

Story and photos by SSG Ken Weichert and participating Guard Soldiers

**MEET
YOU
AT
THE**

TOP

A SPECIAL FORCES SOLDIER ENJOYS THE VIEW AFTER CLIMBING MT. WHITNEY ON A TRAINING MISSION.

YOU COULDN'T PLAN A BETTER MISSION. ON AUG. 9, 2008, I HELPED LEAD A TEAM OF SEVEN SPECIAL FORCES MEMBERS, TWO MASTER CLIMBERS AND ONE TOP FITNESS INSTRUCTOR TO THE SUMMIT OF MOUNT WHITNEY, THE TALLEST MOUNTAIN IN THE CONTIGUOUS UNITED STATES.

CLIMBING MOUNT WHITNEY ISN'T NEW FOR ME. I'VE LED A TEAM TO THE TOP EVERY YEAR FOR THE PAST SIX YEARS. WHAT'S NEW IS THAT THIS TIME, I LED THE TOUGHEST OF THE TOUGH.

-SGT KEN

IT WAS LIKE A CAPTURE THE FLAG EXERCISE. OUR GROUP OF 11 WAS SPLIT INTO TWO TEAMS—ONE THAT WOULD HIKE, ONE THAT WOULD CLIMB. OUR TRAILS WOULD WRAP AROUND OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE MOUNTAIN, AND WE'D MEET AT THE 14,497-FOOT SUMMIT.

THE HIKING TEAM HAD LESS DIFFICULT TERRAIN, BUT THEIR ROUTE WAS MORE THAN TWICE AS LONG AS THE CLIMBING TEAM. THE CLIMBING TEAM WOULD FACE SOME PITCHES THAT WERE 5.7 AND 5.8 ON THE YOSEMITE DECIMAL SYSTEM.

OUR OBJECTIVES: CONSTRUCTING A GREAT STORY FOR GX, TEAM BONDING AND EXTREME ADVENTURE. I WAS FIRED UP FOR THE MISSION!

FOLLOWING ARE OUR TALES FROM THE TRAILS OF MOUNT WHITNEY.

Two Days Before the Mission

Ammo has been with the team for a year. He transferred to the Guard from Active Duty, where he served with 5th Special Forces Group and has over three deployments to Iraq. Ammo and the team describe the events leading up to our climb:

AMMO

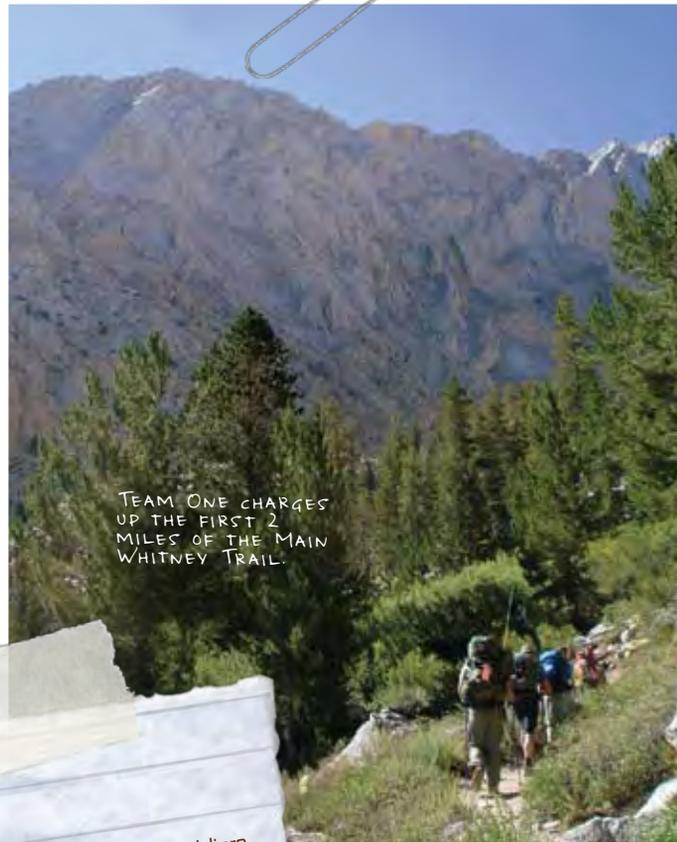
I'm traveling to California. I make it to the airport on time for an 1100 hours departure from New York. I eventually end up in Bakersfield, CA, with several other team members. We gathered around the baggage claim area to catch up on life since the last time we saw each other. It was then that I found out that everyone else is taking a medicine called Diamox to help ease the effects of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). The recommended timeline was two to three days prior to climbing, but since we're not actually going up for another day and a half, I'm thinking, I should be okay. Thankfully, Vlad has extra medicine and shares.

