



BY KEN OLSEN

**R**ob Saavedra refused to acknowledge he had PTSD. The Air Force veteran and sheriff's deputy worried that people around him, particularly co-workers, would consider him weak. And when he finally sought help from two different programs, he got no relief from the nightmares, panic attacks and hyper-vigilance. Seven minutes with a horse changed everything.

"It's amazing how all of a sudden you start meshing with the animal," Saavedra says as he tries to sort out how he just persuaded a hot-blooded 1,000-pound thoroughbred to trust him. "They melt into you. I wish I would have come a long time ago."

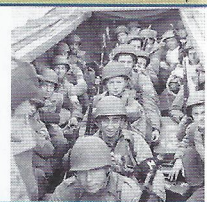
Saratoga WarHorse founder Bob Nevins calls that kind of epiphany "the sacred moment," often marked by a veteran burying his face in a horse's neck and sobbing. "The veteran is relieving years of anguish and nightmares," explains Nevins, a decorated Vietnam War Army medevac pilot who knows combat trauma and the power of the horse-human connection. "We just let it unfold."

More than 400 veterans have had similar experiences at Saratoga WarHorse since Nevins quit his day job and exhausted his retirement savings to launch the program in 2011. The reward comes in emails and phone calls from grateful veterans who report that they can sleep through the night for the first time in years.

**1871** Dr. Jacob Mendez Da Costa observes rapid heart rate, anxiety and hyperarousal in soldiers, which gives rise to the term "soldier's heart."

**1916** Dr. Frederick Mott, a British pathologist, publishes a study in *The Lancet* asserting that shell shock is caused by "physical or chemical changes" in the brain.

**1939-1945** The medical community describes PTSD as "combat fatigue" possibly tied to combat.



**1914** Soldiers with "staring eyes," violent tremors, inexplicable deafness, blindness or paralysis are described as having "shell shock."

**1917** The Army Surgeon General issues guidelines calling for immediate simple treatment for shell shock – rest, a warm shower and food – as well as the expectation that affected soldiers would ultimately return to the front lines.

**1952** The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) calls what we now know as PTSD "stress response syndrome."



# THE MIND FIELD

ALTERNATIVE ROUTES OF RECOVERY

SARATOGA WARHORSE

## Thoroughbred Therapy

*'Veterans are so sick of people talking at them and writing them prescriptions.'*

Photo by Clay Lonneth

"The soldier's heart gets hardened in the war experience," wrote Denny Sedlack, a 2015 graduate of Saratoga WarHorse and Vietnam War Navy corpsman who later served 15 years in the Air Force. "The horse-human connection bridges the difference between the war world and the civilian world. And the horse-human connection tempers the pain of killing (and) being killed."

Nevins also hears from spouses and therapists surprised by dramatic changes in veterans who attend the program. "They call me and ask, 'What did you do with this guy?'" Nevins says.

The program's most potent endorsements come from veterans like Clay Stanhope and Mary Kay McCollum, who saw suicide as their only option.

"I owe my life to Bob and his crew," says Stanhope, an Army veteran who served in Afghanistan and Iraq and lost everything to divorce soon after returning home to Alabama in 2012. "VA wouldn't touch me. Nobody would help me. I was completely lost."

McCollum, a Navy veteran and military sexual assault survivor, says she planned to jump off the Monroe Street Bridge in her hometown of Spokane, Wash., after years of traditional therapy failed to tame her night terrors.

"You get stuck in the trauma, and there's nothing you can do to get out of it," McCollum says. "There's no amount of talking, cognitive therapy and drugs that can help."

**1968** Symptoms lasting more than six months after return from war are presumed to be caused by a pre-existing condition, not combat PTSD.

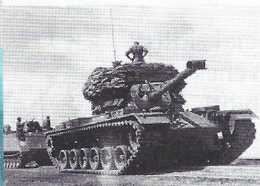
**2007** VA establishes a suicide hotline known as the Veterans Crisis Line to provide immediate access to mental health treatment and support.

