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"Slacklining is yesterday's tether ball and today's 'planking.' Like most hippie climber sports, there is no winner or loser, just losers."

– Jake Nichols



LEIF MILLING

Mending Waters
Young veterans find solace, confidence on the river

By Jessica L. Flammang

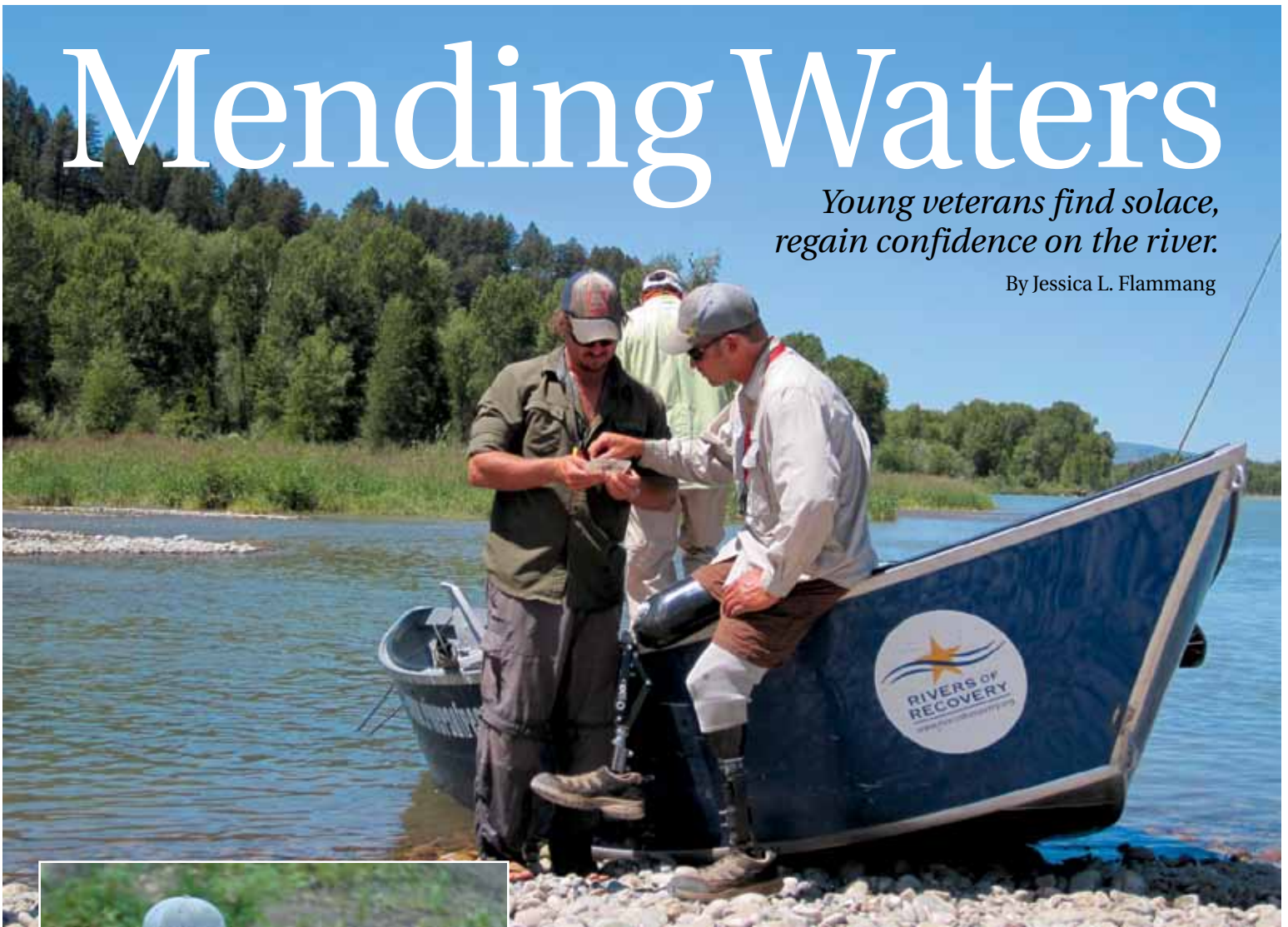
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Mending Waters

