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10 YEARS AT THE BATTLE BACK CENTRE

Research informed practice in military recovery support



“The research gives us a really solid base to be able to make funding decisions from and it feeds into the way in which we strategically review our services and into the long-term strategy of the Legion in terms of where it spends its money and where we think it’s going to get the most impact. Having that body of evidence to support such decisions is invaluable”

Antony Baines, Executive Director of Operations at RBL

2011 - 2012

The Battle Back (BB) project

The Battle Back (BB) project is a unique Royal British Legion (RBL) initiative, a flagship towards delivering a significant commitment to modern day service Personnel on Recovery Duty (PRD) and veterans. It was set up following a drastic increase in UK military deployment to war zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq which occurred in the early 21st century, causing an increased need in support for recovering personnel. In 2011 RBL commissioned Leeds Beckett University’s (LBU) Carnegie Great Outdoors (CGO) to design and deliver a supportive recovery course for service PRD with mental or physical illnesses. Carnegie School of Sport (CSS) were commissioned to carry out the evaluation of the course.

The Multi Activity Course (MAC) was designed to involve adaptive adventurous activities and sport, alongside health coaching, to help attendees achieve their best possible recovery and either return to service or make a smooth transition to civilian life. The process involved consultations with expert practitioners and academics as well as a review of existing literature. This approach provided insight into key elements for consideration to create effort-driven, custom-built challenges to facilitate personal development and growth. It documented important considerations around; activities & sports, physical connectedness, the environment, staff and opportunity to process meaning from an experience. This research created the blueprint for the first pilot courses at RBL’s Battle Back Centre (BBC) and as the reputation of the centre has grown, with CGOs delivery at the heart of the success, it is fast becoming the leading recovery centre in the UK.

To deliver such a bespoke intervention the CGO staff must be highly skilled, able to react to change at every step and have the strength of character to deal with demanding situations. Working in closely knit Coaching Teams, led by a Course Director and supported by a Technical Advisor, the staff are fully immersed in each course and totally committed to every individual participant who arrives at the centre. Many of the staff have been deeply involved in the growth of the courses since the centre launched in 2011, often driving the success. The content of the course has been carefully designed and fine-tuned; the mix offers physical, emotional, and mental aspects with the key focus on Self Determination.

The skills and experience the Coaching Team brings to the centre are incredibly varied, with qualifications from executive business coaching to high level outdoor activities. The Coaching Team brings together staff with wide-ranging backgrounds from extreme expeditions to art psychotherapy, adaptive sport to adventure racing. They are a gender-balanced team with both military and civilian backgrounds, their diversity and vast experience has been central to the continual development, refreshing and updating of the course, to maintain the Centre’s cutting edge approach to meet the changing needs of the participants. The ideas, experiences, and the alternative work that the CGO staff engage in outside of the project, bring a wealth of inspiration and knowledge to the courses to benefit every individual attending.

The impact of this course has been ground-breaking with outstanding feedback from all angles. The research team who works closely alongside CGO, has a wealth of data that support the positive impact the course has on participants. The essential environment for success, which is set by the CGO Coaching Staff, allows a high-quality symbiotic relationship between delivery and research which feeds directly into driving the staff development and enhancing every course.



Throughout this report there are web-links to research articles and supporting documents. To access these, you will need to view the digital version of this document which can be accessed via leedsbeckett.ac.uk/the-battle-back-centre/



2013

Carnegie Great Outdoors - Health Coaching

Health coaching delivered by CGO staff has been widely used to support individuals in initiating changes in their behaviour to improve physical and/or mental health. Over the five days of a MAC, each participant works with the same highly skilled coach, yielding ~50 hours of contact. CGO use of health coaching aims to increase self-awareness, to harness meaningful motivation connected to personal values, to help achieve realistic goals and to adopt a resilient and confident mindset as they work towards implementing healthy behaviours to promote their recovery. Within-session discussions are used to complement and refine end-of-day reflections, which then contribute to end-of-course planning for post-MAC life. It is important to emphasize the distinctiveness of how CGO staff develop a supportive relationship with participants, compared to that between clinicians and patients. Linguistically, a clinician treats patients, a coach helps clients to help themselves. A clinician may strive to have all the right answers for a patient, coaches strive to help their client find their own answers. A clinician-patient relationship relies on the skills and knowledge of the expert and is often unidirectional, the coach-client relationship builds on the client's selfawareness, personal values, and insights. During the MAC, the health coaching approach is the foundation - beyond the adaptive adventurous activities and sport - in delivering a participant-centred experience aimed at encouraging and equipping participants to improve their health and promote immediate, mid, and long-term self-management.

Encouraging Self Determination at Battle Back

The MAC design and delivery derives from the principles of Self Determination Theory (SDT). The SDT proposes all humans have three basic psychological needs; competence, autonomy and relatedness.



COMPETENCE

Competence concerns our achievements, knowledge, and skills: individuals have a need to build competence and develop mastery over tasks important to them. Sport offers a rich context for experiencing competence at a range of levels.



AUTONOMY

Autonomy is the need for individuals to feel in control of their lives and future. This centres on individuals making their own decisions. Battle Back coaches encourage 'challenge by choice'.



RELATEDNESS

Given the human imperative for feeling a sense of belonging and connectedness with others, relatedness is the third SDT theme.

Coaching approach: All CGO staff embed the SDT principles in their support with participants throughout their health coaching at Battle Back; this is the foundation to initiating positive change in participants' well-being.

Expanding the use of sport in recovery support through the development of Skills Courses

Participants who have attended a MAC and found health benefits in a specific sport or activity can return on a Skills Course, which focuses on one activity for an entire week. This allows additional understanding of how they may integrate this activity into their lives beyond their time at the centre, and in some cases acquire foundation level leadership qualifications. The Skills Courses provided alter based on the demand from MAC participants and reported benefits from attending. Skills courses have included;

Fishing
Wheelchair Basketball
Indoor Climbing
Road Biking
Mountain Biking – [View impact report](#)

Paddlesports
Golf
Archery
Outdoor Climbing – [View impact report](#)

PUBLICATIONS

The first scientific article reporting the benefits of the MAC published.

