

A GOOD FIT

The background of the entire page is a large puzzle piece. Inside this puzzle piece is a silhouette of a soldier in a military uniform, seen from behind and saluting with his right hand. The soldier is positioned in the center of the puzzle piece. The background within the puzzle piece is a sky with clouds, transitioning from a deep blue at the top to a bright orange and yellow at the bottom, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The puzzle piece itself has a dark blue top section and a lighter, more yellowish-orange bottom section, matching the sky's color gradient.

Veterans Apply the Skills
They Learned in the
Military to Their
Careers at Zoos
and Aquariums

BY ALINA TUGEND



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hen Jessi Krebs was serving in the Marine Corps in the Persian Gulf and Somalia in the 1990s, he treasured a book he had bought before being deployed called *Giant Lizards*.

The book had cost \$45—a huge sum for him—but for Krebs, it was worth every penny.

In that book, authored by Robert George Sprackland, there was a chapter on careers in herpetology, “and one of them was zookeeper,” Krebs said. “A lightbulb went off.” After all, he had always had an interest in animals, especially reptiles, and still has the same pet turtle—at age 46—that he got when he was seven.

Fast forward several decades, and Krebs is now the curator of reptiles and amphibians for the Omaha Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium in Omaha, Neb. And like many veterans who work in zoos and aquariums, Krebs finds that serving in the military and working in zoos often complement each other.



“In the line work I chose, I’m sometimes put in a situation such as handling a 12-foot cobra,” he said. “The Marine Corps really gave me a way to step back and rationalize fear. What’s in front of me now is the mission, and I have to accomplish the mission. The animal should terrify me, but the mission here is to care for the animal. That really helps me.”

Michael Frushour, curator of mammals at the Toledo Zoo and Aquarium in Toledo, Ohio, went a slightly different route than Krebs—he was first involved in zoos and then in the military. Shortly after college, he interned at Zoo Miami in Miami, Fla., “and fell in love with it.”

Frushour wanted to be a curator, “but to do that, you need leadership skills.” One of his friends suggested that he join the military and apply to officer candidate school “because it’s a great leadership program.”

It was harder than he thought it would be—he spent six years in army reserves while working at the Zoo, and was deployed for eight months in 2015-16. He served as a platoon leader in charge of engineer soldiers performing construction missions in Kuwait and Iraq. Now a curator, he believes his military training played an instrumental role in landing the job.



© Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo

“When I applied for the position of senior keeper, all the other applicants were all similar—I’m sure leadership experience pushed me over the edge,” he said. “If I hadn’t gone into the military, I don’t think I would have had the confidence to apply for a management position, because I wasn’t very outspoken. Now, even the way I run my morning meetings—I’ve taken it from the way I did morning meetings with my platoon.”



Jessi Krebs 2018

The military taught him a great deal that has transferred over to his zoo job, but one key lesson is that “it definitely helped me learn how to do more with less. We had a lot of constraints overseas, but we were pragmatic, used what we had to make it work, always working toward a mission. It really helped me in my civilian career in the zoo field.”

For example, Frushour said, he wanted an orangutan ultrasound heart box—a metal apparatus that would assist

in getting ultrasounds on orangutans—but the funds just weren’t there. “My associate curator, Suzanne Husband, designed it and the in-house maintenance staff built and welded it.” It’s the idea, he said, that he learned in the military, of making something out of nothing.

Working at a zoo or aquarium is a natural fit for many veterans, said Sean Juman. Now a zookeeper at Zoo Miami overseeing crocodiles, alligators, Florida

panthers and two bears, he said “it can be exciting stuff—restraining a crocodile to take it to the hospital for examination or for a vet to come out and examine it. And after the military, working in the snow, rain, hurricanes doesn’t faze us.”

He said like many who served in military, he likes not being tied to a desk job and enjoys having some flexibility to set his own schedule, as well as working in a team environment.



Casey Carrell



Casey Carrell

Like Krebs, Casey Carrell, now a human resource generalist at Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium, loved animals from an early age.

"I'm from this area and the Zoo was a big influence growing up. It was the best place to be. I probably went monthly."

But the military was a family tradition, and "I decided to keep that tradition going." He served in the Marine Corps from 2009 to 2013, based in Hawaii with four seven-month tours in Afghanistan.

"A large part what I did in Marine Corps wasn't arresting people or shooting people," Carrell said. "It was building schools, helping farmers to plant crops other than what they did, which was poppyseed they turned into heroin. The idea was to try to make the world a better place."

And as Carrell sees it, the Zoo's effort with conservation is simply continuing that goal in a different way.

Many say the skills they learned in the military don't necessarily translate to their zoo jobs—it's more of a mindset. But for Ivy Brower, a zoological supervisor of Africa 2 Carnivores/Primates at Zoo Miami, her time driving tractor trailers in Korea and Germany serves her well as a senior zookeeper.

Brower joined the Army in 1996 and stayed until 1999 and then went into the Colorado Army National Guard for eight more years.

"I joined the military for a few reasons—one was because of college tuition assistance," she said. "I knew I wanted to work with animals—that was my ultimate goal—and it helped me go to college and not put myself in debt."

