

Conquering the Seven

A VFW Life member rose above depression and severe injuries to become the first Purple Heart recipient to climb the world's tallest mountains

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Benjamin Breckheimer sat at the edge of his bed with a gun clenched in hand, crying and letting his mind swirl at the mercy of alcohol in his system.

He had measured his life and reasoned it came short of what he wanted — a promising 11-year military career ripped away after being wounded in Afghanistan, which was soon topped by a divorce request that came weeks after his medical discharge in August 2013.

Hoisting the gun to his temple, determined to end the pain and agony of a life unfulfilled, the Purple Heart recipient noticed one of his two service dogs sitting beside him on the floor.

“If anyone has a dog, they will know exactly what I am talking about,” said Breckheimer, who deployed to Afghanistan in 2009 with the 8th Squadron, 1st Cav., 5th Bde., 2nd Inf. Div. “My sweet girl Asia sat there with a goofy look on her face, and it was as if she was telling me that everything was going to be all right if I just hung in there.”

Breckheimer’s mind stopped spinning, and his first thought painted a clear picture of Asia’s brother, Norman, a package deal of siblings he rescued while stationed at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, in 2007.

From Asia to Norman, his mind began welcoming thoughts of his family and friends. He questioned if ending his pain would come at the expense of theirs.

“I’m creating a lot more pain for the ones I love, and I couldn’t imagine doing that,” added Breckheimer, a Life member of the VFW Department of Florida.

“That’s the moment my mindset did a complete 180 degrees. The perceived negative events that had unfolded to that moment were really a clean slate to endless possibilities.”

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

In the deafening silence of his home in Port Charlotte, Fla., Breckheimer grew consumed with a desire to honor all the medics, doctors, nurses and technicians who saved his life following an IED explosion on Sept. 13, 2009.

In a matter of minutes, with a loving Asia by his side, Breckheimer's mind shifted to simpler times. He recalled reading Newsweek issues on Fridays while he was still in high school. Then he remembered one article in particular about Mount Everest, and it clicked.

Without any prior mountaineering experience, he resolved to inspire others to conquer their own metaphorical Everest by climbing the earth's tallest mountain himself.

"I knew the dangers of climbing Everest, and I think that's what attracted me toward it," Breckheimer said. "I do believe there was a little bit of a death wish behind it, but the main reason was to show my ex-wife how tough I was, hoping to impress her so much that she would come running back to me."

'THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD WASLIFTED OFF ME'

Determined to stand atop the 29,032-foot Everest, located in the Mahalangur Himal sub-range of the Himalayas near the China-Nepal border, Breckheimer began training in 2014.

In order to conquer the world's tallest summit, he decided he needed to first scale two of Washington state's highest peaks in Mount Baker and Mount Rainier, whose altitudes stand at 10,000 feet and 14,000 feet, respectively.

"I failed on both mounts, Baker and Rainier, but Dennis Broadwell of Mountain Gurus, who became a great friend during this journey, noticed something about me being in the wilderness compared to being in civilization," Breckheimer said. "He knew I needed that positive light in my life, and the mountains were it."

With positive affirmations on his side, Breckheimer kept poised and implemented an arduous training regimen that included specific leg workouts in the weight room, cardio training and walking around his neighborhood in a heavy backpack.

"I started lifting to the point of leg exhaustion and then went to the elliptical or stair climber to push myself for an hour on the 'hills' training option," Breckheimer said. "I find hiking to be very boring, which catches a lot of people off guard, but when I am in the snow wearing my boots and crampons, I am in my element."

After a few months of strenuous training, Breckheimer jumped at an opportunity to tag along with a group of mountaineers to climb Mount Elbrus in the western part of the Caucasus Mountains in Russia.

Despite having failed to reach the summits of Baker and Rainier, Breckheimer began his

journey up Elbrus with confidence. He was successful, reaching Europe's highest peak of 18,510 feet on Aug. 1, 2014.

Consumed with emotion as he stood above an icy range surrounded by clouds and a piercing blue sky, Breckheimer dug into his pocket, pulled out his wedding ring and hurled it into nothingness along with the grip his ex-wife had on his life.

