

FRONTIER FULFILLMENT

VETERANS SUCCEEDED IN ALASKA
TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY



GETTY IMAGES

By Kit Bernardi

“**T**HERE'S SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL happening off our bow,” Alaskan Dream Cruises Captain Gordon Ringberg announces over the Baranof Dream's loudspeaker.

I wondered what could be more spectacular than our morning aboard the 49-passenger expedition vessel cruising Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve. My family and I were up close to towering Margerie Glacier's jagged, sapphire-blue face. I felt its frigid breath and heard it

speak: soft hissing like air escaping a tire; knuckle-cracking pops; thunder rolling through the ice as massive, crystalline chunks splintered off and crashed into the glassy sea.

I grab my binoculars and head toward the bow. Seagulls swirl above a patch of roiling water. A dozen humpback whales rise in unison, their mouths agape. They look like giant, open black mussel shells. This is bubble net feeding, whereby whales swim up from the depths in tight formation while communicating in high-

CONTINUED »



Ryan Carle, deckhand on the Baranof Dream

GETTY IMAGES; KIT BERNARDI

pitched calls and exhaling air. Fizzing bubbles trap panicked herring.

Exploring Alaska's natural beauty and being part of the Baranof Dream's team are what deckhand **Ryan Carle** likes about his seasonal job. A retired Marine and pastor, Ryan's military career includes work in the Intelligence Unit at Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base Fort Worth in Texas; deployment to Iraq's Al Asad Airbase in 2009; and three years active duty in the Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron while stationed at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni in Japan.

"There are a lot of parallels between the military and tourism operations onboard a cruise boat, only it's safer," Carle says. "In addition to a chain of command, teamwork is essential to our mission to create a community of crew and guests and deliver a safe, enjoyable experience amidst sublime nature."

Pristine wilderness and tourism employment opportunities attract military veterans to live and work in the 49th state. Many in the military first experienced Alaska during their service at one of Alaska's nine active military bases.

Currently, there are more than 22,000 U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps personnel, plus 4,700 Guardsmen and reservists in Alaska. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, Alaska is one of four states — including Montana, Virginia and Wyoming — where veterans account for more than 10 percent of the adult population. A 2019 Housing Assistance Council report said that the state's 65,186 veterans accounted for 12.2 percent of Alaska's adult population.

HISTORY, GASTRONOMY AND THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Anchorage is Alaska's largest city and home to the state's biggest base, Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, where **Derrick Green** worked as a National Guardsman after 11 years as a military policeman in Alabama, Hawaii and Alaska.

While in the Alaska National Guard, he started pop-up breakfast eateries around Anchorage. In 2020, Green opened Waffles and Whatnot restaurant in East

CONTINUED »



Derrick Green, owner of Waffles and Whatnot restaurant



SALUTE TO SERVICE IN SEWARD

Situated on Resurrection Bay in the mountainous Kenai Peninsula 125 miles south of Anchorage is **Seward Military Resort**, where military personnel have been vacationing since 1944 when the U.S. Army's Fort Raymond was deactivated and converted into a military recreation area.

In addition to active-duty and retired service members and reservists, the resort is open to Purple Heart recipients, former POWs and all veterans with VA-documented, service-connected disability ratings.

Marine veteran Barbara Williams and her husband, Frank, a retired veteran of 30 years working in military public health service, have vacationed at Seward Military Resort periodically for 35 years.

"We love coming here," Barbara says. "We've stayed in the original Quonset huts, motel and RV sites. Everything you need is right here."

U.S. Army veteran Jason Ille is the resort supervisor-recreation specialist. After he retired, Ille managed fitness centers and outdoor recreation programs for Army facilities in Germany, but "I plan to stay in Alaska because no place is more beautiful than right here."

The resort's accommodations include 55 motel rooms; eight townhouses; a log cabin; 40 RV sites with water, electric and cable hookups; six yurts; and three tent sites.

— Kit Bernardi



Matt Worden

Nike Site Summit, one of eight Hercules Missile batteries in Alaska

Anchorage. He and his wife, Liron, run the restaurant and its community initiatives, which include advocacy for mental health and veteran suicide prevention.

