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EVERY HERO DESERVES A CHANCE TO HEAL



AHERO's volunteer ambassadors and guest Veterans visit Denmark to meet with Danish Wounded Warriors who fought alongside our American forces, and the Danish officials who support them.



Royal Danish Army Sgt Jacob Panton (left) is visited in the hospital. A tank commander with LtGen Toolan's coalition forces in Afghanistan, Panton suffered multiple gunshot wounds and is the visionary leader behind the Danish Wounded Warrior organization.



(l-r) SSgt Isaac Gallegos, USMC, Mickey Franco, Johnny Stingray, Brian Leiser



(l-r) Kim Robin Poulsen, Bricken McKenzie, Tyler Marci, Ashleigh McKenzie, Poul Lange and Curtis Krenzke

"Being in the presence of these heroes shows the true alliance between these men and women from different countries. We made lifelong friends on this trip and Denmark was amazing!"
 ~ Ashleigh and Bricken McKenzie

"I'm deeply honored to support Danish Wounded Warriors and strengthen the bond between AHERO and our brave coalition brothers and sisters in arms."
 ~ Deanna Smith, AHERO Ambassador

"Warrior Week in Denmark changed us. Combat Veterans reuniting for a celebration of service and freedom, honoring our fallen heroes ... Smiles, laughs and even tears as we shared stories ... Thank you to our Danish brothers and sisters for hosting this event!"
 ~ Jose "Mickey" Franco, AHERO Ambassador

"The relationship developed with Jacob Panton and the Danes exemplifies the bond forged by brothers in arms irrespective of nationality. It's an honor to serve the Veteran community by their side."
 ~ Lex McMahan, AHERO Ambassador



AHERO visits Denmark and the Danish Wounded Warriors

Welcome to AHERO 2019

Founder's Message From Maj. Lee Stuckey, USMC

Almost ten years ago when I was battling my own issues from combat related injuries, I could have never imagined that AHERO would grow and reach almost 5,000 Veterans in that time period. Whether you are new to the organization or have been in the AHERO family since its beginning, you all play a pivotal role in reaching out to our Veterans in need.

Regardless of the ramp down in combat operations, we still have Veterans battling issues. And we still have the brave men and women of our military serving around the world in harm's way. The need will never go away to support them and to introduce them to resources. I ask each and every one of you to reach out and spread the word about AHERO's mission, get involved in one of our various programs, or even to start your own fundraising activity or event on AHERO's behalf in your local area.

Think about organizing a golf tournament, or maybe a 5K run or musical event featuring local talent. You'll be getting Veterans together with others in your community and raising awareness of AHERO's goal of stopping despair and suicide from claiming so many of our warriors.

After an exciting 2018, our AHERO team is getting even better at carrying out that mission, especially since Interim Executive Director Deanna Smith joined us in October. A volunteer, Deanna is a powerhouse organizer dedicated to our men and women who have served. Also, she's extremely motivated, and managed to prevent three suicides in her first two weeks. Please take the time to read about Deanna in the magazine.

AHERO is growing, with new programs. We're excited to announce our first Warrior Hook-Up weekend at the fabulous Wharf at Orange Beach in Orange Beach, Ala. We also are humbled to partner with our coalition brothers from Denmark. Read "In the Company of Vikings," about our Senior Hunt with some of Denmark's Veteran warriors who have fought alongside us.



(l-r) Maj. Lee Stuckey, Deanna Smith, and Dave Glassman

None of this could be possible without the help of our loyal supporters and volunteers. Every time I look on social media and see AHERO hats or supporters posting events, I see it as a testament to your work in spreading the good news about AHERO. Please continue these efforts and help us raise funds for programming and for our planned Maj. Gen. James A. Livingston Lodge to accommodate more guest Veterans who need the often lifesaving friendship and understanding they find at AHERO's events.

Be that one call for a person who needs it and help us save the lives of Veterans who desperately need us and answered the call of our country. Thank you for your time, for your dedication to your Veterans, and for believing in AHERO's mission.

Semper Fidelis,
 Lee Stuckey

The Art and Science of Wounded Veteran Recovery

By Sgt. Maj. Bryan Battaglia

After nearly 37 years serving in America's armed forces, there are things I've learned about the care and recovery of our military injured. I don't carry a formal discipline in medical science, but my experience has allowed me to develop substantial skill and competency in the art of short- and long-term medical care.

The injuries our warriors sustain are best healed with both science and art. Doctors facilitate and manage the science. The rest of us can aid in the medical art. One doesn't holistically work without the other. Following an injury, finding the right balance to a successful medicinal regimen can be daunting for a Veteran recovering from injuries or trauma. We see by the suicide rate among this vulnerable population that without the art of understanding the power of pharmaceuticals, their use can come at a huge cost!

U.S. military medicine has come a long way. Some suggest it is the best in the world. Surgery, prescriptions, and rehabilitative equipment are commonly used to map a path to wellness. New drugs to subdue pain are plentifully served up by our military and VA pharmacies. Another kind of medicine can be found outside the bottle. Possibly it can even replace prescriptions, dispelling the notion that "there's a pill for every ill."



