

This Land Is Your Land

Toward a Better Understanding of Nature's
Resiliency-Building and Restorative Power for
Armed Forces Personnel, Veterans,
and Their Families



Daniel Dustin, Kelly Bricker, Sandra Negley,
Matthew Brownlee, Keri Schwab, Neil Lundberg

Editors

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Dedication

To the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States

Acknowledgments

We are indebted to the Walmart Foundation, the Sierra Club, O.A.R.S, the Association of the United States Army, and the University of Utah for supporting this work. We also thank the book's contributors, many of whom spent the better part of a year refining their thinking and writing for publication, as well as the delegates to This Land Is Your Land, a first ever international symposium dedicated to better understanding nature's resiliency-building and restorative power for armed forces personnel, veterans, and their families. Finally, we thank Joe and Peter Bannon at Sagamore Publishing LLC for their encouragement and the entire Sagamore staff for their attention to detail in seeing the book through to completion.

Preface

This Land Is Your Land began with a cup of coffee and a conversation between two veterans who have a passion for nature and a desire to assist the men and women who have defended our nation as they make the difficult transition back to civilian life. Stacy Bare, a former Army officer who served in Iraq and now directs the Sierra Club Outdoors, and Dan Dustin, a Vietnam-era veteran and college professor specializing in parks, recreation, and tourism, were brought together by geography.

Residents of Salt Lake City, Stacy and Dan began talking about the newly established National Center for Veterans Studies at the University of Utah; the abundance of nature-based programs springing up across the country to serve armed forces personnel, veterans, and their families; and the absence of a cohesive body of knowledge informing the delivery of those services. They decided the time was right to host a symposium to bring together scientists, practitioners, and interested others who are united by the proposition that outdoor recreation experiences have therapeutic value for the public in general and for veterans and their families in particular.

It took 18 months for *This Land Is Your Land* to come to fruition. The symposium was held at the University of Utah's Guest House Conference Center September 17–20, 2014. Three keynote speakers—Doug Peacock, Vietnam veteran and noted author and conservationist; Genevieve Chase, Iraq veteran and founder of The American Women's Veterans Association; and Eric Blehm, *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Only Thing Worth Dying For, Fearless*, and *Legend*—set the tone for the gathering. The remainder of the program consisted of 24 plenary sessions. The intent was for everyone to benefit from what everyone else had to say.

The content of the symposium was driven by three broad questions: (1) What can we learn from existing programs and practices about how best to conduct nature-based outings for armed forces personnel, veterans, and their families? (2) What does the research tell us about nature's resiliency-building and restorative power for armed forces personnel, veterans, and their families? (3) What are the research challenges and opportunities to further our understanding of the resiliency-building and restorative power of nature for armed forces personnel, veterans, and their families? Presenters were given 1 year to prepare their talk and write a companion paper to be included in this volume.

This Land Is Your Land provides a thorough reporting of what transpired at the symposium. By all accounts, the symposium was a resounding success. That assessment reflects the delegates' passion for the work they were doing on behalf of veterans and their families, as well as the delegates' feeling that it was high time to look more critically at the claims made for the resiliency-building and restorative power of nature-based recreation.

As expected, the symposium raised more questions than it answered. It also provoked considerable discussion and debate about how best to move forward in documenting the effectiveness of outdoor programs for armed forces personnel, veterans, and their families. In the end, the give and take at the symposium did not dampen the delegates' enthusiasm for the work they were doing on behalf of military families. They departed Salt Lake City energized, empowered, and emboldened to work even harder in support of those who have given so much of themselves in defense of our nation.

“See, it’s not a straight shot back, from war to the Jacksonville mall.”

Phil Klay, *Redeployment*

Foreword

We can always build more hospitals and treatment facilities for the men and women who defend our country. We can always try to elect members of Congress who will increase funding for veterans causes. We can always call for more research on new treatments, new drugs, and new clinical protocols to deal with an expanding array of physical and mental health problems stemming from combat, problems that all too often accompany our veterans home, including posttraumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, adjustment disorder, and other debilitating damage to mind and body.

Such investments can be beneficial, but in isolation they rarely make enough of a positive difference in the lives of men and women in uniform to really and truly welcome them home. What else, then, is necessary for their successful transition back into civilian life? A simple walk around the block is a good start. From these first few steps to a leisurely hike with family and friends, to tying a fly and casting it into a clear flowing stream, to learning how to kayak, to building up to a 100-mile bike ride, or even to ascending the tallest of our nation's mountains, all are part of what constitutes and supports a healthy path home and, in many cases, recovery.

