

Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

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Creating the *Duty, Honor, America Tour: Vision and Decision*

Debra Lewis and Doug Adams

“Okay legs, here’s the deal. Only one of you gets to cramp at a time. We’re making it up this volcano without stopping. I am NOT stopping now.” One hundred eighty miles into the last ride of the Duty, Honor, America Tour, I was not about to stop on the ride up the Kilauea Volcano. I might not start up again. And with 18,000 miles behind me, there was no way I was not going to finish the last ride of the tour, cycling 222 miles around the Island of Hawaii on October 6th, 2011.

I did finish the ride that day. It was the culmination of over two years of planning, preparing, training, and cycling that began with a vision on July 31st, 2009, a vision of cycling all fifty states in a year for America’s veterans, military and their families. This Thought Piece describes how we created the Tour.

My name is Doug Adams. I retired from the United States Army in 2000 after 24 years in uniform. (My wife, Colonel (Ret.) Debra Lewis, continued to serve until June 2010, commanding US Army Corps of Engineers districts in Philadelphia, Seattle, and Baghdad, before her final assignment as the Inspector General for the Washington National Guard.) Although retired, I stayed involved with military support organizations, primarily the Association of the United States Army (AUSA). I finished law school and passed the Virginia bar exam. In Washington, where we moved in 2003, I became a stay-at-home dad for Debra’s daughter Emily, while pursuing a Ph.D. long-distance from

George Mason University. I gradually immersed myself in veteran and military activities, eventually assuming leadership positions in the Washington State Guard, the local AUSA chapter, and the Veterans Family Fund of America, which raises money for veterans. This latter organization facilitated my relationship with the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs and its leaders, Director John Lee and Deputy Director Alfie Alvarado-Ramos. Through them and Debra's current and immediate past career experiences, as well as my work with veterans in the Washington State Puget Sound area, I began to develop a better understanding of the issues, problems and concerns that our veterans and current military deal with daily.

My interest in veteran and military issues stemmed not only from my own career, but also from a conversation I had with my father—one of my strongest memories with no date. Sometime in the late 1980s or early 1990s, I was talking to my father, a (since-retired) Episcopal minister, on the phone. My father worked with prisoners, alcoholics, and drug addicts, who were either in or on the way out of their particular circumstances. I remember clearly my father telling me, "Many of the people I work with are veterans. What are YOU doing to take care of them?" His challenge unsettled me, because I was not in a position as an active duty officer to do much for our veterans. However, that conversation spurred me later as I thought about how best to care for them.

I mention this background in detail because I believe any vision or revelation flows from the visionary's experience, regardless of how stunning or out-of-context the vision initially appears to an outside observer. Visioning is creative. Like all creations, a vision

must have ingredients. My vision of fifty states in one year for veterans, military and their families was composed of several ingredients, most of which I did not recognize at the moment of revelation! Only after time allowed space for reflection did I begin to understand the conditions necessary for the creation of the vision, several of which are described above. Two additional ingredients were a bicycle and a mountain. I bought a bicycle—a Cannondale road bike—in mid-July 2009. This was my first bike since high school. As a 51-year-old volunteer, I had succumbed to middle-age spread and was not happy about it. I thought riding a bike would be a fun way to reacquire a modicum of fitness. Also, I had read about NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and Seattle Seahawks head coach Jim Mora climbing Mount Rainier in June 2009 for charity. A conversation, a bicycle, and a mountain: flotsam in the broth of thought waiting for lightning to spark life.

That lightning came in the form of endorphins. I finished running a few times around the 0.9-mile loop surrounding the parade field at Fort Lewis, where we lived 2008-2010. As I cooled down, I happened to look toward the east end of the parade field. In the distance, taking up the horizon, stood 14,411-foot Mount Rainier. When we had moved to Seattle in 2003 and I saw the active volcano soaring over the landscape, I told myself (and no one else) that I wanted to climb that mountain. Six years later, as I stood at the end of the Fort Lewis parade field looking at Mount Rainier, I told myself that “wanting to” was not enough; I “would” climb that mountain. I would climb it not for myself, but for veterans and our troops.

I then took a step. “Our veterans and military deserve more than just climbing a mountain”, I thought. “I should cycle around the state of Washington for our veterans and military.” A second step. “One state is not enough. We have veterans and military from all fifty states—I should cycle through all fifty states in a year for our veterans, military and their families.” This thought rocked me, stopping me where I was walking, and causing me to say aloud, “Wow, that’s a Big Idea!”

Once I realized that I was done with the “big idea” generation phase, I strode toward home, excited but wary. Experience has taught me that before making plans based on a Big Idea, I should “sleep on it.” Visioning creates emotion, but deciding should employ emotion. I was interested in whether this Big Idea would go the way of so many of my others—an inspiration born of excitement that is soon tempered by reality, leading to a rational decision to drop the crazy idea. So, over the next three weeks, I kept the Big Idea to myself. During this time I began to visualize what would happen during the year of cycling. Importantly, most images were mental videos of upcoming events, complete with emotions, rather than diagrams of how to organize for and conduct the project (my first term for the vision). I say importantly, because those images became my tempering reality, shielding the Big Idea from the attempts of Rationalizing Fear to get me to “drop the crazy idea.” I could “see” the daily ride, the dialogues with veterans and citizens, the first and the last days.