**May 2016** Congress allows VA physicians to discuss marijuana as a treatment option with their patients in states where its medical use is legal.

**1980** The American Psychiatric Association officially identifies post-traumatic stress disorder as a distinct diagnosis.

**2011** Only 37.6 percent of OIF/OEF veterans stay in VA PTSD treatment for more than a year, according to a study of 204,000 veterans published by the American Psychiatric Association.

**June 2016** A study conducted by Dr. Daniel Perl at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and other scientists suggests a link between PTSD and physical changes to the brain caused by shockwaves from IEDs.







Navy veteran Maura O'Hagan of Chicago interacts with a horse through the Saratoga WarHorse program in Charlton, N.Y. Photo by Clay Lonneth

**UNCONDITIONAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT** A map on a wall of Saratoga WarHorse's office, just off a tree-lined street in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., tracks the places in the United States with the highest veteran suicide rates. The epidemic prompted Nevins to start Saratoga WarHorse after he researched the horse-human connection and tried it for himself. "Every bit of anxiety I had washed away," he says. "That's why I started thinking this would work with other veterans."

He recruited Melody Squier, a noted Vermont equine expert, to help him create a program in which veterans could have the same experience. Then he quit his job as an airline captain and emptied his retirement savings to get Saratoga WarHorse off the ground.

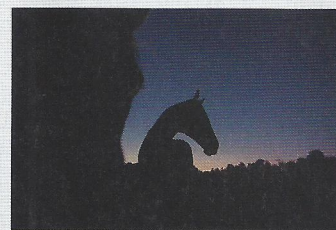
Saratoga WarHorse does not offer mental health treatment, counseling or therapeutic riding. "These veterans are so sick of people talking at them and writing them prescriptions," Nevins says. "I don't get into their trauma. I don't give advice. I create an opportunity for them to have this experience."

The experience is all about resetting the emotional circuit breaker. "Anytime a human being has a traumatic event in their life – from sexual assault to seeing your buddy blown up in combat – their emotional circuit breaker pops," Nevins says. "It's like tripping the electrical breaker in your house. The lights go out. You are walking around in the dark."


Likewise, many veterans with PTSD don't sleep well, endure nightmares and can't re-engage fully with civilians. It takes a powerful experience to reset their circuit breakers.

Horses have two biological attributes that make them the ideal animal for that, says Tim Hayes, an Air Force veteran, horse trainer and author of "Riding Home: The Power of Horses to Heal." Horses, like veterans with PTSD, are hypervigilant. Because they are also intuitive, horses sense the similarity, and they easily bond with troubled humans.

Horses also have highly developed social skills – including tolerance, acceptance, forgiveness and compassion – that are critical to their ability to live in herds. "If a horse gets with someone who is wounded, compassion immediately kicks in,"




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Hayes says. "That feeling that veterans get from a horse is unconditional acknowledgment. It's a mental, emotional and physical shift for them."

The shift enables many to open up to spouses and therapists and start rebuilding their lives. "The horse isn't the end of the healing process," says Hayes, who has attended Saratoga WarHorse. "It's the kick-starter."

**AMERICAN LEGION SUPPORT** Nevins, a member of Adirondack American Legion Post 70 in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., makes it easy to participate. The program pays all expenses, including airfare, so there's no VA approval process, insurance paperwork or financial barriers. Nevins receives support from community and fraternal groups in New York and South Carolina, where a satellite operation opened with the help of horsewoman Anne Campbell. Among the supporters are Knights of Columbus, Rotary and the Elks, as well as donors from the racing community such as Bob Baffert – trainer of 2015 Triple Crown winner American Pharoah – and his wife, Jill.

