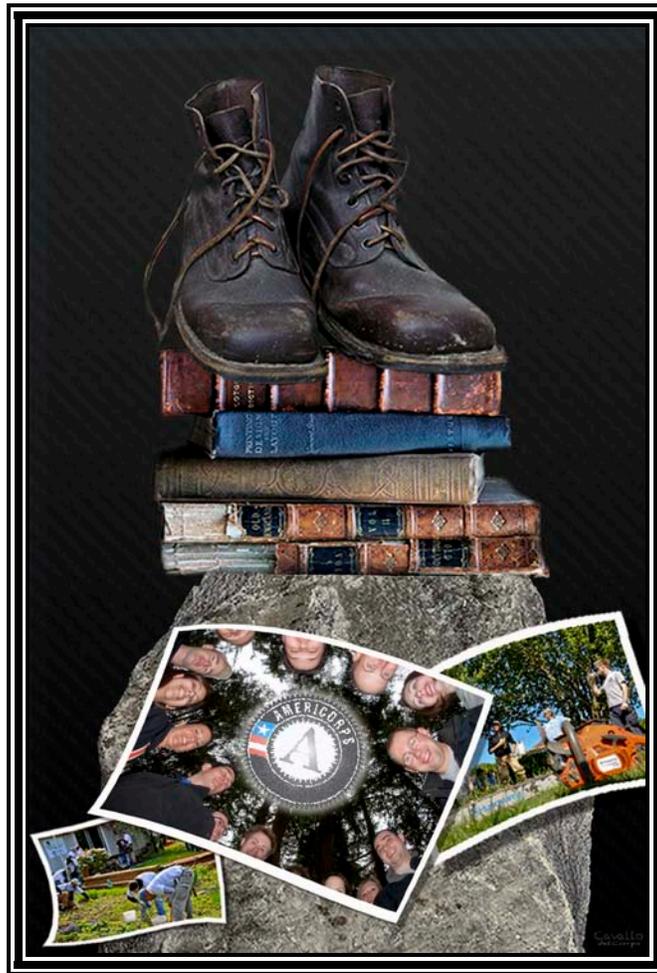


SERVICE TO COUNTRY SERVICE TO COMMUNITY



**A Depiction of the Benefits of AmeriCorps
as a Strategy to Help Veterans Re-integrate into the
Community Following Military Service**

**Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs
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October 2010**

BACKGROUND

As a part of its mission to engage all Americans in service, and as directed by the 2009 Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, the Corporation for National and Community Service places a high priority on engaging veterans in national service and using service as a strategy to support veterans and their families. In 2009, the Washington Commission for National and Community Service partnered with the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs to launch the first CNCS-funded Vet Corps program in the nation to engage veterans in AmeriCorps national service positions. Veterans' mission continues through their civilian national service experience which enables them to make a positive difference in communities across Washington state while aiding their reintegration back into the community following their military service.

In its first year of operation, 46 veterans were enrolled in the Vet Corps. As AmeriCorps members they provided services to more than 3,000 veterans, activity duty military members or their families; started 15 Vet Clubs on college campuses to create a safe and supportive community where veterans could learn how to navigate the higher education system and network with their fellow veterans; conducted in-takes and out-takes on 300 soldiers in the Warrior Transition Battalion to assess their needs and then follow-up upon discharge to assure connection to critical services; and assisted dozens of homeless veterans with referrals to housing and other social services.

In year two, membership was expanded to include not only veterans, but military spouses and widows. For the 2010-2011 program year, 32 Vet Corps will:

- Conduct in-takes and out-takes on soldiers assigned to the Warrior Transition Battalion to assess the soldiers' needs and will track them upon discharge for 30, 60, 90, 180 days to ensure they successfully connected to identified services;
- College-based Vet Corps members will create a veteran community on campuses and provide resources and referrals to services for veterans and their families;
- Engage veterans who have recently served in Iraq and Afghanistan and who are attending colleges and universities in Washington state in local service projects with fellow students, veterans and AmeriCorps members;
- Connect veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who are recovering from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) to services, support groups, and the larger veteran community, while at the same time educating the college about TBI and its effects; and
- Organize and publicize volunteer opportunities for active duty military and members of the Guard and Reserve to enable them qualify to receive the Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal and/or the President's Volunteer Service Award.