Waffles and Whatnot has garnered notice from *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* host Guy Fieri, but Green was motivated to cook by a desire to help his mom, Linda, and his first wife, Shirili, brave serious illness by eating healthier takes on American comfort foods. Green created versatile, nutritious waffle and chicken batters, now the staples of his restaurant's menu.

"The military taught me, 'Do. Not. Quit.' I had to find a way to help them," Green says. "Although they both passed, every day I work to accomplish the same mission — to help people live life by making them good, nutritious food."

To understand the state's important role in the country's military defenses and development, I go to the nonprofit Alaska Veterans Museum in downtown Anchorage. **Suellyn Wright Novak**, a retired Air Force colonel, is the museum's founding director and historian emeritus. She led me through the museum's

curated artifact and photographic exhibits explaining Alaskan veterans' roles in military missions dating from the Civil War — which predates the 1867 purchase of the Alaska Territory from Russia.

For a deeper understanding of what military service was like in Alaska during the Cold War, I tour the Nike Site Summit atop 3,900-foot Mount Gordon Lyon, one of eight U.S. Army Nike Hercules Missile batteries in the state. The nonprofit Friends of Nike Site Summit works tirelessly to preserve the nation's most complete surviving missile site. Army veteran volunteers, including some who served at the site, conduct summertime tours.

Just as missile launch codes are top secret, the best places to pick wild berries are considered classified information among Alaskans. Lucky for us, Air Force veteran **Matt Worden**, owner of Go Hike Alaska, knows where to find summer's berry bounty. He takes us on a foraging tour in the southwest corner of 495,204-acre Chugach State Park.

While hiking through white spruce and hemlock forest and across rushing creeks, Worden explains the complex biology,

diverse geography, geology and natural history of the region. An on-staff master naturalist teaches us traditional foraging techniques, what's edible (and not) and how to "pick clean" to prevent plant damage. Above the tree line, we find ripe, unpawed raspberries, serviceberries and blueberries. I pick handfuls, eating more than I put in our basket brimming with forest edibles for lunch.

FOR THE DOGS

Alaska Railroad's Denali Star service from Anchorage to Denali National Park and Preserve is the same route thousands of World War II servicemen and women took to enjoy a week's leave from duties defending Alaska from Japanese invasion. The Army took over the park, then called Mount McKinley National Park, turning the hotel into a recreation center offering the same wide variety of outdoor activities as the park does today.

Our first stop is Denali Sled Dog Kennels, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. Denali is the only national park with a working sled dog kennel, which is

CONTINUED »





Jason Reppert & Throne



Matt Barnaby



Jeff Budd



Travis Mingo

responsible for helping preserve and protect 2 million acres of federally designated wilderness.

We hear barking well before the five-dog team appears pulling a wheeled cart with Army veteran and Denali ranger **Jason Reppert** onboard. In 2021, Reppert was appointed to his dream job by the Veterans' Preference program. His experience mushing dogs for 14 years and the military's strenuous physical training regimen equip him to work long days with Denali's dogs year-round.

"You must trust the dogs to read the landscape and see a safe path in even the darkest nights and harshest sub-Arctic conditions," Reppert says. "If you don't constantly stay mentally in tune with them, you get into trouble. Sled dogs have taught me to live life in the present on and off the trail."

PRECIOUS FOR MORE THAN METAL

Long before it became a boom town in the 1880s Gold Rush, Juneau was a precious food destination for the Tlingit Nation. Alaska's state capital is named for prospector Joe Juneau, but the Tlingit name for their ancestral home, Dzantik'i Heeni, means "precious water for the starry flounder."

Today, Juneau's reputation as a food town is rising like the region's tides. Local chefs are reeling in national culinary industry accolades, including James Beard Award nominations and multiple Great

American Seafood Cook-off wins.

Like most visitors to Juneau, I photographed Mendenhall Glacier and Nugget Falls waterfall northwest of downtown. But equally memorable are Juneau's museums.

The Alaska State Museum's engaging exhibits dive deep into the Greatland's human and natural histories. Inside a Quonset hut exhibit, I watch original film footage documenting bloody WWII battles to seize Alaska's Attu and Kiska islands occupied by Japanese forces. Juneau's WWII Alaska Territorial Guard memorial bronze statue honors 6,300 Alaska Native volunteers who served as lookouts protecting the state's 6,400 miles of rugged coastline from Japanese invasion.

