

Saddle Solace

An estimated 22 veterans commit suicide each day. The institution meant to help them, the Department of Veterans Affairs, has been rocked by scandal. Meanwhile, a surge in horse-based therapy programs offers hope for bringing at-risk veterans back from the brink. Can equine therapy help save America's wounded military veterans?

By RYAN T. BELL

Jesse Lora
PHOTOGRAPHER
www.jesseloraphotography.com





Matt Littrell (middle) arrives at Camp Lejeune, California, with an entourage of well-wishers.



ABOVE: "Tomorrow, we ride." That was Littrell's motto during his trip. The journey was not without challenges. In Arizona, Littrell's saddle was stolen. But it didn't take long for someone to donate a saddle so he could keep riding.

ABOVE CENTER: Littrell's ride raised more than \$130,000 for the Semper Fi Fund. The organization helps wounded soldiers from all military branches, and their families.

RIGHT: After his honorable discharge in 2006, Littrell moved home to Elizabeth, Colorado. He worked as a farrier and trained outside horses. When confronted with thoughts of suicide, Littrell's love of horses helped him to cope.



ON NEW YEAR'S EVE IN 2012, Matt Littrell lay awake in his home on the Front Range of Colorado. The Marine Corps veteran felt alone. He'd served two tours of duty in Iraq, and then moved home to work as a farrier with his dad. Being around family was nice, but he missed his brothers in arms. Only they could relate to what he'd been through in war. The memories of that experience held him in a constant state of anger. Something had to change. Littrell set a handgun on the table and stared at it, wondering if it was the answer.

Instead of the gun, Littrell picked up the phone. He dialed the VA Crisis Line. That's when a strange thing happened: The person on the other end was



JESSE LORA IMAGES



not helpful. To Littrell, it sounded like the attendant was reading from a script. Fortunately, Littrell had already made up his mind to put the gun away. But what if he hadn't? He imagined one of his fellow Marines, in a more suicidal state, making the same, frustrating call and being pushed over the edge.

Littrell became an advocate, not a victim. He made a plan to raise awareness about the problem of suicide among military veterans.

"I was going to adopt and train a mustang," Littrell says, "and ride him from ocean to ocean."

He called the trip "The Long Trail Home" to symbolize the hard journey a veteran must travel to, as he puts it, "rejoin society and get right with yourself again." In the spring of 2013, Littrell bought and trained a Bureau of Land Management mustang named Crow. One year later, he trailered Crow to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and on May 1, 2014, they rode away from the Atlantic Ocean. Six months and 2,600 miles later, they reached the Pacific Ocean at Camp Pendleton, California – a Marine base where Littrell had served.

Along the way, Littrell spoke with people about the suicide epidemic among military veterans. He also raised \$130,000 for the Semper Fi Fund, a group that helps wounded Marines. Just as important, Littrell rode himself away from the brink of suicide.

"Living with a horse 24-7 forced me to slow down and think about life," he says.

BROKEN SYSTEM

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 22 servicemen commit suicide every day.

"We've lost more guys in their living rooms than on the streets of Iraq," Littrell says.

Many might have been saved, but VA hospitals were woefully backlogged and couldn't always



The route used for "The Long Trail Home" mirrored Interstate 40 across the United States. Littrell had one full-time riding companion, Raymond Avery, a family friend from Colorado. And in Alabama, Littrell met Kristen Fuhrman, a woman who joined the ride and would become his fiancée.



During the ride, Littrell spoke with news media about the epidemic of veteran suicide.



ABOVE LEFT: Debbi Fisher founded Rainier Therapeutic Riding in 2008. The program is based in Yelm, Washington, near Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Fisher's eight-week curriculum for servicemen is now used by 65 therapeutic riding programs around the country.

ABOVE RIGHT: Montana-based horseman Joe Esparza runs a horsemanship program for Warriors and Quiet Waters. The program focuses on helping veterans and their spouses improve their marriages.



When staff sergeant Aaron Heliker started at Rainier Therapeutic Riding, he was borderline suicidal. He's now a graduate of the program, an accomplished trail-riding competitor and burgeoning horse trainer. Heliker also volunteers at the facility to help other soldiers.

act in time. In a recent survey, 35 percent of veterans said they had trouble getting mental health services at a VA hospital.

