

At War

Notes From the Front Lines



May 15, 2013, 5:41 pm

Wounded Soldiers Race to the South Pole

By [MARK WISE](#)

COMMENTARY

**A Soldier
Writes**

This November, I will join a team of three other wounded American veterans — Therese Frentz, Ivan Castro and Margaux Mange — on a 225-mile race across Antarctica for the [Walking With the Wounded South Pole Allied Challenge](#). We will travel on skis while dragging sleds packed with approximately 150 pounds of survival equipment through the harshest climates on the planet. We will be racing for more than two weeks against similar teams of wounded veterans from the [United Kingdom](#), Canada and Australia. Our goal is not just to win the race, but also to raise awareness.

Veterans returning from conflict are confronted with an array of reintegration issues from post traumatic stress, unemployment, drug or alcohol abuse and suicide. Military leaders are taught to lead by example, and on this public stage, the participants in the South Pole Allied Challenge are trying to do just that. By sharing our stories of service, injury and recovery we hope to educate the public, inspire fellow service members and raise funds for programs that can assist those following in our footsteps.

Each of the four nations involved has a primary nonprofit organization to which people can donate time, money or other resources. For our team, that organization is [Soldiers to Summits](#), which uses mountaineering to help build not just physical courage and strength, but also the mental capacity to cope with internal struggles.



Mark Wise Mark Wise, who served as a platoon leader in Afghanistan, in August 2009.

My personal introduction to these organizations began with wounds I suffered on Oct. 24, 2009, while serving as an infantry platoon leader in Afghanistan. While on patrol with 24 soldiers, we came under fire and I tried to maneuver squads to assault a machine-gun position. At one point during the fighting, I tried to switch places with my radio man, Pfc. Devin Michel, behind a mud wall. As Private Michel stepped behind me, he detonated a pressure-plate improvised explosive device. He was killed instantly.

Nine days later I awoke at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, saw my family and asked, “What are you doing here?” The long road of recovery had just begun.

I was bedridden with all of my limbs immobilized. I was on a feeding tube and could not push my own pain-medication button or focus well enough to see faces. I was emotionally crushed. My family provided constant support as I struggled to come to terms with my injuries. Vanity was one of my initial worries, and I felt I needed plastic surgery on my face to feel normal again. [Operation Mend](#), a nonprofit organization that provides surgical care in partnership with U.C.L.A. Medical Center, provided free reconstructive surgery that made me feel that I could go out in public again without being judged or stared at.

Initially, success came in small steps. Scratching my face on my own. Changing channels on the television. Feeding myself. But over time, improvements have come faster, though in fits and starts. There are days when I can run (what a sensation, even with discomfort), days when I can only walk and days when I can barely crawl. What counts is maintaining momentum.



Mark Wise Mark Wise and his wife, Sarah, and their son, Mark Wise III.

While completing my medical treatment, I began studying at Georgetown University for a master's degree in business administration. I participated in an event at the university called "War Stories and Free Beer," sponsored by my current company, [GORUCK](#), that encourages veterans to share their stories with civilians over beer. I spoke at two sessions, the first time I had publicly described my experiences to nonveterans.

After I graduated from Georgetown, I found myself without a larger purpose. I was working at a Fortune 100 company when I received an e-mail from a group called Walking With the Wounded, which offered me the opportunity to trek to the South Pole as an advocate for veterans. I jumped at the opportunity.

We recently completed training for our expedition in Iceland. It was difficult, but as the military taught us, you can find ways to drive on. We endured whiteout conditions, with minus-40-degree Celsius temperatures and 60 mile-per-hour winds. On one mini-expedition, we skied with sleds for five days, covering roughly 16 miles a day while learning to live in Arctic conditions. But in our race to the South Pole, our team will not only be overcoming harsh conditions but also blindness, post-traumatic stress, amputated fingers, reconstructed joints and severe burns. Teamwork will be essential.

Most everyone who has held a leadership position in the military feels an obligation to serve, and I still do – not just to living soldiers but also to Private Michel and the other members of my unit who were killed in combat. Those men remind me daily of my responsibilities to other veterans. And maybe that is why I feel so confident that our team will overcome our adversities to reach the South Pole.

Mark Wise, 27, became an Army infantry officer after graduating from the United States Air Force Academy. In 2009, he was deployed to Afghanistan as a platoon leader with Charlie Company, First Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment of the Fourth Infantry Division. After

receiving a medical retirement, he earn an M.B.A. from Georgetown University and is chief financial officer for [GORUCK](#), a manufacturer of military-grade backpacks.