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MAGAZINE

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Photo by Spc. Antonio Lewis.

Take your leave days



Can you even remember the time before we were plugged in all day, every day? Maybe that era was even before you were born, but life did exist without cell phones, laptops and social media. And the result of less distractions was more uninterrupted time together, something we need to work harder at in 2020.

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to interview retired Maj. Gen. John Gronski. We initially met several years ago at the annual AUSA conference as he was part of the leadership of U.S. Army Europe. Our recent discussion focused on a new book he published called “The Ride of Our Lives: Lessons on Life, Leadership, and Love,” and its focus had me thinking about the value of time off — something my husband is terrible at taking. He’s the guy who always loses leave days because he doesn’t take them before the next fiscal year starts.

Gronski, his wife, Berti, and his son, Stephen, embarked on a cross-country ride in the early 80s. There was no GPS, they relied on paper maps, and only had a pay phone for communication. They traveled over 4,000 miles with bicycles and a toddler. After his retirement, he reflected back on that trip and its transformative impact on the leadership lessons he learned — and sometimes applied to his military career. The journal he had kept became a useful tool in putting together the book.

Reliving his journey was fascinating, when thinking about life in terms of our modern-day luxuries. What lesson is the takeaway to me? Take those leave days. The way in which we spend our off-duty hours impacts other areas of our life, which is reinforced by the four-decades-long-career of leaders like Gronski. Read more on what he hopes readers will learn from his story on pgs. 16-17.

Bianca

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ON THE COVER

Army Reserve Maj. Kevin Wood reads to his two sons near their home in New Jersey. When he’s away for various military commitments, Wood utilizes the United Through Reading app to stay connected with his kids. Photo by John DeFiora Photography.



Gronski speaks with leaders from the U.S. Army NATO Brigade, U.S. Army Europe and other NATO Commands while serving as the Deputy Commanding General of National Guard for U.S. Army Europe. Photo by Tony Sweeney.

Gronski reflects on ride of his life

By Bianca M. Strzalkowski

A recently-retired Army leader is sharing lessons learned on life, leadership, and love.

Retired Army Maj. Gen. John Gronski returned to the States last spring after spending three years as the deputy commanding general at U.S. Army Europe. The longtime soldier was then focused on his next mission: transitioning to the civilian sector. He retired in June.

Shortly after, a conversation with his younger son led to an idea about documenting a 4,000-mile journey that had occurred earlier in his life.

"I engaged in this bicycle trip over 35 years ago, and I was sitting around this summer with my son,

Timothy, who wasn't even born yet when I did the trip with my son, Stephen, and we were talking around the firepit. He started asking me questions and as I was sharing the stories, he suggested I turn them into a book," Gronski explained.

He had kept a journal and a scrapbook from the trip, serving as a baseline for jogging his memory about specific details. "The Ride of Our Lives" was released in February and focuses on people following their dreams, while overcoming challenges.

It was also an opportunity for Gronski and his wife, Berti, to learn a lot about each other in the face of difficult circumstances. The couple, who has now been married 39 years, were still in the newlywed phase when they embarked on the trek in 1983.

"It was all self-supported, self-contained. We were just out there on our own with our baby, a two-man backpacking tent and two sleeping bags. You know, when we had to find a place to sleep for the night, we would do our best to find a town park, a farmer's field, behind a church, behind a school. It was challenging three months on the road on bicycles," he said.

The Gronskis relied solely on bicycles, pulling their 15-month-old son Stephen in a trailer that resembled a pioneer's covered wagon. Their route went from Washington State to Pennsylvania, and he credits the experience with providing life-long formation of character, family values, patriotic service and citizenship, and unshakable faith.

But how does a young couple, with a baby, decide to adopt such a unique undertaking?

"I was 20 years old, before I entered the Army, I started to read and hear about people who were biking across the United States. ... I was always interested in people who would backpack the Appalachian Trail, and I always had this adventurous yearning in me. My wife, she's from Austria, so she showed a sense of adventure by coming over here (U.S.) to try and make a life for herself," he said. "After we got married, we started talking about this dream."

At the time, Gronski was preparing to leave active duty and they were stationed in Fort Lewis, Washington. They didn't see Stephen as an obstacle to the idea, he adds, so this was how they approached getting from one side of the country to their next stop.

Of the 12 states they traveled through, each had "its own magic about it," but Oregon's scenery, people and cascading mountains stood out to him. In fact, it's where the book's cover image was taken. But he also learned a deeper lesson tying in the logistical parts of the trip to a larger life lesson.

"Every state, and every time we had to make a decision whether to go

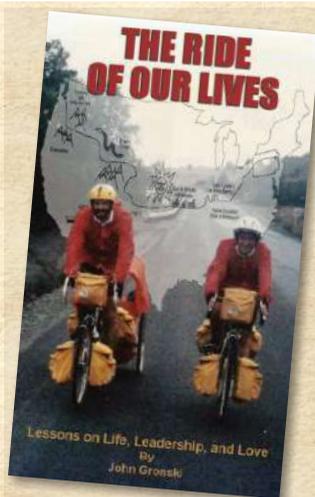


right, left or whatever direction, what I found is whatever choice you make in life really isn't a bad choice. It's the attitude you have that matters. ... I don't think it's ever worth thinking I should have made another choice," Gronski said.

He recommends other service members find their own version of an adventure to share with their family, which he says can improve workplace performance as well.

"I do think spending time exploring different things with one's family is important. I think it helps you

do better in your work — whether it be as a soldier or a civilian career because you step back and do something different. And you usually have the opportunity to think and reflect. Then when you return to your job, you do it with a little more creativity and imagination," he said. "The second thing I want to say, in the Army loyalty is one of our values, what loyalty means is not only loyalty to your country or to your unit — but also being loyal to your family. To be loyal to your family, you have to take that time." ●



**"The Ride of Our Lives:
Lessons on Life,
Leadership, and Love"**

is available now
for purchase on Amazon at

<https://www.amazon.com/Ride-Our-Lives-Lessons-Leadership/dp/1630505307>