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Courtesy of Fredrick Solheim



Warriors on Cataract takes veterans down the Colorado River between Moab and Lake Powell.

NO MAN OVERBOARD

River trip for veterans helps battle the odds

by Elizabeth Miller

The issues veterans face are — in some ways — as big and unmanageable as the Colorado River running through Cataract Canyon this spring. At up to 58,000 cubic feet per second, it was flipping so many rafts that passengers in a 12-foot paddleboat just had to expect to swim.

So it goes with combat veterans. They're dealt turbulent conditions — multiple deployments, increased incidence of traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress, a rising survival rate that sees them returning with injuries, such as multiple amputations that would have left a previous generation of soldiers dead on the battlefield — in which you have to just prepare for your boat to overturn. And many of them are drowning. Each year, 6,000 veterans commit suicide — more soldiers than were lost in conflicts over the last 10 years.

But it turns out, a little time on the river may be among the steps that can help keep veterans onboard, even through the roughest waters.

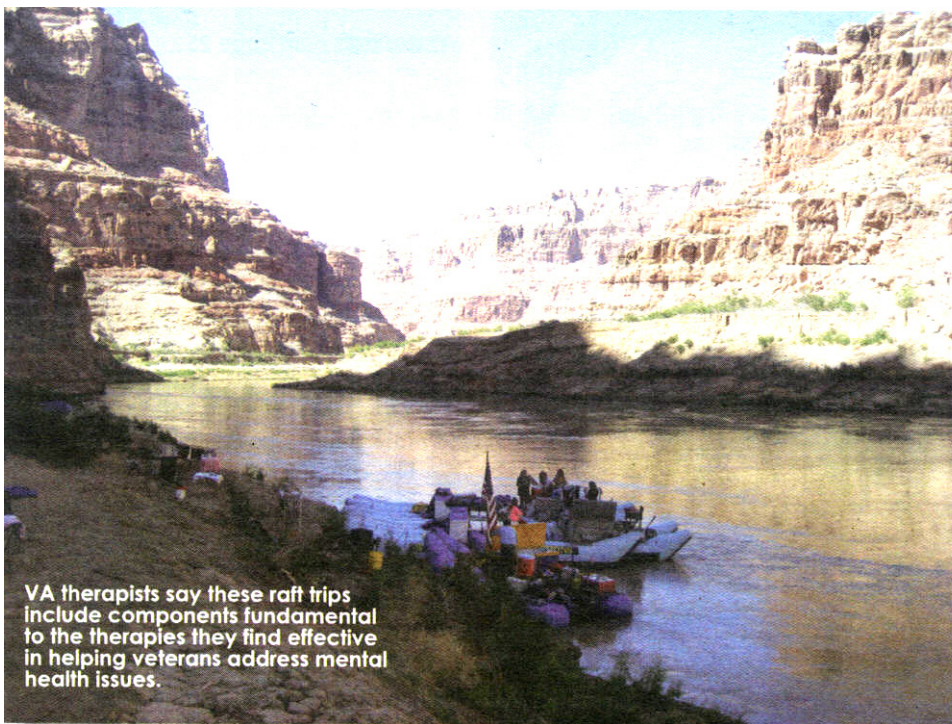
Fredrick Solheim has run Cataract Canyon, the stretch of Colorado River between Moab and Lake Powell that's dense with rapids, for years, and he's always liked to take "wild cards" along for the ride, he says. In 2011, he heard a triple-amputee veteran on the radio talking about how he'd recently learned to ski, saying his stumps were a little sweaty but he was starting to get the hang of it. Solheim thought he'd like to take that guy down the river.

Though he couldn't get that particular veteran out of Walter Reed and onto the water, he says, he thought it sounded like a pretty good idea, so he started looking more locally for veterans within driving distance of Moab. He called anyone he could think of who might be able to connect him to veterans and asked, "Anybody want to go on a raft trip?"

"To me, it's a real embarrassment that we aren't doing enough for these guys, and it seems so easy to give them a little bit of a boost forward, something as simple as a raft trip," he says.

He tells Veterans Administration recreational therapists in Denver, Cheyenne and Salt Lake City, "Bring me your worst," he says.

They do.



VA therapists say these raft trips include components fundamental to the therapies they find effective in helping veterans address mental health issues.

