

# Unlikely Recruits - Hope for Veterans Haunted by PTSD

By Becky Streeter

In late August, Toni Mattson, founder of Trinity Equestrian Center in Eau Claire, released her first book compiled of very personal and very true stories from veterans. The book titled *Unlikely Recruits: How God Enlists Horses to Heal Veterans*, is already receiving acclamations, but that is not Mattson's desire for her novel. Mattson wrote *Unlikely Recruits* to provide hope to veterans.

*Unlikely Recruits* is a labor of love in many different aspects. Containing 20 stories, Mattson addresses a range of intense topics including suicide, substance abuse, and military sexual trauma. Mattson cherished her experiences with veterans while leading the programs at Trinity, then painstakingly and carefully penned those experiences into words over the past four years. Mattson says, "Each story is inspired by true events, gathered over my time of working with horses and my reliance on faith. I've had an astounding front-row seat to witness and participate in the miraculous changes realized by these brave, but broken veterans. Stories about hope and healing, grace and redemption, and the often agonizing journey that paves the groundwork for their personal transformation and triumph."



Mattson recognizes that everyone has a story, and veterans often have no intention of telling theirs. When veterans arrive at Trinity, they are there as a last resort. The heroes that show up there have all but given up. And then they meet the horses. "Veterans often readily trust the horse," Mattson says. "The horse doesn't judge them and won't lie to them—none of the things humans tend to do. They start to connect with the horse, and once a relationship is formed, the trust starts to spill over to the human team." And it's that point of trust where Mattson and the Trinity team can begin to help the veteran maneuver the process of healing.

*Unlikely Recruits* is not only about the trials of the veterans, but more importantly about their triumphs. "These are depictions of the hell they went and continue to go through, but also the amazing story of their victory," Mattson says. "The stories are really about what happens when veterans are courageous enough to say they need help, and that they are willing to step into that journey." Mattson wanted

to give these veterans a voice, and in so doing, give other veterans hope. "I wanted to give them proof to see that it's real," she says. "And show them it's possible to find healing, experience it, feel it, be restored and redeemed—everything they so, so badly need."

Though the audience of the book is geared primarily toward struggling veterans, it is also meaningful for anyone who has ever known a veteran. "This is a book anyone can learn from and begin to understand veterans better," says Mattson. It's not just stories, but a resource. In her Author's Note at the end of each chapter, Mattson lists websites, books, programs and/or tips for anyone to use if they are looking for more information on that particular topic.

Mattson is frequently asked, "Why horses, why veterans, and why God?" In response, she says, "I share our devotion to veterans to honor our father and how he struggled with PTSD. Why horses—because of our deep love and respect for them, and because of the remarkable teammates they are. And why God—because only He can truly transform hearts and minds."

The following is an excerpt from Toni Mattson's *Unlikely Recruits*, the chapter entitled "Battle Buddy":

"I can't sleep. Can't eat. And I sure can't forget. They said it'd get better, but it's not," growled Duncan, a 43-year-old, four-time deployed Army veteran.

"Every night I'm back in the sandbox, on patrol with Karl." Karl was his only boyhood buddy and best man at his wedding. "He demanded to take the lead that night." Duncan buried his face in his hands and continued.

"Karl stopped, turned to me and whispered, 'Did you hear that?' and BOOM, there was an ear-splitting blast, and he was gone." Duncan's voice cracked and trailed off.

Survivor's guilt mixed with haunting nightmares serves up a dangerous cocktail. Their recurrences torment countless combat veterans, making them easy targets to seek amnesia from pills or alcohol.

"I can't live like this anymore," Duncan insisted. "It's been four years and every single night it repeats, like a broken record. This isn't living."

It was our eleventh week when we decided it was time for the game Keep Out. Our instructions were straight-forward. "Use what you can reach in the arena to create a barrier. A bunker that you will keep your horse out of."

We needed Duncan to understand that his attempt to keep a twelve-hundred-pound animal away from his coveted grain was as impossible as it was to keep his adrenaline-addicted Army buddy from ignoring all obvious signs of danger and darting to his death.

Duncan pushed on his horse BB's chest, shouting and swearing at the top of his lungs. Duncan ultimately threw his body in front of the horse, attempting to stop him, and "save his life," but nothing stopped BB. The horse pushed right by Duncan.

Struggling for air, Duncan mumbled, "I couldn't stop him, not when he got in that mood. No matter what, he'd never listen to me when he was like that."

There it was. The lie Duncan believed for years was revealed. The truth was, Karl's addiction to the adrenaline blasting through his blood stream caused him to do dangerous, unpredictable, and irresponsible things that ultimately led to his death. Duncan didn't cause it, and could've stopped it.

Duncan spent twenty-three weeks with us. Working with BB was cathartic for him. His nightmares subsided, until having one was a blue-moon event. He proudly admitted BB changed his life, and that survival sometimes comes down to simply putting one foot in front of the other, over and over. And he admitted, some of the best teachers in life don't need to speak to teach.

For more information, visit Mattson's website at [Tonimattson.com](http://Tonimattson.com). *Unlikely Recruits* can be purchased from Amazon, and all proceeds go to support the veteran wellness programs at Trinity Equestrian Center. All programs are always free to veterans and their families.

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