Psychosocial outcomes of an inclusive adapted sport and adventurous training course for military personnel – David Carless, Suzanne Peacock, Jim McKenna & Carlton Cooke

This research presented meaningful psychosocial outcomes reported by military personnel who had experienced physical and/or psychological disability that attended a MAC. The course helped participants recover aspects of their previous life and self through becoming physically active again, rediscovering a sense of purpose and reconnecting to others. Participants describe a broadening of life horizons because of the course, through new activities, being valued/ respected/cared for, and being inspired by other people.

[View this article](#)

Battle Back research published in the journal of Disability and Rehabilitation





2014

Taking Battle Back recovery support to the mountains - The Cotopaxi Expedition

In 2014 the first expedition was launched from the BBC; a mountaineering expedition to Ecuador, led by highly experienced CGO expedition leaders and mountaineers, in partnership with the All Party Parliamentary Group. The expedition's main aim was to give a group of serving and new veteran soldiers, who recently attended the BBC, the opportunity to participate in an adventurous and challenging expedition to enhance their recovery and future development. The expedition also aimed to highlight and support Battle Back and the need for increased awareness and support for those injured in conflict. The expedition's mountaineering objectives included 5 summits culminating in the summit of Cotopaxi, an active volcano standing 5897m above sea level. This was a demanding challenge, requiring technical glacier travel, mountaineering skills and a high level of acclimatisation.

CGO led staff training

Introduced at the beginning of the project, staff training focuses on mental health training, practical skills, qualifications, and operational updates. Organised and led by CGO this provides an opportunity for the entire Battle Back staff team to meet, upskill and update and is offers a further chance for the successful integration of research and practice. Information gathered from participants through the research process regarding their perceptions of all elements of the course and opinions on where improvements could be made all feed into the development of each bespoke staff training. These interactive sessions have utilised an extremely innovative range of training from detailed technical adaptive skills to in depth mental health, from Dream Intervention training to lessons from blind football, all aimed at ensuring the staff remain at the forefront of recovery. In recent years role play has been used to great success, led by the Leeds Beckett University Course Director of Psychological Therapies and employing professional actors to create realistic scenarios for practice and discussion. Novel pertinent research relevant to military recovery support is shared throughout the training and updates on strategy, health and safety are presented by the major stakeholders.

PUBLICATIONS

Narrative Transformation Among Military Personnel on an Adventurous Training and Sport Course – David Carless

This paper uses a dialogical narrative approach to understand how participation in the MAC promoted personal development, affected soldiers' personal stories, psychosocial wellbeing, identity, and future life horizons. The stories relate to participants' lives in the wake of injury and/or trauma, their experiences during the intervention, and their projections for the future.

[View this article](#)

Disability, inclusive adventurous training, and adapted sport: Two soldiers' stories of involvement – David Carless, Andrew C. Sparkes, Kitrina Douglas & Carlton Cooke

Creative nonfiction offers an alternative approach to qualitative data analysis, this research offered new insights into disabled soldiers' experience of a MAC. Personal stories reveal subjectivities, meaning, and biographical connections. Stories can preserve complexity to support plural understandings of individuals and collaborative storytelling sharing constitutes an ethical act of witnessing.

[View this article](#)

2015

Novel research methods adopted at Battle Back

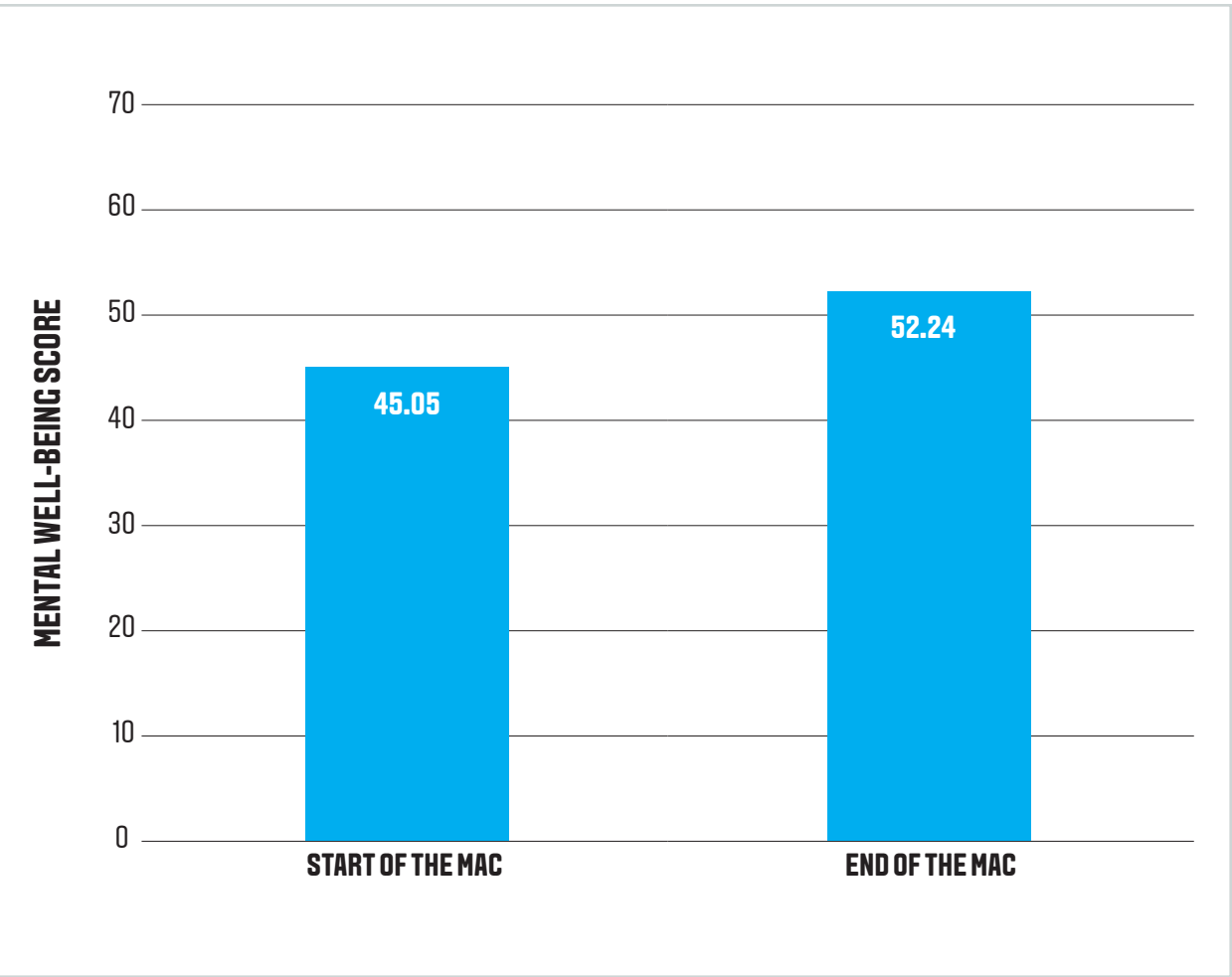
Quantitative measures of MAC participants’ mental health were taken before and after attending a MAC between 2012-2015, 971 participants showed an average increase of 15.9% in positive mental well-being during the course.

