

## Military OneSource Podcast — Discovering Nature’s Rewards: Military Benefits in America’s Parks

### **Episode transcript**

#### **Intro voiceover:**

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast.

Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit [MilitaryOneSource.mil](https://militaryonesource.mil).

#### **Bruce Moody:**

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody.

In this frantic world with deployments and moves, and schedules and trainings, and inspections and all the stuff of military life, sometimes we just need a walk in the woods, which is why my guests today are from the National Park Service, Clay Hanna and Becca Toy, welcome to the podcast.

#### **Clay Hanna:**

Bruce, thanks for having us. Super excited to be here. I'm Clay Hanna. I'm the program manager for interpretation and engagement for the National Park Service out of our Washington headquarters office.

And I often need to describe what is an interpreter to many folks. So when we think about the profession of interpretation, it really is the profession of connecting people to a place. And we've often been called storytellers, often the national storytellers. And so, we're really here to connect people to their parks through storytelling, through engagement and through recreation. And I'm super excited to have a team that helps me do this at the national level. And one of those team members is Becca Toy. So Becca, please introduce yourself.

#### **Becca Toy:**

Thanks Clay and thanks Bruce and team for having us.

I work with Clay in the Washington office as an interpretation and engagement coordinator. So, among my duty functions, I help coordinate national-level outreach that the park service does for military service members, and also programming that the park service does to serve active-duty military as well as veterans, gold star families and everybody under the broad umbrella of military service.

#### **Bruce Moody:**

And Becca, you mentioned that you're joining us from Virginia, but Clay didn't mention he's joining us from Alaska, and he has the most Alaska office. I'll just leave it there.

**Clay Hanna:**

Thanks, Bruce.

**Bruce Moody:**

All right. So we're talking about National parks and there's Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, all the big ones, right? Maybe you guys can talk about some of the lesser-known parks that are part of the National Park system. Would that be a good way to start?

**Clay Hanna:**

I love that question Bruce. When people think about the national parks, they often think about what we would call those big Y parks, Yellowstone, Yosemite. But the National Park Service manages 429 individual units, and those cover more than 85 million acres, and they stretch across all 50 states, District of Columbia and our U.S. territories.

And we have about 19 different naming designations, and that's national monuments, historical parks, national battlefields, parkways, preserves, seashores, and the list goes on. And so, when folks think about national parks, they often think about the 63, what we would call, capital P, national parks, right? The Yellowstones and Yosemites. But there's so many different designations in all 50 states. So really there is a national park that's near you. You just have to look for it.

**Bruce Moody:**

And we have parks. There's a history behind why we have our parks. Let's talk about that a little bit.

**Becca Toy:**

Sure. So what a lot of people don't know about the National Park Service is that national parks existed before our agency did. And, in fact, a lot of the early national parks were managed and patrolled by the U.S. military. So Yellowstone, for example, that you all just mentioned, is generally considered the first national park, and it was established in 1872, but is actually managed and protected by the U.S. Army. So, they stationed soldiers in the park who helped guard major attractions. In particular, they were concerned about protecting the wildlife in Yosemite from poachers. So, they really played that protective role that we think of when we think of the National Park Service today.

**Bruce Moody:**

That's interesting. So, there were military people standing watch in Yosemite?

**Becca Toy:**

There were.

**Bruce Moody:**

Do I have that right?

**Becca Toy:**

That's correct, yeah.

**Bruce Moody:**

Oh, that's so cool.

**Becca Toy:**

And in fact, some of the early national parks were also what we today call, National Military Parks, and those were specifically established by the U.S.

military to preserve battlefield sites related to the Civil War. So, in 1890, you had the establishment of Chickamauga-Chattanooga National Military Park, and then some of the more well-known sites like Gettysburg and Vicksburg. And because they were established by the Army, they were also patrolled and protected by the Army, service members did what we call interpretation aka, helping visitors navigate those parks in those early years. And those military parks, still today, lead staff rides for present-day service members.

**Bruce Moody:**

So for most military people, maybe they're not going to get orders to a national park, but they have free access, which is really what we want to talk about today. Let's talk about this program and how it works. We'll get into the specifics about eligibility, but just give me a general idea of this program that's offering, free access to our national parks.

