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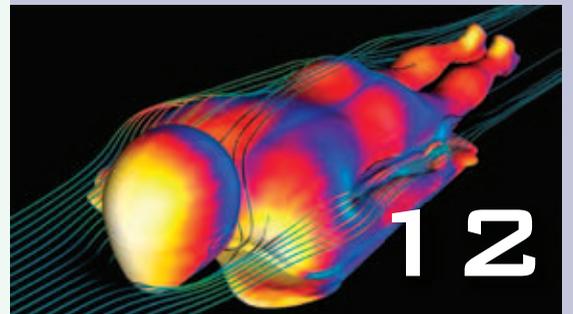
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# More and More Veterans Walking Off the War

Wounded veterans find solace and camaraderie through outdoor programs

BY MARCUS WOOLF

Feeling confused and depressed, WWII veteran Earl Shaffer told a friend in 1948 that he was going to “walk off the war.” That May, Shaffer set off to hike from Georgia to Maine, and four months later he became the first person to complete the entire Appalachian Trail.

There’s a long history of veterans finding solace in the outdoors, and people who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are following in Shaffer’s footsteps. This spring, 13 veterans began an AT thru-hike as part of the Walk Off the War program, which launched in 2011. In the past decade, hundreds of outdoor programs have emerged to help U.S. veterans recover from physical and emotional wounds.

“There’s something like 25,000 non-profits serving veterans right now, and there are about 300 that do things outdoors,” says Chad Spangler, national director of the Outward Bound Veterans program.

Spangler and other experts say that outdoor recreation has proved to be especially effective in treating veterans, and a wide variety of programs have emerged, from six-month treks on the AT to one-day bike rides. In the last couple of years, veterans’ outdoor programs have also become more sophisticated by developing partnerships to broaden their reach and researching how nature and adventure affect war injuries. Plus, groups that serve veterans are looking for ways to build stronger ties to the outdoor industry, and even connect veterans with jobs in manufacturing or retail.

With an increasing number of veterans struggling from the effects of combat and long deployments, the outdoors and the outdoor industry will play an important role in helping them heal.

## A GROWING CRISIS

Over the past decade, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have exacted an enormous toll on U.S. military service members. Since 2001, more than 2,700 members of the U.S. military have killed themselves, and about 22 commit suicide every day, according to a May 2013 report in *The New York Times*. More than 337,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), according to a study by the RAND Corp. Also, the Defense Department has diagnosed at least 233,000 veterans with traumatic brain injury (TBI) since 2001. Various sources report that in the past decade, PTSD and TBI have triggered depression in half a million veterans.

For Navy veteran Justin Haug, depression took hold in 2008 when he returned home from deployments in Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa.

“When I came home, I became an alcoholic and was going down the wrong path, getting into a lot of fights and being really reckless,” Haug told *Outdoor USA Magazine*. “It was so bad, I would fill up a Camelbak with Jack Daniels and Coke and drink that while I was working out and running.”

But in the past couple of years, the outdoors has helped Haug turn his life around. During trips to Yosemite and other National Parks he has worked through emotions, and this spring he had a revelation while rafting in Canyonlands National Park with the Outward Bound Veterans Program.

## “They love that they’re with other veterans who understand their life experience”

“I began to see the person I want to be, and I realized this life is short and I only have one life to live it,” he says.

Outward Bound first launched trips for veterans in 1983, but back then it only did a couple of trips a year for 10 to 20 people, says Spangler. This year it will take 600 to 1,000 veterans on trips.

The Sierra Club has seen participation increase with its veterans’ outings, says Stacy Bare, director of the Sierra Club Mission Outdoors program. In the past five years, the organization has taken about 50,000 veterans



In 2012, Soldiers To Summits led a team of wounded veterans up Cotopaxi (19,347 ft) in Ecuador

outdoors through its Military Families and Veterans Initiative, its Our Wild America program and local outings throughout the country.

The numbers are also up for Wounded Warrior Project, the country’s largest organization with recreation opportunities for veterans. Within the next five years, its alumni base of veterans could grow from 35,000 to 100,000, says Casey O’Donnell, health and wellness coordinator for Wounded Warrior Project. He says the organization’s cycling programs have spread quickly and now take place in 13 cities.

## THE OUTDOORS WORKS WONDERS

Record numbers of veterans are turning to the outdoors because nature and adventure have proved to be very effective in addressing mental and physical problems. Experts say that nature affords veterans some solitude and time to think, without being distracted by normal, everyday worries. At the same time, adventure activities involve the type of camaraderie and physical and mental challenges that veterans experienced in the service.

