

# WINNING **THE** INNER BATTLE

Motorcycle Relief Project helps struggling veterans find peace and purpose of life.

text by Moshe Levy  
photos by Dan Schrock



Tom Larson, founder of Motorcycle Relief Project, studied the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder during his own bouts with depression.

Editor's note: The military veterans interviewed for this story requested anonymity.

*"Riding is dangerous. Riding is dynamic. It is something to look forward to, and it is something to hesitate about – something of both at the same time. It is something to work at, for me, something to surrender to. Close your eyes tonight, I think. You will dream of this ride."*  
— Melissa Holbrook Pierson, *The Perfect Vehicle*

**R**EGARDLESS OF BACKGROUNDS and brand preferences, serious riders recognize the therapeutic value motorcycles provide. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi famously coined "flow," the mental state in which a person is fully immersed in the moment with complete focus, free from discursive thoughts. Neil Peart described the feeling of moto-motion as a subconscious reminder of a mother gently rocking her baby. All riders have experienced two-wheeled therapy—a meditative state relying more on instinct and feeling than on rationality and thought. Where intuition rises to the forefront and the negative chattering in our minds finally ceases. When our heart rates slow from redline to idle, breathing calms from shallow to deep and space and time compress with each passing mile. We eventually get out of our own way, shatter our own self-imposed limitations, and let the bike ride itself. It's the closest experience to inner peace obtainable without the commitment of becoming a monk.

I've been completely addicted to this gentle, clearing feeling through my body and mind since my first 49cc Morini Motomarina Sebring at age 13. Nearly three decades later, as the magnitude of my adult problems increased, the steadfast refuge of motorcycling has

always reliably conquered the noise. Recently, I met Tom Larson, a man who innately understands the healing potential of motorcycles, and who has harnessed that therapeutic power into a rehabilitation program designed and proven to help some of the most vulnerable members in our society. I was offered an opportunity to speak with several participants in Tom's program, too.

## The Story Of Sergeant N

"I ended up putting a gun in my mouth, and pulling the trigger. It misfired; but I just couldn't take anymore."

Sgt. N was seated across the table from me, recounting the depths to which his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) had driven him. His eyes were black with grief and dull with a thousand-mile stare, as though he wasn't present in the moment, but on a mental autopilot to prevent him from sliding back into the psychological chasm he was describing. He pushed on slowly and deliberately.

"It would've been easier to try a second time, so I checked myself into the hospital," he said. "Only two people spoke to me during my three-day stay, so that wasn't a big help, either."

He paused momentarily to gather his thoughts. His massive, imposing physique betrayed the inner fragility of this young U.S. Army veteran as he continued to recount his story of repeatedly seeking help and being ignored. He downed pills that turned him into a zombie, and spoke with counselors who could not relate to his battle experiences, to shrinks offering textbook answers to his unconventional issues and to bureaucrats who checked boxes on government forms before shuffling him back and forth untreated. There was no abatement to the anxiety, no hope to silence the demons. Just an unending spiral into gloomy despair, total isola-



**Riding along the backroads and backwoods of Colorado has proven to be excellent emotional therapy for military veterans.**



tion, joblessness, homelessness and ultimately an attempt to end his life. From such unfathomable depths, an adventure motorcycle, some new friends, and the ride of a lifetime turned things around, providing Sgt. N with a new mission and catapulting him from the depths of darkness and despair back into the light.

### **A Man On A Mission**

Larson had veterans like Sgt. N in mind when he designed the Motorcycle Relief Project. Larson, a former advertising copywriter, garnered formidable experience building nonprofit organizations in developing countries. In 2002, he founded a clean water initiative in the Dominican Republic, which provided local residents with purified water at 25 percent of the market rate. Within a few years, Healing Waters International grew to 30 employees spread over four countries, serving purified water to more than 100,000 people per day. While it was a bona fide business, Larson began thirsting for a more creative endeavor. So he left in 2008.

In doing so, Larson felt lost. He had self-separated from his role as the head of an organization that truly did good in the world. He couldn't go back, but he didn't know the way forward, either. Rudderless, he sank into depression and sought counseling. From there, he began to study PTSD and related issues; that's when he inadvertently discovered an epidemic that afflicts American veterans.

"I was in a dark spot in my life, which drove me to counseling," Larson said. "If it was so hard for me to move on and get through that darkness, imagine what these vets are going through."

Just like that, Larson was once again a man on a mission, one to shine a light on the darkness of the invisible scars of war from which so many veterans suffer.