In April 2014, a doctor from a VA hospital in Phoenix, Arizona became a whistleblower. He alleged to Congress that his hospital had a "secret" waitlist, and 40 veterans had died without care while on that list. The VA's Inspector General's Office (IGO) launched an inquiry into the allegations. It found a backlog of 1,700 patients, with an average wait time of 115 days. The VA's national standard is to treat patients within 14 to 30 days. The probe also found seven cases of veterans committing suicide while waiting for treatment.

News of the scandal spread and whistleblowers came forward at other VA hospitals. The IGO found similar failures at 93 locations nationwide. An estimated 600,000 veterans, or 10 percent of all VA patients, were waiting more than 30 days to get treatment.

As Littrell points out, slow response times can mean life or death to someone on the brink of suicide.

On top of the waitlist scandal, the VA might have compounded the suicide epidemic in another way: by over-prescribing medications. The Center for Investigative Reporting found that the VA's use of opiate-based medications has surged by 270 percent since 2001. In extreme cases, veterans say they're being prescribed painkilling regimens of 40 pills a day. The rate of prescription drug abuse by military personnel is 11 percent, double that of the civilian population's 5 percent. And the VA reports that drugs or alcohol are involved in one-third of veteran suicides.

With a growing distrust of the VA, many veterans are looking elsewhere for help. Horse-savvy servicemen like Littrell can saddle up and help themselves. Those who aren't can turn to a growing number of organizations that use equine therapy for rehabilitation.

RIDING HIS WAY BACK

Aaron Heliker dreamed of being a soldier. It was his life's calling. He fought during multiple deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, but suffered a traumatic brain injury when hit with a roadside bomb. He was no longer able to perform his duties, so the military assigned him to a Warrior Transition Battalion unit at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Tacoma, Washington. Such units are the military's attempt to manage a wave of injured servicemen no longer able to perform combat duty.

For Heliker, it felt like he was being cast away. Already grappling with the combined effects of his physical injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder, Heliker became suicidal. Doctors prescribed so many medications that he was taking 42 pills a day. He was placed on suicide watch and had to check in every two hours. Heliker was on track to becoming a statistic. Then a counselor suggested he try taking an eight-week horsemanship course at a nearby therapeutic riding center.

Debbi Fisher founded the Rainier Therapeutic Riding center in the wake of a tragic life event. Her husband, Colonel Randy Fisher, was a reservist in the Air National Guard. After the events of 9/11, Colonel Fisher was assigned active duty

and they moved to Joint Base Lewis McChord in Washington. They bought some acreages in a nearby town, built a home and horse barn, and Debbi continued her day-to-day life as an avid horsewoman and military wife. Then, in 2006, Randy was killed in a car accident on base.

A few years later, in 2008, an old friend of Colonel Fisher's suggested Debbi go to a conference in Texas on the use of equine therapy for helping military personnel. She was shocked to learn about the statistics of suicide in the military. Debbi returned to Washington determined to start Rainier Therapeutic Riding in honor of her late husband.

Fisher received certification through the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International, earning a specialization in mental health and learning. In 2010, she held her first therapy class, with Randy's horse Rootbeer working as a therapy horse. Today, VA doctors and counselors recommend Rainier Therapeutic Riding to their patients, many who are at risk of suicide.

That was how Aaron Heliker came to be standing in an arena with Debbi Fisher.

On the first day, Heliker had to choose a horse. He walked up to a large, 16-hand gelding named Fred. The horse was known to be finicky with most veterans, stomping his hooves and tossing his head. But Heliker and Fred took to each other. Soon, the soldier was visiting the arena every day, wanting to practice his horsemanship. By the time he finished Fisher's course, Heliker was released from suicide watch and had weaned himself off all but one medication.

Heliker is the subject of the award-winning documentary *Riding My Way Back*. He is now retired from the military and going to college. He's an avid horseman, riding in extreme trail riding competitions, training a foal and volunteering at Rainier Therapeutic Riding.

HOW HORSES HEAL

In equine therapy circles, you often hear the adage: "The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man." But why is that the case? Why do horses succeed where doctors and medication fail?

"A soldier with post-traumatic stress is in a state of hypervigilance," Fisher says. "They're always looking around the corner. A horse is the same way. It's a herd

animal, always on the lookout for danger. They can relate to each other."

For soldiers, especially those with PTSD, the experience of war teaches them to distrust people. It's a quality Fisher says they have in common with horses. She tells the students: "Respect is not transferable. These are well-trained horses, but you have to earn their respect."

