

THE ROAD BACK

BY MARY JO MARTIN
Editorial Director

When one hears the word “champion,” the first thing that typically comes to mind is the winner of a competition. But an equally impressive champion is someone who supports, defends or advocates on behalf of others.

All those who have been involved in Operation Rise & Conquer — the innovative program that was rolled out last summer and first written about in *The Wholesaler’s* November issue — can undoubtedly be characterized as champions. They have given much of themselves and used their talents to serve others.

Operation Rise & Conquer gives companies from this industry an opportunity to support our nation’s severely wounded veterans. This unique program enables some of those brave heroes to experience outdoor adventures in the Colorado Rockies — participating in activities that,

because of their injuries, had perhaps seemed out of reach to them.

Activities during the week-long programs include things like mountain biking, whitewater rafting, fishing, kayaking, skiing, climbing and horseback riding. Along the way, they are guided by the team from Adaptive Sports, which provides coaching and the special equipment needed to par-

a strong military background, and we visited the offices of Adaptive Sports. This organization has been working with people with disabilities for more than 25 years, helping them once again be able to participate in outdoor sporting adventures.



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Sports — and get a chance to really bond with each other.

“It’s really all about giving back. Our goal is to send 50 to 70 severely wounded veterans every year. In addition to the important financial support of industry companies that the program needs, we also encourage them to consider sending volunteers from their staff to work with these soldiers, helping them succeed and watching as they have such an uplifting experience. Just think about how meaningful that would be.”

To make the program as broad as possible in our industry, Werner approached Mike Adelizzi, ASA’s Executive Vice President. Adelizzi and ASA’s Executive Committee enthusiastically supported making Operation Rise & Conquer a key part of ASA’s Giving Back initiatives.

Gen. McChrystal joins forces with industry program to support wounded veterans

The Heroes

It takes the heart of a champion to serve in the U.S. military. The training is intense, much sacrifice is required, and with our country engaged in conflicts for more than 10 years, many of our nation’s soldiers and their families have paid a heavy price for their bravery and sense of duty. In addition to the thousands who have given their lives, thousands more have returned home severely wounded both physically and emotionally.

Two of those soldiers — Sgt. Lucas Oplet and Pfc Giovanni Perez — attended Network ASA this past fall in Washington, D.C., to talk about the tremendous experience they had as part of the first group of veterans to be selected for Operation

Gen. Stanley McChrystal gave the keynote address to open Design & Construction Week (KIBIS and IBS).



Exclusive interview

participate in summer or winter activities. The goal is to empower these wounded veterans and inspire them to regain confidence and trust in themselves and others.

It’s been a humbling experience to personally speak with some of these very special people, most recently Gen. (ret) Stanley McChrystal — who has lent his name as Honorary Chairman for Operation Rise & Conquer. I consider each of them a champion for their dedication to serving others. I’m honored to share their stories — and a closer look at Operation Rise & Conquer — with our readers.

The Visionary

Let’s start with the program’s visionary, Gerber and Danze CEO Michael Werner, who, in addition to his corporate responsibilities, devotes a great deal of his time to supporting and promoting causes that he feels strongly about.

As Michael described to me last fall, “I was inspired by the message of Medal of Honor recipient Dakota Meyer when he spoke at the ASA Network 2012 about his battlefield experiences and the difficulties that many soldiers experience when they return home. A few months later, I was in Colorado with Chris Perry, President and CEO of VAMAC, who has

“Ironically, while we were skiing the day before, we saw a military veteran who had been blinded on the slopes. We were so impressed by his courage and ability. As we talked, it just clicked that this might be a powerful way for our industry to provide a healing opportunity for veterans who

‘It just clicked that this might be a powerful way for our industry to provide a healing opportunity for veterans who have sacrificed so much for all of us.’

— Gerber and Danze CEO Michael Werner

have sacrificed so much for all of us.”

Michael also shared some insight into the program itself, and encouraged industry companies and individuals to consider participating.

“One of the benefits of the program is to help these wounded veterans get a break from their hospital rehabilitation, which often goes on for a year or more,” he said. “They get to breathe fresh mountain air, view spectacular scenery in the Rockies, and eat at some of the local restaurants. Each session is very small, with only 10 to 15 soldiers taking part, so they receive a great deal of personalized attention from the experts at Adaptive

Rise & Conquer. While serving our country during the war in Afghanistan, they were both severely wounded and have been undergoing months of treatment and rehabilitation at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

