

Devastating events in our lives can forever limit the scope of our possibilities. Or they can inspire us to overcome what others consider insurmountable.

Steve Baskis and Chad Butrick would be the first to agree. Both are profoundly wounded U.S. soldiers who ALPA pilots recently sponsored to participate in the Soldiers to the Summit Himalayan Expedition (SSHE), an extraordinary adventure and a documentary film expected to be released this spring and shown in VA hospitals and at military bases to encourage other wounded soldiers and aid in their recovery. Baskis and Butrick, together with other injured military men and women and a supporting cast of climbing experts and camera crew, spent the better part of October on a journey that culminated with the scaling of Lobuche East, a spectacular 20,075-foot mountain peak in Nepal.

F/O Matt Murray (United), who spearheaded ALPA pilot fundraising efforts for this venture, accompanied the expedition in a supporting role. Only hours before the last leg of the climb would he learn whether he was to be included in the select group that made the final ascent to the top.

Why travel halfway around the world with a dozen wounded soldiers to climb a 20,000-foot mountain? Murray, a Denver-based A320 pilot and an Air Force vet, said, "I can appreciate the sacrifices these men and women have made for the sake of their country's war efforts, and I can particularly understand the thrill and joy of pushing yourself to the limit."

Getting started

"I was invited late in the game," said Murray who signed onto the project in early August. Murray is friends with Michael Brown, the president of Serac Adventure Films who produced the award-winning *Farther Than the Eye Can See*, a documentary about Erik Weihenmayer, the first and only

ALPA PILOTS SEE SOLDIERS TO THE SUMMIT

By John Perkinson
 Staff Writer

blind man to successfully climb Mt. Everest.

Earlier in the year, Brown had talked with representatives from expedition host World TEAM Sports, a non-profit organization that highlights the miraculous ways disabled athletes overcome physical challenges, about the event. However, the real impetus for SSHE was Weihenmayer, who had contacted World TEAM Sports, expressing an interest in celebrating the 10-year anniversary of his historic climb with this latest ex-

cursion. A documentary of the journey would be filmed to help motivate wounded soldiers.

Brown contacted Murray, a Gulf War veteran and an experienced climber, to see if he would be interested in making the trek to help the soldiers. "I took a day to think about it and talked to my wife—she was incredibly supportive—and said, 'Yeah, I'm in.'"

Dry run

As a practice run, the climbers traveled to St. Mary's Glacier in Colorado for a training weekend. The purpose was "to get the soldiers onto snow, in crampons, using ice axes and ropes—doing things the group had never done

before," said Murray. Living in nearby Boulder, he decided to tag along.

The climbers met in Golden, Colo., in the basement of a climbing shop. While there, they received a phone call from former U.S. President George W. Bush, who is friends with Weihenmayer. Bush spoke to the soldiers via speaker phone and offered his good wishes. The group had dinner that night and the weekend practice climb passed without a hitch.

However, scaling Lobuche would be costly, and Murray began to think about how he could raise money to support the expedition. He approached the United Master Executive Council and his fellow pilots because he knew that many are current and former military pilots. Murray raised more than enough to support one of the soldiers and soon expanded his sights, approaching the Continental MEC and its pilots for donations to help pay for the second.

The soldiers

Steve Baskis from the 4th Infantry Division was attacked while on combat patrol in Iraq in May 2008. A roadside bomb blasted a projectile through the armor of his vehicle, rendering Baskis blind. A severed artery and several severed nerves also



ALPA-sponsored Chad Butrick (left) and United F/O Matt Murray stand atop Lobuche East (elevation 20,075 feet). Mt. Everest appears in the background, covered by clouds.

PHOTOS: DIDRIK JOINCK



LANDSAT IMAGE

The trek that would take climbers through the Khumbu region from Lukla to Namche Bazaar, Thyangboche Monastery, Pheriche, and on up to the summit.

disabled his right leg and left arm.

