



Trading Combat Boots for Running Shoes: Finding Restorative Nature on Mount Desert Island

By Joseph Miller

On a cool day in November 2005, I sat in the courtyard of a schoolhouse that was serving as a US outpost and looked down at my combat boots. I had just come from the aftermath of a suicide bombing on a crowd of Iraqi civilians, so I was pretty emotionally detached, but when I saw bits of human skin and flesh stuck to my boots, I reacted immediately. I tried to kick the bits off of my feet, but they had been there for a while and were difficult to remove. They clung from one boot to the other until I could finally scrape them off onto the ground. In many ways, I am still trying to scrape the blood from those boots, and I will never really be able to get them clean. From that day forward, I wore those boots on every mission, in the hopes that the bloodstains would wear off during my service abroad. They never came off while I was in Iraq, but I have continued my efforts to wipe them clean on the granite mountains of Mount Desert Island.

On a breezy day in late July 2014, I slogged up the North Bubble Mountain on the twenty-fifth mile and sixth peak of a day's run in which I would cover thirty miles and seven thousand feet of vertical ascent. It was fitting that I was listening to *A Bright Shining Lie*, the classic narrative that describes the hard truths of the Vietnam War, while enjoying what had become my favorite



Captain Joseph Miller returns to a small Iraqi outpost in 2007, following a combat patrol with the Iraqi army during the Surge. Joe had to repair his well-worn boots during his brief leave in order to continue to perform all of his combat patrols in the same footwear. *Photograph by Stephen Booth*

cathartic activity after my return from almost two years of active service in Iraq.¹ Within the first three miles of the run, I sustained a fall that would eventually put me on crutches for over six months. The day was not going according to plan. However, a drink from the crisp, cool water of Jordan Pond reenergized me to finish my private ultra-marathon. I have carried with me the pain and beauty of the day ever since, in the physical scars on my body, and in a newly-gained resolution of mind.

Restorative Nature in American History

America's history is embedded with examples of post-war discoveries of the restorative property of nature. George Washington became a local and international symbol of a leader who returned from the battlefield to his farm, and his life is testament to the power of laboring in nature as a way to restore a veteran's health. During the Revolutionary War, soldiers received land grants as enlistment bonuses, gaining the rights of property ownership, and thus the benefits of working the land, as a way to mend their lives when they returned from battle. In the wake of the American Civil War, restorative nature was in great demand. John Muir advocated for the creation of national parks that would exist not only as unspoiled natural monuments, but also as places of healing for veterans.² In Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park, giant redwoods were named "General Grant" and "General Sherman," symbolically linking the Civil War and the national parks.³ The first Appalachian Trail through-hiker, Earl Shaffer, wanted to walk off the Second World War. Today, organizations in Maine like the Summit Project and Team Red, White, and Blue, emphasize outdoor recreation and commemoration because they recognize the power that exercise and immersion in nature have in post-war reintegration. Nature helps veterans to create new memories and

to develop a new relationship with their sense of place and home.⁴ My experiences in Acadia exist within a broader pattern of a soldier's total dislocation, return, and eventually, of his post-war discovery of peace through nature.

Restoration in Maine and Mount Desert Island

Maine, and Mount Desert Island in particular, were viewed as exceptional places for veterans to feel restored by nature. The National Veterans Home at Togus was selected largely because of its location in Maine and its proximity to farmland.⁵ At the dedication of a cemetery marker in Bar Harbor, a son of a Civil War veteran described the restorative power of the mountains of Mount Desert Island over veterans of the war who "came back as broken reeds."⁶ The dedication described the search for a tribute to the soldiers that would "perpetuate their deeds," recounting the townspeople's suggestion to "place a giant boulder on Green Mountain's lofty peak."⁷ The boulder monument would celebrate nature and would force veterans to experience the beauty of Mount Desert Island and to allow it to restore their health. Families saw that the impressiveness of Green, now Cadillac, Mountain, with its seasons and changes over time, would memorialize the service that Civil War veterans gave to their country. Though the townspeople built a statue, the soldiers are commemorated both by it and by the natural beauty of the surrounding island, and many visitors recognize the ability of mutable nature to celebrate the soldier's contribution.



On Decoration Day, the graves of Civil War dead were adorned with cut flowers rather than the flags used today, and Civil War national monuments were planted with perennial flowers that changed with the season in appearance and fragrance.