In 2011, he brought his first trip of 20 veterans down that canyon in the inaugural run for Warriors on Cataract, spending four days traveling through Canyonlands National Park on the Colorado River, riding rapids and camping on beaches and stopping to hike to see waterfalls, petroglyphs and Indian ruins. Veterans can bring their spouses and even service dogs.

More than the rafting and camping and hiking, Solheim says, what's important is that they're connecting with other veterans.

"I heard some of them say I'd rather be back in combat than be over here. I just don't fit. There's no one I can be around that's my type," he says. And that's what veterans get on these trips — time among people they fit with.

Once the boats shove off from the launch point, he moves into the background.

"Other than saying, 'We camp here, there's a nice hike over to a waterfall,' we let them off on their own," Solheim says.

At night, from his sleeping bag, he can hear the veterans talking until all hours of the night.

"I'm sort of an outsider," he says. "I'm a muggle."

In this, his fourth year, he flips through photos of the veterans against a backdrop of muddy river water and glowing red sandstone canyon walls and recounts war stories tied to each of the faces, from bullet wounds to lost limbs. He talks about the battles they faced after the war, when the shove of reintegrating into society left them dealing with depression and alcoholism, making attempts at taking their own lives. The thing that matters most to him, he says, is the sheet of comments he collects from veterans at the end of the trip. Over and over, they say “This trip saved my life.”

“These raft trips seem like real big medicine,” Solheim says. “[Veterans] get together and they bond up, they communicate. ... The VA therapist told me these soldiers are better healers among themselves than anything that the VA could do with their pharmaceuticals or their therapy.”



That therapist was Emily Potter, with the VA in Salt Lake City. She clarifies, “both are true and that’s my job on the trip, is to see what would be the most useful. So stepping back is one of the best things I can possibly do, because it’s the sky, the river, the wind, it’s the camping, it’s the being barefoot on the sand, those are really beneficial and the camaraderie that happens, laughing, jumping in the river — these things are so beneficial, and then there’s that other element of the actual processing that can happen.”

Actual processing being the times they sit down together and talk about what’s happening for them over the course of the trip, something veterans aren’t always eager to do. She mentions working with a veteran with severe PTSD who spent years dividing his time between work and sitting at home alone, selfmedicating with alcohol.

“He does not want to come in and just sit in an office with a woman psychologist and talk his problems away, that means that he’d have to look into all of those really hard, traumatic experiences and talk about them and cry — that does not sound fun,” she says. “I got with him at some point, he got wind of this trip, he came on the trip and all the sudden he’s with 10 other veterans from Salt Lake City. ... That was really scary for him. That was kind of his first treatment with the VA, so I commend him for saying yes to that. But you can see that because it’s so non traditional, it’s not sitting in an office, it’s, ‘Hey do you want to take a fiveday river trip?’ all the sudden something about that feels really, really good, and they have no idea what’s in store for them or how therapeutic this is going to be. ... Since then, he’s gotten a job that he loves, he actually quit drinking, he has a girlfriend now and he’s gone back to school, and he attributes quite a bit of that to this trip. So Fred is doing things beyond his understanding. I tell him every time I can, but these trips are saving lives.”

Her observations of the trip tells her that the work of saving a life is done in small, potent doses.

“All of this effort, all of this money, all of the organization, all of the debt that Fred goes into to get this happening is for one two-second moment, and those two seconds are going really high on a wave and then dropping back down off the wave and having that one big scream, this burst of excitement. There’s that feeling of being alive, and I could be dead if I actually fall in this water, and something about that is a surge. It flows through them,” Potter says. “They figure out that they are still alive, that there’s something to actually live for, and that you’re surrounded with people who are just as alive, because

right after that everyone is screaming and looking at one another, and it's that surge of, 'We are still alive, this is actually worth being alive for,' when every single one of those veterans have debated if they want to commit suicide. They've seen so many of their friends commit suicide, they've seen so many of their friends die in war, what's life even about? So this gets really, really personal and very deep on a life and death scale."

Veterans can face a slew of severe mental health issues, among them, severe depression, post traumatic stress disorder, severe anxiety and schizophrenia.

"With both the severe mental health issues there's often a tendency for them to want to commit suicide, just because there's a lot of hopelessness when you don't think your life is going to get better," says Kristi Ruben, a certified therapeutic recreation specialist with the Cheyenne VA Medical Center who sent between 20 and 30 veterans on the raft trip and has gone along on the raft trip three times. "I think this trip is wonderful because it does offer that ray of sunshine, that little bit of hope that, 'Hey, this was really fun and there could be more things like this in my life.'"

