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RIDING TOWARD

When I first heard about *Motorcycle Relief Project (MRP)*, I was part of the planning team for the *Pacific Northwest March Moto Madness* event of 2016. MRP was an easy choice to be one of the non-profit beneficiaries of the event because of what they do to help service members with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

MRP is a non-profit organization providing relief to veterans with PTSD and other injuries by taking them on multi-day motorcycle adventure tours. Their mission is to honor and encourage veterans while providing them with opportunities to decompress, get unstuck, and connect with other veterans.

The vision for *Motorcycle Relief Project* was born when its founder, Tom Larson, began learning about PTSD and the incredible toll it was taking on veterans of the U.S. military. Although not a veteran, Tom had been through treatment for trauma in his own life. He realized his own experience was mild in comparison to combat veterans, but it gave him insight into just how disabling PTSD could be.

As a 26-year Army veteran who deployed to two war zones, I took an extra interest in *MRP*. Having recently retired from the Army, I was planning a RTW on my bike. Part of my trip would take me through Colorado, where *MRP* is based and most events are held, so I contacted Tom to volunteer my services.

The group stops for a lunch break at the summit of Boreas Pass, a dirt road that crosses the Continental Divide at 11,481 feet.



RECOVERY

by Greg Hilchey | photos by Dan Schrock Photography

MOTORCYCLE RELIEF PROJECT





Volunteers proudly display MRP stickers on their windscreens.



Being an off-road instructor for *Puget Sound Safety Off-Road (PSSOR)*, I thought that an “Intro to Off-Road Riding” course could help. Although I don’t have PTSD, Tom has a policy regarding volunteers—they must first be participants. He explained the principal idea behind *MRP* is that many servicemen and women in and out of the military carry other ailments, such as depression, suicidal thoughts, anger, and coping problems. *MRP* welcomes all who are having issues. Tom talked with me for about an hour, and the next thing I knew I was invited to participate in the next ride.

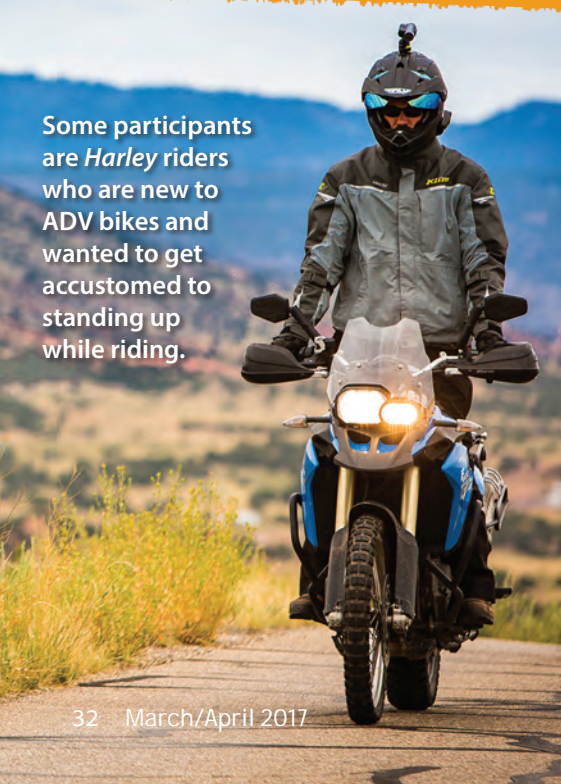
It was a Sunday afternoon in August when most of the participants met at Don Adis’ home in Golden, Colorado. Don is the lead volunteer and a former serviceman. It was an informal meet and greet dinner put on by the families of the event. Initially, most of us were quiet, not saying much to each other. Two thoughts ran through my head: “Do I have merit being among this group?” and “What have these men experienced that brings them here?” One of the volunteers helped break the ice by taking the lead with a round of introductions that included what we could expect over the next few days. By the end of the evening, we all felt more at ease knowing that everyone was there for similar reasons.

The next day we were introduced to the motorcycles we’d be riding over the following week. Some riders had their own bikes, others used *MRP*’s. Most of the fleet consisted of *BMW*’s; some had been purchased through the *RawHyde BMW Off-Road Academy (RawHyde-OffRoad.com)* at a reduced price, and others were donated. From there we took our first tour of the Colorado backroads on our way to a cabin in Florissant that would serve as our base for the remainder of the week.

Evening workshops focus on relaxation techniques, overcoming obstacles, and skills for coping with trauma.



Some participants are Harley riders who are new to ADV bikes and wanted to get accustomed to standing up while riding.



Every evening after dinner we gathered in the living room of the cabin for themed work groups. Each day would start with a theme such as “Gratitude,” and then we’d have open discussions. One thing stressed among the group was that there was no fixing. Nor was this event designed for participants to walk away being fixed. The purpose was to allow oneself to open up and be given tools to help with coping. One tool introduced was meditative yoga, led by one of the volunteers. Our group ranged from soldiers still on active

duty to Vietnam vets. Tom and the other volunteers made it easy for the group sessions to flow. Fears were shared, anxieties were vented; it was a safe place.

The daily rides comprised a well thought-out tour of the best Colorado has to offer, a mix of asphalt and forest roads that any rider with some experience could enjoy. No off-road skills are required at *MRP*, although riding tips were provided daily and throughout the rides. Each day we were led to a new destination; Pikes Peak, Eleven Mile

Skyline Drive outside of Canon City is a one-lane road that follows the spine of a “hogback,” a geological feature that Webster’s defines as a ridge with a sharp summit and steeply sloping sides.



Veterans came from AL, CA, FL, MT, NE, VT, and WA to participate in the program and enjoy the spectacular Colorado scenery.

Canyon, Guanella Pass and Boreas Pass were some of the highlights. The views were breathtaking and provided a headspace for thought while riding. My group consisted of riders from all backgrounds. Some were new, others were 20-year vets. Most had never been on an adventure bike, but by the end of the week, many were converts.

We celebrated our coming together with a grand dinner held at Tom's place at the end of the week, hosted by the families. And awards were presented to everyone based on personality and merits.

I can tell you that this is an outstanding organization that's on the right track. The coping skills and take-away reading materials were fantastic, and the riding was, well... epic!

MRP Facts: All expenses are paid (not including transportation to and from). All meals and lodging are provided. Must have a valid MC license to participate.

MotoRelief.org 



The road to the top of Pikes Peak features 162 turns in 19.5 miles. Riding to the summit was a bucket list experience for many of the guys.

