

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH ARMY LIEUTENANT COLONEL
MARC HOFFMEISTER SUBJECT: ADVENTURER OF THE YEAR SELECTION BY NATIONAL
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MODERATOR: We're here with AW2 soldier, Lieutenant Colonel Marc
Hoffmeister, hopefully, I pronounced that correctly and he's going to
discuss with us, he was recently recognized by the National Geographic as
one of the adventurers of the year this year for his participation in
Operation Denali.

And I'm going to give the floor to you, sir. If you have any
opening remarks or comments you'd like to make or just give us an overall
view of your participation in the operation. And from there we'll take
any questions.

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: Good morning from Alaska. Good afternoon
to you all.

MODERATOR: Good morning. LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: I appreciate
the opportunity to share the story. I've had a lot of opportunities
through a couple of different outlets to try and spread the word and
that's really been one of the major objectives of what we did and the
National Geographic recognition kind of really extended that to a
national scale.

So I'm not really sure who I have on the line or what your
agendas are, but I'm really open to discussing whatever direction you
want to go in and I can give you the whole story or it's probably easier
if you just point me in the direction of what your interests are.

OPERATOR: Okay. Dale with Military Avenue, would you like to
begin with questions?

Q You bet, and Dale at Military Avenue. Thanks for the
opportunity and thank you for serving, first of all. It's an incredible
story. Our web site works with military families during deployment and
one thing that struck us was your spouse. It was said in the story or
mentioned that -- (inaudible) -- without you and you said no way.

So what is something military spouses should keep in mind in
order to help their soldier during the mental and physical healing

process? What is something that you would suggest those spouses to keep in mind?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: I think that the role of the military spouse and a recovering soldier, recovering wounded warrior is absolutely essential because the spouse provides something, a degree of intimacy, excuse me, of care that no one else can really provide and our medical system just isn't resourced to do to begin with.

Because of that, they have the ability to really motivate the soldier to continue the recovery process. They can almost -- because of their close relationship and their third party perspective, they can push a wounded trooper a little beyond what may be that individual thinks they can do.

I'm a perfect case of that. It's pretty easy to wallow in your wounds, I guess, would be a good term and kind of hang out and just take too long when you can really start recovering often a lot earlier with the support of your family.

Another area that's huge is medication. Medication is a challenge, I think, in the military medical community because we almost over-medicate our guys like you've got to take a pill for everything that hurts. And my wife was instrumental in helping me to very quickly limit the amount of meds that I really needed to narrow it down and to help me and analyze it where I was at.

I couldn't have done my recovery without her efforts for sure.
Q All right. Thank you.

OPERATOR: And Jesse, do you have any questions?

Q Not so far, I don't.

OPERATOR: Okay. Well, in terms of, I'm sorry, this is Ashley once again, in terms of actually getting in Operation Denali, like, how exactly was the program? I know I read about it online and we had a lot of questions on our fan page, Facebook, about how you all chose or decided who would go participate in Operation Denali.

Could you shed some light on that for us?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: Sure. You know, the brainchild -- I blamed my wife initially on getting the whole concept started because she did lay down the gauntlet and said she was climbing it and it wasn't really an invitation. She just kind of told me. And it required me to kind of step to the plate and face my fears. And what that really did with me personally is it kind of triggered the thought that if I feel that way, if I'm nervous about my own abilities given my wounds to achieve this and I'm hesitant to kind of come out of my shell and resume my life, then there's a lot of other guys out there that probably felt the same way. And this was a great opportunity to try and bring them onboard, give them an opportunity as well.

So that's where the initial idea of doing Operation Denali came from, you know, I wanted to do this with other wounded soldiers and share in the challenge and the experience and the teamwork.

The process of figuring out who was going to be on the team and climb was significantly challenging because our guys are so motivated to go above and beyond and it's so hard to say no to a guy that is motivated that way.

I put out feelers through a lot of different routes, a lot of non-profit organizations to help wounded warriors, but I think the most response I got was through one of the liaisons for one of the Army Wounded Warrior program at Walter Reed. I believe his name is Mike Hamm and he had a general distribute list of several -- of a large number of amputees that had passed through Walter Reed and I contacted him about the program and he pushed it out, pushed out the invite to everyone and I got a pile of responses from people who hadn't climbed even the smallest hill and were ready to take on Denali.

So I went through and I called every one of them, I went through and kind of rated everybody based upon, you know, where they were in their recovery, the nature of their injuries because I wanted to balance out the team so we could support each others' disabilities. And then would really talk to them about what their motivations were and what this was going to do for them and then I narrowed it down to the guys that made the team eventually and I've actually stayed in contact with a large number of the guys who I couldn't bring on the climb and have been able to link them up with other organizations doing similar projects and have gotten a couple of them climbing up there as well.

Its been a very interesting process.

MODERATOR: Dan, do you have any other questions?

Q Let's see. You mentioned you got in touch with a gentleman out at Walter Reed. Can you give me what you think his name again please?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: I think it was Mike Hamm. I have to go back through the e-mails and stuff to make sure I have the right guy, but I'm pretty sure that was the name.