That message matches the soldiers' outlook, except with the table turned on them.

"This is just a horsemanship class," Fisher says, "but they're getting therapy along the way."

Horses allow soldiers to face issues without feeling threatened by a doctor or counselor. If a soldier is amped up and nervous, the horse will act the same way. Fisher will ask the soldier, "What can you do to help the horse calm down?" The soldier might drop his or her shoulders and try to become nonthreatening. When the horse responds, the soldier feels rewarded. And he's learned something he might not have been receptive to, had it come from a person.

This sort of reflectivity is universal across equine therapy programs.



ABOVE : During a break from his duties at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, a serviceman attends a horsemanship course at Rainier Therapeutic Riding. Around 100 servicemen and their families take part in the program each week.

RIGHT: A servicewoman works on balance while riding across a raised platform. To keep students engaged, Rainier Therapeutic Riding uses extreme trail riding obstacles to challenge their horsemanship.





Matt Littrell and his mustang Crow stand in the Pacific Ocean. For the veteran Marine, training and riding the horse proved therapeutic for helping him recover from the experience of war.

Joe Esparza is a leadership coach who works with wounded veterans in Bozeman, Montana. He sits on the board of Warriors and Quiet Waters, a group that uses outdoor recreation to rehabilitate traumatically injured veterans. He designed the group's weeklong horse program, applying lessons he learned from natural horsemanship clinicians such as Ray Hunt.

"I avoid the term 'equine therapy,'" Esparza says, "because the warriors aren't relating to horses like they would a therapist. Horses are more like mirrors, reflecting back what they see in the warrior's behavior. A horse can see through the times we say one thing but are really thinking and feeling another."

The Warriors and Quiet Waters program uses that reflectivity for a unique purpose: to help veterans save their marriages. Divorce rates skyrocket among soldiers with PTSD. Going to war changes a person, putting stress on relationships at home, which is a contributing factor to depression and suicide. At Warriors and Quiet Waters, veterans bring their spouses to learn groundwork-based horsemanship. The horses help couples to open communication and behavioral barriers that have stressed their marriages.

In one instance, last fall, Esparza was coaching a veteran on how to pick up a horse's hoof. The soldier's wife watched as the man tugged at the horse's leg.

"You can't force the horse to do it," Esparza told the man, "you have to ask."

Esparza demonstrated how to run a hand down the fetlock until the horse offered its hoof.

The man's wife spoke up: "I'm the same way, you know. A lot of times, you force your way around the house when all you have to do is ask."

The man mulled it over, chewing on a twig of pasture grass. Then he tried again and got the horse to raise its hoof.

Littrell has a different take on why horses can help rehabilitate veterans.

"Combat is the world's greatest high," he says. "You'll never feel more alive than when you're about to die. You hear and see everything. When guys get back, they chase that level of high. They drive fast cars, party hard and do drugs. But horses give you a different kind of lasting high. The reward doesn't come from going fast and crazy. It's from getting a horse to soften and relax."

All forms of equine therapy have one element in common: giving veterans a purpose in life. Horsemanship inspires a sense of accomplishment and self-worth. Without that, veterans can feel listless and alone. When that happens, the moment can creep up when they're sitting at a table staring at a loaded handgun.

That reality was never far from Littrell's mind as he rode across America. He couldn't escape it if he wanted to. Three times, he got messages via Facebook that another soldier from his battalion had committed suicide.

"I wish they had called me," Littrell says. "I would've told them they're not alone. People do care." 🍷

Contributing editor **RYAN T. BELL** lives in Washington. Read more Backcountry columns on his website at ryantbell.com. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.

LEARN MORE

["The Long Trail Home"](https://facebook.com/thelongtrailhome) (facebook.com/thelongtrailhome)

["Riding My Way Back"](https://ridingmywayback.com) (ridingmywayback.com)

[American Hippotherapy Association](https://americanhippotherapyassociation.org) (americanhippotherapyassociation.org)

[Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association](https://eagala.org) (eagala.org)

[Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International](https://pathintl.org) (pathintl.org)

[Rainier Therapeutic Riding](https://rtriding.org) (rtriding.org)

[Semper Fi Fund](https://semperfund.org) (semperfund.org)

[Warriors and Quiet Waters](https://warriorsandquietwaters.org) (warriorsandquietwaters.org)

[Wounded Warriors Project](https://woundedwarriorproject.org) (woundedwarriorproject.org)