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At War

Notes From the Front Lines

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Climbing the World's Highest Mountains to Honor Heroes

By BRANDON LINGLE

Our wars hit home for me when my childhood buddy, Capt. Derek Argel, died with four other airmen in a small-plane crash near Diyala, Iraq, on Memorial Day 2005. Derek and his Air Force Academy classmate Jeremy Fresques were promoted to captain just before boarding that airplane.

Before Derek's death, I had no understanding of the real costs of war, no way to connect with the immense human suffering we create. And, since 2005, I've felt the shock waves of Derek's death continue to affect families, friends and me.

I've seen how Derek's widow, Wendy, and son, Logan, now 8, continue to honor his memory. Recently, they placed wreaths on gravestones at Arlington National Cemetery.

I've watched Derek's mom, Deb, embrace the tragic title of Gold Star Mother, travel to Iraq, lead countless fund-raisers for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, write a book and persevere.

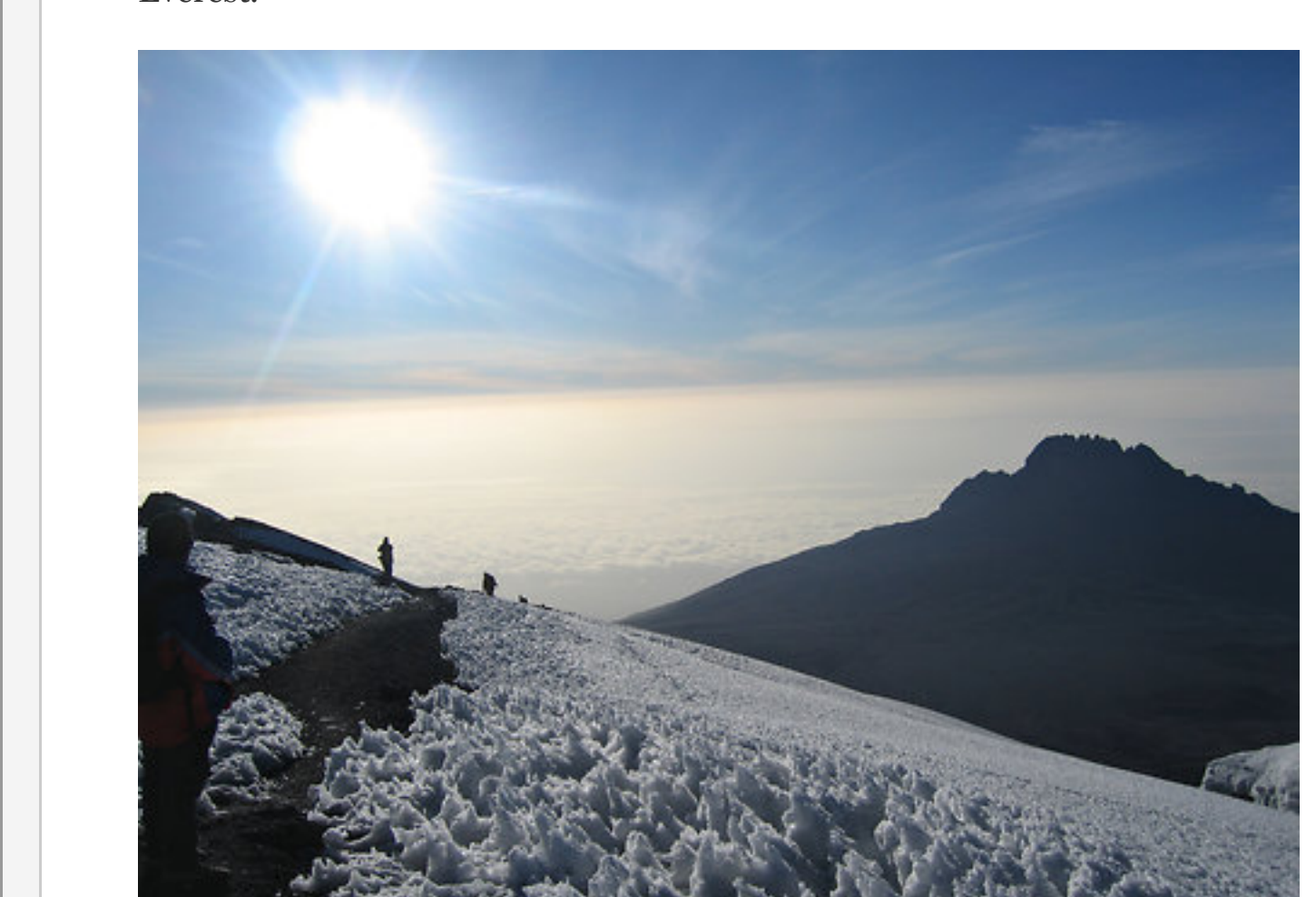
I've tracked myriad tributes to Derek, Jeremy and their teammates: Maj. William Downs, Staff Sgt. Casey Crate and an Iraqi Air Force captain, Ali Abass.