The next morning, as everybody was gearing up for our climb, Chief took a moment to write in his journal. Chief, one of the original Mountain Team Soldiers, was on ODA 955, and served as weapons sergeant and then its intelligence sergeant during Operation Iraqi Freedom. When they returned, he attended the Special Forces Warrant Officer Course and took command of ODA 9225 in 2007.

One Day Before the Mission

CHIEF

Plates and utensils clink in a small, greasy spoon breakfast joint in Bakersfield. The team arrived the night before. And with the jet lag from operating on Ohio time, the group is not very talkative. With hot



TEAM ONE CHARGES UP THE FIRST 2 MILES OF THE MAIN WHITNEY TRAIL.

The Teams

To protect the identity of the Special Forces Soldiers, we are using aliases.

Team One | Main Trail Hiking Team

"Chief" – Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 9225 commander

"Doc" – Medical sergeant

"Surfer Dude" – Engineer

"Ammo" – Assistant weapons sergeant

"SGT Ken" – Mission coordinator

"Jeneane" – START Fitness instructor, the only civilian on this expedition

Team Two | East Face Climbing Team

"Vlad" – ODA 9225 team sergeant

"Witty" – Information sergeant

"Action" – Senior weapons sergeant

"Mountain Ninja" – Instructor from Army Mountain Warfare School (AMWS)

"Mountain Lion" – Instructor from AMWS

breakfast in their stomachs, they hit the road to begin a three-hour drive to the small town of Lone Pine, CA. Before this mission, no one on the team had heard of it.

The highway, stretching from Bakersfield to Lone Pine, is mostly desert scenery, spanning part of the Mojave and gradually ascending into the Sierra Mountains. The peaks of the Sierras appear to be a thousand miles away until in the blink of an eye, you're right in the middle of them . . . the foothills and peaks very quickly become menacing

ridgelines and towering cliffs. The team pulls into the hotel around 1500 hours and quickly meets face-to-face with SSG Ken Weichert, aka SGT Ken. We unpack and regroup at 1800 hours to go over the mission details.

We'll split into two main teams, each with a different route to the summit. SGT Ken and I will lead Team One using the main trail to work toward the summit. Our plan is to hike from the Trail Head to Trail Camp from an altitude of 8,360 to 12,002 feet on the first day. Vlad and Mountain Ninja will lead Team Two, the technical team, using the East Face to work their way to the summit. Their plan is to scramble over rough terrain to camp at Iceberg Lake on the first day. Team One has the longest distance in miles, and Team Two has the most difficult route.

On Day Two of the climb, both groups would break camp at the same hour and meet at the summit of the tallest point in the continental United States, Mount Whitney.

SGT KEN

I provided a hiking timetable for Team One in my original Operations Order (OPORD) based on my previous hikes on the main trail. Team Two planned their timetable on our camp and summit times. I passed out high-powered two-way radios, two for each team. I briefed them all on using a Bear Canister (a hard-sided container that keeps smells and food away from bears) and the need to clean out our vehicles before beginning the climb. Lastly, I passed out trail and camping permits, and instructed them to fasten them to their backpacks.

Team One, Day One

CHIEF

As day breaks, the team is already in motion. After hot chow, they make the 13-mile drive to the Mount Whitney Portal. Lone Pine is at an elevation of roughly 3,000 feet, while the portal is 8,360 feet. As soon as the team steps out, the difference in the air pressure is noticeable. With everyone eager to begin, we start the grueling ascent.

