

ON ★ PATROL

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Forever Indebted

"The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation."

—General George Washington, November 10, 1781



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Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina: The Purple Heart Medals are one of the oldest medals given out by the Marine Corps. The Marines of 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment received their awards for wounds received during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Official U.S. Marine Corps photo by Corporal Athanasios L. Genos.

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Operation:



Denali

On June 1, 2009, four wounded veterans, two mentors, and one guide, began a quest to climb Mount McKinley, also known as Denali. DoD photo by Army Lieutenant Colonel Marc Hoffmeister.

Four Wounded Warriors Set Out to Conquer a Mountain

BY SAMANTHA L. QUIGLEY

“I believe it would be the ultimate challenge for disabled war veterans,” said Army Specialist David Shebib of “Operation Denali.”

Mount McKinley, known to most climbers simply as Denali, is the highest peak in North America. It blithely challenges anyone so bold as to try to summit its peak extending 20,320 feet into the Alaskan sky.

On June 1, 2009, four combat-wounded veterans and their support team sponsored by the Military Order of the Purple Heart set out to do defy “The High One.”

The goal of this once-in-a-lifetime expedition: To get four combat-wounded veterans and their support team to the summit.

For Shebib and others, it is “a way of bringing us closure from the wounds of war and a starting point on the rest of our lives.”

“Climbing Denali is always a unique experience [but] the people and their character makes or breaks a trip,” said Kirby Senden, the team’s lead guide. “This group has an unbelievable amount of pride, determination, and motivation like I have never seen before.”

The group, three soldiers and a Marine, all sustained their injuries while serving in Operation Iraqi



The team of wounded warriors and their guides pause during their descent from Mount McKinley for a group photo at 13,500 feet, Denali National Park, Alaska, June 22, 2009. U.S. Army photo by Army Lieutenant Colonel Marc Hoffmeister.

Freedom, but wanted to prove they could still do whatever they put their minds to—including summit Denali.

Army Lieutenant Colonel Marc Hoffmeister, the climb's organizer, graduated from West Point in 1992. Fifteen years later he found himself in Iraq as an embedded trainer conducting a combined patrol with the Iraqi army.

On April 22, 2007, a roadside bomb hit the patrol just north of Hillah along alternate supply route Jackson.

The blast severely damaged Hoffmeister's left arm, breaking bones and causing nerve damage. He also suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) and, as he puts it, "The pleasure of accompanying shrapnel popping out on odd occasions.

"I have more titanium than bone in my left arm now, and my elbow is more a collection of plates and screws than an elbow," Hoffmeister said.

He said he considers his rehabilitation ongoing because of slow nerve growth and recovery. He had a nerve transplant from his left leg, was initially hospitalized for two months, and needed an additional two months of home healthcare. During that time his brigade commander in Iraq called and asked him to take over the brigade's rear detachment.

"He stated to me very simply that he figured, 'Anyone with two arms is still only half as good as Hoffmeister with one arm, so would [you]

mind taking command of the brigade rear detachment?'" Hoffmeister recounted. "How do you say no?"

The duties gave him a purpose and a focus. He could relate to the large population of wounded in the brigade's rear detachment. It kept him looking beyond his personal obstacles and moving forward.

The injury has forced Hoffmeister to figure out how to modify equipment so he can return to activities he enjoyed before his injury, such as climbing. It has also given him a new perspective on life.

"It's forcing me to learn how to become a much more technically adept climber, as I can't rely on the strength or dexterity of my left arm or hand," he said. "So my lower body technique and positioning must change to reduce the strain and extend my endurance.

"I embrace life's experiences far more than in the past because I am far more aware of the blessings that each new day brings," he said. "I've also realized that the combined virtue of my experiences being severely wounded and my rank and position have enabled me to assist other wounded warriors experiencing similar challenges."

The loss of his right arm while serving in Iraq made everyday tasks, such as eating, a challenge for retired Marine Captain Jonathan F. Kuniholm, a former engineer officer and platoon commander with the 2nd Platoon, 4th Combat Engineer Battal-

ion, attached to the 1st Battalion, 23rd Marines.

