

David Binford (far left) loves teaching snowsports because it gives him the sense of community he misses from his time in the military.



THE HEALING POWER OF SNOWSPORTS

COMBAT VETERAN DAVID BINFORD REFLECTS
ON THE RECUPERATIVE IMPACT OF INSTRUCTION

By Peter Kray, PSIA-AASI Lead Writer

David Binford, a combat veteran who served in the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Army, got his first taste of skiing and riding in the late 1980s while stationed in the Pacific Northwest. Two decades later, after his second enlistment, he was drawn back to snowsports – and instructing, in particular – as a way to build the sense of community he missed from his time in the military. Binford now teaches at New Hampshire’s Loon Mountain Resort, where he is the seasonal programs manager. He credits snowboarding with helping him push his physical, emotional, and mental limits to work through his injuries – both the seen and unseen – from his time in combat.

A WAY TO HAVE FUN IN THE WINTER

After enlisting in the U.S. Air Force in 1987, Binford spent four years on active duty at McChord Air Force Base outside Tacoma, including a temporary duty assignment during the first Gulf War. The Texas native was having a difficult time adjusting to the damp, gray days of a Pacific Northwest winter, so his supervisor suggested he give skiing a try. With previous waterskiing experience, he was soon negotiating the blue terrain at nearby Crystal Mountain Resort, but then became intrigued by the relatively new sport of snowboarding.

“I bought a used GNU Antigravity board and on a wet, snowy day in late November headed up to Paradise Lodge on Mt. Rainer with a



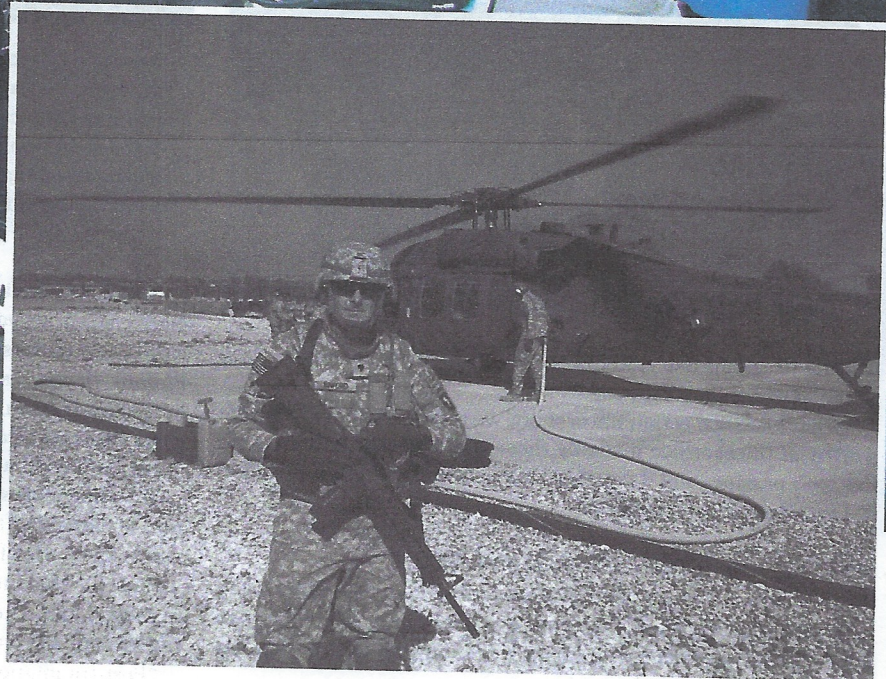
group of Air Force buddies,” Binford recalled. “We hiked up and proceeded to huck ourselves down the backcountry terrain.”

He was hooked instantly. Realizing that snowboarding at a resort would help him improve more quickly – with fewer hikes up the hill – he soon ventured to the slopes of Crystal Mountain and Snoqualmie Pass to teach himself how to make turns.

“This was late 1988 and early ’89, when I was 19 years old,” said Binford. “Snowboarders weren’t always welcome, but after a few visits to the slopes, I figured out how to control the downhill missile strapped onto my feet and started sharing the sport with other friends I served with.”

REENLISTMENT

When his first enlistment ended, Binford spent four years in the U.S. Air Force Reserves, living in Everett, Washington, working as



an aircraft mechanic at Payne Field, and snowboarding on weekends and holidays. He returned to Texas in 1996 and then reenlisted in the military in 2008; this time with the U.S. Army. It was at the height of the war in Afghanistan, and he knew it was not a matter of *if* he would be deployed, but *when*.

That deployment came in 2010 to combat outpost Monti, in Afghanistan’s Kunar Province – with the 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division. The 327th Infantry Regiment, nicknamed “No Slack,” was featured in the documentary films “The Hornet’s Nest” and “No Greater Love.”

“My unit served in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan on the Pakistan border, where we regularly encountered hostile contact,” said Binford. “We lost 17 brothers and 1 sister during our



Left: Binford returning from a mission while serving in Afghanistan's Kunar Province in 2010 and a more recent photo of him with his snowboard, customized to commemorate the unit in which he served. Right: Recovering equipment, Kunar Province, Afghanistan (2011). Below: With daughters Kirstyn (far left) and McKenna (far right), along with Robin Boisvert, an instructor with whom he worked at New Hampshire's Ragged Mountain Resort.



HOW PSIA-AASI SCHOLARSHIPS SUPPORT COMMUNITY

David Binford received the 2021-22 Veteran Workforce and Education Track scholarship to attend Rider Rally. PSIA-AASI developed this scholarship with the 10th Mountain Division Foundation to provide active and non-active military members with funding to support education opportunities as they pursue careers in the outdoor industry.

time there. Seems like yesterday, and the memories are as clear now as the moment they happened.