We have known for centuries about the power of the outdoors to heal and help make sense of our imperfect, messy, and often traumatic lives. All three of the major Western religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—feature charismatic leaders (Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad), who spent time in the wilderness or climbed mountain heights to receive divine revelation before starting or continuing their life's work. The Spartans walked home from war. Odysseus took the long way home, and after Vietnam, Doug Peacock spent 35 years in grizzly bear country tracking and communing with those magnificent animals in one of the largest unspoiled ecosystems in the United States. What did they know? Why did they do it?

When I came home from my own war in Iraq in 2007, I retreated to the coast of South Africa on a surfing trip. The days I spent there were enough to meditate on a beautiful world where I was accepted as I was, a natural world that was oblivious to the incapacitating labels I would attach to myself in the coming years. Nature did not ask anything of me, and in the waves, I broke down time and time again—and it was okay.

Returning home, I did all I could to hang on. I lived two lives: one as a diligent but hard-partying graduate student and the other as an addict and alcoholic spending hours, if not days, curled up in a dark, windowless room afraid to see the light of day. Eventually, an invitation to go rock climbing with my friend and fellow Iraq veteran Chuck pulled me out of my own head and got me to a place where I realized that my life could have a beautiful sense of purpose, mission, and camaraderie that I had not felt since my time as a team leader in Iraq and that it was okay to ask for help and seek treatment.

That first day on the rock was 5 years ago, and although I have not spent as much time climbing as I would like, I have made remarkable strides forward in my own recovery. I have sought and received help. I have walked through the oftentimes frightening doors of the Veterans Administration. And I have met thousands of veterans and their families, as well as non-veterans, who have experienced the profound healing power of the outdoors. In so doing, I realized I was not alone.

I finally found my way to Utah and to a coffee shop with Dan Dustin, chair of the University of Utah's Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Department. We talked about our shared, but different experiences in uniform, the healing power of nature, and what we might do together to serve returning military members and their families. One thing led to another, and soon the idea of a symposium was born, a symposium that would become *This Land is Your Land: Toward a Better Understanding of Nature's Resiliency-Building and Restorative Power for Armed Forces Personnel, Veterans, and Their Families*.

With the support of many individuals and organizations, the symposium provided the grist for what follows. Somewhat to our surprise, the symposium took on an international flavor as researchers from Australia and Denmark joined scores of United States–based institutions and organizations involved in providing and studying nature-based outings for our military families. The symposium was interdisciplinary and broad based, and at times, it was uncomfortable as different presenters challenged assumptions that many in the room held dear about the healing power of nature and the way outdoor programs should be conducted.

Some of us were disappointed that a symposium was needed. Why is it, for example, that we have to quantify and qualify what we know in our hearts to be true and what history has shown to be true? Nature heals. In a society in which fewer and fewer people are going outside and more and more people are choosing to live sedentary lives inside, our challenge is to demonstrate that exposure to the natural world is not a luxury, but a necessity for healthy living.

To that end, we trust *This Land Is Your Land* is but a beginning. It is the first survey of a growing field of questions concerning how and why time outdoors helps promote healthy functioning in our service members, veterans, and their families. So please, when you read this book, remember its humble origins. Our hope is that you will be emboldened, impassioned, and motivated by what you read to use the lessons in the book to make your own contributions. Remember as well, it is not just a matter of building more brick-and-mortar homes and hospitals for our veterans and finding new pharmaceuticals and clinical treatment approaches to cure what ails them. Our collective quest is how best to treat whole people who have been torn apart by war. That requires medicine of a different kind, medicine that only nature can provide. And if we can show that strong doses of nature are good medicine for those who fought for our country, are they not also bound to be good medicine for us all?

Stacy Bare

Director, Sierra Club Outdoors

2014 National Geographic Adventurer of the Year

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Addendum: This final chapter, though not nature based, describes a research rationale that satisfies many of the concerns raised by Bryan and Bryan in Chapter 16 regarding the way in which research is commonly conducted in nature-based settings. We include it here to help the reader compare and contrast the challenges inherent in trying to conduct applied research with research under more controlled conditions.

