



# FINDING WARMTH IN ELY

During the past decade, more than 2.5 million service members have deployed in support of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. A growing number of organizations are helping them transition back to civilian life.  
By Amy Stevens

**C**rack! The ice began to give way under the half-ton dogsled. I glimpsed black water below. "Let's go!" I said to the dogs. They lunged against the harnesses, and we moved again. It wasn't enough. The sled shifted and the back end creaked, settling deeper into the growing darkness. My heavy boots slipped on the runners, and I felt panic rush through me. One misstep and I would be plunged into the freezing water below. In a split-second decision, Joe hurled his sizable frame away from the sled to lighten the load. The dogs strained again, and we shot forward.

The dogs and I were safe, but where was Joe? I glanced back and spotted him sprinting along a disinte-

grating ice shelf. In one giant leap, he crossed from the weak crust along the bank to the creek's stronger center. We glanced at each other, wide-eyed, then grinned. *This* was living.

That close call in Ely, Minnesota, was just one of many memorable moments during an eight-day Outward Bound dogsledding expedition for veterans in February 2012. The remote Boundary Waters region provided a perfect setting for the rigorous physical and mental challenges that united our group of six veterans and two instructors. Together, we learned and practiced new survival skills, battled freezing temperatures, and discovered individual strengths.

For many combat veterans, the transition home is the most difficult adjustment they will ever have to make.

Matt Colvin, a strategic-partnership associate for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and a U.S. Air Force veteran with two deployments to Afghanistan under his belt, suggests that the transition from military to civilian life is more challenging than the transition from civilian life into the military. "The things we have been asked to do and the things we have seen will be with us forever," he says. An ever-expanding network of organizations (see sidebar) provides an invaluable resource for veterans who are struggling to find community in their new lives. "These programs require teamwork," says Colvin. "They require and foster leadership and bonding under common circumstances. They're the perfect reintegration tool for veterans."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY (FEET, DOGS, SLEEPING BAGS, TWO PEOPLE, DOG HOUSES, AND CABIN) LYDIA DAVEY, (PERSON WITH AX, COOKING FIRE) LARRY MISHKAR

"In the deployment area," Colvin continues, "military members are always on heightened alert. Hypervigilance becomes the norm, and once we return home it's hard to break what has become habit. The rules that applied in the combat zone are no longer necessary, but we carry them with us. These programs really provide a safety net for veterans who are struggling. We connect them with others who have literally been in the same trenches, kicking in the same doors. Providing that commonality and sense of understanding is the start. Then we push for deeper involvement and introduce them to resources for getting help."

Outward Bound participant Nick Coleman, an Army vet who deployed to Iraq in 2005, found value in the expedition. "I was looking forward to the camaraderie, and to bonding with other veterans through a trying experience," he says. "Before the trip I felt kind of purposeless, but my time out in the wilderness—in the quiet and the still—made me contemplate my life in a new way. I started questioning what I was really doing with my life, and what I was capable of."

After returning home from Iraq, Coleman, like many veterans, found substance abuse a way to cope with the stress of reintegration. As the years passed, he found himself frustrated by poor job prospects and was looking for a change. Since his Outward Bound experience, he's launched a new career in comedy. He's stayed busy performing, taking workshops, and connecting with other comedians socially. "The Outward Bound trip really inspired that

change," Coleman says. "It helped me see what was important in life. I was inspired by the fact that I got out there and did stuff that's terrifying. I had some anxiety about the trip—I didn't know how I would handle the cold or what our instructors would be like. You don't know what's going to happen, but you finish it and you're proud of it."

Since 2008, Outward Bound has led more than 2,500 vets through its seasonal wilderness courses, according to Chad Spangler, Outward Bound Director of Veterans Programs. From sailing in the Florida Keys to dogsledding in Minnesota to mountaineering in Colorado, vets and instructors work together to discover new purpose. "The overarching goal of our courses for veterans is to focus on the idea of transition," says Spangler. "Many veterans experienced courage, brotherhood, and a real sense of power and competence while in combat. Outward Bound gives veterans and service members the opportunity to re-experience these strengths in themselves in a different context."