More individualised, qualitative research was also conducted in this time. The courses were found to stimulate a balance of present- and future-oriented psychosocial outcomes for participants; rediscovering aspects of themselves lost through their injury or illness and moving forward with their lives adopting new activities. Findings suggested course involvement had positive short-term outcomes for psychological well-being and development of the participants.

First MAC Level 2 designed and delivered

Having delivered a number of courses CGO identified there would be value in offering the next step on from the MAC for attendees who connected with the course ethos and content and wanted to learn in more detail.

The psycho-educational content of the MACs is explored further with participants. Additional activities such as inclusive skiing provide new opportunities to be challenged in a safe environment. Other, often unfamiliar holistic activities such as yoga & meditation are also undertaken.



2016

Longitudinal research begins

In November 2016, following approval from the Ministry of Defence (MOD) research ethics committee, LBU began a longitudinal impact study of the MACs on participants mental well-being and health-related behaviours. Participants are invited to contribute research data at four time points over 12 months after attending a course (2 weeks, then 3, 6 & 12 months after).

Four-year MAC impact report informs future delivery

As the project became well-established under the careful management of CGO, a consolidation impact report was produced compiling health and well-being research data captured in the weekly reports from each course since 2012.

Families Resilience course pilot

The first Families Activity Course (FAC) was held at the BBC in August 2016. The group consisted of 13 participants; seven PRD and six relatives completed the initial survey. The residential course included indoor climbing, caving, and wheelchair basketball together with health coaching and daily evaluations.

The course was rated as beneficial by all participants and compared favourably to other recovery courses, allowing for opportunities for them and their family members to try something new, overcome challenge and achieve.

Many attendees of the first FAC commented the course was too short and suggested the duration should be between four and five days to allow for more coaching sessions and recovery.

The FAC was acknowledged for its unique nature in incorporating the family unit, which brought an added element of enjoyment and a feeling of closeness for many of the PRD personnel and relatives. This was due to participating alongside their relatives, as well as seeing and supporting their family members through challenge and achievement. Positive changes in wellbeing, basic psychological needs and resilience were also experienced.

PUBLICATIONS

Narrating embodied experience: sharing stories of trauma and recovery – David Carless & Kitrina Douglas

This paper explores the use of a dialogical storytelling approach in researching another person’s embodied experience. Consideration is given to how (a) different ways of communicating with participants during the research process, and (b) diverse ways of representing participant experiences, can support more potent insights into embodied experience.

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“The Battle Back Centre has been the only course that has aided me and my family. A unique and exceptionally valuable experience that the wider MoD needs to recognise”

“We had a great time here and would love to come back, it was so good to see my children so happy and relaxed and have no worries or stress for a few days. We would love to come back and hope this course continues to run, definitely one of the best courses I have ever been on in the 21 years I have served !”

“Before our arrival I was apprehensive about my family undertaking some of the events and how they would cope with the strain. But through the coaching and working together I was surprised and happy with how well we did. I would recommend this course to couples and families alike and would return again. It should definitely continue”

2017

Mid-contract review and five-year contract extension to 2022 agreed

CGO's highly successful delivery capability and the CSSs ongoing research on the recovery courses continues to feed into RBL's annual strategic decisions on its armed forces support services. Like many commissioning organisations, evidence is important to support financial outlays and inform decisions on future spending priorities. Antony Baines, Executive Director of Operations at RBL corroborates: "When you look at Battle Back over a period of eight years, it actually makes quite an impact having all that evidence. [LBU's] research gives you a real solid base to be able to make funding decisions from and it feeds into the way in which we strategically review our services into the long-term strategy of the Legion in terms of where it spends its money and where I think it's going to get the most impact."

Research informs RAF decision to mandate the MAC for their recovering personnel.

LBU's research on UK armed forces recovery policy is further evidenced in the RAF's decision to mandate the course for their PRD in 2017. At the time, the RAF had 238 personnel in recovery; the number of RAF PRD personnel had increased every year since 2014 and more than doubled since 2010. This decision further increased the impact reach to another PRD population. Wing Commander Mike Bowditch explained how LBU research informed this decision, "In my role when I am making decisions about how we are going to direct and implement policy the existence of evidence plays a key role. We used the research studies from Leeds Beckett University at the time as a key reason for us mandating the requirement to attend the Battle Back course. The evidence in the studies confirmed the anecdotal evidence we had from talking to our Service People who attended the course that it had a substantial impact on their outlook on life, reframing their negative perceptions of their injuries to be more positive and resulted in massive improvements to their mental health and wellbeing."