"It felt like the weight of the world was lifted off me," Breckheimer said. "That little cylindrical item that weighed less than an ounce had held me back for so long. At that moment, I was no longer climbing for her but for myself. I felt like I was unstoppable."

With the success of Elbrus still lingering, Breckheimer pursued Everest in April 2015 by way of its southern route, where he got a taste of his original "death wish."

On April 25, 2015, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake ripped through Nepal's capital of Kathmandu, causing an avalanche in a neighboring mountain that reached the Everest Base Camp, killing 20 people and injuring many more.

"I didn't know exactly what was happening," Breckheimer said. "My legs started to shake, so I looked toward the ground and saw rocks shifting beneath my feet. It was more terrifying than an IED, which you don't really see. It just happens."

The experience of an avalanche and near-death cooled Breckheimer's fire, taking him more than a year to continue what had become a new unwavering goal — becoming the first Purple Heart recipient and combat-wounded veteran to climb the Seven Summits.

He put Everest on hold, making Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak, his next task.

Breckheimer traveled to Kilimanjaro in 2017 with One Team Colgan Foundation, a U.S.-based nonprofit that encourages resilience among veterans, which snowballed into four more successful climbs.

Between 2017 and 2019, Breckheimer conquered Kilimanjaro, Aconcagua in Argentina, Carstensz Pyramid in Indonesia, Vincent in Antarctica and Everest.

"Everest will always be a personal favorite simply because my desire to reach the top of the tallest peak in the world is what catapulted this seven-year journey," Breckheimer said. "Being able to sit on top of Everest for 30 minutes is something nobody will ever be able to take away from me."

‘I HAD LEARNED A LOT’

With just one of the Seven Summits left to climb, Breckheimer approached Denali in Alaska with blissful ignorance stacked with what felt like an unlimited supply of confidence in himself.

“I was told it is the hardest of the infamous Seven Summits, and I shrugged it off in disbelief,” Breckheimer admitted. “When I first attempted Denali in 2019, I was in for a treat.”

Unlike Everest, where yaks, porters and sherpa can carry 90 percent of a mountaineer’s gear, Denali forces climbers to be self-supported. For Breckheimer, that meant individually lugging 120-pounds worth of gear up the mountain.

Breckheimer’s first attempt at Denali ended after inclement weather forced him and his group to abandon the climb after reaching a 16,000-foot benchmark.

Given just 21 days to climb the summit, they vowed to return in 2020.

That expedition hit a roadblock when the COVID-19 pandemic struck worldwide.

In the first week of June last year, Breckheimer and his crew began the ascent on Denali once more. This time around, his group reached the summit on June 13, a full week ahead of the permitted allotment of time issued by the state and national parks services.

“I had lost my grandmother in November 2020, and Alaska had been her favorite place,” Breckheimer said. “I made the commitment to carry her ashes up Denali and was able to release them off the summit. I truly do believe she was with me on this final climb.”

Standing atop Denali, Breckheimer also allowed himself to look back in retrospect, now that he had become the first Purple Heart recipient to climb the Seven Summits.

“I had learned a lot about myself and what the human body and mind are capable of when we have a desired goal we try to achieve,” Breckheimer said. “The mountains and nature saved me, and I feel the mental health aspect of it should never be overlooked. Dealing with PTS, it’s really nice to be able to disconnect from everything and be one with the elements.”

Upon returning from Denali and having reached his goal of completing the Seven Summits, Breckheimer decided to devote more time to his family and friends before venturing off into the unknown again.

Along with his second wife, he opened a mobile café dubbed Avalanche Coffee Company in their hometown of Tega Cay, South Carolina, in late 2021 with the intention of donating a portion of the proceeds toward nonprofit organizations they value.

Breckheimer also signed with an agent to write a book about his unique journey from the battlefield to climbing the Seven Summits, which he hopes will both inspire and motivate readers.

“All the perceived ‘negative’ events have turned out to be blessings in disguise, having opened so many doors for me,” Breckheimer said. “I’ve met a lot of amazing individuals who have been my foundation, so I have made it my goal to pay it forward by giving back as much as I possibly can in return.”

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