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'I came back. I hated myself.' How mustangs are helping vets heal



At BraveHearts, in Poplar Grove and Harvard, veterans, many with PTSD, come to learn to ride and take care of horses.

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The stallion kicked out, nostrils flaring. In the ring, it faced off against a 32-year-old former infantryman.

Months ago, Mitchell Reno was sitting in a hotel room with a half-gallon of vodka and dark plans. But this April afternoon found him serenely still as a stallion kicked up sawdust in an arena in Poplar Grove. Slashes across the horse's heaving belly and back revealed fights in the Wyoming wild.

The horse zeroed in on Reno, who wrestles with PTSD and knows a thing or two about scars, the kind you can see and the kind you can't.

"Whenever I get in the ring, it's just me and the horse," said Reno, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2003, according to an Army spokesman. "Nothing else matters."

An explosion in Iraq left him with a traumatic brain injury, ending the Texas native's military career, he said.

Mustangs help him in a way, he said, that years of therapy, medication and turning to alcohol couldn't.

Reno and the mustangs are part of BraveHearts, the country's largest free equine-assisted services program for veterans, says Meggan Hill-McQueeney, BraveHearts president.

Re-acclimating to life after combat isn't easy. Finding a footing takes time. Many veterans struggle with battlefield injuries — physical and mental.

Reliance on medication and alcohol can lead to addiction. And deployment experience doesn't always translate to civilian employment, which only adds to the strain for veterans and their families.

Many veterans arrive at BraveHearts after trying medication and therapy. The program provides work and hope for vets who are looking for purpose — a goal to work toward.

Veterans gentle the stallions — themselves traumatized by being relocated — acclimating them to things like saddles and halters.

"The veteran doesn't want to change because of what I'm telling them," said Patrick McKeivitt, BraveHearts' director of operations. "They want to change because you're going to help the horse. And the horse ends up helping you."

Reno is sober now. He can sleep at night. But not everything is perfect — it's hard to be away from his wife and the kids whose grinning faces fill his iPhone photo stream.

The horses, though, he says, make "life worth living."

BraveHearts, serving soldiers since 2007, partners with the federal Bureau of Land Management to corral wild horses from Wyoming in an effort to curb population growth. Veterans work with the horses once they arrive in Illinois, and McKeivitt and Hill-McQueeney help them train.

McKeivitt and Hill-McQueeney pull people "right out of the gutter," says Reno.

The gutter has been a familiar place for Reno.

Earlier this year, he was in a downtown hotel room with the half-gallon of vodka, making a noose out of cord.

He'd already used the vodka to swallow his wedding ring. He'd tossed his cross necklace into the Chicago River.

The suicide attempt capped rocky years when he was arrested for assault, divorced twice and often drunk.

"I came back, and I hated myself," he said. "The pills didn't fix anything. The booze just hid the feelings of guilt."

Reno, who received a Bronze Star for his service, first came to BraveHearts two years ago while at the PTSD program at Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center in Chicago.

He met the horses, which reminded him of the three he had while growing up, but that bright spot barely pushed back struggles that were years in the making. He found his way back to booze and eventually the hotel room.

Reno's wife, Corinne, remembers the time as one of many when she couldn't reach him. She'd call friends, hospitals, the VA.

Then she called McKeivitt.

"You could tell that Paddy saw something in Mitchell that I did, that so many people in Mitchell's life do," she said. "There's a guy in there that we fell in love with and we know that exists. And sometimes it's hard for a guy like Mitchell to see that, because all he can see is the bad."

McKeivitt summoned Reno back to BraveHearts. They set him up working with mustangs that, he said, "blew my mind and stole my heart."

Reno said he finds calm with the tense, distrustful animals and knows he can help.

"I have a lot of the same feelings," he said.

The idea of working with stallions almost seems counterintuitive. Wouldn't the best animals for veterans seeking stability be gentle and reliable?

Hill-McQueeney has found it's the wild ones.

Mustangs don't trust humans, said Steve Mantle, who runs a wild horse adoption facility in Wheatland, Wyo.

"They don't want anything from you. They were fine on their own," said Mantle, who shared his mustang-training techniques last year at BraveHearts.

"The vets maybe come from that same position of needing to trust someone but not sure they can," he added. "So the two meld together."

Reno readily acknowledges that people who knew him years ago would not recognize him today — he's

chosen a calmer life and talks openly about his feelings.

"I'm starting to have a little bit of patience for myself," he said. "I haven't had a life until recently, honestly. Not any kind of life that anybody would want."

Corrine Reno said she saw the difference earlier this month, when the couple saw each other at a horse event BraveHearts attended in Texas.

"It was hard and good," she said. "Because the man I saw that left, I wouldn't be caught dead in a room with him. And the guy I saw last week was a guy I recognized."

Working with horses seems to be working for Reno, and many advocates hope that bringing veterans to stables will be as common a treatment for PTSD as medications and therapies offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Last year, the House passed a bill to research alternative treatments, including horse therapy. And in March, during a House Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing addressing opioid prescription and abuse, testimony touched on finding nonpharmacological options — such as equine-assisted rehabilitation.

Back in the arena, McKeivitt's soft, Irish brogue encouraged Reno. Gentle, gentle, he repeated. Bring your hand down, but just so. Don't get too close. You're in the strike zone. Watch his left hoof.

"He's kind of like you," McKeivitt said. "He's a tornado."

McKeivitt instructed Reno how to move a rod, with a silver sack tied to the end, just so to touch the horse from afar.