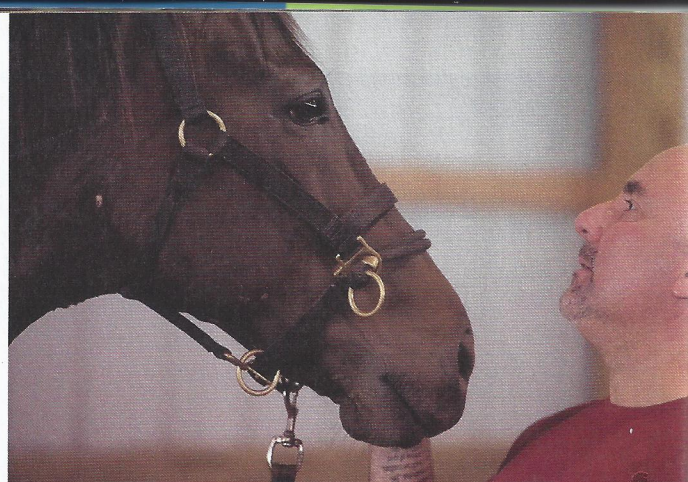
Joseph E. Zaloga Post 1520 in Albany, N.Y., has raised money for Saratoga WarHorse. And Whiteman-Hull-Snyder Post 1360 in Cherry Valley, N.Y., has donated half the proceeds from its Veterans Day weekend 5K run to the program after Nevins attracted the interest of former post Commander Alan Grover four years ago.

"Twenty active members of our post raised \$10,000 for Saratoga WarHorse over four years, which shows what can be done by a dedicated group and great local businesses for a great cause," says Dave Lamouret, commander of Post 1360. When Grover died in 2015, his family asked for donations in his memory to the program.

"Alan's family loved Saratoga WarHorse, loved that our race was raising money for a great cause," Lamouret says. "Last year, all of Alan's family came to help coordinate our 5K race."

**WORD OF MOUTH** Many veterans who come to Saratoga WarHorse have never before touched a horse. Some are terrified. Most simply doubt the program will help.

"I would never have imagined this would have worked," says Rich Keiser, past department commander of the New York American Legion, who was wounded on Hamburger Hill during his 1969 tour in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne. "I have PTSD and I got more out of WarHorse than I have my therapy at VA and my group therapy," says Keiser, who came to Saratoga Springs in



*Air Force veteran Rob Saavedra of Seattle says he wishes he would have found Saratoga WarHorse sooner.* Photo by Clay Lomneth

early June. "I hope a lot more veterans will try it."

People who participate in the program are often referred by others or family members of veterans. Counselors are now referring veterans to the program as word has spread.

The application process is simple: a telephone conversation with Nevins. "I don't want anything between me and the veteran," he says, even though that can mean midnight calls. "When a kid tells me he hasn't slept in 10 years, I don't have to ask him any more questions."

Nevins and program coordinator Janelle Schmidt also don't describe the horse-human interaction in great detail. They just try to make it sound safe so veterans will come give it a try.

Sessions typically involve six veterans at a time, of all ages, from the Korean War era to Iraq and Afghanistan. About 30 percent are military sexual trauma survivors.

The first step is a low-key get-acquainted dinner that steers clear of war stories. The next morning, the veterans head to a farm about a half-hour from Saratoga Springs. They learn the fundamentals of horse behavior – and winning the trust of a horse – from Squier. That's important because, Hayes says, "as a prey animal, horses don't immediately like you or accept you like most dogs will. Before a horse accepts you, he has to trust you."

By late afternoon, Squier selects a retired racing thoroughbred for each veteran. One by one, they lead the animals into a pen for the critical encounter. When horse and veteran connect, veterans and staff are often brought to tears. It's hard for veterans to express exactly what transpires.

"Most of the time when I talk about this, I lose it," says 83-year-old Norman Seider, a Korean War-era Army veteran. "There were several heavy moments with the horse, a bonding, then stuff began to pour out of me – not verbally, but it came tumbling out of my head. The anger and the stress just sort of flowed out."



**UNIVERSAL CONNECTION** “There’s no difference with a 24-year-old veteran and a 68-year-old veteran,” Nevins says. “They have the same nightmares, the same issues. There’s no difference between military sexual trauma and losing your buddy on the battlefield. The trauma and the effect are the same. We give them the same experience, because the experience creates the change.”

