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Denali climbers hope to highlight importance of proactive resilience

By Bo Joyner, Headquarters Air Force Reserve Command / Published May 18, 2021



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Lt. Col. Rob Marshall, an individual mobilization augmentee assigned to U.S. Space Command who is currently on full-time orders with the Air Reserve Personnel Center at Air Force Base, Colorado, will be leading the 20,310-foot climb up Denali in Alaska beginning May 29. Marshall is hoping the climb will put a spotlight on the importance of resilience. (Courtesy photo)

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ROBINS AIR FORCE BASE, Ga. --

Five current and former Airmen - including two Air Force Reservists - who are planning to scale the highest mountain peak in North America beginning later this month, are hoping their expedition will put a spotlight on the importance of proactive resilience.

Lt. Col. Rob Marshall, an individual mobilization augmentee assigned to U.S. Space Operations Command who is currently on full-time orders with the Air Reserve Personnel Center at Buckley Air Force Base, Colorado, will be leading the 20,310-foot climb up Denali in Alaska beginning May 29.

Also on the climb will be active-duty Lt. Col. Mark Uberuaga, traditional Reservist Maj. Marshall Klitzke and former Airmen Mark Schaffeld and Wesley Morgan.

"It's going to be a difficult climb, so we formed a group of highly qualified mountaineers, but we also wanted several Airmen who have overcome significant personal hardships because we want to use their stories to highlight how important it is for people to practice being actively resilient," Marshall said.

An experienced mountaineer who has scaled many of the world's highest peaks, Marshall said climbing helps him deal with the problems in life he is currently going through, but it also helps him be better prepared for any difficulties that may come in the future.

"I was into mountain climbing as a hobby when I was young, but I didn't realize it was resiliency related until 2005," he said. "I was a young captain in my 20s and I was on a special operations mission in Albania when our sister ship crashed into a mountain range and killed all nine Airmen on board. That was my first real close experience with death and losing friends I worked with on a daily basis. I became depressed and needed to find a way to process the pain I was going through."

Marshall said his first response was to turn to alcohol to deal with the loss. When that didn't work, he looked to the mountains.

"I was really at a low point, so I turned to mountaineering because that was my happy place," he said. "I turned to my community because I had friends who liked to mountaineer and it took my mind off the pain, but it also helped me process the pain. We talked about the loss while we were hiking and mountaineering. I found it helped me process it way better than drinking beer with the guys in the bar."

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The lieutenant colonel said that as he continued to climb and spend time in nature in the years that followed, he felt his resilience grow.

"What's cool about mountaineering for me is it hits all four pillars of comprehensive Airman fitness," he said. "Obviously, it's extremely challenging physically. Socially, it's such an amazing experience because you're spending days, if not weeks, with other people and you develop deep, lifelong bonds. It's mentally stimulating - there is risk management happening all the time and route finding and managing days of food and planning out schedules. It takes tremendous mental fortitude. And finally, nature is my church. That's where I feel closest to God, to spirit, to perfection. Watching the sun rise or the sun set from these high mountains just fills up my spiritual bucket."

Marshall said this climb up Denali is especially significant for him because the last time he tried to reach this summit, he didn't quite make it.

"I tried to climb Denali back in 2009 and the military recalled me when I was one day from the summit," he said. "I got the call saying they needed me right now for the first combat deployment of the CV-22 Osprey to Iraq. When I said I'll summit tomorrow and leave right after that, they said no, we need you right now. So while I was on a plane leaving the glacier, my team was reaching the summit."

Marshall said this climb is also special because of a new physical challenge he will be trying to overcome.

"About a month and a half ago, the Air Force diagnosed me with two torn meniscus in my left knee," he said. "I tore them skiing and the surgeon is already talking about a possible knee replacement after I'm done with Denali. It's going to be super challenging, but we want to show people that they can overcome challenges if they have already worked on building up their resilience."

Marshall isn't the only climber who will be dealing with physical issues during the Denali climb.

Uberuaga recently survived a major infection in his spine that resulted in the removal of two of his vertebrae. He had spinal reconstruction surgery in December.

"Training for Denali helped me and my caregivers set and achieve challenging goals instead of settling for a life of mediocrity," he said. "Outdoor adventure sports provide me the best form of my creative expression and I find an abundance of energy when considering and executing trips into the mountains."

Schaffeld, who is currently employed as a social worker with the Boise Veterans Administration Medical Center, said mountaineering has helped him overcome the traumatic brain injury he suffered while serving as a security forces Airman in the late 1980s.

"Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, the outdoors have always been a source of adventure and healing for me," he said. "I credit my work as a seasonal park ranger, exploring the backcountry of Crater Lake, Sequoia/Kings Canyon and Olympic National Park as a significant part of my healing/recovery process."

Marshall said the team is going to be doing something unique during this Denali expedition.

"We're going to do the normal Denali climb, called the West Buttress, to about 14,000 feet," he said. "From there, we're going to take a more difficult route, called the Upper West Rib, for the final 6,000 vertical feet. The plan is to leave most of our gear at 14,000 feet and climb the last 6,000 feet and ski back down to our camp, all in one day. That last day is going to be extremely challenging, but we think there is value in trying something harder than average."

While Marshall said he is looking forward to the climb because it will help him strengthen his own resiliency, he is hoping this expedition will inspire other Airmen.

"The more I mountaineer, I feel like the more prepared I am for unexpected problems or even traumatic stress," he said. "It may not be mountains for you, but knowing you have a community or place on Earth you can go to when tragedy strikes or you are really having a tough time, that's your resilience safe haven. We want to inspire Airmen to get in touch with what makes them feel resilient and then get out and do it. That's active resiliency."

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