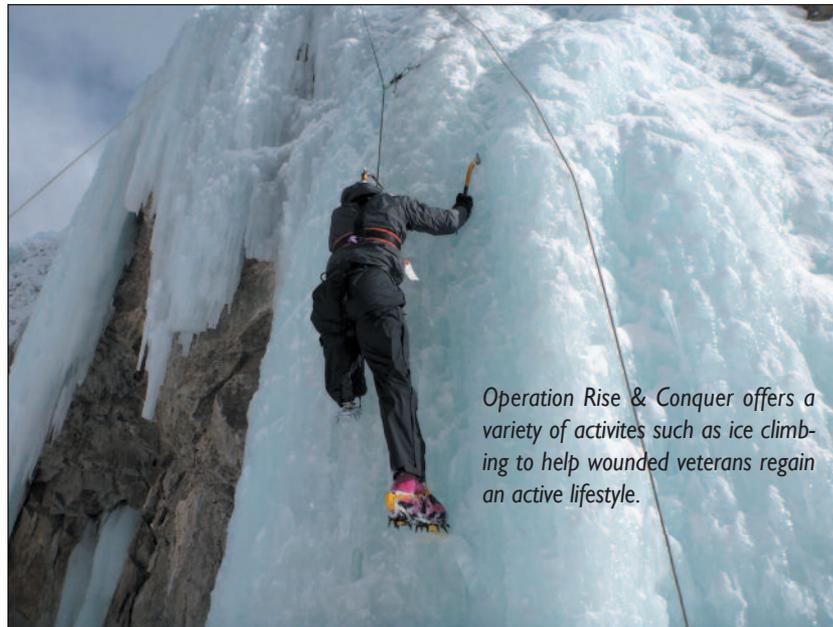
I was honored to spend time with these two young men, learning about their backgrounds, military service, and what it meant to them to participate in the program. One of the first things I noticed about them was not their injuries, but instead, their genuine smiles and incredibly positive attitudes. Rather than dwell on their injuries, they are upbeat and enthusiastic.
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astic about what the future holds.

In May 2012, Sgt. Oppelt, a combat line medic from the 82nd Airborne Division, and his unit took on a new assignment in the Kandahar province. It was an area that had been overrun by Taliban forces and the sound of gunfire was constant. For the next few days, Lucas treated a number of soldiers who were injured by mines and IEDs. On the third morning, as Lucas and a group of soldiers pushed out, he stepped on a pressure plate IED that exploded. He was thrown quite a distance, and despite being in shock and bleeding profusely from his femoral artery, he put on his own tourniquet while another medic applied pressure to the wound. He lost consciousness while being Medi-Vac'd out, and woke up a day and a half later while being transported on a bus. He was flown back to the U.S. for treatment at Walter Reed. While both of his legs were seriously damaged in the explosion, the injuries to his left leg were so trau-



Operation Rise & Conquer offers a variety of activities such as ice climbing to help wounded veterans regain an active lifestyle.

"I don't want this to define me," he said. "I'm not going to lay down and let them win. This has taught me that you never know what day will be your last, so I owe

Pfc Perez is also recuperating at Walter Reed, having lost part of his left arm while serving with the 3rd Infantry Division in Afghanistan.

"Being chosen for Operation Rise & Conquer was amazing," said Pfc Perez, who is now hoping to run in the Marine Corps Marathon. "They had special attachments and equipment that accommodated all of our different injuries. I was able to do things like rock climbing and biking, which I never dreamed I'd be able to experience again after I lost my arm. I used to race BMX bicycles, so was most

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assignments were Commander of the U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force, the Joint Staff and the Joint Special Operations Command. Since his retirement, Gen. McChrystal has been teaching a course on leadership with a former Navy Seal at Yale University. The course is so popular that it typically draws

'It was so nice to get away, let down our guard and just be ourselves for a while, instead of being a patient.'

in excess of 200 applications for the 20-seat class. He also formed The McChrystal Group, a consulting firm that works with companies on the key principles of organizational leadership. And last year, Gen. McChrystal's memoir, *My Share of the Task*, was published.

He was chosen as the keynote speaker to open Design & Construction Week (K/BIS and IBS), held in February in Las Vegas. In a thoughtful and enlightening talk — that at times showed his sense of humor — Gen. McChrystal emphasized the importance of teamwork and leader-

