

A close-up photograph of a person's hands and arms as they paddle a wooden canoe on a river. The person is wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt. The water is dark and rippled, and the background shows a dense forest of green trees. The title 'Homeward Bound' is overlaid in large white serif font across the top of the image.

Homeward Bound

SOLDIERS AND
VETERANS FIND
PEACE IN THE
ADIRONDACKS

BY BRIAN CASTNER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JAMIE WEST MCGIVER

WE LAUNCHED THE LONG WAR canoes on the St. Regis River, at the put-in just above the low dam in Keese Mill. The river is quiet here and the color of iced tea and we had it all to ourselves as early summer bugs—both physical and metaphorical, blackflies and the on-going pandemic—kept crowds at bay. Yes, I wore my mask, as much as I could.

Our destination was the marina at the south end of Upper St. Regis Lake. A short five-mile paddle, with fine views of the mountain and famous Great Camps along the shores. There were about a dozen of us, mostly military veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan and the late Cold War. For the outing, some had traveled from Tupper Lake and Malone, and some from New York City and Maine, and though members of the group had jumped out of planes and driven tanks and sailed enormous blue-water ships, it was clear from the start that few had spent much time in a canoe.

Brian MacDonnell, owner of MAC's Canoe Livery, based in Lake Clear, provided the boats. Brian is a serious canoeist, the long-time organizer of the annual three-day "90-Miler" race, but our outing was a much less intense affair. Brian and Jack Favro, another guide, steered the boats between lily pads and past palatial summer homes clad in patriotic bunting as their crews of military veterans paddled with various levels of enthusiasm. "Whenever there's two boats in the water, there's a race," Brian had said, but the paddlers only occasionally obliged. Sometimes they sang cadence like they were back at boot camp, sometimes they drifted lazily into the head wind.

For once, there was no competition. The point was not to win. The point was to breathe, and find just a little peace.

The organizer of our trip was Valerie Ainsworth, the executive director of Homeward Bound, a veterans' support nonprofit. Valerie has long graying blonde hair and



“I was curious about Homeward Bound,” writes Brian Castner, at right, in the stern of the canoe, “of how it fits into the history of going to the mountains in search of healing.” At the retreat, he and other soldiers and veterans paddled the St. Regis River.



warm eyes. Since 2018 she has been running a retreat space north of Saranac Lake, a forested hillside of cabins and fire rings, raspberry canes and tiny ripe wild strawberries. Homeward Bound has been settled in that grove for two seasons now, after several years of moving its programming to various campgrounds that happened to have free space on off-peak weekends.

This was the first retreat of the COVID era, and everyone was figuring out how to live in this new world. Valerie kept the event small. “Too many and it feels like a conference,” she told me. Three days of food and fellowship, this canoe trip as the main event. We took our time and enjoyed the spotty sun, eating a long lunch on the point across the lake from Paul Smith’s College.

Towards the end of the trip, Brian called the canoes together to show us a monument erected at a place called Rabbit Island, a small tuft of land in Spitfire Lake where Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau made a discovery. In 1886, Dr. Trudeau was researching cures for tuberculosis, and had a theory that required a quarantine zone. He took a number of rabbits and divided them into two groups. The first he kept indoors in cages, some with tuberculosis and some free of the disease as a control. All the infected rabbits died, and even the healthy ones failed to thrive in captivity. But the second group of rabbits Dr. Trudeau took to the island, where they had abundant food and sunshine and free breezes off the lake. Some of these rabbits were likewise exposed to tuberculosis, and some were not, but in either case the rabbits grew and multiplied, seemingly free of the disease. From all appearances, the fresh air of the wil-

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derness had cured them.

As I sat in that canoe, bobbing on the lake, I looked around and saw not a few other veterans who hoped the wilderness worked on more than tuberculosis.

I WANT TO MAKE THIS VERY CLEAR UP FRONT:

I’m not the kind of veteran who goes to veterans’ retreats. Nothing wrong with them, of course, they just aren’t for me. True, I had some struggles when I came home from Iraq years ago and I did therapy at the VA. I knew there were retreats available for people with post-traumatic stress, but I figured they were meant for someone else, and anyway, I don’t like sharing with strangers in a circle.