**Clay Hanna:**

So, there's two options for military access to national parks. We have an annual military pass that's good for current U.S. military personnel and their dependents. And as the name suggests, it's an annual pass, so they would've to renew that every year, but it is good for free entry into national park units. There are some amenities that it wouldn't cover for some like parking and different things, but if it charges an entrance fee to get into that national park unit, the military pass would usually get the service member and their dependents into the park for free.

So that's a great program. We want to shout that from the mountaintop so that all military service members and their families know about the annual pass. We also are excited to have a military lifetime pass. And this is for gold star families and veterans, and they can apply for the military lifetime pass online or downloading and printing a special voucher that they could present at the entrance station as they come into a national park site. So those are the two opportunities and really, it covers all military service members and their families and gold star families and veterans. So we're super excited to have both of those passes.

**Bruce Moody:**

Once they've entered a national park, there's a lot for them to do. And I'd like you to talk about the variety of things because you've got stuff available for people of all ages and interests, also physical abilities, and that would include people who have special needs, medical needs. You have a lot of resources for the whole range of military families. Please talk about that.

**Clay Hanna:**

Bruce, I love that you mentioned that and asked about that because as interpretive park rangers, this is our job. We are connecting people to these parks, and we often do that through what we would call interpretive experiences, and visitors might know that as what we would call ranger programs. So think about the traditional campfire programs that maybe some folks experienced as a child or with their family. Those can of course include hikes, they could be tours of caves or historic homes. It could be astronomy night sky programs. It could be snowshoe hikes that I used to provide at Grand Teton National Park. We also have historic weapons demonstrations. So Becca was mentioning some of our national military parks. And some of those parks, of course, would also demonstrate some of the weapons that were used in firing demonstrations and what have you. So there's so many activities that service members and their families can be involved in.

Another of my favorite opportunities is our Junior Ranger program. So the Junior Ranger program is a beloved program of the National Park Service, and it's really there to provide experiences, multigenerational experiences, loosely targeted for ages 8 to 12, but we do not discriminate for age so all are welcome. But it's really fostering that personal connection to the site and to the mission of the National Park Service.

Now, I will say the majority of our parks have Junior Ranger programs. Often, they're in the form of a booklet, an activity booklet that the Junior Rangers and their families can pick up at a visitor center, or really just ask any ranger, anyone that's in the flat hat, how they can participate in the Junior Ranger program. And it often includes activities that the junior Ranger would fill out with their family as they're visiting the park. And then eventually turn that booklet back in to earn some kind of memento. Most of the time it's a wooden Junior Ranger badge, so it mimics our ranger badge that we would wear on our Park Service Ranger uniforms, but it can also be a patch or other memento. But it is a beloved program of the National Park Service. And really some of my fondest memories, fondest experiences have been with visitors and swearing them in. And I have seen some seriously cute junior rangers during swear-in ceremonies. So that's definitely something that we want to highlight.

You had mentioned ensuring people with all abilities have equitable access to these programs, and that's something that the Park Service strives. We ensure that all persons with disabilities would have that opportunity to participate in these programs and in that integrated setting. So if it's a hike, if it's a night sky program, we're providing those opportunities for people of all abilities to be able to participate in that programming.

**Bruce Moody:**

So interesting.

Becca, I want to get you to talk about how families can plan to take advantage of the parks. And what I mean is this, a family who is going to move, they have orders from one place to another, maybe looking at a very, very long drive, and they're looking at ways to break up the drive so they can get out of the car, get some fresh air, unwind, recharge, all that sort of thing, get out in nature before they get back into the car. What would be some suggestions for families who have some travel ahead of them? How could they plan national parks into that trip?

**Becca Toy:**

That's a great question. Clay and I were actually talking about this and a lot of times visitors think that Park Service staff are sent to duty stations much in the same way that the military is. And while we do actually get to choose our duty stations, the experience of PCSing is very familiar because most of us start out as what we call seasonal employees, where we often are doing those cross-country road trips ourselves going from park to park.

