



Now a BLM Ranger, Rebecca Merritt's Colorado patrol district of around 377,000 acres includes mountains, sand dunes, canyons and rivers.

THE Merritt System

How one federal officer unintentionally achieved a unique status

DIFFERENT PATHS lead each of us into a career in the outdoors. What started as a chance sighting of a poster during her college days at the University of Wisconsin, and a subsequent trip to Alaska, became the catalyst for Rebecca Merritt to earn the unofficial title of becoming the one and only known permanent female law enforcement officer to wear the badges of four different federal natural resource agencies.

Merritt's upbringing near the small farming town of Silver Lake, Wisconsin, where family vacations meant hunting, fishing and hiking, instilled in her a love for the outdoors. Yet in her early years neither a career in natural resources nor law enforcement ever seriously crossed her mind. With both parents being in law enforcement, hearing their "war stories" at home convinced her she wanted none of that. While attending the University of Wisconsin she initially steered her studies towards medical microbiology and immunology. Then one



Alongside her proud mom, Rebecca Merritt on graduation day, 2007, from FLETC as a law enforcement officer for the US Forest Service.

day during her senior year she spotted a poster from AmeriCorps, the national community service organization, offering adventure and partial student loan forgiveness to those who would volunteer for six months. The opportunity took her to the Tongass National Forest in Alaska for a job as a seasonal

interpretive ranger. "When I saw the mountains, glaciers and bears it flipped a switch," Merritt said. From there, her path turned sharply towards a career in natural resources. Upon returning from Alaska, she completed her studies at Western Washington University where her degree became a blend of biology and natural resource management.

Many who go into conservation law enforcement often don't do so directly. They usually have to pay their dues working a season or two as a temporary or in a low level entry position within an agency. Rebecca followed this formula, working for a couple of years as a seasonal with both the National Park Service and the Forest Service. Her first permanent federal position was in Arizona as a Forest Service fire tech, which eventually led her to joining a hotshot crew. Traditionally a male dominated position at the time, Merritt worked hard to keep up, never wanting to be the slowest member of the team. After being

hit by a drunk driver, she spent months recovering from her injuries. “My last season the hotshot superintendent, who was a medic, would give me a cortisone shot when my neck would lock up and we were in the middle of nowhere. I was approaching 30 and my body was pretty beat up. It became clear that my days as a firefighter were coming to an end.”

Eventually, the idea of becoming a Forest Service law enforcement officer appealed to her. Her introduction to being a “cop in the woods” came through meeting a Forest Service officer during her Americorps stint in Alaska. Hiking the backcountry, flying in a helicopter and getting paid to do it didn’t seem like such a bad way to spend a career. Her graduation from the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) in 2007 now made her the third generation of her family to work in the law enforcement field.

Merritt recalls one of her most embarrassing professional moments happened early in her enforcement career, while she was in the Forest Services’ Field Training Program in Tennessee. In fact, it was the first day as primary officer with her first Field Training Officer (FTO). Walking into a deer camp she encountered a group of hunters and asked to see their hunting licenses and tags. Not being familiar with the English language dialect of the South, she admitted to not understanding a single word they said to her. Nodding her head a lot and smiling, she eventually procured their licenses. With their paperwork in hand she returned to her FTO, who must have had the same trouble deciphering their speech, as he remarked, “If you can tell me anything they said, I’ll give you a rating of all 10’s for the day.” That FTO, who once described Rebecca’s performance by reporting, “Green is not just the color of this officer’s pants,” has since become a lifelong friend.

Then there was the time in Virginia when she was checking hunters at a Forest Service checkpoint and a hatchback vehicle drove in with a “dead” deer in the back. When the deer suddenly came back to life, spraying blood over the officers from a neck wound, an eight-year-old boy, who had been riding in the



Working for her third federal land management agency, Merritt spent five years as a park ranger in Glacier National Park.

car, grabbed a shotgun, racked a round into the chamber and shouted, “Daddy, I’ll put him down!” (It was dispatched by the hunter.)

As fate would have it, her time as a Forest Service enforcement officer lasted only about a year. In 2008, Rebecca married her best friend from college, who happened to be a Forest Service law enforcement supervisor in Pendleton, Oregon. Federal rules prohibiting nepotism meant that if she wanted to live with her husband, she would have to change jobs. In Oregon, Rebecca found a position with the US Fish and Wildlife Service as a refuge officer at the Mid-Columbia River National Wildlife Refuge Complex, a sprawling area consisting of the Hanford National Monument and seven refuges scattered around the states of Washington and Oregon. Her territory was big and it kept her traveling. The job included working on a marijuana eradication task force, but what she loved best was patrolling as a “lone ranger,” checking hunters, sometimes working undercover, investigating violations and putting together cases for prosecution. During her tenure with the Fish & Wildlife Service the agency created an honor guard; and she counts it as one of her proudest career moments to be selected as a founding member of the team. In addition to the honor guard, she served for several years as

President of the National Refuge Officers Association.

