

# VETERANS YOGA PROJECT

## Rest, Restore and Reintegrate: A Montana Veterans Retreat

Feathered Pipe Ranch, Helena MT Sept 4-7, 2015



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## Mission:

For three days in September of 2015, 17 veterans, three spouses (plus three staff consisting of the Program Director, and two psychologists) participated in a healing retreat at the Feathered Pipe Ranch. The retreat was intended to provide Montana veterans with an opportunity to learn skills to enhance their recovery and/or build their resilience via:

- Instruction and practice in self-regulation skills including breathwork, meditation, mindful movement guided rest, and gratitude practices.
- Various recreational activities with lots of time to ‘unplug’, including hiking, swimming, napping, and connecting with other veterans.
- Information about social, medical, legal and mental health resources available to veterans in Montana.

The data collected from our participants confirms our experience: that our goal of providing a retreat that enhanced the lives of our participants was achieved.

## Attendees:

- The retreat was attended by 17 veterans (all branches represented: 11 Army, one Navy, three Marines, one Air Force, one Coast Guard), three spouses, and three civilian support staff (program director and two VA psychologists).
- The attendees were diverse in terms of gender [five female, 15 male (plus one male and two female volunteer staff)] and age (range 26-67).
- There were five participants from Bozeman, eight from Missoula, one from Helena, one from Potomac and five from out of state (MN, FL, MO, CA, CA).
- Overall, our sample rated themselves as healthy (All rated health as good, very good, or excellent) and most did not report significant pain-related interference (During the past 4 weeks, how much did pain interfere with your normal work?: 1 quite a bit, 4 moderately, 8 a little bit, 4 not at all)
- Participants were all in different stages of recovery or resilience-building. Some were in the midst of the darkest part of their recovery, admitting to suicidal thoughts and self-harming behavior. Other veterans were in the post-traumatic growth phase of their recovery, there to teach and offer support to their brothers and sisters.
- Of the 16 participants for whom we have data, nine screened positive for probable PTSD, 10 participants screened positive for probable major depression, eight reported using sleep aids for insomnia, and 12 rated their sleep quality as very bad (wake up feeling unrefreshed every morning) or fairly bad (wake up unrefreshed more than 3 days a week).

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## Results

- For a large majority of the Veterans, the retreat provided an opportunity to learn these resilience and recovery techniques for the first time which offered them a new way to look at their problems. (85% of the Veterans in attendance were Very Satisfied with their experience, 15% being moderately satisfied; Over 85% of the Veterans that attended the retreat said the program has helped them think about their problems in a new way)
- Survey results after the retreat show a dramatic increase in yoga practice, from less than 50% of veterans with any kind of practice, to over 90% planning to maintain a consistent yoga practice of at least 3 days/week.
- All Veterans in attendance said that they found the mindful movement, guided rest, and breathing practices to be extremely helpful, and that they plan to continue to use these practices for their recovery and resilience. Out of the different methodologies taught, the Veterans found the guided rest and mindful movement practices to be most helpful.

## Lessons Learned

- Partnering with Montana veteran mental health and service providers was crucial for veteran recruitment and support. The Missoula Vet Center referred several veterans to the retreat and one of their clinicians, Dr. Kristin Kopplin, attended the retreat as support staff. Caitlin Brandl, Case Manager at the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP), Bozeman Job Service, provided us with print resources about Veterans services available around the state and referred several of the veterans to the retreat.
- Systematic errors with data collection led to fewer valuable data points to evaluate the clinical effectiveness of the retreat on specific symptoms. New software and data collection procedures will ensure more robust program evaluation in the future.

## Feedback from Veterans

- “When I served in the military, I learned a particular way of thinking that made me an effective soldier. During the retreat I was learning a new way of thinking that I am convinced will help me lead a better life as a civilian”.

