

From the military to the fairway

Ron McCall served his country before making a splash in the golf industry.

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Ron McCall, previously a member of the U.S. Air Force and a special agent, has settled in as equipment manager at The Highlands at Harbor Springs, a multi-course resort in Highland Springs, Mich. Photo courtesy of Boyne Resorts

As the first high school drum major in his hometown's history, Ron McCall displayed leadership skills. In time, his survival skills proved indispensable.

His march toward even more take-charge examples includes time spent as commander of an American Legion Post, chaplain and, most recently, as equipment manager for The Highlands at Harbor Springs, part of Boyne Resorts' all-season destination in Highland Springs, Mich.

How he arrived there – and in this industry in the first place – could be classified as a death-defying journey.

McCall spent a decade in the U.S. Air Force as a special agent in the Office of Special Investigations. He was stationed in England in particularly treacherous times between 1982 and '92. The Cold War remained in full effect for much of that era. It clearly was a dangerous span for McCall, who dodged a litany of obstacles in his line of work. So – wouldn't you know it? – after all of those potential life-and-death experiences serving his country, it was a routine mountain bike ride in America in which his life could have come this close to tragic consequences.



American Legion Riders director McCall, leading the Milford, Mich., Veterans Day parade. Photos courtesy of Ron McCall

It appeared on that day in September 2012 that not even living through tumult on foreign soil might guide him through this potentially disastrous brush with mortality. McCall was clipped from behind by a van that swerved to the right onto a Michigan highway shoulder driving 60 mph in a 50 mph zone. It could have been way worse for McCall. He managed to walk away with, among other things, two dislocated shoulders and one epiphany.

“God reached down and picked me up and moved me 6 inches to the right. If I had been 6 inches to the left, it would have been a bumper and not a mirror, and I may not actually be here,” McCall says. After four years of being out of work, it didn't take nearly that long for this Air Force veteran to make a name for himself in a new line of work. Following a few stops working at other golf courses, McCall has settled in nicely at The Highlands at Harbor Springs. “You could tell within five minutes that he knows what he is talking about,” says The Highlands' GCSAA Class A superintendent Jason Bazan, an eight-year association member who recalls his interview with McCall. “I was looking for that person. He was it.”



McCall recently served as guest speaker at the Wisconsin Turfgrass Symposium.

Michigan, music and military

It makes sense that this John Denver song is his favorite.

"I got into music in the sixth grade. Played guitar. I'm a John Denver fan," says McCall, "and one of my first songbooks when I learned the guitar was Denver. My favorite song was 'Leaving on a Jet Plane.' And I ended up in the Air Force."

McCall, 59, is a Pontiac, Mich., native who was 4 when his father died. He ended up going to high school in the village of North Branch, a small farming community where he developed a father figure in band director Gary Sutton. "He (Sutton) was a guy who just cared," McCall says.

McCall's partner, Katrina Summersett, was his high school classmate and was also on the marching band field. She was one of the first rifle corps members in the North Branch marching band.

Music must be in the family: McCall's son Nik, 15, plays the flute and piano and is in the marching band drumline and plays tenors as well as the percussion section in concert bands.

Family and friends imagined that McCall eventually would become a music teacher. Instead, he was singing a different tune. As a high school sophomore, he joined the Air Force through the delayed-enlistment program. "I'm a hands-on, practical guy," McCall says.

Best practices were essential during his Air Force career. As a federal security officer for OSI, McCall roamed England and other regions. He was on it during a security sweep when President Ronald Reagan and then-Vice President George H.W. Bush visited. "When they traveled, we met with the Secret Service and worked with them to figure out a plan when they

were traveling. Literally, it was like what you see on TV,” says McCall, a four-year GCSAA member. “I was part of security to find the most viable route to travel. We also did early scouting of the route.”



Air Force basic training for McCall in October 1982.

Peril abounded, part of the deal on occasion when hostile regimes lurk. “Was there danger? Always,” he says. “There are always threats going on. I was in Honduras, Grenada (in October 1983, Reagan issued U.S. troops to protect American nationals from Grenadian revolutionaries and the Cuban army in the Caribbean nation). I saw combat. We secured the runway in Grenada. A lot of it was nerve-wracking. I was just a young kid.”

To Eddie Cutter, McCall blossomed into quite the man. “We (Cutter and his wife) took him and a few others in who were far away from home. They became like sons,” says Cutter, then an Air Force staff sergeant and currently a retired master sergeant. “They would do their job – very good at doing their job, which was important because they were doing their missions.

