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GUEST COLUMNS:

My friend, American hero, Gen. Jim Hall, USAF (Ret.)

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Little did I know that, years after being in a parachuting accident during a year at Oxford, I would meet Gen. James C. "Jim" Hall, USAF (Ret.), one of the greatest parachutists of all time, and then plan a recent celebration of his many professional and personal achievements.

Gen. Hall is an American hero who has played a significant role in the history of aviation.

As Lt. Col. John Buckley, USAF (Ret.), who spent 24 years as an Air Force officer, said, "Many of the most important parachute developments done for the USAF in its first 30 years came from Jim Hall. He truly was a USAF pioneer."

Among the general's many accomplishments: he created the premier parachuting program for the U.S. Air Force Academy, which still today trains 600 cadets annually and ranks first in the world. He also created new techniques to make parachuting safer; wrote story lines and did stunt work in Hollywood; and was the recipient of many of the most prestigious medals in his field.

I first met Hall at the historic Brown Palace Hotel while working on a congressional campaign for a Navy F-14 pilot.

Soon after meeting Gen. Hall, I realized that he was unlike any other person I'd ever met – he was the stuff of John Wayne movies. With a razor sharp memory and dry sense of humor, and endless courage and common sense, he is "true grit" brought to life.

Gen. Hall introduced me and the candidate to everyone he knew, including then-Cong. Bob Beauprez and then-Secretary of State Mike Coffman. He even became co-chairman of the campaign, along with Brig. Gen. "Ace" Steve Ritchie, and was available around the clock to fill my mind with wisdom and my rolodex with valuable contacts. The friendships he helped foster outlasted the campaign, and he, like many of my new friends, remained a key ally on many projects.

In 2010, I became agent and publicist for Tenor Anthony Kearns, a great talent who was a founding member of the popular group, The Irish Tenors. While doing research, I discovered that Anthony had a distant cousin in Colorado named Capt. Michael Kearns, USAF (Ret.). Upon meeting Capt. Kearns, I learned he was a Master Parachutist – the first man to parachute on all seven continents. I introduced Capt. Kearns to Gen. Hall, and the two became fast friends.

Gen. Hall said, “It’s a match made in heaven.” (The two parachutists even have the same birthday—April 14.) Kearns has been instrumental in preparing Hall’s parachuting exhibit for the United States Air Force Academy.

On March 24, Gen. Hall’s family and friends gathered to celebrate his life and achievements at the Glenmoor Country Club in Denver. Some say you can tell a man’s character by the company he keeps. This is true of Gen. Hall, as many of Colorado’s top echelon were in attendance, including those already mentioned as well as former Gov. Bill Owens and Secretary of State Scott Gessler, Mort and Edie Marks, and many others.

Dressed in fine military attire and impressive medals, Gen. Hall sat in the front row, surrounded by friends and family, including Dr. Hai P. Bui and Michelle Bui, and others from the Vietnamese community—which he has helped foster in Denver. One by one, leaders from Colorado’s military and political sectors mentioned in their remarks that Gen. Hall continues to be an inspiration to them, and a mentor, who prefers to “get things done” than to take credit for them.

The evening’s entertainer, Anthony Kearns, was at his absolute best. During his performance, he sang classics from the ages, in a rich tenor voice that enthralled the crowd. He also sang *Ave Maria*, which he frequently dedicates to the military wounded, and the Irish classic, *Danny Boy* – a song that reminds Gen. Hall of his coal-mining father from Pennsylvania. While his father’s life was tough, tougher than most of us will ever face, Gen. Hall said his father never missed a day of work. Eventually, says Gen. Hall, “The coal mines killed him, at age 54.” Gen. Hall said his father, with roots in Ireland’s soil, would have been honored – as he is – to celebrate such a special night with a “world-great, Irish Tenor like Anthony Kearns.”

By the end of the night, the room was heavy with emotion. Just a few days before, Mr. Kearns – and his longtime accompanist Patrick Healy – performed for the President of the United States, House Speaker John Boehner, the Prime Minister of Ireland, and a hundred members of Congress and foreign dignitaries. Therefore, it seemed fitting that one of his next stops be for a great American hero, Gen. Hall, and his guests.

The tribute was even more poignant because it was a benefit for Gen. Hall’s son, James C. “Eagle” Hall, Jr., a Special Olympics athlete.

As the general said in his remarks, “My family – they are the wind beneath my wings.”

When he said that, I was reminded of Isaiah 40:31, “Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

The tribute was a rare moment to celebrate a living legend in our midst, one whom we hope to cherish for many years to come. Rest assured, Gen. Hall’s legacy of fearless courage, friendship, patriotism, and “can-do American attitude” – where nothing, nothing, is impossible – will endure. His legacy will continue to soar with the eagles in our skies, and he will continue to be the wings of inspiration for generations ahead.