



Service and Whiskey— **NO BETTER WAY TO HONOR VETERANS**

By James Peterson

"Like every single veteran in every single city in every single state, I cringe when people thank me for my service," says Jesse Sommer, a former U.S. Army paratrooper and founder of Albany County-based New Scotland Spirits.

"The gratitude doesn't fit. Like, yeah I saw some shit. But I also made it home, got paid well, traveled to some places, made some friends. I'd rather people thank me for my belief in America—it's why I joined in the first place. Assembling people who share that belief is why we do this."

By "this," Jesse is referencing the second annual Veterans Day "Ruck March" Fundraiser on Saturday, November 11, 2023, in his native New Scotland, NY. Like last year, his company is orchestrating a 6.8-mile military style "ruck march" in support of three venerable nonprofits.

"A 'ruck march' is a training tool," Jesse explained to me as we dodged the trappings of renovation in the Tasting Room he's opening on Albany's Lark Street. "Ruck marches test soldiers' physical and mental endurance, as they trek long distances while shouldering several dozen pounds of equipment. For our event, we're rucking with 35 pounds of food and toiletries on our backs. Then, at the end of the march, we're gonna donate it all to the Food Pantries for the Capital District."

Jesse is quick to point out that event participants need not undertake the extra challenge of marching with a "ruck sack." Like last year, walkers and runners are welcome; the objective is merely to gather veterans, family members, friends, neighbors, and supporters who see Veterans Day as a day to serve.

Proceeds collected from event registrations will again go to the Boot Campaign, which "provides holistic care to veterans . . . treating diverse health challenges" connected to trauma, brain injury, and—notably—substance abuse. Jesse says this partnership is no accident.

"It's not lost on me that my company manufactures an addictive intoxicant," Jesse acknowledged, "and I'm cognizant that alcohol abuse is rampant in the ranks." (He ain't lying. A few years ago, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention determined the U.S. military to be America's heaviest drinking profession.)

Yet that's also why New Scotland Spirits donates 68% of all profits from every sale of a bottle of "68W" to the Hidden Battles Foundation, which specializes in the treatment of alcoholism in veterans and first

responders. Jesse's rationale is practical: "We're gonna drink anyway. At least now the purchase price will help folks who let whiskey get the better of 'em."



"68W" [pronounced "68 Whiskey"] is the name of the company's 82-proof unaged corn whiskey. Jesse described to me the meaning behind this brand, and the reason New Scotland Spirits selected 6.8 miles as the length of its ruck march:

"68W is the phonetic MOS [military occupational specialty] code for the Army Combat Medic. Medics are an indispensable force on the battlefield, and often the difference between being blessed to celebrate Veterans Day instead of being remembered on Memorial Day."

If that sounds morbid, consider the circumstances which prompted Jesse to apply for trademark recognition of his 68W brand.

"I hadn't even been in-country six weeks yet back in October 2017," Jesse recounted. "I was at an Iraqi outpost called the 'SaDOC'



[Salah ad Din Operations Center] and sometime after dark a blast shook our entire compound. I felt it more than heard it."

In Jesse's telling, one of his unit's convoys was struck by an improved explosive device, a so-called IED. The attack gravely injured one soldier while mortally wounding Private First Class Alexander Missildine.

"He was posthumously promoted to Specialist," Jesse said. "And in the memorial services that followed, I kept hearing 'sixty-eight whiskey' as people described the medical response. It just clicked."

Despite being overseas, Jesse quickly set about trademarking "68W" for use on a spirit that would be dedicated to America's soldiers.

"By that point, I'd already started sourcing grain from New Scotland's farms and working with a couple distilleries back home to produce my whiskey. So in between [combat operations], I was reaching out to veteran-oriented nonprofits to partner with us. Hidden Battles answered the call. Now we have a spirit dedicated to heroes—both the fallen ones, and the ones who keep their memory alive."



SPC Alexander Missildine

The Veterans Day Ruck March begins in the heart of New Scotland, at the Village of Voorheesville's American Legion Post 1493. For the second year in a row, participants will step-off promptly at 1500 (3pm) and march 3.4 miles down Albany County's Helderberg-Hudson Rail Trail. They'll then conduct an "about face" and return to the Legion Hall for a catered "finishers reception."

Nearly a hundred people participated in last year's ruck march, in the process raising \$2,950 for the Boot Campaign. "We also donated \$1,000 to the Hidden Battles Foundation and 1,200 pounds of nonperishables [to the Food Pantries for the Capital District]," Jesse said, "and every single one of those pounds was schlepped on our backs."

Those who register for the Ruck March by November 1st will receive a free event T-shirt. The company is welcoming additional event sponsors as well as private donations in support of their nonprofit partners.

In an email a few days after our interview, Jesse personally invited me to participate. "Last year was humbling, it was inspiring, it was emotional," he wrote. "It's all about connecting people who still harbor a compulsion to serve, whose hometown communities are what motivate them to sign up, and who every now and then indulge in a glass of whiskey to toast the brothers and sisters who had our backs."

I responded to say I'd be there.

In just 18 months, New Scotland Spirits are now available in more than 225 retail outlets statewide. Find them online at www.NewScotlandSpirits.com and on social media at

www.instagram.com/NewScotlandSpirits.