



# SCOTT BILL

## The Brian Bill Foundation



PHOTOS FROM SCOTT BILL

Equine-assisted therapy programs have been proven to have emotional healing attributes for those suffering from PTSD, depression and stress-related illnesses.

BY MARCIA BIGGS

When Scott Bill lost his US Navy SEAL son, Brian, on August 6, 2011, in Afghanistan, his world was shattered. Brian Bill was larger than life, destined for greatness, a mountaineer who had scaled three of the world's highest summits, a triathlete, marathoner and pilot. He was planning to become an astronaut.

Deployed to Iraq on four occasions, and to Afghanistan four times, Brian Bill had been awarded four Bronze Stars, the Purple Heart and 14 other decorations. He tragically lost his life when he and 29 other American service members were killed; their military helicopter shot down west of Kabul was the greatest single loss of life ever suffered by the U.S. Special Operations community.

With his son gone, Scott Bill knew he had to continue his legacy, make him proud. He wanted to give back, some way, somehow. Today, the Brian Bill Foundation works with Special Operations wounded warriors to help heal the emotional wounds of war. The foundation offers equine assisted therapy through weekend healing retreats. The Brian Bill Foundation covers all expenses of the program for each participant, including airfare, food, lodging, and the costs of all the therapies employed.

The long weekend retreats are for Special Ops active military

and retired veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress, mild traumatic brain injury, and pain management.

"At first I wanted to work with Gold Star families but felt I wasn't doing enough," explained Scott Bill. "I was a Gold Star parent myself but I knew I could do more. Brian was a Navy SEAL, so I wanted to stay within his group. I decided to work with Special Ops since their chance of getting wounded is much higher than regular military and their chances of getting post-traumatic stress or other combat issues is also much higher."

From his Sarasota home at the time, Scott Bill got to work in 2014. His goal: Establish a 501(c)3 foundation honoring the memory of Brian and all of his fellow Special Operations warriors who have died since 9/11. He established a board of directors (he is the President and Chair) and began looking for certified therapists who could work within an equine assisted therapy program.

Scott Bill met his wife, Jennifer, after moving to the Old Northeast neighborhood in St. Petersburg several years ago. Jennifer now works alongside Scott, a partner in every sense of the word, assisting with administration and fundraising for the foundation and the many other details that require them to travel to military events



Participants in the weekend retreats engage in stress-reduction "guy-yoga." Scott Bill is always on hand during the retreats.



and meetings across the country.

They are proud to claim that over 230 special ops military, veterans and spouses have participated in the Warrior Healing Program. Scott Bill was presented with a Tampa Bay Lightning Community Heroes Award in 2018 and earlier this year he received the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) Patriot Award.

#### Healing Retreats

Each retreat consists of a small group of 6 or 8 men who come from all over the country. Couples retreats are held several times a year to help reconnect and energize couples dealing with pressures that accompany military life.

On hand for every retreat, welcoming and overseeing his guests, is Scott Bill. The four-day weekend is held at Westgate River Ranch Resort, in the scrub pines and oak hammocks west of Yeehaw Junction in South Central Florida. Participants are immersed in an itinerary that includes exercise and health seminars, camaraderie, and professional certified psycho-therapists in one-on-one sessions and teamwork.

Early morning yoga (or "guy-oga" as they prefer to call it) teaches breathing and stretching and meditation exercises to relax the inner soul. Behavioral therapists who have extensive experience working with those affected by PTSD, chronic pain and other emotional disorders will guide classes to help heal the mind, spirit and body.

The weekend also includes education on nutrition and a technique called iRest which is a form of yoga nidra, "it's a technique that helps you gain mind control in order to fall asleep," explains Scott Bill. "Navy SEALs use it without the yoga part, it's a conscious sleep, allows you to fall asleep anywhere anytime."

#### What is Equine-Assisted Therapy

Equine assisted therapy programs for military and veterans, wounded warriors and caregivers have gained in popularity and number in recent years. Programs exist across the country.

Equine-assisted therapy is considered an alternative to traditional counseling. Studies show that by developing

Evening campfires for socializing and a visit to the Saturday night rodeo at the ranch round out of the retreat.

#### Horse Power

At the heart of the program is the healing power of horses.

"I love horses, grew up with them in Connecticut," said Scott Bill, who served in the US Army for two years and worked in property development with custom-design homes for more than three decades.

"After I visited a couple equine therapy programs I thought this is the perfect fit, so equine therapy is at the nucleus of the program, it's what we spend the most time doing on our group weekends." It's more than learning to ride a horse, Scott explains. They team older passive horses with a rider, who learns how to work one on one and form a relationship with the horse. They need to care for the horse, walk it, ride it, groom it. The experience teaches trust, respect, responsibility, non-verbal communication.

Scott and Jennifer Bill work diligently, seeking donors and organizing fundraising events to help pay for the retreats. Each retreat costs the foundation \$22,000 to \$25,000, they estimate, including air fare of all participants. "We rely on major donors, they supply most of our funding," says Scott Bill. "Events like golf tournaments and runs help and we are going to be seeking more grants."

He knows Brian would be proud of what he has accomplished. "It's amazing what our little program can do to help change lives, to give them a toolbox to take home with them to heal. It's gotten into our souls, being able to help Brian's buddies." ●

a strong relationship with a horse, much is learned about respect, love, kindness, empathy, and trust. Patience, acceptance, emotional control, self-discipline and a sense of responsibility are fostered.

To learn more about the Brian Bill Foundation and the Wounded Warrior Retreat Program, go to [brainbillfoundation.org](http://brainbillfoundation.org)