I was curious about Homeward Bound, though, because of how it fits into the history of going to the mountains in search of healing. From Spain’s Camino de Santiago to the Kora routes in Tibet, pilgrims have long sought spiritual renewal by traversing hills and valleys. In the French Alps, tourists flocked to thermal pools in Chamonix long before there were ski resorts. And in the Adirondacks, of course, Dr. Trudeau’s insight led to a whole industry, the sick coming north to sit in “curing” chairs outside “curing” cottages, patients bundled up on a porch to take in the cold lake air. Homeward Bound was the brainchild of Garry Trudeau: political cartoonist, long-time veteran supporter and great-grandson of the rabbit experimenter. Different cures for different times.

For there are other stories, war stories, that reveal the balm of wilderness.

One involves Earl Shaffer, who grew up near the ribbed mountains of central Pennsylvania. He loved to hike, especially with his best friend, Walt Winemiller, and the two made plans for the many long trips they would take together.

In early 1941, the whole country seemed to whisper rumors of war, and Shaffer got sick of waiting to be drafted and enlisted in the Army. He was in training, learning to install radar systems, when Pearl Harbor was attacked. Winemiller joined the Marine Corps, and the two young men served throughout the South Pacific. On February 19, 1945, Sergeant Winemiller landed on Iwo Jima with the first wave of the 25th Marines and died there on the beach. Shaffer survived his service and went home.

Back in Pennsylvania, Shaffer didn’t know what to do with himself. He thought about his buddy Walt and how Walt died and he didn’t, and he remembered all the trips they wanted to take together. So in 1948, Shaffer went down to Georgia and put on his old Army pack and started to hike north. He hiked more than 2,000 miles before he was done. He said that he “wanted to walk the war out of his system.”

Shaffer became the first person to record an end-to-end hike of the Appalachian Trail.

HOMeward BOUND BEGAN AS A GRASSROOTS INITIATIVE

in Saranac Lake in 2009, “to promote the wilderness as a place of healing for soldiers and veterans suffering from PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder],” according to Valerie. What that meant, in practical terms, has expanded over time. Valerie is clear that Homeward Bound doesn’t directly provide clinical therapy or other mental health interventions. But it does offer a range of other services, including free transportation to medical appointments, peer-to-peer crisis outreach, and case management to connect veterans to government services. All of this, plus



Nearly everyone at the retreat has a PTSD diagnosis. Some have suicide attempts or jail time or both. But Homeward Bound is “a place for veterans to be the kind of person they want to be,” writes Castner. “Invested. Helpful. Relied upon. Needed.”



the retreats, is run largely by volunteers and paid for by private donations and a few grants. “It’s a passion,” Valerie said. “A commitment. You can’t turn back.” Over the cold COVID spring, someone had broken into the retreat compound and stolen a mishmash of items: head lamps, the digital projector for movie night, cans of food, trashbags and napkins, a talking fish on the wall. A small organization feels the losses keenly.

Valerie is a licensed clinical social worker with decades of experience in various forms of trauma, especially sexual abuse. But she was moved to start working more with veterans after the news of Australian Captain Paul McKay, who on New Year’s Eve of 2013 committed suicide by lying on top of Scarface Mountain near Ray

The retreats provide a place to say the things that can’t be said, and to ask questions that can’t be asked.

Brook and letting himself freeze to death.

“He came with the intent to die,” Valerie told me, sadly. “I thought, Wouldn’t it be great if he could have come and healed?”

She took over the veterans’ nonprofit four years ago, after a series of previous leaders, all high-ranking retired military officers, did more talking than working, in her opinion. “You don’t need a general. You need a woman with a clipboard,” she told the board of directors. They agreed, and she’s been expanding programming ever since. “Ideally, Homeward Bound helps people realize what they need,” she said, “whether that’s just retreats with us, or if that is therapy at the VA.”

Dan was a former gunner’s mate in the Navy. He has a beard and tattooed hands and had recently done in-residence detox near Buffalo. But he was clean and sober now, he said, ready to venture out.

