping people with physical challenges lead active, healthy lifestyles. CAF believes that participation in physical activity at any level increases self-esteem, encourages independence and enhances quality of life. Since 1994, more than \$112 million has been raised and over 26,000 funding requests from people with physical challenges in all 50 states and dozens of countries have been satisfied. Additionally, CAF's outreach efforts impact another 60,000 individuals each year. Whether it's a \$2,500 grant for a handcycle, helping underwrite a carbon fiber running foot not covered by insurance, or arranging enthusiastic encouragement from a mentor who has triumphed over a similar challenge, CAF's mission is clear: give opportunities and support to those with the desire to live active, athletic lifestyles. To learn more, visit challengedathletes.org or call 858-866-0959.