The idea is that it's like a hand, helping the mustang adjust. To learn trust.

Reno's slow, calm movements toward the horse turned the arena so still that the only sounds were buzzing fluorescent lights.

Two steps forward, one step back. A delicate dance of hoofs and work boots.

After inching close enough to touch Boo-Yah's cheek — a successful moment with a stallion who'd only the day before been haltered — Reno climbed the fence, grinning. He said, "I feel like I just had a massage."

"You get a sense of peace like no pill they could put down your throat," he said. "I'm starting to look forward to the next 20 years of my life."

Reno hopes to return to his family in Texas and help other veterans into the saddle. It helps them, he said, "walk out with a little bit of hope and strength."

More than a decade after the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions, veterans are still finding their way toward calm. Mary Apper, 35, also knows how the bond with horses soothes.

After returning from a Navy deployment to Afghanistan, Apper said the only solace she found from wrestling with PTSD and rage was her 29-year-old quarter horse, Satin.

On the worst nights, she slept in Satin's stall.

"She was literally the only thing that could melt my anger," said the damage controlman, who is on active duty. "My mom always said that my love for her was stronger than my anger for what I've been through."

Horses, medical and animal experts say, force calm. They are sensitive animals that react to tension. Interacting with them, veterans are forced to strip away any anxiety or anger.

"They have a level of hypervigilance," says Dr. Anthony Peterson, section chief of the PTSD program at Lovell. "So if you have a population of individuals with PTSD who themselves carry a level of nervousness or anxiety on a day-to-day basis, when they interact with the animals, it really challenges them."

In 2005, Kimberly Williams, now 30, said she was serving with the military police in Iraq when an IED blew up the truck she was in. She was 19.

A decade later, her hypervigilance and anxiety have gotten worse.

She said she's been helped most by things that feel useful — volunteering with homeless veterans and helping horses at BraveHearts.

"It's a different relationship than with a person," she said.

She doesn't have to talk.

"I'm not real good with social situations and being around people," said Williams, while waiting to work with Azul, a mustang adopted in 2013.

As her husband watched, she entered the ring nervously, with jeans rolled up past her prosthetic — she lost her leg in a 2011 motorcycle accident. By the end of the session, Williams was comfortable, stroking the horse's neck before walking out, smiling.

Williams left the stable to a chorus of voices asking when she'd be back.

It helps to be around other veterans. Not to talk about the war. But to know that someone understands what it's like to find yourself looking for the safest corner in the milk aisle; or to have your mind being invaded by images of your spouse bleeding in a mangled car.

"That's the big thing we don't do," said Tim Stratton, a Vietnam veteran who leads the stable's drill team. "We don't discuss what you came from or what happened."

The purpose, said Stratton, is to connect veterans to a horse. And if nothing else, keep minds busy.

"Our worst enemy is our idle time," he said.

There are 29 VA medical centers that participate in riding therapy, according to a Veterans Affairs spokesperson.

McQueeney said that while other groups in the country have connected veterans with wild horses, BraveHearts is the first to have veterans gentle mustangs.

The veterans help with everything from performing at parades to heaving hay into stalls.

The organization has a second location in Harvard, Ill., a more rustic site — folks greet each other with "morning, cowboy," and horses neigh in green pastures. The Poplar Grove location is "corporate," they joke, with gleaming stalls and two arenas, one that hosted last year's Special Olympics.

The programs are free for vets, and BraveHearts even offers family retreats, with lodging for veterans and their families. Horses need hay, veterinarians and farriers, however, and the programs require funding.

Operation Mustang also has a problem — it doesn't have enough mustangs. The program has nine mustangs that veterans take turns training.

BraveHearts is raising money for [Operation Mustang](#), and donors who sponsor a mustang with a donation of \$5,000 get naming rights.

Veteran Nicholas Montijo, 28, greets the busload of Milwaukee veterans arriving each Tuesday. BraveHearts served more than 500 veterans in 2015.

Before coming to BraveHearts, his mind was buzzing with replays of the chaotic calls he received as a radio operator in Afghanistan.

"I relive a lot of that stuff," he said. "It goes through my brain like a big, old recording."

His first deployment, he remembers, was fun — traveling to exotic ports, experiencing different cultures. But the second, to Afghanistan, was haunting.

He returned a man without purpose — broken and silent.

"You couldn't get me to talk," he said.

Now, his colleagues joke, that's not a problem.

Showing a guest around the ranch, pointing out horses and their quirks — this one's pals with the donkeys, this one thinks he's getting fed soon — it was hard to believe he was ever anything but a friendly greeter and natural leader.

Riding gave him purpose, a goal, a bond.

Apper, who is stationed at nearby Naval Station Great Lakes, is teaching Montijo to be a riding instructor for other veterans.

Barking out orders, Apper directed a riding group trotting single-file on a recent afternoon. Her clipped, confident tone revealed her drill-instructor background.

When her beloved horse, Satin, had to be put down last August, her mother flew out and "pretty much forced me to come out here," Apper said of BraveHearts.

Devastated, she hesitated to be near horses again. But during that visit, someone told her about a filly needing work.

Apper started making 90-minute trips from Gurnee.

"I just got this ridiculous feeling," she said. "And I realized, 'Oh, my God, I'm happy.'"

A few months ago, she was surprised by streamers and balloons affixed to a stall with the news that BraveHearts was giving her CC, a beautiful gray mare with white eyelashes.

When Apper walks to her pasture, the horse's head bobs up immediately, nose lifted to nuzzle.

"This little filly saved my life," she said.

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