

Living a Better 'Storey'

Kionte Storey lost his right leg in an IED explosion while serving in Afghanistan and since then, he has battled depression, trained for the Paralympics and climbed two mountains as a way to show other veterans what they are capable of doing

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After losing his leg in an IED explosion while serving in Afghanistan, Kionte Storey has hiked to two of the highest points in the world.

Storey, who served in Iraq (2008 to February 2009) and Afghanistan (2010) with the 3rd Bn., 7th Marines as a basic infantry rifleman, said when he reached the summit of Mount Vinson in Antarctica in 2013, it was “such a big relief” that he cried.

“It was such a big moment for me because, here a year ago I was in the hospital. I didn’t know how life would be, walking and struggling through my depression and not wanting to live,” Storey said, “and now I’m at the summit of Mount Vinson blessed that I’m alive.”

In what he called a “life-changing” moment, Storey said he thought about his brothers from combat and realized, after completing the 16,067-foot trek, that living to help others was what he needed to do.

“If I never went through that experience, I honestly couldn’t tell you where I would be,” Storey said.

‘I’m here for something better’

On Sept. 7, 2010, Storey and his unit set out for a satellite patrol. As he took three steps into a compound, an improvised explosive device (IED) detonated.

“When it was triggered, I just fell down,” Storey said. “I didn’t know exactly what happened. The wind was completely knocked out of me. I was trying to just breathe a little bit as my heart was racing.”

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While lying on the ground, waiting for the corpsmen, Storey thought he was a double amputee. He tried to compose himself so that when the corpsmen arrived, he could tell them what he was feeling.

“As long as I didn’t freak out, they won’t be able to freak out, and everything will go smoothly, which it did,” said Storey, who spent the first two months of his two-year rehabilitation at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.

He then was transferred to the Naval Medical Center in San Diego.

The most challenging aspect of his recovery was mental.

“I didn’t care that I lost my leg,” said Storey, a member of VFW Post 888 in Perris, Calif. “I cared more that my guys [were] still overseas fighting. We had less than one month left.”

It wasn’t until he was considered an outpatient that he began grappling with his situation in life.

“I think that was the big trigger where I started to really struggle mentally, started to abuse my pain meds and question why I’m still alive,” Storey said. “I had nightmares, all these little things that I didn’t previously have.”

That lasted for about one year.

“Then I decided to just kick all my pain meds and realized this is not the route I want to go down,” Storey said. “I’m here for something better.”

‘The big shift’

At that point, Storey started participating in Paralympic camps. Those camps, according to Storey, were more therapeutic than visiting a psychologist.

“That pretty much was the big shift from that point,” Storey said.

Around the time he began training as a sprinter for the Paralympics, he also got involved in hiking.

Storey said what he enjoys about hiking is that it’s “hard to fathom once you’re there.” While attempting to reach the summits of two mountains, he questioned his motives.

“You start to think, ‘Why am I here? Why am I doing this? I could be at home, watching TV and relaxing. But I’m suffering right now, but why?’” Storey recalled.

Another amputee, Mark Zambon, told Storey about The Heroes Project, a foundation based in Los Angeles that raises funds to take wounded veterans on expeditions around the world.

From there, the Marine learned about an upcoming climb to Mount Vinson. Storey took on that challenge in January 2013.

Inspiring Others Through Action

Storey said his reason for climbing Mount Vinson changed throughout the hike.

“I got to the point where I’m doing this not for myself,” Storey said. “I’m doing this for myself, but what got me to the summit was no longer about me. It was about others... I wanted to show others that, despite being injured, we are a lot more than we think we are at this point. We are mentally setting ourselves back.”

To Jake Rath, an analyst for the Stamford, Conn.,-based Steven and Alexandra Cohen Foundation who climbed Mount Kilimanjaro with Storey, the single-leg amputee is an inspiration to any veteran, but specifically those who feel that an injury is a “limit on their life.”

“[Storey] is proof that that’s not even close to the truth,” Rath said. “You really have control over what you can accomplish, and an injury, whether it’s physical or mental, has no control over your life. It’s what you take into your hands and what you do with the situation you’re presented with.”

Storey, a below-the-knee amputee, also has been an inspiration to Rath personally.