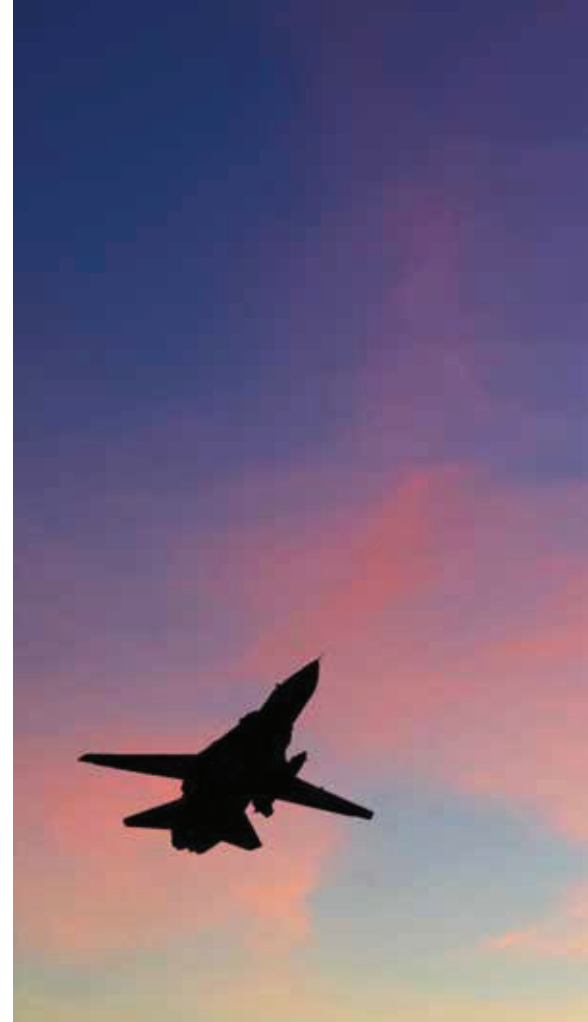
Right after basic training, her first duty station was in Korea for a year, and then when she joined the National Guard, she was sent to Germany to build roads on one of the bases.

"We have big equipment here at the Zoo," she said. "If we have to put sand in exhibits or holding pens, I can operate all the equipment—I don't need to wait for someone to do it for me. It's extremely helpful that I can do it."

Brower also learned a less tangible but equally important skill during her time in the military. She served as a squad leader at the end of her National Guard tour, and that helped her "to understand how to approach people from above and below me. To accomplish your goals, you need to communicate in both directions."

Even those who haven't seen active combat say that what they learned in the military helps them every day at their zoo job. Craig Jacobs, director of human resources, safety and security for the past 20 years at Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium, was in the U.S. Air Force from 1972 to 1998 as a musician. He played the saxophone, and then was eventually promoted to an administrative position.

"Talk about a career change," he said of his move from the military to the Zoo. But serving as squadron superintendent



in the Air Force was very much like the human resources position he now holds.

"You're responsible for everything," he said. "You're the parent away from home."

Stationed for most of his service in Omaha, he said, the Zoo was very much a part of his life, "I had twins I would put in a stroller and take to the Zoo," he recalled.

Most AZA zoos and aquariums offer free entrance to veterans on either Veterans' Day or the Fourth of July, but some go a step further. At Denver Zoo in Denver, Colo., veterans can sign up for a free specialized tour any day; they can also have up to nine guests join them at \$7 each.

The program was the brainchild of Bud Gawn, a World War II veteran who volunteered at the Zoo for 21 years; he just left last year.

"I was a radioman on a minesweeper in the western Pacific, but never saw any combat," said Gawn. As a volunteer docent, Gawn said, "I thought we weren't doing enough for veterans at the Zoo. I was particularly interested in Vietnam and Korean vets."

Gawn brought up the idea in 2012 with Zoo administrators.



“Bud was very, very passionate about it and we have such a rich veteran community here in Denver, with six different military bases,” said Brittany Frederick, director of guest engagement for Denver Zoo.

But with limited resources and time, it took a while to develop the program; the Zoo does not typically lead tours, Frederick said. In 2017, docents led about 30 veteran tours for 150 people, Frederick said. This year so far, there have been 18 tours for 100 people.

The Zoo advertises the tour through it social media and gave posters and fliers to nearby veterans’ organizations; docents also typically reach out to veterans who have signed up for the tour to see what their interests are.

“Our hope is that these tours have made the Zoo more accessible to an audience that might not have visited otherwise,” said Frederick.

And Gawn is more than pleased with the success. “It’s a great tour, and the vets really like it and the docents fight to lead them,” he said.

Besides attracting veterans as guests, many said they would also like to see

more as employees. Although Jacobs said he doesn’t particularly seek out veterans, he does believe he finds a “certain caliber and quality when we hire veterans. One of the critical elements is having a set of core values—that’s ingrained in us in the military—excellence in all that we do, service before self. Most military members bring to the civilian world a level of engagement and commitment to getting the job done.”

Ryan Zach, collections manager of reptiles at the Phoenix Zoo in Phoenix, Ariz., spent six years in the Air Force reserve, said it was a real eye opener for people to find out he was a zookeeper. “A lot of people had never even met one before.”

But he thinks serving in the military and working at zoos are a natural fit.

“One of the reasons people join the military is a sense of belonging and fighting for something bigger than yourself,” said Zach. “I want to defend animals—it’s a different thing, but it all has a bigger goal than yourself.”

Alina Tugend is a writer based in Larchmont, N.Y.

Ryan Zach