The best place for a family to start if they are looking to identify parks along their travel route is to visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov) and then use what we call the find a Park tool. This will generate a map that allows them to geographically see how parks are dispersed along their route. And then we also have, and I think we're going to link this in the show notes, a specific tool for the military that shows national parks in relation to military installations. So they can actually see layered onto the map, both of those types of sites, and get a sense of what's along their route and what might be close to where they're going. Because one of the things that we find to be a real benefit of the National Park Service is once you visit one national park, you're now friends with all of our rangers. So when you get to your new duty station, your nearby national park is going to have rangers who are already a friendly face, who are eager to welcome you.

**Bruce Moody:**

Listening to you talk, I'm just reminded that we do from time to time need a walk in the woods. And maybe you can talk about the benefits. What are the health benefits, the therapeutic aspects of just getting outdoors, of being in nature?

**Becca Toy:**

Absolutely. It's funny, I think we all feel that innate sense of peace and grounding when we go for a walk in the woods, but science actually tells us that a 20-minute walk in nature improves concentration, reduces the need for ADHD and ADD medication in children, improves cognitive function and can improve memory. It's really neat, right? Science actually tells us that this is really good for you.

We know that getting outdoors makes you stronger. You have greater health benefits when you exercise or do other activities in nature than if you were to do them indoors.

It makes you healthier. A 30-minute walk can improve heart health, circulation, lower cholesterol, a whole host of things. And even if you don't have 20 minutes, a 5-minute walk in nature can improve your mood, can help you relax and improve self-esteem. And all of these things are things that are backed by science. In fact, it's so beneficial for people to spend time in nature that the American Academy of Pediatrics considers outdoor play a vital aspect of childhood development.

**Bruce Moody:**

There you go. And there's even more to that. There's really a sense of belonging in the expansive beauty of America's national parks. Where does that connection come from?

**Clay Hanna:**

Bruce, this is something that's personal to me and to our agency. The National Park Service seeks to be welcoming. It wants to provide that sense of belonging for everyone that comes into our parks. It's really the job of our agency to make sure that parks are accessible, and we talked about that, to all that want to visit. And to us that means ensuring that people are empowered to explore their parks.

And I would say that not all visitors come to us feeling comfortable about national parks. Maybe it's their first time to visit. And these places can be intimidating. They can be unknown or a space that you haven't felt comfortable in before. And that's really the job of the interpreter to make that connection, to make it feel welcoming and provide that sense of belonging. And we really strive to actively welcome all visitors to national parks, and we're really working to make our spaces more inclusive.

And as I think about some of my experiences working in parks, we often think about the front country, right? The roads, the trailheads, the visitor centers. And most people stay within that front country experience. And so, I would offer up that the military service members and their families, if they can just get a quarter mile off of that front country away from the trailhead, they're going to experience a national park like they've never seen before. So just taking that extra effort to get out of their comfort zone. And it's really our opportunity as rangers to provide that safe and enjoyable experience in their national parks. And I'll say, if you want to make a park ranger's day, ask them a question. Ask them how they could visit their national park. That's our job. And you're really going to make a ranger's day just by asking, "Hey, what's the best way to experience this place?"

**Bruce Moody:**

Then, I'll make your day because we're talking to military families. What do you have specifically for service members and their families that can impact them in a positive way?

**Clay Hanna:**

That's great, Bruce. I think I'll transition into 10 tips that we have for planning like a park ranger. And the first tip is don't miss the good stuff. We had talked about early in the

podcast, there's 429 national park units across all 50 states. So search for those parks that are near you. I trust that there is a park that's near you. We'd love for you to make a plan and have a backup plan. So really consider jumping onto that NPS.gov site that Becca spoke about, using that Find a Park tool and then digging into planning for that particular park that you want to visit. There's going to be lots of great tips and tricks on how you can plan your trip.

We also have an NPS app. That's the third bullet point here on planning like a park ranger so use the app. You can download the app, just search in whatever app store you might use for the NPS app, and it should come up with a picture of our National Park Service Arrowhead and that's also a great tool. Puts all of those tools right at your fingertip.

