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## Veteran, climber elevates battle against suicide

Clintonville man hopes to scale seven giant peaks to help veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder



JOSHUA A. BICKEL/THISWEEKNEWS

**Michael Fairman of Clintonville chats with Dietrich Stallsworth, a Northland-area resident, about Summit for Soldiers Thursday, Feb. 27, at Crimson Cup Coffee in Clintonville. Fairman plans to climb Mount Everest and several more of the world's tallest mountains as part of his awareness program focusing on mental and physical health issues for veterans and active-duty military personnel.**

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By **KEVIN PARKS** *ThisWeek Community News*

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Next up: Everest, the holy grail for mountain climbers.

Clintonville resident C. Michael Fairman hopes to scale the northeast ridge, the "mountaineer's route," of Mount Everest in about five weeks.

"It's a huge challenge," Fairman said last week. "This is a huge, huge mountain. I'm excited, terrified and just happy to be able to take on this challenge."

Fairman isn't doing it just to say he did -- although he will be proud of his accomplishment, as he will be if his dream of climbing the Seven Summits, the highest mountain in each continent, is realized.

What motivates Fairman is the knowledge that every 60 to 80 minutes in the United States, a veteran commits suicide -- almost 8,000 a year. Fairman hopes by attracting followers to his Summit for Soldiers page on Facebook, he will increase awareness of the issue and convince lawmakers to take steps to prevent soldiers, sailors, Marines and other ex-service members from taking their own lives as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder or mild brain injury suffered while on duty.

"That will be the motivation to get to the top of Everest," he said.

The freelance photojournalist and a friend from Tennessee, Steve Redenbaugh, initially came up with the idea of scaling the highest points in all 50 states to bring greater awareness to the appalling suicide rate among fellow veterans. Now, Fairman's goal is to conquer the Seven Summits. He reached the top of Aconcagua, the highest peak in South America, at 3 p.m. Jan. 28.

There, the retired Navy corpsman with the U.S. Marines Corps planted a Summit for Soldiers flag bearing the names of "some of the warriors we have lost to suicide and the Silent Wounds of War," Fairman wrote in an email.

While Everest will be the tallest mountain Fairman will face, he said his biggest challenge may be going up against the bureaucracies of the Veterans Administration and the Department of Defense in bringing about wider recognition of PTSD and mild brain injury among former members of the military -- and the terrible toll it can take on them in civilian life.

Currently, VA officials tend to limit a diagnosis of PTSD -- formerly labeled as shell shock or battle fatigue -- to those who were wounded in combat or were presented with a medal for their exploits, Fairman said.

"A huge portion doesn't have either one of those things," he said.

So when he's not climbing the world's tallest mountains, Fairman often can be found at Crimson Cup Coffee, researching the issues and making pleas to members of Congress for some legislative relief for veterans with PTSD. One of these approaches is a requirement that soldiers, when discharged, receive a "significant event tracker."

"Our whole idea, it's stupid simple," Fairman said.

The military keeps meticulous and detailed records relating to combat situations, patrols and enemy attacks, he said. That includes the names of all military personnel involved, so a database compiling this information easily could be provided to a veteran upon discharge from service.

"If you have no problem, you just have an extra piece of paper," Fairman said. "The beauty of it is, it's cost-effective. It's real-time verification. It helps to weed out fraudulent claims. If somebody just makes something up, it can't be verified.

"The thing about this tracker is, it's not just for wartime. You look at training accidents. You look at other traumatic events that can occur."

Fairman said he is hopeful that U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown might present creation of the significant event tracker requirement as a stand-alone bill.

"We're pretty excited about that," he said.

"If there is anything that others can do to help support this project, it would be to follow Summit for Soldiers, the Everest climb and the legislative process at [facebook.com/summitforsoldiers](https://facebook.com/summitforsoldiers)," Fairman wrote in an email.

"Not only is it a great encouragement to the families who have lost and the veterans who are struggling that follow our progress, it also shows our community stands behind finding solutions for these issues that affect us all in one way or another."

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