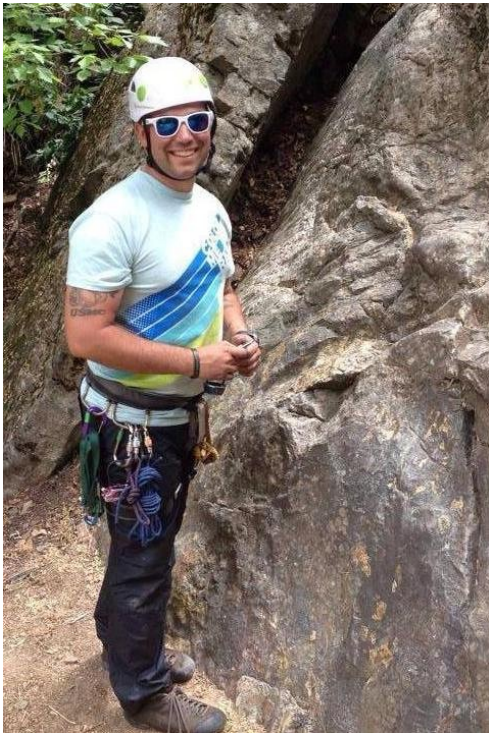


Michael Cumming
Veteran
Director, Operation Climb On

I served almost 12 years on active duty as an infantryman. During that time I served on a couple of combat deployments to Iraq. After leaving active duty in 2011, I faced a lot of the same issues that I've seen many of my friends deal with upon leaving. I was lost and did not feel like I really fit in as a civilian. I began to deal with PTSD type issues and what the Veterans Administration (VA) diagnosed as Survivor's Guilt. I fell into alcohol abuse, lost my family, and became suicidal due to not being able to deal with the memories.



It was at my lowest point that some friends who were veterans realized I wasn't doing well. They came alongside me as my battle buddies to help me fight this new battle which was for my health and soul.

I began going through treatment at the VA and when my counselor learned that I used to be an avid climber I was encouraged to begin climbing again as a healthy hobby to relieve stress and put my focus on. Experiencing the therapy that nature and climbing provides while building camaraderie with other veterans who had similar backgrounds catapulted my life and health back on track.

There is something about both the peacefulness and ruggedness of nature that has a healing effect on me and brings a calmness as well. No matter how stressed out I am, when I get outside and on the rock I'm able to put everything aside and just focus on the puzzle of how to climb this thing. And being out in nature with other veterans is even more healing. We don't even have to talk about our experiences. Just knowing that we all have gone through similar things is enough.

After climbing for a while with other veterans, I began to realize that the battle I faced upon my return to civilian life wasn't all that uncommon in the veteran community. This led me to develop a program that could help my brothers and sisters in arms as well Operation Climb On -- a non-profit therapeutic climbing program for veterans. We use climbing and nature as a therapeutic tool to help build camaraderie, trust, and promote healthy lifestyles within the veteran community.

We couldn't do that effectively without the pristine landscapes that provide the therapeutic backdrop and serenity that is needed. Places like Greater Canyonlands are essential to the services that we provide our veterans. It is very rewarding to our veterans to be able to go to these gorgeous and scenic landscapes and realize that this was part of the America they signed up to defend.