The Importance & Value of Caring For Combat Veterans Across the Life Span

“Any nation that does not honor it’s heroes will not long endure.”
— Hugh Gordon Miller, 1909

Central Oregon Veterans Ranch
65920 61st Street • Bend, Oregon 97703 • 541-706-9062
covranch.org
A working Ranch that restores purpose and spirit to veterans of all ages.
Who We Are

“A working Ranch that restores purpose and spirit to veterans of all ages.”

For over five years COVR has operated a 19-acre working farm and engaged hundreds of veterans of different ages and eras in peer support and agriculture-related activities, or “agri-therapy”. COVR has built community and camaraderie among veterans in Central Oregon and around the state. The Ranch helps veterans find a sense of belonging and purpose through meaningful interactions, team projects, education, growing plants and caring for animals.

During the past five years we have offered veterans and community members workshops on Post-Traumatic Stress, Suicide Prevention, and Non-Violent Communication. The Ranch has become a hub for veterans to meet and connect; a safe space to build relationships with peers as well as civilian community members. Several veterans have stated that the Ranch “saved their lives,” and many return during time of personal crisis because of the trust and sense of community the Ranch provides.

“You bring people together who have had such trauma in life and you show them that there are lots of others out there who think the same and go through the same darkness in this journey after war. You have showed others that it’s okay to be safe at the Ranch and to just enjoy one more day of life. It’s just what I see being done. Like I have said you may have saved someone on those days. I’ve seen a few guys smile and open up with each other and that is what heals – knowing you’re not alone.”

– Mike, OEF/OIF Marine Corps Veteran

COVR values partnerships with other organizations to strengthen service to veterans and our community. Our partners include Deschutes County Behavioral Health, Opportunity Foundation of Central Oregon, High Desert Food & Farm Alliance, Oregon Department of Agriculture, and Oregon State Hospital. Through partnerships we have been able to have an impact beyond our local community, from providing education on PTSD and veteran culture, to donating food to local food banks, to education on how to grow produce in Central Oregon.

A Gap in Care for Our War Wounded: Moral Injury in Recently Returned Veterans and Those at the End of Life

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Moral Injury in Combat Veterans

Many combat veterans suffer from what is now commonly identified as “moral injury”:

**moral injury**: an injury to an individual’s moral conscience and values resulting from an act of perceived moral transgression, which produces profound emotional guilt and shame, and in some cases also a sense of betrayal, anger, and profound “moral disorientation.”

Moral injury is also recognized, often by veterans themselves, as a deep wound at the soul level, or “soul injury”.

**soul injury**: An overlooked, unassessed wound that separates one from their “real” self, causing them to feel less than whole.

In recent years there has been more attention on the necessity of addressing moral injury in returning veterans. However there has been no attention to how veterans cope with moral injury at the end of life, which tends to surface naturally as people prepare to “meet their maker.” Left untended, this injury (and the guilt, shame, and self-hatred that often accompany it) can precipitate agitation – a symptom that greatly complicates peaceful dying. The inability to address moral injury in senior or dying veterans is typical of medical facilities, including the VA, due to limited resources and/or poorly trained, unequipped staff and volunteers.

1Wikipedia
2Deborah Grassman, Opus Peace, https://opuspeace.org/About-Soul-Injury
*Deborah Grassman is a Mental Health Nurse Practitioner whose 30-year career at the Department of Veterans Affairs included being the Director of the Hospice program, as well as personally taking care of more than 10,000 dying veterans.
She is recognized as one of the nation’s leading experts in caring for Veterans nearing the end of life. Deborah is a TEDx Talk presenter, she is a contributing author in four textbooks, has 25 published articles, and five documentary films featuring her work. Deborah is most well-known for identifying the unique needs of Veterans as they near the end of life which has become the basis for National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization’s (NHPCO) We Honor Veterans program.
Veterans at End of Life

Family members and hospice workers understand that the wounds of war sometimes do not surface until the end of life because as people are dying their conscious mind becomes weaker and their unconscious mind gets stronger. Suppressed memories surface unbidden causing an increase in PTSD symptoms. Changes in the brain and the experience of increased vulnerability can also trigger an increase in PTSD symptoms. The combination of unresolved moral injury and increased anxiety and fear due to PTSD can cause undue levels of suffering for veterans and family members, with loved ones at the mercy of inadequately trained staff who possess no concept of military culture or PTSD, much less an ability to address moral or soul injury.

