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THE SUMMIT

AF team makes history conquering peaks of each continent

[STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON](#)

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5 September 2013



Members of the U.S. Air Force climbed Mount Kosciuszko, the highest peak on the Australian continent and the sixth peak of their U.S. Air Force Seven Summits Challenge. They are joined by members of the Australian Defense Force.

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The mountain the Tibetans call the "Goddess of the World" almost seems to take it personally when climbers attempt to reach its summit. Along with freezing temperatures and altitudes not meant for human life, Mount Everest throws in avalanches and falling ice.

Once climbers reach 26,000 feet, they must fight through exhaustion, extreme cold and lack of oxygen. Those who collapse in the "death zone" and are unable to walk on their own are usually left behind.

"When you're climbing a mountain, it's such a personal endeavor that you're constantly having to overcome your own personal limitations and weaknesses," said Capt. Marshall Klitzke, an instructor pilot at the U.S. Air Force Academy and a part of the six-member U.S. Air Force Seven Summits Challenge Team that reached the top of Everest in May. "It becomes almost like a personal vendetta between you and the mountain because the mountain is throwing challenges at you with the rock, slope, weather and whatever else it's throwing at you. You end up going to battle with the mountain every day."

When the team unfurled the U.S. and Air Force flags on the top of Everest just after sunrise May 19, it became the first military team from any nation to reach the summit of the highest mountain on each continent. The team, made up of Airmen, isn't sponsored or endorsed by the Air Force or Department of Defense, but the members used their military training throughout the challenge to make safe risk management decisions and look out for each other, while avoiding slower and less experienced climbers they call "zombies." Everest was the last of the seven summits the team conquered in the past eight years.

In 2005, Maj. Rob Marshall and Maj. Mark Uberuaga, then lieutenants, were planning to climb Mount Elbrus in Russia, the highest peak in Europe. But personal tragedy inspired Marshall to plan a more ambitious mountaineering project. An Air Force Special Operations Command MC-130H Talon II crashed in Albania, killing nine crew members, including several of Marshall's close friends. Not long after that tragedy, two of his former U.S. Air Force Academy classmates were killed in a crash in Iraq. Marshall and Uberuaga dedicated the climb to their friends and committed to climb the highest summit on each continent to raise funds and awareness for organizations like the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, which offers full scholarships and counseling for children of special operations members who die on duty.

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U.S. Air Force Seven Summits Challenge team members hike through thick fog during the first day of their climb of Mount Kilimanjaro.

The team followed with summits on Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro in 2006, South America's Mount Aconcagua in 2007, Mount McKinley in North America in 2008, Mount Vinson in Antarctica in 2010, and Australia's Mount Kosciuszko in 2011, before they scaled Mount Everest's 29,035 feet this year. On each summit, Marshall completed push-ups as a tribute to his fallen friends and other Airmen who died during their service and as a testament to Air Force physical fitness. The only exception was during his climb of Mount McKinley, when he was called back for a deployment to Iraq before he reached the summit.

The team quickly earned a reputation among the multitude of climbers on Everest for its cohesion and speed. The members worked on the philosophy that the faster they moved, the less time they would spend exposed to some of the most dangerous elements in areas like the Khumbu Icefall. The icefall, located at about 18,000 feet, not far above the base camp, can send large towers of ice, ranging in size from a car to a large house, tumbling down from a glacier. Other teams remarked that they thought the Air Force climbers were moving too fast. But this strategy was even more crucial once the climbers reached the mountain's highest elevations. Climbers who take too much time in the death zone usually don't reach the summit and sometimes don't come back at all.

"It's a very fine line between speed and safety and exposure to the death zone," said Marshall, a CV-22 Osprey acceptance test pilot at Bell Helicopter in Amarillo, Texas. "It can make the difference between a successful summit, not reaching the summit or dying.

"By being fast on the lower parts of the mountain from base camp all the way to Camp Four, we were blowing away all of the estimated speed times," he said. "We would do it so much faster than they expected, which was great because that would minimize our exposure to the icefall."

Marshall said the team also ate breakfast earlier than normal to increase their calorie intake, which allowed them to rest longer.



Then-Capt. Mark Uberuaga serves up dinner at a base camp on Mount McKinley.

"That was a huge advantage for us because everybody on our team probably got a little more rest than the average climber," he said. "By the time we got to 26,000 feet, we knew that instead of daylight and weather being an issue, we would have a limited amount of oxygen, and the amount of time we would spend at 26,000 feet would be directly tied to how safe we are."

