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PRESS RELEASE
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By: Staff Sgt. Edward Eagerton

Guided by faith, driven by a calling to serve

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — To look at him, you wouldn't know that he was a decorated combat veteran or that he had just retired after serving 25 years of his military career in the rescue community.

For all cursory observations, he could be anybody.

Senior Master Sgt. Doug Widener, a pararescueman (or PJ) who retired from the 212th Rescue Squadron April 1, sat at a coffee-shop table eating his lunch, dressed in every-day clothes on a warm, spring afternoon, and recounted the years that led him from New Orleans to the Alaska Air National Guard, with whom he deployed four times to Afghanistan, and finally to a newly endeavored second career with the Anchorage Fire Department.

A HUMBLE START.

Selfless service was in his blood. His family had a history of service to the country, and after graduating from high school in 1990, he worked briefly in the civilian workforce before he decided to answer the calling in his heart.

"I got out of high school and worked downtown there for about a year, and then decided that I wanted to look for something more," Widener said. "I knew service was something I wanted to do, just in what capacity, I wasn't sure."

Joking about the movie, *Top Gun*, and its influence in the late 1980s, Widener said he wanted to be a fighter pilot. After an unsuccessful attempt to get into a service academy, he tried to figure out how he could become a pilot. This was when he spoke with a recruiter.

"The recruiter said, 'Oh, you want to be a pilot? Well we can start you off in the enlisted force, and then if you want to transition, you can get your degree,' and that's how it all started. I started off humbly as an aircraft mechanic, and ironically enough, I started off working on helicopters."

The Lord has a way of guiding you to the right place, he explained.

"After going through avionics training, my first assignment was with the 66th Rescue Squadron out of Las Vegas," he said.

There, he worked on HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters.

"That was when Pave Hawks were brand new," Widener said. "They had that new plane smell and very low hours and very little maintenance issues at all. That was just after the first Gulf War, give or take, and they didn't have half the wear and tear on them that they do now."

It was this initial assignment that exposed Widener to the rescue community, where he soon found his true calling.

THAT OTHERS MAY LIVE.

"I was pretty dead set that I was going to be a mechanic and then go to the academy and become a pilot," he said reminiscently. "But then flash forward, and there I am in Las Vegas, working as a mechanic, getting exposed to the rescue mission and the rescue environment. What I saw with this group of guys, the PJs, I was very attracted to the way they took care of each other, the way they related to each other, their mentality and their attitude on life. It looked like a really admirable way to serve your country. I started looking into that, and then after one deployment to Kuwait, I applied to cross train in 1993 to become a PJ."

At the time, he was 23 years old. He would emerge from the training pipeline two and a half years later – a PJ.

"It started with the selection course down in Texas," he elaborated, "then on to dive school, airborne school, survival school up in Washington, water survival down in Florida, freefall parachuting which is now in Yuma, but then it was at Fort Bragg, but the majority of it was at Kirtland Air Force Base."

The training pipeline for the pararescue community is said to be one of the toughest in the military, with a reported washout rate of more than 75 percent. Mindset was everything.

"No matter how bad it gets, you're not going to tap out and quit, you're not going to let your discomfort level get the best of you," he said. "One of things that is really remarkable, is most of the people involved in this line of work, what I've found was that the majority of people that I've had the pleasure to work with, they're extraordinary in their desire to do extraordinary things. They're not necessarily the most extraordinary athletes or thinkers, we're just normal people, but we have this immense desire to be successful. Not everybody in this career field looks like Captain America. We come in all shapes and sizes. We all bring something to the table; the common thread is everybody has the extraordinary desire to help people, to sacrifice and pay whatever price is necessary."

After graduating from the pipeline, his first assignment as a PJ was with the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron out of Hurlburt Field, Florida. After just two and a half years there, he and his wife packed up their truck, drove across the country to Washington state and began their move to Okinawa, Japan, where he was assigned to the 33rd Rescue Squadron.

It was while he was with the 23rd STS in Florida that he first heard about the 212th Rescue Squadron in Alaska.

“We did a deployment for the Bosnian conflict,” he said, “and a couple of guys from Alaska came down to augment the team. I was asking questions about what Alaska was like, and they started telling me about the unit and the mission. The Alaskan team has a certain mystique among the rescue community. There’s an understanding about the guys on the team up here; it’s a very pure form of being a PJ here because you get exposed to all the different disciplines.”

Widener explained that with the size, terrain and varying weather conditions of Alaska, the civil alert commitment of the Alaska Air Guard’s rescue community requires them to often put to use the many specialized skillsets they train for, including mountaineering, parachuting, and land and water survival.

“That operational reality of being asked to do your job and needing to rely on your training on any given day is very unique and very special among the rescue community,” he said. “That’s what drew me up here, that mystique. Some people have called it PJ heaven up here.”

When he was nearing the end of his contract in Japan, Widener decided that he wanted to explore the option of switching to the ANG in Alaska. After hearing about some job openings in the 212th RQS, he conferred with his wife about the possibility of the move. Neither of them had ever been to Alaska at that point.

“My wife was pretty surprised about the idea, but she was really supportive of it,” he said. “So, after four years in Japan, I separated from the Air Force and enlisted in the Air National Guard. That was in 2001.”

Widener was barely into his new house when 9/11 happened.