### **The PTSD Epidemic**

Post-traumatic stress disorder is defined in part as a psychiatric disorder that can occur after experiencing life-threatening events, such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents or physical assault. It is an epidemic among American soldiers. A comprehensive RAND study ([rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9336.html](http://rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9336.html)) determined there are approximately 2.7 million post-9/11 veterans, of which 20 percent have PTSD or depression. Include those with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and the number becomes even more staggering. Yet, more than half of those afflicted do not seek care, and half of those who do receive only minimally adequate care.

The practical effects on the afflicted are devastating. Symptoms include "hyperarousal" (a permanent state of high alert), nightmares, sleeplessness, anxiety and vivid flashbacks. Explosive anger and rage are also common, partially fueled by frustration with the bureaucratic U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which is unable to provide the necessary care. Separated from their comrades on the battlefield and suddenly immersed in the radically different rhythm of civilian life, affected people lose the driving purpose of a team mission and their vital role within it. Without adequate support, they can become extremely solitary, despondent and increasingly desperate. Too often, the downward trajectory drives them to divorce, alcoholism, substance abuse, unemployment, homelessness, and even suicide. Statistics from this tragic existence are disturbing: 22 American veterans commit suicide every day, and more active duty personnel die by their own hand than in combat.



## The Motorcycle Relief Project Is Born

Larson knows from firsthand experience the therapeutic value of a motorcycle. He's been riding since the age of 17, when he started out on a 1974 Kawasaki KZ400. He has had several motorcycles along the way, and his current mount is a BMW R1200GS. In fact, it was an action shot of a dual sport machine on an off-road adventure that provided the spark of inspiration for something that Larson knew would change lives: He would help struggling American veterans find peace and purpose through motorcycle riding. They could grab the handlebars with each hand and discover for themselves the all-encompassing experience that he knew. It would present to each participant a personal and meaningful immersion in nature. It also provided the opportunity to share a group experience, to effect positive change in the lives of others. Riding also generates a continuous exhilaration, helping to fill the adrenaline void veterans might be facing in a way most other recreational therapies couldn't possibly hope to.

With no real proof of concept beyond a gut feeling that this was a necessary endeavor, Larson began planning a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, with the express mission of using motorcycles to provide ailing service people new opportunities to decompress, get unstuck, and connect with other veterans toward recovery. Using seed money donated by friends who believed in his idea, Larson recruited an advisory board and board of directors, assembled a small staff of key volunteers, built a website, and designed the online application forms for potential participants.

However, it wasn't enough to just ride — Larson wanted an itinerary that served to honor the veterans for their service and created what is essentially a first-class, professionally guided, multi-day tour. Once screened and accepted for participation, the only thing the vets need to do is get to the ride location, which varies by season (operations are based in Colorado). Upon arrival, the red carpet is rolled out the moment they step off the plane. Participants are picked up from the airport and brought to luxurious mountain lodges, where they are given their own private rooms

in which to relax. All meals are included. The first night's activities focus on a group dinner and introductions all around.

For the next five days, each morning begins with a hearty breakfast and quickly transitions into traversing Colorado's breathtaking motorcycle terrain, some of the most scenic and memorable in the United States. The trip encompasses both on-road and off-road adventures, and covers some of the most famous vistas in the country: Pike National Forest, Tarryall Road through South Park, the Boreas Pass across the Continental Divide, a ride to the top of Pikes Peak at 14,115 feet above sea level, Eleven Mile Canyon, the top of Mount Evans (the highest paved road in North America at 14,240 feet), and many more. In any experienced motorcyclist's mind, these names immediately conjure up the trip of a lifetime.

All of the associated logistics are covered as well. The vets wear premium Klim riding gear from head to toe. Insurance is included. The motorcycles are all BMW's high end GS-Series, and a support vehicle carrying tools, spares, luggage, food, and emergency equipment follows closely behind, in case of the unexpected. Every detail is taken care of, and the soldiers are completely free to focus on the ride and totally soak in the majestic views around them.

Each night, after riding is over and dinner is devoured, there are workshops designed to help the vets take lessons from the ride into everyday life. Topics covered include relaxation and stress-management techniques, including overcoming obstacles, getting unstuck, and accelerating recovery through serving others. Larson based one of his workshops in part on Steven Pressfield's book "The War of Art," which encourages people to shed self-induced resistance in order to get out of their own way. The parallels between these subjects and motorcycling itself are obvious, driving complementary lessons off the bikes as well as on them. After bonding on such voyages, participants are surrounded in safety by other veterans who truly understand each other and the unique challenges they face as a group. These powerful workshops frequently open the door to life-changing breakthroughs.

