

Veterans Journey Home: Five Documentaries by Frederick Marx

By Gianluca Cinelli

America has struggled to reintegrate soldiers returning from overseas since the Second World War, as John Houston's documentary, *Let There Be Light* (1946), shows. Houston's film, initially rejected by the military, was broadcast only in 1981- that is, by no chance, one year after the American Psychiatric Association had coined the famous acronym PTSD. For decades, the problem of psychologically injured veterans remained taboo within the military, and those affected by posttraumatic syndromes were forced to hide their pain away, deal with it alone, and pretend they were strong and never in need of help.

By the early 1980s, though, the US were flooded with traumatised veterans from Vietnam, who struggled to go back to their civilian status and find their rightful place in society. Many of them became homeless, addicted to drugs and alcohol, as their families broke up and their social bonds dissolved. A recent report states that "despite comprising less than seven percent of the United States' adult population, veterans make up over eight percent of the incarcerated population within United States jails and prisons" (Gallagher 2026). As the US engaged actively in international wars since 1991, deploying tens of thousands of servicemen and servicewomen overseas, the number of veterans returning with physical, psychological and spiritual injuries increased dramatically. Despite the support provided by the Veterans Affairs, veterans represent a group of fragile citizens that society too often neglects, for they are not profitable, unfashionable, and because their stories reveal uncomfortable truths about the military and the too many wars that the US have waged worldwide. Thus, society often fails veterans, abandoning them to a destiny of isolation, mental illness, substance abuse, violence, and self-deprecation, which often leads many to commit suicide. Figures suggest that a veteran in the USA takes her or his own life every 72 minutes, approximately 18-20 per day. That means that the casualties among veterans are much higher after the deployment than in combat.¹

An increasing number of charities, associations, and communities help veterans find a haven where they can meet other veterans, professional therapists and counsellors, and civilians, to share their stories and emotions. Such an in-

intervention is aimed at permitting veterans to stitch together the pieces of their lives torn apart by war and trauma, to absorb the negative experiences into the flow of their memory and identity, and to find meaning in such suffering to tread new paths and reconnect with society.

The *Veterans Journey Home* project is an initiative of Warrior Films, consisting of five documentaries written and shot by director Frederick Marx. The five documentaries, available on the Warrior Films' website (<https://warriorfilms.org/veterans-journey-home-2/>), are *Solutions* (15 minutes), *Ben's Story* (53 minutes), *Kalani's Story* (30 minutes), *On Black Mountain* (49 minutes), and *Leaving it on the Land* (80 minutes). Each of them explores one aspect of war trauma in veterans, with and without combat experience. By letting the protagonists of his stories speak directly, Marx unfolds touching narratives that trigger empathy and compassion, not only for the veterans but also for their friends and families.

Solutions introduces the series through interviews with counsellors and therapists, including Edward Tick. This first short film introduces the community-based and non-medicalised solutions for healing the psychologically and spiritually injured veterans.

Ben's Story revolves around the experience of Ben Singleton, a former Army Ranger and sniper, challenged by suicidal ideation, divorce, and alcoholism, who fights to reconnect with his family and resume a place of leadership in civilian society.

Kalani's Story introduces Marine Captain Kalani Creutzburg, a divorced, suicidal, and homeless veteran who undertakes a challenging course of transformation through healing circles to get in touch with his emotions and feelings again and find new meaning in his life.

On Black Mountain addresses the problem of gendered violence and abuse in the military by observing the meetings of twenty-two women veterans who learn the tools of meditation and sensory awareness to confront military sexual trauma and the ghosts of war.

Leaving it on the Land concludes the series by following twelve suicidal veterans in their voyage to the mountains, where they are introduced to an ancient 12-day Vision Fast ceremony – out in the wilderness with minimal shelter, fasting, alone – seeking transformation.

The series suggests that several different approaches can be employed to pursue healing, including group therapy, counselling, meditation, storytelling,

and even ancient ritual practises of purification used by Native Americans. The spectrum of suffering shown by the series is broad and includes one form of pain that often remains neglected and underestimated: the burden carried by families, spouses, and friends. Seeing a loved person drifting away in desperation and self-deprecation, abusing substances and craving suicide, breaks the very fabric of family and social bonding, causing an amplification of trauma throughout society. Thus, what looks like a personal problem is, instead, a social issue that must be tackled collectively.

Frederick Marx has recognised the universal value of veterans' ordeal, from which he has extracted stories and teaching of profound compassion. His documentaries are a tribute of gratitude and respect for those veterans who bravely face their demons along the way to wisdom.

Further readings

Gallagher, Neil. 2026. *Incarcerated Veterans*. «BJCL Blog» (23 September). <https://www.bjcl.org/blog/incarcerated-veterans> (accessed 27 October 2026).

Hooper, Charles. 2026. *Suicide Among Veterans*. «American Addiction Centers» (3 June). <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/veterans/suicide-among-veterans> (accessed 27 October 2026).

Miller, Faith. 2021. *Report: Veteran Suicides far Outstrip Combat Deaths in Post-9/11 Wars*. «Colorado Newslines» (21 July). <https://coloradonewslines.com/2021/07/08/report-veteran-suicides-far-outstrip-combat-deaths-in-post-9-11-wars/> (accessed 27 October 2026).

Ramchand, Rajeev. 2022. *Suicide Among Veterans*. «Rand Health Quarterly», 9, 3: 21.

¹ While 7,057 US servicemen and servicewomen have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001, over 30,000 veterans have taken their lives in the following twenty years, as studies suggest (Miller 2021).