Soldiers and Mountains

Mountains and soldiers have been linked across many times and places. Among the rituals of the 506th Regiment of the 101st Airborne division is a run up Toccoa Mountain in northwest Georgia. The regiment symbolically secured edelweiss flowers from defeated German paratroopers, who had a similar connection to the Alps.⁸ The toughest physical phase of a US Army Ranger's training occurs in Dahlenega Georgia, and there it is common for patrols to run into Appalachian hikers. My fellow ranger officer cadets and I ran up Crown Mountain once a week. Throughout the world, elite military units like the Scottish Highlanders and the Nepalese Gurkhas similarly conduct their most challenging training rituals in mountainous terrain.⁹

It is appropriate that the very terrain that hardens soldiers, can also serve as a place of solace and peace for them. For the soldiers of Eden, the author of the pamphlet "Shall we change the name of the town" believed, a monument "from out of Maine granite" would be a fitting representation of the rocks that form the peaks of Mount Desert Island. Mountains, granite, and soldiers all stand "in strength and beauty, defying storm and blast."¹⁰ In Washington, DC, the monument to the Grand Army of the Republic, the Civil War veterans' organization, is likewise granite. It is indifferent to weather, but surrounded by flowers—a combination of strength and fragility that characterizes the post-war soldier. I came to this realization because the monument was the best place to relax and drink a cup of coffee, or

to eat a quick lunch, while on breaks from my research at the National Archives.

How Acadia Helps Restore Me

As a soldier whose defining experiences of military training occurred in the mountains of northern Georgia, I was drawn to Maine as a place to redefine my life following my experiences in combat. When I left the Army, I was offered jobs in the South and at the University of Maine. Because of my southern roots, my family and friends were shocked when I selected the position in Maine. It was the only choice that would allow me to live near mountains, so to me, it was the obvious choice. Initially, I spent most of my time in western Maine. However, when I hiked in Acadia, I knew I was in a special place.

On the day of my long run, the mountains of Acadia National Park became a part of me. The cool water of mountain runoff was inside my body and slowly collected on my skin, just as the fine yet harsh dust of the Iraqi desert had once filled my lungs—dust that I have been forever coughing out of my system, first in Iraq, and then as the asthma that the dust has caused. Mount Desert, like the Iraqi desert, became a significant part of my body. While I could not then, nor will I ever be able to escape the desert, by trail running in the unique environment of Mount Desert Island, I discovered a way to become a part of a more peaceful place. The small pebbles of granite would fall from my boots, get in my clothes, and even embed in my skin after a fall. The place shaped me, adding new scars to old.

Joe Miller running during a 2014 Runner's World photo shoot on South Ridge Trail on Cadillac Mountain. The author typically ran up and down the South Ridge Trail before ultramarathons. His favorite run was from Parkman Mountain to Dorr Mountain. His longest run started at Jordan Pond to the Triad, to Dorr, to Cadillac, to Pemetic, back to Jordan, to North Bubble, to Day, and finishing at Jordan.

Photograph by Roderick Aichinger



When I began my activities on the island, I was wearing the bloodstained boots I wore on every combat mission in Iraq, in the hopes of replacing sanguinary images with mountain vistas. It soon became apparent that the boots would fall apart long before the bloodstains—or my psychological scars—would wear away. In my transition to trail running, my running shoes became symbolic of a life that follows a young adulthood scarred by war.

The imagery of the North Atlantic, the coastal islands, and the concentration of bald mountain peaks make it a geography unlike any other in the world. It is a place where I can purify water from Cannon Brook at eight in the morning

and eat exceptional barbeque at the Atlantic Brewing Company at lunch. A place where, in the early spring, with a pair of gaiters and micro spikes, I was as alone as I could be in the most remote wilderness reservations. A daylong hike is as easy to set up as a thirty-mile trail run. The hydrology of the area has made long, spring-supplied minimalist trail runs more feasible than they are in western Maine. Multi-peak runs provided an added satisfaction when I noticed surprised looks from other hikers as I ran by on difficult terrain. On an eighteen-miler from Parkman Mountain to Dorr Mountain, I could see the ground I covered and gain perspective. Long solitary days in the mountains could not replace the bloody images of combat, but they could add splendor. Mount Desert Island was a place where I could be alone most of the day, yet civilization was



always close enough to make running alone safe. A quiet day in Acadia did a lot more for me than a trip to the therapist's office could have done.

While running on the peaks of Acadia, I often intentionally listened to music that reminded me of my days in Iraq, and I would purposely recall my worst memories. The memories did not go away, but I could gain perspective in the mountains. My life was preserved in those boots more times than I could count. And yet, my boots were symbols of survival; things that made me feel guilty. While I survived, people who, in my mind, were better than I was, had not. Unlike those combat boots, my trail runners made me feel better about loss. When I was running multiple peaks in Mount Desert, I was living my life to the fullest. I felt like all the friends I had lost, all the Iraqis I had watched die, would be pleased with me. Those days in the mountains were days when I was doing their memory justice; I was pushing myself to my limits to experience the maximum amount of beauty possible in a day in the mountains. The tough slog of moving fast in the mountains—the physical discomfort that it took to see the landscape this way—was balanced with my experience of visiting some of the most beautiful mountain vistas in the world. Many people come to Mount Desert Island, but few get up on top of more than five peaks in one day. The beauty, the scenery, and the difficulty of experiencing it, helped me to measure the ways that the loss and the guilt that I felt from experiencing war had helped me to become a better person. It is impossible to take away the bad things

that I have experienced, but, by adding more quiet, beautiful, and strenuous days in the mountains, those horrible days have become less powerful. Now when I look at my trail runners and then at my combat boots, I see a continuity of inner strength that carried me through some of my best and worst days.

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