Lessons from MACs extended to help veterans

Until 2017, recovery support was delivered to PRD personnel who were in-service. Considering the future potential for supportive courses, RBL commissioned the delivery of bespoke courses for military veterans. Antony Baines explained the decision rationale: "The consistency of the research has helped the Legion continue funding MACs, but it also gives confidence to look at expanding the remit into things like veterans' courses". Impact for veteran participants – On average, veteran participants mental well-being scores were below the national average upon course arrival. 171 veteran participants have shown an average increase of 50% in their positive mental well-being by course completion, bringing this average up to 19% higher than national average because of attending the Battle Back course. Since May 2019, participants have been invited to take part in a long-term follow up study to understand the impact the course has had on their life since attending. 213 data sets have been provided by veterans in this follow up study. Which has identified a sustainable increase of 24% in mental well-being scores of those participants three months later.

[Click to read the report](#)

Supportive courses for Junior Soldiers, based on MACs, become regular feature in Army foundation training

Having read LBUs research as well as witnessing the impact of the courses during his time at Army Recovery Capability, the now Commanding Officer of the British Army Foundation College believed junior soldiers may also benefit from this type of support. He used LBU's research evidence to gain permission from Army Regional Command for supportive courses for Junior Soldiers to be delivered. "The previous (LBU) research that I read was very influential in my decision to try and support courses for junior soldiers because I thought I can sell the argument, not just based on my recommendation, but actually pointing to facts and figures". Impact of the pilot course on the twenty-one 16–18-year-old Junior Soldiers was researched by LBU. The soldiers reported an average increase of 19% in their mental well-being scores. One soldier said: "I now feel 100% ready to seek out things I'm not confident in, do them, gain confidence in that and move on to the next thing for me to develop".

Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hall further corroborated the impact of LBU's research: "Your report came in and it added objectivity to what we hoped and suspected would be a really worthwhile course. That then allowed me to go back to my Chain of Command as well as Commander of The Initial Training Group and say, I think we've proved it, you can't argue with the objective nature of the report, we'd like to get this established on a permanent footing, expand it, and find the time within training to send them on it.". Two courses per year have now been agreed in perpetuity, allowing 48 Junior Soldiers to benefit annually; a decision based on LBU's research.

Follow up research evidenced fewer Junior Soldiers were considering leaving the army. The financial impact on the MOD was explained by Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hall "the greatest impact you could have on the Army's quality and quantity would be to retain a Harrogate junior soldier and that's what your research has contributed to. Given that costs for training can be up to £90k per head, a reduction in wastage of 11 recruits equates to a financial saving of just under £1 million. For the first course we expected to lose 60% of that cohort and I think in the end we only lost less than 20%. The only difference between that cohort and the previous cohort was that they had been through the Battle Back course, so you can link the two together".

[Click to read the report](#)



"Given that costs for training can be up to £90k per head, a reduction in wastage of 11 recruits equates to a financial saving of just under £1 million."

Lt Col Rich Hall MBE, Commanding Officer of the Army Foundation College (Harrogate) 2017-2020"



"For those that are sceptical about it all, all I have to say is that I am proof that it works!"

Junior Soldier, 6 months after Battle Back

2018

Long term impact of the MACs becomes clear

Between 2017-2018, 759 participants reported an average increase of 33% in their mental well-being scores by the end of the course. An 82% greater increase seen in participants between 2012-2015 (18%). This indicates that not only have the courses been consistently beneficial but that its impact on well-being is heightening. The repetition of the of the well-being measures provided by participants showed a statistically significant and sustainable improvement in their scores in the 12 months following the course. The average mental well-being scores of the contributing participants was significantly higher at every time point after attending a course than the average score before the course. An increase in a person's well-being score of at least 3 represents meaningful change for an individual. The average increase over 12 months for course participants is 5.2.

The attribution of the course to these improvements in mental well-being was considered through additional research questioning; 89% of respondents indicated that the personal impact of the MAC was "positive or mostly positive" 12 months after attending. 75% reported making "changes in their day-to-day life since attending 12 months ago". 40% of these changes related to having a "negative mindset", "worrying about things out of their control", "bottling things up", "being hard" on themselves or "avoiding thoughts and feelings". 15% had stopped "finding excuses" and were now "taking responsibility for their recovery", "stopped isolating themselves" and/or "feeling less self-pity".

CGO lead Battle Back recovery in the mountains- The Mission Himalaya expedition & research

The second Battle Back expedition launched from the centre in October 2018. Organised and led by CGO it also included a five-year longevity study to research the lasting impact. With a team of 10 veterans and three serving personnel, the expedition's purpose was to support participants' personal recovery and growth as well as commemorate the centenary of the end of the first world war. The expedition involved a 23-day trek in the Nepalese Himalaya, including an attempt to summit Mera Peak (6476 m/21,247 ft).




The practicalities of the research project included:

- Recorded interviews prior to, during and after the expedition for five years.
- Assessment of psychometric aspects of mental well-being at each of the research time points.
- Participant observations and field notes throughout the expedition.

There were 11 months between the release of the adverts for Mission Himalaya 2018 and the beginning of the expedition. This included four training weekends for the participants, a two-day launch event and several communications with the coaching staff who were supporting them. The expedition had already become a big part of their lives before any of the participants had even left for Nepal.

During the expedition, leaders, who were all experienced CGO Battle Back health coaches, facilitated reflective practices with the beneficiaries throughout, focusing on experiential transfer to day-to-day lives after the expedition. Throughout the expedition team members became more functional, resourceful, and capable. The research focus over the five-year follow up period is to gain a deeper understanding of the wider challenges the participants face and how this experience has helped them.



The routines established during the preparation stage and during the expedition itself activated a renewed energy for personal improvement. At 18 months post-expedition, the key changes were;

- Altered perspective
- Improved relationships with other
- Improved self-worth and confidence in decision making
- Employment skills and work-life balance
- Increased physical activity and enhanced personal awareness

[Click to view the research article](#)

"I don't know if I am being totally truthful, but not a day goes by when I don't think about something about that trip. It's still in my brain and my head and my thinking process. I think of something about it every single day. I don't want to get it out of my head, I am glad it's there; and so, it makes me smile sometimes, it makes me think a bit deeper and also, on occasions it can bring a tear to my eye as well."