“The great thing about the Walk Off the War program is you’re on the AT for six months, with long periods of solitude and nothing to do but think,” says Sean Gobin, a former

Army officer and veteran of the Iraq war. He and another veteran, Mark Silvers, created the program after they hiked the AT and realized how beneficial it was. “Your mind processes experiences and memories, whether you want it to or not, and you come to terms with a lot of things that you can put away.”

Outdoor programs also help wounded veterans make the difficult transition from military life to the civilian world, says Spangler of Outward Bound. Former service members often miss the camaraderie they enjoyed in their military units, and they long to be around people who can understand their experiences.

“One of the big issues veterans face is a sense of isolation,” says Spangler. To address this, most outings programs group veterans together, so they can share common experiences and gain a sense of belonging. “The overwhelming response we get to these courses is about the camaraderie,” says Spangler. “They love the fact they’re with other veterans who understand their life experience.”

The veterans also get the opportunity to once again be part of a team, says Conrad Anker, a climber and athlete with The North Face who helped the non-profit organization Veterans Expeditions take 11 wounded service members ice climbing this spring. Climbing is an ideal activity for the veterans because it’s

## Overcoming Invisible Wounds: One Vet's Story

The term ‘wounded warrior’ often conjures the image of a veteran with a prosthetic limb. But less visible traumas affect many veterans, says Sarah Aktepy, a researcher with the Center for Military and Veterans Education in Virginia. While serving as a Navy chaplain assistant during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Aktepy was sexually assaulted and developed post-traumatic stress disorder. Also, an auto accident left her with brain and spinal injuries. In 2012, Aktepy climbed Cotopaxi in Ecuador with Soldiers To Summits (S2S), a program of NoBarriers.org. Outdoor USA talked with Aktepy about how her injuries and the S2S program changed her life.

### What sparked you to join the military?

Due to my family, I grew up with a large sense of patriotism and duty to service my country. My grandfather was a World War II pilot, and my godmother, who was in the Air Force, also played a significant role in my childhood.

### What duties did you perform as a chaplain assistant?

I did six months in the Mediterranean and nine months in the Persian Gulf supporting amphibious operations post 9/11. We provided services for all the faith groups, performed memorial services and responded to medical emergencies. When we lost one of our Marines, the chaplain performed last rites, and we helped prepare his body and coordinated a memorial service onboard.

### While serving, you suffered military sexual trauma. Can you define that term?

MST is a broad term that encompasses long-term sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape and sexual coercion. On my last deployment in the Gulf, I had a significant experience related to MST that has



Aktepy climbed Cotopaxi in Ecuador with Soldiers To Summits (S2S)

changed my life forever and completely changed my view of the military and how I felt about my service. I was forced to work with the person who assaulted me, and I dealt with ongoing stalking and harassment.

### How did MST affect you after you were honorably discharged in 2003?

I went on to get my LPN (licensed practical nurse), my associate degree, my bachelor’s degree and my master’s in medical sociology. I maintained a heavy caseload and pushed through school. But I went from being a rock star in graduate school to being unemployed for two years, and almost ended up homeless. I had isolated myself and was self-medicating.

### Why did you apply to Soldier to Summits?

Being from Montana, I’m outdoorsy and love pushing myself mentally, physically and emotionally. Simultaneously, I realized I had totally isolated myself from the veteran community, except through research, which focused only on women. The challenge for me was in knowing I would be surrounded by male veterans.

### How did the S2S program help you?

When you train for the climb, you do team building exercises, and you support each other and realize you have to rely on your buddies. Those relationships really help people with PTSD. S2S helped me regain that camaraderie and trust of other service members, especially male service members. Also, climbing provided a little risk, which makes you perform, and you find out what you’re really made of. S2S hones your strengths, and I realized that I am a wounded warrior, but that is only part of my identity. I am many other amazing things.

team oriented like the military, Anker told Outdoor USA.

"We were still dealing with an adversary, but it wasn't a combatant. It was the environment," says Anker, explaining that the veterans worked together on essential tasks such as organizing equipment and preparing for bad weather. "Building that together was a key component to it," he says. "When we were watching out for each other and motivating each other, that emotion was really important for them."

