



Active Duty

A former Navy SEAL honors fellow veterans with a covert, record-breaking mission on Colorado's fourteeners.



When Josh Jespersen was a Navy SEAL, grueling expeditions were the rule, not the exception. So, naturally, out of the record-breaking 138 days it took him to climb and splitboard all of Colorado's fourteeners, one of his favorites was also one of the most challenging: a 15-hour push to bag Crestone Peak and Crestone Needle in a foot of freshly fallen powder. "It was mind-blowingly beautiful," the 30-year-old Leadville resident says. Beautiful? Sure. Exhausting, too—but for Jespersen, co-founder of Mission Memorial Day, that's sort of the point.

Nearly three years ago, Jespersen, along with three other combat veterans, established the Mission Memorial Day initiative as a way to honor those killed in action and to inspire veterans to get active by embarking on punishing climbs and hikes over the May holiday. Jespersen, however, keeps the group's spirit alive year-round by, say, shredding every fourteener in a single ski season. In winter 2015-'16, Jespersen tracked Vail resident Jon Kedrowski as he tried to break the existing record (362 days) held by big-mountain skier Chris Davenport. After seeing Kedrowski fall short—and take some flak from the snowsports community for piecing together his runs, as opposed to descending via continuous routes—Jespersen decided to keep his own attempt quiet.

Jespersen (who *did* ride continuous lines) began his expedition solo on Mt. Elbert on January 3. Of the remaining 53 peaks, he broke trail alone on 28, while ski buddies or fellow former SEALs joined him on the others. Maintaining a near-daily routine of climb-board-sleep, Jespersen only took breaks because of bronchitis, bad weather, and dangerous avalanche reports. When he descended his final fourteener, Capitol Peak, on May 21, he celebrated with a single Instagram post, then headed directly to Denver, where he boarded a flight to the Philippines.

There, the Mission Memorial Day founders spent five days walking 66 miles from south to north on the country's main island of Luzon. They retraced the route taken by hundreds of U.S. and Filipino prisoners of war in 1942's Bataan Death March, during



Josh Jespersen on Ellingwood Point with a flag bearing the names of fallen soldiers

260,560

Total feet of elevation Jespersen climbed on his quest to ride all 54 fourteeners

which thousands of the POWs were tortured and killed by the Japanese army.

The trip was sobering but underscored part of his mission to get veterans outside: "When you're a vet, you take an oath to protect this land, so why not get out there and enjoy it?" Jespersen says. "You really get a sense that you fought to preserve it and protect it and keep it American." This month, Jespersen will lead a group of former service members on a mountaineering trip in Wyoming's Teton Range, but don't look for him to be setting any more records this ski season. "From now on, when I go out, I'm just going to go ski what I see," Jespersen says. Spoken like a regular ski bum.

—JEFF WARANIAK