A horse named Zoe was one of the main catalysts sparking an initiative that not only changed the life of a former soldier and his family, but gave countless contemporary Canadian veterans a voice.

Paul Nichols, from Quesnel, British Columbia, served for eight years in the Canadian Army as a Calgary Highlander and in the 2nd Battalion of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry. In 1993, while on a United Nations peacekeeping mission in Croatia, he faced the horrors of genocide and fought in intense battles.

Like countless soldiers through the ages, Paul found his internal conflicts began when he returned to Canada. He not only had to come to terms with his military experiences, he also felt what he describes as a “disconnect” when integrating back into society.

“I was so proud of what we had accomplished. I would tell my stories and I would hear things back like, ‘You’re not a really a veteran because you’re not old enough,’” said Paul, 47, his voice tinged with emotion. “And I struggled. I went to a pretty dark place. I stopped telling my stories, I stopped sharing. I had a tough time just trying to make that transition.”

About 10 years ago, Paul found understanding in an unlikely place. A woman behind the counter in a small Vancouver gift shop recognized the regimental crest on his jacket. She had struggled for years to survive in Sarajevo, before Canadian troops helped her escape. Crying, she gave Paul a big hug and thanked him. “It was life changing,” he said. “I didn’t have to question the value of that time away from home, didn’t have to question the value of the sacrifice…I realized that there is such power in the shared story.”
SOMETHING SPECIAL

A few years later, Zoe, a registered Canadian Sport Horse, put the next major piece of Paul’s puzzle into place. “I knew she was something special,” he said of the 15.3-hand Trakehner/Quarter Horse who came to him through a friend.

Needing time for self-reflection, he took Zoe on treks to fish in areas of central B.C. that were sometimes hard to get to. In finding creative ways to ask the mare to navigate through tough spots, Paul discovered something about himself. “I started getting a lot better results with my horse and getting to where I wanted to go. And not just physically, I also started seeing changes in myself.”

Facing tangible challenges with Zoe offered Paul a blueprint on how to move forward in life – by providing strong leadership, making plans, following through and “being fair, not a bully.” He said Zoe helped him come back to the world. “This horse is a huge, huge part of my journey. And I had to share that.”

Together, Paul and his wife Terry, a therapeutic riding instructor, realized horses were the key to promoting awareness about today’s veterans and their unique struggles with re-integration, mental health and society’s general lack of understanding about who they really are and what supports they need.

The couple, aiming to bring to life the “changing face of Canadian veterans,” created the Communities For Veterans Foundation and the 2015 Ride Across Canada – an epic six-month cross-country journey from Victoria, B.C., to St. John’s, Newfoundland.

SHARING EXPERIENCES

To ensure the campaign was more than “just a guy riding a horse,” Paul asked his compatriots from across the country to ride along with him and share their stories in their own communities through speaking engagements in legions, schools and other outreach events. Some of these stories are shared below.

With horse and rider safety paramount concerns, and many of the ride’s “guests” bearing mental and physical effects of their time in the military, Terry developed mandatory pre-ride equine-assisted therapy lessons. The sessions focused on the relationship between individual and horse and acknowledged the similarities between military experience and equine herd hierarchy.

Paul said Terry and crew – which included their two daughters Jordan, 19, and Kirsten, 21 – “absolutely” achieved what they originally set out to do by “creating discussion in communities” and “raising awareness.” Now they’re embarking on a new endeavour – the Equine-Assisted Mindfulness Veterans Transition Centre, launching with a 13-day pilot program at their property in Quesnel, B.C., in May. Future plans include expanded programming and sessions for families and first responders.

And Zoe? She not only carried Paul for the majority of The Ride Across Canada, he credits her with saving his life. On his blog at www.communitiesforveterans.ca, Paul writes in his characteristically unassuming way, “She’s a really good horse.”

The Ride Across Canada: By the Numbers

- The ride was 211 days long – from May 22 to November 9, 2015.
- The Nichols spent 250 days away from home.
- 55 communities hosted administration camps at homes, equestrian and therapeutic riding centres and other venues.
- 363 veterans joined Paul on the ride.
- Each veteran spent an average of about 3 hours in the saddle.
- 14 horses were used, both from the Nichols’ own herd and borrowed mounts.
- Up to 8 horses were ridden at a time if they were riding on the road, 4 at a time on trails.
- Paul rode 35 to 45 km a day at a walk.
- Of the ride’s total 7,000 km, Zoe carried Paul for 5,000 km.
- Zoe was 17 years old when the ride started.
- By the time they reached the Maritimes, Paul conducted 2 or 3 speaking engagements a day.
- They visited more than 140 Royal Canadian Legion branches.
- The stories of more than 700 veterans were collected.
- It’s early days, but the foundation is planning events to again bring veterans, horses and the community together for Canada’s 150th anniversary in 2017.
HORSES HELP RESTORE SOLDIER’S BATTERED CONFIDENCE

When asked if he’s a horse person, Graham Ridley enthusiastically responds, “Now I am!”