INTRODUCTION

For this project, Christine Bellotti conducted a focus group with three Vet Corps AmeriCorps members who served during the 2009-2010 program year with the intention of gathering stories; stories that would shed light on the potentially beneficial role that the Vet Corps program might play in the life of an Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) veteran. Using a semi-structured interview format that also included Mark Fischer, M.A. (Vet Corps Coordinator) and Brianne Leimbach (an intern with the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs), a collective discussion took place exploring the challenges a veteran faces after being discharged from the military and how programs like the Vet Corps may aid in reintegration. The Vet Corps AmeriCorps members took turns sharing their thoughts and perspectives on the program, on healing the wounds of war, the importance of meaningful work, and the far-reaching implications of having a “mission” from which to anchor one’s life.

Each story had its own distinct flavor and described the unique experience of the individual serving. However, some common themes emerged that are worth noting. Beyond the concept of “veteran readjustment,” which can limit itself to stress management while one reorients to civilian life, themes of deep healing emerged in these stories. It was suggested unanimously that such healing is something that all veterans thirst for, and can only take place with the support and connection of other veterans.



PHOTO: On September 10, 2009, Governor Chris Gregoire and First Gentleman Mike Gregoire are joined by Kristin McSwain, Chief of Program Operations for the Corporation for National and Community Service, and Bill Basl, Executive Director of the Washington Commission for National and Community Service, to issue the oath of service to Washington’s Vet Corps members.

THE VETERAN AS HERO or HEROINE

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell (1968)ⁱ discusses the concept of “The Hero’s Journey,” a myth found across countless cultural and spiritual traditions. This myth, according to Campbell, illuminates a kind of spiritual *coming of age* that each human being has the opportunity to experience if he chooses to do so, multiple times throughout the lifespan. The opportunity to undertake this journey initially presents itself in the form of a “call to adventure,” and begins when the individual consciously responds to this calling. Upon this commitment, she will then embark upon a quest which consists of three rites of passage: departure, initiation, and return.

In hearing the stories of the Vet Corps members’ combat experiences and resulting readjustments from the military back to civilian life, we’re reminded of The Hero’s Journey and the challenges inherent within each of its three stages. Specifically, the role of the Vet Corps program in facilitating the stage of the *return* reveals itself strongly. Tragically, homecomings for U.S. warriors in the past century have failed to provide a container for healing and transition back to civilian life, and the result for our veteran population has been devastating psychologically and spiritually.ⁱⁱ

The initial “call to adventure” may take various forms. For example, the hero may have experienced a loss, may perceive that something is lacking in his life, or feel the desire to restore honor to her family or country. From this vantage point, it becomes very clear how this myth is playing out quite literally in the realm of modern day men and women entering the military. A desire to serve, protect, explore the unknown, develop one’s strength of character and live for something bigger than oneself are all characteristics of The Hero’s Journey – and widely accepted catalysts for the decision to enlist.

Further elaboration on the threefold process of “The Hero’s Journey” reinforces this. The first step, *departure*, involves answering the “call to adventure” and leaving behind that which is familiar and comfortable. It requires crossing a threshold into the unknown. The second phase, *initiation*, requires the most difficult challenge, where the hero must surrender completely to the journey and face his fears alone. There, emotional and physical dangers are encountered and overcome so that the hero builds skill, confidence, and wisdom. Thirdly, and most relevant to our veterans transitioning back home, is the stage of *return*. Here, the hero emerges from the darkness back to “every day life,” with the task of integrating and synthesizing his experiences in a meaningful way. This synthesis or integration, if accomplished successfully, manifests as new knowledge or some type of blessing that the hero acquired during the adventure. Ideally, it will then serve as an elixir with healing or restorative properties, which can now be shared with his community.

