

# Veterans Expeditions to Wilderness and Regaining Health

BY STACY BARE

Returning home from war or military service, veterans should have a first option of experiencing the great American wilderness to help heal any trauma associated with combat and overseas service. Even before we send in the psychiatrists and doctors, unless they're needed to get an individual mobile again, a supported trip to the wilderness should be offered, if not mandated, within the first two to four weeks of a serviceperson coming home.

Success or failure notwithstanding, war is a bloody, messy, difficult experience.

In the last 10 years, combat increasingly has occurred in urban and suburban settings similar in many ways to the built environment of the United States ... but with a difference. Tires may explode on the side of a road and kill a teammate in the vehicle in front or behind you. Sniper fire from a high rise could disable your best friend. Helicopters hover overhead or come crashing down, raining hellfire onto the enemy or signaling an extraction of your team out of, or an insertion in to, a combat zone.

War is also technological. Machines, computers, logistical systems, and so forth are omnipresent in war (see Figure 1). Even during combat, computer jocks and analysts way behind the lines produce endless reams of dreary reports, Excel spreadsheets, and PowerPoint presentations, trying to capture the reality of the war by requesting data through endless radio calls to those in the field. Infused with technological demands, war can be decidedly unwild, or not natural.

Meanwhile, as war proceeds, those at home are largely unattached to it, or to the men and women who serve on their behalf. Many citizens may not even be able to locate the war on a map. While I was at war, I perceived most noncombatants back home as enjoying a soft life making inconsequential decisions such as which television show to

watch, which outfit to wear, or where to go out on the weekend. A non-veteran may even think they understand the realities of war after hours of playing one of the many video games modeled on combat.

Society at large, enjoying its softness, thinks that it's the comforts of civilization and the great advances in medical and psychological practices that will help our veterans move forward from military experiences. Our country has responded as if this were the case: We have gleaming hospitals, mounds of prescription medications to choose from, and a host of events designed to make welcome the military veteran, including free restaurant meals or new wardrobes, deep discounts in higher education, free tickets to sporting events, and even discounts to amusement parks.

These "thank you's" are not unwelcome. It's only that, by themselves, they are not effective because the experience of war from which the veteran is emerging is so very different. Consider the following:

- How different is driving to and from work from driving in convoy into a firefight or an improvised explosive device?
- How different is waiting in an airport to visit your in-laws from waiting in an airport to see the caskets of your



Stacy Bare ice climbing in Ouray, Colorado. Photo by Lourdes Izziray.



**Figure 1 – Stacy Bare with his military team in Baghdad. Photo courtesy of Stacy Bare.**

platoon mates loaded onto a plane and flown home?

- How different is sitting in a classroom from sitting in a mission brief?
- How different is shopping in a mall from chasing an insurgent through a crowded market full of strangers?

Unimpressed with the softness of the civilization at home, many veterans are not willing to, or even wanting to, assimilate back into society. Although the war experience may have left a significant traumatic impact, it also led many to an extreme sense of camaraderie, focus of mission, and physicality that is simply lacking in the day-to-day American experience (see Figure 2). Life outside of war is boring. Uninspiring.

## Returning Home

A marine sergeant tells the story of questioning why he fought while sitting inside a large chain restaurant two weeks after he returned from deployment. Had he really fought for cheap, gimmicky cocktails and two-for-one appetizers? Why was it that no one around him seemed to know that thousands of men and women were at

that very moment fighting ill-defined wars in strange countries? Why was it that someone was bitching that their steak was overdone?

I was no different from other veterans when I came home in 2007, but I did all I could to fit back in and start churning along with the rest of America anyway. However, before I really settled in to try and do the “right thing” by going to graduate school and, I

hoped, setting myself up to be accepted into the ranks of the upper-middle class, I spent three weeks surfing in South Africa. The waves abused me, knocked me down, and gave me bruises. Every morning, my shoulders ached from paddling out past the violent shore break, only to get knocked off my board by powerful waves on uneasy feet.

I loved it, and while the next few years would be full of cocaine, broken relationships, suicidal ideations, and failed attempts at traditional therapy – as well as no surfing – those three weeks off the rugged coast in South Africa anchored me to a reality more important than the one I was living in. In my darkest moments, I returned to the tranquility of a hidden bay just east of Cape Town, where it poured down rain as I sat on the beach, surfboard chewed up in pieces, and stared at the raging water and sheltering cliffsides. I was at peace there.