"Before I went out to the Himalayas, I was getting quite anxious about becoming a Veteran. But having achieved reaching High Camp... It's ingrained in me now that I can achieve anything that I want to. It's also given me a sense of inner calm, which helps me to think more clearly about things."

"I can only thank the Battle Back Centre and the Royal British Legion for giving me the opportunity to be part of the team that went out to the Himalayas."

Battle Back included in the EU Benefits of Outdoor Sports for Society Project (BOSS)

What is the BOSS project?

The European wide BOSS project was designed to help organisations research the social value of their interventions/projects. It engaged with existing outdoor sports projects that seek to build social capital or develop social change in individuals or communities through the use of outdoor sports. The contributing organisations helped to develop a Toolkit that guides anyone who is developing or managing outdoor sports to better understand the impact of their project."

[Interactive summary of the BOSS project](#)



How was Battle Back Involved?

LBU was invited by The European Outdoor Group to submit Battle Back as a case study. It was accepted as one of only 12 projects from across Europe. Battle Back was chosen as one of the underpinning case studies to develop a toolkit to help others research their projects. The case studies focused on the testing and evaluating of the process that had been designed. Our research and testing of the method contributed to the toolkit development.

[Battle Back Case Study Infographic](#) [Findings from the Case Study testing](#)

What has happened with the Toolkit?

The dissemination of the BOSS project was targeted to four key sectors:

- The political sector: Including the European Commission and both central and regional authorities that have a remit for the development of sport and/or social integrations/development.
- The National sports sectors including European and National federations as well as voluntary clubs and grass roots providers of outdoor sports.
- The academic sector through publication of findings in academic journals and conferences
- Commercial sector through the European Outdoor Group who bring together the main manufacturers and the outdoor industry

[Final BOSS Toolkit](#)

Second Battle Back PhD studentship awarded

Deliberately developmental experiences routinely struggle to generate learning transfer in alternate settings and situations. These often involve considerable human resource and financial investment. Although transfer-informed practice (TiP) is controversial and rarely considered within programme delivery, this approach can amplify learning transfer outcomes. Consequently, several TiP concepts were created by combining evidence from relevant sectors including psychology, cognitive psychology, adult learning theory, learning and development, education, and behavioural science. These ideas were explored with practitioners at the Battle Back Centre, alongside the unique experiences of

military veterans. Action Research guided this process across four phases including (1) contextual sense making, (2) identifying evidence and gaps, (3) preparing for implementation, and (4) experimentation and evaluation. Data capture included a series of face-to-face and remote focus groups with forty-eight practitioners, in-depth telephone interviews with five military veterans and one spouse, and five observations of the residential programme, totalling 230 hours. The findings were explored across four main themes including (1) Meta Learning: Learning about Learners Past, Present, and Future, (2) Tailoring Programme Delivery to Users, (3) Developing Cognitive Infrastructure/Capital, and (4) Negotiating Transfer Counter Forces. Future recommendations include additional in-depth discussions with veterans' post experience to better understand various transfer trajectories, since Covid-19 and programme interruption prevented this. Similarly, practitioners should be supported to implement further TiPs, with the effectiveness of each considered. Alongside this, additional experimentation should occur with post experience support. Efforts could generate more gradual transitions to everyday contexts, extended programme impact, additional learning retention, enhanced transfer outcomes, and increased behavioural influence.

PUBLICATIONS

Inclusive adapted sport and adventure training programme in the PTSD recovery of military personnel:

A creative non-fiction – Suzanne Peacock, David Carless & Jim McKenna

This paper uses creative non-fiction to explore the meaning and value of the MAC for participants who are experiencing mental health problems and explored the fictional representation considering judgement criteria.

[View this article](#)

The Impact of an Outdoor and Adventure Sports Course on the Wellbeing of Recovering UK Military Personnel:

An Exploratory Study – Mariana Kaiseler, Chris Kay & Jim McKenna

This study offers a unique contribution to the OA literature by providing follow-up data of change following a bespoke, theoretically oriented course aiming to enhance the personal development of PRD UK MP. It analyses physical and mental wellbeing benefits participants have described 6 months after attending a Multi Activity Course at the Battle Back Centre.

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2019

Positive Behaviour change for MAC participants

LBU have also shown the long-term impact of the course on participants' ability to make changes in their day-to-day life through the lens of psychological well-being. This research identified course elements that satisfy the participants' basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. The behaviour changes reported by 97 participants six months after the course were predominantly aligned with improved psychological well-being. This meaningful change in mental well-being and positive behaviour is exemplified in these example quotes from participants, 12 months after attending a course.

"The Battle Back course has probably saved my life. What I have been through in the last 18 months is probably hard to believe."

"I cannot express adequately, how the experience helped me. It literally saved my life. This was down to the amazing people who run the course, I'll always be grateful to them, thank you."

"Please keep encouraging PRD to go - it was the most enjoyable and influential part of my recovery journey."

PUBLICATIONS

Outcomes from a One-Week Adapted Sport and Adapted Adventure Recovery Programme for Military Personnel – Suzanne Peacock, Jim McKenna, David Carless & Carlton Cooke

This study explores the role of a five-day adaptive sport and adventurous training (AS & AAT) course in the recovery of UK PRD in-Service personnel. Findings suggest attendance of the MAC generates statistically significant improvements to positive mental health and satisfaction of psychological needs. Moreover, while the scale of the effect is comparable to, and often greater than, existing interventions, it is achieved in a much shorter period.

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2020

Battle Back research in the Defence Recovery Capability Review 2020

Research on the Battle Back programme was described as “the most comprehensive and consistent data gathered across the Defence Recovery Capability (DRC).”