The challenge for our veterans in achieving this task seems evident. How does one internalize the experiences of war in such a way that not only minimize damage to his psyche and soul, but bring forth some type of gift or medicine for the world around him? Is this even possible? How does a program like the Vet Corps assist in this process? The following sections present some of the common themes that surfaced in the stories which relate to these questions and speak directly to *return* phase of The Hero’s Journey.

DISCONNECTION

One of the primary themes which stood out during the focus group interview was the need to disconnect from the military culture upon returning home. There was a process described by all three Vet Corps members of needing to dissociate from the military; a desire to completely break away from anything identified with military culture, including veteran's organizations. This process was also described as having the characteristics of "feeling lost" or "searching for something." I wondered if this was a universal experience of all heroes on the *return* leg of their journey; a need to separate from the trials which were just endured, in order to decompress and reevaluate life. For veterans, it seemed clear that such a period of disengagement – even if typical – would ultimately require the presence of other veterans in order for things to shift and evolve. In other words, in order to stir the hero's soul and engage his heart once again, there needs to be a system in place to provide the very things that veterans say they need the most: a sense of having a mission through meaningful work, and the camaraderie of other veterans with whom to make this enormous transition from the military back to civilian life.

Vet Corps member George Cavallo shared his concerns of becoming an ex-military member who lived too much in the past, or spoke too nostalgically about war experiences. He states, *"Initially it can make you feel a little stand-offish. Like 'Yeah, I'm not sure about this veterans group.' 'I don't know if I want to get involved with that.' 'What's that going to be about?'"* In remembering his experiences of overhearing retired Coast Guard members, he goes on to say, *"In the Coast Guard toward the end, I'd see these retirees and these people who had gotten out; I'd see them at the exchanges, and you'd be like, 'Oh God, let it go dude.' And now, I was that guy. So I thought, 'I'm not going to be that guy.'"*

Vet Corps member Jonathan Phillips describes his experiences of needing to disconnect based on a fundamental disagreement with the direction the country was taking; or a lack of belief in the mission itself. He states, *"When I got out, I wanted nothing more than to just go to school and get away from what I perceived to be turning into an ugly situation. So when I went to school, I didn't want to have anything to do with things that were 'veteran' or 'service-related.' I wanted nothing of the sort. I just didn't agree with the direction that our country was taking."*

Vet Corps member Timm Lovitt speaks about the separation experience as a form of rebellion. He states, *"You almost go through your teenage years when you get out. You rebel against the service and against the American leaders."* He goes on to say, *"When I got out I went through this transition program where I just sat in classes and listened to people talk, and I was thinking, 'Just get me the hell out of here. I don't want to do this anymore.'"*

Lovitt also compares the military experience to that of incarceration. He said, *"It's pretty common in the service where you feel like you're doing a prison term. It's like, 'They got me for five years.' So you sit there and you do time. You count down until the time that you get out. And then you get out, you're free, and you don't want to do anything with it."*

RECONNECTION

All three Vet Corps members go on to describe their experiences of wanting to *reconnect* with other veterans after the period of disconnection had taken its course. There seemed to be an internal shift; a subtle awareness that something was missing or incomplete, and there emerged an impulse to turn their attention toward creating healthy, meaningful connections with other veterans.

George stated, *“I think everybody needs to get over it on their own. I did. I said to myself, ‘Well, I’ll just go to the Veterans Conservation Corps¹. It’ll be worth it. I’ll put up with the other veterans for \$1,000 a month.’ And I wound up loving it. So, I think eventually, you find that you’re seeking the very thing you’ve been pushing off. You’re thinking, ‘I don’t want to be that guy; I don’t want to be that retired guy, or that old guy that wants to talk about the military and the ship, or the combat mission he went on. I just want to move on with my life.’ And then, somehow, it eventually flip-flops at a certain point where you kind of seek that out.”*

Jonathan talks about the lack of identification with his non-military peers, and the realization that he didn’t want to ignore that aspect of his identity anymore. He states, *“The identity of being a veteran didn’t really kick in until I started having conversations with people about the wars that were going on. Some people didn’t know any other veterans; some people didn’t have any other family members that were veterans; and they had these strong opinions. I felt like I had something to say as well. Some of my friends were even shocked to hear that I had served. And so at that point I had realized I had kind of pushed off this side of me. I remember doing an internet search for anything related to this and I came up with the Veterans Conservation Corps program.”*

