

## **“Any Country that is worth Defending is worth Preserving”**

*BY MICHAEL FARNUM*

There's a new program in town, and it's bringing with it some incredible people, people with the core values of Loyalty, Honor, Integrity and Respect. Professionals will want to look closely at this program for two really good reasons. First, because they volunteer for work! And second because many of these people are soon to be available for hire.

It's called the Veterans Conservation Corps and it's the result of a conversation between two men, Washington State Senator Ken Jacobsen and Tom Schumacher of the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, from that fortunate meeting legislation was passed and the Veterans Conservation Corps was created. The purpose of the Veterans Conservation Corps is to assist veterans by providing volunteer opportunities on projects that help restore Washington's rivers, streams, lakes, marine waters and open lands. How does that help veterans? It helps in three ways: for starters there are the rehabilitation benefits to be gained from doing conservation work. Then there is networking with prospective employers like private consulting companies, city, county, and federal agencies. And finally it provides educational opportunities leading toward a degree in Natural Resources, Water Quality, or GIS.

The rehabilitation benefits of restoration work, or “eco-therapy” as it's sometimes called, are very real. A prime example is the story of John Beal. John was a Vietnam vet who was given 6 months to live. He decided to spend his remaining days cleaning up Washington's Duwamish River, a last gift to the planet and something positive to leave for posterity. Twenty six years later John finally passed away. The side effect of “eco therapy” adding years to veteran's lives is the topic of leading edge research at state and federal levels. This research may lead to expansion of the VCC program to other colleges, cities and states.

As for the networking opportunities, the VCC conducts volunteer work on restoration projects throughout the Puget Sound area and are able to work directly with program managers at all levels. As a result some of these managers are noticing the value veterans can bring with them. Values like a strong work ethic acquired from working long hours on long deployments. Another value is experience, everything from construction to communications and heavy equipment management to aircraft maintenance and more.

Finally and most important are the educational opportunities. This is where the Veterans Conservation Academy comes in. The Purpose of this program within the VCC is to provide eligible veterans a monthly grant to participate in specialized training approved by the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs through Green River Community College. These are primarily Natural Resources programs and include Fire, Water Quality, Park Management and GIS. Hands on or lecture, classroom or alpine forest the vets are doing it all. And best of all, the flexibility built into the program allows vets to seek AAS or BS degrees or take their dream job at any point in between.