

## Outdoors: Wilderness offers healing to military veterans

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Michigan ranks 53rd behind Puerto Rico, Guam and the Virgin Islands in military spending on vets per capita, leaving our heroes to fight through the postwar wilderness of PTSD, brain injuries and other disabilities virtually alone.

That is, until now.

Retired Air Force Maj. Rick Briggs and his best friend since childhood, Allan Lutes, bet their last dollar that if a wilderness weekend could provide mental nourishment for the run-of-the-mill cranky suburbanite, it would help heal veterans from the trauma of war. Any nature devotee knows the soothing power of an outdoor ramble. It improves cognitive skills, helps people concentrate and heck, the soil even contains a beneficial bacteria that acts as an antidepressant.

So Briggs and Lutes dug up \$300,000 of their own cash in the hope they might help these heretofore often neglected veterans. They wanted to create Camp Liberty, 137 acres of land in Ann Arbor, but they weren't quite there. Eisenhower Center of Ann Arbor, a premiere rehab facility, tossed in another \$100,000 to make the dream come true.

The concept was to provide a location where vets and their families could come to start — or speed up — healing post-combat. Briggs is the manager of the veterans program for the Brain Injury Association of Michigan and Lutes is the founder of Labor of Love, a program that provides renovations and repairs free to disabled, elderly and financially challenged Livingston County residents.

"We're light-years ahead of what I expected in 10 months," Briggs said. "Jason Allen of the state of Michigan Department of Military and Veteran Affairs contacted us and acted as a liaison to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. This ultimately resulted in the use of the 4,300 acres of the Sharonville State Game area for the program. The governor had learned how slim resources were for vets and said, 'let's help.'

"These soldiers are dealing with all sorts of issues, suicide, increased incarceration rate, sometimes joblessness, homelessness or abusing substances to cope. Unfortunately, soldiers don't reach out their hands for help, they give it. If they need help themselves, they usually just try to suck it up."

It's what military culture teaches, appropriate during wartime, but counterproductive for rehab. "Especially with traumatic brain injury when you're trying to retrain the brain," Briggs said. "You can't analyze yourself if your executive functioning has taken a hit ... inevitably they get to a point where life is harder than it should be."

Briggs took a soldier from Southfield fishing. The soldier's hand couldn't make the circular motion to reel in his line — at first. By the end of the day, he was making careful circles, retraining his brain.

"Doing this outdoors vs. in a rehab center, well, it seems like a no-brainer," Briggs said.

Retired Marine Corps Sgt. Ken Katter agrees. He suffered a traumatic brain injury during an IED

(improvised explosive device) blast and was awarded the purple heart. He finished his 15 month deployment returning home to seizures, and issues with balance, cognition, speech and memory.

There was little assistance from the military. Only by spending time outdoors did he begin to heal.

“An organization contacted me to go fishing,” Katter said. “I was still recovering from my injuries and kind of reluctant. While I was there, for a couple days I felt like the weight of the world was taken off my shoulders. I was laughing and enjoying the life the way I used to. Since that day, I’ve been trying to do that for other veterans.”

Katter now helps returning troops get accustomed to civilian life and volunteers in any way he can, from cooking to taking them fishing.

He says spending time in the wilderness, “Makes it feel like I’m recovering. When I’m fishing or hunting, there are a lot of things to memorize, anything from loading a gun and nocking an arrow, the distances you can shoot safely to tying a knot. It’s using your brain.”

A June 2013 U-M study verified that not only does outdoor recreation help veterans with their recovery on a whole host of fronts, the worse off they are to begin with, the more significant the benefits/outcomes.

Currently, Camp Liberty is a wide wild expanse of land, planted with 18 types of native wildflowers and the River Raisin winding its way through the property. Soon it will give rise to five homes in which military families can stay, a main hall and a rec building.

“A key ingredient is to get them out with other vets relaxing, enjoying themselves and building on three main components: know, like, trust,” Briggs said. “Use of the equipment and the facility will be provided for free. Our goal is to get them into a good place mentally.”

Length of stay will vary from several days to long term. “If a guy is injured and needs a place to live it could be a 90-day program; those considerations will come into play,” Briggs said. “Supporting the family is key as well. They need to know they aren’t alone.”

Thanks to Briggs and his ilk, they are not.

*Camp Liberty will be the site of additional medical research on the outdoor rehab-brain connection. To donate to Camp Liberty, volunteer or attend, contact Rick Briggs at [rvbriggsjr@yahoo.com](mailto:rvbriggsjr@yahoo.com) or visit [www.camp-liberty.org/](http://www.camp-liberty.org/). To contact the author e-mail [lydiaoutdoors@gmail.com](mailto:lydiaoutdoors@gmail.com).*