The authors went on to say “Data requirements were not articulated at the outset of the DRC. Therefore, the review has found, that programmes and activities in this space have gathered data on an ad hoc basis. There are pockets of best practice to learn from: The Battle Back Centre delivered in partnership with The Royal British Legion has been successful in recording success metrics for their Multi-Activity Course. This endeavour has been supported by Leeds Beckett University, which has yielded an impressive longitudinal study.”

“There are a number of Rolling Recovery Programme activities on offer, delivered by service charities. This eclectic array of programmes and qualification courses are provided on sites across the country. While such diversity is supportive of the PRD community, it is key that duplication of work is not encouraged. As is, there appears to be numerous adaptive sports, resilience-based courses on offer. Other charities have articulated that they will be unable to sustain current levels of activity. These other programmes also lack the solid data around success as deemed by MOD. It is therefore recommended that an option of MAC expansion is considered. With its proven track record of success, it seems nugatory to recreate this course.

While funding from MOD would be required to procure this expanded service, it is a low risk, high win option for increased partnership to deliver a cornerstone activity for PRD serving personnel.”

A recommendation to the MOD by the authors is to “Renew contract with RBL to provide the BBC. Proven to be supportive to PRD SP, and with RBL willing to continue delivery, it is recommended this contract be renewed post 2022.” Recommendations were given as being either key, secondary, or tertiary. The recommendation to “Renew contract with RBL to provide the BBC.” Is listed as a key recommendation as part of phase 3: Enhanced Delivery Recommendations within the DRC.

Providing recovery support at the Battle Back Centre during the COVID-19 pandemic

The World Health Organisation declared Pandemic status on 11th March 2020 regarding illnesses caused by the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Health precautions implemented by the UK government to limit the spread of COVID-19 led to the closure of many well-being support services in 2020. This created a need to re-think how impactful recovery support courses can be provided. One such service was the five-day MAC which was redesigned in accordance with national health guidelines to allow continued access for PRD military personnel to the service, the positive impacts of which are well established.

The development of the Reduced-MAC (R-MAC) prioritised restricting social mixing by mandating physical distancing. As a result, R-MACs were initially limited to eight participants per course, working in two groups of four with two staff members. This ration of 2:4 (staff:participants) aligned with the ‘rule of six’ advised for persons interacting indoors in a work environment. Virtual on-boarding to the course managed by MoD and CGO coaching staff were delivered to ease any pre-course apprehensions, social deconditioning effects from social-isolation and manage course expectations. All activities were delivered on-site to eliminate shared travel during the course previously utilised to travel to public sports facilities. Two metre social distancing and a one-way system was implemented in all indoor areas. In line with health guidance and stake holder requirements, mandatory lateral flow tests were conducted on course arrival with daily temperature checks of participants conducted by MoD staff. Face masks were worn, except for when seated and in distanced health coaching sessions. The adaptive sports and adventurous activities were changed to allow increased outdoor activity and adhere to and, where possible, exceed government and individual sport’s National Governing Body (NGB) health guidelines. Activities included biking, archery, slack lining, orienteering, walking and golf.

Adapting to challenging circumstances and developing the R-MAC mitigated against the already adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for PRD participants.

[Click to view the research article](#)

PUBLICATIONS

Health and Wellbeing in an Outdoor and Adventure Sports Context – John Allan, Ashley Hardwell, Chris Kay, Suzanne Peacock, Melissa Hart, Michelle Dillon & Eric Brymer

This article uses a wide-ranging spectrum of innovative methodologies to investigate the many issues concerning the impact of Outdoor and Adventure Sport on health and wellbeing, adding to our understanding of (i) the diverse and powerful outcomes derived from adventure experiences, (ii) how adventure experiences facilitate these outcomes, and (iii) how best to design outdoor and adventure experiences with the aim of health and wellbeing.

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2021

Virtual Activity Courses (VACs) piloted

In addition to developing the R-MAC to allow face to face courses to run during the pandemic, a virtual course was also developed. The course has some standardised elements and focusses on what participants can do. The pilot course provided a steer on models presented and each delivery team had the autonomy to deliver in their own way and style. Delivery teams set different tasks to their cohorts as 'homework' prior to the regroup sessions.

The first part of the Virtual Course was a 3-days of group coaching sessions, break out opportunities, and challenge by choice activities. Daily themes were; Day 1) Control, Day 2) Wellbeing, Day 3) Future. Pilot One had two follow-up days, pilots Two and Three had one follow-up day. The initial designs were piloted with a group of known participants from the RBL Mission Himalaya over one day with a morning and afternoon session.

Overall, the course created a positive experience for most participants despite some scepticism and apprehension. Potential reach of the online courses is greater than those delivered at the centre; the VAC was even delivered to participants in Canada. Far transfer is worked hard against at the BBC to facilitate better transfer once they return home; the online course provides immediate near transfer for participants to make changes to behaviours and actions. Additional benefits include digital inclusion, life opportunities and improved tech skills can help their online social interaction. Some participants suggested a Microsoft Team's meeting would help reduce their anxiety prior to attending a physical course.

Virtual Battle Back courses provide opportunity for life changing support to be delivered to beneficiaries around the world in an unrivaled manner. It can support on-boarding and continued support for those attending courses at the centre as well as being an independent service. It is recommended they be a major consideration of future Battle Back provision. They provide an opportunity to reach cohorts that have not been willing or able to benefit from physically attending a course at the centre. Continued research would allow more in-depth questioning, longitudinal follow up and ethnographic research to be completed.

All Battle Back courses now include the opportunity for participants to take part in a digital on-boarding session prior to attending the course.

PUBLICATIONS

Sustained positive behaviour change of wounded, injured and sick UK military following an adaptive adventure sports and health coaching recovery course – Rebecca Sutton, Chris Kay, Mariana Kaiseler & Jim McKenna

This study explored the impact of MACs on UK personnel's ability to make day-to-day changes that facilitate positive mental health and achieve psychological need satisfaction, 12 months post-course. Findings suggest 75% of participants found the course useful for facilitating restorative changes in behaviour 12-months after a MAC. Results indicate participants' day-to-day changes positively correlate with positive psychological well-being (98%). Relevant reported aspects of the MAC mostly align with the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs.