Literally, I could not get the idea out of my mind. I was becoming invested in the vision. I had to do it. There was only one problem (well, maybe more like one thousand

problems, but I decided to take them on one at a time). Was it feasible? Was it possible to ride a bicycle through all fifty states in one year, given the weather and roads available to bicycles? Could I ride a bicycle that distance in that timeframe? What became clear to me as I asked these questions is that I had made a decision to commit to the vision. One action remained before that decision was solidified: I had to ask Debra for permission.

I did my homework. I learned that the project was feasible, that the existing road infrastructure was available to bicycles, and that with some basic criteria (weather, terrain, state capitals, and military installations) I could design a route that allowed a cyclist to hopefully avoid the worst weather while hitting important stops in each of the states and doing this in a single year. I originally estimated that the route would require about 15,000 miles. With this estimate I then determined that a cyclist could ride 50-60 miles a day in a year though all fifty states along my route. Could I be that cyclist?

I had a new road bike. I was fifty-one years old. I weighed about 220 pounds. Although I was able to run three miles at a ten-minute-a-mile pace, I was not in the condition necessary to start AND FINISH this project. What could I do to reach the necessary fitness level? Again, I considered some basic criteria, such as the need to start slowly, avoid injury, and cross-train, especially with the Great Northwest winter closing in. Another spark helped these criteria meld together: I found a book. Browsing through a now-defunct Border's Bookstore (which I will miss greatly despite the management's inability to think with profound knowledge) in Hilo, Hawaii, I pulled the

Triathlete's Training Bible by Joe Friel from the shelf. The *Triathlete's Training Bible* has a year-long training plan for an Ironman Triathlon. I had discovered the plan for reaching my needed fitness level. As the saying goes, though, experience is a great teacher. Plans I had previously executed often failed because of a lack of sufficient metrics. Fortunately for me, triathlon training comes built in with its own metrics: triathlons! I decided that if I could complete a full Ironman Triathlon (2.4-mile open-water swim, 112-mile bike ride, and 26.2-mile marathon) that I would prove to myself that I was fit enough to start the cycling tour. Fortune smiled on me yet again. The Wisconsin Ironman was being held in Madison on September 12th, 2010. This was one month before the start of the Tour, allowing me to recover and travel from Wisconsin to our starting point in New York.

I had a vision. I had the concept of the operation. I had a route, a timeline, and a plan to prepare physically. I was ready to talk to Debra.

Three weeks after my vision creation experience, Debra and I sat down to synchronize our calendars, a regular event, which largely consisted of me telling her when my volunteer activities would interfere with her “earning-the-bacon” activities. This time, though, I surprised her by asking her if I could talk to her about something. She assented and with some trepidation I launched into my PowerPoint-laden presentation. As I concluded, I asked her if she had any questions. She replied, “Just one. You don’t expect me to ride too, do you?” I laughed nervously, and then told her I was just looking for moral support, that I didn’t anticipate her being intimately involved in the actual tour.

“Well then, it sounds like a very nice idea.” With those words, we moved from vision creation to decisions about mission and logistics plan development, which we would continue to refine to the last day of the Tour on October 6th, 2011.

Biographies

Even though they were classmates at West Point (in the first class with women since 1802), Deb and Doug first met 17 years after graduation at the Pentagon in 1997. Their relationship evolved from co-workers to friends to husband and wife. (This highly unlikely pairing occurred despite Deb's earlier public foreswearing to ever again date military men, especially West Pointers, and really especially classmates!!!) With over 60 years of combined military service, they separately held numerous leadership and followership positions in their careers, facing and overcoming many personal challenges to be who they are today. As Deb and Doug's relationship deepened, they discovered their complementary, yet different approaches to life and learning. Deb's approach is more experimental (think 'recon by fire') versus Doug's often theoretical (think 'observation'). Both approaches have offered countless opportunities to serve others in small and large ways over the years. These past 14 years together made it possible for Deb and Doug to take on impressive challenges, such as Deb's three Engineer District military commands in the U.S. and in Iraq, and Doug's championing Veterans issues and supporting neighbors during natural disasters. Both also continued their education, with Deb earning a Master of Science in National Resource Strategy and Doug receiving a Juris Doctor. Most recently, they created a non-profit to help them prepare for and complete the Duty, Honor, America Tour, during which Doug cycled over 18,000 miles through 50 states in one year for veterans, military and families with Deb as his one-person support team or CEO (Chief Everything Officer, except cycling) and their dog Daisy as security. Together, Deb and Doug have three children, who remind them what's really important. Always continuously learning, growing, and taking risks along the way, they've joined forces with many talented and like-minded allies to make a positive difference for others. You can certainly relate to Deb and Doug's diverse experiences, which can inspire and encourage us to bring out the best in each other. For more in-depth biographies, please click on their website link below and also visit their Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube links found in the top left corner of their website.

Website: www.DutyHonorAmerica.com

Contact: Deb and Doug can be reached by e-mail at dhatour@gmail.com, for additional information about this Ongoing Discussion session.

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