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Introduction



Photo courtesy of Warren Price

1

Social and Cultural Aspects of Posttraumatic Stress and the Role of Nature in Recovery

James Smith

Saybrook University

Traumatic experiences have a variety of sources—natural calamities (hurricanes, earthquakes, tornados), unintentional human actions (automobile, industrial, and other accidents), and intentional human actions (wars, revolutions, political repression, criminal activity, domestic abuse, and sexual assault). The source and type of calamity can have a direct effect on an individual's experience of the event, resulting trauma, and the probability or possibility of recovery.

Resilience and recovery are also directly tied to societal and cultural definitions of the event and its meaning. The characterization of rape in a society, for example, will have a profound effect on recovery for an individual victim, as shown in the conflict in Bosnia and the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa, where rape was used as a social weapon of war to send a message of shame and dishonor. Similarly, Vietnam veterans experienced societal rejection upon coming home and subsequently went for decades without the community support needed for their recovery. Acceptance of responsibility, reconciliation, and the concurrent ability to move on socially and individually from trauma and its effects are thus interrelated.

The social, cultural, and political consequences of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and military sexual trauma (MST) are often not considered in the healing process for trauma victims. First, the mere characterization of an individual's personal experience that is the basis of the injury may be given a social, cultural, or political meaning separate from the reality the victim experienced. Second, the constellation of personal psychological, medical, and emotional symptoms, family problems, and occupational and community dysfunctions may manifest in an overwhelming life experience that defies the ability of an individual or a family to endure. At a basic level, then, it is clear that these injuries may be the individually manifested consequences of certain societal choices that express contested values and actions that then take on political and ethical meanings that affect recovery; access to resources; and support for the individual, family, and community. Simply stated, a direct correlation exists between these personal issues and societal values and problems.

Trauma and Social Stigma

Disabilities and injuries come with a variety of social stigmas. Many people feel uncomfortable around individuals with obvious physical, mental, and emotional challenges. The quality and characterization of knowledge about various disabilities create multifaceted problems for the injured person: acceptance in social circles, employment access and accommodation, career challenges, physical access to public places, communication and capability challenges, and other restrictions that society is still trying to come to grips with, despite legal requirements such as complying with the Americans With Disabilities Act.

Outdoor recreation activities as a component of therapy and as an aspect of a continuum of care may help alleviate negative social stigma when the participants demonstrate that they can meet physical and mental challenges. Attendant to providing such outdoor recreation opportunities for armed forces personnel, veterans, and their families are questions concerning their special needs. Victims of MST, for example, often experience PTSD. Combatants also tend to be populated by a disproportionately large percentage of ethnic and racial minorities, which in turn may influence the effectiveness of recovery approaches, interventions, therapies, and relevant recreational activities. Additionally, respecting military culture as having unique mores and values, especially with regard to courage and weakness, must be considered when inviting veterans to participate in therapeutic outdoor activities. Last, the range of ages of veterans from wars over the last 50 years also complicates therapeutic practices, as do the increasing numbers of women who have served in the armed forces.

The long-term effects of PTSD and other war-related injuries have gone unattended long enough. It is time to give them the attention they deserve. As more and more veterans return home from battles fought overseas, there are more and more combat-related physical, psychological, and emotional wounds. Understanding how nature-based recreation can contribute to the healing process is critical to developing a lasting and effective continuum of care. More than 2.8 million U.S. soldiers, sailors, and marines have been deployed in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Of the redeployed (returning) veterans, 38% of soldiers, 31% of marines, and 49% of National Guard members report psychological problems.¹ The need to study alternative treatment approaches that may help in the healing process is painfully evident.

Recovery, Rehabilitation, and Nature

Rehabilitation and recovery from trauma, from a traditional therapeutic treatment standpoint and from the role of nature as a component of therapy, have been explored in the work of Korn;² Pitchford;³ Pitchford and Davies;⁴ van der Kolk;⁵ Ewert and Frankel;⁶ Wilder, Craig, Sable, and Gravink;⁷ Van Puymbroeck and Lundberg;⁸ Lundberg, Bennett, and Smith;⁹ Griffin;¹⁰ Litchke, Hodges, Schmidt, Lloyd, and Payne;¹¹ Mowat and Bennett;¹² and Gelkopf, Hasson-Ohayon, Bikman, and Kravetz,¹³ among others. As Bryan and Bryan point out in Chapter 16, however, the findings from this body of research are inconclusive. There is a lot of scientific work to be done to substantiate the claim that nature-based recreation is effective as a therapeutic modality in meaningful and lasting ways. Moreover, the how and why of nature's contributions to the healing process have yet to be addressed in depth.