Q Mike Ham, H-A-M?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: Two M's, I believe.

Q Do you plan another -- how did you find out from National Geographic that you were being given this honor?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: Almost indirectly. They called me in, I guess, October or so of last year and told me that they wanted to do kind of a 700-word article on the climb and then I was going to get contacted by a writer and by a photographer in order to gather the necessary information. And so we went through the process, Dave Roberts wrote the

article and he interviewed me and I gave him all the necessary information and then Matt Haig, a photographer from up here came up and got a hold of me and we did some shots. But never in any of that discussion did anyone even mention that this was for an Adventurer of the Year contest or recognition or anything like that until National Geographic did some follow up on the pictures and some of the scheduling and the person who was coordinating said, oh, by the way, congratulations on being selected. I'm like, I'm being what? It was a total surprise, total shock and very exciting.

I went back and I hadn't really been familiar with the program and looked at last year's winner and was blown away to even be considered ranked amongst those guys, amongst the quality of people that were recognized last year.

So that's kind of how it started and the follow-on Reader's Choice Award was a whole -- another chapter because they decided to take the ten initial winners and then offered up to, you know, the nation to choose from amongst the ten who they thought would be the Reader's Choice Award winner and that set off several months of -- a flurry of e-mails to let people know about the voting and then watching the numbers change as the date and January came to end the voting.

MODERATOR: Thank you. I have another question. In terms -- the climb itself, could you, I guess, talk about how you and your other team members incorporated some of your, well, not some of it, I'm pretty sure a lot of your military background with your, I guess, what you had to learn or what you already knew about outdoors and actually having to make that big of a climb?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: In mountaineering and glacial traverse is a small team type thing and it's the direct parallel to what we're doing in the military, so it's almost like a natural progression, the way that you have to check your gear and you have to be proficient in the tasks of how you tie this knot. What do you do if this event happens? It's almost the same exact thing as you do in the military. We train battle drills on how you react to enemy contact or how you react to an IED. And the team in mountaineering does the same exact thing, how do you react if you have an avalanche? How do you react if somebody, someone falls in a crevice?

So that translation made things a lot easier for Team Dynamics, I think, in terms of the way we quickly formed and figured out who was good at what and how we could balance out the team to be the most effective performers.

We had a civilian guide, we had civilian guides that helped us with this, with the climb, Kirby Senden, who was our lead guide and this was actually the 20th time he's been on the mountain, he summited it 11 times.

So he's got a lot of experience on the mountain and his comment about us, I mean, he loved guiding us because he just had to generally say, okay, this is the timeline, this is what needs to happen and it just

happened because of that translation of military discipline to the requirements of glacial traversing and high altitude mountaineering.

MODERATOR: Great. Thank you. Now, are there any other questions on the line?

Q I have a question, Mark. This is Jesse from Army Social Media. I was reading the story on army.mil and it mentioned that you have a lot of stuff on your bucket list and I was wondering do you want to do more of these climbs or can you talk about what's on that list for you?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: My list never ends, I guess, there's a hole in my bucket because I keep adding more. Well, I'm scheduled for deployment coming up again, so that's the near-term focus. You never really know how things are going to shape up until after that obstacle is over. But what we would hope to do, our goal is to try and do a climb in Argentina in 2012, very similar to what we did with Operation Denali and pull together some wounded warriors and do the same thing and climb Aconcagua, which is a 22,000-foot peak down there.

So that's -- in terms of the climbing realm, that's a goal. It would be nice to try and get to climb all seven of the summits, the highest summits, one in every continent, but some of those are pretty cost-prohibitive, so I don't know if that will happen. But you never know what life will deal you.

I've gotten involved because of this climb, I've gotten to know a lot of folks in the mountaineering community and I really enjoy, I enjoy the niche and I enjoy doing it. It would be great to be able to develop my own skills enough to become a certified international mountain guide and then take that skill set and maybe just do this consistently and help in rehabilitative programs with other wounded warriors, teach them to climb and getting them up mountains.

Q Thanks.

MODERATOR: Another question from Ashley again. Before you decided to do Operation Denali, were you participating or involved in any other Wounded Warrior activities?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: I had done a soldier ride with the Wounded Warrior program and that was the only real activity that I had the opportunity to do. When I was wounded, we were still standing up the warrior transition units. That was pretty much an in-progress thing. So when I finally got out of the hospitals and when I finished home care, our brigade was having some issues with the leadership of our brigade's rear detachment. So my brigade commander called me even before I was off convalescent leave and asked me to take command of the leave.

So what really happened with me is I came off of convalescence leave and went right into the command and was taking care of around 300 guys, about two-thirds of which were, you know, wounded like myself and then taking care of all the rear detachment challenges with a brigade

that's forward deployed in Iraq at the time, which when I look back at was a wonderful opportunity because it gave me -- it made me recognize the role that I could play with my fellow wounded because of my rank and position that actually, I could achieve things that some of the junior enlisted couldn't. And I could call bull on the younger soldiers who were going through the process because I had been there and experienced it and knew what was going on in terms of being wounded in the recovery process.