And then you also want to consider reservations. So that's number four, plan like a park ranger. Reservations may be needed. There are some parks today that see so many visitors that in order to manage a high-quality visitor experience, we need to use reservations. So there may be a reservation that's required at a campground, a timed entry reservation into a park. So that's something to keep in mind. And that should be front and center on the park's website using that Find a Park tool.

We also ask that when you're taking photos that you keep safety in the picture. So just considering being safe when you're taking those photos. Consider what's behind you, what's in front of you where wildlife might be so just consider safety as you're taking those pictures.

We've already talked about number six, and that's ask a ranger. So, if you have questions, again, it is our job to assist you in your visit to your national park. So, ask a ranger, you're truly going to make their day.

Number seven, we love this one because it's funny, but don't pet the fluffy cows. So, what we mean by that is bison and just wildlife in general. So just considering the safety implications about visiting national parks and the wildlife that are contained within the park, we ask that you keep a safe distance between wildlife. A really good rule of thumb is to use your thumb and actually with an outstretched hand, if you can cover that wildlife with your thumb, that likely means that you're far enough away from that particular wildlife.

Number eight is dedicated to bringing your fuzzy friends, and that is are you roughing it? And that's thinking about our pets, specifically dogs coming into national parks. So again, plan your visit. Some parks are really dog-friendly and have opportunities for you to bring your pets. Others have restrictions and you would just need to plan for that.

Number nine is leave only footprints. So this is thinking about leaving no trace and the things that we bring into parks and the things that we would take back out. So we ask that you leave only footprints and pack out what you bring in.

And then lastly, expand your options and discover something new. And that hearkens back to that idea that we have a diversity of park units across our system. So expand

your options, discover a new park, discover a new activity. Maybe push yourself outside of that comfort zone just a little bit. And I think you'd be surprised at what you find. So we love to share those 10 plan like a park ranger as you're planning your visit to your national parks.

**Bruce Moody:**

No, that's really good advice and I'm getting major flashbacks to my days as a boy scout so thank you for that.

Let's wrap this up by just giving you each the opportunity to share your feelings about nature and the parks and what you are offering to people who will come and visit these parks. Becca, let's start with you.

**Becca Toy:**

Sure. Thanks for asking, Bruce. I think this kind of goes back to your first question about the history of the National Park Service. I think one of the really inspiring things about our agency is that we were created because parks are good for people and because we believe that experiencing parks is good, not just for individual people, but for whole communities and for the nation. And that's a moving target of what we define as good for people, but because we know that science tells us that experiencing nature has very direct health benefits, we feel really passionate about being those ambassadors for our parks. As Clay said, empowering people to visit parks, not taking for granted that everybody knows how to navigate. Even a two-mile trail can be for people.

So we really build that into our programming, and we build that into a lot of our military engagement programming too. A lot of that is geared towards introductory experiences that help families become familiar with how parks are organized and how to figure out where the campground is, and where they can fish, and where they can hike and if their dogs can come so that they have the opportunity to experience parks for a lifetime. We know too with kids that the more that they get outside as children, the more likely they are to choose to go outside and recreate outside for their lifetimes, which means that one, they get the immediate health benefits of being outside with their families now, but they get to experience those benefits for the rest of their lives because they're empowered again to continue visiting parks wherever they might go.

**Bruce Moody:**

Nice. Clay?

**Clay Hanna:**

National Parks are America's best idea. They truly are a democratic idea, and national parks are included in the National Park system because of their national significance. So it's like the full package. You get to go to these amazing places that might have amazing scenery, but also has a story. It has a nationally significant story, specifically our historic sites that have a connection to our broader national community and inspire us to get involved in our communities. So I think they are places of inspiration because they are



the full package. You can recreate, but you also get the stories, you get the scenery, it's the full package.

**Bruce Moody:**

Nice. We'll leave it there.

Thank you for inspiring us. We're all going to get out and get some fresh air. Clay Hannah and Becca Toy from the National Park Service, great to have you with us today.

**Becca Toy:**

Thanks for having us.

**Clay Hanna:**

Bruce, thanks for having us.

**Bruce Moody:**

Absolutely.

I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. Click on the link in the program notes to send us a question, a comment or maybe an idea for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.