A 16-year Canadian Army combat engineer, Graham said his mental health problems “really took hold” during his last deployment in Afghanistan in 2008-2009 when he suffered an intense traumatic incident. He was officially diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression in August 2011.

Through it all, he suffered a complete loss of confidence. “I was literally scared of my own shadow,” said Graham, 36, who lives in the military community of Petawawa, Ontario. “For a while I was living a very safe life. I was convinced I was going to have to raise kittens because it’s safe,” he continued. “I hadn’t had adrenaline in my system for so long, if I did get fired up, it would trigger a panic attack because my body didn’t know what was going on. It thought it was ‘go time’ again...we’re going to war.”

Things began to change in June 2014 when Graham took part in a pilot project offered by a local equine-assisted therapy group, first as a participant and now as a peer facilitator. “I started to realize what an incredible tool it was to sort yourself out – hanging out with horses.”

Graham said before his equine therapy experience, horses were his wife Melissa’s passion, while he loved motorcycles. Today, the animals are a family affair. The couple (now expecting a baby) and their 10-year-old daughter Alexis spend most of their free time with their leased seven-year-old Canadian/Paint cross Douglas, a “mischievous pickpocket” and Rocky, a six-year-old Morgan they acquired in March 2015. “He’s a punk,” said Graham, recounting one of his first experiences with the gelding. “He tried ninja-kicking me and gave me a panic attack.”

But the pair has come a long way since then. And so has Graham’s confidence. He was one of a handful of veterans who accompanied Paul Nichols through downtown Ottawa in late August. Although the overwhelming experience triggered some anxiety, he was able to conquer it. “There was too much going on. I said, ‘I’ve got to get down.’ Then I looked at Paul and thought to myself, ‘He’s not worried, so why should I be?’”

Graham also praises Terry Nichols for relating his military experience back to horses. “She oozes confidence, but not in an arrogant way,” he said. “I was a section commander on tour, so she really pushed that you’ve got to be calm and collected just like you would be with your troops. You’ve got a job to do on the ride and you need to take care of [Terry’s] horse, ultimately, regardless of how you’re feeling or how you’re doing.”
Veteran Lawrence Christensen of Trenton, Ontario, who served 28 years in the Canadian Forces, rides Skip onto the parade square at Fort Henry in Kingston, ON, on August 22, 2015. He said animals bring him an awareness about himself that has been missing from his life.

Lawrence Christensen: A HOMECOMING PARADE FOR TODAY’S VETERANS

As a 19-year-old Canadian Army soldier returning from his first deployment in the Middle East in 1982, Lawrence Christensen felt something wasn’t right. Nevertheless, over the next 27 years, he participated in international peacekeeping and counter-terrorism missions. “I kept doing deployments. I’d look for things to prove to myself that I wasn’t a coward,” explained Lawrence, 54, from Trenton, Ontario. “And it escalates because you don’t deal with it. You suppress it because, ‘I’m a soldier and it shouldn’t affect me.’”

In 2004, after his last deployment, Lawrence’s mental health issues peaked and he was eventually diagnosed with severe PTSD. In 2009, he was medically released from the forces. “I didn’t want to get out of the military,” he said. “They saw me as unfit. It was brutal; after 28 years, just to be cast aside.”

Things started to brighten for Lawrence in March 2015 when National Service Dog, Lynx, came into his life. With Lynx, Lawrence is able to face everyday situations that previously would have left him extremely stressed and anxious, such as shopping or seeing a movie with his 15-year-old son Craig. And as a major triumph, Lawrence was also able to participate in The Ride Across Canada, not just once, but twice – last August in Kingston and on the wrap-up leg in Newfoundland.

Lawrence, who rode the Nichols’ horse Skip, recalls the large crowd at Kingston city hall. “It was so relaxing to have that connection with the horse. I don’t even know how to explain it. I was just so comfortable, and that’s not a situation, even with Lynx, that I would put myself in.” In fact, his wife Andrea likened Skip to a giant service dog.