That sympathetic understanding, I think, made me more effective in trying to do my job as a rear commander and it also set the conditions to try and go on to building things like Operation Denali. MODERATOR: Thank you. Are there any other questions or has anyone else joined the line since we started?

Q I have a question.

MODERATOR: Okay.

Q This is Dale Kissinger from Militaryavenue.com again.

Another question we had from one of our users was at any point did you want to quit? And if so, what kept you going? Was there faith? Was it the challenge of your wife?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: I think almost everyone when they enter any type of hardship has those passing doubts and has those desires, you know, the thought of why am I doing this because it really sucks and everything hurts and it's cold and I'm not really enjoying it. So why am I doing this? And I think probably the biggest way that I regularly overcame that and continue to overcome it is remembering how fleeting life is because, if anything, being wounded reminds me of that. And those periods of hardship and those periods of challenge, they're just as fleeting. So if you can always keep the perspective that all you got to do is last a little bit longer, just suck it up and drive on and an hour from now, the weather will be different, you know, or tomorrow, the pack will be lighter. The blister will be better or whatever. It's all a matter of the perspective.

It's when you allow what I'd call a defeatist mentality, I guess, to kind of creep in there and make you believe that nothing is ever going to change, that this is going to be -- your conditioned for the rest of the time. That's when you end up quitting.

And I think that's reinforced also with the entire team because we all -- everybody goes through those periods of time, and again, it doesn't matter whether you're climbing a mountain or you're on a deployment. Everybody has their highs and lows and the greatest value of a good team, good family is that you can recognize when people are down or having issues and if you're the one who is up and doing well at that point then you can motivate them or take a little weight out of their rucksack or help them out in some way to get them out of that lull.

Narrow that down, I guess, two things, remember things are going to change soon and be a good team member.

Q Got it.

MODERATOR: And quickly, it comes with a piggyback on that because I think my question is going to be before you started the climb because you said that there were some soldiers on your team that I know you have been outdoorsy for a while. I read your bio. But you said there were some soldiers on your team that hadn't really done the types of outdoor things that you have done, your first climb to be such a huge mountain. What types of feedback did you get from your soldiers that wanted to participate or if any, everyone ready and willing to go for it?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: Well, you know, that's all a matter -- your perspective is based on your experience and I've done a lot of climbing and I knew what Denali meant. A lot of the guys that were willing to step to the plate had no idea what they were volunteering for and so I definitely filtered a little bit because I didn't want to bring a guy up there who I knew was destined to fail because either his injuries at that point were too severe for us to get them up the mountain or because he just had so far to come in terms of physical development and skill development that it would have crushed him.

But you know starting out though, I had a goal that I didn't want people, I didn't want a team of guys that had a lot of experience climbing. I wanted guys who had minimal experience, at least had an understanding in basic fitness that I could work with them to get them to a point to get up Denali because it's a big mountain. But I wanted to make this a life-changing experience that wasn't just the three weeks on the mountain, it was a year plus process where we got them up here after the team was selected and got them up here into Alaska and trained them for 12 days on the mountaineering skills necessary. And then spent an entire year interacting at a distance, but all of us focused for a year on the physical development needed to be conditioned and ready to climb the mountain.

So the idea was that after that whole year, they emerged with a new skill, an ability and hopefully a desire to continue mountaineering.

MODERATOR: Thank you so much. And once again, are there any other questions?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: You guys are too easy.

MODERATOR: Before you -- because I'll give you the floor once again so you can wrap up, your wrap up question would be from me, what type of advice would you give anyone who wants to pursue such a huge task that you and your team have accomplished pretty much from being a wounded warrior or just a soldier in general? What type of advice would you give them?

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: Never give up and always keep in perspective because no matter what your task is, whether it's climbing a

mountain or running on a prosthetic leg or walking for the first time, you know, everything is achieved through small steps and just working at it in manageable bites and not allowing yourself to feel overwhelmed by what you're confronted with and being wounded, especially severe wounds is no doubt overwhelming and it creates its own mountains in terms of the way we have to deal with our recovery and our changes in life, but that's just reality. That is life. It's the new conditions that your given and you need to look at it and figure out how it is that you can best get to whatever your personal summit is.

The adage I live by is that, you know, when in doubt, go up.

MODERATOR: Right.

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: So, you know, how that translates is when you don't know what to do, just confront the challenge.

MODERATOR: Sounds good. Thank you so much.

Well, again, we'd like to thank Lieutenant Colonel Marc Hoffmeister for calling in this morning on your time, giving us your time and all your information on your Operation Denali, as well as congratulating you again on your recognition for being one of the Adventurers of the Year for National Geographic.

And this concludes our Bloggers Roundtable. Thanks again everyone.

LT. COL. HOFFMEISTER: Thank you. Thanks.

END.