The trip often begins with a lot of anxiety and an uncomfortable, quiet group of strangers, she says. When it finishes and they take out of the river near Lake Powell, more than the scenery has changed.

"There's hugs and tears and exchanging of phone numbers and emails and, in that very short period of time, they really build a bond and hopefully it strengthens your life by having additional people for support," Ruben says.

Veterans who've been before ask to go again, she says.

What makes Warriors on Cataract unique is that it combines so many elements — river rafting along with camping, teamwork, a level of challenge, a shot of adrenalin, some camaraderie.

"It really encompasses a lot of things that we use that are very therapeutic in nature, especially for veterans recovering from particularly psychological, mental health-type challenges," Ruben says. "There's a lot of healing that goes on just from them talking among themselves. They share a lot of resources, they share a lot of ideas that work with everyone on board. I do think it helps them to build better coping skills."

Solheim's whitewater trips were included in a University of Michigan study, commissioned by the Sierra Club, that found that improved psychological wellbeing, social functioning and life outlook among outdoor group recreation program participants.

"The findings suggest that extended group-based nature recreation can have significant positive impacts on veterans struggling with serious health problems," Jason Duvall, a research scientist at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment and one of the study's lead authors, said in a press release. "Although more research is needed and many questions remain, the use of extended groupbased outdoor recreation programs to ease veterans' transition back into civilian life seems to be a promising approach."

"I don't know what the magic is of that trip — I guess I should know, I've been down there enough," Solheim says. "It's depressurizing."

Potter says it's like hitting a refresh button.

This year, for the first time, Solheim ran a raft trip just for women. He'd noticed that although the raft trips were open to both male and female veterans, he wasn't getting any women veterans to come along. Just looking at the number of women coming out of the military with allegations of sexual harassment, sexual abuse and rape paints a pretty clear picture for why women might want to keep themselves separate.

"It's very sensitive for these women to be on vulnerable trips for overnights, and they don't feel safe, that's a lot of what they're trying to come to therapy for," Potter says. But when the all women's trip was announced, the response just in the first 24 hours was tremendous.

"I think there's a real need to do trips specific to females where they can address their issues in an environment that feels very safe," Ruben says, after mentioning the increasing number of military sexual trauma programs at VA medical centers.

In an effort to, he says, "keep up the cadence of healing" throughout the year, he's started "mountain camps" where veterans canoe, kayak, hike, fly fish and ride horses and a winter ski camp to help disabled veterans learn how to ski again. This year, the August mountain camp will be only for women.

He'd like to see even more programs added throughout the year, and more than the roughly 100 veterans who attend his trips now be able to benefit.

Warriors on Cataract partners with Outdoor Buddies, an off-shoot of the Craig Rehabilitative Hospital, for 501 (c)3 status. Funding comes from Ball Aerospace, Ophir Corporation, others corporations and a number of Boulder-area law firms. Though VA therapists attend as support staff, the VA does not provide any funding for the program.

Among the things that were really important for him was to make this an operation without expenses — no one gets a salary. In fact, Solheim's likely to find himself a few thousand dollars in the hole at the end of the year. He shrugs it off.

"One thing that really strikes me about this particular Warriors on Cataract is that it was kind of one guy who said, 'I want to help. I want to do something.' So he just got this whole ball rolling — just one individual, which I find truly amazing," Ruben says. "This whole fantastic program that has benefitted so many wounded soldiers over now four years was just kind of the goal of one person who knew how beneficial rafting and the outdoors was in his own personal life. That's a huge tribute to Fred because we all have fabulous ideas, but not many of us really act on that and create a program as large as this."

"Fred is not a saint, he's actually the opposite of a saint on pretty much every level, which actually makes him really endearing. ... It's that he has this heart that he just had to make a difference, he just had to," Potter says. "I personally want people to know that it doesn't take saints to make these things happen, it just takes someone putting a focus onto making the world a better place."

"My belief is volunteers and nonprofits are more helpful than W2 employees because they have their heart in it and they have some talent, and they stick that talent right where it fits, right in some area of the nonprofit," Solheim says. "It's pretty effective when somebody takes their talent and put it against a need or a problem. That's what I'm trying to get people to do. You'd get more out of it than you put into it, I'd almost guarantee it."