SGT KEN

I led Team One up the first two miles at a fast rate, forcing our bodies to adjust to the steep grade and high altitude. At the two-mile mark, we took 10 minutes to stretch our calves and thighs.

CHIEF

The effects of altitude are comparable to “ruck” marching with a protective mask on. It takes a lot of energy to suck in air, but it still doesn't feel like you are getting enough oxygen. As you expend more energy trying to breathe, your heart beats faster until the point that even walking feels like you are running a sprint. Doc, a graduate of summer Mountain Warfare School, whose training is a step away from a physician assistant, keeps a watchful eye on the group and responds quickly to those suffering AMS. He is trained in everything from internal medicine to trauma, sniffles to gunshot wounds. So, during the climb, he would provide the crucial and vital medical support.

AMS is not fatal; however, it can be so debilitating that one might not be able to make it to the top and be forced to descend. Symptoms include dizziness, severe headache, vision anomalies, nausea, vomiting and cramps. With one or two of us starting to yield to the thinning air, I slow down the pace, and the uphill march presses on slowly but surely.

After a few hours, we break through the trees and are surrounded by walls and staircases of stone. By this point, the sun begins to go past the ridgeline just as Team One reaches the Trail Camp at 12,002 feet. Trying to stay ahead of nightfall, we set up camp, purify water and hunker down away from the gust-

ing wind to force-feed ourselves a dehydrated meal and catch some rest. “Almost there,” I said aloud.

I look at my watch. 6 p.m. Just as I reach for the radio, Vlad scratches through the speaker. “This is Team Two. We are set into our camp.” I respond, “Roger ... see ya tomorrow at the top.”

The night is miserably cold. Team One tries to shelter down in their tents as much as possible, but the howling winds and the cold stone beneath the tents make getting warm impossible. With the Diamox having a side effect of frequent trips to the latrine, the cycle of trips into the darkness makes sleep difficult. At this point, some are hoping that a few minutes of actual sleep will be enough to keep the altitude monster off their backs long enough to see the summit.

SGT KEN

Mount Whitney has always been challenging. In past Whitney climbs, I physically trained at least three months out with hiking, trail running, stair climbing and weight training, most of the time while wearing a tight-fitting weight vest. This time, I trained only for two weeks on a Stair-master with some weight training and body resistance exercises and no weight vest. I should have trained a bit more effectively. I was breathing heavy on every trail and relying heavily on my hiking poles.

Also, I did not get much sleep the night before. I felt the effects of the high altitude by the time we got to Trail Camp. The Special Forces medic told me to increase my water consumption, elevate my feet and get some rest. He is correct. The more sleep I get tonight, the more I'll acclimate to the altitude.

Team One, Day Two

SGT KEN

Frigid, rough winds at Trail Camp stripped us of sleep last night. Half of Team One was a bit nauseated by the time we got to 13,000 feet; however, nobody wanted to turn back. Teamed with several members of 19th Special Forces and a couple of instructors from the Army National Guard Mountain Warfare School, I feel more secure mountaineering now than ever before. After the medic checked us out, we continued our ascent up the 97 Switchbacks to the next waypoint. Next stop, Trail Crest at 13,600 feet!