McCollum says she found the strength to leave an abusive marriage and plans to start a blog to help other female veterans, particularly those who have suffered military sexual assault.

Stanhope went from living in a homeless shelter and attempting suicide to a successful job as a long-haul trucker with a service-connected disability rating from VA; he credits Nevins and fellow Alabama veteran Glenn Knight, who recommended the Saratoga WarHorse program.

Knight isn’t sure how a horse was powerful enough to penetrate the emotional walls he had built in the wake of his tour as a crew chief and helicopter door gunner in Vietnam. “That horse told me, in a way I don’t understand, ‘It’s OK, you can trust people. You can come out of your foxhole.’” He says he was downing his seventh large glass of bourbon the night he first talked to Nevins on the telephone. “I’ve found new life,” Knight says. “I found faith in the church. I sing in the choir. It’s an experience I’ll never forget.”

The payoff for Nevins comes when one veteran tells another. “I know when a veteran shares this with another veteran who hasn’t been here that they get the same satisfaction from touching someone’s life.” 🌿

*Ken Olsen is a frequent contributor to The American Legion Magazine.*

## Program inspired by near-death experience in Vietnam

A rocket-propelled grenade ripped into the UH-1 helicopter as it was about to lift wounded 101st Airborne soldiers out of the Vietnamese jungle. The crippled Huey erupted into a ball of flames, rolled over and plunged to the ground 20 miles southwest of Hue. The ordeal affected Bob Nevins for the rest of his life. “By the time I hit the ground, I had kissed my ass goodbye a hundred feet ago,” says Nevins, who was 21 when his Huey went down in January 1971. “If it wasn’t for my near-death experience, I would be a basket case. It’s a really powerful spiritual experience that tells you you are here to serve.”

Nevins, a member of American Legion Post 70 in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., doesn’t talk about his three Distinguished Flying Crosses or Purple Heart. “Those were for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I did not do anything in Vietnam that every other helicopter pilot didn’t do.”

What he will happily discuss is Saratoga WarHorse, a nonprofit program he founded in northeastern New York to help veterans with PTSD. “The greatest challenge is making sure we reach the veterans who need us the most,” he says.

He might have been one. Two crewmembers were blown out of the aircraft by the RPG hit in 1971, and Nevins crawled through a hole in the floor of the flaming Huey to pull them to safety. He stayed on the ground in the midst of a firefight and helped evacuate his injured crew and the seven wounded soldiers his team was originally sent to rescue.

Nevins went back to flying medevac helicopters for the duration of his combat tour and returned to the United States on July 4, 1971. Three days later, he was discharged. That short transition gave him an appreciation for the need to help veterans reintegrate into civilian life.

He later became a commercial pilot, a career he’d dreamed of since riding the bus from Queens to JFK Airport just to watch airplanes as a child. He had 24 years with American Airlines and American Eagle before he could shift to help veterans.



Photo by Clay Lonneth

He pulled together experts and volunteers, leased a farm and started offering veterans the chance to heal. He quickly got the attention of another Vietnam War veteran, Brian Austin, a twice-wounded Marine who had worked with Nevins in the early days of the Vietnam Veterans of America.

“One day I was reading the local newspaper, and I saw a story about a guy named Bob Nevins starting Saratoga WarHorse,” Austin says. “I called him up and said, ‘Count me in.’”

Austin still helps with the program, but he credits Nevins for making it happen. “For at least the first two years, he paid for everything out of his own pocket. That’s how much he believes in the organization.”

Demand has grown dramatically since November 2011. But Nevins is mindful of the need to keep overhead low – he can give a veteran the Saratoga WarHorse experience for between \$2,500 and \$3,000 – and remain financially sustainable. Nevins has since started a satellite operation in Aiken, S.C., run by a veteran he trained.

Ultimately, Nevins says, he would like to raise enough money to build a facility near Saratoga Springs that would serve as the national center.

– Ken Olsen