Her time with the Fish and Wildlife Service lasted about five years. In 2014, Rebecca’s husband was again promoted, this time to Forest Service Law Enforcement Commander, and was stationed in Missoula, Montana. For 14 months she commuted between Yakima, Washington and Missoula. But once again, if she wanted to be near her husband, she would have to relocate. “It broke my heart to think about leaving Fish” as she endearingly calls it. “I loved the job, but family came first.” Positions with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, or maybe the Missoula Police Department were considered, but by now she was deeply vested in the federal pension system and it was to her advantage to continue in this direction. She eventually hired on as a National Park Ranger in Glacier National Park. This was the closest federal land management job to Missoula she could get, but it still required them



One of Officer Merritt’s proudest moments was being chosen as a founding member of the Fish & Wildlife Services Honor Guard team.

to live about 170 miles apart. Landing the position as Park Ranger wasn’t easy. Typically, the National Park Service hires their permanent rangers out of a pool of seasonal rangers who have put themselves through the seasonal ranger academy. Hiring from outside the agency is uncommon, but she credits the supervisor for his out-of-the-box thinking that allowed her to come onboard.

Rebecca was now a full-time permanent sworn officer for her third federal natural resource agency. And, like the other two agencies she previously worked for, policy required her to go through yet another full field train-

ing program. She admits that being a national park ranger was challenging and unlike any other law enforcement position she previously held. “All of a sudden I went from sneaking around in the woods watching hunters to dealing with people being mauled by a bear or falling off a cliff and having to figure out how to get them to safety. The territory I was assigned in Glacier National Park seemed tiny in comparison to what I had been doing before.” She lived in a cabin in the park and was responsible for just about anything occurring in her district. The parks are self-contained, so rangers do it all. Besides law enforcement duties, rangers deal with wildland and structure fires, medical issues, search and rescue, wildlife encounters, bear management and people management, whatever the call or task. “You wear many hats and have to be a Jack of all trades” she stated. The management of people, especially around wildlife, required her to develop a new skill set such as explaining in a friendly, positive way to park visitors why she took certain actions, like making loud noises and throwing rocks at bears to educate them to stay away from people. “It was easier to move a 300 pound bear away from people than to move 300 people away from a bear.” Because park rangers have such a wide umbrella of duties, Merritt estimates 60-70 percent of her time was spent in training. Working for the National Park Service required her to get out of her comfort zone and become more visible; she missed her lone ranger days of just being out in the field working at her own pace and direction.

Like before, there always seemed to be changes on her horizon. After about five years with the National Park Service, she was once again faced with another career decision when her husband decided to retire from the Forest Service. They both had always liked Colorado. Rebecca began looking for opportunities there. Wanting to go back to a job where the primary duties were law enforcement, she found that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) was hiring officers and got a position in northwest Colorado. This time her husband followed her.



Not your average job. As a park ranger Merritt patrolled the backcountry of Glacier National Park in addition to the more popular areas of the Many Glaciers District.

Throughout her career as a natural resource law enforcement officer, Merritt has been through four different field training programs and had 12 different field training officers. She says she didn't mind and jokes that it's like getting a “tune-up” every few years. It can be humbling at times, she noted, but it has kept her current, non-complacent and enthusiastic. She believes it has also given her “street cred” with other officers within those agencies. As to her being the first woman to achieve the distinction of working as a permanent law enforcement officer for the four natural resource agencies, she admits it just happened while following her husband through his career. “I did it for love,” she quips; but after hiring on with BLM, she began to realize her situation might be unique. “My husband and I asked around and did some research through our connections with the different agencies.” While there have been male officers who have “hit the grand slam” as natural resource law enforcement officers, she has not found any who have done it under full-time permanent status, but instead through a combination of seasonal as well as permanent positions.

After two decades she still loves her job and welcomes work each day. The four agencies have been different enough to keep her energized and positive - there is always something new.

She can retire in about three years, but says she would like to stay until she is forced to retire by federal rules in about 15 years, at age 57. She aspires to be seen as a role model to young women who are contemplating a career in natural resource law enforcement and has spoken at colleges on the subject. One question she frequently gets is, “Which agency should I apply to?” That question Officer Merritt can answer with some expertise.

Since November 2019, BLM Ranger Rebecca Merritt has been patrolling the Kremmling District of northwest Colorado, a popular sand dune area for off road vehicles. After working with four different land management agencies, she says she plans to wear the BLM kha-ki for the remainder of her career and do what she loves best, protecting public lands for future generations, interacting with the public, investigating criminal violations and chasing violators. Now Merritt can also claim, in more ways than one, to being the lone ranger.