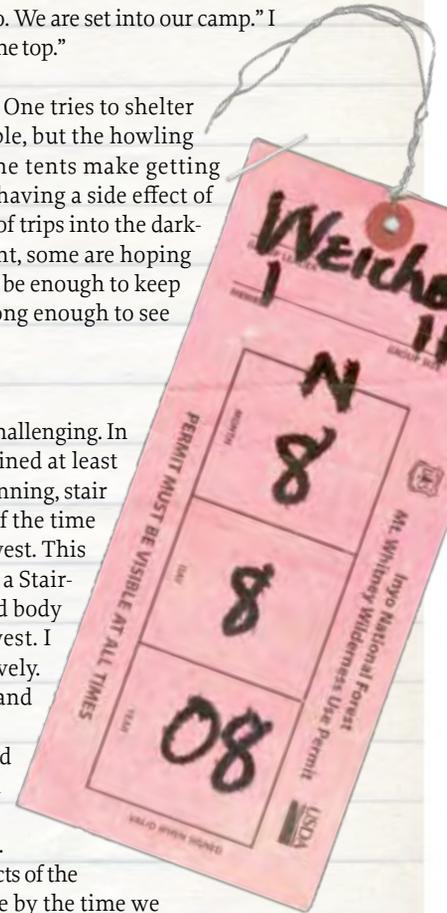
Ammo is one of the Soldiers coming down with AMS. His journal picks up the next morning, after a night of waiting for the sun to come up.

ODA 9225 Records Check

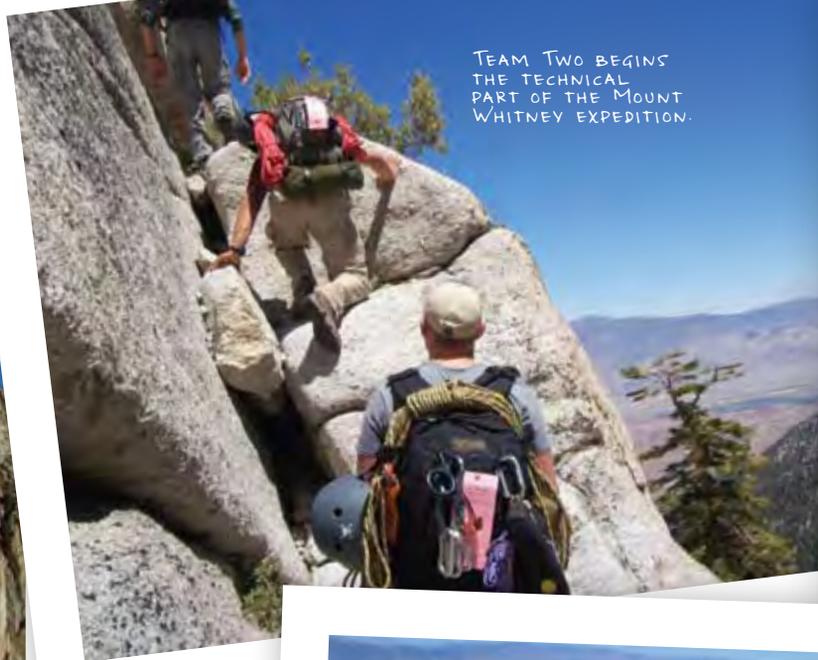
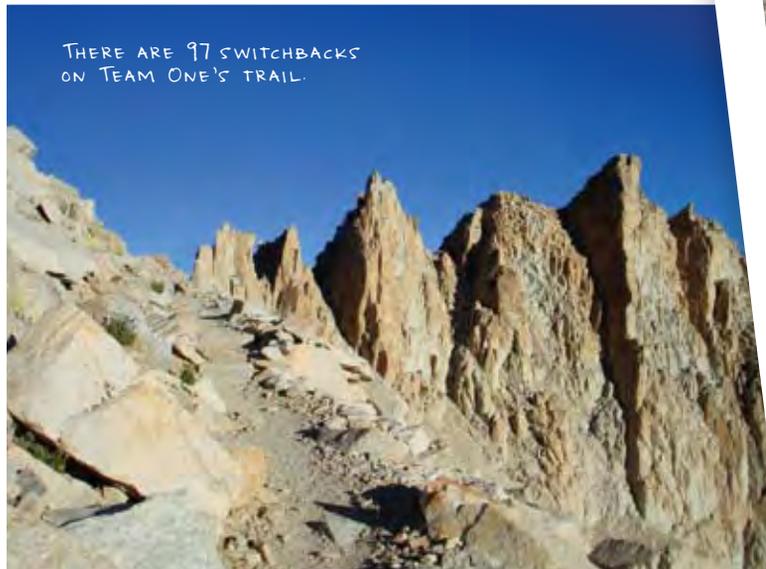
Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 9225 derives its lineage from previous mountain teams. ODA 955 was the original Company B Mountain Team. In 2003, it was deactivated. In 2005, members of the ODAs were merged to form a new team and in 2006 deployed to Iraq. Upon its return, the new team was established as ODA 9225.