Timm had similar experiences socially to Jonathan. He says, *“So I decided to go back into school, and when I finally got into school I felt totally disconnected from everybody. In classes, people would talk badly about the war, or badly about my life experiences, without them knowing that I had served. And so I started wanting to be with people I could identify with more. So I started showing up to veterans clubs, and taking on more responsibilities. It was around this time that I met Mark [Fischer] and learned about the Vet Corps. As soon as I heard about it, I knew it was something I wanted to be involved with.”*

¹ The Veterans Conservation Corps is a state-funded program administered by the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs that provides opportunities for veterans to engage in environmental projects to heal themselves while restoring Washington’s natural resources.

MEANINGFUL WORK

After the desire to reconnect with other veterans was established, George, Jonathan and Timm discovered the Vet Corps program as a possible avenue through which to achieve this sense of community. As each spoke about his role and function within Vet Corps, the third common theme emerged clearly. There was a strong, fundamental need to engage in meaningful work that serves and helps others.

For example, George experienced dissatisfaction when he attempted to pursue a career in web and print design upon his discharge. His experiences in the Coast Guard had provided him with a rich foundation of 'meaning and purpose' through years of serving and helping others. Although he felt logically pulled in the direction of a practical skill, a career in web and print design without a larger, service-driven context was failing to meet his fundamental need to help others. George states, *"Going to school for web and print design had been a hobby of mine for years, but what really drives me is helping veterans. I think having been in the Coast Guard and having been in the military, I always felt like I wanted to help people. I mean, that's what I did! I rescued people; I saved people. So, I guess I've always considered myself 'the rescuer' and I missed that after getting out of the military. So with the Vet Corps, I still have that opportunity to help people and even rescue people on occasion. So it kind of feeds me again."* He goes on to say, *"I think it's just that 'feel good' sensation. With the things I do (as a Vet Corps member), I get that feeling that I've helped somebody today, or that somebody is better off because of the things I've done. You know, it's been imbedded in me for 20 years in the Coast Guard. I've been to Haiti, I've been down to Katrina, and I've always helped people. Being a web and print designer without that experience of helping others was failing to feed my need to be of service and make a difference. But working with the Vet Corps does meet that need. So now when I put on events or I work with a veteran who's having problems with rent or school, I can feel good about myself at the end of the day; I have the knowledge that I made someone's life a little smoother."*

Timm's experiences were very similar. He spoke about his attempts to pursue a vocation that had been in the family: real estate. He states, *"Initially, after getting out of the service, I got into real estate. It was a family business, but it just didn't work out for me. It just felt like it didn't have a mission. I was waking up and not doing anything. I couldn't see the importance behind it, just going out and showing people houses, and people complaining about colors. When I served [in the military], my job was more important."* He also describes the experience of getting just as much 'out' of helping other veterans as he invests into it. *"Through helping other veterans as a Vet Corps member it's almost selfish anyway, because part of the reason I'm doing this is to learn about my wounds. Helping other Vet Corps members helps me because I can learn more about post-traumatic stress. I can learn more about traumatic brain injury. I can learn more about these things so that I can not only help myself but at the same time help the other people going through it. That's therapeutic in itself. The best way to learn something is to teach something."*

Jonathan identified his need to be of service from a broader perspective as he describes his pull toward environmental work offered through the Veterans Conservation Corps (VCC). The environmental contributions of Vietnam Veteran John Beale continues to inspire veterans who enroll in the VCC, and the story serves as an example of the therapeutic, life-enhancing and curative properties of passionate, mission-driven work. The VCC is also one of the resources that Vet Corps members can refer veterans to for everything from academic, social, vocational, or mental health benefits. Jonathan states, *“One of the things I identified (about the Veterans Conservation Corps) was that number one it was a veteran program; but number two, it offered the opportunity to work out your demons through actual physical labor, and number three, the opportunity to get involved with the environment. I’m an Eagle Scout. I was raised camping and hiking, so that spoke to me right away. So when I researched further on the website I saw that the VCC was training people in green jobs, and it was something that I wanted to get involved with right away. When I took the one class (energy auditing) at Cascadia College, I got the chance to work outdoors in the field and I really enjoyed that aspect of it. The aspect of camaraderie was helpful and healing in addition to the actual working in the dirt, doing native plant restoration and all of that. It was kind of like being in the service again.”*

