

I SHOULD BE DEAD

Meet Pete The Feet: the Royal Marine amputee now targeting gold at the Winter Paralympics

PETE THE FEET Words MATTHEW DRAKE



050 | loaded.co.uk

ALREADY

"K eep shooting. Keep fucking shooting," screamed Royal Marine Dave Gostick to Lance Corporal Peter Dunning, who sat perched on the top deck of his Viking tank as Taliban bullets flew towards him. Pete, manning a machine gun, began ripping back into the predators as they crawled like ants between nests on a river bank. The pair were in Afghanistan's Helmand Province, and they were being torn apart by insurgents bristling with RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades), mortars and AK-47s. Stalked by rapid fire, the twelve-tank convoy had run into a hellish gauntlet. But in a sickening heartbeat they veered into the enemy's deadliest plaything - the IED (improvised explosive device). A blast tore through the Viking - throwing the six-tonne vehicle through the air before it emitted a final, lingering death rattle. Inside, Pete's backbone was shattered and his legs were hemorrhaging blood as burning skin spat from his blistered body. Now he lay entombed, his bones stripped bare, his spine snapped and his chances of survival slim. The worst part? This was supposed to be his final day of service. By rights, he should already be dead...



features

Four years to the day they amputated both his legs, *loaded* meets Britain's very own bionic man. A superhero they call Pete "The Feet" Dunning. Now our favourite for Winter Paralympics glory in two years time, he has rebuilt himself to lead an amazing, mad and adrenaline-firing life. It was though, a long road back from that horrific day.



Target practice in Sangin

"They were the last words I heard before I lost my legs for life," Pete wearily explains to *loaded* on the order to return fire. "We'd dropped down along river bed. It was rocky and we were moving quickly. They knew we were coming and before we knew it we were under attack from both sides.

"It was stinking hot and the sun was blazing down. I was half in the tank and half out of it wearing full body armour and hitting back from a heavy artillery gun. I couldn't see their fighters though - I was just firing at shadows.

"It was hell on earth," he adds. "I wouldn't wish it on anyone." As part of the Royal Marine Armoured Support Group, Pete's mission was simple: transport troops and supplies across the most lethal countryside on the planet. Crawling with Taliban fighters, the sticky air was heavy with the threat of IEDs - intended to maim and slaughter patrolling British troops.

It all must seem like a dream at times to a squaddie. Talking to *loaded* on a freakishly steep indoor ski slope in Holland, he retells his final seconds in the world's deadliest minefield. "The Viking was packed with food, rations, water and ammo. It was the perfect target.

"When the blast went off I just didn't remember a thing.



Flashing the pins beside the Wirral, 2010

"I got lucky with the missus really.... turns out she doesn't like feet"

Gostick was found dead when a helicopter swooped down to attempt to rescue him. Scraping up what they could of Pete, medics flew his lifeless body back to Camp Bastion's field hospital. The sports-mad soldier, who worked his banter pulling pints and playing rugby before signing up, was forced into a gruesome trade - his legs for his life.

constant fear

"Just three weeks before I lost my legs, I lost a good friend of mine from the same company when two tanks hit IEDs," explains Pete. "The threat never went away, it was always very real. It got higher and higher. They were impossible to spot. The Taliban dig holes for them and simply cover them up. It all looks sandy out there. You've got no chance." What makes this already-terrifying situation worse is that not



On with the shoes, Selly Oak, 2008

long before the blast he'd already dodged death.

"I'd got lucky a few days before the IED blast," he recalls. Deployed on a mission in a village set deep in Taliban heartlands, his Viking spearheaded a patrol. Snaking through a maze of narrow streets, they drove straight into an ambush. "This Taliban bloke leaps out of a house door ahead of us and we can see him aim the rocket launcher straight at us from just twenty metres away," Pete says. "He fired it and we could see it as it came at us, but luckily it missed and went over the top of the tank. It was an ambush and we came under heavy fire on both the left and right

BACK ARMED FORCES DAY

loaded asks you to raise the profile of the event celebrating the heroic services of our service personnel

Where at *loaded* are proud to support our boys and girls who selflessly lay down their lives and scrap tooth and nail for this country. Their extraordinary courage in the face of ferocious conflict in Afghanistan deserves nothing less than gratitude and thanks in mammoth abundance. As a mark of utter respect we are putting our backs

into raising the profile and pride in Armed Forces Day, which is due to take place on June 30.

Military personnel, veterans and cadets will mark a special day of honour hosted in Plymouth with marching bands, exhibitions and dazzling displays of military skill on land, sea and air.

