

Awareness and Service

PA Student Prepares for Mount Everest

NO MILITARY AND NO MEDICINE. This is what I told myself while in high school, the child of two military medical parents, as I pondered my future. While I admit my paradigm was shifted significantly by the events of 9/11, I have no regrets about changing my path. Now, as a physician assistant student, I have found my calling to serve as a civilian PA, partnered with my military service. It wasn't until recently that a long-time dream of mine finally came into fruition in the form of Mount Everest. It came by the way of the USAF Seven Summits Challenge team, a group of airmen who have been coming together for nearly a decade to scale mountains, hoping to provide perspective to others and for others. While the team is unofficial and neither sanctioned nor funded by the U.S. Department of Defense or the Air Force, it is a collection of Air Force service members who want to show what airmen are capable of accomplishing.

The Mount Everest climb is a culmination of the endeavor of a couple of active duty Air Force airmen (pilots) who decided to climb the highest points on all seven continents as a way to motivate and inspire—through their actions—airmen and those who aspire to join the Air Force. While I have kept in contact with them over the past few years, my deployment and work schedule have kept me from joining the airmen in climbs, until now.

I am a pararescuer, or “PJ,” and my role on the mountain will parallel my role in the Air Force. I will help medically treat the other team members as well as climb the mountain myself. Most of the other team members are Air Force pilots, and the primary role of an Air Force PJ is the rescue/recovery of downed and injured aircrew and special operations forces members in austere and non-permissive environments. We are combat search-and-rescue specialists. This means we train to rescue/recover personnel or equipment from any environment, whether it's the ocean, desert, arctic or a remote mountain. I regularly train for mountain rescue, so I feel ready to begin preparation for this Everest climb. Spending three years with the 212th Rescue Squadron in the Alaska Air National Guard played a significant role in deciding to attempt this climb. There are PJs in that unit that can out-climb me any day of the week and they became an inspiration for me to up my skills in the mountains.

To prepare, I am dedicating time each week to work on my rope skills, such as handling, knots and rescue system setups. I am also changing my workout routine to include elevation change, such as regularly summit-



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ing Stone Mountain in Georgia and adding a pack with weight. I am receiving training at CrossFitRx here in Atlanta to increase my core strength and functional agility. The team is discussing a training climb, such as a winter ascent of Mount Rainier, to develop team cohesiveness and coordination while spending time in some altitude. A large part of our efforts in the immediate future will be dedicated to fund-raising for the climb and for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, an organization that helps support the families of fallen military members and provides assistance to severely wounded warriors.

My personal goals for this climb are twofold. First, I would like to coordinate with the Everest ER at base camp to help facilitate the use of PAs at altitude as medical providers. Second, as a combat veteran of both Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the PA student representative for the Veterans Caucus of AAPA, I hope to use this climb to raise awareness of veterans' health issues that most civilian PAs will be facing as practitioners. We are on the brink of a major influx of veterans with physical and mental health issues that both

military and civilian providers need to be prepared to handle.

For more information about the USAF Seven Summits Challenge team or to donate to the Special Operations Warrior Foundation and help fund the Mount Everest climb, please visit their website, www.usaf7summits.com. **PA**

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