Those who have endured combat on behalf of our nation did it so in order that others could live their lives in peace. We as a nation are obligated to provide a means to the same peace that these few sacrificed and made possible for us.

Our Vision: Connecting Veterans Across the Lifespan to Heal Each Other

While the majority of our WWII veterans have died without any special intervention or assistance at the end of their lives, we now have an opportunity to help current and future generations of combat veterans die in peace. We have the opportunity to create interventions that not only reduce suffering and promote healing at end of life, but interventions that have the power to change a young combat veteran’s life forever. Dying veterans have something unique to teach us because they have had a lifetime to reflect on their combat experience, and because perspectives dramatically shift when a person is given a terminal diagnosis. As a result of their life experience and unique perspective at end of life, dying veterans most commonly reveal lessons about how to attain personal peace. These lessons are their legacy, and their gift to younger generations of veterans.

This model of care will provide treatment and training to younger combat veterans who will accompany dying veterans in their final years of life, affording both the opportunity to share their life stories and wisdom with one another. The healing for the younger veteran will come from the power of knowing that they helped a brother or sister to find peace before dying. The veteran in his or her final years of life will be given the opportunity to find redemption and healing from the acceptance and understanding that only another combat veteran can give. The dying veteran will also have the satisfaction that his/her suffering has not been in vain – that the most difficult and painful life lessons he or she learned and lived with can actually benefit someone else.

This model of care will start in a state licensed, residential home, in a natural setting, where veterans of all ages participate in caring for the environment, with staff who have familiarity with military culture and are trained to respond to the unique needs of veterans at end of life.
Our Duty

These days everyone has heard the message about “caring for our troops.” We may have heard it so often that we no longer think about what it really means - or what it could mean. Central Oregon Veterans Ranch is a non-stigmatizing model of care that creates community and sustained support for combat veterans across generations. Our vision is to pilot the next stage of our program, addressing a critical gap in care – healing combat trauma at end of life.

Background/Founder’s Story

COVR was established in 2014 as a 501c3 nonprofit organization by Alison Perry and a team of veterans, veteran family members, and healthcare professionals. Alison’s journey as a military family member began in 2003 when her brother deployed for the invasion of Iraq, flying Apache attack helicopters. Her first encounter with moral injury occurred when Warrant Officer Perry returned home in 2004 and stated that he wanted a new mission. He went MEDEVAC and deployed two more times (Major Todd Perry is still Active Duty Army today.) It was her brother’s service that prompted Alison’s call to work with veterans and their families, and to cold call the Department of Veterans Affairs in Portland, Oregon.

From 2005-2012 Alison worked as a trauma therapist and counseled hundreds of veterans, of various eras, from age 22 to age 92. It was during this time that she witnessed the aftermath of war in different generations and developed a passion for combat trauma across the lifespan.

It was also during this time that Alison witnessed the negative impact that the institutional or “Medical Model” of care can have on veterans, and the gaps in services that the VA was unable to meet – namely the critical need for community and connection among veterans, but also a lack of trauma-informed or culturally appropriate care for veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress at end of life. She watched as young veterans dropped out of care, frustrated with the bureaucratic tape of the system, and as older veterans spoke about death and dying. She listened and heard a consistent message – that veterans wanted to help each other. And that they were hungry for more meaningful – and natural – methods of healthcare than medication and talk therapy. It was during this time that Alison’s vision of “a PTSD Ranch” was born – a place where veterans could “work on the land, sleep under the stars, and be in a community of other veterans.” It was her work with four PTSD groups with a total of 50+ Vietnam veterans that sparked her interest in what combat trauma would look like at the end of life for these vets – and how to help them heal and die in peace.

Yearly Operating Budget*

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*Includes fully staffed ranch and house