# JASON VICKNESS

## —SHOULDER TO SHOULDER WITH A MORGAN—

**By Jill Hoenmans**

Jason Vickness and Major Tom (photos © Tami Johnson).

At the 2023 Marion Therapeutic Riding Association (MTRA) "Horses & Hearts" Gala in Ocala, Florida, one of the speakers, Jason Vickness, shared his experience with the Association and his partner in the program, a Morgan horse called Major Tom. Through the work of MTRA and their equine therapy program for veterans, Jason and "Tom" are both sharing a journey toward healing, growth, and a brighter future.

Jason, having served 15 years in the U.S. Army, took an early retirement due to multiple fractures in his back. With no time to adjust to his new reality, Jason found himself without a uniform, without purpose, and without hope. He felt discarded and dismissed after his years of service, and there was little to no support to help him adjust to life outside of the Army. Jason notes these factors are not uncommon for veterans returning to civilian life after years of leaving "self" behind in the role of service. The Ocala Vet Center (a subsidiary of Veterans Affairs) partners with MTRA to provide equine therapy as an alternative treatment for veterans. At MTRA Jason was given a novel opportunity, beginning a journey to healing, self-discovery, and hope.

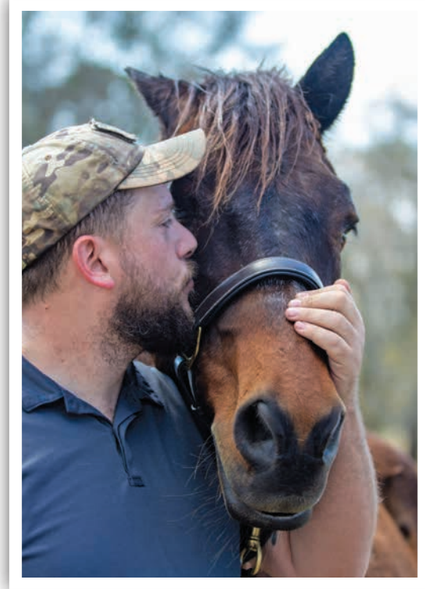
Pam Morrison, Executive Director of MTRA, doesn't assign members their horses. She lets the choices happen organically. On Jason's first day he was given the biographies of the horses that were available to him. According to Major Tom's bio, he had been an Amish cart horse who, when his feet and legs could no longer handle the work, found himself at risk in an auction. The 501c3 rescue group Forever Morgans came to his aid, rescuing him from the kill pen, after which he was fostered by Joanna Kelly of Blue And White Morgans from July 2021 until he was selected as an MTRA candidate in March 2022. Before heading for Ocala, Major Tom had his own battles—neglected feet took time to recover and a tumor, while benign, had to be removed surgically. Tom faced a few more challenges but saw them through, and his kind and gentle spirit remained.





At the time of his rescue, Tom was simply said to be a Morgan. Weeks after he arrived at MTRA his DNA testing revealed his registered Morgan identity as Wonder Flight, AMHA 164053, foaled in 2003. Joanna Kelly would tell you he was cooperative and appreciative while she and her farrier and vet team got him well and sound enough for his new future. He arrived with the barn name of "Major," but he was just too sweet and laid back, so the name was tweaked to Major Tom. Jason, a Ziggy Stardust fan, confessed that "Space Odyssey" was one of his favorite songs, another reason he was drawn to the horse. Jason felt he and Tom had much in common. Both had done their job and worked hard, and both had been discarded. Their first meeting cemented his choice. After haltering Tom for the first time and starting to lead him, Jason got insight into what makes this breed of horse so people-oriented and special, and an amazing fit for this kind of program. "He started going off faster than I could walk. So, I told him, 'whoa, boy, I can't walk that fast.' So, he put his shoulder into my shoulder and matched my pace." And that was when he knew. They chose each other.

Major Tom, aged 19 when he joined MTRA, is easy to love, with true Morgan intelligence, disposition, and kindness. There is a wisdom in his expression, and a gentle adoration when his person interacts with him. Jason says, "From where I first started at MTRA to where I am now, it's been a complete 180 degrees." Unashamed of sharing the despair he once experienced, Jason says, "I held a gun to my head the morning before I drove there. I've told him he saved my life, and he gave me a gentle snort." Experiencing a path now full of love, patience, and acceptance, Jason says, "We are kindred spirits."



A month after starting his sessions with MTRA, Jason learned he was "not a surgical candidate" for his ongoing conditions. Driving back from his medical appointment in Gainesville, he reflected on his training, his sense of mission, and where it had led him, asking, "Why did I do this to myself? Did I do it to any of my soldiers?" He realized he was spiraling and remembers "All I wanted was to come see Tom. He is my Rock of Gibraltar." Jason's family admires what Tom has meant. His children come to visit from time to time, and Jason recently learned his kids, ages nine and ten and exhibiting wisdom beyond their years, have thanked executive director Pam Morrison, saying, "Daddy has never been happier than he has been with Major Tom."

Jason shares what he has learned from a rescued Morgan horse, saying, "Horses have feelings. It's okay to feel—for humans to feel, men to feel, veterans to feel. He has made me very aware that it's okay to feel." The Army vet has become an advocate for giving alternative therapy treatments a chance. "When people hear therapy, they think of laying on a couch and having a psychiatrist tear your life apart. That's not what this is. Find whatever it takes to make you feel better.

"I love what Pam calls 'undemanding time.' And I love riding. I love just spending time with [Tom], grooming him, talking to him, just being with him. I love riding him too. When I am riding, he is my legs and there is a thrill with that." Jason attributes his newly acquired ability to accept emotions and love as part of everyday life, and the ability to be present allows him to shed the sense of despair that came with unexpected retirement. All because a discarded Morgan horse leaned into his shoulder and walked beside him when Jason most needed support. ■

*Consider contacting Pam Morrison at MTRA to give horses and people a new future by exploring www.mtraocala.org OR emailing information@mtraocala.org*