I found myself missing war. Life made sense and I clearly understood my mission, my purpose, and my role. In nonmilitary life, I could not. In



**Figure 2 – A group of children in Iraq playing with Stacy Bare for the camera. Photo courtesy of Stacy Bare.**



**Figure 3 – A Veterans Expedition on top of Longs Peak with Stacy Bare in Colorado. Photo courtesy of Stacy Bare.**

2009, while living in Colorado, a friend of mine got tired of my constant threats of suicide and wanting to end it all or return to war when he said to me, “Well do something about it. Either end it, go back in, or come out rock climbing with me.” I went rock climbing, and although I recognize his approach to healing was certainly not a textbook approach, it worked for me, and in his offer of wilderness, I found salvation.

### **Wilderness and Reconnection**

The wilderness allowed me to be me. I understood my mission, my purpose, and my role. Rocks were not sympathetic when I fell on them, but seemed to always offer a handhold at the right moment and constantly offered yet another chance at success. The trees did not judge me, but from time to time kept me from sliding off the mountain, just as easily as they knocked off my hat.

Ultimately, I was able to meet other people in a setting free from normal social pressures. Bonds of trust were more easily built as I exchanged

information with other hikers and climbers about bears we had seen, how best to weather the coming storm, belaying someone on a challenging rock pitch, or discussing around camp fires the beauty of sunsets from different vantage points on a trail. The soft society, which angered me so much, and the hard society which I had left behind, never got mentioned. The focus was simply to get to the base of the next climb, to the overview of the next hidden alpine lake.

Around campfires and after big days in the mountains, I began to open up to others as others opened up to me. I was surprised to meet so many veterans in the wild, and even so many more people who were not veterans, but in some sense, might as well have been. I learned from men and women I had grown to look up to as superior climbers and athletes, that it was okay that I had struggled with drugs; so had they. It was okay that I dealt with depression every day; so did they. It was okay that I had been, am still from time to time, suicidal. They had healed, improved, gotten better, but they never went to the

wild expressly to heal, they went into the wild for the wild itself and ended up healing, and ended up rebuilding their trust in others. The wild is enough in and of itself, and the side effects are wonderful.

I learned to sit still in the wilderness, to focus on the task at hand, and let the rest of life fade away. Escaping from the constant hum of civilized life, I had the quiet and time to think or not think as I chose. To quote from a former platoon mate of mine with whom I have climbed in the Rocky Mountains, “I came off the climb and felt guilty that I had not thought of those who had died all day long ... then I realized they were right next to me all day. At the end of the day, their faces and laughter became easy to remember again.”

From here, I jumped off into a number of different directions, including more traditional forms of therapy and a willingness to engage the Veterans Administration (VA) with my issues in hand. The VA still gives me the heebie-jeebies, but I know that if others have survived it, so can I. For me, a former commissioned officer in the United States Army, I knew that there were others, like me, who had not yet been shown the way into the wilderness.

### **Veterans Expeditions**

Since I did not know much beyond what veterans wanted, wilderness was a way to continue the adventure, the mission, and to be part of a team with a higher cause. I founded Veterans Expeditions with army veteran and former ranger Nick Watson in 2010 (see Figure 3). Nick left the military in 1995 and soon after lost the fingers on his right hand and severely injured his hip while working in oil fields. He went on to become a forest ranger and wilderness guide. The wilderness gave

him a sense of anonymity and purpose he could not find elsewhere that allowed him freedom to deal, or not deal, with his issues as he saw fit.

We quickly realized we were not alone in our attempts to get people outside and into the wilderness, but we wanted to push the envelope further and help move people beyond a one-week or once-in-a-lifetime experience so that the wilderness and outdoors would become a day-to-day part of their life. Early on, hiking up over Arapahoe Pass in Colorado, the same young marine who questioned in a chain restaurant what he had fought for, stared over the pass, turned to Nick and me and said, “This is what I fought for!”

Later that year, snowshoeing through the same area, we had another young marine exclaim to us that his time in the mountains was “freedom – ain’t no other way to explain it! How do we get others to understand?”

