

The Washoe Jeep Squadron: A Lasting Legacy

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When people discuss Nevada Wing's 80-year history, many think of the actions each of our great squadrons had undertaken in search and rescue, volunteer service, and flight training. Without one of Nevada's oldest squadrons and their legacy, Nevada Wing wouldn't be the same as it stands today. Nevada Wing's 80th anniversary has sparked a new appreciation for what the Civil Air Patrol has accomplished over the years, now is the perfect time to commemorate the legendary actions of the men and women of the Washoe Jeep Squadron.

During World War II, Nevada Wing assembled the Washoe Jeep Squadron's predecessor, the Mechanized Unit to assist the air searches. The difficult terrain combined with the notoriously harsh weather of the Sierra Nevada mountains often made air searches and rescues impossible. But it would not be enough to simply locate a downed aircraft by air. If a pilot and/or crew had survived the crash, most probably it would be necessary to get to them with medical aid and bring them out. Helicopters were still undergoing development at the time, and therefore unavailable. Nevada Wing found a solution, with members offering their 4x4 off-road vehicles to aid mission efforts. After years of service, this Mechanized Unit was disbanded at the conclusion of the war.

However, the need for ground support didn't disappear. So, in 1950 the Washoe Jeep Squadron, based in Reno, was founded. Wanting to help others in their hours of need, "The Jeeps" still faced the huge challenges of conducting search and rescue missions over Nevada's vast and mountainous terrain. As this solution continued to evolve, the Washoe Jeep Squadron soon had an entire fleet of these vehicles. Within record time, The Jeeps became the centerpiece of Nevada's ground search and rescue forces. In only a few years, the squadron had become so well-established in the surrounding community, that it rose to over 40 members and 18 all-terrain Jeeps.

The squadron hit the ground running with several important mission successes only mere months after their creation. In 1951, it mobilized after reports came in of a missing glider in Southern Nevada. The glider belonged to Swedish air scientist Karl Ovgard, who had endured a severe crash well outside the range of any airport. Rushing into action, the Jeep Squadron began one of the biggest ground searches undertaken by any CAP unit. Searching from Death Valley to the Amargosa Desert and onto the Panamint Valley, the search team gave the mission their fullest efforts. With the search finally ending with the discovery of the downed glider, the members of the Washoe Jeep Squadron had covered over 10,000 miles solely in their Jeeps. With the sheer speed and size of this ground search, the Jeep Squadron quickly built up a reputation among the Civil Air Patrol and Air Force. With signs only pointing to the Jeep Squadron getting bigger and bolder in their rescue missions, it was recognized as one of the finest civilian search teams in the nation.

While the squadron had done everything from saving flash-flood victims to finding missing children, The Jeeps engaged in much more than just search and rescue. They were well known around their community for their regular civic work and nature preservation. It was never out of the ordinary for the squadron members to transport feed to herds of wild animals, restore and maintain mountain trails, or help the local disability support groups. Whenever they were not training in search and rescue, they jumped on every opportunity to give back to their communities in some way or another. Squadron members were avid about promoting safety and well-being around the entire state as well. Regularly, the squadron would assemble to teach the students and other citizens basic first aid and help others gain medical qualifications. All of this goes to show that all the members of the Jeep Squadron were successful in their goal of leaving the surrounding community in better condition than they found it. With everyone around recognizing the need for this squadron's dedication to service leadership, the Jeep Squadron established itself as a community cornerstone.

Although The Jeeps had well over 60 members and the whole community's support at its peak, they disbanded in 2014. The Jeeps left behind a timeless legacy of dedication toward success, saving lives, and the betterment of the community. With the loss of an important and legendary group of service members, a question arose: "Who will carry on their legacy?"

Today, we as members of Civil Air Patrol's Nevada Wing need to ensure the legacy of the Washoe Jeep Squadron is not forgotten. We are making sure to carry on the traditions of the Washoe Jeep Squadron by teaching our members life lessons and instilling the core values that can be learned from these brave men and women. I strongly encourage you to do the same and carry on their legacy. By living as they did through embracing a service lifestyle and Civil Air Patrol's core values, we can continue to make lasting impacts on Nevada's communities.