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Accustomed to Wheels, Thrill-Seeking Injured Veterans Take Wing

By **A. G. SULZBERGER**

KETCHUM, Idaho — Searching for ways to keep his adrenaline pumping after a motorcycle accident forced him out of the military and into a wheelchair, Darol Kubacz recast himself as something of a pioneer of extreme sports.

First he took up downhill skiing, racing and jumping with such abandon that he broke his spine a second time. After a painful rehab he started mountain biking and scuba diving, and even hauled his barrel-chested frame up Mount Kilimanjaro.

Last month, that risks-be-damned pursuit of adventure drew Mr. Kubacz from his home in Arizona to a rocky mountaintop here to do something a pair of working legs never would have allowed anyway — take flight.

“Like the Marines say,” he said, “adapt and overcome.”

And with the crunch of sagebrush under a new, modified wheelchair, Mr. Kubacz, 37, and his instructor rolled down the slope and then soared into the expanse, his paraglider canopy lofting in the breeze.

For generations, returning soldiers with serious disabilities, whether sustained in combat or in risky off-duty pursuits like motorcycling, found limited — and relatively tame — options for athletic recreation. But the latest generation of disabled veterans are increasingly returning to the thrill-seeking activities they enjoyed before their injuries.

As they expand the range of so-called adaptive sports to surfing, rock climbing and white-water rafting, with the help of new technology and public and private financing, these veterans have worked to prove that a wheelchair does not necessarily require its occupant to stick to level ground.

“They are doing things we never thought possible 10 years ago,” said Kirk Bauer, executive director of [Disabled Sports USA](#). Back when Mr. Bauer lost a leg in Vietnam, the organization

had one chapter teaching one sport (skiing); today it has more than 100 chapters and offers 30 sports.

“They love speed, they love challenge, they love risk,” Mr. Bauer said. “And they are really pushing the envelope.”

That was the clear goal for the five paraplegic military veterans, none injured in combat, who arrived here last month to learn to paraglide, a type of unpowered flight similar to hang gliding but using equipment that more closely resembles a parachute.

Pilots launch on foot and then sit in a harness below a canopy, which can be steered with hand controls. Those with experience can stay aloft for hours before landing, typically in an open field.

Though they are not the first paraplegics to paraglide, they were the first being taught from scratch using a new device called the Phoenix, with a wheelchair in place of a normal harness. The eventual goal is for participants to pursue the high-altitude sport on their own, perhaps even at a competitive level.

“I knew I could do it with the right equipment, but I just didn’t know whether anyone had been brave enough to try it yet,” said Erik Burmeister, 37, who was paralyzed in a motorcycle accident.

After his injury, Mr. Burmeister learned to ski and scuba dive, doing each as often as possible. One day, at home in Pennsylvania, he searched the Internet for an activity that would replicate the thrill of his dozen parachute jumps with the Army and stumbled upon information about the [Able Pilot](#) program, the group organizing the first wheelchair paragliding class. He was one of the five chosen from more than 100 applicants.

“We’ve all accepted that our mobility is limited,” he said. “But it’s a constant grind to drag our wheels around. In all these sports, moving is effortless again. The sense of freedom is just so incredible.”

The four-day training program served up constant reminders of the inevitable trial and error that comes with learning a new sport, particularly for someone in a wheelchair. During the introductions, the participants were told they were not hamsters in some experiment. Still, they embraced the role of putting their bodies on the line. By the end, four of the five had tipped or rolled over on landing; the fifth crashed on an aborted takeoff.

The volunteer instructors, as well as engineers from the University of Utah, took notes as the students suggested ways to change teaching methods and improve the wheelchair design to

better fit their needs.

The program was paid for with grants from the Paralyzed Veterans of America and the [Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation](#), with help from the local [Sun Valley Adaptive Sports](#). A number of other groups declined to offer support, calling the program too risky.

“Yes, paragliding is inherently dangerous,” said Mark Gaskill, a veteran and a paraglider who started the Able Pilot program after taking several paraplegics on tandem flights. “Life is dangerous. These guys understand the risks. They understand what injury can do. But wheelchair tennis isn’t for everyone.”

The classes, which mostly consisted of on-the-ground training, started before sunrise, with the group hauling themselves out of their wheelchairs and into vans for the ride into the mountains. Each day students also were taken on tandem flights with the volunteer instructors, during which they were able to fly the gliders themselves.

“I didn’t think I’d ever fly again,” said Anthony Radetic, 32, a former helicopter pilot who broke his back when his motorcycle was struck by a car.

For years after his injury he was too embarrassed to even go outside, particularly after he was forced to leave the Army. That changed with his introduction to adaptive sports: Jet Skiing, downhill skiing and handcycle racing (he has competed in numerous marathons). And he even retrofitted his motorcycle, a Ducati, so he could continue to ride the back roads of his rural Alabama community.

This type of transformation is one of the reasons the Department of Veterans Affairs has enthusiastically supported what leaders there describe as an exponential increase in extreme sports, providing money for equipment and training. As risky as the activities may be, they are viewed as preferable to the drinking and depression that often follow life-altering injuries.

“It’s more than a bunch of yahoos going out and having a good time,” said Richard Stieglitz, who oversees physical health and wellness for the [Wounded Warrior Project](#), which provides programs for injured service members. “We use it as a tool to show them they can do anything they want.”

After a bumpy van ride to the top of the mountain used for the paraglider launches, Ernie Butler, 59, executive director of the northwest chapter of the [Paralyzed Veterans of America](#) in Washington, readied himself for his first flight in the Phoenix.

He pulled a fitted helmet out of a small bag. The last time he put it on was to sky dive 16 years earlier, he said, “the day I bounced.” His parachute had become tangled when it was hit by

another sky diver; after he hit the ground he had more than 220 fractures.

His wisecracking betrayed no nervousness, just anticipation. “It’s been a long time since I had my knees in the breeze,” he said.

And then with a joyful holler he rolled down the slope and took off, whooping as he passed the group readying the second chair for launching.

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