“Following the loss of my right arm in Iraq on New Year’s Day 2005, the most basic of things became a challenge,” he said. “After putting up a ceiling fan that spring with my five-year-old son, I realized that as long as I was patient enough, I could do whatever I wanted.”

Kuniholm was on the shore of the Euphrates River south of Haditha, Iraq, when insurgents used a homemade bomb to initiate what he described as a sophisticated ambush on the platoon. Three service members suffered serious injuries and another was killed in the ambush. One sailor, Navy Petty Officer Second Class Juan Rubio, earned a Silver Star during the engagement.

Kuniholm had played his guitar the night before in a talent show and described himself as “pretty rusty” because he hadn’t played in months. It’s a moment he would always remember, considering what would happen the next day.

“It took about a year before I was done with surgeries, fitted with prostheses, and ready to get back to my life,” Kuniholm said. “Prosthetic arms are, as I discovered, still very much a work in progress, and

if you want to call that part of my rehabilitation, my work to improve prosthetic arms continues.”

Kuniholm has already started to set an example for others who have disabilities and big dreams.

With the help of his flight instructor, Kuniholm recently renewed his pilot’s license and has returned to flying as a private pilot.

Before being wounded in Iraq and retiring from the Army, Sergeant First Class Matt Nyman was a Special Operations soldier whose life at home revolved around family and outdoor activities.

He refused to let a right-leg amputation slow him down when offered the chance to fulfill his dream of conquering North America’s highest peak. Denali is daunting for anyone, much less a person who lived through Nyman’s July 2005 Baghdad helicopter crash.

“I was tossed into the rotor,” he said. “It cut off my right leg below the knee, cut and crushed my left foot, [and caused a] compound femur fracture and collapsed lungs.”

Nyman now deals with pain in his left foot caused by the pressure of standing. He suffers from

A team of four wounded warriors and supporters make camp at 11,000 feet on Mount McKinley, Denali National Park, Alaska, June 3, 2009. U.S. Army photo by Army Lieutenant Colonel Marc Hoffmeister.



considerable nerve pain, but he's never stopped exploring his limits and said his recovery gave him more time to spend with his son. He has returned to work full-time as a requirements specialist for the Joint Special Operations Command, which he cites as his greatest triumph since he was injured.

"So far, I have not run into any limitations, except that I cannot go as far or for as long due to fatigue and pain," he said. "Since I got hurt, it just made me want [to climb a mountain] even more to prove to myself I can overcome anything."

Wounded in Iraq, Specialist David Shebib was looking for closure and a new starting point for his life as part of the team that scaled Denali.

The combat medic said he "got his bell rung pretty good" on December 28, 2006, when a homemade bomb exploded in his face. He was serving in Hawr Rajab, Iraq, when the blast occurred. It cut his carotid artery, causing a small stroke and a traumatic brain injury.

"[It] blew a hole in my eardrum, broke my collarbone and [a] finger, and smashed a few teeth out," Shebib said. He also suffered a scarred retina, soft-tissue damage to his face and torso, and burns on his arms and hands.

He was in a coma for five days and spent two weeks in the intensive care unit at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. Therapy to help with his TBI lasted for two years, and he's still going through procedures to lessen the scars on his face.

His doctors told him that the average person would not have survived his injuries, he said, and that he likely would be paralyzed on his left side from the stroke.

But the worst of the doctors' predictions never came true, and Shebib vowed not to let his injuries prevent him from doing what he wanted to do, including staying on active duty. He will soon transfer to Bamberg, Germany, as a combat medic with the 173rd Airborne Brigade.



When four of the seven-member Team Denali reached the top of McKinley on June 16, 2009, after a 16-day expedition, what should have been celebratory whoops and hollers was instead a quiet, tempered satisfaction.

Though the weather was perfect when Hoffmeister and Shebib approached Denali's summit, they enjoyed it without three of their team members.

"The summit was almost anti-climactic to be honest," Hoffmeister said. "It was great, but it was bittersweet that we could only have half the team [reach the summit]."

Kuniholm, Nyman, and Gayle Hoffmeister, Hoffmeister's wife and part of the group's three-person support team, were each forced to return to lower altitudes during the ascent.

Nyman made it to 16,000 feet with no problem. But when the team set-up camp at 17,200 feet, his oxygen saturation plummeted.