He credits Paul and Terry for not only bringing contemporary veterans recognition, but essentially giving them a homecoming parade. “All the people on the ride or that had come out to be part of it in some way, they knew I was a veteran,” he said. “And people were glad to see us. It was very rewarding.”

Lawrence said Paul mentioned that one of the questions he heard when organizing the ride was, ‘How are you going to get all those old guys on the

Terry and Paul Nichols with Gary O’Neill (left), president, and Gerard Hachey (right), executive member of the Hawkesbury Legion in Hawkesbury, ON, at the Black Tai Ranch in L’Original, ON, where Paul and his crew stayed for a few days during The Ride Across Canada.
horses? Lawrence noted, “I’m an old guy at 54 – and there’s so many younger veterans. What does a veteran look like? They’re not just the old man in the wheelchair on Remembrance Day.”

Lawrence wants to stay involved with horses, perhaps leasing or owning someday. In the meantime, he made plans to travel to B.C., to participate in the Nichols pilot Equine-Assisted Mindfulness program in May. Although nervous about the long trip to B.C., he acknowledges Lynx will be right by his side. Plus, he enthused, “I’m excited because I get to spend time with the horses again.”

Zandra Rubinger: THE RIDE’S “POSTER CHILD”
Horses have been a part of Zandra Rubinger’s healing journey since a 13 ½-year career in the Royal Canadian Navy left her with chronic depression and anxiety. “I really depend on my horses to keep me steady,” said Zandra of her two mares, Sassy, an 18-year-old registered Paint and Cinder, a Thoroughbred/Quarter Horse/Tennessee Walker cross.

Zandra Rubinger, a Navy veteran living in Fredericton, New Brunswick, who served 13 years and was a hall technician, shared a four-hour ride with Paul Nichols on the trail system in Fredericton, NB. Here, she is receiving a lesson on Cowboy from Terry Nichols on October 1, 2015, in Bartits Corner, N.B. She said she feels lucky she has been able to deal with her mental health issues and now wants to help focus on others who need help.
When Zandra heard The Ride Across Canada was coming last October to New Brunswick, she knew she wanted to join in. While the animals were the main draw for the 48-year-old, she was also pulled in by the messages the ride promoted. “Paul and Terry’s whole goal and journey is like me encapsulated,” said Zandra, who lives in Fredericton with her husband, Mike Smith, a soldier stationed at Canadian Forces Base Gagetown. “I’m their poster child. I’m the forgotten veteran who is struggling and who has gained health and happiness through horses.”

Zandra, who maintains and repairs medical equipment for the hospital system full-time, is also a barefoot hoof trimmer on weekends. She took time off from both jobs when the ride was in town and not only joined Paul for four hours on the trails, she also pitched in to help with various horse-related duties.

“Horses are ‘beautiful therapeutic animals,’” she said. “They put on the outside what you are on the inside.” She added that many people, veterans or otherwise, gloss over their problems, at least in part due to societal demands. “But when you’re with horses, you can’t do that. You have to be true. Horses are incapable of lying. So they mimic what’s going on with you. And for a lot of people it really comes as a shock that horses can read them.”

Zandra believes horses are particularly valuable at helping veterans because they both understand the meaning of expectations and results. She explains that a horse wants: the safety and security of a group; firm, fair, consistent leadership; and a job within the herd. “That’s almost exactly like what you get in the military,” she explained. “I think a lot of veterans really struggle when they come home or leave the military because they’ve lost their herd, they’ve lost their leadership and they don’t have a job that’s clear and concise anymore.”

In May, Zandra headed to B.C. to help the Nichols prepare for their Equine-Assisted Mindfulness session. She is confident the couple will be successful in their undertakings.

“You can’t get through to military people unless they want you to, unless you are a veteran, unless you have their respect,” said Zandra. “You’ve got to have the knowledge of the military behind it. Paul and Terry have that; veterans understand and respect them.”

Communities for Veterans Foundation crew members (from left) Sylvain Nadon (a veteran from Victoriaville, Quebec, who also rode during The Ride Across Canada), Lindsay Chung, Cathleen McMahon, Kirsten Nichols, Terry Nichols, Paul Nichols and Zari Benedict (with Jerry the kitten) pose at the goldpan in Quesnel, B.C. on December 1, 2015, as they return to the Nichols’ hometown after The Ride Across Canada.

Paul Nichols meets Clayton Lepine near the National War Memorial in Ottawa, ON, on August 30, 2015. Clayton had ridden with Paul during a parade in Quesnel to send off The Ride Across Canada on March 29, 2015, and when the two met again in August, Clayton was in Ottawa as a member of the honour guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.