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Veterans and Volunteers-In-Parks

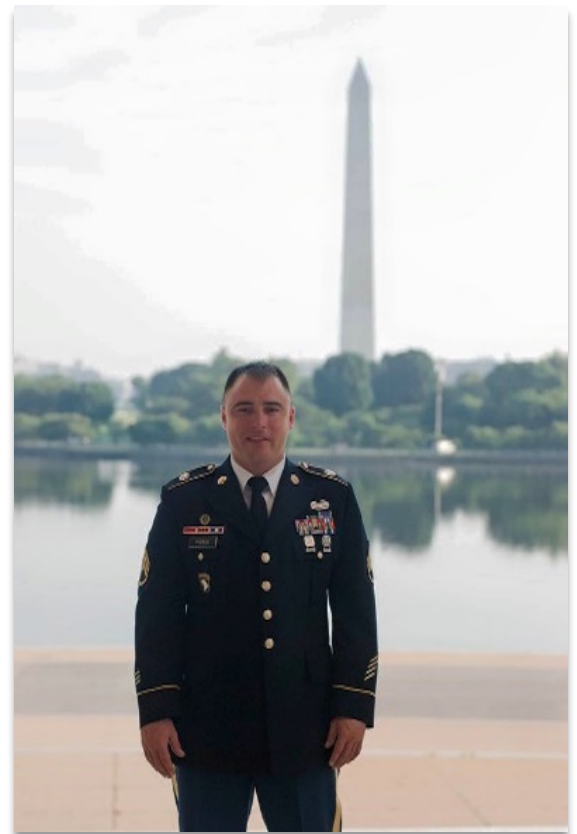
By James Pierce, Park Ranger at the National Mall and Memorial Parks

During the 2012 dedication of the [American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial](#), a certain glass panel stood out, the “1,000 yard stare.” An expression I had following my rehabilitation at Walter Reed Military Medical Center. On October 1, 2012, while on foot patrol in the Khost Province of Afghanistan, the 514th Military Police Company out of Winterville, North Carolina, was attacked by a suicide bomber. The attack killed three and injured three additional members of the Company. I was one of the three injured members.

Due to the severe injuries I sustained during the blast, while focusing on my rehabilitation, I couldn't help but to wonder, *what life will I have after my military service?* I knew that I wanted to continue my service; I just didn't know *how* I would be able to continue it. Shortly thereafter, my Transitional Coordinator told me about Operation Warfighter, a Department of Defense internship program that matches qualified wounded and ill and injured Service members with non-funded federal internships. I had received a Bachelor's Degree in Parks and Recreation from Appalachian State University in 2009 and inquired about the possibility of an Operation Warfighter internship with the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service. It would be a perfect fit where I could use my military skills as well as my college education. For two years, I had the distinct honor to serve my internship as a Park Ranger at the National Mall and Memorial Parks, serving under the [Volunteer-In-Parks \(VIP\)](#) program: a program dedicated to help preserve and protect America's natural and cultural heritage for the enjoyment of this and future generations through the service of volunteers.

Following my internship I earned a permanent position with the NPS and continue today serving as a park ranger at the National Mall and Memorial Parks working with volunteers. I work every day facilitating the much-needed help of the public to support our park land. I also assist veterans through visits to the memorials or encouraging them to be volunteers themselves.

This work, and my military background, brought my focus to the newly established American Disabled Veterans



The author James Pierce.

for Life Memorial. I was there from the very beginning while the memorial was constructed, to its dedication, to leading volunteer efforts today. It is a memorial I personally connect with. At the dedication of the memorial, President Barack Obama stated *“Here, in the heart of our nation’s capital, this memorial is a challenge to all of us -- a reminder of the “obligations this country is under.”* These profound words resonated to all veterans who attended the dedication and to the many more who have visited and in whose memory it was built.



Waves of heat from the ceremonial flame rise from the reflecting pool in front of the white granite Memorial wall. NPS photo.

The American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial conveys a combination of strength and vulnerability, loss and renewal – dedicated to both the living and the deceased. The focal point of the memorial is a star-shaped fountain, its surface broken only by a single ceremonial flame. A grove of trees stands sentry beside the reflecting pool, signifying the persistence of hope.

Serving my Country has been the biggest reward of my life and while I may have retired my military service uniform, I continue to serve in a different capacity, as Park Ranger protecting and sharing our nation’s history. Join me in celebrating the National Park Service Centennial as a [Volunteer-In-Parks](#) and help preserve America’s natural wonders, history, heritage, and sacred memorials that honor the ultimate sacrifice many brave men and women in our armed forces have given to our great country.

To learn more about the **Volunteer-In-Parks** program visit: <https://www.nps.gov/getinvolved/volunteer.htm>



The author at work at the American Disabled Veterans for Life Memorial and with volunteers at the Lincoln Memorial.