“We had just moved here, no furniture in the house, things still in boxes and then BANG!” he said while making a loud clap with his hands, “the whole world changed.”

ONE STEP AT A TIME.

Throughout the next 14 years, Widener’s operation tempo never slowed down. He would go on to deploy in support of Operation Enduring Freedom four times to Afghanistan – 2003, 2008, 2010 and 2012. But even between deployments, the mission continued.

"Up here, even in our day to day, when you're in between deployments, it's as if you're always deployed with our mission," he said.

Widener recounted the deployments and the Alaska rescue missions, and the one consistent element to all of it was that everything to him was an opportunity. His eyes scanned the light through the coffee shop window as he replayed the memories of his career.

"I was part of an expedition team on Denali in 2005," he reminisced. "We spent two and a half weeks and had an amazing rescue above 17,000 feet. The next year, I had the opportunity to go back on Denali as part of a four-person climbing patrol. We got to walk in from Wonder Lake; it was just an exceptional experience. I remember getting out of the Suburban at Wonder Lake, getting to the ranger station and thinking 'wow, how do you start that journey?' You just take that one step at a time."

In 2012, Widener was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with Valor for his actions while deployed to Afghanistan in 2010. In the span of five days, he conducted more than 20 missions that ultimately saved 19 lives while under enemy fire.

He then mulled over a rescue mission from 2011 on Mount Hayes.

"These guys were stuck at 11,000 feet," he recalled. "The weather was coming in on them, their tent is gone and they're in a snow cave. It really brought to light again that it's always the teamwork factor in how these missions are executed. Even though I had the opportunity to be the guy on the end of rope, went out and got these guys and brought them back to the helicopter, the pilots did this hover/forward flight because the winds were coming off the nose above 40-50 knots. We're on this ridgeline, and Brian Kile just perched the helicopter on this knife-edge ridge. John Romsper's got me on this belay, and I run out on this ridge, and there's thousands of feet on either side, and I snatched these two guys up and brought them back inside."

He then recalled one of his career highlights as being the senior enlisted PJ during his last deployment to Camp Bastion in Afghanistan in 2012.

"From start to finish, I just couldn't have been prouder of the way everybody performed, the mentality, the professionalism and operational success that everybody had," he said. "Over a four month period, it was something like 305 saves and 280 missions. It was a very busy, high intensity, fast-paced time in the Helmund Province. That whole deployment was one of the highlights of my career."

From the mountains of Afghanistan, to the mountains of Alaska, the meaning of his life was measured in his work – work that he felt was his purpose in life, guided always by his faith in the Lord.

"In my experience, God gave me these abilities," he said somberly. "I've had immense peace with knowing that I'm doing what he designed me to do. How do you deal with the more unpleasant or ugly side of what we get to see; how do you carry that weight and not

let the horrible things that you endure and not let it permeate in your life? It's my trust in the Lord. And knowing him, I don't have any fear. It's not living your life with reckless abandon; it's a knowing that because you have purpose, you live your life with an open hand, instead of living dominated by fear and what could happen, and instead, trying to live each day to the fullest."

Despite the faith, however, the human body is a finite vessel. Considering all of the things he's done throughout his career, he explained, he feels fortunate that he is still in one piece.

"That I'm sitting here now after all of this, still healthy, still functional, it's an amazing blessing," he said smiling. "After all the parachute jumps, scuba dives, helicopter hours, it's what I'm most thankful for. I've had great people taking care of me and made sure that I've gotten to go home to my family when the job is done."

Since moving to Alaska, Widener and his wife brought two daughters into the world, he said. Despite the dangers of his line of work, he never felt that he should stop pursuing his commitment to service.

"The questions I've often been asked," he explained, "is, 'How can you do what you do and be a father? Aren't you scared of something happening to you, and now that you have kids, shouldn't you tone it down a bit?' My response to that has always been, no. Period. My daughters would want me to live my life to the fullest. In order for me to be a great husband and father, I have to live to my fullest potential. For me to back away from that out of fear or out of reservations, that's not fulfilling the potential of my life."

And with that said, after 25 years, Widener felt it was time to retire from life in the military. Although this chapter is ending, he recently began pursuing another career with the Anchorage Fire Department.

Still, as anybody who has spent more than half their life devoted to a single cause would, he feels he's going to miss the community he leaves behind.

"I've had an amazing career and had some unbelievable opportunities that I've been able to take advantage of," he said. "I'm extremely thankful for every moment, even the tough ones, because even the difficult times over the past couple of decades helped forge me into the man I am today. It all contributes to your strength. It's about the organization, the people, the experiences that I've been able to have and the people I've been able to have those experiences with. It's not just the PJs. It's everybody involved, from the aircraft maintenance technicians, pilots, fuels technicians, the supply technicians and the people in medical. We may be the ones that touch the person at the very end of the mission, but it takes all of those people to make it happen."

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Photo Outline:

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Senior Master Sgt. Doug Widener, a pararescueman with the 212th Rescue Squadron, takes part in Exercise Mojave Viper at 29 Palms, California, March 16, 2012. The 210th, 211th and 212th Rescue Squadrons, 176th Wing, Alaska Air National Guard, stationed at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, participated in the exercise with the 3rd Battalion 8th Marines, Camp Lejeune, N.C., before they deployed together to Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Cynthia Spalding)

For additional photos, please visit: <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/161601/guided-faith-driven-calling-serve>