➔ *Dan Kelsey, Idaho Dept. of Fish & Game (retired)*

Sentiments from the Wildland Sentinel

IT TOOK ME about ten years of working as an Iowa conservation officer to figure out that I really ought to be writing this stuff down.

So, knowing that my memory is far from perfect, I started cramming a small leather-bound notebook into the side pocket of my uniform pants before leaving for work each day. Whenever something interesting happened, I jotted down a few notes. For instance, there was the time I pulled into a wildlife area parking lot to check on a suspicious vehicle and found a disheveled man sitting in the driver's seat. As I approached the car window to chat with him, I glanced down and discovered that the man wasn't wearing any pants.

“Why aren't you wearing any pants?” I asked as I tried to not accidentally look in the direction of his lap.

“I...uh...had to use the restroom,” he said sheepishly. “I really had to poop.”

“Oh. Alright... but where are your pants?”

“I left them in the woods. It was an emergency” he said.

“Hmm. That’s...just...weird.”

“I know. I’ll go get them.”

While the driver slunk back into the woods to retrieve his trousers, I returned to my truck and ran his information through dispatch. It turned out that not only was the poor man sans pants, he was also driver’s licenseless. After the man found a valid driver to give both him and his soiled pants a ride home, I took out my small notebook and jotted down these words: Guy without pants- pooped in the woods. No license.

Without my little leather-bound notebook reminding me: Puking guy arrest warrant, I never again would have thought about that horrible night when, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, my passenger/prisoner bound for jail, puked all over inside (and then the outside) of my truck. Thankfully, I have that little note to reinforce the memory of how I felt as my germaphobic anxieties shot through the roof while I dry-heaved and madly searched for my PPE...while the man barfed and the virus tried to zero in on me.

And there were many more...a notebook full of this cryptic language of which only I know the real meaning. They were messages scrawled in my barely legible handwriting.

Bumper poacher kid- plus history
Body recovery- under ice- hot coffee
Water bottle enema- don’t eat the raspberries

Search warrant hostage stand-off- snipers

Pigeon lady- crap can campsite- fleas on seasonal

Man with woman’s wig chase- swam away and climbed tree- knife

Drunk snake guy- screaming seasonal

Each one of these notebook entries evoked a sense of place in my mind. They put me back there to re-feel the

feelings I experienced at that particular moment. Each time, the story played out with more and more detail and I found myself jotting down a few extra words in my notebook until it became evident that I needed to tell the whole story. That’s when I began writing.

One day, that little notebook filled with my experiences and ideas, met with a tragic watery death by washing machine. My memories were soaked and shredded into a pulpy mess at the bottom of the basin. Now I’ve taken to logging those short jots into my Google Keep account instead. Where I once reached into my pocket for my notebook, I now reach for my phone. There I find my list (more legible but just as cryptic) full of stories and ideas waiting to be written. I’ve also started

printing out my investigative reports and storing them in binders for future use to kickstart my pen into moving across the page.

The best and most entertaining storytellers I know are the people who I work with. I hope that they too are keeping track of those daily moments that make up their lives as game wardens. It’s not always about the biggest cases you make like the ones for which you might win an award or find yourself featured in this magazine. You also need to remember the smaller, more fleeting ones- an interaction with an angler, witnessing a kid’s first deer harvest or choking back tears during an accident investigation. While you don’t win awards for those moments, they are important and you will want to remember them someday. Those are the stories that your children and your children’s children will want to hear and remember too.

I know that the idea of writing an incident report, much less a memoir, doesn’t top everyone’s list of fun things to do. Thankfully, it isn’t necessary. The tradition of oral storytelling dates back to ancient times when stories were passed on from one generation to the

next purely through repetition. Such an extended game of telephone through one’s genealogical history is no longer required. Digital technology makes recording (and even transcribing) one’s stories available to everyone, writers and non-writers alike.

As for me, I’ll stick to jotting notes on my phone, or in my newly purchased waterproof notebook, until they brew into a story on the page.

Like the time that an intoxicated boater complaint turned into an attempted rape case: Creepy boater- fake diabetic - sex assault

Or how about the time a bone sticking out of a garbage bag in the back of a pick-up truck led to multiple deer poaching charges and a drug case: Zach and Matt- deer in town- no tags

Or the time you worked a multi-month long marijuana-grow case that resulted in the bust of an especially creative organic chemistry Ph.D. student: Ritter pants- trail cam- invasive species- father of the year

Or maybe the time...

