

The Gift of Bringing Remains Home

A VFW Life member and Army National Guard veteran discovers new passion through an archeology program designed to enhance a veteran's mental health

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When Sandra Johnson joined the American Veterans Archaeological Recovery team in Saratoga Springs, New York, in September 2019, she came away with a memorable experience.

The archaeological dig provided the longtime Minnesota Army National Guard medic a perspective few veterans get to experience while roaming a 250-year-old battlefield that served as a stage for America's Revolutionary War.

"I wasn't sure what to expect, since I had never done an archaeological dig before," said Johnson, who deployed to Iraq in 2009 with the Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 151st Field Artillery. "As a medic, it gave me this gift of bringing remains home instead of having to leave our dead on the field. It was very powerful. Not a lot of people get to do stuff like this."

Johnson's experience is typical among the 15 to 25 veterans chosen per trip for an all-expenses paid archaeological dig with the American Veterans Archaeological Recovery (AVAR) project, a nonprofit that promotes the well-being of disabled veterans, while exposing them to rigorous archaeological fieldwork and career development.

Backed by a PEW Research Center study on the positive holistic effects archeology has on veterans' mental health, the nonprofit was created by current CEO and Air Force veteran Stephen Humphreys in 2016.

Humphreys fell in love with archeology in 2011 while working toward a masters degree in Theology from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He later was inspired to create AVAR based on a similar project dubbed Operation Nightingale in

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southern England.

“The Brits are the ones who came up with the idea of putting disabled vets on digs,” said Humphreys, who deployed as an aircraft maintenance officer to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. “They invited me to a dig while I was doing research for my PhD at Durham University in 2015. So I went out with them and immediately thought this would work as well, if not better, with American veterans.”

Although AVAR’s debut began with a small, self-funded trip in 2016, its success under Humphreys prompted interest from National Geographic, which offered the nonprofit its first grant for \$20,000 in 2018.

In the five years since, the organization continues to grow exponentially, now receiving more than \$900,000 in grants annually to fund all-expenses paid archaeological trips for chosen veterans.

“For me, personally, it’s allowed me to continue to take care of my people through archeology instead of the Air Force,” said Humphreys, who has led veterans in digs throughout the world, including places such as Israel, Jordan, Cyprus, the United Kingdom and the United States. “I’ve seen them come away with friendships that they didn’t expect, bonded over the physical work and the missions, knowing they can go on more excavations together.”

It’s in Humphreys’ passion for archeology and his fellow veterans, coupled with an enlightening experience at Saratoga Springs, that Johnson found herself signing up for a second dig.

“He’s really passionate about the program, and that attitude is very infectious,” said Johnson, a VFW Life member of the Department of Minnesota. “It motivates us to go out and learn new skills, make new friends and share camaraderie with other veterans in what is a very positive environment.”

Johnson, who has served more than 16 years in the Army National Guard, was chosen again in 2021, joining AVAR in helping the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency find the remains of U.S. troops at a World War II battlefield in Sicily, Italy.

“I was the only one that was still in the military, but I noticed all veterans there still had that sense of working hard, teamwork and following instructions,” Johnson said. “We all wanted to find our WWII predecessors, and that’s something veterans can connect with and have pride in doing. It helped us reconnect with history, with those who came before us.”

To join for a chance at an excavation trip with AVAR, veterans can apply at www.americanveteransarchaeology.org, where every applicant considered leads to a Zoom

interview with Humphreys and AVAR's mental health staff coordinators.

“About a third of the veterans that come on these projects are returning, but we try to always bring in new faces,” Humphreys said. “We like to know what disability they have and what we can put them on. We focus on the capability instead of the disability for optimal experience.”

This article is featured in the 2022 January issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.