Nearby, Barnaby Brewing Company is owned by Coast Guard veteran and self-taught brewer **Matt Barnaby**. At age 18, Matt served in the Bering Sea aboard the historic USCGC cutter *Storis*, then the fleet's oldest ship. Now he's a civilian watchstander at Juneau's District 17 Coast Guard command center and runs his craft brewery.

"I like the creativity of making something from scratch," Barnaby says. "It all began with making jellies from berries my wife and I picked in the Tongass National Forest."

Barnaby started homebrewing his own beer recipes, then opened the nanobrewery in 2016.

Barnaby Brewing Company has won more than a dozen international awards at the annual U.S. Open Beer Championship.

LAND AND SEA

Sitka is wedged between the Pacific Ocean and Tongass National Forest, the

northern hemisphere's largest temperate rainforest. For a bit of adventure, we hop into Army Infantry veteran **Jeff Budd's** 1973 Checker Marathon car for a spin through city history. A 27-year resident of Sitka, Budd operates Sitka Checkered Tours.

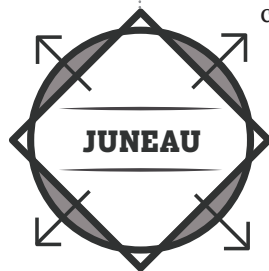
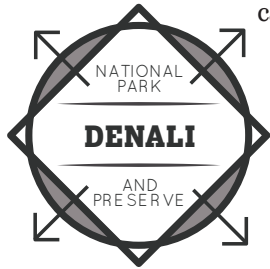
On our 15-mile drive, he shares the town's rich history starting with the Tlingit people, then the Russian occupation, America's purchase of the Alaska Territory, World War II military presence and today's fishing and tourism industries.

From Sitka, we board the Baranof Dream and spend the next nine days cruising the Inside Passage through Tracy Arm-Fjords Terror Wilderness, Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve and Misty Fjords National Monument Wilderness.

Our small ship can navigate remote inlets and secluded coves sheltered by old-growth forest. We kayak, hike and view wildlife without another ship in sight and take guided cultural excursions to meet Alaska Native artisans and storytellers in Wrangell, Kasaan and Ketchikan.

Travis Mingo, a retired 21-year U.S. Coast Guard veteran, is operations manager for Alaskan Dream Cruises, the state's only Indigenous-owned cruise company.

"I love working and living here," Mingo says. "Alaskans enjoy freedoms of living off the land and sea on a grand scale. This experience is not as readily available in the Lower 48. Our constant proximity to vast, raw nature requires coexistence and commands mutual respect."



CONTENTS

2022 SPECIAL EDITION
VETERANS AFFAIRS

FEATURES



WELDON B. JOHNSON/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

50 HIDDEN HISTORY
Project unlocks secrets of
enslaved Union soldiers



WILLIAM MEADOWS AND LANNY ASEPERMY

58 VALIDATING VALOR
Race, religion may have cost some
WWI heroes the Medal of Honor



OPERATION HOMEFRONT

64 AT THEIR SERVICE
Operation Homefront celebrates
20 years of helping vets in need



42

**NORTHERN
EXPOSURE**
Veterans at home
in Alaska tourism
and hospitality

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UP FRONT

10 OUTCOME FOCUSED
Q&A with VA Secretary
Denis McDonough

16 REFORM ROADBLOCK
Infrastructure panel
gets sidelined by
Senate

20 REBEL RECALL
Confederate names
to be removed from
military assets

26 STAR SEARCH
Project aims to honor
all WWII dead

**32 ACHIEVING
ACCREDITATION**
Navajo Nation can file
VA benefit claims

34 SEARCH TOOL
Zillow adds VA loan
status to condo
listings

36 LOCAL LEGEND
WWII vet has eight-decade
history with shipyard



DEB CRAM/SEACOAST ONLINE



**USA
TODAY.**

SPECIAL EDITION
**VETERANS
AFFAIRS**

FREE
2022 EDITION



**HEALTH &
WELLNESS**
Expanding benefits,
improving outcomes

**TRANSITION
TALES**
Aiding the return to
civilian life

**RETRO
RECOGNITION**
Honoring heroes from
Civil War to WWII

**EDUCATION &
EMPLOYMENT**
Schools, companies
focused on vets