

'Everything is Free of Charge' at Lazy U Ranch

A Cold War veteran and VFW Life member in southern Texas opened his ranch to wounded warriors and active-duty soldiers, serving more than 24,000 veterans since

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Unraveling with the gospel of those touched by its power, a ranch hidden amidst the rolling pastures of Seguin in southern Texas has become a sanctuary for veterans.

Though few outside of the local veterans' community in and around San Antonio have heard of it, Lazy U Ranch has become a safe haven for legions of active-duty troops, chaplains and wounded warriors over the years.

Named after the cattle brand registered by Henry Ulbrich in 1914, the 101-acre Lazy U Ranch moves many who have graced its pastures to recite its therapeutic effects, which often begin as the electric ironclad gate closes behind them.

Putting the clamor and speed behind, veterans proceed down a dirt road surrounded by swaths of greenery lined with oak and cedar elm trees that harbor longhorns munching on grass before arriving at the heart of the ranch.

Without the noise of contemporary life, veterans reach the ranch's homestead to the tune of birds and insects buzzing and humming like pleasant memories, an old home built beside the slithering Guadalupe River.

As is customary, they are welcomed by the ranch's owner, a hulking Cold War veteran sporting an ivory handlebar mustache and a cowboy hat that take a peripheral view to the piercing blue eyes and warm smile of Craig Russell.

'UNDERSTAND THE HISTORY'

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Russell, who purchased the ranch alongside his wife, Nancy, whose family goes back several generations at Lazy U, has devoted his own home to the wellbeing of veterans. It is an oasis built on the ethos — “God, Family and Country,” that Russell imparts to visitors.

“And no one gets to enjoy the amenities and activities we provide without having seen the short presentation we’ve created to tell the history of this place,” said Russell, a Life member of VFW Post 8456 in Geronimo, Texas. “They all need to learn and understand the history before becoming part of it. I’ve probably shown this presentation over a thousand times to more than 17,000 soldiers since.”

Russell indoctrinates newcomers by bringing them into the SS American Memorial, a hand-made building beside the family’s homestead. The building, started in 1984 by Nancy’s father, WWII veteran Jim Ulbrich, was dedicated in 2014 through more than \$110,000 in donations to include air conditioning and a finished wine cellar in the basement.

Once inside, visitors sit to a backdrop adorned with timeless military memorabilia along massive commissioned paintings depicting American history hung on the wooden tapestry that makes up the ceiling and walls.

In this atmosphere, Russell plays the presentation on a screen, an emotional video compilation of photographs and quotes of sacrifice and duty to God, family and country that tell the history and evolution of the place.

“This gives a powerful visual history lesson on the Cold War and the founding of our country,” Russell said. “And it closes with a tribute to the sacrifice of our warriors.” By the time the credits roll, the veterans above their heads, separated by two factions — the dead and the living — become part of the viewers’ experience, a kind of distant family whose sacrifice is now bore by the new generation of veterans.

“It’s pretty powerful stuff,” said Timothy Voss, an Iraq and Afghanistan War veteran who was first introduced to the ranch in 2012. “The education and message it provides let you begin to feel like you belong to something special.”

Voss, a Life member of VFW Post 8111 in San Antonio, was introduced to Lazy U in 2012 while looking for a good fishing destination around San Antonio, about 36 miles west of Seguin.

The Army veteran, who was medically retired in 2007 following an IED explosion while deployed to Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division in 2005-06, met Russell, learned about the place and has since become a regular.

“I come for the sense of peace the grounds provide,” Voss said. “As a veteran, it’s a struggle

to find your clan amongst the general populace. The ranch provides the warrior clan a home amongst kinfolk of the same calling.”

‘LET THEM DECIDE FOR THEMSELVES’

In hearing much iteration of Voss’ sentiments about the ranch from thousands of veterans, Russell and his shipmates in 2016 decided to create the SS American Memorial Foundation. Through this nonprofit, Russell seeks to bring military and civilian families together by relieving the burdens of separation and hardship through direct assistance for basic needs, historical education and patriotic avenues.

