

AHERO, Tall Timbers help veterans find value



Photos by John McGuire

Tall Timbers burn team coordinator Jeremiah Cates instructs military and first-responder veterans on fire gear at Camp ASCCA in Jacksons Gap, Ala. **A U.S. Army veteran, above right,** shadowed the Tall Timbers burn team for two days following her training to become a certified burn manager in Alabama.

Partnership opens carrier paths worthy of heroes

BY JOHN MCGUIRE
Tall Timbers

In the spring of 2020, Tall Timbers — a non-profit dedicated to research, conservation and education — was enlisted to conduct prescribed burns under the vibrant longleaf pines on the AHERO Farm in Macon County, Ala.

AHERO wanted to turn the event into a celebration of veterans learning how fire is used as a tool in forest management, so the Tall Timbers/AHERO relationship began.

The burn event at AHERO did its intended job

and the event served to introduce several veterans to potential career fields in forest management. Afterward, Maj. Lee Stuckey came on as an intern with Tall Timbers through the Marine Corps Wounded Warrior Battalion. The program was novel in that it allowed Stuckey a soft transition from active duty to retirement — a luxury many service members do not have.

It was apparent both organizations could benefit each other. AHERO is committed to assisting veterans with reintegrating into American life and finding the right career and

Tall Timbers is interested in workforce development to meet the need for more prescribed fire to protect forests, firefighters and communities.

Alabama has a large veterans population and their unemployment rate is higher than the state's general population. Additionally, when veterans are released from active service, they have an increased risk of suicide. A worthwhile career, solid earnings, a strong support network and a sense of purpose are all key ingredients to help address this epidemic.

Training for a job in natural resources addresses

those criteria while also aligning with research findings that show veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and engage with the natural environment find critical therapeutic value.

Currently, the natural resource management sector has significant bottlenecks in its capacity to respond to conservation requirements in many states, Alabama among them, so veterans interested in nature-based employment can help. Programs that train veterans in land management may well be saving lives as they save the environment.

With Tall Timbers' deep

history on the use of prescribed fire as a land management tool, the organizations focused on wildland fire training. By mid-summer, Stuckey identified three veterans who would serve as test subjects in the pilot program.

Through the summer of 2021, the three veterans were trained to become certified burn managers in Alabama and earned their federal wildland firefighter credentials. By September, all three found seats on contract fire engines heading west to participate in managing wildland fires, including Dixie Fire, Memorial Fire and KNP Com-

plex Fire.

The value of these experiences is best described by one of the veterans, U.S. Army Spc. Shane Herring, a south Alabamian who served in Afghanistan:

“The challenges I faced post-retirement were businesses looking at me as a liability due to possible PTSD incidents, as well as health issues stemming from my time in service. Finding someone who was willing to take a chance on me to prove I was fit for duty was my biggest obstacle.

“The best part about my training and experience in wildland fires is that it places me back on a close team that I can rely on to help me throughout the incident. It also has given me back a sense of purpose and drive I thought I would never have again.”

The partnership between AHERO and Tall Timbers has trained more than 40 veterans in the use of prescribed fire — a critical practice for managing forests and reducing wild-fire risk.

The same program also stopped four veterans from committing suicide and provided them with a new sense of purpose.

Veterans interested in this proposed training are encouraged to reach out to AHERO via the Quail Lands Job Board (www.TallTimbers.org/Jobs), which includes a niche market of jobs on large private quail-hunting properties. Many such natural resource jobs require skills largely learned in the military, meaning interested veterans may need minimal training.

John McGuire is the director of the Tall Timbers Private Lands Prescribed Fire Initiative. This article is reprinted courtesy of the Alabama Forestry Association's Alabama Forests magazine spring 2023 edition.



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