Hunters value different things about hunting. A hunt can be a chance to reconnect with nature, fill your freezer with wild meat, sharpen outdoor skills, seek adventure, or strengthen bonds with family and friends.

For some, it can also be a chance to heal. While the healing powers of nature for both body and spirit have long been recognized, being outdoors can have special significance for combat veterans.

Using hunting as means of treating battle trauma may sound odd to civilians. It might seem logical that situations that require handling guns, stalking around the woods, spending nights in the backcountry, or other scenarios might be associated with unwanted memories.

But for Curtis Fish, the 2016 Wyoming Super Tag wild bison winner, the opposite is true. Hunting has served as a motivation to overcome his own injuries as well as provided a tool to share with other veterans struggling with re-adjusting to civilian life.

Curtis’ 23-year military career in the Army, including 17 years as a Green Beret in the 7th Special Forces Group, resulted in
a great deal of familiarity with injury. He has been shot multiple times, lost his left eye, and had a finger nearly chewed off. In June 2016, Curtis had a spinal fusion surgery for degenerative disc disease that affected discs in his neck.

Curtis applied unsuccessfully for hunting licenses all over the West, but his luck didn't change until a July phone call from Director Scott Talbott of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department — he was the 2016 Wyoming Super Tag wild bison winner. For years, Curtis' wife, Marcella, had been asking him if he could get a bison. Typically, the Fish's freezer is filled with elk, deer, wild boar and antelope, and occasionally wild goose, duck, and Sockeye salmon from Alaska, but never bison. It is her favorite, and her excitement at the news may have exceeded his own.

This was the perfect motivation for getting back in shape and pushing through physical therapy. "I would be hunting North America's most iconic big game animal," Curtis said. "Over the years, hunting in the West has literally provided healing for me, as I spend time in the mountains, enjoying the wilderness for all its splendor. The peace that comes upon you as you sit in the Rockies is therapeutic. What I've learned from hunting in the West is that you must respect nature and be humble in your approach."

The next few months were busy with preparation. On December 26, Curtis and Marcella loaded their truck and started the ten and a half hour drive to Jackson from his home in Nevada. Curtis described the drive as a winter wonderland the whole way, with temperatures as low as -10°F. Besides seeing the beauty of Jackson Hole and the Tetons, the hunt offered the unique experience of traveling by horseback into the National Elk Refuge, where thousands of elk winter. To support his hunt, Curtis enlisted Double Diamond Tag-n- Drag Outfitters with Ralph Green as his guide.

Ralph immediately made it obvious he's been doing this for a while, as they hung back and glassed the landscape from afar before picking a location to embark from with the horses. The first bulls they located were on the west side of the refuge in cottonwoods. After about a half-mile ride, they tied their horses in some trees. Viewing the animals, Ralph saw some nice bulls but they were immature, still around two or three years old. To Curtis' untrained eye they looked huge. Eventually, those bulls wandered off. While the day was cut short by a snow storm, the educational experience was valuable. Curtis and his guide had spotted six bulls, but all were too young. He had watched cow hunters chase a herd of bison and saw thousands of elk that call the refuge home for the winter. Being a diehard elk hunter, he enjoyed seeing so many large bulls and thousands of cow elk. That alone, he felt, was an extraordinary experience.

After spending some time on the south side of the refuge on the second day, Ralph made the decision to cross the Gros Ventre River on horseback to hunt the river bottom. Not many hunters venture there due to the difficult access and the challenge of packing harvested bison back across the river. Once across, Curtis and Ralph found themselves nearly alone.

They started making their way west down
the river bank. About 30 minutes into the ride, they heard a gunshot in front of them, probably 150 yards away. It wasn’t another 50 yards before they spotted what looked like two or three bulls busting out of a thick cottonwood patch, heading southwest. Slowly, Ralph and Curtis followed at a distance, not wanting to further pressure the animals.

The bulls finally joined a larger herd, at which point the horses were tied and the two men proceeded on foot. The snow depth ranged from about a foot to more than three feet, making progress difficult as they carefully made their way from one patch of cover to another. Eventually, they were able to get within 250 yards of the herd. By then, the herd had cleared a line of trees and was grazing in the open. Curtis remembers the amazing sight. The snow that caused so much toil for the hunters was barely an inconvenience for the bison. They put their massive heads down and, with incredible ease, begin clearing the snow away to get to the dormant grass below.

Once Ralph got a better view of the herd, he located a few good bulls. Following a low depression in the terrain to a clump of trees, they were able to get within 200 yards. The new vantage point provided good cover and was situated so their scent drifted away from the herd. After careful examination a bull was selected. Once this decision was made, Curtis said it seemed like an eternity for the bull to get into a position for a clear shot. It was the culmination of a lot of planning and a dream come true, three well placed shots later and the bull was down.

Reaching the bull in the deep snow was difficult. “I was astonished by his sheer immensity,” Curtis said. “He is and will always be the most incredible animal to walk up upon, between his winter coat and massive size.”

During the ride back to the truck, the thoughts of the past five months rushed through Curtis’ head; all the excitement, preparation, coordination and assistance of friends and businesses that contributed to the hunt.

“I thought of veterans out there struggling and looking for something to bring them peace,” he said. “I wanted to let them know it’s here, in God’s country; it’s here in nature where you can find all the healing and peace you seek. The majesty of the mountains and solitude of nature can bring tranquility. The drugs or pain killers only bring more chaos. Venture into the silence of the woods and mountains and let your spirit take it all in.”

The Wyoming Game and Fish was happy to be a part Curtis’ hunt and we greatly appreciate his years of service in the U.S. Army.