“He (McCall) was working in security in law enforcement – aircraft protection, weapon protection. We had exercises for chemical weapons, had gas masks on for five or six hours. It was real. You never take anything for granted. You never knew what may happen, and it was a very important time because it was still before the wall came down (the Berlin Wall, a symbol of the Cold War, came down in 1989, leading to Germany’s reunification).”

Told that McCall has established himself in the golf industry, Cutter wasn’t surprised. “He’s very resourceful,” Cutter says. “Anything he puts his mind to, he can do. Anything.”



McCall among those on deployment in Germany in 1986. It was the largest Joint Chiefs of Staff exercise in history at the time, according to McCall.

Back in business

A nine-hole public course roughly 30 miles from Detroit took a chance on a man trying to put his life back together.

Union Lake Golf Course in Commerce Township, Mich., hired McCall in 2016 after he had seen a help-wanted sign for a greenkeeper down the road from his residence. Although he once owned a landscaping company and at one point took a job as an automotive mechanic, McCall applied for the opening at Union Lake as a newbie to the golf maintenance world.

“They hired me on the spot,” says McCall, who self-taught himself golf equipment he oversaw at courses where he was stationed, including six years at Wabek Country Club in Bloomfield Township, Mich. “At Union Lake, we had an old Jacobsen fairway unit and Toro 500 walking mowers, plus a tractor gang mower. We had equipment that didn’t have a bedknife for four months. I fixed things.”

In the meantime, McCall, who studied business administration and marketing at Michigan State University, immersed himself in the industry. Currently, he is a member and secretary of the Michigan GCSA’s equipment managers committee and a factor in all things they do, according to Mitch Hunt, CTEM, at Traverse City (Mich.) Country Club and chairman of the committee. “Six or eight months ago, he called me out of the blue. He works on PowerPoints and helps me with some things I don’t have time to do. We work really well together, and he does a spectacular job,” says Hunt, a two-year GCSAA member. “He’s been in the industry longer than I have, and I rely on him for guidance.”



No. 13 on the Donald Ross Memorial Golf Course at the Highlands at Harbor Springs. Photos courtesy of Boyne Resorts

Hunt says the number of equipment managers in the state has more than doubled in six months, and they are trying to launch a regional conference for equipment managers in at least six states. Then there's this: When Hunt was preparing to become a CTEM last November, McCall was by his side as Hunt prepared for his 154-item CTEM attesting rubric.

As for Union Lake, McCall is eternally grateful. "Had I not had the experience from my landscaping company, I would not have been hired on the spot," he says, "and I wouldn't be where I am at today without that opportunity, for sure."

Tyler St. Clair has benefited from McCall's presence. "He's taught me a lot about reels, how to grind, what to do and not to do," says St. Clair, an assistant equipment manager and one-year GCSAA member. "He likes to have fun and joke but at the same time can be very stern. We try to make it a fun, educational environment. He's a game-changer."



McCall, center, chats with superintendents Nick Shaw, left, and Jason Bazan.

Anniversaries, Ian Woosnam and TV shows

May will be the one-year anniversary for McCall at The Highlands at Harbor Springs. What happens there the following month is more reason for him to celebrate.

The 113th Michigan Amateur Championship is scheduled in June on The Heather, a Robert Trent Jones Sr. design and one of four 18-hole golf courses on the property. "We want to be the No. 1 resort destination in the state," says McCall, who is a golfer and in 1986 in England met Ian Woosnam (who went on to win the Masters in 1991) on the range and struck up a fruitful conversation. "He was doing a demo with clubs. He sent me all these clubs (Ping Berylliums) to try out."

McCall still suffers from numbness in his left leg, and his shoulder pain comes and goes, but none of it seems to slow him, based on what 17-year GCSAA member and The Highlands at Harbor Springs superintendent Nick Shaw sees. "With four courses, it (maintenance shop) gets a little chaotic at times with the amount of equipment we have. Anything you can dream of, if it needs a fix, he's going to fix it," Shaw says. "He is a knowledgeable, driven guy."

This year, several of those he worked with in the Air Force are coming to visit McCall and check out the place. Certainly, they will share stories about their past. "It was definitely rewarding. Educational. Sometimes an evil necessity," he says. "I don't regret what I ever did."

Does he ever tune into TV action-drama series like "NCIS," which purport to reflect professions like his military one?

"I watch occasionally," he says. "Usually I figure it out (the plot) pretty early. I used to hunt people for a living."

What a life, huh? McCall, though, doesn't make a big deal out of it. "I'm just a dude. Worn a lot of hats in my life," McCall says, "but, in the end, I'm just a dude."

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