It's also worth noting that Outward Bound team leaders exemplify the core values of compassion, integrity, and excellence in their interactions with one another, the veterans, and, in our case, the sled dogs. They use calm voices and practice a gentle courtesy that is catching. "I expected some really gung-ho guys to be leading us," says Coleman. "Instead we got two really awesome, patient people. They led by example, and gave us comfort, care, and guidance." Coleman said he learned a valuable lesson from the

dynamics between leaders and students. "When you're leading, there's a way to do it where you don't have to yell and get everyone's blood boiling," he says. "It doesn't have to be an emergency situation every time. After that, I know that you can comfort and guide more than push, shove, and shout."

IAVA's Colvin says this type of lesson is exactly what veterans need to learn, because it helps them relate to civilian coworkers and family members. "I believe that these types of programs work well, because by getting outside and interacting with other vets and civilians, we tend to let down our walls a little more easily and possibly open up," Colvin tells us. "It's therapy without calling it 'therapy.'"

Outward Bound's Spangler agrees: "Wilderness activities are used as metaphors for daily-life experiences in the pursuit of individual and group excellence. [These activities] illuminate how the support and collaboration needed to meet Outward Bound goals can positively impact participants' interactions with others at home."

The night we returned from our intense week in the wild, all six veterans on my team bunked down in a small cabin. Accommodations were sparse, but our bellies were full of hot chow, our minds full of fresh adventure. A small heater struggled to warm the room, but the chill didn't matter; our hearts were glowing warm.

The author served as a combat correspondent in the Marine Corps from 2003 to 2010. Her service included a deployment to Afghanistan.

## Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America

[IAVA.org](http://IAVA.org)

IAVA seeks to connect veterans of the war on terror with one another, and to link them to health, employment, and community resources. It also advocates for awareness of veterans' issues and lobbies for positive policy change. IAVA is the largest nonprofit of its kind, with nearly a quarter of a million members.

# HELPING HANDS

These organizations, among others, are dedicated to helping members of the armed forces transition back to civilian life.

## Outward Bound

[OutwardBound.org/veteran-adventures](http://OutwardBound.org/veteran-adventures)

Outward Bound for Veterans offers wilderness-adventure programs for returning service members, like the one in which this author participated. Veterans who have deployed are eligible for full-ride scholarships for trips that include rafting in Utah, sailing in Florida, dogsledding in Minnesota, and skiing in Colorado.

## Horses for Heroes

[HorsesForHeroes.org](http://HorsesForHeroes.org)

The organization's Cowboy Up! program caters to veterans who have sustained physical injuries or combat trauma (PTSD) during the recent conflicts. The program emphasizes horsemanship, wellness, and camaraderie for its Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) veteran beneficiaries. Veterans care for the horses they ride, and participate in other ranch activities (like working cattle), with cowboys who are themselves veterans.

## Team Rubicon

[TeamRubiconUSA.org](http://TeamRubiconUSA.org)

This rapid-response disaster-relief organization, comprised of veteran volunteers and medical personnel, takes advantage of the fact that the skills learned on the battlefield—particularly emergency medical treatment and risk assessment and mitigation—are needed desperately in disaster zones. Its intention is to offer vets a new sense of purpose and mission through leadership opportunities and real-world challenges.

## Sierra Club

[SierraClub.org/military](http://SierraClub.org/military)

The Military Family and Veterans Initiative provides leadership training and discounted programs for service members and their families. It hopes to connect vets with the healing powers of the homeland they defended, and raise awareness of the challenges vets and their families face. According to the Sierra Club website, the armed forces share its "deep commitment to the ideals that make our nation great: democracy and civic engagement."