Nevertheless, a growing number of allied health professionals involved in rehabilitation and recovery have found that participation in outdoor recreation programs can help military service members and veterans reintegrate into their families and communities, regain a sense of purpose in life, become involved in recreation after a life-changing injury, and aid in the reduction of symptoms of PTSD, TBI, and MST.²⁻¹³ Following their lead, and informed by a growing body of relevant literature, we need to examine the role nature plays in therapeutic processes for persons who are victims of combat-related trauma.

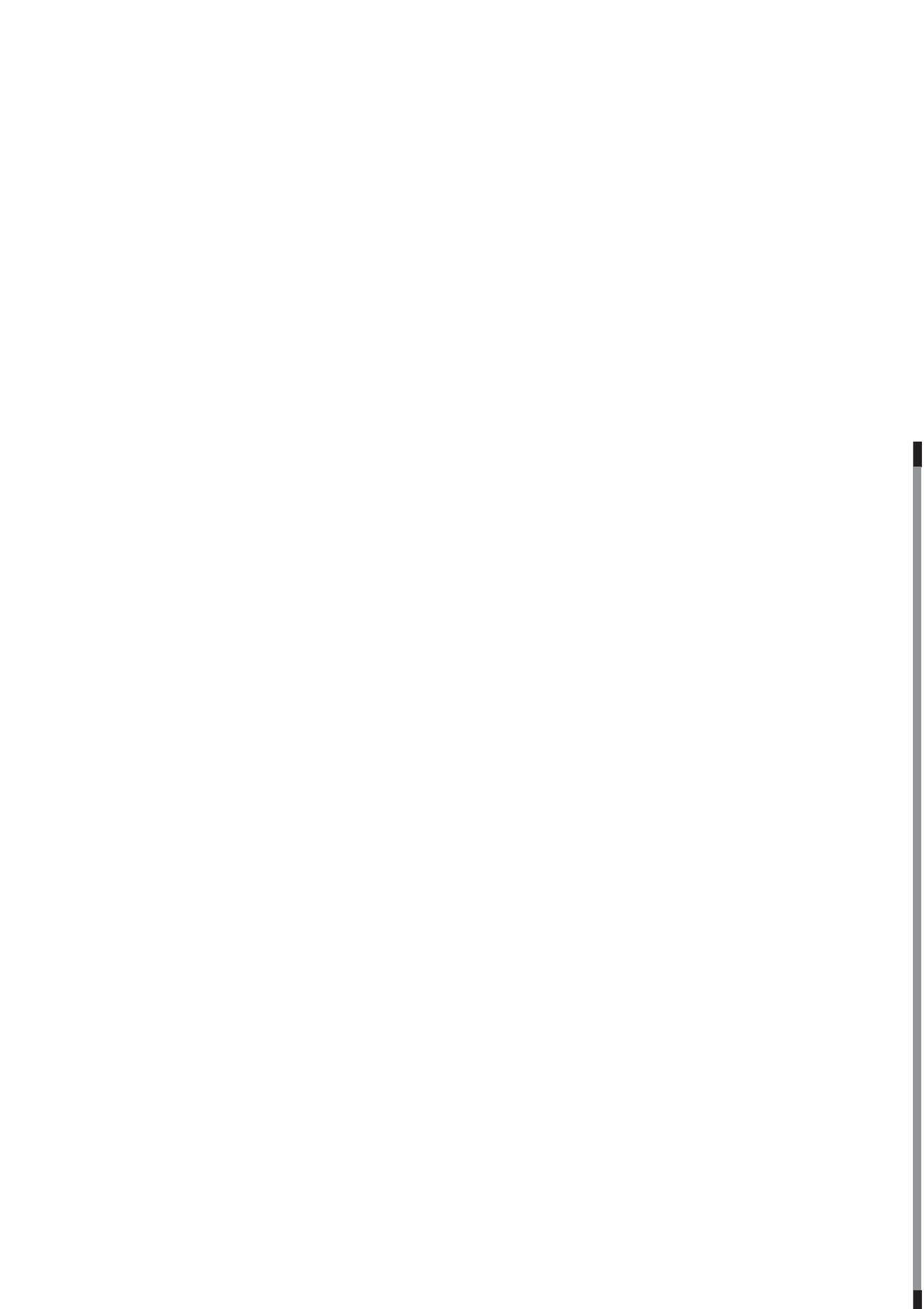
The Challenge Ahead

Left unchecked, the costs of war to individual combatants and their families, as well as to the society that depends on them for its defense, are enormous. Combat-related (CR-) PTSD results in significant

