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# Veterans Discover Allure Of Jobs in Western Wilderness

Sequoia National Park draws crews that build wilderness pathways. James Morin, below, is among the veterans involved in the program.

By FELICITY BARRINGER

SEQUOIA NATIONAL PARK, Calif. — On the hillside above Evelyn Lake, deep in the southern Sierra Nevada, it was surprisingly easy to tell time: precisely at noon, a loud whoop echoed amid the black-flecked granite and dust, signaling lunch hour for the 17-person crew repairing the trail to the lake.

“How much rock do you think we moved today?” Gregory Snyder asked his work partner, James Morin, over the metallic clang of rakes, shovels, mallets and pickaxes.

“About five tons,” Mr. Morin guessed. Not bad for a morning’s work building wilderness paths with tools little different from the ones the Egyptians used to build the pyramids. Not bad at all.

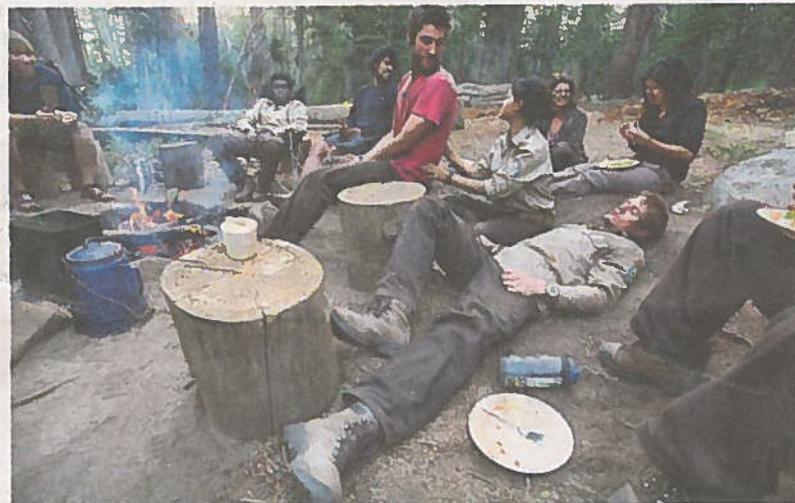
Fourteen miles from the nearest road and thousands of miles from the areas of conflict and tension where the two men served in the Army, Mr. Snyder (a former air traffic controller in Iraq) and Mr. Morin (a tank corpsman on the Korean Peninsula) and five other former military men are breaking a trail, figuratively and literally. They are part of a pilot program run by the California Conservation Corps, which gives veterans a chance to learn skills and perhaps pursue careers preserving public lands.

The two Army veterans along with two Navy veterans, three Marines, seven civilians and three supervisors, are part of a backcountry crew shoring up and clearing debris from paths that transport hikers from a world of Facebook into a more natural life, where encounters with sharp-smelling bear clover or the shrub’s namesake are possible.

The effort to attract veterans, many either unemployed or adrift in a turbulent economy, into the backcountry is new to California this year. The program took root in Colorado in 2009 and has spread from the Rockies to the rest of the West. It is a collaboration among many government agencies and nonprofits, particularly a three-year-old group called Veterans Green Jobs.

Bill Doe, the chief executive, said the number of veterans participating was small but growing: perhaps 300 since the program’s inception. The number on trail crews this summer is about 100, estimated Harry Bruell, the executive director of the Southwestern Conservation Corps. Like the California Conservation Corps, whose logo adorns Mr. Snyder’s and Mr. Morin’s hardhats, the Southwestern Corps offers a chance to cut trees and rebuild switchbacks amid huge forests and tiny flowers.

The veterans benefit from having work (albeit at \$8 an hour) and from being in a familiar situation: part of a small group in a far-off location with a little-understood job to do. “This reminds me of Fallujah, being in a remote area with a tight family,” said Aaron Hernandez, a former Marine who served as a diesel mechanic in the Iraqi city during a



Members of the crew relaxing at camp, above, five miles from Evelyn Lake; an illustrated journal by one worker shows flowers, animal tracks and a storm moving over a meadow.



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bloody assault in 2004. “There were 10 mechanics, and we all lived together, we all ate together, we all worked together. That was what kept us going.”

Mr. Bruell said he had heard much the same from others in similar programs. “You have all these people who had all these experiences, trained expensively at government cost, put their bodies on the line and have all kinds of skills,” he said.

The backcountry provides a respite from the very different demands

of civilian life.

“You’re out here in the middle of nowhere,” said Mr. Snyder, 26, who attended Bowling Green State University in Ohio. “It gives you time to reflect. You don’t have to deal with all the chaos in society. You have to deal with yourself and your community, and it’s a very small community. It’s easy to function.”

The close quarters, heavy-duty chores and interdependence of a backcountry camp reminded participants of the military but with a new

wrinkle. Most of the civilians on the crew have lacked contact with military life. “People outside the military, they think people in the military who’ve been veterans and been to Afghanistan and Iraq, they think like all of us have, like, P.T.S.D.,” Mr. Snyder said, referring to post-traumatic stress disorder. “They are really kind of cautious at first.”

In its last big job before moving on to the Inyo National Forest, the Sequoia crew rerouted a trail near Evelyn Lake under the direction of Major Bryant, leader of a permanent trail crew from the National Park Service. They reduced a steep grade by adding six switchbacks, each anchored with a massive keystone that they found, unearthed and replanted. Each switchback was dedicated by the team to someone who died not long ago, like the singer Amy Winehouse or the author J. D. Salinger.

Emergencies also forged common bonds. A lesson in using a cross-cut saw turned into a lesson in fleeing as the log broke loose and rolled downhill, catching a comrade, whom the group rescued.

A more serious emergency had some crew members cutting trees to create a trail and a helicopter landing area while others — Mr. Snyder included — ran two miles to get oxygen from a ranger station for a 57-year-old visitor who had had a heart attack. The man survived.

Crew members networked with every ranger and park supervisor they met. At least three want to land permanent backcountry jobs; Mr. Snyder wants to become a backcountry firefighter.

“Wild-land firefighting, as anybody understands, it’s a military operation,” said Mr. Doe, listing the skills required: “communications, traversing over terrain with lots of equipment on your back, using chain saws.”

Finally, Mr. Doe added, “There’s the element of risk.”

Seeing bears and mountain lion tracks, catching a trout with bare hands, as Mr. Snyder did last month, is gravy.