**The FriYAY Podcast Series**

**Transcript for Episode 26:** Rob Vessels, Learn About the Sierra Club Inspiring Military & Veterans to Become Outdoor Champions

*(Introduction Music)*

It’s Fri-Yay, Fri-Yay, Fri-Yay, FriYAY! (woo!)

*(Fast guitar-picking music)*

**Narrator:**Welcome to the FriYAY Podcast Series from PPFL. Each week we interview interesting experts in a variety of disciplines from underwater basket-weaving to animal husbandry. This week we're talking to Rob Vessels about the Sierra Club's Military Outdoors Program. Ryan conducted the interview.

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**Ryan Scavo, byline:**Can you tell us a bit about your background and how you got to where you are today?

**Rob Vessels:**Right out of high school, I joined thearmy and I was in the infantryfor just about five years. Spent sometime, total of 25 months, in Iraq andAfghanistan. **I**t's kind of a typical, unfortunatelythe typical veteran story, getting out and immediately feelingpretty lost and dealing with some-some trauma and some emotional hardshipsthat I was not really prepared for and didn't really see coming.

So I movedout to Ventura, CA with an armybuddy of mineand kind of just spent four yearsplaying around,bartending, and going to communitycollegeat Ventura College. And I took a modernU.S. history class thatstudied the Iraq invasion andAfghanistan, 9/11.I think I was like maybe a year at most out of my time in Baghdad. It was really a trip learning aboutsomething I had just recentlyexperienced. Ithad such a profound impact on my lifestudying that in a college historycourse like a year laterI kind of redirected my studies andended up going to University of California Berkeley forMiddle Eastern Studies to get a betterunderstanding of you know what wasthe Middle East and U.S. foreign policyand just trying to get a betterunderstanding of those experiences Ihad.

Naturally when I graduated I appliedfor a job at the Sierra Club and, youknow,went from middle eastern studies toconservation. After going to school, Irealized I never wanted to carry a gunfor money again and I really wanted to do something productive with my life. And this opportunity at the Sierra Clubkind of presented itself at the perfecttiming when I was about to graduate. And I wasn't boughtinto the conservation side of things atfirst. I definitely saw this as anopportunity tohelp veterans like myself. At that stagein my life I had sorted my head out and I was on a better path. I was excited to have the opportunity tohelp fellow veterans.

I've been with the Sierra Club for five years over the course of those five years I've started just wanting to serve veterans. And since then and my evolution at the club been able to really pivot towards advocacy side of things, too. So not just getting veterans outdoors but also helping veterans find opportunities to continue to serve whether that's through advocacy or whatnot.

**Ryan:**What's the mission of Sierra Club's Military Outdoors Program and what draws you to that and your work overall?

**Rob:**  
The mission of the Sierra Club'sMilitary Outdoors Campaign is toimprove the lives of service members,veterans, and their families throughmeaningful connections to the outdoorsand toempower veterans to become champions ofconservation and environmental justice.

**Ryan:**If there was one thing that you wouldlike for people to know about your workwhat would you tell them?

**Rob:**So MilitaryOutdoors is housed underthe Outdoors for All campaign at theSierra Club which works onensuring equitable and just access tothe outdoors for all people.A big part of that work is redefiningwhat it means to get outdoors.I think a lot of people, and myselfincluded before I really went down thispath,if someone said they were outdoorsy Iwould imagine, you know, someonebackpacking or camping, rock climbing, something like that. Thesemore adventurous activities. But gettingoutdoors is as easy as going to yourlocal park orsitting on your deck having a picnicwith friends. You can reap the samebenefits. I think the minimum is like just 10minutes outside. It improves your overallwell-being. Everyone can be outdoorsy there are somany different activities and ways to doit. And none of it's wrong.

**Ryan:**Has the pandemic impacted what you do?

**Rob:**Yeah absolutely. It was definitely a challenging pivot. Typically in a calendar year we'll get several thousand veterans outdoors across the country, whether it's through outings or advocacy-related opportunities. Obviously we could not do that safely last year, still this year. Right now as well with a pause on all of our in-person events and outings it created quite a challenge for us to ensure we're still providing veterans with those frankly life-saving opportunities getting outdoors and connecting with other veterans and other people within their community.

We brainstormed for a bit and we started an “Adventure from Home” campaign. We're encouraging folks to get outdoors on their own safely within their local COVID guidelines and we host campfire events so folks get outdoors on their own and we link up on Zoom and go around the circle and folks share their experiences and what they got out of it. If they had photos or they wrote some poetry while they're out there. Just using that as an opportunity to continue to intentionally build community for veterans and mitigate the isolation that I know so many people around the world right now are struggling with.

**Ryan:**Do you all have any highlights from the last year?

**Rob:**Yeah definitely we had a couple ofexciting highlights from last year. Wepretty recently within the last twoyears started dip our toes in policywork to, you know, enact policies that will leadto systemic changethat will ensure more veterans and morepeople have that equitable access to theoutdoors.Ensure every veteran has an opportunityto get outdoors and to enjoy and healon public lands that they serve toprotect. We had two big policy onesthe first was the Accelerating VeteransRecovery Outdoors Act. This will create an interagency taskforce that will be led by theSecretary of Veterans Affairs. It will becharged with 1) identifying barriers toaccess to the outdoors for veteransand 2) making recommendations on waysin which the VA canutilize public lands as adjunct therapyfor vets. In the long term this will lead totherapists encouragingtheir patients to get outdoors.

At the state level in New York we passed theOutdoor RX Act which isessentially a very similar billidentifying various access for New York State's veterans and findingways that the VA can usestate land in New York to get vetsoutdoors to heal. It's a big deal. There's been a big movement over thelast few years Outdoor RX and the pushtoreally amplify the health benefits ofgetting outdoors. And access to publiclands is really a public health issueand I think the importance of gettingoutdoors has never been more apparentand in our face thanit was last year with everyone stuckindoors for, you know, months at a time.

I know whenever I get out now on the trail it's packed. It's great that folks are getting outdoors as long as they're doing it safely. I think it's never been more apparent that the outdoors is linked to our well-being so we're hoping this is a first step towards normalizing outdoor access adjunct therapy for folks.

**Ryan:**Do you ever partner with the National Park Service?

**Rob:**We havepartnered with the National Park Service in the past for service trips and service opportunities. Honestly it's been a while. I would love to find new ways for us to work together in the future. I think with AVRO passing and the Department of Interior being on the Veterans Outdoors Task Force that opens up a natural path of collaboration. Yeah hopefully we can find ways to get veterans outdoors in our national parks.

**Ryan:**What should people look out for and how can folks get involved and support your program?

**Rob:**We're hoping to play a role in the task force at the federal level and to work with local and federal government to get more opportunities for folks outdoors. We're still doing our adventure from home program. If folks are interested in getting involved with that I would highly encourage them to contact either myself or their local sierra club chapter to get more information. We'd love to plug folks in. Sierra Club's a non-profit so I'd be remiss if I didn't mention donating to the Sierra Club, to Military Outdoors. We are a donation-based program and always helps to get more veterans outdoors.

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**Narrator:**To learn more about the FriYAY Series visit the Common Learning Portal.