PEER-TO-PEER VETERAN CONNECTION

The fourth theme – veterans connecting with other veterans – doesn’t seem like anything new at first. However, the connections that appear to be unfolding within programs like the Vet Corps and the VCC have a positive spin; a life-enhancing, life-affirming quality rooted in the veterans’ strengths. Rather than the notion of peer-to-peer counseling, the Vet Corps members emphasized that there was a therapeutic value stemming from the implicit connection with each other as veterans, rather than the result of some kind of explicit therapy or advice.

Cavallo said, *“There’s a connection because we’re all military. Just because we are Marines, Navy, Air Force, it doesn’t matter because we all connect. It’s really interesting. When we all get out there in the field and everybody starts working together, it’s a little different because we’re all prior military.”* He goes on to say, *“It all comes back to vets helping vets. When we did the VCC there were only twelve of us and we came together. One guy let two guys move in with him. They needed places to live and they couldn’t live with other people. But when they found they lived with other veterans they gelled better. And another guy was having problems in school and two or three of them started helping him. So it’s much more powerful with a veteran helping another veteran than anything; than any other referrals or services that we can do; and it happens on its own.”*

Jonathan talks about his experience of empathy when serving as a Vet Corps member. He states, *“I just have to remember what it’s like to be in their shoes at this point in their lives. And so I come clean right away and let them know that we’re not about talking about old war stories, and wearing funny looking hats and pins, and things like that. We don’t watch old World War II movies or anything like that. I try to stress to the students that they have an experience that they’ve gone through. And it helps to define the person that they are today. Whether or not they really want to investigate*

that right now is beside the point. I just let them know that I've gone through all of that too and if they need someone to talk to about any of that, I'm here. I'll let them know that there are services available to them, and that I'll help them jump through the hoops." Mark Fischer states, *"The peer connection is extremely important; these folks provide what nobody else can provide."*

Timm addresses the qualitative differences between counseling and peer-to-peer connection. He states, *"Just show up and listen. Don't diagnose them, or treat them as a case. Look at them as people and understand them. That's why I try not to even mention counseling, because if they're going to walk with you then they're going to walk with you. But if they're not; if they're not secure with what they have to work with, then they're not going to take you there. So whether or not you have counselors at your beck and call doesn't matter. It's getting them to that point where they're comfortable with themselves enough to talk about it."*

CONCLUSION

The shared experiences identified by the Vet Corps members illuminate the potential inherent within programs like the Vet Corps for facilitating healthy transitions from combat to civilian life. The initial desire to disconnect from military culture, the impulse to reconnect with the service once again, the search and yearning for meaningful work, and the healing that comes about as a direct result from peer-to-peer connections were strong themes that emerged for each veteran in this focus group. It is plausible that the stories shared by the three participants in this study have implications for all returning OIF/OEF veterans, in terms of the process and order through which readjustment and healing can successfully take place.

One feature of the Vet Corps program (similar to the VCC) that stands out significantly seems to be its hidden therapeutic value. In other words, since the program exists in and of itself as a positive, strength-based service for all involved, it lacks the dreaded stigma of a rehabilitation or mental health service that so many veterans would avoid seeking out, barring a crisis situation such as homelessness or substance abuse. In this light, the more subtle issues of readjustment and healing are addressed instantly and indirectly. Veterans can receive a rich sense of homecoming and shared community through being of meaningful service to each other, and to the community at large. Through participation in the Vet Corps program as a veteran seeking guidance or as an AmeriCorps member, the *return* phase of The Hero's Journey is now given the opportunity to unfold in a meaningful way.

END NOTES

ⁱ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968), Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

ⁱⁱ Edward Tick, *War and the Soul: Healing our Nation's Veterans from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House.