

Wounded Warriors Train For Denali.

This July, four unlikely mountaineers will arrive on the glaciers of Denali National Park. Their goal – to learn the skills needed to return to the mountain next June in pursuit of the summit. For these fledgling mountaineers, this first step towards Denali is a little bit more difficult than you may expect. This just may be because one is missing a leg, another is short his right arm, the body of the third team mate is covered in burn scars and although the fourth has all his limbs, he just can't feel or fully control his left arm. And you thought Denali would be tough for you to climb? This journey is a path of discovery for the team as a whole, in order to leave behind the legacy of the missing pieces, and these men are fully committed to the challenges ahead.

What would bring such an assorted team together to attempt this feat? They are brothers in arms, wounded in battle in Iraq. Each of them sustained injuries during combat in the last three years and all of them share a kinship in the desire to show the world that their wounds don't define who they are or limit what they can do.

In a nod to the combat action which brought them together, this team sees this as their next critical mission. They have aptly named it "Operation Denali". For two weeks this July, they will participate in a 12 day mountaineering course with the Alaska Mountaineering School. During this critical time, they will learn as a team how to compensate for their individual limitations on the mountain and develop a team strategy to cope with any challenge they may face. Matt will learn to use crampons and snowshoes on his prosthetic leg while Jon and Marc will learn to manipulate ropes and ascenders with one good hand. Dave will have to live on the glacier with his face constantly covered to protect sensitive scars from the intense reflected sunlight. No matter how you approach it, the obstacles are significant. The course will give the team a solid feel for how well they will perform under the demands of a summit bid and focus their training efforts for the next year.

If successful with both training and fund raising, the team will reunite in early June 2009 and make their move for the summit of Denali. They are a true testament to the mettle of the Warriors who defend our nation and are, without question, an inspiration to their fellow Wounded Warriors who continue the long and difficult road of recovery.

More information is available online at http://www.theveteranscoalition.org/operation_denali/

Meet the team

**Matt Nyman, U.S. Army
Iraq 2005**



"I dream of climbing Denali. My whole life was the outdoors before my injury. My goal was to climb Mt. Rainier and [my injury] happened before I could do it. I wanted to follow it with Denali. When I trained for selection for Special Operations Command, I would run up to base camp at around 10,000 ft. It started at 7000 ft and I would do it with 30 to 60 lbs depending. My whole life I've hiked, camped, skied, and just about everything else you can do. In 2005, I was on a little bird helicopter in Iraq when we crashed. I was tossed into the rotor. It cut off my right leg below the knee, cut and crushed my left foot, compound femur fracture, and collapsed

lungs. All I have done is dreamed about climbing a big mountain and since I got hurt, it just made me want to do it even more to prove to myself I can overcome anything. I will do whatever it takes to do this expedition."

Jon Kuniholm, USMC
Haditha, Iraq 01 January 2005

“Before my injuries in Iraq, I was an engineer, spending my free time with my family, long distance running, and piloting an airplane. Following the loss of my right arm in Iraq on New Year's Day in 2005, the most basic of things became a challenge: writing my name, putting on a pair of pants in the morning, tying my shoes, cutting a steak. After putting up a ceiling fan that Spring with my 5 year old son, I realized that as long as I was patient enough, I could do whatever I wanted. By the end of the year, I was back doing many of the things I had before my injuries. I had also found a new calling in life. Realizing the deficiencies in arm prostheses, I had begun work as an engineer on the DARPA



Revolutionizing Prosthetics 2009 program, and started a non-profit called The Shared Design Alliance Open Prosthetics Project to address the lack of innovation in arm prosthetics. While my professional goal is to improve the technology amputees all over the world use to replace their arms, I have a new personal goal as well. People are incredibly resilient, and we are capable of doing nearly anything we set our minds to. People with disabilities have a greater set of challenges, and while the road may be longer and harder, have just as few limits to what we can achieve. Climbing Denali is a task that many able bodied folks would never undertake. By being part of a team tackling that task while sharing the additional challenges of disability, I hope to inspire others with similar challenges. I hope as well to remove the limits placed on their expectations of what they can achieve. This won't make getting dressed, eating, or anything else any easier, but it's my hope that it will make any challenge seem possible, and less of a chore to undertake.”

David Shebib, U.S. Army
Hawr Rajab, Iraq December 2006



“It has been over a year since I almost died in a road side bomb attack in Hawr Rajb, Iraq. My wounds were so severe most people would not have survived, with a severed carotid artery being the worst of a mile long list of other injuries. The doctors at Walter Reed thought the left side of my body would be paralyzed because of the stroke I had suffered from my injuries. After two weeks in ICU and a remarkable recovery, I am not paralyzed. I am not going to let my injuries prevent me from doing what I want to do in the future in the Army or in life. Once my recovery is finished, I plan on returning to full duty in the Army and taking on whatever life throws at me. I plan on summiting Denali in one year's time with fellow warriors wounded in Iraq. I believe it would be the ultimate challenge for disabled war veterans to summit Denali. It is a way of bringing us closure from the wounds of war and a starting point on the rest of our lives.”

Marc Hoffmeister, U.S. Army
Al Hillah, Iraq 22 April 2007

"It's been just over a year now since the IED strike ripped through my body and instantly changed my path. My body is still intact, sort of. Not all of my men were so lucky. But I'm no longer the man I once was. My left arm is titanium from wrist to elbow and then some. I lost 50% of the muscle mass in my arm and five inches of my ulnar nerve. I'll need more surgery in the future. I don't have feeling in my left arm, leg or several fingers and can't fully control its use. My brain has become adept at suppressing the pain. As time crawls by, I



struggle to rediscover my own ability. Slowly, I am gaining strength.

I won't be that casualty who forgets who he was or can't see what he can still be. After months of hospitalization, 8 surgeries, and the constant pain of therapy, I allowed my wounds to convince me the chance of climbing Denali was gone, but not anymore. I will climb this mountain to remember who I am and for the Wounded Warrior's like me, to shrug off the limits of perception formed within the scars of our wounds. If my fight to not be 'that wounded guy' can be an inspiration to another Warrior, then I don't want it to be a secret. And when I summit, I will have likeminded Warriors at my side because I know that I am not alone in this desire."