Vlad, who served on the original Mountain Team, has an impressive military career. He was asked to stand up a new team just before their trip to Iraq. As the team sergeant, he laid the foundation for the team as it is today. He's a Veteran of the 1988 Olympic Security Detail in Korea, Desert Shield/ Storm, Kosovo and Operation Iraqi Freedom. He's a graduate of both the summer and winter Army Mountain Warfare Schools, and he has climbed Mount Rainier and Mount Kilimanjaro.

Vlad said this about his unit: "The mountain team was shut down for about three years. The training and support from the Vermont guys is how we've been able to stand the team back up so quickly. They've gone out of their way to get mountain-mission-capable in such a short amount of time. We owe a lot to MAJ Pelletier, MSG Benore and SSG Powell for helping us make this happen."



THERE ARE 97 SWITCHBACKS ON TEAM ONE'S TRAIL.



TEAM TWO BEGINS THE TECHNICAL PART OF THE MOUNT WHITNEY EXPEDITION.

We continue up the trail with several of us physically ill. We head to the portion of the trail called 97 Switchbacks.

—AMMO

AMMO

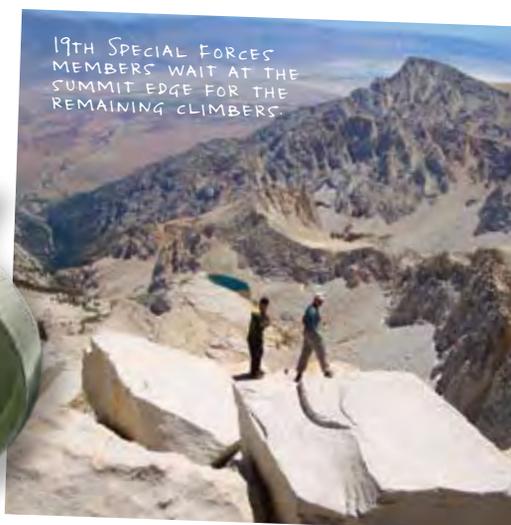
4 a.m. finally rolled around, and we started to get ready to head up the famous 97 Switchbacks of the Mount Whitney trail. We pack the gear needed for the summit and leave some behind in the tent, put our headlamps on and start walking around 5 a.m. I force down a protein bar and drink more water with hope of suppressing the AMS. As we begin to climb, I can feel my nausea leaving, but the headache is still there. While not happy that I don't feel well, I'm glad to hear that there are a couple of others who also don't feel 100 percent. Knowing that others were hurting and still pushing on motivated me to continue hiking up the trail toward the summit.

We continue up the trail with several of us physically ill. We head to the portion of the trail called 97 Switchbacks. As we continue to climb, we take breaks, hydrate and slow our pace to try to curtail the effects of AMS. As soon as the sun showed itself to us, we reached Trail Crest. From the crest, we continued on our way to the summit.

SQT KEN

We lost radio communication with Team Two while on the 97 Switchbacks. Chief felt confident that between the leadership and the technical expertise on their team, they would be just fine. Seeing the summit ahead seemed to motivate everyone on our team! However, the altitude prevented us from hiking any faster. As I glanced behind us, our tents 500 feet below looked like little buttons sitting on rocks.

Once we made it to the Trail Crest at 13,600 feet, I told everyone that the remaining ascent was less aggressive. We regained communication with Team Two on the final approach to the summit.



19TH SPECIAL FORCES MEMBERS WAIT AT THE SUMMIT EDGE FOR THE REMAINING CLIMBERS.



CHIEF

We saw the roof of a small shelter as we made our final approach to the summit. The team erupted with excitement! "Almost there!" we all shouted.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the mountain...

