

The VIA way: Post-Traumatic Growth

Billy MacLeod, Chief Operations Officer at Veterans In Action, explains how the organisation is helping Veterans to rebuild confidence, self-esteem and self-belief.

Veterans In Action (VIA) has been operating as a registered charity since January 2009, helping Veterans and their families who have suffered the effects of war or who have found the transition to civilian life difficult. But we are aware the wider Veteran community may not have heard of us.

From the outset, we have tried to ensure our work does not replicate services already provided by other organisations.

In our early years, VIA undertook long-distance walking expeditions across the UK, called the Union Flag Walks, with each walk forming a part of the Union Flag. Between 2010 and 2015, more than 500 Veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other mental health issues took part in these walks, covering 13,500 miles.

In 2013, we moved into new headquarters just outside Andover in Hampshire, where we began to

develop the ALIVE Centre. This includes a vehicle workshop, a workshop for garment printing and embroidery, an exercise suite, project room and fully equipped kitchen.

Our main and most visible project involves Veterans stripping and rebuilding Land Rovers to get them to expedition standard. These



vehicles are then used for overland expeditions and humanitarian aid missions. All our other projects surround this main activity.

Since 2018, we have enabled Veterans to travel across 30 countries

on overland expeditions. The humanitarian aid thread took centre stage during the pandemic, when our expedition vehicles were used to deliver food and essential household items to more than 6,000 people.

More recently, they have been used to deliver 14 tonnes of medical supplies to Poland for onward delivery to Ukraine.

At VIA, we take a long-term, non-therapy approach to mental health, using the outdoors, adventure activities, centre-based projects and expeditions to help Veterans rebuild their confidence and self-belief.

Our projects are based on a decade's study of post-traumatic growth. Our Veterans participate in tried and tested projects that enable them to grow within a team of peers in what is their new mission: helping themselves by helping others.

The onus is on the individual to make the changes so they can move forward. We are proud to be at the forefront of post-traumatic growth – the only Veterans organisation using it to overcome mental health issues.

The very nature of PTSD means people can become very isolated. Our projects put Veterans in a group with their peers to help them replace stress with growth. The first thing we do is to get them to come in and talk to us. That's the most important step on the path to recovery.

Our ALIVE Centre headquarters is set in a beautiful private estate seven miles from Andover. This environment, including walks through woodland and the Hampshire countryside, helps Veterans to de-stress as soon as they



MAIN IMAGE: Travelling through Bosnia with a group of Veterans suffering from PTSD, 2018
INSET: VIA Land Rover workshop

enter the estate. We then use our ALIVE Programme, developed over 15 years, to help Veterans grow at their own pace by participating in projects run at the ALIVE Centre and the surrounding area or on long-distance expeditions.

Over the past 14 years, VIA projects and expeditions have given structure and a sense of achievement to those prone to serious bouts of depression or who feel socially isolated in the civilian world. They offer a non-therapy process that uses the initial rapport of Veterans working with Veterans to build trust between the VIA team and those taking part.

This allows barriers to be broken down quickly and is key to improving mood and stress levels. Working as part of a team at a level consistent with ability promotes confidence, a sense of purpose and self-respect.

Although challenging, Veterans join an environment where they instantly feel relaxed, secure and safe to work at their own pace to build something positive. Most important, they find their problems are understood. ▶

Get in touch



If you'd like to get involved in our work or need our support, please email: info@Veteransinaction.org.uk

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A Walk & Talk session at the VIA Centre

ALIVE Programme: ACHIEVE | LEARN | INSPIRE | VALUE | EXPERIENCE

Service personnel are well versed in achieving results, often beyond their expectations, but on leaving the Services some lose sight of this. By joining the ALIVE Programme, our Veterans begin to learn again that, despite what they may be going through, they can still achieve remarkable things and grow as individuals or in a team, as they did in the military.

• **ACHIEVE** We encourage participants to recognise their achievements, no matter how small they believe these are. Our test is to get our Veterans to ask themselves whether they could have completed a task before – a day, a week or a year ago. If the answer is no, then they can celebrate moving forward.

• **LEARN** Experiential learning is a large part of all our lives. When undertaking any project or challenge, small or large, we need to reflect and plan ahead to move forward positively. Any challenge is a challenge of self-confidence and self-esteem on many levels, so a substitute is required – namely passion and intensity. At VIA, we focus on the idea that the best way to learn things is through actually having experiences. Those experiences then stick out in the mind and help you retain information and remember facts. The ALIVE Programme lends itself to all of that.

• **INSPIRE** When serving, we are surrounded by those who inspire us to achieve more. On leaving the Services, we can find it hard to find that same inspiration. The ALIVE Programme provides a setting for Veterans to be inspired by emulating characteristics such as self-awareness and confidence, learning how to overcome challenges and cope under stress. Inspiring others plays a pivotal role in the programme – through the right leadership skills, Veterans can provide structure and stimulus to all those around them, even during difficult times.

• **VALUE** An appreciation of usefulness or worth helps those in the ALIVE Programme determine what is important to them. It also provides a sense of purpose and achievement, such as taking part on an expedition or helping those in crisis. For us, value is ultimately about gaining self-worth.

• **EXPERIENCE** Those who have served in the military have a distinct set of experiences that have moulded the way we think and act. For some, these experiences can have a negative impact on how they live their lives. The ALIVE Programme enables Veterans to harness skills learned in the military in a positive way by immersing themselves on our long-term projects to help those they are working with.