In both situations, if we had advertised the trips as therapeutic, as something other than adventure, I doubt that we would have heard either man speak as he did. Although there is certainly a need for more traditional forms of therapy, and wilderness therapy itself has proved very useful, the wilderness – all by itself – is often enough, at least to sustain the individual until they are ready to take the next step. I have been accused of selling the wilderness and outdoors as a “silver bullet” that will solve all of our problems. I do not refute that accusation.

I have heard from hundreds of veterans that the wilderness, the outdoors – whether it’s fly-fishing underneath an old railway bridge, surfing, climbing, or sitting in a duck blind – has helped bring them back from the brink of disappearing entirely from society. This could mean suicide

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or shutting down completely from the rest of the world. The wilderness helps to bring them back. From time to time, there are those who get lost in the wilderness and don’t come back in from the trail. They’re out there and finding joy in life. Isn’t that enough?

The movement to get military service members, veterans, families, and their children is coalescing in exciting ways (see Figure 4). Nick is still running Veterans Expeditions, while I have moved on to work as the national representative for Military Families and Veterans at the Sierra Club. Led by the Sierra Club, a number of other organizations as diverse as the YMCA, the Wounded Warrior Project, and a number of environmental education institutions and adaptive sports programs are

coming together to determine a more coherent spectrum of care as it relates to the outdoors.

The idea is that any returning veteran, military family, or youth, should be able to experience everything from an afternoon in the front country or city park, to a week in the backcountry, wilderness therapy if they so chose, and ultimately, leadership training so he or she can help someone else begin to move through the spectrum at their own pace.

Surfing may not be for everyone, or even a multiday backpacking trip, but in the outdoors, in the wilderness, there is something for everyone, of this I am 100% certain. We are also discussing more and more about the importance of protecting and defending the wilderness, and what better advocates than veterans?

After all, as the marine sergeant said of the wilderness, “we fought for this,” not for the chain restaurant. What better expression of our national democracy than public lands and protected wilderness? So, we’re working hard to show veterans and the military community firsthand the threats to the



**Figure 4 – U.S. Marine Corps Sergeant Dean Sanchez resting on Longs Peak, Colorado. Photo by Stacy Bare.**



Figure 5 – Veteran Service Project on the Yampa River. Photo by Stacy Bare.

wilderness by taking them to the places where climate change is most noticeable. To that end, we are partnering with Jim Balog and the Extreme Ice Survey to take a group of veterans out to Glacier National Park in August of 2012 and allow them to see what all the climate change fuss is about and make up their own minds. This will turn into a national tour of participants, with multimedia images taken on the trip and shown to audiences nationwide. Veterans and the military still hold a certain moral authority in the minds of many Americans. We hope to encourage a new sort of patriotism that shows you can support the troops by getting outside and supporting public lands and protecting wild places. The wilderness can, and should be, a sort of living monument to the sacrifices of all of our troops, their families, and communities.

### Getting Outside

It's a message we're finding resonates with many veterans and military communities: You fought for it, now use it, and keep it safe ... again. Many traditional veteran service organizations, such as the Wounded Warrior Project, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, the USO, the American Legion, and even the Department of Defense's own Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Division, recognize the value of the wilderness and outdoor recreation and are partnering with the Sierra Club to ensure more and more military families, veterans, and service members are getting outside.

Five years from now, we'll know we've been successful if all outdoor conservation and recreation groups are deliberately reaching out to the military and veteran community for membership and participation.

Additional successes would include a formalized program for all returning combat veterans and their families to receive the hard-skills training required to survive in the wilderness, as well as ensuring they have opportunities to spend extended amounts of time in the backcountry in either formalized recreation or conservation programs, or simply with support from others in the area. Simply put, the formalized transition process from military to civilian should take place outdoors, not in a classroom.

Finally, the wilderness could, and should, be used as a key component to future peacebuilding and international reconciliation efforts. What better way to build trust and understanding than by allowing former combatants and future potential agitators to get to know each other on the opposite end of a rope, miles away from the hum of civilization? In the next few years, I hope to attempt our first climbs and backcountry trips in places such as Angola, northern Iraq, the Caucasus states, and ultimately Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, if you want to say thank you to a soldier, sailor, airman or airwoman, marine, or member of the coast guard, get outside. If you want to move from thanks to support, take one outside with you and just let them be.

STACY BARE served in Iraq from 2006–2007 as a U.S. Army Captain, where he received the Bronze Star for Meritorious Service. An avid rock climber and aspiring mountaineer, he is currently the Military Families and Veterans Representative for the Sierra Club.