

'The Gear is No Longer Helmets, Rifles and Helicopters'

A VFW Post in Colorado started a weekly outdoors tradition during the winter season that has added members through an ambiance of bonding on the ski slopes

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There's something in the rolling white slopes lined with powdered pines along Vail Mountain's ski lift that brought Pete Thompson an idea more than five years ago.

For the VFW Post 10721 senior vice commander in Vail, Colorado, zooming down the mountain in his ski gear to the tune of a cool swoosh treading snow was therapeutic, but he wanted his fellow veterans to join him.

"The world has always been changing around these veterans," said Thompson, an Army veteran who served in the Vietnam War. "From Vietnam in the 1960s to today, here we are, all these years later, still dancing to the music of 'get your gear and keep moving.' But the gear is no longer helmets, rifles and helicopters. Today it's helmets, skis and ski lifts."

The epiphany led Thompson to create Post 10721's "Veterans Ski Day." Since its creation in 2017, the event has traditionally rounded up between five to 20 veterans and their loved ones on most Tuesdays or Thursdays in January, February and March.

The veterans, many of them having served in the Vietnam War, gather 8,150 feet above sea level at Vail Mountain's Chair 11 ski lift at 11 a.m., where they begin skiing until about 1 p.m. They then religiously trek down to Vendettas Restaurant in Vail Village for a discounted meal and laughs.

"It keeps us young and active, but it also allows us to share stories while we ski and then later at Vendettas," Thompson said. "These aren't stories about combat, but about life — little things like getting a speeding ticket, how the kids are doing or how we are all great

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warriors on the ski slopes.”

‘VFW HAS BEEN A HIGHLIGHT’

Flocking to the slopes to join Thompson and his posse also has become a recruiting tool for Post 10721. In the five years since its inception, the word has snowballed to reach veterans in nearby towns.

“I would say between two and three veterans have signed up as VFW members every year through our ski trips,” Thompson said. “I also author little articles that tease these guys and gals that ski with us. I then publish them and hand them out to Post members to try and get more veterans to join us skiing as they would not want to miss out.”

Among the many retired veterans who have joined Thompson’s VFW crew on the slopes, Iraq War veteran Laura Johnson, though deemed the youngest, brings the most experience to the group.

“I grew up learning how to ski in Minnesota, and then moving around the world during my time in the Air Force has allowed some great opportunities to ski in Colorado, Europe and Japan,” said Johnson, a 26-year Air Force veteran who retired as a colonel in 2018. “When I retired, I knew I wanted to be someplace where I could enjoy some great skiing, and the Colorado mountains, Vail specifically, has proven to be a great spot.”

For Johnson, who moved to Vail in 2018, joining the VFW has had as much of an impact on her happiness as the natural splendor of Vail Mountain, a testament of Thompson’s vision.

“Getting involved and becoming a member in our local VFW has been a highlight,” Johnson said. “Besides our weekly ski day being loads of fun, it is incredibly inspirational for me. Not that I’m calling any of these Vietnam guys old or anything, but I love the fact that they are all out there living their best lives and ripping up the moguls and powder runs the way they do.”

‘FOLKS I CAN CALL MY FRIENDS’

Another veteran who joined the VFW as a side effect of the camaraderie shared on the slopes of Vail Mountain is Bill Welch, a Vietnam veteran who today serves as the Post’s judge advocate.

“My wife and I bought a home in Vail Valley in 2013 and moved full-time to it from Denver in 2017,” said Welch, a Marine captain who deployed to Vietnam between 1968-69.

“During this time, I met and became friends with a number of veterans, and consequently, became a Life member of their local VFW Post 10721. Since then, I have become involved in many of the VFW activities.”

Another lifelong skiing enthusiast, Welch says his favorite VFW activity is both the catalyst for his good health as well as the rewarding camaraderie most veterans spend their post-military lives trying to find again.

“Many of us are Vietnam veterans, and we’re grateful to share the health and environment to partake in such a great outdoor activity,” Welch said. “It doesn’t get any better than cruising down a ski slope with your best friends and then talking about how great the run was while riding up on the chair lift together. And the fun doesn’t end there. We then hit a local restaurant for lunch, where many stories are shared ad nauseam. Of course, for the record, Marines have the best stories.”

Fellow Vietnam veteran Garrett Fonda shares Welch’s sentiments on the mystifying effects of skiing, an activity that he credits as a blessing for all that it brings to him personally.

“It is truly a blessing to spend three to four hours with these folks that I can call my friends – even the Marines,” said Fonda, a former Army lieutenant colonel. “Most of us are older, so it’s kind of nice skiing with my ‘old’ friends instead of getting completely worn out chasing my children and grandchildren all over the mountain.”

Like Johnson and Welch, Fonda’s skiing background is extensive. While stationed in Europe, Fonda spent six years skiing throughout Germany, Austria, Switzerland and France.

‘THE CAMARADERIE IS UNBEATABLE’

These days, however, the trips to Vail Mountain rekindle Fonda’s nostalgia as much as his legs and cardiovascular health.

“The camaraderie and friendship from these days is unbeatable, and it keeps all of us ‘old’ guys young at heart, if not in the legs,” Fonda said. “Skiing with my veteran friends at Vail Mountain today is as enjoyable as any of those experiences from my younger days.”

A self-deprecating romantic, Thompson hopes the slopes continue to bring new veterans together every Tuesday or Thursday for a weekly “Veterans Ski Day” this year.

As for his posse that has remained loyal to one another over the years, he expects to see them laced up and ready to go by 11 a.m., if they’re not already getting in an early bird run this winter season.

“We old veterans made it home to celebrate life every Tuesday in Snag Park, Northwoods and China Bowl [slopes on Vail Mountain],” Thompson said. “We ski, dance, tell stories, play guitars, and I doubt if there is anyone out on these beautiful mountains as filled with more love for their country than these bow-legged warriors.”

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