posttraumatic residues up to 20 years after combat, including high levels of distress, depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive tendencies and hostility.... Furthermore, CR-PTSD is also associated with extreme social maladjustment, including social avoidance or phobia, anger, violent behavior, family discord and interpersonal problems, as well as unemployment.¹³

High rates of suicide are also widely documented in returning combat and noncombat veterans who suffer from a constellation of symptomologies.¹³ The current estimates of 22 veteran suicides per day for U.S. service members may be understated, and rates for veteran suicide at 30 per 100,000 are more than double the general population's rate of 14 per 100,000.¹⁴ Further scientific inquiry into the potential positive role of nature-based recreation is warranted to aid in the physical, psychological, and emotional recovery of veterans as well as to help them curb self-destructive tendencies, reintegrate into civilian life, and offer hope for the future. The personal, family, community, and social costs of not pursuing this avenue of research are almost incalculable.

What follows are preliminary attempts to better understand nature's resiliency-building and restorative power for armed forces personnel, veterans, and their families. But there is more informing this book than meets the eye. In this work, we also acknowledge that when we use acronyms such as PTSD, TBI, and MST to describe the physical, psychological, and emotional wounds afflicting returning service members and their families, we understand them to be labels placed on individual citizens by the larger society. The underlying assumption is that these individuals have something wrong with them that needs to be fixed. But we also recognize that the larger society's values and ethics must be put under the microscope, for defending these values and ethics is what is asked of individual citizens when they are sent into battle in the first place. In this sense, we must always remain open to the possibility that something may be wrong with the larger society that also needs to be fixed. We understand, in sum, that there may be an unmet need for healing all around.



Part I

Programs and Practices



Photo courtesy of Chris Kassar

2

Freedom's Families

Warren Price

Brigham Young University-Idaho

I was 34 years old when I went to war. I did not give a second thought to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or any disability for that matter. I was an Army medic, an awesome one at that, and I fixed people. I never considered what the effect of doing so would have on my life after the war. Disability was an abstract concept that I never imagined would happen to me. Now, however, PTSD and disability are more than simply words on a page. They are a way of life for me. What follows is how I try to make sense of my world with PTSD and how I try to help others in similar circumstances.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Family, and Leisure

PTSD is an anxiety disorder associated with exposure to trauma,¹ and it is not experienced in a vacuum. The memories of combat experiences expand from the veteran's mind outward, like ripples on a pond at the drop of a stone, infringing on the lives of those closest to him or her.² The effects of PTSD are pervasive as they affect physiologically and psychologically how a veteran reacts to every social situation, including family interactions.³

In 1913, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski asserted that the family is the basic unit of society and is virtually universal. His assertion was reaffirmed when fellow anthropologist Silvia Yanagisako concluded that the construct of family is universal, even if the definition of family is not.⁴ In the leisure literature, this notion of family as the basic unit of society has been echoed.^{5,6}

Veterans with PTSD are 3 times more likely to divorce than those without it.⁷ In families of Vietnam veterans, a 98% divorce rate was a contributing factor to higher levels of mental health issues, substance abuse, alcoholism, divorce, and suicide among children of Vietnam veterans.⁷

Typical societal truisms such as “the family that plays together stays together” and “as the family goes, so goes society” have served as my guides in studying recreation. Recreation, specifically fly-fishing, saved my life. I will discuss how recreation also saved my family from becoming a divorce statistic. Family leisure has been shown to be a potent force for improving family cohesion, adaptability, and communication^{8,9,10,11,12} as well as a promising method for improving family relationships. Family leisure is also an effective treatment modality for transcending negative life events and enhancing family functioning.¹³

