

Pike's Peak or Bust

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Pike's Peak wasn't really the mountain involved in this incident, but it's only a couple thousand feet taller than the one a couple of Sailors tackled—at a price.

A 22-year-old PO3 and a 33-year-old CPO will be sidelined for more than a month apiece because they didn't listen to the warnings they had heard at boot camp or in an MWR safety briefing before going mountain climbing. Both have the sickle-cell trait (SCT), a condition in which you have one gene for sickle cell hemoglobin and another for normal hemoglobin. People with this condition run serious risks anytime they are at high altitudes.

Both Sailors had signed forms acknowledging they understood the risks they were taking that July day. Those forms discussed all the environmental risks (rugged terrain, falls, hypothermia, sunburn, high-altitude sickness) and certified an individual's capability to participate in the climb.

While hiking at approximately 10,000 feet, both Sailors experienced stomach pains and descended to a lower level, but the pains didn't get any better.

The PO3 was admitted to a local civilian hospital with an initial diagnosis of altitude sickness. Meanwhile, the CPO was

admitted to a Navy hospital with an initial diagnosis of viral gastroenteritis. Within 24 hours, though, doctors confirmed both patients were SCT positive. They subsequently ordered CT scans, which showed both patients were suffering from splenic infarct (sickling).

This condition occurs when people with SCT are exposed to a combination of altitude, extreme physical exertion, and dehydration. Red blood cells deform into the characteristic sickle shape and can become lodged in the spleen, which leads to pain and/or further complications of the spleen, including tissue loss.

Although screening for SCT occurs in basic training, the secretary of the Navy does not disqualify anyone in the aviation, undersea or general-duty programs because of it.

Why did these two Sailors ignore the warnings and go mountain climbing? Both said they had engaged in high-altitude sports in the past with no adverse effects, so they assumed nothing would happen this time, either. Although it was the PO3's first effort at mountain climbing, he had gone skydiving before, and the CPO had successfully climbed the mountain on two previous occasions. ❌