

## Hope For Veterans: A camp that helps healing

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Elk hunter, Milan, has two prosthetic legs, but that didn't stop him from getting an elk in 2019.

Photo Courtesy / Divide Camp

Divide Camp is an odd name for a place that brings veterans together to instill hope, develop friendships and give purpose to their lives.

The all-volunteer nonprofit organization is located 20 miles from the town of Joseph, Oregon on the divide between Big and Little Sheep creeks in the Wallowa Mountains. It's about as far from Curry County as you can get and still be in Oregon.

The group is committed to helping veterans find joy and happiness through an immersion in nature.

“Every day in America, an average of 22 veterans intentionally end their lives,” reads the Divide Camp brochure. “They fought for all of us ... yet their return to civilian life is often plagued with survival guilt, effects of blast-wave brain injuries, and post-traumatic stress. Some are missing limbs, while others feel they are missing their soul. Many of our combat veterans are missing their will to live.”

Jim Webber is a construction manager who has been in Brookings for the past several months while working with crews to fix up the local Head Start building. In his spare time, he volunteers his construction skills to help repair the cabins and lodge at Divide Camp.

Webber has been with the organization since its formation in 2012, helping to refurbish cabins that had been vacant for many years, and as well as building new ones and an outdoor kitchen.

Over the years, he has helped to update the cabins and lodge with electricity, running water and heat; has built an all-terrain electric wheelchair-accessible cabin; and put a new roof on the lodge using structural insulated panels and a standing seam metal roof.

Webber also is an ambassador for the Divide Camp program, wanting to ensure that veterans in Curry County are aware of the camp's programs.

Divide Camp offers post-9/11 combat-wounded veterans from Oregon, Washington and Idaho the opportunity to get away from it all with a wilderness experience, based at the organization's rustic, remote site.

Until Webber began reaching out, no one from Curry County had ever applied to the program, which covers all costs door-to-door, including travel and meals.

The old hunting camp once belonged to the family of Divide Camp founder Julie Wheeler, who traveled there in 2011 to prepare the place to list for sale. According to Webber, once there, her memories of spending time with family made her realize she wanted to give something back to veterans by making the camp a place where they could experience what she had experienced while growing up.

The camp is on 40 wooded acres with six cabins, including one that is ADA-accessible. Meals are prepared in an outdoor kitchen using Dutch ovens and a grill. Guests, in small groups of five or six, stay for a week and can participate in a variety of wilderness outdoor activities, such as fishing, hunting, river rafting, archery or backpacking.

"We offer two types of therapy," Webber said. "'Front-porch therapy,' where we've got a big front porch and people can just sit and talk and enjoy the sunset, and 'fire-pit therapy.' That's a good time when they are gathered around the campfire telling their stories, war stories and other life stories.

"It's good therapy to hear someone else saying the same thing you're going through."

There are no mental health therapists at the camp or any pharmacological cures — just extra-large doses of the healing power of nature. Alcohol and drugs are banned from the camp, and smoking is discouraged, Webber said. They try to provide meals that may well be healthier than they might have at home.

Webber described the experiences he has observed while working at the camp. When visitors arrive camp, they come during the day and get to settle in for the night. Then, they go out on an activity for four or five days with a guide, be it hunting, fishing, running rapids on the Snake River or hiking in the Eagle Cap Wilderness.

When they return to the camp, they get to spend a couple more days there.

"Most guys come out without knowing anyone, and when they leave, they go away with four or five new friends," Webber said.

"Last year, they had hikes where each guy had a llama. Each one had his own llama that was his responsibility to take care of. So, these guys are hiking along and the llamas are on a rope and it's following them. Before he knew it, one guy's llama had his head up over his shoulder, and the guy looks and the llama nuzzles him right there.

“It gives them something to do other than just walking behind the guy in front of you. We had some goats another year that helped with the packs. They were a big hit, too. The vets liked the animals’ help, and they helped quite a bit.

“A couple of groups of women have come up,” Webber said. “They went out on a two- or three-day hike. Then they came back to camp and had a writing class. They brought someone in to help them write about their experiences. What I hear is secondhand, but I think they learned to write what they can’t say.

“We’ve had a couple of memorial hunts up there. We just had one where the guys were real good friends who went overseas together. He came back, but his friend didn’t.

“We got the dad of the fallen soldier and the friend together, and they went out on an elk hunt, representing the fallen soldier. The friend and the dad really bonded; they couldn’t help it.

“It heals both sides - the friend and the family. It makes me get emotional right now,” Webber said.

“We have a 3D archery course, with animals from a skunk to a full-size elk spaced out around a trail that they can go on from station to station. We just had the second-annual archery shoot, where we had about 25 guys there this year for three days.

“When you get out in the wilderness, it’s so quiet. These guys come from the big cities and traffic and congestion and smog and all the noises and stuff around them. And when they get up there, if you’re not talking and nobody’s around, there’s a lot to hear. They might not realize right away, but even every tree makes a different noise in the wind.

“Since we started, we have brought more than 160 veterans to the camp over the five to six years we’ve been doing it,” Webber said.

Veterans who can benefit from the program and meet the organization’s criteria can access an online application on the group’s website. After submission, Corey Watson, a wounded post-9/11 vet himself and a board member and liaison for veterans, will follow up with a phone call to determine what opportunities would work best for the veteran.

*To apply for the program, volunteer or make a donation, visit [dividecamp.org](http://dividecamp.org), or call 541-531-9939.*

#### Did You Know?

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