“He’s definitely helped me look deeper into myself and realize even the greater potential that is there,” Rath said, “and he makes me want to be a better person, which you don’t find too often. Everything he does is not for himself, but for other people.”

Connecting to climb Kilimanjaro

With Mount Kilimanjaro, Storey said, he still was climbing to remember his fallen Marines, but there was a different emotion when he reached the summit at 19,340 feet in 2017 compared to 2013.

“I’ve done this before, I can do this again, but I’m a lot higher now,” Storey said, “and it was more of a self-affirmation of, ‘I’m only getting stronger. I’m only getting better.’ It was just more of a reflecting moment on Kilimanjaro when I got to the summit.”

Rath said the Steven and Alexandra Cohen Foundation wanted to work in the same vein for the Mount Kilimanjaro climb as with a previous fundraising campaign that used social media. They reached out to the Bob Woodruff Foundation, a New York City-based nonprofit that assists veterans, and ultimately connected with Storey.

Rath said it was a personal goal to climb Kilimanjaro, but he did not want to take on such an endeavor just for himself.

Between the Steven and Alexandra Cohen Foundation and a personal fundraising campaign that Rath and Storey set up, the climb raised nearly \$510,000 for the Bob Woodruff Foundation.

From the bottom of the mountain to the summit took six days during summer 2017, according to Storey, and they were off the mountain on the seventh day.

Rath said he had an amazing time with Storey and feels blessed to have met him.

“He’s really become a lifelong friend, and that’s really meant more to me than anything personally,” Rath said.

‘Being an amputee didn’t stop me’

For both climbs, Storey used the Pathfinder II prosthetic, which he said has a compressing heel and is “more ideal” for hiking.

Storey said he faced some issues climbing with the prosthetic, but none that surprised him. He had a tender spot on the back of his leg that he would have to massage periodically, and that prompted him to take the prosthetic off to relieve pressure. Climbing up the mountain wasn’t hard on his leg, but the return trip to the base of the mountain was more difficult.

Because of the angle of the mountain, Storey said, he had to step down on his heel, which made him “almost straight-legged” and added to the difficulty.

“It just really wore me down and took a lot of energy and caused probably the most pain and bruises,” Storey said.

Overall, the most challenging part of the climb, according to Storey, was summoning the motivation to reach the summit.

“The mental part of just that last day going to the summit, looking up, you could see the guys who were moving faster [and who] had left hours ahead of you,” Storey said.

Storey also said the switchbacks — zig-zag trails on the mountain — kept “winding like a snake.”

“They were so tight that although we’re moving up, we’re moving up really, really, really slow,” Storey said.

Once daylight broke, Storey said, he and Rath were still about four hours from the summit and ready for the final push.

“Having Jake there was really good for, I think, both of us,” Storey said. “I think we both pushed each other.”

On the “summit night,” Rath said they started at midnight and didn’t return to camp until 4 p.m. He likened that feeling to issues that veterans face.

“Especially with mental health, it feels like this long journey in the dark then the sun finally comes out... It’s just putting that foot in front of the other when you feel like you have nothing left,” Rath said.

But making it to the summit was “the most incredible feeling,” according to Rath.

“All of the adrenaline is just flowing through you,” Rath said. “We all just kind of embraced each other. It was a pretty emotional experience.”

Mount Kilimanjaro is the highest summit either Storey or Rath have reached.

“It was just uncharted territory,” Rath said. “It feels amazing to accomplish something like that. And for me getting to see him accomplish that was just so amazing because every step he takes he has to work twice as hard as I do.”

Rath said he has never seen anyone with determination like Storey’s. And though both were “nervous about the unknown,” Rath said they had positive attitudes throughout the climb. “We both try and be really positive people,” Rath said. “There were definitely times where each of us had to prop the other one up.”

When they reached the top of Mount Kilimanjaro, Storey said it was “such an enlightening moment for all of us.” There also was the realization that he had summited two of the highest points in the world.

“Being an amputee didn’t stop me,” Storey said.

Storey currently is studying kinesiology at Mesa College in San Diego, and hopes to become a doctor of physical therapy. For him, it should be an easy climb.

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