We ask all our readers to raise a pint in tribute to Britain's astonishing troops, and pause to

reflect on their unstinting heroism. Without their sacrifices over the years this country wouldn't be the place that it is today.

We will never forget their amazing contribution to British life. And we also ask our troops reading this magazine to keep sending us your letters and messages from the front line to letters@loaded.co.uk.

Italian Disabled
Alpine Skiing
Championship



Practice on
the piste



features

side. It was only a small patrol so we turned round and moved back under fire. One of the other lads I knew was killed a few days before by an IED too."

constant fear

On 25 May, 2008, they were both speedily amputated. One was sawn off below the knee and the other through it. "Ten hours later, I only remember coming round for a second or two at Camp Bastion," Pete tells *loaded* of the moment he realised they'd gone. "I could see my legs had gone, but I was too drugged up to think. In the bed next to me I saw my mate Marc lying there with a sergeant major standing over him. My driver was missing. 'Where's Dale (Gostick)?' I cried. He just turned to me and said 'I've got some bad news to tell you.' I knew straight away what that meant. I passed out again." Looking back on the loss of his comrade, who he had fought shoulder-to-shoulder with, Pete says "I was on top cover and Dale was driving. When you train you learn both roles and each time we swapped over. But I'll never say it was fortunate or unfortunate that Dale was driving that day. It's just the way it is."

In addition to the harrowing catalogue of injuries, Pete had also suffered severe burns. He'd spend the next five weeks in a hospital bed waiting for an operation to fix his back. They were the hardest five weeks of his life. After his amputations, Pete was flown back to the UK, still unconscious. "The next thing I remember is coming round in an ambulance back in Britain. I had no fucking idea what was going on or where I was," he explains.

"I was on so many drugs for the pain I didn't know what planet I was on." Over 50 gruelling weeks at Headley Court – the defence rehabilitation centre near Epsom in Surrey – they rebuilt him, first his mind and then his body.

"You got a constant lift from the other lads in there," Pete tells us. "It was the most painful place in the world, but it was also the most competitive. Everyone was trying to get one up on each other about whose injuries were the worst. It



was like battle scar Top Trumps." Step-by-step, they recreated his upper body with strengthening work. Then they finally fitted the prosthetic legs.

Yet as Pete advanced through the recovery programme, he never believed he'd walk again. "Some bloke told me I'd be able to walk again in no time. I thought he was mad. There were some real black spots, some real bad moments when I didn't want anyone near me. I never considered suicide, but I wanted to be left alone."

"I knew what was going on," he says of the explosion. "I knew what the consequences could be, like in the state I'm in now, or even worse. But you just seem to think, 'Oh, it won't happen to me.'"

the feat

"I've just got married and we have a six-month old baby girl," he tells *loaded*. "I got lucky with the missus really. Turns out she doesn't like feet. Never has, it must be a woman thing." Pete – who was cheekily nicknamed the "The Feet" by one of the officers who helped him battle back to fitness through months of gruelling training – tells us he can still feel them. "I get these phantom sensations when I feel myself twitching my toes – it never leaves me."

"When they first handed me the prosthetic legs and fitted me with the fixings, I thought 'how can I ever do this,'" he says of the days before his astonishing comeback. ✈️

Pete was forced to trade his legs for his life



Knockabout: ice sledge hockey in Vancouver



COMING HOME SAVED ME

Captain Garth Banks lost both his legs in Afghanistan

“Most of my young Guardsmen would not even be thinking about buying a house for some years yet as our money is often spent on enjoying life! So if they are suddenly injured, and face the possibility of a life outside the army it can be a daunting world. These young servicemen and women need to start thinking about suitable housing, which is incredibly unnerving if you don’t know where to start. Coming Home can provide everything from advice on property purchase, adaptations, guidance through the purchase process, paying legal fees, a Shared Ownership Scheme and even outright purchase of a property, which is then rented back to the soldier. Coming Home helped me with the purchase of my property by providing free surveyors to check the building was structurally sound and suitable for me. It sounds like a small thing, but that is all I needed at the time. For other injured Servicemen and women, they have bought houses for them, had them adapted for wheelchair access, adjusted the gardens; basically provided everything they need. It is an amazing service that the charity provides and helps to take away all the stress and worry, allowing them to concentrate on facing the future”.



