

**Veterans** and **volunteers** like **Rex Laceby** forge a **community** through the **challenges of adaptive climbing.**

Rex Laceby thrived in the United States Marine Corps. An honor graduate of Ranger School, a grueling combat leadership course, he found his passion as a climber in the training's Mountain Phase in remote northern Georgia.

But a 2004 gunfight with insurgents in Iraq rattled his confidence. Shrapnel, driven into his right hand and face, severed his left optic nerve and caused a total loss of vision in his left eye. He fought hard to stay in the Marine Corps, but with the loss of depth perception and dexterity and strength in his injured hand, Laceby thought his climbing days were over.

When Laceby retired after almost 21 years and returned to civilian life in Colorado, he decided to try climbing at Earth Treks Climbing Center through an adaptive sports program created by a nonprofit, Paradox Sports.

Adaptive sports are simply sports modified to enable access by people with physical or emotional challenges. Since its founding in 2007, Paradox has grown from serving a handful of people to reaching over 450 participants in 2018 through its courses, clubs and trips across 25 states. (Look for Paradox on NeighborhoodofGood.com.)

On the wall at Earth Treks, looking down at fellow climber Maureen Beck, Laceby realized climbing was different now—even scary. Beck, a Paradox volunteer born without a left hand, was belaying him and could see he had lost confidence. The first time, she was kind, telling him, “Go on, I can help you from down here.” The second time, she let him have it: “I know you can do it. Don’t be a quitter!”

It was the same tactic Laceby had seen in recruit training and used on hundreds of combat Marines. “Sure enough, I stopped being a baby, sucked it up and got up that route,” he says.

#### **A ROUTE FOR EVERYONE**

Climbing changed Laceby’s life in Ranger School. It changed his life after the military. And adaptive climbing is helping to change the lives of veterans across the country.

Adaptive climbing is a small subset of the adaptive sports world. In the last few decades, differently abled athletes have pushed adaptive sports to outdoor challenges: skiing, kayaking, hiking and biking, to name just a few. There are adaptive athletes competing in the Paralympics and Extremity Games.

Unlike some adaptive sports organizations, Paradox focuses exclusively on climbing. It was founded by professional climber Timmy O’Neill and Army Major D.J. Skelton, who rediscovered climbing—and his joy for life—after injuries sustained in Iraq landed him in the hospital for almost a year.

As a volunteer with Paradox, Laceby links Colorado vets with Paradox. Laceby is uniquely positioned to do so: He created the University of Colorado Boulder Veterans Mentorship and Transition program, which helps students transition from the military to the classroom to the workforce. In his spare time? Laceby also serves as a public safety diver, swift-water

# PUSHING UP THE MOUNTAIN TOGETHER

WRITTEN BY ANN KLEIN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATHRYN GAMBLE





rescue technician, wildland firefighter and ice rescue trainer and volunteers with the Boulder Emergency Squad, a volunteer technical rescue group.

### BECOMING A CLIMBER AGAIN

Lacey was transformed by a 2015 Paradox Tetons trip. His group was on Middle Saddle Mountain, chatting and relaxing after the day's climb, when somebody zipped a coat. Reflexively, Lacey and another veteran dropped to the ground; the sound mimicked that of a rocket-propelled grenade. Their reactions scared the civilians on the trip.

When everyone awoke the next morning, snow blanketed the terrain they were about to cover. "It looked like Everest," Lacey recalls. "I remember thinking, 'Are we really gonna do this?'" The Exum Mountain Guides assisting the Paradox veterans called it: Yes, they were.

As the climbers prepped, Lacey reminded himself that he was the only officer in the group and the one with the most combat experience and training. He couldn't quit or show lack of confidence in himself or the others. "We all pushed up that mountain together," he says. "I was never alone. And I was a climber again and part of an amazing team."

### A SECRET WEAPON

If Paradox gave Lacey something back in his life, he has more than returned the favor. Lacey has helped supercharge the reach and offerings of the group from scrappy self-starter to nationally recognized nonprofit.