[View this article](#)

Book chapter published

Outdoor and Adventurous Activities in Supporting Wounded, Injured and Sick Military Personnel and Veterans – Chris Kay & Rebecca Sutton

This book chapter outlines how Outdoor Adventure Activities (OAA) are being/have been used to support military personnel and veterans around the world. In this, we highlight how the unique features of OAA are being used to release the adaptive well-being capacities of PRD personnel. This evidence can be used to better inform any level of decision-making around policy and funding. The body of evidence represents an important new collation of the positive impact OAA can have on people's lives. This extends beyond the rich day-to-day experiences that will be familiar to practitioners.

[View this book chapter](#)

Comments from Virtual Activity Course participants

Hope this all rolls out to all of the veterans, it is totally life-changing. This will help everyone and those that can't get to Lilleshall."

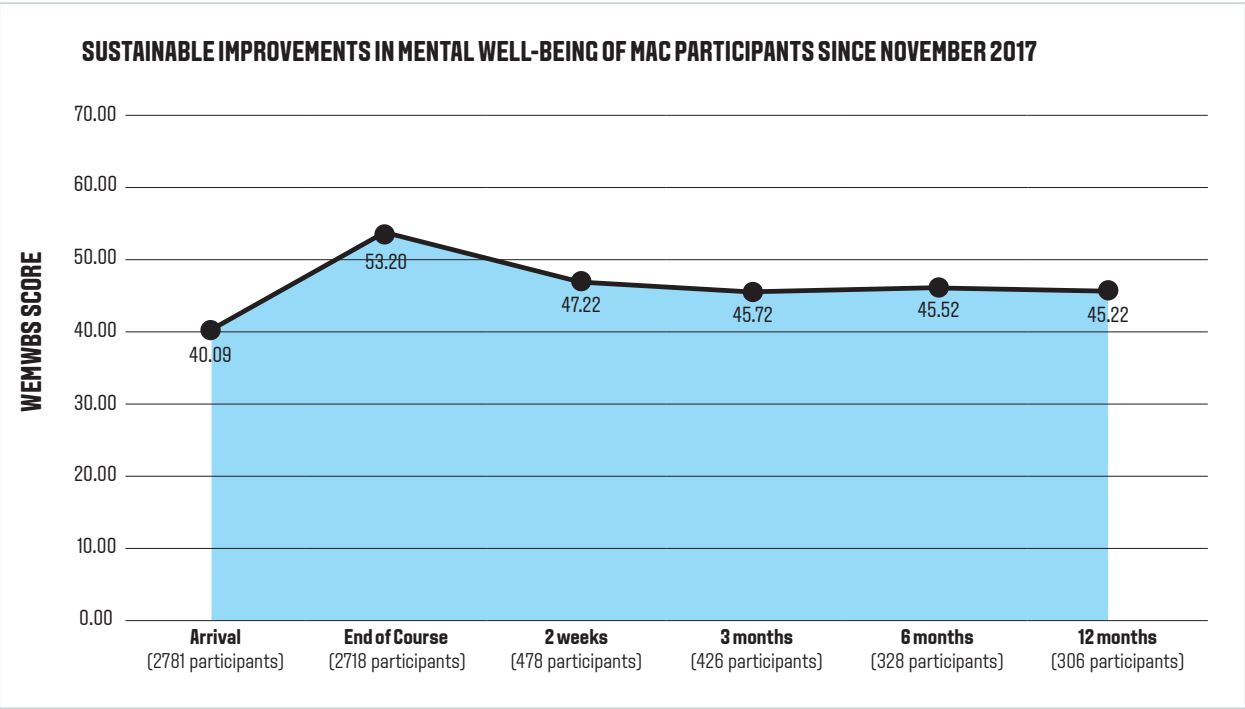
"I found it to be equally as powerful as working at the centre, creating an online community which allowed for in depth coaching sessions with engaged participants who were grateful for the support from us and the other participants."



2022

The importance of being able to provide face to face at Battle Back during the COVID-19 pandemic

Longitudinal research has highlighted the lasting positive impact the R-MACs had on participants lives. Adapting courses to exceed COVID restrictions meant hundreds of recovering military personnel were still able to access this impactful support programme. The R-MAC led to comparable impacts for participants well-being, at a time in which people’s mental well-being was often being adversely affected. Positive mental well-being of the 261 participants improved by 33% throughout the course and remained 14% higher for 37 participants who provided data six months after attending. Key facets of the experience most impactful for participants were the (i) ability to socialise with like-minded individuals who were in recovery, (ii) adaptive sports and adventurous activities created a context for and deeper, meaningful discussions and (iii) support and guidance of the R-MAC staff. [See the follow up RMAC summary](#)



What did it mean to the participants to be able attend during the pandemic?

“This course saves lives, you may never be able to quantify how many, but it really helps and makes a difference.” - 3 months

“This course has changed my life. Without it I may not have been here in a few months’ time.” - End of the course.

“Truly believe without Battle Back I may not be here today.” - 2 weeks

“Since attending the course I have stopped suicidal thoughts” - 12 months

“It was the missing piece in the puzzle that I needed to help me reset and take that step forward into

Additional staff supervision developed

Online mental health and well-being supervision sessions directed by qualified mental health professionals and a counsellor offered more frequently to staff directly involved in supporting PRD Service personnel. These sessions offer the opportunity to reflect in a supervised and confidential supportive space. These are conducted in small groups with the option to attend additional 1:1 sessions as required.

PUBLICATIONS

The enduring well-being impacts of attending the Battle Back Multi Activity Course for the lives of recovering UK armed forces personnel – Chris Kay & Jim McKenna

This is the first longitudinal study into the effects of an adaptive sport and adventurous training recovery course on the mental well-being of in-service, PRD UK armed forces personnel. Participants reported significant and sustainable improvements in their mental well-being throughout the 12-month research period. Early intervention with recovering in-service PRD personnel may offset future pressure on dedicated Veterans services.

