

Wounded warriors train to surmount Denali

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If things go as Maj. Marc Hoffmeister plans, a good portion of his next summer will be spent assaulting Mount McKinley. He knows it will be a challenge.

But Hoffmeister has become accustomed to challenges.

In April 2007, he was serving with the 4th Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, in Iraq when a roadside bomb ripped through his vehicle and shattered his body.

"My body is still intact, sort of. Not all of my men were so lucky," he wrote in an online article for the Web site dedicated to the McKinley mission.

He lost half the muscle mass and five inches of the ulnar nerve in his left arm. The arm is now titanium from wrist to elbow, and then some, and he will require more surgeries in the future.

"I don't have feeling in my left arm, leg or several fingers and can't fully control its use," he wrote. "As time crawls by, I struggle to rediscover my own ability. Slowly, I am gaining strength."

Hoffmeister is the team leader for a group of service members, all severely wounded in the Global War on Terrorism, as they plan and train to climb North America's highest peak.

They have dubbed the climb "Operation Denali 2009," and plan the ascent with three objectives:

- To raise awareness for the needs of severely injured service men and women.

- To work together to overcome their physical limitations and achieve a common goal made to seem insurmountable by the impact of their injuries on their lives.

- To demonstrate by performance and example that no obstacle is so great the human spirit cannot overcome it.

Their most recent training mission in preparation for the climb was a mountaineering course with the Alaska Mountaineering School in Talkeetna. The team spent 12 days on Pika Glacier in an area of Denali National Park known as "Little Switzerland."

The course included training on roped team movement on glaciers, winter camping, self arresting, crevasse rescues and other key skills needed for



photo by Maj. Marc Hoffmeister/Alaskan Command

The Operation Denali Team on the summit of Acropolis.

successful high altitude mountaineering, according to Hoffmeister, now the chief of Alaskan Command's J42 Engineering Division at Elmendorf Air Force Base.

Some highlights of the course included climbing a class 5.8 rock pitch and summiting Acropolis, a Class 4 peak near the glacier. Climbs are rated numerically to indicate their steepness and technical difficulty to ascend. Classes greater than a 5 require ropes and protection to scale.

The team members faced not only the normal obstacles like weather and technical climbs, but also how to deal with limitations caused by their injuries.

Sgt. 1st Class Matt Nyman's struggle was learning to use crampons and snowshoes on his prosthetic leg. Nyman was injured in Iraq in 2005 in a helicopter crash.

"I was tossed into the rotor," he wrote on the Operation Denali Web site, www.theveteranscoalition.org/operation_denali. His right leg was cut off below the knee, his left foot was cut and crushed, and he also received a compound femur fracture and collapsed lungs.

"I dream of climbing Denali. My whole life was the outdoors before my injury," he wrote. "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."

Marine Capt. Jon Kuniholm lost his right arm in Iraq on New Year's Day in 2005. He now faces an arduous climb using one good hand to manipulate various technical pieces of climbing gear.

Kuniholm wrote his injury has filled his life with challenge and a new calling.

"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," he wrote. "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," Kuniholm wrote. "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."

He said his professional goal is to improve the technology amputees worldwide use to replace missing limbs. Personally, he said he hopes to prove

people with disabilities can do far more than they or others may believe.

"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," Kuniholm wrote. "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."

A December 2006 roadside bomb almost killed Spc. David Shebib, then with the 4-25th.

"My wounds were so severe the average person would not have survived, with a severed carotid artery being the worst of a mile-long list of other injuries," Shebib wrote. "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."

Now with Fort Richardson's Warrior Transition Unit, Shebib must deal with bright sunlight reflecting from the ice and snow onto his sensitive scar tissue during the training and the impending climb.

"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," he wrote. "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," Shebib said.

A concert designed to pay tribute to wounded warriors, help promote "Operation Denali" and encourage individual and business support for the project is scheduled for 7 p.m. Wednesday at the University of Alaska Anchorage's Wendy Williamson Auditorium.

For more information about Operation Denali, visit www.theveteranscoalition.org/operation_denali.