Former Soldier & Coastguardsman, Dave Riley, lines up for the putt with SgtMaj Battaglia providing encouragement.

Explaining the Art

Art-driven modalities can provide effective approaches to healing for many individuals. In the case of AHERO, whose acronym is drawn from "America's Heroes Enjoying Recreation Outdoors," this modality is used to advance the healing process for many of our injured and combat wounded, including this writer.

Military folks in general have an appreciation for the outdoors, and being competitive is often part of their makeup. Such characteristics are developed as part of the enlistment or commissioned experience. When service-related injuries bar the outdoor lifestyle, depression and unhealthy sedentary routines often follow. Being able to enjoy outdoor activities and camaraderie with others can restore the spirit, producing long-term positive health results that one cannot put a price on. AHERO's artfully applied fishing, hunting, music-enjoyment and other programs amount to a successful "medical recipe" for healing.

AHERO: Providing Opportunities for Courage to Tee Up and Play

Recently, I met another injured Veteran, a quadruple amputee. Together we played 18 holes of golf. The average person would likely consider this unachievable for a quad

amputee. For this brave warrior, "scientific" healing had included life-changing surgeries, followed by a period of adjusting to prosthetics with intense physical therapy.

Then came the "art," supplied by AHERO in the form of outdoor sports like fishing, hunting, golf, teamwork and friendship. Sharing such experiences helps Veterans defeat adversity while building resiliency. The restoration of skills once enjoyed is key to a good quality of life. To witness this Veteran's determination and grit brought tears to my eyes: tears not of sympathy but fulfillment. Despite his disability, he was doing it ... just like the rest of us.

Neither the art nor the science of healing are possible without financial backing. Public and private facilities receive hefty government grants and major donations to conduct important scientific studies and develop pharmaceutical therapies.

But sustaining the art of warrior healing is where you and I come in. Small non-profit organizations such as AHERO rely on the appreciation and generosity of patriotic citizens. Without our help, this effective form of healing would be unavailable to many Veterans who may not get through life without it. I believe it is up to us to help them recapture a healthy lifestyle that can ensure they succeed.



SgtMaj Bryan Battaglia, USMC (ret) honors former Army Pvt. 1st Class Samuel Muldrew, 91, a Purple Heart recipient who served from 1943 to '45. Presentation was made at a World Cup game halftime ceremony [U.S. versus Nigeria], 2014.



Mission Brief

Military and Veteran suicide* statistics are hard to pin down, but overall the figure ranges from 20 to 22 such suicides occurring each day.

The mission of AHERO is to reverse the upward trajectory of this statistic and, indeed, substantially reduce the daily number of such suicides. AHERO works toward this goal by introducing those who have suffered serious physical/emotional trauma while serving to resources and programs that can help increase their overall quality of life. This includes:

- ★ Developing an informal support network of Veterans across the country
- ★ Encouraging constructive communication and engagement
- ★ Boosting Veteran morale

AHERO will accomplish this by welcoming Veterans into communities willing to donate the time, recreational equipment and the natural and financial resources necessary to support events that facilitate fellowship, communication, and mentoring. Through these activities, AHERO will establish and support a network of Veterans with personal experience in learning to deal with the emotional and physical wounds caused by the stress of military service and combat. The network will be self-sustaining and support Veterans across the United States of America.

AHERO is a 100 percent volunteer-run, 501(c)(3) charitable organization. More than 95 percent of all donations received go directly toward benefiting the Veterans we serve.

*For purposes of the AHERO mission, the term "Veteran" refers to all who are serving currently or have served in any branch of the United States Armed Forces.

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FEATURES, PROFILES, AND PATRONS

Welcome to AHERO 2019

AHERO and Danish Wounded Warriors.....	pg 2
Founder's Message from Maj. Lee Stuckey, USMC.....	pg 3
The Art & Science of Wounded Veterans Recovery	pg 4
AHERO Mission Brief	pg 5
Why Our Interconnected Support Groups Work.....	pg 8
Deanna Smith, AHERO Interim Executive Director	pg 10
54 Minutes	pg 11
In the Company of Vikings.....	pg 12
AHERO Events.....	pg 15
AHERO Celebrates a Beloved Family Man.....	pg 16
Carrying on a Tradition.....	pg 18
Firehouse Subs Proud to Serve	pg 19
AHERO Salutes Pensacola Beach Elks	pg 19
Patriotism Runs Deep for Rick Reynolds.....	pg 20
AHERO Thanks Firehouse Sub.....	pg 21

AHERO Comes to The Wharf At Orange Beach

The Inaugural AHERO Warrior Hook-Up at The Wharf	pg 24
Art Favre - A Head for Business, but a Patriot's Heart.....	pg 26
Making it Happen: Jim Bibby and his team at The Wharf.....	pg 28
Call him Zorro.....	pg 29
Matt & Amy McDonald - Help Bring AHERO to Orange Beach.....	pg 30
Brian Leiser - Why I and Others Want to Help	pg 32
David Theriot and Performance Contractors Vet Hiring Program	pg 33