During the following 6 weeks, Baskis would undergo more than a dozen surgeries at Walter Reed Medical Hospital. However, the wounded soldier maintained an incredibly positive and upbeat attitude.

Since his recovery, Baskis has engaged in several sports to build up his strength. He's participated in numerous climbs and competes in tandem bicycle racing, participating in July 2009 in the State Games of America in Colorado Springs. A self-proclaimed "adrenaline junkie," Baskis has aspirations to join the national Paralympics cycling team and enter the London Olympics in 2012.

Chad Butrick was injured in an army training accident at Fort Irwin in California in 1998 that resulted in his discharge. In September 2005, he was involved in a car collision, severely damaging and ultimately losing his right leg from the knee down.

Following his recovery, he discovered an intriguing activity to focus his

attention—mountain climbing. Butrick and his brother attempted to scale Mt. Elbert, the tallest peak in Colorado (elevation 14,443 feet). They didn't quite make it to the top, but he noted that "that weekend was the beginning of a transformation for me."

Butrick has since set a personal goal to solo all of Colorado's 54 peaks above 14,000 feet. He reported on chad-butrick.com that he has nine "14ers" left. He also began to meet other disabled climbers and has set another goal for himself—to help those with disabilities overcome their limitations.

Setting out

Knowing that Baskis lives in Chicago, Murray spoke to United O'Hare chief pilot Capt. Jeff "Bo" Ellis and his assistant chief pilot, Capt. Jeff Bayless, about SSHE and the flight Steve would take. Ellis had Baskis upgraded to first class for the LA segment. Ellis also briefed the captain of the flight, who told the passengers about the expedition, and one of them gave Baskis a check, made out to World TEAM Sports, for \$1,000.

The group met in Kathmandu on October 3 and prepared for their trek. Two days later, they flew from Kathmandu to Lukla (elevation 9,200 feet), touching down on a runway that is a nail-biting 450 meters long with

altitudes for generations and have developed a genetic tolerance for the altitude and have proven to be excellent guides.

No ATVs for these climbers; the group acquired 27 yaks and set out for higher ground.

Murray explained, "The trek in is a process. You have to acclimate in stages because you have to get used to the altitude." The reduction in oxygen at higher altitudes creates a tendency to become exhausted with minimal physical exertion. The crew traveled to the camp at Namche Bazaar (elevation 11,250 feet) where the members spent a day resting and adjusting.

They continued to Thyangboche Monastery (elevation 12,700 feet), which is perched on a tree-lined hilltop above the Imja Khola River. The monastery is one of the most important religious centers for Sherpa culture in the region, and a welcome site for the travelers. On October 9, Baskis, Butrick, Murray, and the others traversed dirt-packed trails with dramatic cliff drops until they reached the village of Pheriche (elevation 14,355 feet).

"For most of us, every step above Pheriche was a new personal record," said Murray who noted that you never know how this kind of climb will affect you. A large part of a climber's physical reaction is based on his or her genetics

HELP STILL NEEDED

While the Soldiers to the Summit Himalayan Expedition was completed in late October, the group still needs donations to pay for this trip. ALPA pilots have donated approximately \$18,000, but more is needed to fully sponsor the two wounded soldiers as well as support the making of the documentary.

ALPA's president, Capt. John Prater, in a recent message to the ALPA Board of Directors, praised pilots for contributing to this important cause, and is encouraging members to make donations at www.soldierstothetsummit.kintera.org/alpa. "Thank you to everyone who has shown support, gratitude, and respect for these veterans' sacrifices for our nation," Prater said. 🔄

a 12-degree upslope. Murray noted, "There's no go-around option, because you're looking at the face of a mountain." The expedition required three separate flights to transport the entire crew and gear.

Porters and Sherpas met the expedition team in Lukla. Sherpas, inhabitants of the Khumbu Valley of northeastern Nepal, have lived at high

and proclivity toward altitude sickness and related conditions.