As PTSD disrupts the lives of more families, scholars and government officials are looking for solutions. Physical disability may accompany PTSD, such as traumatic brain injury (TBI), amputation, or penetration wounds caused by munitions or explosives. However, PTSD may not be readily identified upon visual inspection. TBI and PTSD are often referred to as the unseen wounds of war and are associated with readily identifiable disruptions such as hyperarousal, increased anxiety, depression, antisocial behavior, and increased likelihood of divorce, abuse, and suicide.^{2, 14, 15} Repeated deployments only exacerbate the cumulative effects of negative symptoms for family members of veterans with PTSD.^{3, 15}

Many health-related programs are used in an attempt to alleviate symptoms, but in some treatment models, the veteran is removed from the family system in an effort to reduce symptoms and build coping skills. Once the veteran shows improvement, he or she is sent home to an often broken family system without addressing the underlying issues family members face as a result of their relationship with the affected member. It is as if the treatment providers are taking a cog out of a broken watch, having it remotely precision tuned, and then placing it back in the watch and wondering why it will not tell time.

I make the claim that recreation saved my life by giving me the tools to manage symptoms of PTSD and deal with thoughts of suicide. As I have become a student of recreation and its therapeutic benefits, the relief of symptoms has had a direct positive effect on my family. The healing effects of leisure in my life enabled me to use leisure to heal my broken family relationships through family leisure participation.

PTSD and Me

When I stepped off the battlefield, I hoped to leave the images of war and trauma behind me and, like many warriors, live out my life in peace. Having spent a year in a near constant state of conflict and crisis, I was interested in returning to my family and enjoying a fairy tale ending to my wartime narrative.

As I fought the flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts from Iraq, a smoldering rage grew inside me that I tried with all my might to suppress. It changed me until I felt as if I had become a monster who did not care about other people's suffering. I felt like Dr. Jekyll trying to be a normal person to others, but with a raging Mr. Hyde fighting to be set free.¹⁶ The monster I had become manifested itself a mere month after I came home. I arrived home from work tired, agitated, and hungry when my son asked permission to go play a few minutes before dinner, and I told him no.

Whining, he asked, "Why not?"

I raised my voice and retorted, "Because I'm the dad, and I say so. That's why!"

"You never let me do what I want to do," he cried.

Something snapped inside me and I was transported across time and space. I no longer saw my son, but a vision filled with flies and the face of a crying, injured boy from a bunker in my memory. Hearing the whining Iraqi boy whose cries accused me of incompetence, I turned my fury on my son and bellowed, "You want something to cry about? I'll give you something to cry about." I no longer cared about my son's complaint. I only wanted silence.

His frantic screaming could not penetrate the disorienting rage that engulfed me as I dragged him into another room. I shouted for him to shut up as I pulled him onto my lap. I repeated the command as I exhausted my arm spanking him. "Shut up!" I shrieked in exasperation as I heaved him to the floor. The more he cried, the more enmity I felt at my inability to stop the crying. I dove on top of him and repeatedly slammed my fist into the floor next to his head as I screamed, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" He finally did. Only then did I recognize the terror

in my son's eyes. I rolled away and sobbed uncontrollably and wondered what kind of monster would do this to his son.

It was clear I had left Iraq, but Iraq had not left me. Plagued by intrusive thoughts, nightmares, flashbacks, and paranoia, I sought help from the VA hospital through counseling and medication. The drugs numbed the pain and I began thinking to myself, "If one works so good, two or three must work even better." I spiraled into a pattern of abuse and justification. "It's not like I'm doing illegal drugs. The VA prescribed them." I sank into depression and suicidal ideations, which resulted in multiple hospitalizations.

In my darkest hour, a high school friend of my wife, also a combat veteran, invited me to go fly-fishing in Idaho. The experience was so profound I credit him with saving my life. My world had become a cacophony of nightmares, flashbacks, depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide, and although I used all of the remedies offered by the VA health care system, I found no relief. The experience challenged everything I believed in secularly as well as spiritually. Once my friend got me to the river, however, something changed. There, knee-deep in the gurgling water and surrounded by nature's grandeur, the symptoms plaguing me dissolved, and for the first time in years, I felt peace. Peace gave birth to the possibility of recovery and hope of a better future.

This is the power of nature and leisure in unison, the power to heal the wounds war leaves on the body, mind, and spirit. Leisure gave me the power I needed to create a positive postwar identity and negotiate a new family role. It also provided me with a renewed sense of purpose as I reached out to other veterans with disabilities in situations similar to my own.