Adventure outings also appeal to veterans because they replicate a sense of being on a mission, says Mike Kirby, a former member of the Special Operations Command who is now with Exum Mountain Guides in Jackson, Wyo. "The whole process of climbing is very similar to what I did in the military," he says. "Everything from preparation and checking equipment, to approaching the climb, which is like hitting the target on the objective. It's all very familiar, except I'm not out hurting people, but doing something that I'm passionate about."

The concept of having a mission in life is especially important for veterans suffering badly from depression, says Charley Mace, a guide for Soldiers to Summits, an expedition program offered by the non-profit NoBarriers.org. "With TBI and PTSD, there are a lot of guys who can't get off the couch," says Mace, adding that climbing expeditions have helped veterans improve their bodies and minds significantly. "It might be a person getting the confidence to go on a job interview, or lose 40 pounds," he says.

Naturally, some veterans aren't as physically or emotionally strong as others, but another advantage of outdoor recreation programs is that they can be suited for all ability levels. About five years ago, Wounded Warrior Project transformed its fundraising bike rides into day-long outings that would attract more veterans who were sedentary due to injuries. "For a lot of them, this is their first activity since their injury," says O'Donnell, adding that Wounded Warrior Project leads shorter bike rides in and around a particular city for less-experienced veterans, while "challenge rides" that stretch up to 100 miles cater to experienced veterans.

Before the participants ride, experts fit them with bikes and teach veterans with physical injuries to use adaptive equipment. "A program should teach the veterans a new skill," says O'Donnell, adding that wounded veterans can gain more freedom by learning to use equipment and prosthetics, or by being more in tune with their injured bodies.

#### FURTHER ON UP THE ROAD

Once a cycling outing is over, Wounded Warrior Project sends an email sharing the list of participants to all of its 18 offices, says O'Donnell. This way, all employees in the organization are better able to keep track of the veterans for follow-up contact, which happens after 30, 60 and 90 days.

Unfortunately, most of the programs we interviewed said they struggle to track the progress of participants. They simply lack the resources, infrastructure and processes to make it happen. However, in the past couple of years, some organizations have been seeking ways to improve their follow-up.

Bare of the Sierra Club says he knows through anecdotal evidence that many veterans are getting involved with their outings on a local level. But it's hard for the national organization to identify these people and track them. "We're not asking people to self identify as a veteran, but we're trying to develop technology so people can better report on who they have taken out," he says.

The Sierra Club is also adjusting operations to reach a greater number of veterans. "We're taking the principles of community organizing and adapting those to the outdoor recreation community," says Bare, explaining that Sierra

Club is developing partnerships with other non-profits throughout the country. If it can't provide a certain outdoor experience, it will work with another national organization, or a group in the veteran's community, such as Team Red, White & Blue, which has running programs for veterans, and Active Heroes, which encourages veterans to walk.

Partnerships are becoming more important because most groups serving veterans are non-profits with limited resources, and they typically offer trips for little or no cost to veterans. When the Pennsylvania-based Appalachian Trail Conservancy was looking for ways to serve the large number of veterans hiking the trail each year, it found an ally in the Walk Off the War program. "We don't have the resources to do it all by ourselves, so we're looking for opportunities to partner," says Mark Wenger, executive director and CEO of the ATC. Having built relationships with gear manufacturers, the ATC helped Walk Off the War secure gear from Granite Gear, Ahnu and a dozen other brands.

The Sierra Club also works with gear companies, including The North Face, Petzl, Black Diamond, Suunto and Keen to outfit veterans on trips.

#### GETTING HARD DATA

As organizations increase their ability to serve veterans, they're also conducting research to better understand exactly how nature and outdoor recreation affect veterans physically and mentally.

"We know anecdotally from participants that outdoor experiences have been vital to their reintegration," says Bare. "Securing quantitative data that reinforces these beliefs will support our efforts to make these types of experiences available on a larger scale."

In 2012, the University of Michigan surveyed about 80 veterans who participated in multi-day wilderness outings with the Sierra Club. The goal was to see how the natural environment affected the mental health of these people. "The general trend is that there was a lasting impact on their well-being," says Jason Duvall, a researcher with the University of Michigan. "There were improvements to their mood, their life outlook, and social functioning," he says, adding that veterans with the most severe psychological problems showed the greatest level of improvement.

Outward Bound is working with The Warrior Institute in Reddick, Fla., to study how PTSD affects veterans physically during wilderness trips. Another Florida organization, Combat Wounded Veteran Challenge, is taking amputees and veterans with other physical wounds mountaineering, rafting and diving to develop better orthotics and prosthetic limbs.