[View this article](#)

Mission Himalaya: Exploring the Impact of a Supported High-Altitude Mountaineering Expedition on the Well-Being and Personal Development of UK Military Veterans – Chris Kay, Harriet Wingfield & Jim McKenna

This study used a longitudinal and immersive research approach to explore the psychological impact of a high-altitude expedition to the Nepalese Himalaya on 10 (9 males) UK military veterans with longstanding well-being concerns. During the expedition, Battle Back health coaches facilitated reflective practices, focusing on experiential transfer to day-to-day lives after the expedition. Follow-up interviews, conducted up to 18-months post-expedition, identified changes aligned with the three psychological needs of self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Key changes reflected altered perspective, employment skills and work-life balance, increased physical activity and enhanced personal awareness and mindfulness. Supported by health coaching and focused on the transfer of learning, expeditions can activate meaningful long-term changes to the well-being and personal development of military veterans.

[View this article](#)

Providing recovery support to wounded, injured, and sick UK military personnel throughout the COVID-19 pandemic - Chris Kay, Rebecca Sutton, Gemma Margerison & Jim McKenna

Published in the Special Edition of the Journal of Military Psychology - COVID-19 and the Military, lessons for readiness and resilience. This study investigated the influence of the newly developed Reduced numbers MAC (R-MAC) on the PRD participants lives during and for six months after attending. The positive mental well-being of the 261 participants improved by 33% throughout the course and remained 14% higher for the 37 participants who provided data six months after attending. Adapting to the challenging circumstances and developing the R-MAC mitigated against the already adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for the PRD participants.

[View this article](#)



MEETING THE CHANGING NEEDS OF BATTLE BACK PARTICIPANTS OVER THE YEARS

THE COURSES HAVE SUPPORTED RECOVERING PERSONNEL OF **BRITISH, NEPALI, CANADIAN, US, GHANAIAN, IRISH, SOUTH AFRICAN, AND FIJIAN** HERITAGE



MORE THAN
5,000
BATTLE BACK COURSE PARTICIPANTS HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO OUR RESEARCH.

BETWEEN 2015-2022
ARMY REPRESENTATION **REDUCED 5%**
ROYAL NAVY **REDUCED 5%**
RAF REPRESENTATION **DOUBLED FROM 9% TO 18%**



9% INCREASE
IN PARTICIPANTS WITH ILL MENTAL HEALTH OR SYSTEMIC ILLNESS FROM 2015 TO 2022

9% DECREASE
IN PARTICIPANTS WITH NON-BATTLEFIELD INJURIES FROM 2015 TO 2022

10% DECREASE
IN PARTICIPANTS WOUNDED IN THE BATTLEFIELD FROM 2015 TO 2022



INCREASE
IN FEMALE PARTICIPANTS FROM **16% TO 22%**
FROM PRE-2018 TO 2018-2022



REDUCTION IN CO-MORBIDITIES
(INCREASE IN MENTAL HEALTH)
MEANINGFUL DECLINE IN WELL-BEING STATUS ON ARRIVAL FROM 2015 TO 2022 (3.98 WEMWBS DECLINE)

PARTICIPANTS ARE NOW ARRIVING ON A COURSE WITH **POORER MENTAL WELL-BEING** THAN IN PREVIOUS YEARS
THE MENTAL WELL-BEING SCORES OF PRD BATTLE BACK PARTICIPANTS ON ARRIVAL **HAVE DECLINED SINCE 2012**

KEY LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY STAFF IN THE BATTLE BACK PROJECT

CARNEGIE GREAT OUTDOORS

COURSE DIRECTORS

Anna Meardon
Ady Cole MBE
Ceri Williams
Edward Kinnear
Guy Buckingham
Neil Matthews
Nick Arding OBE
Nick Moore
Paul Elias
Pete Golding
Richard Groves
Richard Lake-Bullen
Steve Davies

TECHNICAL ADVISORS

Graeme Morrison
Jim Bonney
Jim Gilligan
Louise Assioun
Suresh Paul

COACHES

Adam White
Andy Fletcher
Andy Phillips
Anna Sharpe
Chris Brain
Dan Mckinlay
David Haygarth
Erin Bastian
Gordon Perry – Adaptive Sport Lead
Hamish Maclean
Jane Godfrey
Kelda Wood MBE
Laura Simpson
Lyndon Chatting-Walters
Maegan Whiteley
Mark Smith
Martin Brennan
Martin Fricker
Natalie Wilson
Olan Parkinson
Paul Lefever
Sally Ozanne
Terry Hubble
Tom Powell

MANAGEMENT

Michaela Barwick – Programme Manager
Dave Bunting MBE – Head of Training & Development
Alison Stanton – Business Support Manager
Mark Robinson – Director

RESEARCH CENTRE FOR ACTIVE LIFESTYLES

RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Amy Chell
Charlotte Hinchliffe
Davide Sterchele
Gemma Margerison
Heidi Schwenk
Jemma Terrey
Leoni O'Dwyer
Liz King
Lucy Keyworth
Mark Cooke
Michaela Coetsee
Richard Simpson
Ross Shand
Sara Rushworth
Sarah Burrows
Will Batho
Will Shaw

ACADEMIC AND RESEARCH STAFF

Prof. Jim McKenna – Professor of Physical Activity & Health
Prof. Carlton Cooke – Professor of Sport & Exercise Science
Prof. David Carless – Professor of Narrative Psychology
Dr Chris Kay – Senior Research Fellow
Dr Suzanne Peacock – PhD researcher
Rebecca Sutton MSc – Research Assistant
Chris Webber – PhD candidate

For enquiries regarding the Battle Back project please contact:

d.bunting@leedsbeckett.ac.uk – Project delivery & development

chris.kay@leedsbeckett.ac.uk – Research