Since 2009, a group of Air Force special operators have trekked across the country in honor of their lost brethren.

Last year, a fellow Academy graduate deployed to Baghdad dedicated a CrossFit workout to Jeremy and Derek.

And, right now, another of Derek and Jeremy's Academy classmates, Maj. Rob Marshall of the Air Force, continues to honor the fallen with the Air Force's 7 Summits Challenge, a quest to lead a team of airmen to the summit of each continent's highest peak. In April, Major Marshall, a 34-year-old special operations pilot with multiple combat deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan, will lead his team on their most impressive mission to date — an attempt to scale Mount Everest.

With a successful summit of Everest, the group would make history as the first military team to climb each continent's highest mountain and the first United States military team to conquer Everest.



The snowfields of Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro's summit in 2006.

Major Marshall, a Mercer Island, Wash., native and a longtime mountaineer — who bagged 27 peaks as an Air Force Academy cadet — first considered an Everest attempt while visiting the mountain's base camp in 2001 shortly after graduating from the academy.

"I had this strong intuition that I needed to come back and climb Everest one day," he said. "But, it needed to be for a reason bigger than just personal conquest."

The reasons came in 2005 when an Air Force MC-130, call sign Wrath 11, crashed in the Albanian mountains, killing nine, including several of Major Marshall's friends. Jeremy and Derek died in Iraq two months after that.

The losses drove Major Marshall to find a way to help his fallen friends' families. "Remember walking around a track to raise money for your school or charity?" he said. "Well, I decided to take it vertical. For every thousand feet we climbed, we'd ask people to donate to the college education of these kids."



Capt. Graydon Muller, left, and Capt. Rob Marshall display the U.S. Air Force flag from Antarctica's highest peak, Mount Vinson, in 2010.

So, the 7 Summits Challenge was born, and to date the team has successfully tackled six of the summits — Mount Elbrus in Russia, Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Mount Aconcagua in Argentina, Mount McKinley in Alaska, Mount Vinson in Antarctica and Mount Kosciuszko in Australia — and countless others in training. Team members mark their accomplishment with memorial push-ups, in honor of their fallen friends, on each summit.

About 25 men and women have climbed with the team since the challenge began, and they've raised more than \$60,000 for the military charities like the Special Operations Warrior Foundation and the That Others May Live Foundation.

Though not financed or officially sanctioned by the Air Force, the military has been generally supportive of the team, thanks to its intense planning and risk-mitigation process, said Major Marshall, who is currently stationed in Amarillo, Tex.

"Mountains are excellent leadership laboratories," he said. "We get to work in small teams in extreme conditions. Climbing takes a combination of leading and following to survive together."

But sometimes the military and climbing worlds have collided. "I was on Mount McKinley 24 hours from summiting when my unit told me via satellite phone that I needed to return immediately for a deployment," he said. "Had to leave my team and haul ass back to base."

With luck, the realities of military life won't hinder the chance to stand on the roof of the world for the airmen who have committed to the Everest summit attempt and are training at their bases across the country. The following people are also on the Everest team:

- Capt. Andrew Ackles, 29, a TH-1N instructor pilot, from Ashland, Ore., stationed at Fort Rucker, Ala.
- Capt. Marshall Klitzke, 30, a KC-135R pilot from Lemmon, S.D., currently an instructor pilot at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.
- Capt. Colin Merrin, 28, a GPS satellite operations mission commander from Santee, Calif., stationed at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo.
- Staff Sgt. Nick Gibson, 36, a reserve pararescueman and physician-assistant student from Gulf Breeze, Fla., stationed at Patrick Air Force Base, Fla.

"Several wounded warriors and supporters also plan to trek with us to Everest base camp this spring," Major Marshall said.

"Climbing these peaks is my way to deal with the pain and sadness that sits in my stomach from the losses of friends and colleagues," he said. "I use physical exertion and time outside as my way to blast depression and sadness. After just a day hiking trails on the outskirts of town, I come home refreshed, re-energized, and looking forward to getting things done. If it wasn't for this, I think the bad experiences would get the best of me. I hope that through this challenge we can help other military members use the outdoors and adventure sports to improve their emotional health."



A climb up Argentina's Mount Aconcagua in 2007.

With each day, the goal of climbing Mount Everest inches one step closer for Major Marshall and his team. And, just as each day marks a step toward Earth's highest point for this group of airmen, so too does it mark some kind of step toward solace or understanding for those close to the lost.

Perhaps George Mallory, a veteran of World War I's Battle of the Somme and an English mountaineer who was key to some of the earliest Everest expeditions, captures this sentiment best: "So, if you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward and forever upward, then you won't see why we go."

I'm confident that Derek would have agreed.

Brandon Lingle served in Iraq and Afghanistan as a public affairs officer. His nonfiction was noted in "The Best American Essays 2010," and he is an author of War, Literature & the Arts, published by the United States Air Force Academy. He is an active-duty Air Force major stationed at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. You can follow him on Twitter. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Air Force, Department of Defense or United States government.

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