Lacey's secret weapon, according to former executive director Mike Neustedter? "He's willing to put himself out there and express the need."

Take the Paradox office and equipment space. When Lacey began volunteering with the group, it was a shack where mice ran among cardboard-box desks, and gear piled haphazardly floor to ceiling. Lacey asked The Home Depot for help, and the company transformed the space into a freshly painted area with custom cabinets for ropes, tools, helmets, shoes, tents and more. "Now there is an organized gear



Opening spread: Rex Lacey on a climb. This spread, top left to above: Luis Frias at work. Checking knots. Ann Cipriani makes her way up the rope. The climbers gather at the top. Lacey and his gear. Luis moves up the climb. Lacey leads Paradox climbers to a new pitch.

arsenal, just like you'd see if you went to a regular business for a day of climbing," Neustedter says. "Veterans deserve the same thing anyone else would have if they were to work with a guiding company in Colorado."

When Neustedter found himself stretched too thin by obligations to organize sponsors for a 2018 Tetons trip for veterans, Lacey took over. He pulled in logistics help from No Barriers Warriors, a nonprofit that provides veterans with trekking, skiing, rafting and climbing experiences. He vetted, selected and prepped veterans; Rory Teehan was on his list.

### CLIMBING WITHOUT JUDGMENT

Teehan spent his childhood dreaming of a military career. In the U.S. Navy, he worked in satellite communications systems and scuba diving off fast-attack submarines in the Pacific. But a back injury, a torn ACL and a diabetes misdiagnosis derailed his progress. He couldn't get out of his desk job: He'd lost his place, his people and the career he'd given everything for. Because he hadn't been injured in combat, he wasn't able to identify with veterans who had. "To the military, I was damaged goods," he says.

That didn't matter to Lacey. What mattered was that Teehan had joined his Paradox trip. As dusk fell at the climbers' base camp at the foot of the Teton Mountains in Wyoming, Teehan sat at a picnic table with 10 other veterans who had arrived with scars of their own—some physical, some emotional. They'd come together to share a challenge. Nobody was there to judge.

### THE BONDS OF VETERANS

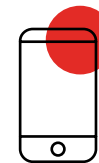
On his 2018 Tetons climb, Teehan learned that he wasn't alone, that he could find himself again, that he could even laugh. At one point, the most macho guy in the group froze. "We couldn't progress or regress without him," Teehan says. "So he told us, 'Just yell things at me, make me mad at you, so I can get through this.'"

They did, and it worked, and afterward the guy gave everyone big hugs. "That's a unique bond that veterans have," Teehan says. "We can make fun of each other and know it's in good spirit; it's really a sign of affection."

When Teehan reached the base of the mountain, it was with the group identity he thought he'd lost, as well as a renewed perspective. "Everyone has good and bad experiences in the military," Teehan says. "When you meet up, you forget the bad. And you're like, 'I don't know how we ever left this.'" ■

## Supporting Veterans

Of the 19 million veterans in the U.S., nearly one-fifth have a service-connected disability, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Even if a veteran returns to civilian life with no disability, they may often need assistance transitioning to a new career. State Farm® knows that, which is why we've long supported service members in a variety of ways. Since 2009, State Farm has been recognized as a Military-Friendly Employer for its support of veterans and military employees. State Farm has provided financial assistance for a variety of community efforts, including a van used to help transition homeless veterans to temporary housing and assistance and grants for veterans advancing their education or pursuing specialized training. And State Farm continues to connect veterans groups, like Paradox Sports, with volunteers in their communities through the Neighborhood of Good™ program (NeighborhoodofGood.com).



**Are you looking for your perfect match, or want to try to find more volunteers for your group?** The State Farm Neighborhood of Good tool makes it easy. Simply visit [NeighborhoodofGood.com](http://NeighborhoodofGood.com) and search by ZIP code for volunteer opportunities in your area.