



Strength in the Storm

*Oregon Guardsman helps
veterans find healing,
connection through sailing.*

Guardian Sailing founder Michael Tieman, right, spends a day on the water at Fern Ridge Reservoir outside Eugene, Ore. With him is former Army Green Beret Joseph Washburn, left, who is learning to sail through Guardian, and Andy Bailey, an Air Force veteran and fellow sailboat racer.



BY KEN OLSEN
PHOTOS BY ZACH KRAHMER

A storm packing 6-foot waves and 35-knot gusts caught Guardian Sailing in Johnstone Strait two days into the 2024 Race to Alaska. It was an all-hands-on-deck moment that called for a rescue-gear refresher, dry suits and three of the four crew harnessing themselves to the windward side of the vessel – a human counterbalance to the forces attempting to roll their boat.

Oregon National Guardsman and Guardian founder Michael Tieman was at the helm, telling

his teammates to give a shout every 10 minutes so he would know they hadn't washed overboard while he fought to keep from burying the bow. The waves were stacked so close together that the 24-foot sailboat wasn't able to clear one before slamming into the next.

"It sounded like a Tyrannosaurus rex was landing on the deck," one crewmember says. Another remembers feeling the entire boat vibrate as it bounced through the swells. As for Tieman, it

was a moment of truth. "That's where I had my first doubts," he says. "Like, what happens if the boat does go over?"

Six hours later, the small sailboat was still upright and on course with its weary, battered crew still onboard. And upon reflection, the intense storm during Guardian's first ocean race was, in many ways, more healing than harrowing. It forced team members to push aside stress, worry and anxiety, and focus on keeping themselves and their boat intact – a key part of sailing therapy.

"It's just you and the wind and the waves," Tieman – a combat veteran, full-time Guardsman

and single father – says of sailing. "It takes everything you're dealing with mentally and physically and pulls it right out of your head. The only thing you're dealing with is being present in the moment."

In essence, Guardian is creating a space where veterans and first responders feel safe letting down their guard and talking about PTSD and trauma, says Joe Cleinmark, a race crewmember and Marine Corps veteran. "The opportunity it creates for something beautiful and therapeutic to arise is pretty special, but pretty uncommon in the veteran world," because it's often difficult for former servicemembers and first responders to share their experiences with outsiders, he says. "You aren't going to understand until you put your life on the line for other people."

Ocean dreams Tieman knew he wanted to become a marine biologist when he was just 5 – "I adored everything about the ocean," he says – and went to the University of Oregon after high school to pursue his dream. But a family member ran into legal trouble, and he used some of his college money to help her hire a lawyer. He dropped out and spent a decade working as a bartender, karaoke host and sound technician.

Drinking. Partying. Regretting he hadn't become a marine biologist. "When you grow up with a dream, not achieving your purpose is something you feel," Tieman says. "The longer you avoid it, the worse it gets."

Divine providence led him back to the ocean. "Jesus pulled me out of the gutter and introduced me to sailing, and I fell in love with it." He took free sailing lessons from various skippers at the Eugene Yacht Club, became fascinated with racing and – because he didn't have a car – regularly bicycled 26 miles round-trip to Fern Ridge Reservoir to volunteer for whatever boat was shorthanded. "I'd get a half-rack of microbrew and hold up a sign that said 'Got Crew,'" he says.

Tieman joined the Oregon National Guard in 2009 and used every spare moment to hone his sailing skills. When other soldiers headed for Hooters during breaks from training exercises at Fort Gordon, Ga., he headed for the Augusta



Sailing Club to practice, he says. He became a youth sailing coach for the City of Eugene's recreation program and sought more intense sailing challenges, including volunteering as a crewmember in the renowned Rolex Sydney Hobart race in Australia. Then he participated in races and cruises everywhere from Baja to Croatia. "Sailing," he says, "flat-out gives me life."

After returning from a deployment to Afghanistan in 2015, Tieman told his supervisor at the Eugene Recreation Department that he wanted to create a nonprofit to teach veterans to sail as a means of healing. It's a natural fit because sailing, like military service, calls for teamwork and camaraderie. His supervisor was all in, Tieman says. "He's like, 'Why don't you do it here? We've got the boats. We've got the insurance. We've got paid instructors.'"

The city supported Tieman's plan with a \$15,000 grant. And American Legion Post 83 in Eugene – where Tieman is a member – has financially supported Guardian Sailing's work, says past post commander and National Guard veteran Philip Highwood. A decade later, the program is still providing free sailing lessons to veterans while adding first responders, who often deal with similar stress and anxiety tied to their professional lives. And Guardian is hoping to secure the donation of a bigger boat and connect with more funders so it can help more veterans.