#### MAKING AN ALLY OF THE OUTDOOR INDUSTRY

While outdoor programs are compiling better data, they are also concerned with social problems of wounded veterans, especially their struggles to get jobs.

The unemployment rate for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans is 10.8 percent, while the rate for the general population is 7.8 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Many veterans we interviewed said that a lot of companies avoid hiring because they

## Bellyak: A Useful Tool for Veterans

When Adam Masters launched the Bellyak in 2012, he hoped to make paddling more accessible to people of all ability levels.

Mission accomplished, says Sean McCarthy of the non-profit Team River Runner. According to McCarthy, the Bellyak has become an important tool in the organizations' adaptive paddling programs for wounded veterans.

"The Bellyak is really good for folks who are not necessarily friends with the water, because they can sit on top of it and don't have to worry about being trapped inside of something like a kayak," says McCarthy.

With chapters in 50 states, Team River Runner instructs about 2,000 veterans in flatwater paddling and whitewater paddling each year. While outings take place on rivers, lakes and oceans, much of the initial training takes place in swimming pools. This is where the Bellyak really shines, says McCarthy. He uses the Bellyak in the pool to help people become comfortable with the water, learn safety measures, improve their balance and learn to paddle.

Because a person can lie down, kneel or sit on the Bellyak, the device accommodates people with a wide range of physical injuries and abilities, says McCarthy.

"It's really useful for TBI patients and medicated patients with balance issues," he says, explaining that the Bellyak is stable, but not too stable, so it helps people improve their balance incrementally over time.

The Bellyak also helps veterans with cognitive issues to use their limbs more effectively, says McCarthy. He explained that people with brain injuries sometimes struggle to understand where their limbs are in space. To paddle the Bellyak straight, they must move both hands at an equal pace and rhythm, and this motions helps them locate their limbs.

Another positive aspect of the Bellyak is that it makes paddling less intimidating, so family members of veterans can participate in classes, says McCarthy.

"Virtually any family member can work with the Bellyak safely, especially kids," he says. "And family is a major component of the healing and treatment process."



A Bellyak doubles as a recliner for a vet and his pooch

think veterans lack skills, can't perform on the job, or might turn violent.

In fact, "Veterans are afraid to report their disabilities on an application," says TJ Laynor, a veteran and government programs manager for Outdoor Research.

Laynor and other veterans in the outdoor industry hope that gear manufacturers and retailers will consider hiring veterans. "We need to educate people. Some of these veterans have incredible leadership skills," says Laynor, who lost an eye in combat in 2005 and suffered from PTSD.

Laynor says many veterans not only bring to the table strong leadership skills, but also a real desire to work in jobs related to the outdoors.

"I can't tell you how many emails I get from veterans who want to get into the outdoor industry," he says.

Bare of the Sierra Club agrees that the outdoor industry should take a closer look at hiring veterans. "Our argument to the outdoor industry is to give veterans a chance because they understand discipline, and they know how to work hard and play hard," says Bare. Before the Sierra Club hired Bare, he served as an Army captain and won the Bronze Star for meritorious service in Baghdad. He suffered from PTSD and credits rock climbing and

the outdoors for helping him put his life back together.

Bare says the Sierra Club is working informally with human resources departments of various outdoor companies to find avenues to bring more veterans into the industry.

#### LETTING GO AND MOVING ON

Since he was discharged from the Navy in 2010, Justin Haug has been working diligently to get a job in the outdoors. In December 2013, he will graduate with a degree in recreation, park and tourism management from Penn State University. Just four years ago, he was drowning in depression and a Camelbak full of Jack and Coke. His journey back hasn't been easy, but he made peace with himself this spring during his Outward Bound rafting trip.

"Each of us picked up a small rock that spoke to us, and we shared what the rock meant to us," says Haug. "For me, it was knowing there are things in the past I'm not proud of."

When Haug's boat reached the confluence of the Green River and Colorado River, his guide explained that Native Americans would cast stones into water to project a certain future. For a few moments, Haug gazed at the swirling river, clutching the rock. And when his mind finally settled, he tossed the stone into the river, and let the river roll on. 



Walk Off the War AT thru-hikers gather at a kickoff event in Georgia



The Appalachian Trail Conservancy provided support for Walk Off the War hikers