

● person of interest

COLD WARRIOR

Ski mountaineering and life lessons from a Soviet-era Special Forces veteran

As told to Devon O'Neil /// Photo by Ryan Dearth

Suffering comes easier to some than others, but perspective helps. Just ask Mike Hagen. Considering Hagen spent his twenties training to do battle with the Soviet Union as a US Army Green Beret, it should come as no surprise that he is able to race up snowy mountains with the win-at-all-costs resolve and results you'd expect from a West Point-educated Special Forces veteran. Hagen, a Breckenridge resident and endurance coach, qualified for the Ski Mountaineering World Championships in 2014—at age 52. He once completed an Ironman triathlon in 8 hours and 51 minutes and a marathon in 2:36, and before leaving the Army as a major in 2007, he commanded its prestigious World Class Athlete Program for four years. Now the married father of two marches at a slower pace, relatively speaking. He is a frequent and cheerful presence at local races, where you would never know what he used to do if you didn't ask. So ask we did, inviting Hagen to condense a few chapters from a storied personal journey.

I GREW UP on a farm in Olivia, Minnesota. We had chickens and sheep and raised cucumbers to sell to the pickleries and raspberries to sell to the local groceries. I suppose growing up on a farm established a bit of a work ethic. I didn't mind being out in the fields working. Or actually, I probably did mind it, but you learn to put up with it.

WHERE WE LIVED, there was one town five miles east and another town five miles west, and I could see them both from my house.

I WAS THE kind of kid who liked war novels and spy novels. I liked the idea of serving my country. It was the height of the Cold War, so I studied Russian



and international relations at West Point and went into intelligence.

THERE WAS SOME legitimate concern that the Soviet Union might invade Europe. So the Special Forces group we were supporting had lots of missions; some were called "direct action," which entailed going behind enemy lines and blowing things up. They were one-way missions: There was no plan to get you out. You could try to get out on your own, but you'd have to avoid the enemy for 1,000 miles to get to Finland or something. It wasn't going to happen.

EVENTUALLY I GOT offered [the opportunity] to become a team leader with the Green Berets. We had some nuclear missions that I'm not going to discuss. I never felt like war was imminent, because the MAD—mutual assured destruction—theory was working. The Soviets knew they couldn't come out ahead.

I MET MY wife, Eva, while I was stationed in Naples, Italy. She was an Austrian ski instructor, and we had traveled up for a ski trip to St. Johann. I met her at the social the first afternoon and one thing led to another. We got married a year later.

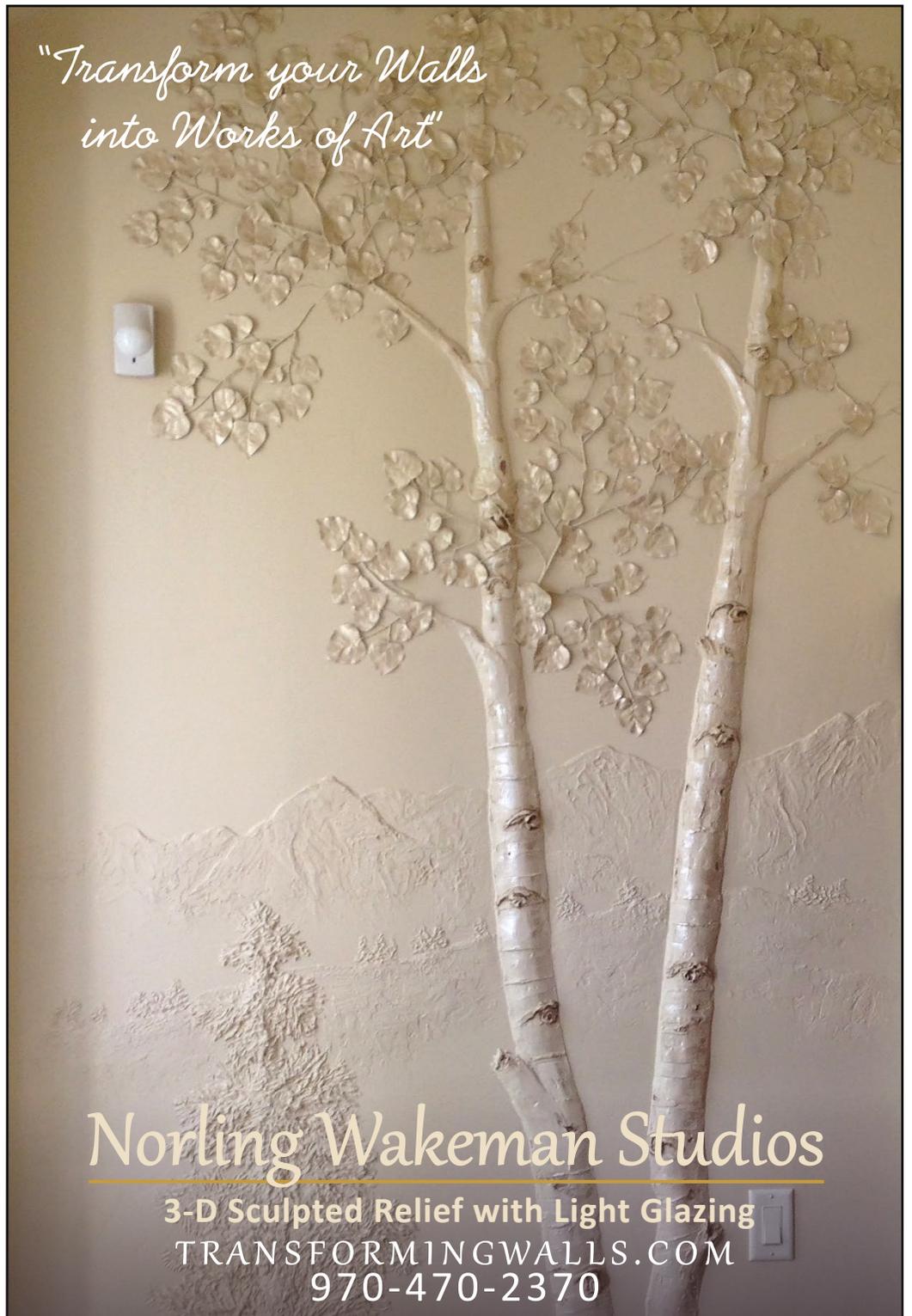
WE'RE PRETTY MUCH exercise addicts. Gotta do it every day or we go a little batty, get a little hyper, angry, don't relax. So we like getting up high and there's just more of that here.

I COACH ABOUT 35 athletes. All of them are recreational—no pros. The mental side is a huge component to maximizing performance. You could take people with the same genetic ability and training, and on race day some will be 20 percent better just because of their mental strength.

TRAINING HARD IS part of that. Pushing yourself and getting used to discomfort, it becomes a lot easier to deal with it during the race. But it's also important to go easy on your easy days.

THE BEST ADVICE I've gotten would have to be something along the lines of perseverance and forgoing the short-term, immediate satisfaction for longer-term goals; and realizing that longer-term goals take time to develop, and it's the little things that will get you there. So be patient. **CSM**

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