Guardian gives participants more than a one-off sailing adventure. "Usually, we're pretty aware of what's haunting us" but don't take steps to address it, Tieman says. "You have to make an actionable plan to start working on those things that trouble you. I think sailing provides the confidence that allows that conversation to open up."

A lot of recreational therapy programs don't help veterans and first responders develop coping skills, Tieman adds. "So you're going to go back home and your PTSD symptoms are still going to haunt you because you didn't really learn about



Tieman returned from Afghanistan with a vision for recreational therapy through sailing.

anything to combat those symptoms. I wanted to combine this healing/ coping curriculum, if you will, with the adrenaline rush and experience that is sailing." This work is even more urgent given that in-person therapy resources were obliterated by the pandemic, he says. "It set us back a decade because of the time it takes to build confidence, trust and develop self-care habits."

No experience necessary Like most Guardian Sailing participants, Josh Cooper had never touched a boat, other than a kayak, when Tieman persuaded him to give sailing a try in the summer of 2022. To the Oregon Army National Guardsman's surprise, he enjoyed it so much that he and his wife plan to buy a boat and sail to Alaska when he retires.

"I don't like swimming," he says. "I don't like doing things in the water. I like hiking and climbing." But soon, the Iraq War veteran was sailing with Guardian two evenings a week. "You are in the moment. You are on a boat with a bunch of guys focused on what you are doing. It's really fun to sit there and problem solve ... 'How do I make the boat go faster?'" And Tieman is the ideal leader. "He can talk to you about anything," Cooper says. "He's always calm."

Former wildland firefighter Emily Boes, who got to know Tieman through the Eugene sailing scene, is impressed by how quickly veterans take to sailing. "One of the coolest things to watch is these people who have never raced before, and they kick ass," Boes says. "It seems like it's a natural for people who have been in the service to succeed."

It was also natural for Tieman to take Guardian Sailing to the next level with an epic competition like the Race to Alaska. He and Guardian board member Eric Redmond – who has loved the water since he and a cousin converted a rowboat into a makeshift sailing craft when they were kids – first wanted to enter the competition in 2015. It took them nearly a decade to make it happen.



In 2024, Tieman put together Team Guardian - from left, Emily Boes, Eric Redmond and Joe Cleinmark - to compete in Race to Alaska, a grueling 750-mile sailing challenge.

Watch a video about Guardian Sailing:
legion.org/magazine/videos

In early 2024, Victor Felice, owner of the Tiller and Kites sailing school in Arizona, offered to give Guardian a sailboat bearing the artwork of veterans who were part of a Phoenix VA therapy program. Tieman and Redmond - a former wildland firefighter now working for Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue in Portland - installed a pedal drive, since race rules prohibit motors. They assembled their crew and packed every available space with food, water jugs and fuel for a backpacking stove, while course-plotting and contingency-planning for the looming challenge.

Organizers describe the Race to Alaska as “a throwdown with one of the most storied and unforgiving coastal passages on the continent.” And that’s only part of the story.

“It’s designed to be difficult,” Redmond says of the competition, which is held during a time of the year with the toughest winds, tides and currents. It’s also more challenging because the 750-mile race takes place in the remote waters between Victoria, British Columbia, and Ketchikan, Alaska. “It’s riskier because you are farther away from rescue,” he says. And you don’t have an engine, so you can’t just motor over to a safe harbor.

There are rewards, too: enjoying the company of an orca pod one evening, and maintaining the straightest course and therefore sailing the fewest miles of any of the boats that finished the race - one of the benefits of enduring the storm in Johnstone Strait. Team Guardian completed the race in 8½ days, placing 12th in a competition that

half the teams typically fail to complete. Plus, the ultimate victory: “We knew we weren’t going to win,” Redmond says. “We agreed success would be good relationships with each other.”

The race was transformative for Boes - who, although she learned to sail in college, was blown away by the challenge and reward of her first ocean race. After more than a decade working for the U.S. Forest Service, she came home from the race determined to remake her life on the water. Sailing “clears my mind and opens it to new possibilities,” Boes says. “Because of all of this, and much more, I believe wholeheartedly in the power of healing Guardian Sailing Adventures can bring as people come together in these ways.”

Cleinmark also found the race both trying and inspiring. “What Michael is doing is such a beautiful, impactful thing,” he says. “The intensity of sailing and one of extremes is similar to being in the military. It creates this common fertile ground to engage people.”

The Race to Alaska was only a starting point for Guardian’s next chapter. After he retires from the Guard, Tieman plans to include land-based pursuits such as backpacking and overlanding, as well as growing the sailing program. “The Pacific Northwest doesn’t really have anything veteran-centric like this,” he says. “I see it as a unique opportunity to continue serving after serving.” 🌿

Ken Olsen is a frequent contributor to The American Legion Magazine.