



Fishing for Serenity



How wounded soldiers and other combat veterans find peace with a fly rod. **BY TOM DICKSON**

Captain John Gehring lets out a whoop and raises his fly rod into the air, his reel singing as the taut line steadily pulls against the drag. Just one year ago Gehring and his helicopter crew of

Montana National Guard aviators were in Basra, Iraq, helping an Army infantry division fight the United States' prolonged war in that country. But on this sunny summer day on the Missouri River near Craig, the soldier is battling nothing more dangerous than a big rainbow trout.

For some military men and women returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan, assimilating into normal life can be a psychological and emotional struggle, says Carroll Jenkins, a Helena psychiatric social worker who helps veterans. Stress, depression, and anxiety are commonplace. In some cases they result from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is diagnosed in 12 to 15 percent of returning soldiers. Those with head and spine injuries, limb loss, paralysis, and other physical damage must grapple with disability and pain as well as war's psychological aftershocks. "The stresses that come from combat are extremely challenging," says Jenkins, a veteran of the Korean and Vietnam Wars. "The body chemistry can actually change when a person is in a state of constant hypervigilance for long periods. Then they come home and there's no need for that anymore, and it can be real difficult to cope."

Fly-fishing, it turns out, can help. "Natural methods of relaxation such as fly-fishing can be like physical therapy for the brain and the spirit," Jenkins says. To help soldiers find that mental and emotional therapy, the Pat Barnes Chapter of Trout Unlimited launched Montana Healing Waters. The program teaches veterans to fly-fish and uses the sport's serenity and grace to smooth civilian reentry.

The program is a partner with Maryland-based Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, a national program created by retired Navy Captain Ed Nicholson. While recovering from cancer surgery at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the 30-year-veteran saw soldiers wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan

struggling to cope with their new injuries and disabilities. A longtime angler, Nicholson thought wounded vets might benefit from time on the water. He started the non-profit Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing in 2005. That same year Mike Geary, owner of Lewis and Clark Expeditions in Helena, contacted Nicholson and offered to take a group of combat veterans on a five-day trip down the Smith River. With the help of Trout Unlimited, the Federation of Fly Fishers, and independent clubs, outfitters, and fly shops, the program has since helped more than 1,200 wounded and other combat veterans.

One of them is retired Army Captain David Folkerts, 30, who was severely injured by a roadside bomb in Iraq. The explosion blew him into the air and sent shrapnel into his face, legs, and left arm, leaving the hand paralyzed. At Walter Reed he met Nicholson, who invited him to fly-fish. "At first I didn't want to even try," Folkerts says. "I thought it would be too hard, and I didn't want to fail." But the wounded soldier soon learned to cast and, with a special device, reel in line with his rod

hand. The next year Folkerts took part in a five-day float down the Smith. "That first day I caught a brown trout, and I thought: Hey, I can do this," he says. "At Walter Reed, I was so focused on all the things I couldn't do, but on the trip I started to see the joy that was still out there."

Folkerts volunteered to help on several

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other trips and was soon hired by Project Healing Waters as operations manager. He says most of the group's programs consist of a day of fly-tying and casting lessons and then anywhere from a day to a week of fishing. Funding comes from individual and corporate contributions, fund-raising events, and donated instruction, travel, guiding, lodging, meals, and equipment. The six-year-old organization now has nearly 100 programs nationwide. Each is run by a local fishing club that works with wounded and disabled veterans at Department of Veteran's Affairs and military hospitals and medical centers, such as Fort Harrison VA Medical Center in Helena.

A WELCOME TIME OUT On the Missouri River near Craig, National Guard Captain John Gehring (bow) holds on as a rainbow trout surges downstream. The helicopter crew commander, who spent time in Iraq war zones, says fly-fishing provides a "time out from the struggle of readjusting."



TOM DICKSON

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

Army Staff Sergeant Brian Mancini nearly died in 2007 after an armor-piercing explosive blew up the Humvee he was riding in during a firefight in Iraq. Mancini lost one eye, most of his forehead, and his right cheekbone. He spent three weeks in a coma, then underwent 20 operations at Walter Reed. "People see the physical scars, but they can't see where all the emotional healing has to take place," says Mancini, 32. "There are some things doctors can't operate on and can't prescribe pills for."

Since his injury, Mancini has lost his military career and his marriage, and now faces financial hardship. "So obviously a lot of healing needs to take place outside the hospital," he says. "That's where Project Healing Waters comes in. It helps with physical things like balance and hand-eye coordination, but, more important, it provides opportunities for healing to take place in your heart."

Fly-fishing may seem like an odd way to help wounded soldiers. The sport requires dexterity, keen eye-hand coordination, and intense concentration—challenging for able-bodied anglers, much less those with one arm or impaired vision.