➔ *Erika Billerbeck has been an Iowa conservation officer for 20 years. Her first book, Wildland Sentinel: Field Notes from an Iowa Conservation Officer, published by the University of Iowa Press was released in September of this year.*

SPOTLIGHTING

ONE DUTY REQUIRED of wardens in rural areas is night patrol - looking for poachers who would use spotlights, aka the one-eyed dog, to shine game. In my area, they were mostly looking for the deer or elk transitioning from daytime cover to nighttime foraging areas next to rural roads. The poachers would drive along one of these roads and shine the spotlight in a sweeping manner, lighting up areas off to the side of the vehicle. When they saw the glowing eyes of their prey, they would fire with the relatively quiet twenty-two caliber rifle or, in the case of bigger game, a high-powered rifle. From there, they would either throw the dead animal in the vehicle

and flee or drop someone off to gut the critter and pick them up a little later.

Working these night poachers alone took a certain kind of nerve because of poor lighting and potential for problems. I don't know why, but I loved it. I saw the challenge as hunting the hunter. I used my experience and knowledge of the countryside to identify areas that might get "hit".

Around four o' clock in the afternoon I would wrap some leftover casserole in aluminum foil, pop the hood of my patrol truck and lay the night's dinner on the soon to be warm, engine manifold. I'd tell the rat terrier to, "Load up!" After a kiss goodbye to my wife, I'd depart. Once in the target area, I would hide my rig behind a locked gate, log deck, or brush pile and wait for darkness.

All our four-wheel drive, V8-powered patrol trucks were outfitted with switches to cut the brake lights. Hence, they didn't illuminate when I moved and stepped on the brake pedal. Radios and scanners were dimmed. Long ago I removed the buzzer that made a racket when the door was opened. I double checked the "sneak light", which was mounted under the front bumper. This was a backup light bulb I had secured in a round metal housing, angled slightly downward and capable of casting a narrow beam of light several feet in front of my truck. I could use it to approach, or follow suspect vehicles without them ever knowing I was thirty feet behind them. The front grill and bumper were painted flat black and the reflective front license plate was removed. Now all I would need was a sign of nefarious nocturnal activity.

I often heard them before I saw them. Poachers drove differently than a citizen cruising along a road. With my eyes already adjusted to the darkness, the quick flash of a strong, distant light beam immediately caught my attention. I usually let them pass. Then, using the

sneak light and a burst of V8 power, I would catch up to their vehicle, keeping a stalker's distance. I was careful not to get too close, but close enough I could cut the sneak light and follow, using the illumination from their vehicle. When I was "in the saddle," I was invigorated. I was stalking prey. Sometimes I would follow for miles, other times for only a short distance. It depended on whether I



had enough evidence and probable cause for a stop. If they were spotlighting, I would note the license plate number, number of occupants, and pick a good place to make the contact. I'd notify dispatch as to my location, plate number, and type of violation.

Now my adrenaline began to surge. I was on point, the dog was on point, my pre-set forward-facing auxiliary roof-mounted spotlight was ready to go, high beams were intentionally left on, all set for activation. From thirty feet back in the pitch black, I'd hit the forward-facing red emergency stop light; then the headlights and overhead light. There was usually general panic and confusion in the suspect vehicle. I barked out who I was, ordering them to keep their hands up, and not to move! I watched for a couple seconds to see if they were going to flee. When I initially approached the vehicle, it was a no-nonsense, austere moment: command voice, command presence, and capitalize on the surprise factor. At gun point I'd bring them out one at a time, have them open their coat, lift their shirt, then tell them to stand in their headlights. Sometimes I would say a fake name like there was another

warden behind my vehicle's headlights, who was also watching them. I seldom used curse words in the initial contact because it might unnecessarily escalate emotions. I saved swearing for when I had to convince a culprit if they didn't behave things would end badly for them. I seized guns, knives, spotlights, and any game, all the while doing my best to keep an eye on everybody. I'd run them

for warrants, write the tickets and, if appropriate, thanked them for being cooperative and sent them on their way. I'd head back to my hiding spot, jot down a few notes, and pop the hood of my truck. Then, under a beautiful, clear, starlit night, I'd eat the hot casserole.

Even in the darkness I realized I had a slight trembling of my hand, I guess I was still decompressing after my little adventure. I'd toss a piece of food to the terrier and think, "Man, I love my job." ☺

☺ Mike Maschmeier

A Midwest upbringing in 1950s Cincinnati sculpted Mike's loyal, polite, hardworking personality. Maschmeier's core encompasses an intense curiosity, unstoppable wanderlust and an enjoyment of diverse personal interactions. These manifested themselves towards a Fisheries degree from Humboldt State University, then a 28-year career as a northern California Game Warden. Also, study of philosophy contributed to a 13-year stint as a Hospice patient care volunteer. Mike is now retired, married for 43 years (met at Mardi Gras 1973), with three remarkable children. He enjoys spending time with grandchildren, fishing, wilderness forays, and challenging people to laugh (was a standup comic) or reflect.

AN AMERICAN POSSIBILITY is Maschmeier's first foray into writing.