*Young veterans find solace,
regain confidence on the river.*

By Jessica L. Flammang



Dan T. Cook and Justin Clenard



Justin Clenard served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Justin Clenard paddles through the glassy waters of the South Fork of the Snake River, his gleaming turquoise eyes and calm demeanor hardly revealing the hell he has been through. His strong hands and patient temperament are a stark contrast to the “controlled chaos” he was part of in Ramadi, Iraq, and Now Zad, Afghanistan. He began as a machine gunner in the Marines infantry and later moved up to squad leader and stand-in section leader, responsible for 13 men in a rifle squad. He lost his left leg below the knee and his right leg above the knee from an improvised explosive device. A 25-year-old veteran, Clenard is one of seven young vets on the river with Rivers of Recovery, a national recreational rehabilitation program that launched a division in Jackson this year. Also on the water: ROR’s founder, Dan Cook, a medical research student, and me.

Three-year-old ROR serves more than 200 vets a year. The program attempts to parallel the physical and psychological recovery process that injured combat vets go through with the movement of water. Similar to Outward Bound, ROR seeks a kind of ‘flow experience’ to help vets lose track of time and tame their hyper-vigilance, one of the myriad health issues they face, by providing an all-consuming activity that demands close attention to detail. “Everything has to be perfect, every knot you tie, every line you throw, the color, the size, the precision, the cast,” Clenard said. “It’s very methodical, just like strapping magazines down before combat ... you have to read the water and look for fish.”

Medals of morale

Walking into ROR camp at East Table, a riverside campground in Alpine Canyon, I notice how peaceful it is. Because the program encourages vets to talk and interact in a meaningful way, the camp is even devoid of music. A welcome canopy of American flags and balloons greets us, and the trip coordinator briefs the vets on the mission so they know exactly what to expect. Dinner consists of chicken and slow-roasted lamb, while the vets enjoy the campfire and play the beanbag toss game, cornhole, on the lawn. Five tents sit along the rushing Snake River. Camaraderie is the theme.

All the vets are fresh off the plane – they hail from California, Florida, North Carolina and Washington D.C. They are in their mid-20s, and two are physically injured – one has a service dog with him. Besides one vet on crutches, it's not obvious that these young men have recently left combat zones. "You have to have something traumatic happen to reaffirm it all," said Jaime Henderson. Henderson spent seven years in the Army, and believes that a program like ROR is here to help him regain his sense of confidence.

The river trip starts early the next morning with coffee and eggs. The vets receive their itineraries. And at the put-in at Palisades Dam, Cook gives each vet an individual ROR medallion – much like the challenge coins that soldiers receive to identify the platoon or regiment to which they belong. The medallions – decorated with stars and stripes on one side and a rainbow trout on the other – represent brotherhood and morale, Cook said.

On a six-hour day-trip down the South Fork the next morning, we are all comrades engaging in fly-fishing, fly-fishing, and becoming one with nature relaxing together. "I feel comfortable in this environment," Clenard said, "like I don't have to explain myself to anyone."

We pocket our gold coins, and board the whitewater dories and drift boats, with the silence and order of a well-planned military operation. Due to an epically high snowpack this year, the rivers have also been running high and fast. The river runs at 15,400 cubic-feet per second, down from the summer peak of around 18,000 cfs. It's the end of July; the Snake River is finally fishable.

Aftermath of war

Dallas Bragg is excited to catch fish. He served four years in the Marines, and five in the Army. Over eggs and bacon, he tells me that he wouldn't have come without Frida, a service dog he's had for five months that has helped him deal with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

Three-hundred-thousand vets suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and 20 percent of returning military personnel are haunted by nightmares, sleeplessness, hyper-vigilance, distancing from others, stress, flashbacks, anxiety, and depression, according to Vets Prevail, an organization that offers a confidential approach to treating combat and deployment effects such as PTSD, depression and anxiety.