“I didn’t know if I could cope with the prosthetic legs at first. They remade me, but two inches less than I’d been before. They ached and ached at times, but I kept going. He took up a desk job with the Royal Marines after finally being released from hospital, but a two-week ski trip to Austria changed everything. “I’d never put on a pair of skis in my life but the first time I went down I knew I loved it.” After days of practise, Pete was selected for the Combined Services Disabled Ski Team. Later that year he was at the Vancouver Winter Paralympics as a spectator.

olympic glory

Now he has recently moved into a new home with the help of forces charity Coming Home, who will soon set about adapting it for him and his young family, as they have done for scores of wounded British troops. After mastering the slopes since losing his limbs, the 26-year-old has now set his sights on glory at the next Winter Paralympics for Team GB

“I guess your legs don’t matter down there. You just have to power yourself with your arms. My upper body strength has come on leaps and bounds. I’ve had all sorts of gym stuff to do to bulk up.” So much so that Pete’s also remarkably become a master of water-skiing. “You don’t have the prosthetic legs on for it. You’re on a mono-ski tethered to the boat. You just keep upright and hold on.”

charity help

“Coming Home has been fantastic to us. They really help you with all the difficult stuff, Pete tells *loaded* about the charity who helped him rebuild his life. They even found him and his partner Laura a suitable new home where they could raise their daughter. They are now advising

“All my dreams and ambitions are now fixed on the Paralympics”

at the Games in Sochi, Russia in 2014. Artificial devices were fitted to replace his missing body parts, which work with his muscle, skin and nervous system to enhance motor control. The hardware for his leg consists of a C-Leg knee section (a prosthetic part), a socket or stump attachment system and a foot. “I’d never even seen a slope before the bomb, now I can’t get enough. All my dreams and ambitions now are looking towards the Paralympics in two years time.”

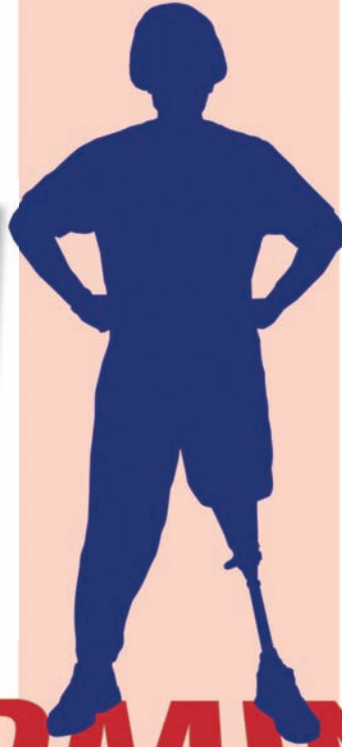
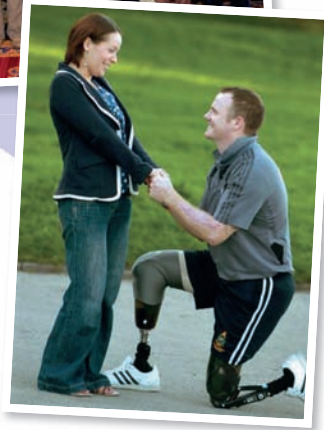
He has also been fitted with a pair of running blades similar to South African sprinter Oscar Pistorius. Now when he goes on the piste, he goes everywhere – he’s unstoppable.

And when he’s not braving black runs, he’s in the gym, or scuba diving or water skiing. “I’ve always been big on scuba diving, even before the blast. Luckily, I discovered I could keep it up after my legs went,” Pete beams.

and helping with adaptations needed to aid Pete to get on with his life. They also took advantage of the charity’s Shared Ownership Scheme whereby they pay a deposit on a property while Coming Home pay the remainder.

And that help means Pete can learn to embrace his injuries – and even pull pranks. “What I love to do is not tell security at the airport I’m wearing prosthetics. I go through the metal detector and the alarm goes off. Security guards scratch their heads and pat me down. Only then do they twig it. I get some right looks.” But what is remarkable about Pete is his lack of bitterness.

“That day changed my life forever. But I’d totally go as far as to say it changed it for the better.” And with that, the astonishing man they call “The Feet,” due to his lack of any, is up and running again. ■ **loaded**



COMING HOME

Housing Our Wounded Heroes

features

Dig deep to support the charity that helps our lads and lasses injured on the frontline

Coming Home has one simple aim: to help put a roof over the heads of brave wounded and seriously-injured troops. The charity campaign to raise money to provide specially adapted and appropriate housing for the hundreds of service personnel in need of rebuilding their lives. Prime Minister David Cameron said: "I am delighted to support Coming Home and its pledge to find and adapt

housing for Servicemen who have given so much for the defence of our country.

"As you know, I have just announced the enshrining of the Military Covenant into law and we will work in partnership with Haig Housing Trust and Coming Home to ensure these brave men and women have the life they so richly deserve." To donate call the Coming Home donation hotline on 02086855770 or text Home18 £3 (or any amount up to £10) to 70070

Show your support by visiting coming-home.org.uk