

Ethos

NAVAL SPECIAL WARFARE
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NEVER QUIT

THE JOURNEY
OF A WOUNDED
WARRIOR



ONE MAN

A BIG MOUNTAIN

A BIGGER MISSION

When Michael Kobold decided to summit Mount Everest, no one thought it was crazier than he did. But he accepted the challenge, and raised more than \$250,000 for wounded warriors in the process.



There is a peaceful moment of clarity that transcends everything when you stand atop the highest point on Earth. Like everything else on Mount Everest in the Himalayas, the concept of time seems frozen in irrelevance. There is nothing but the vastness of the world below you and the newfound sense of the soul inside you. Nothing will ever again be the same.

Everest is an extreme, utterly unlike any other created in the natural world. At 29,035 feet, the mountain hosts blistering cold winds up to 125 mph

and temperatures lower than 90 degrees below zero. There's barely enough air to breathe; most climbers rely on oxygen tanks. The blood in your body thickens, putting pressure on your circulatory system. This frigid titan of nature has claimed the lives of more than 200 climbers since 1921. It is not a venture you simply do one day on a lark.

But Michael Kobold, a 30-year-old watchmaker from Pittsburgh, decided to undertake the life-changing task. Why? Because he met a SEAL.

The NSW connection

Kobold's link to Naval Special Warfare was forged two years ago. After becoming a supporter of the Navy SEAL Warrior Fund, he was invited to a fundraising gala in New York City. Later, Kobold was approached by his friend, actor James Gandolfini, who wanted to purchase a Kobold watch and donate it to a Special Warfare Operator 1st Class (SEAL) Elliott Miller.

Kobold flew to Naval Medical Center San Diego to visit the recuperating Miller, who had a picture of Gandolfini in a white button-up shirt and denim pants, sporting a whimsical smile in a Kobold watch advertisement for the Soarway Diver "SEAL" prototype. The watchmaker's experience with Miller inspired him to find a way to raise more money to help other wounded warriors.

Kobold decided he would climb Mount Everest and subsequently made three goals: raise \$250,000 in public donations for the Navy SEAL Warrior Fund, raise public awareness and support for their men and women serving in the armed forces, and hoist a flag depicting the SEAL trident warfare device at the summit of the world's tallest mountain.

March 2008, first attempt on Everest

Kobold decided to tackle the prize right away. He and seven-time Everest climber Kenton Cool and famed explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes flew to Nepal and scaled up and down Everest, but never quite reached the top. Weather conditions stopped the expedition at 20,000 feet.

Later at the second annual Navy SEAL Warrior Fund Gala, Kobold was relating this experience to a SEAL team commander. In response, the commander pointed out, "that's not really the summit."

His balloon sufficiently popped, Kobold vowed to complete the task. "Mountaineering for the sake of proving something to myself was not an issue; I had lived too comfortable a life of eating chocolates and sitting around to have that ambition," he remarked. "But the idea of summiting Mount Everest in order to raise awareness of the [Navy SEAL Warrior] Fund was something that struck a chord."

January 2009, training with SEALs

First he had to get his body and mind right. Used to a far less demanding life, Kobold joked that he “did not even like to climb more than a step ladder” before he decided to embark on the mammoth endeavor. Fortunately, he had some SEAL friends who shared his passion for the ultimate challenge. They volunteered to work in their off-time to help him become physically and mentally hardened.

It began at the NSW Center in Coronado. His body became acquainted with the six-story cargo net on the obstacle course, of which he was mortally afraid to climb. Laden with up to 50 pounds in his rucksack, his mentors pushed him through steep trails around the mountains of eastern San Diego, rain or shine. His muscles strained from pushing a large truck tire on the training grinder. He lost about 30 pounds off the frame of his “puny little watchmaker” body.

“Actually, a lot of the training was more physically and mentally challenging to me than the mountain itself,” Kobold admitted.

May 17, the climb begins

Kobold’s group embarked on the 2009 Everest Challenge Expedition, a perilous journey they knew would take every bit of their strength, skill, perseverance and luck to accomplish.

The expedition is a simultaneous feast of and an assault upon the senses. Heavy, spiked boots and walking poles crunch through the ice and snow. Metal ladders shriek from bitter cold and explorers’ weight. Saliva from the climbers’ masks freezes and chaps their chins. The blue-white bleak mountainside glows in the dark, as they look upward with frosting goggles and hissing oxygen tanks. The dark, cloudless horizon slowly gives way to a yellow ball, devoid of warmth. Sunrise makes an encore on the roof of the world.

There’s more to getting to the top than just dressing warmly and ascending. Avalanches, hidden crevasses, falling rocks, whiteout conditions, and sometimes hurricane-force winds lurk as physical obstacles. The body can suffer from dehydration, exhaustion, frostbite,



Top of the World. Michael Kobold, Ang Namgel and Kenton Cool proudly display the SEAL trident flag after reaching the top of Mount Everest.

pneumonia, broken bones, and infections. Equipment can be lost or damaged, potentially causing a life-threatening situation from which there is no escape.

About five percent of climbers who confront Everest never return. Along the way, Kobold and the others pass by the frozen bodies of past generations of climbers who never left Everest. “There are dead bodies everywhere on either side of your path,” Kobold recalled. The dead are part of the mountain, grim reminders of the uncompromising challenge.

At various places throughout the expedition, Kobold nearly decided not to finish the expedition, because “it is too hard, too high, I am not strong enough.” He suffered a fall on the ice, injuring his knee and had a horrible case of stomach flu that kept him from eating for three days. Then there were the two close calls with death when he almost slid off the mountain and had to jump over a seven-foot wide crevasse.

Encouraged by e-mail from his SEAL trainers, he pushed on. “You have no idea what a morale boost that was. It was really, really cool.”

May 21, 5:55 a.m., the summit

Kobold and the rest have reached the goal of a seven-week expedition. With victory in hand, they triumphantly unfurl a blue banner with the brazen yellow emblem known throughout the world as the U.S. Navy SEAL trident.

“This has been the hardest thing I’ve ever done, and without the SEALs’ help I sure would not have made it to the top,” he said during a satellite phone call from the summit to his staff in Pittsburgh.

His effort alone raised more than \$250,000 in pledged donations for the Navy SEAL Warrior Fund. The fund is a non-profit organization established to raise money in support of the families of U.S. Navy SEALs who have died while serving our country, or who are presently serving in harm’s way in trouble spots around the world. 

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