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## America 250 Celebration Rallies Around Veterans Trekking the Great American Rail-Trail

*A series of events in and around Norfolk, Nebraska—the midpoint of America's first cross-country multiuse trail—elevate magnitude of outdoor recreation's role in nation's well-being*

WASHINGTON—On July 3, six veterans will hit the midpoint of their trek across the country on bike when they arrive in Battle Creek, Nebraska, along the 3,700-mile route of the [Great American Rail-Trail®](#).

The group of veterans departed Washington, D.C., on May 21 as part of [Warrior Bike](#), an outdoor expedition that is the result of a partnership between [Rails to Trails Conservancy](#), the nation's largest trails, walking and biking advocacy organization, and [Warrior Expeditions](#), an outdoor therapy program that helps veterans transition from their wartime experiences through long-distance outdoor expeditions.

"It is an understatement to say that trails have transformed the American experience," said Ryan Chao, RTC's president. "Across the country, trails make it possible for people to build the outdoors into their everyday lives, whether that's trekking across the country like this incredible team of veterans, commuting to work by bike, or heading out for a walk with your family. Just a few decades ago, the concept of creating a national network of trails was audacious. Today, we couldn't imagine our country without the tens of thousands of miles of trails that connect people and places across landscapes. We're humbled by the progress that's been made, and the opportunity trails create to deliver quality of life and well-being to all Americans."

Upon their arrival to northeast Nebraska, the veterans will join RTC and Warrior Expeditions, along with the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission and Visit Norfolk for [special semiquincentennial celebrations honoring their service](#) and the importance of outdoor recreation infrastructure, like the Great American Rail-Trail, in addressing the mental and physical health needs of the nation. On July 3, Battle Creek will host a picnic lunch followed by a community walk and bike ride on the Cowboy Trail segment of the Great American into Ta-Ha-Zouka Park, and on July 4, the veterans will join RTC and Warrior Expeditions at Norfolk's annual Freedom Fest.

"We are honored to welcome these veterans to northeast Nebraska as they reach the midpoint of their journey across the country. The Cowboy Trail—and the Great American Rail-Trail—connects our communities and gives both residents and visitors the opportunity to experience Nebraska's outdoors. It is a privilege for Norfolk and Battle Creek to recognize their service and be a part of this memorable journey," said Traci Jeffrey, executive director of Visit Norfolk.

The veterans riding across the country include **Justin Abramo** of New Port Richey, Florida, who served as a combat medic in Afghanistan for the U.S. Army; **Jayson Goetz** of Satellite Beach, Florida, who served as a rescue pilot in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan for the U.S. Air Force;

**Winston Hall** of Elkhorn, Nebraska, who served as an aircraft mechanic in Vietnam for the U.S. Army; **Mary Montigny** of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, who served as a Seabee technical security specialist in Iraq and Afghanistan for the U.S. Navy; **Patrick Smith** of Patrick SFB, Florida, who served as an infantryman in Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan for the U.S. Army; and **Mitchell Villafania** of Hammond, Louisiana, who served as a scout pilot in Iraq and Afghanistan for the U.S. Army.

“After sacrificing so much for the country we love, nothing is more therapeutic than spending months at a time crossing our nation's trail systems while experiencing the beauty of its landscapes and the kindness of our citizens. Of course, this wouldn't be possible without the incredible work and immense resources dedicated to building these trails,” said Sean Gobin, founder and executive director of Warrior Expeditions.

The veterans' journey on the Great American Rail-Trail takes place against the backdrop of RTC's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and at a time when the future of public funding [for trails, walking and biking is uncertain](#)—despite decades of progress and demonstrated impact in rural, suburban and urban communities nationwide. As Congress continues debate on the next federal transportation bill, which delivers the primary programs responsible for creating, connecting and maintaining America's trails, the Great American Rail-Trail is a demonstration of the need for stronger, dedicated federal, state and local investment in this essential infrastructure.

The Great American Rail-Trail, RTC's flagship initiative to create a fully bikeable route across the country that is separated from vehicle traffic, and the opportunity for these veterans to ride across the country by bike, is a result of decades of advocacy and trail development spearheaded by the organization. When RTC opened its doors in 1986, there were a handful of open rail trails, and the term was not a part of the American vernacular. Today, there are over 42,500 miles of multiuse trails, the majority rail-trails, and more than 150 known multiuse trail networks are in development nationwide, with trail networks underway in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico.

“Located in the heart of the country, the Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail helps connect communities and outdoor enthusiasts to a continuous route along the Great American Rail-Trail stretching from Washington, D.C., to Washington State. Investments in the trail support recreation, tourism and local economies while providing opportunities for people, including these veterans participating in Warrior Expeditions, to experience the restorative benefits of the outdoors. We are proud to support this journey and the partnerships that continue to expand access to Nebraska's remarkable landscapes,” said Jesse Petersen, recreational trails manager at the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

The 3,700-mile Great American Rail-Trail is nearly 56% complete and will serve more than 50 million people living within 50 miles of the route along with the millions who visit from across the country and the world. The trail is expected to unlock more than \$229 million in annual economic impact as it is fully developed. For more details, including photos and video for press use visit [greatamericanrailtrail.org](http://greatamericanrailtrail.org) and follow @greatamericanrailtrail and #GRTAmerican on social media. For information about the Warrior Bike Ride, visit [warriorexpeditions.org](http://warriorexpeditions.org).

*Rails to Trails Conservancy is the nation's largest trails organization—with a grassroots community more than 1 million strong—dedicated to building a nation connected by trails, reimagining public spaces to create safe ways for everyone to walk, bike and be active outdoors. Connect with RTC at [railstotrails.org](http://railstotrails.org) and @railstotrails on social media.*