**The physical thrill of riding helps fill the void of adrenaline many combat veterans had grown accustomed to in their lives.**







### The Ripple Effect

Larson knew he was on the right track from the first MRP ride in August 2015. Putting it together was a daunting logistical challenge, but he was determined to make it work. One of the participants, Sgt. Z, was extremely bleak about his future prospects. After being discharged, Sgt. Z was working as a whitewater river guide, living in a tent, mired in alcoholism, drug abuse and a string of failed relationships. He was suffering from PTSD and moderate traumatic brain injury, absolutely paralyzed by depression. Sgt. Z found out about MRP and wrote to Larson on a whim, expecting it to be too good to be true. Instead, Larson replied within a few hours to move the application process forward. Sgt. Z was shocked by the rapid response, because the care he received through VA could take months to schedule. The shift in Sgt. Z's mindset during the program was almost immediate.

"Riding all day in that beautiful place allowed me to truly refocus on what was really important and on what I needed to do to turn my life around," Sgt. Z said.

At the evening workshops, Sgt. Z realized that other veterans were struggling with similar issues, which gave him the hope and incentive to climb out of the rut he was in. Another MRP participant introduced Sgt. Z to a fellow Marine sergeant, who helped place Sgt. Z with various veteran organizations that helped him get back on his feet. Sgt. Z is now on solid ground, newly married and working as a history teacher at the high school from which he graduated. Mission accomplished!

Encouraged, Larson wrote to Pressfield about the program, and the author donated 120 books to give to MRP participants. Larson then wrote a short article about his MRP experience for the BMW Motorcycle Owners of America club magazine, and in short order, four motorcycles were donated to help grow the MRP cycle fleet. Larson is heartened that word about MRP is slowly spreading, but his real reward is always on the last day of the program.

After riding on the final day of the MRP itinerary, everyone gathers for a big barbecue and wrap-up reward ceremony. Participants are introduced to the MRP volunteers, advisors and board members who helped put the experience together, and the soldiers' families are invited to participate. It is here, Larson explained, that the spouses and children of the veterans often cannot believe the changes they immediately see in their loved ones after graduating MRP. Veterans who were once dejected are now smiling, laughing and joking around—often for the first time in years. Where the traditional system of therapy and pills had failed these troops, MRP has succeeded. Validation was unexpectedly found in the form of grateful wives and children.

### Paying It Forward, Veteran To Veteran

Recounting his experience at MRP, Sgt. N spoke of his own support network expanding with the dozen new friends he made during his ride—service members with shared experiences and a common bond, with whom he now stays in regular contact. As he spoke about the positive turn his life has taken since MRP, there was a marked transformation in his demeanor. His eyes were clear and sharp, his posture straightened, and he was completely alert and in the moment. It was emotional for him to describe coming back home after MRP.

"My wife noticed right away," he said. "For the first time in years, I was laughing. I was happy to be home. I was happy to be around my children and happy to be around her. The key word is happy! It's not a cure-all, but it's a hell of a lot more effective than anything else was."

Sgt. N keeps his momentum going by volunteering with MRP, helping to spread the word to other vets that this program is available to them. Only former participants can volunteer, ensuring that the critical loop of veterans helping other veterans stays intact; thus, the network keeps growing organically. Volunteering is now Sgt. N's new purpose, a mission of selfless service and sacrifice that keeps him driving forward optimistically.

Forty-two veterans like Sgt. N and Sgt. Z have graduated the Motorcycle Relief Project since the first ride in August 2015. Without exception, every one of them has reported similar positive experiences that ripple through their affected families, friends, co-workers, associates and the veteran community at large.

### MRP Can Help

We have a genuine crisis on our hands, with our young warriors returning home from war zones unable to receive the help they need to mend. MRP is a volunteer effort, wholly dependent on donations and corporate sponsorships to operate. By showing our support as motorcyclists, MRP is a shining example of how we as individuals, and as an industry, can help our traumatized troops along the road to healing. **MCN**

**Rides done in groups build camaraderie and fellowship similar to what many veterans had in the military and are often missing.**

*Motorcycle Relief Project, P. O. Box 3220, Evergreen, CO 80437; 720-722-3995, fax: 303-945-7903; info@motorelief.org*