ROR's goal is to help vets reintegrate into society in meaningful ways. In addition to the float itself, the program uses therapies like yoga and breathing techniques to limit dependency on painkillers and anti-anxiety drugs.

Each morning, the groups stand in the circle and focus on deep breathing. Amy Simon, a hatha yoga



JIM URQUHART

Veterans flyfishing.

and breathing therapist who also acts as a program coordinator, practices simple stretches with the vets that relate to casting, fly-fishing, and balancing on the boat. "Yoga doesn't ask you what's wrong with you. It asks you to be," Simon said.

Bragg now runs his own nonprofit in Maryland, which is how he came across ROR. More veterans, Bragg said, need this kind of experience. "If they could find out easier ... if we could make them realize they are not condemned to the house because they have an injury," Bragg said, then more veterans could heal. "I believe it works," he said.

Beyond the catch

While Jackson Hole has been called "cutthroat country," a draw to "thousands of fly-fishing fanatics ... each summer" in *Jackson Hole Traveler*, this isn't

the reason Rivers of Recovery came to the valley. ROR staff believes in rehabilitation: "Catching the fish is not the most important thing," Cook said. "It's the experience and the mission to feel whole again."

Cook, a former Wall Street currency trader, founded ROR in 2008, inspired by his brother, Steve, who lost his foot and lower leg when he fell into a grain auger pit in a farming accident in 1988. His first outdoor activity after leaving the hospital was fly-fishing on Glacier National Park's Bowman Lake. He added mountain bike racing and road cycling to his repertoire, before he went on to become a Para-Olympic Skiing and World Championships gold medalist, as well as former World Cup champion on the U.S. Disabled Cross Country Ski Team for the better part of a decade, winning the 2005 Nordic World Championship.



LEIF MILLING

Rivers of Recovery Camp at East Table in Alpine Canyon.

"Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing it is not fish they are after."
– Henry David Thoreau

This sense of adventure and achievement runs in the family – after 15 years on the Street, Dan Cook was named on the 2006 *Outside Magazine's* “Top 100 People, Adventures and Ideas.” He is an expert rower of the Yukon River in Alaska and Canada, and has completed a 27-month, 75,000-mile around-the-world fly-fishing odyssey. In 2009, he launched the “Heart of America campaign,” a 3,700-mile, 80-day trip from Montana to the Gulf of Mexico to raise awareness of the challenges facing disabled service-members. “There is a culture that reinforces the idea that they are broken,” Cook said. “We don’t treat them like victims. We treat them as potential leaders [which] they demonstrated before they were injured.”

ROR was initially based in Utah. Cook wants to expand to four locations in Jackson, Aspen, and Telluride, and serve 5,000 vets per year – and he’s already initiated trips solely for female veterans and veteran couples.

‘I’d rather it be me than them’

Clenard has been involved with ROR since its inception in 2008. Hailing from a small town in central California, he grew up raising horses and cattle. He wrestled, participated in the rodeo, and joined the Marines right out of high school. He executed two tours in Iraq, and a final tour in Afghanistan. In addition to losing both his legs to an IED, Clenard suffered traumatic brain injury, major hearing loss and damaged tissue in the buttocks. He also lost a chunk of bone from his wrist that had to be surgically replaced. He came home with acute mood swings, memory loss, severe phantom pains, vivid dreams of combat and heavy anxiety attacks. He was overmedicated – mostly on painkillers and anti-anxiety medications – and he now suffers from problems in his hands, pain from overcompensation in his shoulders, chest and neck, sores on his upper legs, and continual battles with medication and issues with prosthetic replacements.

Despite all this, he still considers the Marine Corps “the finest fighting force the world has ever seen.

“If I didn’t step on [that IED], one of my machine gunners would have,” he said. “I’d rather it would be me than them.”

Clenard says that ROR opened his eyes a lot on what he actually could do, even with prosthetics. “I didn’t have to sit in a wheelchair and play video games for the rest of my life.” He now receives disability from the government, which allows him to volunteer as a guide, taking fellow veterans on the river. Now he has reduced his medications greatly, and has learned to utilize the meditation and mindfulness techniques he learned through ROR. When asked what war means to him, he replies, “Si vis pacem, para bellum,” an old Latin adage that translates as “If you wish for peace, prepare for war.”