For those who gave much

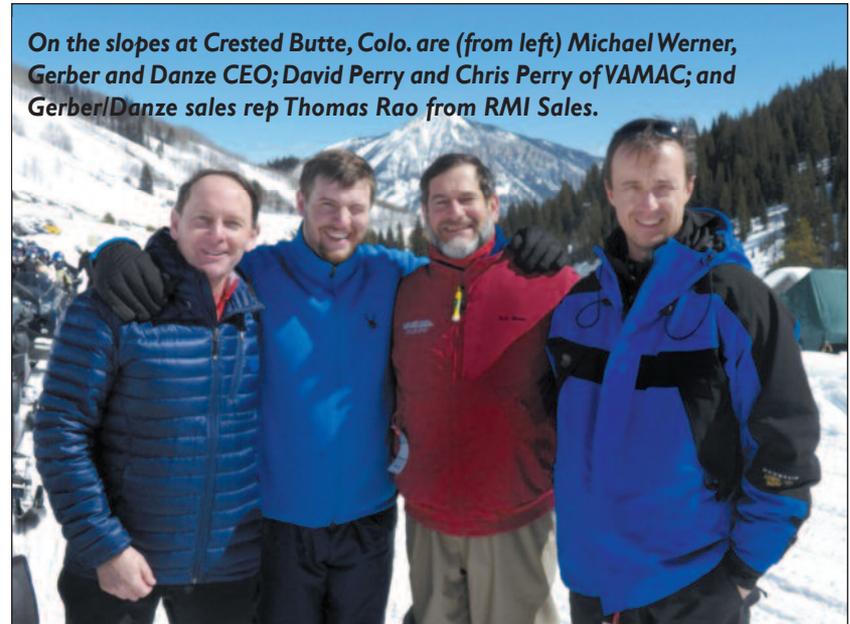
matic that it had to be amputated. He actually was presented his Purple Heart medal while in a medically induced coma.

Married and with two young children, Sgt. Oppelt was determined not to let his injuries change the course of his life.

it to those people who didn't make it home to appreciate each day. I plan to be active and involved in everything I can, especially when it comes to my son and daughter. Prosthetics are so evolved, which is allowing me to enjoy a lot of activities."



A wounded veteran shows himself — and the world — that he can do anything he sets his mind to, such as rock climbing.



On the slopes at Crested Butte, Colo. are (from left) Michael Werner, Gerber and Danze CEO; David Perry and Chris Perry of VAMAC; and Gerber/Danze sales rep Thomas Rao from RMI Sales.

excited about getting on the mountain bikes. But I also really enjoyed working with and riding the horses.

"The people who worked with us were so nice — they wanted us to succeed and helped make sure we all did. And it was a great bonding experience for all of us who have been cooped up at the hospital in rehab. The mountains were beautiful and it was fun to eat out at some of the local restaurants

The Warrior

General (ret.) Stanley McChrystal, a West Point graduate, served our country for more than three decades until his retirement in 2010. Among his most notable

ship not only on the battlefield, but in everyday life.

Surprisingly approachable, he graciously agreed to spend some time with me afterwards to talk about his involvement with Operation Rise & Conquer:

"I met Michael [Werner] at an event last year and he was so passionate in describing the program to me," said Gen. McChrystal. "I appreciated his humbleness and sincere wish to do something for our wounded veterans. But I get approached often about lending my name to a variety of initiatives, and I have to be cautious in selecting which ones to align with. I liked the concept, and when I did my research I liked the reality. I

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am very impressed with the structure of the program, and the benefits it will bring

Giving back

to these soldiers. What Michael has orchestrated is an effort that brings together a lot of people to touch these soldiers in a very real and practical way."



Mary Jo Martin with Annie & Stanley McChrystal.

Gen. McChrystal, like most soldiers a vigorous and active man, explained just why the program could play such an important role in a veteran's recovery.

"One of the things that young people often take for granted is their health," he said. "Many soldiers were athletes growing up and had a very active lifestyle. Then they become soldiers, and that becomes their new identity. Many of their responsibilities in the military involve physical tasks, so they continue to stay in very good shape. And they form a new team with those they serve with on the battlefield.

"When a soldier is wounded on the battlefield, they are immediately evacuated to a medical facility and separated from that team. It's very disconcerting to them. Often, the extent

of their injuries means that they are now faced with a future that is much different from their past. This further separates them not only from their team, but from much of what they identify themselves as and with. They have to adapt to a new way of doing those athletic, active things they always enjoyed.

"Along the way, there is a danger that they will begin to think 'I can't be exactly what I was, so I can't be anything.' But that's not reality. They may not be exactly what they once were, but they can still be amazing. What Operation Rise & Conquer does is help these wounded soldiers reconnect with their background, and get back to a place that is healthy and feels good to them. The program allows them to be physical again, push themselves, and accomplish things they might not have thought possible."

You Can Be A Champion, Too

Werner hopes to generate enough funding to send 50 to 70 veterans through the program annually. The cost to sponsor one veteran is \$3,000 — which includes

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all of their air and ground transportation, housing, meals, activities, programs and equipment.

The Wholesaler was privileged to be among the first group of sponsors for the program — which also included APR Supply, First Supply, Gerber Plumbing Fixtures, Hajoca, Oatey and VAMAC. Other companies such as Columbia Pipe have since signed on.

This is a tremendous way for any industry company to support our brave veterans by providing them with a unique and challenging adventure in the Colorado Rockies, and helping them regain confidence in their abilities.

It is an opportunity for all of us to be champions for those who have been champions for us. 🌐

For additional information, visit www.operationriseandconquer.org or call Jennifer Hulick at 630-754-0109.