How Freedom's Families Came to Be

After my initial experience fly-fishing, I was placed in a residential recovery program for veterans with PTSD in Menlo Park, California. Part of our treatment was weekly recreational therapy, which included team-building activities, indoor and outdoor games, and outings, all of which challenged our limitations. As part of our treatment, we were required to plan and carry out our weekend recreational activities with other veterans. We went to the beach, attended rodeos and fairs, and hiked among the giant redwoods. As the Fourth of July approached, we were expected to plan outdoor activities that would take us into crowds, expose us to noise, and generally make us uncomfortable.

As we sat planning our holiday activities, another veteran remarked, "I wish we could just get a group of us veterans together on the fourth and go camping or something in nature where we could be away from the crowds and fireworks." His sentiment struck a responsive chord in my heart and has stayed with me since. His offhanded comment was the impetus for creating Freedom's Families and for holding our first "Fireworks-Free Fourth of July."

My wife and I did the leg work to establish a nonprofit entity so we could raise funds, and I tapped the resources available to me through Brigham Young University to enlist volunteers from our recreation program to help carry out the activity. We raised \$5,000, gathered food donations, and accepted free activities from the city where we held our 4-day event.

Recreational activities for families were programmed around meals and lodging and were specifically considered to improve family relationships through teaching communication skills, leisure education, and participation in activities to improve quality of life. Activities began with icebreaker games for families to get to know each other and to feel welcome and part of a larger community. Families were lodged together in cabins with linens and restrooms provided for each family.

The first morning included outdoor games in which we could participate at home or at locations near home, that were inexpensive, and that required relatively few resources. Most activities for children were led by my teenage children. The most significant activity for the first full day was a 4-hour train ride on a restored steam engine and rail cars through the mountains and valleys of Utah's Heber Valley and Provo Canyon. Actors dressed in period clothing performed for the passengers, and family members of veterans sat with peers, took pictures, and conversed about topics related and unrelated to military service. Halfway through the ride, we stopped for a meal at a park and stretched our legs.

Once we returned from the train ride, we hosted the public at the campground for a family-style barbeque, picnic, outdoor games, and a benefit concert performed by local artists, including a band of veterans with disabilities. The crowning event was a campfire program with a patriotic speaker and songs and finally the retiring ceremony of the American flag. The flag was donated by a local company and measured 30 feet by 60 feet. Every family member and veteran was included in the process of retiring the flag. It was a moving and meaningful ceremony, and the veterans stayed up discussing it for hours afterward.

Another full day of activities was planned in collaboration with another nonprofit organization around water-based activities, including boating, adaptive waterskiing, swimming, and hiking. These activities had to be canceled, however, because of rain and unsafe conditions on the water. Families adjusted and spent time at the campground's recreational facility enjoying indoor games and recuperating from the previous day's activities.

On the fourth day, the families gathered for breakfast and held a debriefing to learn from each other what had gone well and what had not. Each family received a package, including games to play at home, and was asked to remember to recreate at least once a week. Contact information was exchanged, and we went our separate ways.

In retrospect, I did not feel we had missed anything from the traditional celebration of Independence Day with fireworks and festivals. I felt a quiet appreciation for the sacrifices I had made as well as a deeper connection to my family and other veterans and families who were dealing with similar difficulties in their lives. I was reconnected to my family, and I was engaging in activities that had previously been the source of much friction.

Now What?

I feel passionate about exposing veterans and their families to nature, and I have also developed an interest in the role animals can play in healing relationships and helping veterans learn coping skills. My wife and I recently purchased a small farm in Idaho, and we are raising goats with the intention of raising other animals. I believe the connection agriculture has to nature can be instrumental to healing as much as traditional nature-based leisure activities.

I experienced peace for the first time when I went fly-fishing, but it did not last. I had to develop an ongoing relationship with nature to receive its lasting benefits. Once we bought the farm and moved in, I found that peace, and now I have a daily connection with nature through my work on the farm.

My long-term goal is to bring veterans and their families to our farm to teach them agricultural skills that may help them find a renewed sense of purpose as well as repair family relationships. As for me, I feel the same peace I felt when I was knee-deep in water for the first time. The only difference is that I feel it almost every day now. I want to invite my fellow veterans with disabilities to join me in the adventure that is farming, but mostly in the joy that comes with lasting peace through close encounters with nature.