Due to the number of people in the group, not everyone would be able to continue the climb to the summit. The group split and those making the final ascent continued onto the Lobuche East Base Camp (elevation 16,269 feet). The group spent October 11–12 once again acclimating and preparing



Eight of the soldiers, including ALPA-sponsored Steve Baskis and Chad Butrick, make it to the top of Lobuche East. Fair conditions allow the climbers to remain on the summit for 45 minutes.

for the final leg of their journey.

"It was as hard as you think it would be," said Butrick. "I have climbed a lot of mountains but never at this altitude. I was blown away by the resolve I saw on everyone's faces as they pushed themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally."

On the morning of October 13, the climbers participated in a Puja ceremony, in which the Sherpas paid homage to the mountain deity. This is the starting point for all Everest expeditions. Baskis explained, "In the ritual, you're essentially asking the mountain's permission to climb it."

Later that day, the expedition members scrambled up to Lobuche high camp (elevation 17,100 feet), scaling snowy slopes beneath the main glaciers of the southwest face of the mountain. The climbers established camp where the glacier face and one of the ridges meet.

To make the final precarious ascent, you must have a permit that includes the names of your climbers. The number of people allowed on the summit at any given time is limited. About midnight, the climbers divided into a slower unit, which included Baskis and Weihenmayer; this team began their ascent at about 1 a.m. The second group departed 2 hours later.

Murray said climbers leave for these trips early in the morning because the

weather is more likely to be clear and calm at that time. Clouds typically move up the valley during the early to middle afternoon, decreasing visibility and increasing the chance of precipitation.

The apex

Murray woke just before midnight to help one of the film makers and soon learned that one of the soldiers had developed severe altitude sickness and would have to drop out. At about 12:30 a.m., the expedition leader, Jeff Evans, asked Murray if he'd like to make the final climb. Murray originally joined the group as a trekker and was not expected to proceed to the top. Without hesitation, he said "Yes!" He hurried to get his gear and was assigned to the second group.

The final ascent required climbing steep snow and ice slopes to the top from the summit ridge. It was an 11-hour voyage from high base camp to the summit and back. Murray said that on this particular day, the weather was beautiful with only a few clouds and virtually no wind. The climbers remained on the peak for approximately 45 minutes, in part, because of the beautiful weather.

"Lots of tears," Murray recalled. "It was an incredibly powerful, overwhelming, and rewarding experience. I

used my satellite phone to call my wife from the summit because it was our anniversary. I could barely talk to her because I was so emotional."

Butrick explained, "There is nothing like looking across the skyline and seeing huge, giant mountains for as far as the eye can see. There are absolutely no words to describe the scale and size of these mountains. We looked across the valley and saw the highest mountain in the world (Mt. Everest), a short 8 miles that might as well have been 100. The scale is that big."

The return

"When you're climbing a mountain, you always need to save enough gas in the tank to make it down safely. Summiting is optional; getting down is a requirement," said Murray, who added that it's easy to misjudge just how tired you are from the trip up.

The group proceeded to rappel down the fixed lines, a slow and difficult process, eventually returning to high base camp. Making their way down the mountain in many of the same stages as they did ascending, the climbers traveled back to Kathmandu where Marines at the U.S. embassy sponsored a party for them.

"Trying to communicate an entire months' worth of experiences is extremely difficult," said Butrick, reflecting on the trip. "At the end of every day of hiking, we would talk about our high and low experiences for the day. That is a lesson I am trying to incorporate in my daily life. We all experience highs and lows. Without the lows, we can't know how great the highs are."

Baskis is still in awe of his journey, but tried to put it into perspective. "Everything I have done and everything that I will do, which seems to spark the interest of the news media, I hope will inspire others," he said. Looking ahead, he reported that he's hoping to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, possibly next year. He also said that expedition leader Jeff Evans and others are planning a climb in Antarctica in January 2012, but none of this is "rock solid."

"Till the day I can't climb anymore, I'm going to hike and mountaineer and travel the world, and visit the places I've always wanted to see, as I used to say. Now I experience the world in a different way," he said. 🌐