Marshall explained that when a climber reaches that height, it's similar to an astronaut walking in space or a diver descending deep into the ocean, all environments where humans were never meant to be.

"It makes you acutely aware of the risks involved and the tools you need to mitigate those risks," he said.

However, the closer the team got to the summit, the more the climbers learned that safety wasn't just a matter of good risk management decisions and wingmanship. They also had to find a way to avoid getting stalled behind the slower and lesser experienced climbers, especially near the dangerous Hillary Step, which has a tendency to get crowded.

"The crowds at Everest get worse every year, and you don't want to get stuck behind climbers who are slow and dangerous," Marshall said. "Do we stay behind the zombies and risk getting cold, burning up a bunch of our oxygen and end up spending more time on the mountain, or do we unclip from our ropes and pass these guys? Our team made the risk assessment that it was better to go faster, unclip from the safety rope and get around these people and move. So we were able to get up to the summit before the zombies did and get back down to the Hillary Step before they jammed it up and blocked it."

An overwhelming majority of the more than 200 climbers who died while trying to conquer Mount Everest succumbed in the death zone. Although there has been a major recovery effort in recent years, many corpses remain on the mountain.

Mount Everest's allure is also perhaps the greatest danger to those who are attracted to its challenge. Climbers often get what Marshall calls "summit fever," and are so consumed by reaching the top that they put their lives in jeopardy. Team members were convinced they could help each other not make that mistake, no matter how badly they wanted to reach Everest's summit.

In fact, two of the team's climbers were forced to turn back before reaching the summit. Capt. Colin Merrin was fighting illness, and Staff Sgt. Nick Gibson had major frostbite concerns, which were aggravated when he became stalled behind a group of slower climbers.



Maj. Rob Marshall crosses a crevasse on the way to camp 2, as Capt. Ackles looks on.

"In the military, we are an organization of men and women who volunteer to essentially sacrifice our lives for others and for our country," said Gibson, a Reserve pararescueman at Patrick Air Force Base, Fla. "If there's anything you learn from that, it's that there are things worth risking your life for and there are things that are not. With Everest, there were many objectives with this climb and other climbs in the Seven Summits that we accomplished, whether I reached the summit or not. I made the decision that it was not worth my toes and not worth my life, and I'd accomplished everything else I set out to do. I knew in my heart that I did not come to this mountain to define myself."

Gibson and Merrin took solace in the fact that they'd already helped the team meet its goals despite not joining their four teammates on the summit at sunrise. When Merrin made his decision, Marshall pointed to a somber sight to convince him that he'd made the right choice.

"When Capt. Merrin made his decision to turn around, he was at a little ledge, and I'd noticed a downed climber on the way up right before he stopped," Marshall said. "He was obviously upset about having to turn around, but I pointed at the frozen body about 15 feet from us – legs curled up in a ball and sticking out of the ice. I told him... that person had the choice to turn around and clearly made the wrong decision. You, my friend, are turning around and making the right decision.' I don't think there could be a more powerful reminder of the risks that are involved and the importance of making right decisions.

"Being the leader of the team, I wanted all six to make it up. As much as it pained me, I was also terribly proud because they were overcoming summit fever with the coherent thought that they needed to turn around to save their lives," he said. "So there were conflicting emotions of pride and pain because throughout the last 45 days, we were the strongest team on the mountain, and with all of my heart, I wanted to see all six of us on the top."

Now that the team, which also included Capt. Andrew Ackles, a TH-1N Iroquois instructor pilot at Fort Rucker, Ala., and Capt. Kyle Martin, an F-16 Fighting Falcon pilot at Langley Air Force Base, Va., has conquered each continent's "Everest," the goals now shift toward using their love of mountaineering to help other Airmen. Marshall calls mountains "excellent leadership laboratories" and wants to give the experience to fellow Airmen wounded on duty or who might be dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder or other illness or injury.

Since completing the summit challenge with Everest, Marshall and Uberuaga took a group on a climb of Mount Rainier in Washington and hope there is more to come in the next year.

"After eight years of climbing the world on some of the most difficult peaks on the planet, we decided to make it more accessible to the average Airman," Marshall said. "We call it the healing powers of mountains. Everybody who has come on one of our climbs in the past eight years talks about how it's changed their lives. Now we want to share that with people who may have no background in mountaineering. The idea is Airmen helping Airmen overcome personal obstacles."



Then-Capt. Mark Uberuaga descends Mount McKinley after successfully reaching the summit.

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