After four deployments with the U.S. Army, packing became routine for Raleigh Heekin. This time, however, was different. Heekin joined the other weary-eyed, post-finals Colorado State students as they packed their belongings in Summit Hall, shifting their sights from the spring semester to summer jobs or adventures in far-off places.

Heekin, who served in the U.S. Army for 20 years, and his service dog, Winnie, are looking forward to moving back home after finals. His wife, Misty, and their four children aged 7-16, have remained in their house in Denver, while Heekin attends CSU.

"I enjoyed living in Summit Hall because of the sense of community and also because I felt like a platoon leader again," Heekin says. "My house is always the house extra kids hung out in, anyway. The dorm is kind of like that."

Heekin, from Littleton, Colo., enlisted in the Army at 17 and retired from military service in 2014. He first became interested in CSU when he visited campus after completing his basic training more than 22 years ago. Now, he’s a year and a half away from completing his newest mission, a CSU degree in social work, and has been assisted by the Liniger Honor, Service & Commitment Scholarship and the New Start program. He hopes to assist fellow veterans after graduation.

Sense of community

Heekin said living on campus helped him with the loneliness he felt being away from his family (whom he would visit on weekends) and also with his transition from military to college life.

Detachment, loneliness, and isolation are far too common for many returning soldiers. Heekin served in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Ukraine in the 1990s, and Iraq from 2006 to 2007. In Iraq, an IED exploded beneath the vehicle carrying Heekin, a driver, and a medic as they set out to help fellow platoon members who had been attacked. The explosion seriously injured Heekin, and killed the driver and the medic.

Being connected to others and a sense of community can be critical for returning veterans.

"If I hadn't lived in the residence hall, and had lived by myself off campus, I could have easily started down the path of isolation," Heekin says. “You lose a lot of your support system when you leave the military.”

“At CSU, there are so many people and programs willing to help, not to mention the students who are so accepting. ... They have all given me my new support system.”

– Raleigh Heekin

Raleigh Heekin and Winnie say goodbye to students they’ve shared a floor with for a year.

STATE YOUR PURPOSE
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From combat to counseling

On Steven Baldwin's first day of U.S. Army combat in Iraq in 2004, a rocket-propelled grenade hit his vehicle and blew off a fellow soldier's leg. By the end of his tour, he had survived three blasts from improvised explosive devices. And he'd won an Army Commendation Medal with Valor for saving a fellow soldier's life.

Baldwin, who is earning his Ph.D. in social work at CSU, says his military service made him realize that his true calling is counseling. "In the Army, I was already counseling and didn't know it," he says. "I was helping soldiers through hard times."

A native of Astoria, Ore., who identifies as Native American, he grew up in a family with a long history of commercial fishing and logging. His grandparents raised him from the time he was 6 years old. "They gave me my work ethic," says Baldwin, who joined the Army when he was 18.

Work ethic, indeed. After Baldwin's service in Iraq, which involved fighting in major battles such as Fallujah and Najaf, he returned to the United States and set his sights on education. He earned an associate's degree from Clatsop Community College, a bachelor's in communication and master's in counseling from Western Oregon University, and a master's in social work from Humboldt State. He says getting his Ph.D. is the next logical step.

"I've always wanted to achieve the highest," Baldwin explains. "I'm at level E-8 in the military, and E-9 is the highest rank. The Ph.D. is the highest degree in education."

He plans to pursue an academic career, preferably at CSU, when he finishes his degree. "Teaching is my passion," Baldwin says. "I just want to be a positive role model."

When asked why he chose CSU to pursue his doctorate, he smiles. "Honestly, I just looked at the website, and there was a calling," Baldwin says. "It seemed very veteran-friendly."

"Riding really helped me, and I wanted to give back, so I started this nonprofit. ... And it's not just about riding. You can talk to animals and say things you might not say to people."

– Steven Baldwin
Nathan Perrault has seen enough death to last a dozen lifetimes.

A former Marine corporal, he lost several buddies in battle while serving in the infantry in Afghanistan. Then, after coming to CSU to study in the Warner College of Natural Resources, he lost good friend and fellow CSU student Corey Stewart in a climbing accident in Rocky Mountain National Park in 2013.

It’s difficult for him to contain his emotions when he talks about the incidents. "Losing Corey really affected me," Perrault says. "A similar thing happened to me in Afghanistan; I lost a good friend who was right next to me. That’s why I like getting out in nature whenever I can. That’s my getaway from regular life."

Calling Perrault an avid outdoorsman would be an understatement as tall as a Colorado 14er. He rock climbs. He ice climbs. He whitewater rafts. He hikes. He summits very tall mountains. He mountain bikes.

“Spending time in the outdoors was a big part of our family life,” says the Maryland native. "I had never heard of Fort Collins when I first moved out here, but I love it. I dove head-first into ice climbing, rock climbing, and mountaineering, and I get outdoors whenever I have the chance.”