“It has been a slow process because many veterans, especially wounded warriors, are skeptical when we tell them everything is free of charge,” Russell said. “That’s why we try hard just to get them to this place, let them take it in and decide for themselves.”

Russell’s confidence in the ranch’s power dates back to a fateful Fourth of July reunion with his shipmates in 2000. In many ways, the seeds for the SS American Memorial Foundation and the Russell family’s continued refuge for veterans at the ranch were planted that day.

After more than 15 years since they served aboard the USS Tunny (SSN682), which patrolled an area around the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia, Russell and his submarine crew had a reunion at the request of their beloved Chief of the Boat (COB), Master Chief Torpedoman’s Mate David Follo.

What began as a small get-together for 30-40 shipmates morphed into an annual event later dubbed “The Lazy U Ranch 4th of July Shindig.”

“Each year the event grew in numbers of shipmates, family and friends in attendance,” Russell said. “It included a BBQ cook-off contest, live music and an attendance of more than 500 guests from 17 states, which included Hawaii and the country of Ireland.”

By 2005, the event morphed yet again to include the raising of a 20-by-30-foot U.S. garrison flag. This led to a different dimension — having children in the audience read the history of the Declaration of Independence, Pledge of Allegiance, Star-Spangled Banner, 21 Gun Salute and TAPS.

“The event became an education in the traditions of this great country,” Russell said. “It went from a gathering of old shipmates to an educational event intended to offer a sense of history to renew patriotism in the hearts of guests.”

‘A CHURCH IN A SENSE’

In wanting to both share the ranch’s fertile grounds for respite and outdoor therapy, as well as reminding veterans of their storied past laden in sacrifice and patriotism, Russell reached out to a new wave of soldiers in 2010.

“We reached out to the Warrior Transition Battalion located at the BAMC Intrepid Center [at Fort Sam Houston] so that they may use and enjoy the ranch as a place of quiet rehabilitation,” Russell said. “They understood that one of the most powerful tools for healing was outdoor activities like kayak fishing.”

Since then, groups of active-duty troops as small as 10 and as large as 400 have visited Lazy U Ranch regularly, where they are greeted by local volunteers who provide meals for the day with donations from churches and local companies.

Someone most keen on the idea of outdoor therapy is retired Command Sgt. Maj. Gabriel Camacho, whom after 19 years as an Army combat medic was selected to run the Warrior Transition Battalion, now known as the Soldier Recovery Unit at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio.

“I met Craig and Nancy back in September 2019,” said Camacho, who deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. “Our meeting was in support of my unit’s mission of taking care of our most critically wounded, injured and ill. It was quite obvious that they were doing truly good things for others. They essentially took the ranch and used it to continue providing nurturance and sustainment of life in a bigger way, well beyond producing consumables.”

Camacho, a Life member of VFW Post 8315 in Schertz, Texas, went on to conduct three “Organizational Days” at the ranch following his initial visit, introducing his unit members to the ranch’s charm.

“It proved to be the right environment to get after the unit’s relaxation, resiliency and unit cohesion enhancement,” Camacho said. “I personally view it as a church in a sense, a building where a community of believers congregates. Veterans can come to any event that’s held at the ranch and be around relatable people. This in turn allows for conversation, which drives the ability to help and inspire each other.”

‘A BIGGER IMPACT BY WORKING TOGETHER’

Camacho’s unit, along with numerous nonprofit organizations centered around the well-being of veterans, remain active attendees of the ranch, which through the creation of the SS American Memorial Foundation has allowed Russell to offer more.

Lauded as one of the few places that remained open to veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Russell’s efforts have turned toward expanding the ranch. He wants to add a 65-acre park devoted to active-duty troops, veterans and first responders. The SS American Memorial Park, according to Russell, also will include a church for chaplains, walking trails and primitive camping.

The location is in its development phase, which will include a lofty goal of Russell’s to build

the largest freestanding flagpole in North America at more than 400 feet.

“I have found that there’s often a lack of communication between organizations that do good work for veterans,” Russell said. “So the ranch has become a place, like a central command, where these organizations can come in and coordinate assistance and make a bigger impact by working together.”

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