Mancini, who has participated in Healing Waters trips on the Smith and Clark Fork Rivers, says for him the therapy of fly-fishing comes from the intense sensory engagement. "You're in the middle of a beautiful stream on a sunny afternoon, feeling a cool breeze on your skin, seeing the mountains

around you, hearing the trickling of the water—all of that gives you hope and allows you to believe that life really does have more to offer," he says. "Compare that to combat, where you have this negative bombardment of your sight, smell, and sound, and all your senses are on high alert because your life is on the line. When I'm out fishing, it's a chance for my senses to say that nothing but positive can happen to me out here."

According to Jenkins, learning to master technical skills like tying flies or casting 40 feet of line provides wounded veterans with a strong sense of accomplishment. "I had one client, an Iraq combat veteran with the Montana National Guard, who talked about what she called 'a sense of complete satisfaction and complete balance,' that came when she learned to cast," he says.

Another reason fly-fishing works so well, adds Folkerts, is the scenery. "When you're trout fishing, you're in these incredibly beautiful places," he says. "The peace and tranquility there is the complete opposite of the violence and chaos you experience on the battlefield."

Mancini admits fly-fishing can be physically challenging. "There are times I'll have trout rising all around me and I can't get the depth perception with my one eye to tie on a fly," he says. "I have to ask the guide to tie it on. But that's the thing about Project Healing Waters: People are there to help when you need it, and eventually you learn you can

SUCCESS ON THE SMITH "At first I didn't want to even try [fly-fishing]," says retired Army Captain David Folkerts, severely injured by a roadside bomb. "I thought it would be too hard, and I didn't want to fail." Folkerts says a Montana fly-fishing trip with Project Healing Waters changed his mind.



Greg Stube, a Green Beret who served in Afghanistan, with a Montana elk he shot as part of a week-long hunt provided through the Big Hearts Under the Big Sky Program.

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Many groups help veterans recreate outdoors

Other groups also use outdoors recreation to assist vets in returning to ordinary life. Washington, D.C.-based Operation Second Chance brought four vets to Montana last summer for a week of rafting on the Yellowstone River and horseback riding into the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. The greater Red Lodge community donated the entire trip—including lodging, activities, and meals.

A similar organization, Buck Up for Wounded Vets, sponsors an Operation Valor Program that uses raffles to raise money to take returning soldiers on outdoors adventures. One trip last fall brought seven wounded veterans on a five-day trophy mule deer hunt in the Missouri Breaks. Other vets have been provided free Montana hunts through the Wounded Warrior Project, which supports injured military men and women recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and helps them transition back to duty or civilian life.

Through Big Hearts Under the Big Sky, a program of the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association, outfitters such as Russ and Carol Greenwood of Doonan Gulch Outfitters provide free

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actually do many of these things yourself. You realize that life is far from over.”

Healing Waters participants aren’t the only ones who benefit. The program’s many volunteers say they enjoy giving back to men and women fighting for the United States overseas. “What we try to do is help them find some normalcy in their lives,” says river guide and fishing book author Trapper Badovinac, Helena, a Vietnam vet who has guided several Smith River trips.

Geary says he’s had little difficulty soliciting donations of time, money, and equipment for trips. “People come out of the woodwork to assist. I think helping disabled vets is something that binds us all,” he says. Jenkins notes that the involvement of local lodges, fly shops, guides, and others adds to the therapeutic benefits. “It’s important for veterans to see their community supporting what they’ve done and welcoming them home,” he says.

Most soldiers returning from combat zones are not physically injured or diagnosed with psychological trauma. But all endured, and continue to experience, some level of stress. “There was a constant threat to our operating base and aircraft every day,” says Gehring several months after his fishing trip on the Missouri. “You’re operating in surroundings where you have to be in an intense state all the time. I came home to a divorce and custody battles for my three sons. It’s been tough. Those days on the Missouri were a complete release from that. I can’t tell you how often I think of my time on the water. A memory like that is incredibly helpful to me right now.” 🐾



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SAFE SURROUNDINGS Part of the healing process, say Healing Waters participants, comes from spending time on beautiful rivers like the Smith (above). But equally important is shooting the breeze with other combat veterans afterward (Smith River campsite, below). Soldiers say spending time in tranquil settings with others with similar physical disabilities or combat experience can go a long way toward repairing psychological wounds. “When I was in the hospital, I didn’t want to talk to anyone else who hadn’t been through what I’d been through,” says David Folkerts. “Then I went on the Smith River trip and was with guys who were in the same situation, and we built some real camaraderie. During that trip I was able to see for the first time in a long time how big and beautiful the world is.”



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