“What I learned is that life is short; we only get one, so live a life worthy of the sacrifice made by those that love and care for you, live with passion, and if you don’t know what your passion is, find it. I found mine in snowsports.”

HIS RETURN TO THE MOUNTAINS

When that tour of duty ended, Binford retired from the military, and in 2014 started instructing at New Hampshire's Ragged Mountain. In 2019, he took a position with Alpine Adventure while also spending time teaching at Loon Mountain.

“Looking back,” said Binford, “it’s funny how, in 1990, I thought teaching snowboarding to people would be an amazing experience, and in December 2014 I began instructing as a career.”

One difference between that 19-year-old discovering snowboarding for the first time and the now 53-year-old sharing his love of skiing and snowboarding with Loon Mountain guests is that he now experiences the effects of a traumatic brain injury (TBI) he sustained while deployed, as well as post-traumatic stress. The injuries pose both challenges and opportunities for Binford. He now works within certain limitations and has discovered ways to push through those limitations. The physical elements of snowboarding encourage him to stay on top of his nutrition, and physical wellbeing, which in turn helps him deal with his injuries from combat.

“Traumatic brain injury effects my short-term memory, mental clarity, sleep, speech, concentration, and ability to think of specific words and understand written words; my comprehension,” said Binford. “It also results in irritability, impulsivity, and can play a role in mood swings, anxiety, apathy, loneliness, and depression. At times, it can affect my balance. But on the good side, I can watch a movie and a couple of weeks after seeing it, watch it again like it’s the first time!”

Teaching snowsports helps him stretch his memory by forcing him to remember the names of guests and key facts that are important to them. He often writes and keeps notes to review later, which include his students’ names, interests, and what they’re working on in their riding. The notes are especially helpful if he knows he and the student will have a lesson together in the future.

“Post-traumatic stress plays into all walks of life, not just those exposed to combat,” said Binford. “Many of us walk through life allowing stressor triggers to control us. Finding a passion helps one redefine their life and recognize the triggers. It allows for the trauma to play a smaller role in their life.”

Learning about his physical, emotional, and mental limitations has helped Binford improve his teaching by honing his ability to empathize with his students and understand their personalities and learning styles.

“Everyone is unique, and nothing should ever be expected or assumed,” he said. “My awareness of my own potential limitations, real or perceived – and knowing it’s possible to overcome limitations – enhances my empathy for my students and helps me focus on creating a successful learning experience.”

THE REWARD OF INSTRUCTING

These days, Binford enjoys his time on snow with his children – Kirstyn, McKenna, and Garrett – and has found a niche teaching adults ages 35 and up, one of the fastest growing demographics in snowboarding. Many, he said, are parents wanting to spend time with their children on snow. And whether his students are at-home caregivers or workforce bread winners, they are adults who tend to be more cautious because they can't afford an injury that will take them out of commission for any period of time.

"I love teaching this demographic because it helps parents and children have fun together," he said. "It speaks volumes to a child when they see their parent learning something new. The family that boards/skis together stays together!"

His approach is to quiet his students' fear by using simple and basic movements – physically walking them through the movement patterns and progressions to help them build confidence and muscle memory. As his students progress, he incorporates more complex movements to refine board performance and body movement. The process helps his students have fun and want to learn more.

Binford also appreciates his opportunities to work with other veterans, and one lesson in particular stands out in his memory. Asked to help teach a U.S. Air Force veteran who'd been the victim of severe domestic abuse, Binford was reminded of just how life-affirming and powerful snowboarding can be.

VIEW VIDEO



tiny.cc/EdScholarships

Watch this video to learn more about PSIA-AASI's scholarships.

"It was as if snowboarding helped coax her out of a shell she had been living in for a long time," he said. "Watching her make her way down the hill in a heelside garland with a huge smile on her face, and listening to her belly-laugh when she fell in the fresh snow showed me that results come in many different shades and parameters. It's not always about making a perfect turn. The look in her eyes and the pure joy of life in that moment on the hill changed my life."

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During every lesson, Binford makes a point to ask his students to take in the view and atmosphere; to be in the moment. If he can, he takes a photo of his students relishing that quiet, special time so they have something to look back on and remember the day.



DAVID BINFORD

Binford makes turns at Big Sky, Montana, during Rider Rally 2022.

“Teaching is all about creating an experience,” said Binford. “My student’s experience is not my experience, as everyone’s experience is a bit different. It’s important for me to always create these moments for my students.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Binford is committed to his students, the PSIA-AASI community, and his own personal and professional growth. He also hopes other veterans will see the potential to find a successful career in snowsports.

“One of my mentors, Sean Gwinner, is a fellow combat veteran and recipient of the Veterans Workforce Scholarship,” said Binford. “He pushes me beyond the limits I put on myself, as only a fellow veteran can do.”

Binford is currently working toward his AASI Level III and PSIA Alpine Level II certifications, as well as his Freestyle Specialist 1 and Children’s Specialist 2 credentials. When asked why he loves snowboarding, he shared that he enjoys the unimpeded process of carving up a mountain and how it takes you to the present moment.

“To me, riding is FREEDOM,” said Binford. “It is one of the only times I can clear my mind and be in the moment. As a combat veteran, those times can be few and far between. Hell, they can be few and far between for anyone. Teaching someone to ride means they will also have that opportunity to find a place of living in the moment.” **32**

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