Challenges for ROR

When your average Jackson resident thinks of Town Square in the summer, she probably imagines Japanese tourists taking pictures of the elk antler arches, not war veterans. “You don’t see a lot of 25-year-old kids walking around on prosthetics in Jackson,” Cook said. “We all have the obligation to support these kids when they come back injured.” He said that he believes the program succeeds because it allows veterans to become participants in their lives again, and it makes them more visible, which seems important when you consider that only one-third of returning vets receive care, according to Veterans Prevail.

Most of ROR’s funding comes from private donors and corporations, although funding itself is a con-

stant struggle for the program. Regardless of political affiliation, there is a general shared goal to serve the veteran, according to Michael Rubenstein, a Jackson local who sits on ROR’s board of directors. Nonetheless, Cook said that the program and its mission can be difficult to explain to potential donors. He says it is challenging to “convince sophisticated philanthropists that this is worth their time.”

Enter Jessie Bennett, a recreational therapist, medical researcher, and doctoral student at Indiana University. She has been involved with ROR for two years, trying to create a qualitative study of vets’ perspectives and the demographic variables to find out who got the most out of the program. Bennett chose the measurements that evaluate the variables in the vets: veterans’ cortisol levels often stay high, which causes stress on the heart and nervous system, and results in a reduced life span; norepinephrine – adrenaline, which affects the fight or flight mechanism; and catecholamine levels, adversely affecting the immune system’s functioning. She examines each vet a week before they enter the program, on their last night of the program and at one-month and six-month follow up intervals. She separates her emotions from her work by focusing on the veterans’ talents and skills. “I look at their abilities and not their disabilities. We try to teach them that they are still competent at life – they have abilities that maybe they didn’t realize before.”

Improving quality of life

The research stands alone – the multiple pre-tests the program administers to its clients correspond to stress, anxiety and sleep quality. For all three pre-tests, the lower scores ROR records reflect improvement: less stress; fewer PTSD symptoms; and enhanced sleep quality, respectively. The 20-percent reduction in PTSD symptoms ROR records speaks to the prognostic health of vets over time. ROR has sustainability initiatives for long-term recovery, tracking their participants’ progress through a closed social networking site and a focused outreach program.

“No one has taken the next step to scientifically quantify the physical and psychological healing benefits that result from fly-fishing and outdoor recreation,” said Mitch Butler, a member of ROR’s board of directors.

So the vets in the program are also its best spokespeople, demonstrating the healing properties of the outdoors. “You don’t have to take a pill or medication or sit in a therapeutic environment; you can actually heal by getting outdoors,” Cook said.

Moving forward

After two days, the trip ends at the Conant take-out near the South Fork Lodge. The vets are tired, but satisfied. They all caught fish, and enjoyed the challenge. They are relaxed and smiling, and looking forward to dinner by the campfire.

Returning to camp feels much like returning from a mission. There is a palpable sense of accomplishment and brotherhood among the group. The fire is alight and the grill is heating up.

Cook relaxes before a night river mission, clearly satisfied with the trip. In his confident manner with piercing gray eyes, he says that he left Wall Street because he had a sense that he could contribute in better ways. He folds his hands, speaking easily and quickly. He has done this before on national television stations such as MSNBC. “When you see a psychologically injured kid open up to a group, feel comfortable for the first time in years or smile ‘just because,’ there is no other way,” he said. “This is incredibly effective therapy disguised as a fly-fishing trip.”

While ROR continues to work for more funding and understanding, its guides and its vets are reaping the bounty of rehabilitative effects. While one prosthetic leg can cost up to \$40,000 before labor and costs, Clenard is at peace on the river. The flow, the newness, and the constantly changing water conditions correspond to his own dramatic career switch. “I had plans, but shit happens, and you have to deal with it, get over it, and on to something else. This isn’t a bad thing to move on to.”



Dan Cook wants to treat veterans as leaders.