Grants Pass Oregon's Daily Courier thedailycourier.com

Grants Pass Daily Courier
Tuesday, Nov. 11, 2025

GP Navy vet still serving after his service



JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier
Navy veteran Christopher Stucke speaks about his time as a naval helicopter crew chief and an aviation rescue swimmer. Stucke said leaving the military and returning to civilian life was a challenge.

By Chrissy Ewald of the Daily Courier

Christopher Stucke did a lot of hard things in the Navy: He jumped out of helicopters, fought wildfires in Southern California and was in charge of a search and rescue crew.

But one of the hardest things he ever did was come home.

"I didn't know what to do," he said. "I was kind of lost, unsure — did I want to go to school, did I want to get a job?"

Stucke, now 31, enlisted in the Navy a year after he graduated from high school and had served 10 years in San Diego, where he worked as an air crewman, helicopter crew chief and aviation rescue swimmer as a member of Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 3, known as HSC-3 for short.

"After 10 years of such a structured life, it was like, 'Now I have all these options, but I don't know how to go about doing any of this stuff,'" he said. "It was very difficult."

In March 2024, Stucke left the Navy. He waited about a month for his son, Mason, to finish first grade before moving up to Grants Pass with the help of his uncle, an Army veteran.

Stucke was born in Sacramento, California, and spent his early years living there and in Chico. He moved with his parents to Grants Pass in 2011 and was homeschooled for a year before enrolling at Lincoln Savage Middle School. He graduated from Hidden Valley High School, where he went to state as a soccer goalie in his junior year. The team placed second in the state tournament.

"I was more into sports than I was academics," he said. "Not the best student."

He had family in the military. His great-grandfather Ross was a pilot with the Marines, his grandfather Charlie was in the Air Force, and his uncle was in the Army.

"My idea was, I think I want to go Air Force," he said. "I was looking at some of the training of the career that I wanted to do, and they said swimming was the hardest part. So my senior year, I was like, 'Well, why don't I join the swim team?'"

He swam freestyle events that year, and after graduating and working at Safeway for a year, he moved to Montana to live with his great-aunt and great-uncle and went to talk to an Air Force recruiter.

"They wanted me to wait one extra year before getting a ship-out date," he said.

That was because he had a procedure when he was 15 for a heart condition called ventricular tachycardia, which caused his resting heart rate to be higher than normal.

"I was like, 'Nope, can't wait a year,'" he said.

He got in contact with a Navy recruiter, who asked what he was good at.

"I said, 'I did swimming,'" he said. "And they're like, 'All right, we have aviation rescue swimmer.' I was like, 'Oh, OK.'"

And that's what he did.

After boot camp at Naval Station Great Lakes in Great Lakes, Illinois, he started a two-year training program for a six-year enlistment.

"You go through many, many schools," he said. "Once you actually complete and you go to your duty station, it really depends where you get stationed."

He was stationed in San Diego to finish his training at HSC-3 on the tip of Coronado Island, where there is a Navy air base.

"Once I finished that training, I got orders. It said 'SCORE DET.' I had no idea what that was."

He figured out that he was assigned to a sea duty squadron.

"I go to San Clemente Island, just south of Catalina Island, so we're actually closer to LA," he said. "It's a Navy auxiliary where we assist Third Fleet, so pretty much the entire West Coast and their anti-submarine warfare. So we basically deploy and recover very expensive targets, and our Navy assets go out there. It's like a big war game. They go and try to hunt down this decoy sub that they're trying to detect before they deploy and actually go do the real thing somewhere in the world."

His crew was also in charge of aerial firefighting.

"They said rescue swimmer, but I found out there is a wide variety of mission sets that we do," he said. "Ever since 2015, it was pretty much at every fire — big, small — we were at every major fire in Southern California when we were activated."

He especially remembered the 2018 fire season, the most destructive for California on record at the time.

His crew fought multiple wildfires that year, including the 281,000-acre Thomas Fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties and the 96,949-acre Woolsey Fire in Los Angeles and Ventura counties.

He described fighting fires in urban areas as looking like the apocalypse in a movie.

"Which is surreal," he said. "People were evacuated, fires everywhere, homes burning up. I remember seeing wild animals just running, and even domesticated animals, you know, cats, dogs. I'm like, 'Oh man, that's eerie.'"

When the unit was called up, either by the Navy or by other agencies like the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, they would hook what's called a "Bambi Bucket" to the MH-60S Sierra helicopters.

The bucket hangs about 25 feet below the helicopter and can scoop up around 3,000 pounds of water.

"When you're going down to scoop up water, you get pretty close to the ocean," he said. "When we're getting over the water, the pilots can't see what's going on down there, so we as the crew chiefs in the back are verbally controlling the aircraft because a lot of things can go wrong."

If a full water bucket is offset from the helicopter, it can swing and make the aircraft wobble in the air.

"Then you let the pilots know the bucket's clear, clear forward flight, and they fly us to the fire. We see it, we're looking out the right side cabin door — it's the big door that opens up," he said. "Our

heads are sticking out, we're looking forward, the pilot says fire line in sight, I'm like, 'Roger, fire line in sight.'"

The crews used an electrical signal to release the water on the fire.

"It's a lot of fun," he said. "That was probably one of the best missions."

His unit also fought fires on San Clemente Island.

"The Navy SEALs have a base out there, and they blow things up," he said. "The south part of the island is like a bombardment range, so the Navy ships with their big cannons test-fire their stuff, and sometimes they end up starting some fires. We hop in the helicopter and put those out."

In 2024, after 10 years in the military, Stucke received a medical discharge.

His ex-wife, Mason's mom, died three years ago, making him a single parent.

Stucke's parents moved from the Applegate Valley to a larger home in Grants Pass so the whole family could live together.

His dad connected him with a Veterans Affairs work-study program at Rogue Community College, where he enrolled in fall 2024.

"I was nervous as heck," he said. "I didn't know they had a military veteran resource center."

He met a V.A. work study student there and asked how to start school using G.I. Bill benefits.

"It was actually a lot easier of a process than I thought," he said. "Thank God they were there, guiding me through that process. It was crazy to think back — here I am, jumping out of helicopters, and aerial firefighting, and all that, and here I am nervous as heck to go step on a college campus. It tells you something — it is nerve-wracking for someone who is in the service and gets out. This is all a new life."

In spring 2025, he became president of RCC's Student Veterans Organization, the local chapter of the national Student Veterans of America organization.

The organization supports the students receiving military benefits to pay for college, who numbered 229 in the 2024-25 school year. That includes active duty and retired military, as well as spouses and dependents.

Stucke said the organization helps students navigate their benefits, connect with people with similar experiences and hosts events throughout the school year.

Stucke also joined Grants Pass American Legion Post 28.

"I'm trying to understand who I am now, outside of service," he said. "Yes, I'm always going to be a veteran, yes, I'll always have that calling to serve. It's one of the things I was born to do is serve, help others."

Stucke is working on his associate of arts Oregon transfer degree and plans to attend the University of Oregon to study business, with the hopes of working at a veterans' organization.

"They really do help veterans, so that's one of my things that I want to do," he said.

———

Reach reporter Chrissy Ewald at 541-474-3806 or cewald@thedailycourier.com.