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## Iraq vets fight a war of perception



by Jason Moore  
Friday, January 16, 2009

ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- Before the sun reached the eastern slopes of Flattop Peak with the temperature hovering near zero, three climbers slogged toward the top.

They are not your average mountaineers.

A group of wounded Iraq veterans is preparing to climb Mount McKinley in June. (Scott Jensen/KTUU-TV)

"Our goal is to prove that we accept those changes in our lifestyle, but are able to move beyond them and still achieve those goals that we have in life," Maj. Marc Hoffmeister said.



Team leader Maj. Marc Hoffmeister was wounded by an IED. (Scott Jensen/KTUU-TV)

Their goal is not simply the peak of Flattop. The ultimate goal is behind them, rising over 20,000 feet above the Susitna Valley:

Mount McKinley.

They are a team of climbers facing more challenges than the rock and ice, the steep terrain and harsh weather.

The climbing season on Mount McKinley is still several months away, but if you're planning to climb now is the time prepare.



Jonathan Kuniholm lost part of his right arm and is pursuing a doctorate at Duke University. (Courtesy Duke University)

And that's what this group of six climbers is focusing on -- getting themselves ready physically and mentally.

They call their challenge Operation Denali. If it has a military ring to it, there's a reason for it. And the trials they face make many others pale in comparison.

Their obstacles come from within their own bodies, left marred by the war in Iraq.



Gayle Hoffmeister is Marc's wife and part of Operation Denali. (Scott Jensen/KTUU-TV)

"I was on foot and an IED (improvised explosive device) went off in my face," Spc. Dave Shebib said. "I severed my carotid artery, I have a scar on my retina, I have two teeth missing, a hole in my eardrum and obvious facial injuries."

The men are lucky to be alive, much less preparing to climb the continent's highest peak.

Of the four wounded warriors on the team, all are disabled.

An IED shredded team leader Hoffmeister's arm in 2007. He has no feeling in his forearm and fingers. A metal rod replaced his ulna bone. He wouldn't be able to feel the onset of frostbite.

"I've got a lot of metal in my arm now and it's very close to the



Spc. Dave Shebib was wounded when an IED exploded in his face. (Scott Jensen/KTUU-TV)

surface, so the fear is it kind of freezes from the inside out," he said.

So why climb McKinley? The answer for these disabled veterans is more complex than the common response -- because it's there.

"The question is about what perceptions do you live with, what is your perceived capability," Hoffmesiter said. "And anytime you face a limitation on your perception, that's something you can't move beyond. You can't accomplish a dream, a goal, or whatever if you don't believe you can do it."

On the other side of the country at Duke University in Durham, N.C., graduate student Jonathan Kuniholm works on his Ph.D. project -- perfecting prosthetic arms he hopes to use one day.

The former Marine lost his arm in an IED explosion in 2005.

"I've said before that we'll be done when we have something that's so good that somebody with two arms will want to cut one off to have one," he said. "And we're nowhere near that now, but I'd like to keep working on it."

Kuniholm joined the Denali expedition after getting an e-mail from Hoffmeister while at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

Hoffmeister's wife Gayle is also part of the team. For the couple, the climb serves as a way to return to their active lifestyle.

"I think about this climb every single day," she said. "Every single day there will be points of the day when I picture ourselves climbing and standing on top of the mountain and succeeding and getting through all those trying moments."

The team members train daily. In June they will set out for Denali. Only 52 percent of those who attempt the mountain reach the summit, and most climbers don't face the obstacles from within.

But this group of wounded warriors also knows a thing or two about overcoming odds.

"Not everyone knows how they're going to react at altitude, you don't know what kind of weather window you're going to get," Marc Hoffmeister said. "If those are the types of things that confront us and prevent us from climbing, we can deal with it. We'll go back at it another day. I've no intention of being unprepared physically or mentally. That won't be the reason we fail. In fact I don't feel we'll fail at all."

Along with training the group is in the process of raising money for its climb and planning all the logistics.

In December Kuniholm suffered a heart attack caused by a genetic condition, but he has still been cleared to make the attempt come June.

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