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- “It’s hard to put into words, but I can honestly say that for one, my back has not felt this pain-free and healthy since I got blown up in Iraq about 5 or 6 years ago, and number two, this is the first time I’ve really believed that I can live without being defined by chronic anxiety, anger and depression in over two years of VA treatment. This retreat has opened up possibilities to believe in actually having life again and enjoying it. I just want to say thank you to everyone who made this possible”
- “Nowhere to go, and Nothing to do. I know this is a simple mantra, but it can be translated into every facet of our lives, and quite frankly, it does wonders to calm an otherwise aggressive spirit.”
- “The chance to connect with others and discover that, despite our individual issues, there are ways to grow together as a group was most helpful. The fact that we share a common background (i.e., military service) gives us a basic level of trust and understanding. From that base, true connections and shared pain, successes and healing can emerge.”
- “I am convinced that this type of program, especially in the healing setting of Feathered Pipe Ranch (or other similar venues) is perhaps the most effective manner of building, rebuilding and perpetuating "connectedness" -- both with others and with one's self -- I have ever encountered. Count me in for any future events -- heck, I'd come just to wash the dishes (as long as I was able to participate in the group sessions!). Thank you, Dan Libby, as well as your staff, for an incredible weekend. Life-changing would be an accurate characterization of the weekend as a whole. In many cases, "life perpetuating" is not going too far. I saw many pained facial expressions that had morphed into smiles (or calm, less stressed demeanors) of participants -- and facilitators! Thank you again for an incredible weekend experience, one that has enhanced the color of each day of my life since Labor Day!”
- "Yoga is for women. It is not something I ever really put any thought into. It is for the soccer moms to get together once a week and “work out”. Not something for a Marine. Not anything I needed. The problem is that kind of thinking shows just how narrow minded I had become.

A year ago my life fell apart. I had been out of the Corps for several decades and had never dealt with any of the issues that came up during my service. I was recently released from Federal Prison and had suffered additional trauma during my incarceration. My marriage of 29 years was coming to an end and I just couldn't deal with it. I decided I had enough. I found myself in Walmart with a tent and several charcoal grills. I had done enough research up to that point that I felt that CO2 poisoning was the way to “go” not having access to a firearm. Instead of going through with it I ended up going to someone I thought I could trust. All of that culminated with a 10 day stay in St. Pete’s acute care unit. Upon release I was scheduled for a 6 week inpatient PTSD Program at Ft. Harrison VA Hospital.

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It was during the program that I was introduced to yoga. It was one of the groups that we had once or twice a week to help us learn mindfulness. I participated but mostly because it was mandatory. I did at least approach it from the aspect that I might learn some stretching that would help when I worked out. I was also introduced to the Feathered Pipe Ranch during our first weekend in the program. When I found out that there was going to be a Veterans yoga retreat there I applied to go as part of my treatment. It wasn't easy to get into but I am very thankful that I did.

The light came on for me during our first yoga session at the retreat. It was led by a Vietnam Vet. He started out by saying that he wanted to educate everyone on the one main tenant of yoga. The one hard and fast rule that everyone should know and understand. His philosophy so to speak. Then he told us, "its ok to fart"!

That set the tone for my weekend. That is when I figured out that there is so much more to yoga. For me there was a desperate need to find a way to buy the gap. To gain a moment between emotion and reaction. To find out how to have a negative emotion and gain enough time to evaluate it before retaliating, flying off the handle or doing something worse. I went into the PTSD program knowing that it wasn't going to work. That I was still going to take my life at the end of it. I had a BCD mask and a nitrogen bottle in the back seat of my truck the entire time I was in the program. The thing is I found something that worked. The mindfulness practices taught during yoga both at the retreat and in the program helped me find a way to break the loops running through my head. It allowed me to take a breath or two and stop thinking too much. It showed me how to have an emotion without letting that emotion rule me and my actions.

The Veterans Yoga Project did one more thing for me. It gave me a full night sleep. That may not seem like much to most people but for someone who had not slept more than an hour or two at a time for over 5 years it was huge. Dan Libby led a Yoga program just before we went to bed the first night. I found a way to quiet my mind, let things go without holding on and allow myself to actually sleep. I slept a full 8 hours that night. He has some of those programs on their website and I still use them to help calm myself after a stressful day so I can sleep.

I left the retreat with a new appreciation for yoga, mindfulness and the benefits. I still practice when I can. I will forever be thankful that they took in a skeptical Marine and did not judge me. They accepted me and helped me more than they will ever know. Yoga and mindfulness may not be the tool you need but at least it should not be overlooked. It was and still is a powerful tool in my recovery toolbox.

To everyone that helped put that program together and made it the safe and comfortable experience it was you will always have my thanks."

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**Below is a blog post providing a first hand account of the weekend through the eyes of VYP Ambassador and Coast Guard veteran, Adrian Campbell.**

## Veterans Yoga Project Fall 2015 Retreat at Feathered Pipe Ranch

Getting off the plane in Helena I was greeted by the cool crisp Montana air and the majestic sight of the Rockies. I had been so overwhelmed by life and all the goings-on that I had completely forgotten where the retreat actually was. With my first deep breath of that clean, clear, air I felt an immediate release and was grateful just for the opportunity to be there.

I arrived at the Feathered Pipe Ranch and was greeted by a warm and welcoming staff. In addition to Feathered Pipe Ranch staff, the retreat staff included two psychologists, two civilian yoga teachers, two Vietnam veteran yoga teachers, one OIF veteran yoga teacher, and an acupuncturist. There were a total of 15 participants including three spouses and myself. Two of the participants were Vietnam veterans and the rest were Iraq or Afghanistan veterans.