"It dropped to 50, which is dangerously low," Hoffmeister said. "We ended up putting him on oxygen."

When Nyman didn't recover overnight, he was taken back down to 14,200 feet, where he remained on oxygen for about four days.

Kuniholm had reached about 14,000 feet when he started showing early signs of high-altitude pulmonary edema. Based on a doctor's advice, he was taken back down the mountain.

Gayle advanced with the remaining team members as far as Denali Pass at about 18,000 feet—some 2,300 feet shy of the summit—when Hoffmeister realized his wife was showing signs of mild hypothermia. She had a patch of frostbite spreading across her cheek, and she wasn't responding normally, he said.

None of the situations that kept the two veterans from ascending to the summit with the rest of the team had anything to do with their previous injuries. "It was just altitude stuff," Hoffmeister said. "Just like I said before we even climbed: you don't know what your predisposition to altitude is until you're on [the mountain]."

Hoffmeister and Shebib, along with their guide, Kirby Senden, and the third member of the support team, Bob Haines, a retired Army sergeant first class, continued and reached the summit ahead of schedule. The weather was perfect until just before they reached the peak, which Hoffmeister described as awesome.



Retired Army Sergeant First Class Matthew Nyman sits at the base of headwall fixed lines during the climb to the summit. Mount McKinley, Denali National Park, June 10, 2009. U.S. Army photo by Army Lieutenant Colonel Marc Hoffmeister.



Amy Lieutenant Colonel Marc Hoffmeister, a wounded warrior attempting to summit Mount McKinley, stands on the Autobahn heading up Denali Pass, Denali National Park, Alaska, June 15, 2009.

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

Marc Hoffmeister has an offer to climb Aconcagua in Argentina, the highest peak in the Western Hemisphere, in November. In February, he will attempt to climb Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro.



Camp Patriot, a non-profit organization based in Seattle, Washington, that takes disabled veterans on outdoor adventures, sponsored their annual "Mt. Rainier Climb Quest for the Summit 2009" in July. Three wounded veterans participated in the climb, with Sergeant First Class Mario Barragan and Sergeant First Class Jesse Yandell reaching the Summit East Crater on July 9, 2009. Captain Ray Gonzalez made it to 11,000 feet. He was paralyzed from the waist down six months ago. For more information, please visit www.camppatriot.org. ★

"We got up on Summit Ridge and had clear skies and could see forever," he said. "Then, of course, 15, 20 minutes before we hit the summit, a squall rolled in and we could see absolutely nothing."

Minus three of their teammates to witness the momentous occasion, they quickly did what they set out to do. They conducted Shebib's re-enlistment ceremony before heading back down to 17,000 feet.

"The entire trip was a high," Hoffmeister said. "Not having John or Matt make it, and the frustration of Gayle not being able to make it, really dampened a lot of that, but I guess it took the entire team to get to the summit."

"This was one of the hardest things I've ever tried to do, and I'm still processing the fact that it remains, for me, unfinished business," said Kuniholm. "I was elated to have passed what I thought would be the most technically challenging part for me, the fixed ropes [used to ascend from 14,000 feet to 16,000 feet]."

While the fixed lines may have caused him some unwarranted angst, he said, it ultimately was the tasks that he used to consider easy that were difficult on the mountain.

"Getting dressed in the morning in a tent with

another amputee... was [difficult]," Kuniholm said. "Going through the necessary drills of shedding and donning layers of clothing and my pack on short breaks. These were big challenges, and I hadn't given them a thought before the climb.

"And the challenge for the team became sitting there while I got it done," he continued, "because doing it for me doesn't help me learn to do it faster."

Even given the challenges and frustrations, the team members were positive when asked if they'd ever tackle something like this again.

"Climbing Denali is a task that many able-bodied folks would never undertake," Kuniholm said. "By being part of the team tackling that task while sharing the additional challenges of disability, I hope to inspire others with similar challenges."

When four wounded warriors went up a mountain this summer, all returned having conquered their injuries. "They are breaking ground with their physical challenges," Senden said. "They are a real inspiration." ★

—Samantha Quigley is a reporter for American Forces Press Service. To read more about Operation Denali, please visit www.DefenseLink.mil, where this article originally appeared.