**Showcasing the DNR: Honoring conservation officers with military backgrounds**

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Veterans Day is one day to appreciate and thank soldiers, Marines, airmen and sailors who spent years of their lives defending our country’s freedom and protecting the rights of the American people.

Some of those military veterans continue to actively serve the people of Michigan as conservation officers in the Law Enforcement Division of the Department of Natural Resources.

There are 25 military veterans serving throughout the DNR’s current conservation officer ranks. Their service spans every branch of the military, various ranks and backgrounds.

Conservation officers protect the state’s natural resources, environment and the health and safety of the public. Without this protection, outdoor enthusiasts would risk losing their ability to enjoy Michigan’s natural resources, as a result of overharvesting of fish and game and environmental damage.

“Parents will say, ‘This is who protects the deer,’ but we also protect the rights of all people in Michigan,” said Corporal Ivan Perez, who has been a conservation officer for 25 years.

Perez was stationed in Saginaw with the U.S. Coast Guard from 1990-95, where he met conservation officers who docked their boats at the same pier. A Texas native, Perez grew up hunting and fishing, and was interested in pursuing a career as a conservation officer.

If you ask officers why they elected to protect Michigan’s natural resources, they will give answers mirroring those behind their decision to serve our country – for something greater than themselves.

“After separating from the military, I wanted to continue service which was both beneficial to my state and fulfilling to myself,” said Sgt. Chris Maher, who supervises conservation officers in Macomb, St. Clair and Lapeer counties.

Maher joined the Army in 2002 and became a truck driver. He spent 2003-05 in Iraq, where he transported units in combat.

“I worked and fought beside many incredible men and women,” Maher said. “All of us faced daily adversity and got through it as a team.”

Maher served in the Army for 12 years, ending his career as a first lieutenant with the National Guard, responsible for leading his unit’s day-to-day logistics and operations.

“Leadership was the most valuable skill I learned in the military,” Maher said.

Maher’s peers echo the value in leadership, a trait that all conservation officers use daily, at all ranks.

Steven Burton, assistant chief of the DNR Law Enforcement Division, retired from the military at the rank of major, after serving in the Army National Guard for 22 years, including a combat tour in Iraq from 2007-08.

“I wanted to serve my country, its citizens, and the ideals of a free democracy,” Burton said. “The Army allowed me to learn leadership skills through trial and error by permitting me to make mistakes, receive critical feedback, and coach me into making better leadership decisions for the good of my unit and its members.”

While stationed in the Upper Peninsula as the commander of Bravo Company, 107th Engineer Battalion, Burton worked into the early hours of Sept. 11, 2001. Little did he know that when his wife woke him after the first plane struck the World Trade Center's North Tower, that those events would lead him to Iraq in the coming years.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, Burton witnessed the same selfless service that motivated him to join the military displayed by his soldiers. Three weeks into his tour, one of his unit vehicles was struck with an improvised explosive device (IED) – which killed two soldiers and hospitalized others.

“I remember the feeling everyone had in the unit after that attack, being truly afraid for their life and the lives of their buddies,” Burton said. “But everyone continued to put themselves in harm’s way every day to accomplish the mission. My soldiers overcame their worst fear for something bigger than themselves. In the end, they saved countless lives of coalition troops and Iraqis by keeping the roads clear of IEDs.”

While military experience is not a requirement to become a conservation officer, many soldiers transition their skills to a law enforcement career, particularly in conservation enforcement.

“I knew college wasn’t for me,” said Chad Baldwin, conservation officer in Charlevoix County. “I always had an interest in law enforcement, but I could never see myself being a traditional officer. I remember seeing a conservation officer while deer hunting with my dad. I didn’t know who he was or what he was doing, but at a young age I remember the professionalism he displayed.”

Baldwin, a master sergeant, has been in the Air Force for 21 years. As a squad leader in the Air Force National Guard, he is responsible for training and mentoring squad members to ensure they are qualified and certified to perform their duties.

“The military taught me so much,” Baldwin said. “Learning how to be a leader and supervising troops, to make sure they don’t make the same mistakes that I made as a young troop, is a skill I will utilize my entire career as a conservation officer.”

Conservation officers learn from each other. Each officer’s skills and experiences are unique and help peers enhance their skills.

Conservation Officer Jeremy Sergey, who has worked for the DNR since 2016, patrols in Marquette County. He actively served the U.S. Coast Guard from 2005-13. He currently serves in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserves as a boatswain’s mate first class.

In 2009, Sergey was sent to Fargo, North Dakota to help evacuate hundreds of flood victims from their homes after record water levels in the area crested at more than 40 feet.

“Members of the Coast Guard from all over the country who had never met, worked together with state and local agencies,” Sergey said. “It was a true testament of what standardized training and human compassion can accomplish.”

Sergey’s Coast Guard experience driving boats and leading teams in maritime search and rescue and law enforcement patrols is valuable to one of his current positions as a marine instructor with the DNR.

When conservation officers are hired, they complete a 23-week recruit school academy, followed by six months of probationary field training and additional specialized training.

Operating vessels is an important part of a conservation officer’s job because they work on or near the water year-round and are often involved in search and rescue missions.

“I enjoy passing on knowledge that I have gained in the past 15 years, teaching new officers how to operate small craft during adverse weather conditions,” Sergey said.

For Sergey, raised in the Upper Peninsula, becoming a conservation officer was a simple decision.

“I remember being on the Atlantic Ocean my last year of active duty and reading the application steps to become a conservation officer, preparing myself to apply online when my ship had internet connectivity,” Sergey said.

In addition to their leadership, these conservation officers each bring diverse, worldly experiences and skills they use daily while patrolling local communities.

From 1988-91, Sgt. Mark Leadman was stationed in Aschaffenburg, Germany, assigned to the 3rd Infantry Division, where he maintained, drove and operated missile launcher vehicles.

“Being stationed in Germany when the Berlin Wall came down – to see both sides of Germany get reunited – the celebration amongst east and west Germans was unbelievable,” Leadman said.

Following in the footsteps of his father and two uncles by serving in the armed forces, Leadman always had his heart set on being a conservation officer.

Leadman served the U.S. Army and Army Reserves for a total of six years and currently supervises conservation officers in Baraga and Marquette counties. He has been with the DNR Law Enforcement Division for 22 years.

For anyone interested in pursuing a career as a conservation officer, Leadman advises to begin hunting, fishing and trapping.

“It’s a very competitive career to get into, but it’s worth your time and effort if it’s what you truly want,” said Conservation Officer Micah Hintze, who patrols Oceana County.

As a Marine corporal, Hintze managed and maintained his unit’s equipment to ensure proper functioning for training students.

Hintze joined the Marines to experience life beyond the small town he grew up in.

“Joining the military taught me how to interact with different cultures, religions and walks of life,” Hintze said. “It opened my eyes to the bigger picture and showed me that there’s more good people in this world than bad.”

Hintze has been a conservation officer since 2017.

Whether they have been in the military or not, conversation officers serve the state of Michigan, and their local communities, with a common denominator – wanting to serve something greater than themselves.

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