



### **Sierra Club Military Outdoors**

[www.sierraclub.org/military](http://www.sierraclub.org/military)

Joshua Brandon

Sierra Club Mission Outdoors Military Organizer

Email: [joshua.brandon@sierraclub.org](mailto:joshua.brandon@sierraclub.org) Phone: 931-206-1595

The U.S. military and the Sierra Club have much in common but are perceived to often reach very different audiences. The truth is though that members of the Armed Forces and the Sierra Club share a deep caring for our nation and a commitment to the ideals of democracy and civic engagement. John Muir is known to have remarked that “Uncle Sam’s soldiers were the most effective forest police,” concerning the care that the U.S. Cavalry showed in safeguarding Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks prior to the establishment of the National Park Service. During World War II, Club leaders, including the legendary David Brower, responded to the need for an alpine fighting force by using the mountaineering and skiing skills they had developed with Sierra Club to found and train the 10th Mountain Division—a unit that has distinguished itself from the Dolomites of Italy to the Hindu Kush of Afghanistan. Today, the military tradition in the Club is as strong as ever. Veterans continue to serve in numerous club leadership positions to include 8% of Chapter Chairs and executive committee members, an impressive number given that veterans account for less than 7% of the population of the United States.

Increasing the number of opportunities for service members, veterans, and their families in the great outdoors can and will lead to decreases in suicides, divorce rates, and mental health issues which, despite significant drawdowns in the military activity in Iraq and , are all on the rise in the military community. New research reveals the benefit of outdoor activity on increasing the mental and social health resilience of service members on their families prior to deployment and as a way to lessen the impact of increased stress on military families and veterans when they return including physical disabilities, mental health issues related to post traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, depression, and other social reintegration challenges.

The goal of Sierra Club Military Outdoors is to ensure that service members, veterans, and their families have the skills, exposure, and knowledge to access the outdoors to promote mental health resiliency and leadership development prior to deployment and know how to enjoy the outdoors upon returning from deployments or separating from the service to improve the transition home and improve mental and social health. This focus will foster the development of a new generation of Sierra Club leaders and supporters from within the military and veteran community, including family members who will work to actively achieve the Sierra Club’s mission and lead their communities outdoors.

In July 2013, the University of Michigan released a study, co-sponsored by the Sierra Club that showed strong indications that time in the outdoors worked to improve the social and mental health of veterans. What we have known anecdotally since John Muir founded the Sierra Club in 1892, that time in nature heals, we are starting to see born out in data and quantitative study.

Since 2006, Sierra Club Military Outdoors (SCMO) formerly known as Military Family and Veterans Initiative (MFVI) has gotten over 50,000 service members, veterans, and their family members outside through partnerships with Outward Bound, National Military Family Association, Blue Star Families, Armed Forces YMCA, the YMCA, and others. In 2011, we shifted away from acting as a large grant making body to supporting localized leadership and outings trainings that give service members and veterans the knowledge and opportunities to get outside in their own communities and ultimately receive the skills and training to get others outside.

## **SCMO Programs**

**Military Resiliency Program** - SCMO and our partners at Project Rebirth, Outward Bound, and various Army active duty units are working to develop a revolutionary outdoor resiliency program to complement the Army's existing training. We are educating Army Master Resiliency Trainers and unit Non-Commissioned Officers in outdoor leadership, technical, and interpersonal skills in order to empower individual units to plan and execute their own outdoor resiliency events. These leaders will develop their own internal outdoor programs for the benefit of their soldiers, specifically targeting high risk soldiers and military families.

In 2013, SCMO and its partners worked with an active duty units in Ft. Bliss, TX to organize and train nine active duty resiliency leaders that promote the value of the outdoors for supporting a healthy and successful military. These outdoor resiliency leaders are empowered to lead outings and directly address mental and physical health issues for over 1200 active duty service members in four individual units at Fort Bliss Texas. In 2014, we will expand the training to multiple units across the country, ultimately allowing the program to reach over 5000 service members. Additionally, we will conduct a multi-year study with Texas A&M based researchers in order to analyse the effects of the outdoor resiliency program on service members.

**Celebration of the Military Child Outdoors** - The Sierra Club, in partnership with Blue Star Families, organized four national and eight local events across the United States in the month of April to connect military families to the outdoors. These primary purposes of these events are to connect military families to local and national outdoor organizations in order to provide them with opportunities for numerous activities in the outdoors in their areas. These connections ultimately allow military families to engage in safe, healthy, and positive activities that directly impact the challenges of military life.

**Outdoor Skills and Leadership Training** - Mission Outdoors provides basic outdoor and wilderness skills training to members of the military community in order to empower them with the tools that they need to safely enjoy the outdoors. These training events consist of both nationally and locally organized events around the country, and the resulting skills obtained in the program allow service members and their families to directly enjoy the benefits of the outdoors on their own.

**Climate Recon** - In 2012, the Sierra Club, in partnership with Veteran's Expeditions, Chad Balog, and Conrad Anker, led a veteran climate recon expedition in Glacier National Park. Through the course of this scientific expedition, the team not only collected valuable scientific information used in the ongoing study of climate change, but they also highlighted the importance of leveraging the immense leadership potential of veterans in the outdoors and in environmental science. In 2013, the Sierra Club has expanded this program in sending a veteran climate recon team into the Arctic Circle in Alaska that further studied the effects of climate change on our wild lands.

**Veteran Storyteller Initiative** - In May of 2013, the Sierra Club, in partnership with Veteran's Expedition and the Outside Adventure Film School, held its first Veteran's film school. The purpose of the program is to empower vets to explore and tell their own stories in the outdoors through the professional level training from some of the leading outdoor film makers in the industry. Alumni leave the program with the technical, artistic, and leadership skills necessary to record and tell their stories as well as those of their peers. Upon graduation, these warrior film makers will continue to be supported by the Sierra Club and Veterans Expeditions through organized outdoor events, veteran and warrior engagement, partnerships with Sierra Club campaigns, and film publication as they continue to develop their outdoor filmmaking, leadership, and technical skills.

**Mountain Expeditions** - The Sierra Club traces its roots to the mountains of the Sierra Nevada. Many of our earliest leaders within the club were World War 2 veterans and were avid mountaineers as well as conservationists. To both celebrate this heritage as well as to offer veterans a powerful way to cope with the challenges that arise after the war, the Sierra Club, in partnership with Veterans Expeditions, organized two national mountaineering events: The Hyalite Canyon ice climbing near Bozeman Montana and the 911 Olympus climb in Washington State. These climbs provide high level climbing training and mentoring from top class climbers, and often are a once in a lifetime experience for veterans to explore and enjoy the wildest lands that they served.

**Sierra Club Outings Program** - One of Sierra Club Outdoors's top priorities is to connect service members, veterans, and their families with the outdoors. The best way to accomplish this is to connect people to those resources on the local level. In 2013, we are connecting the military community with the Sierra Club's existing outings program, one of the largest outdoor organizations in the country, at the individual base and post level. This provides service members access to thousands of outdoor opportunities locally and nationwide.

**National Partnerships** - The Sierra Club is proud to be a partner in several coalitions that support the military community. These partnerships include Bureau of Land Management, Blue Star Families, Outward Bound, Project Rebirth, Outdoor Outreach, Got Your 6 Campaign, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Association, The Department of the Navy, The Department of the Army, Veterans Expeditions, YMCA, and The North Face. These partnerships are powerful tools in collectively advancing the wellbeing of our military community.