Team Two, Day Two

VLAD

The approach to the technical side, the mountaineers' route, was a pretty steady upward grade that was exhausting. Later that night we froze our tails off. For the technical climb team, we divided into two-man and three-man rope teams. Mountain Lion and I climbed a traversing route around the East buttress spanning 16 pitches (sections of the climb shorter than the length of the rope).

CHIEF

The call comes over the radio that Vlad and Mountain Lion are only two pitches (roughly 200 feet) down from the summit. Some of the members of Team One are still feeling the intense effects of the altitude at 14,497 feet. Doc makes the decision that it's best to send four back down the main trail to the camp to alleviate their AMS and get a head start on

LAURA YOUNG/ISTOCKPHOTO



TEAM TWO GETS TECHNICAL ON THE EAST FACE OF MOUNT WHITNEY.



packing the extra gear at Trail Camp below. Team One starts heading back to the camp, leaving SGT Ken, the lead group of Team Two and me awaiting the arrival of the last two climbers.

CHIEF

Mountain Lion breaks into view with the remaining team members sitting on the stone buttresses cheering their comrades on. After a few more rope lengths, the last two have arrived at the top. The mission has been an outstanding success!

After Action Review

MOUNTAIN NINJA

Got a 6:30 a.m. start this morning, cold temps, led T-Dac and L.A.J. on the East Buttress of Mount Whitney (12 pitches), quite possibly the single-most classic technical alpine rock-climb of its grade in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Long and challenging, yet well within their ability levels. Great day, beautiful weather and good quality rock! The guys did really well, super-fit with great attitudes. For Soldiers relatively

new to technical climbing to complete a steep climb over 1,000 feet high at extreme altitude on a big mountain range is certainly a testament to how strong and well-rounded these guys are. Such an exciting event to be a part of!

JENEANE

I could not have predicted how difficult this hike would be. It was not the 14,497 feet I feared, but the pressure of being the only female civilian on a hike with a Special Forces team. I realized I was not just with any men, but men with specific roles and strengths handpicked for one team.

The higher we climbed and the more tired we became, the more we bonded and trusted each other. Even though my body grew weaker as we climbed higher, my mental being became stronger. The motivation from the team was amazing!

A couple of us were experiencing altitude sickness as we reached the summit, yet we were all smiling from ear to ear! I realized that these Special Forces guys must remain tough in any situation they experience. They have more heart than I ever imagined. I felt that they always had my back, and that feeling made the hike seem easier and more achievable.

You guys are amazing! Thank you SGT Ken and to everyone on the team! I had an unforgettable experience! **GX**



SGT KEN

AS I WRITE THESE WORDS, MORE THAN A MONTH HAS PASSED SINCE I RETURNED FROM MOUNT WHITNEY. A COUPLE OF TIMES A DAY, MY THOUGHTS GO BACK TO MY FANTASTIC EXPERIENCES ON THOSE GRUELING TRAILS, SHARED WITH SOME OF THE FINEST SOLDIERS THAT THE ARMY NATIONAL GUARD HAS TO OFFER.

IT WAS A VERY SUCCESSFUL MISSION! WE WERE INJURY-FREE, AND, MOST OF ALL, WE ALL HAD A GREAT TIME!

DURING THE TEAM DINNER BEFORE GOING OUR SEPARATE WAYS, I REALIZED THAT THIS MISSION WAS MORE THAN JUST A TEAM-BONDING EXPERIENCE FOR THE MILITARY MEN THAT ACCOMPANIED ME. MOUNT WHITNEY WAS A STEPPING-STONE FOR GREATER THINGS TO COME. THE NEXT TIME THAT ODA 9225 IS AT AN ALTITUDE AS EXTREME, THE MISSION WILL BE REAL AND THEY WILL BE READY!

For information about planning a Mount Whitney expedition, contact SGT Ken at sgtken@gxonline.com.
* Members of the 19th SF ODA 9225 and the VTARNG Mountain Warfare School contributed to this story. Journal compilation by Heather G. Allen and SSG Ken Weichert.