“It’s been real lonely since the COVID,” he said. “It feels so damn

good to be here.”

Nearly everyone at the retreat has a PTSD diagnosis. A fair number have suicide attempts or jail time or both. These are tough cases. Ryan is a former Marine Corps grunt who fought in the Second Battle of Fallujah in 2004. He had an ugly, violent job and the memories haunt him, and after he was forcibly discharged he felt lost and betrayed by the Corps. “These people saved my life. They’re family,” he said of Homeward Bound. Ryan told me that before coming to a retreat, he hadn’t left his house in three years. “Everything I went into the military for, I’ve found here.”

There was a fire circle at Homeward Bound. What else was said around that fire, well, that’s sacred, I’m not going to tell you that.

The retreats provide a place to say the things that can’t be said, and to ask questions that can’t be asked. What did I do? Why did I do it? Was I used? Were we all used, and what does that mean?

But Homeward Bound is also a place for veterans to be the kind of person they want to be. Invested. Helpful. Relied upon. Needed.

Eric is a retired Army Sergeant who used to be a tank gunner. He started as an attendee of Homeward Bound retreats and has since become a board member and volunteer organizer, doing everything from running logistics to starting and tending the campfire with an elaborate combination of flint, steel, knives, hatchets and shovels. “Homeward Bound has been a game-changer,” he said, and his face lit up.

The retreat is like a reunion, a mix of old hands and new faces. Valerie says 12 to 15 attendees is ideal, smaller groups lead to more talking. Military service is a very physical experience—always tightly packed with your fellow soldiers at boot camp or on a C-130 ride, sleeping almost on top of each other in barracks, field tents, racked out on the ship—and so the immediate bond between veterans can be similarly visceral. But in a time of COVID, the normal physical interactions aren’t possible, and there is uncertainty about what to do. Hugs that end before they start, hands removed from shaking. But the easy manner remains, an acceptance of mental health issues, physical disabilities, different races and religions, probably different politics. Not all the jokes are polite.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” Ryan asked Chris, one of the blind veterans.

“It better not be one!” Chris replied, and everyone laughed.

During the canoe trip, I had lunch with Michelle, a Black woman with long braids who brought her daughters on the retreat. She thought the weekend trip would be a good way to get the girls out of their Brooklyn apartment in a way that she could watch and protect them; Michelle is vigilant and always makes sure to keep her girls safe.

Michelle’s career in the Army | *Continued on page 55*



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as an ammunition specialist went off the rails before it even really began. In basic training she injured her knees and feet, and she spent the next 11 years working through medical reviews and treatments before she was finally discharged.

But even that short time in the active duty Army changed her. Her friends from back home told her that she was different. She tried college but struggled at first. "Too many young ones acting the fool," she told me. Michelle and her girls spent more and more time in their apartment with the windows closed. Seven surgeries followed. The military had broken her body and tried to break her spirit and she had never even really gotten a chance to serve.

George, another Army veteran and one of Valerie's regulars, saw Michelle at the VA hospital in New York City and encouraged her to go on a Homeward Bound retreat. Michelle said she had never really spent time in the mountains, and she turned him down. George kept after her. She knew she should go, but she didn't see herself as the kind of veteran who went on retreats.

Like I was looking in a mirror.

And that's when I finally realized that maybe no veteran thinks of themselves as the kind that needs retreats. The retreat is always meant for someone else.

I admire the veterans like Michelle who do it anyway, because it does help and they want to get better. She and others do it for themselves and they do it for their families, no matter how awkward or uncomfortable it might be for everyone their first time at the fire circle.

Michelle wants things just so. And so she brings her daughters on the retreat so they can see other men and women who also need things just so, and for many of the same reasons. Michelle told me she wanted her daughters to see that there are others who struggle like their mother, and many of them have grown past their trauma, in no small part due to Homeward Bound. ▲

Learn more about Homeward Bound at www.homewardboundadirondacks.org.

Brian Castner served two combat tours in Iraq. His next book, *Stampede*, will be published in April 2021.



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