

# WHAT MATTERS?

Stories by Abbey Smith & Caroline Treadway



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WHAT MATTERS?: Stories by Abbey Smith and Caroline Treadway.

## VETERANS EXPEDITIONS

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From: [Caroline Treadway](#)  
February 07, 2011

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Photo: Michael Ramsey (video still)  
Veterans head to the summit of Longs Peak, on Sept. 11, 2010.

In the wee hours of Sept. 11, 2010, a small team of combat veterans, ages 24-65, set out to climb Longs Peak, the highest mountain in Colorado's Front Range. Together they headed up the dark trail, headlamps bobbing through the frosted morning. When sunrise torched the tip of Longs, they were still hours from the 14,259 ft. summit. Exhausted, but fueled with a group determination honed by years at war - Vietnam, Iraq and everywhere in between - they marched to the summit, signed the registry and looked out on the country they'd fought to protect.



Photo: Michael Ramsey (video still)  
Veterans sign in at the top of Longs Peak.

Stacy Bare and Nick Watson led the mission. The 32-year-old executive director of Veterans Expeditions, served in the army for seven years and hatched the idea for Veterans Expeditions in 2009. A year later, when Bare met Nick Watson and received a generous first time grant from Force Factor Nutrition, their vision to connect veterans through outdoor sports like hiking, rock climbing and biking, became a reality. Bare says activities like rock climbing recreate positive aspects of war that are often missing in civilian life - physical challenge, teamwork, trust, a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

Bare hopes Veterans Expeditions will improve life for veterans who might be struggling on a variety of levels. "We don't have a therapy agenda. We don't say, 'if you come on this trip you'll be better.'" said Bare. "But amazing things happen in the outdoors. Anyone who's been on top of a mountain knows that it changes you."



Photo: Michael Ramsey (video still)  
Each of the veterans hiked up Longs Peak flying an American flag.

For a lot of veterans, it's not easy to come home. Many return to broken families and relationships, unemployment and depression. Isolated by their combat experiences, they turn to drugs, alcohol and suicide, with disturbing frequency. This past April, the Army Times released a statistic that 18 vets commit suicide each day, just one number that hints at the hidden costs of war, back home. Bare, who's worked through his own struggle to reintegrate, often found that nothing helped more than just getting outside and climbing.

"The veteran identity can be all-consuming. People ask really personal questions like, 'have you ever killed someone?' That's really isolating," Bare said. "But when

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you become a climber, you become more than a veteran. You become a vet plus something."



Photo: Caroline Treadway  
Stacy Bare, president and co-founder of Veterans Expeditions, outside the Trident Cafe in Boulder, Colorado.

I met up with Bare at a cafe in Boulder, Colorado. Tall and gregarious, with a light beard and big blue eyes, Bare wore Carhardts and a t-shirt despite the winter chill. He was immediately easy to talk to, and I'd never pegged him as a veteran, at least until he pointed out the best surrounding buildings to shoot from.

A self-described "stereotypical, middle-class, white kid from South Dakota", Bare joined the army in his early twenties, following family tradition. His grandfather was a sailor in WW II and his great aunt, a family heroine, chose the Women's Army Corps. over Nebraska farm life.

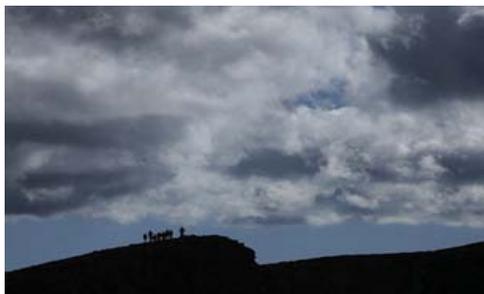


Photo: Michael Ramsey (video still)  
A Veterans Expeditions trip to the Mummy Range.

From 2000-2007, Bare served all over the world - Germany, Sarajevo, Angola and northwest Georgia, where he got a taste for rock climbing in the Caucasus Mountains with a Chechnyan friend. "I started doing alpine stuff, stupid shit really, on rocks," Bare said. "We thought we were so bad ass one day, going up this icy slope. Then this old woman blows past us, she was like 85 years old, wearing rags on her feet, carrying cords of wood on her back, and I'm like standing there in my Goretex. That was pretty humbling."



Photo: Michael Ramsey (video still)  
Veteran Demond Mullins enjoys a moment of quiet below Hallett's Peak, Colorado. Demond is working on a PhD in sociology at CUNY in New York. He's writing his dissertation about recruitment and the effects of combat on veterans.

Like many returning vets, Bare struggled with the blandness of civilian life compared to the adrenaline-fueled camaraderie he experienced in combat. Relationships were difficult, and drugs and alcohol only exacerbated the problem increasing his isolation. Desperate to engage himself in something that felt useful, Bare threw himself into graduate studies, a consuming distraction that required clear-headedness. "Grad school kept me going," Bare said. "It was an intense focus, I just kept moving."

When Bare graduated from UPenn with a master's in urban planning and design, he decided to give back to the veteran community, became the director of national programs and COO of Veterans Green Jobs, training close to 150 vets for employment in the green sector and convincing organizations like Wal-Mart to support the military, before starting Veterans Expeditions.



Photo: Michael Ramsey (video still)  
Veterans Expeditions trip at the summit of Longs Peak.

"Stacy's a very smart guy, and he's very open about the fact that he's working through his own challenges and memories of what went on in the military," said Michael Ramsey, ([www.spokenimage.tv](http://www.spokenimage.tv)) an award-winning filmmaker from Boulder, Colorado who's making a documentary about Veterans Expeditions.

Ramsey, a pacifist at heart, says that working with the veterans shattered many of his preconceptions about soldiers. "A lot of these guys miss it pretty deeply, the edge they found, the adrenaline, the meaningfulness of

every day life they found in service. So when they come home they're just bored to tears," Ramsey said.

Eventually, Bare hopes Veterans Expeditions will bring



Photo: Michael Ramsey (video still)  
Veterans head up Longs Peak on Sept. 11, 2010.

together veterans from opposite sides of combat, through challenging, team-oriented outdoor activities.

Bare's currently working to drum up support for Veterans Expeditions, using a "shared basecamp" model by combining forces with already established outdoor organizations like the Women's Wilderness Institute and the Sierra Club. Multi-day trips cost between \$800-\$2000. per veteran depending on the trip. Veterans Expeditions is seeking fiscal and gear sponsorships to help offset trip costs. For more information please check out the web site at [www.vetexpeditions.com](http://www.vetexpeditions.com).

Says Bare: "We're not trying to save the world, but we want veterans to take the next best step in their lives, expose them to the outdoors, create a new community, and replicate the positive experiences of combat. However we can do that, and anyone who wants to help us do that, we'll work with them."



[Veterans Expeditions Teaser](#) from [Michael Ramsey](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Including news, features, photo galleries and videos, *What Matters?* is dedicated to covering adventure sports, active travel and the outdoor lifestyle on behalf of [VentureThere.com](#)--a member of the [USA TODAY Travel Alliance](#).

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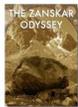
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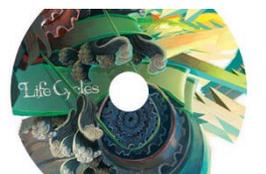
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