The other veterans started showing up Friday afternoon and the Veterans Yoga Project staff worked to greet them and get them checked in. Our accommodations ranged from a private room and bathroom in the great lodge to well-appointed and comfortable yurts staggered throughout the spacious grounds. Veterans who attended with spouses were given the double occupancy cabins or yurts which were tucked into the trees spread around the ranch grounds, but still close to the bath house and hot tub.

Once we were all checked in we had a fantastic dinner and then gathered for orientation in the great hall. The orientation started out the weekend right with a nice meditation and talk about the purpose of the weekend; to help us re-learn how to breathe and hopefully find a way to be back in our bodies with less pain.

The retreat schedule included meditation every morning, scheduled yoga classes at various points throughout the day, shared meals provided buffet style, and free time when we could participate in acupuncture, reiki, or guided hikes. I was amazed at how many participants were not only open to trying reiki and acupuncture, but also eager.

The yoga classes were each taught by one of the seven instructors and were as unique as the individuals who taught them. The veteran yoga teachers taught yoga in a way that I had never experienced before. Their classes were more relaxed in nature, much less serious than what I had experienced in the past, one even cracking a fart joke to help people loosen up. They went out of their way to discuss injuries and limitations,

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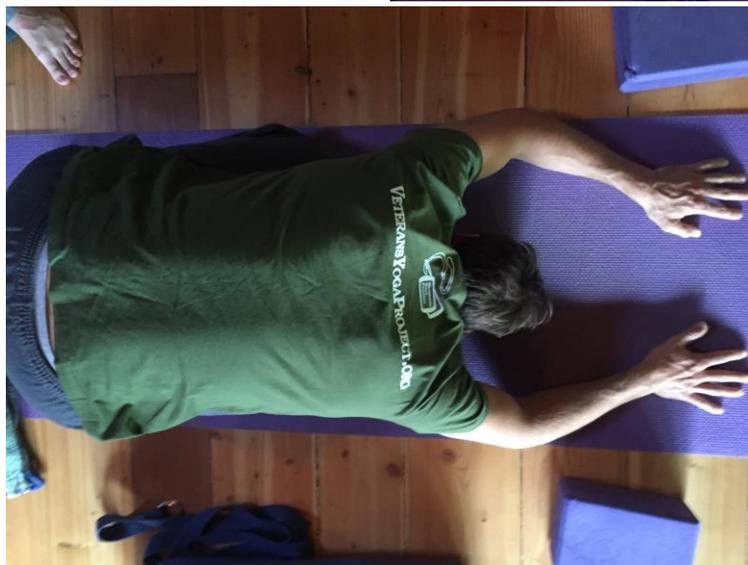
and reminded us multiple times to be patient and forgiving with our bodies. One of these two teachers spent a large majority of his class discussing modified poses that can be used if you have specific injuries. This was very beneficial for me and was a pivotal point in my relationship with yoga, as I was able to do the pose of "downward dog" for the first time without a painful grimace on my face. Many of the participants expressed their gratitude for these particular teachers; their presence and teaching style, seen as a beacon of hope for the younger generations who are struggling with many of the same issues that they, as veterans, were able to overcome.

The witnessing of each other's struggles, wounds, and healing was one of the most impactful aspects of the retreat. We spent hours together telling stories of different experiences in the field, grieving over brothers-in-arms that were lost, and sharing the challenges experienced upon coming home. As a veteran who has spent a good amount of my time avoiding other veterans due to fears of triggering, I have to admit that this was the most comfortable I had felt in a very long time. It reminded me that I am a warrior, and that this is my tribe. It was nice to be home.

At the end of the retreat there was a gratitude circle where everyone expressed their feelings about the weekend. To hear the heartfelt appreciation from all the veterans for the support and guidance given over the weekend, and the outpouring of gratitude from the support staff who were so grateful just to have the opportunity to help, was remarkable. Several of the veterans expressed that this retreat had come at exactly the right time, providing them not only the relief they needed, either through unexpected pain relief or much needed sleep, but also gave them a renewed sense of hope. With the extremely high rate of veteran suicide I think this sense of hope is possibly one of the best gifts that could have been given.

This retreat helped me find my way home to the breath, to the body, to my tribe. It has inspired me to get certified as a yoga instructor and share this gift with others. I honestly never expected for something as simple as mindful breathing and movement to have such an impact. Thank you Veterans Yoga Project, I will be forever grateful for this opportunity.

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