Colorado’s mountains not only provided a great test of his outdoor skills, they offered a respite from haunting memories of experiences in Afghanistan. That’s when it struck him: If he felt a sense of calm while climbing a 14er or scaling an ice wall, wouldn’t other veterans reap the same benefit?

That’s when he discovered Veterans Expeditions, a nonprofit started by veterans to help other veterans through challenging outdoor adventures. Perrault started working with Nick Watson, a former Army Ranger who is co-founder and executive director of Veterans Expeditions, and was immediately hooked.

Perrault was part of an eight-man team that summited Denali (formerly Mount McKinley) in Alaska, North America’s tallest peak at 20,301 feet. The climb required planning and patience — the team was stalled for 16 days at 14,000 feet, waiting out a dangerous storm — they reached their goal on the 27th day. “It was a long, long wait, but we were rewarded with a perfect day to summit,” Perrault says. “It was a great relief, but also an amazing experience.”

Perrault, who interned for Veterans Expeditions, is set to earn a degree in recreation and tourism, and has been assisted by the Liniger Honor, Service & Commitment Scholarship. He has been involved with CSU’s New Start program designed to help veterans achieve success in college and beyond, and volunteered with Larimer County Search and Rescue. He plans to become an EMT and, eventually, a ranger with Colorado Parks and Wildlife or the National Park Service.

Rick Dixon’s road to academic success has led through many challenges. But he has walked it with persistence.

Dixon, an enrolled member of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, was born in Chicago and was more inclined toward sports than academics growing up. After a short stint in college and a few jobs, he decided the right path for him was the Marine Corps. Dixon started as an infantryman and eventually worked his way up to the rank of first sergeant. His service involved multiple combat tours, including participating in Operation Al Fajr (Second Battle for Fallujah, Iraq) in 2004.

After more than 16 years of service, Dixon left the military and began yet another battle: Finding the answer to the question, "What’s next?" He knew exactly what he wanted to do – accounting – and where he wanted to go – Colorado State University.

“As I advanced in the military, I was charged with accounting for more and more things,” said Dixon. “I also served as a dispersing agent in Iraq, so a lot of the things I did later in my career in the military were accounting-related. It seemed like a natural fit.”

There were more hurdles to conquer, such as earning a place at CSU (his first two applications were not accepted) and overcoming a cancer diagnosis in 2012.

In 2014, as a Liniger Honor, Service & Commitment Scholar, he graduated from CSU with a bachelor’s degree in business administration with a concentration in accounting and a minor in history.

Upon graduation, he applied to CSU’s highly competitive Master of Accountancy program, without much expectation of being accepted. Not only was he accepted, he eventually earned his Master of Accountancy.

“I knew how amazing the M.Acc. students were,” said Dixon. “I wasn’t sure I could be successful at that level. I’m extremely fortunate. Our University has tremendous professors and people who support veterans.”

Dixon also served as the vice president of SALUTE, the veteran’s honor society on campus. “My favorite memories of CSU will be of the people here — the faculty and students,” said Dixon. “I love the Ram spirit. I think CSU has a great culture of school pride and people really care about each other.”
Capt. Michael Wettlaufer, U.S. Navy, a 1985 Colorado State University microbiology graduate, visited campus this spring to speak to ROTC cadets about leadership.

Wettlaufer commanded the U.S.S. John C. Stennis until 2015 and, while on campus, he had the opportunity to reconnect with Petty Officer Karla Schwartz, who served four years in the Navy and graduated from CSU in December 2015. Schwartz is one of two inaugural employees in a veteran benefit certificate program funded by the Anschutz Foundation. Schwartz served on the nuclear-powered flagship of the John C. Stennis Carrier Strike Group (JCSSG), from 2009-2013, when Wettlaufer was the executive officer.

Courtney and Dean Graby both receive financial aid and supportive services at CSU, made possible by generous donors.

Dean Graby, a 13-year Army veteran admits that the pressure that he and his wife face as both attend school while raising two small children, as well as adjusting to civilian life after the military can sometimes feel overwhelming. Graby and his wife, Courtney, an Anschutz Veteran Spouse Scholar, are both studying sociology. Graby said the New Start program, Liniger Scholarship, and Anschutz Veteran Spouse Scholarship have all allowed him to sleep better at night, knowing he is able to care for himself and his family.

Graby said he has a message for Dennis Repp, Dave and Gail Liniger, members of the Anschutz Foundation, and others who have donated to student-veteran programs: “Your generosity is working. Programs like New Start and the scholarship programs wouldn’t be around without private donors, and it is a huge stress relief to veterans and their families to know we have this kind of support. Thank you.”

Commitment to Veterans

Colorado State University is committed to educating, supporting, and honoring student-veterans by helping them acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their personal and professional goals.