There Are Heroes Among Us

Come Home to (Vet) Church.....	pg 36
I am That Man.....	pg 38
I Got Off My Ass and Did Something.....	pg 40
The Rediscovery of Hope	pg 41
Pushing Past My Boundaries.....	pg 42
Finding Her Hero: Heidi's Story.....	pg 44
The Coincidence of Seven	pg 46

Veterans Memorial Park... A Place of Sacred Remembrance

Veterans Memorial Park of Pensacola.....	pg 48
Hero CW04 – Phil Garvey	pg 51
Q & A with Pete McKanna.....	pg 52
The Wingman Foundation.....	pg 56

Six All-In 4AHERO: Raising Funds and Awareness

High Points Keeps on Climbing for AHERO	pg 58
Kappa Sigma's Boardwalk Bash.....	pg 60
Riding 4AHERO – One Man's Inspiration	pg 62
Fly Fishing 4AHERO – Renew the Spirit.....	pg 64
Golfing 4AHERO – Perido Bay Tournament.....	pg 65
Combat Vets Riding 4AHERO.....	pg 66

AHERO: The Story Continues ...

Sustaining our Gulf Coast Sea Life.....	pg 68
The Saga of Sneaky Pete	pg 70
Shad Mashad and the National Veterans Foundation.....	pg 71
Guns to Hammers Raises the Bar for 2019.....	pg 72

AHERO Supporters

AHERO at The Wharf – Thanks to Area Businesses.....	pg 34
Constant Coffee & Tea	pg 21
Crown Church	pg 75
DigiPro Media/Island Fiber	pg 23
Gulf Breeze Sertoma Fishing Rodeo	pg 22
Gulf Coast Yacht Group.....	pg 21
Hemingway's Island Grill/Bamboo Willies	pg 20
Heroes Among Us Speaker Series.....	pg 57
Island Fiber.....	pg 76
Mobility Plus.....	pg 34
New Grant for Qualifying Wounded Vets	pg 39
O'Choppers Almost Irish Pub	pg 35
Palomar Insurance.....	pg 7
Papa Nalu Ahoaha Grill.....	pg 19
Pensacola Beach Elks Lodge #497.....	pg 34
USMC Aviation – Memorial Placement Ceremony	pg 5



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Why Our Interconnected Support Groups Work

By Dave Glassman, USMC (Ret)

AHERO came to be only because of one despairing combat Marine's interrupted suicide.

It was USMC Major Lee Stuckey's experience of having his MRAP vehicle run over and detonate a tank mine in Iraq in 2007, adding to his trauma and self-imposed guilt over the loss of Marines on the battlefield, that led him to a decision to take his own life. But in that desperate moment of holding his firearm to his head, an angel call made by his mother caused him to drop it, overwhelmed by the realization that he would be doing far more harm than good by pulling the trigger.

Stuckey's next thought was: "If I'm feeling this kind of pain, there must be others like me who are, too." He was thinking about those with severe PTS, terrible burns, or lost limbs and/or eyesight. Valiant men and women who had given some part of their physical bodies, and the many whose losses were of the spirit, or of the body and spirit, both.

He was Capt. Stuckey back then (he is still in active service) and had an idea of how to help those who were suffering as he was. He would pull together an organization of fellow service members and Veterans who understood the need and could help to heal these devastated warriors by reacquainting them with the enjoyment of outdoor life. He would call it "America's Heroes Enjoying Recreation Outdoors." Or, as a more manageable acronym, "AHERO."

You could say AHERO was born into a family of military-minded folks who shared a love of the pastime of hunting. They also shared a powerful interest in reaching out to connect with other service men and women affected by military training experiences and combat. When they weren't in the woods or a tree stand, they would spend time at the hunting lodge engaged in what became known as "screened porch therapy."

In the 10 years since its inception, AHERO has provided programming to thousands of active duty personnel and Veterans. Nowadays, the programming includes many other outdoor events and activities matching the interests of Veterans and increasing support in the community.



Montgomery based AHERO, along with business owners and volunteers, host wounded service members from Denmark at the 2018 Senior Mentor Deer & Hog Hunt.

This is the AHERO cycle: Our volunteers put on events and our website, magazine, social media and members put out the word. All is made possible by our donors. Guest warriors arrive, touching hearts and making connections, and more support is raised as more in the community hear about it and are inspired. The cycle turns again, and AHERO is able to reach more warriors who have known loss, injury and despair and are in need of the kind of connection this organization can provide.

That said, part of AHERO's success lies in the understanding that it can only play a limited role in the healing process but that its strength can be geometrically increased by partnering with other people and organizations who provide niche services and help to Veterans who need it.

AHERO magazine is committed to highlighting such partners as part of its regular content. This year's issue, for instance, notes the generosity of the Cpl J.R. Spears Detachment of the

Marine Corps League of Pensacola, Fla., and the Joseph Whitehead Detachment of the Marine Corps League in Orange Beach, Ala., as well as the work on behalf of disabled Veterans being done by Guns to Hammers (GTH), a Houston, Tx, charitable group that helps to provide free, American with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant home-remodeling to Veterans in a number of states.

Read about the University of West Florida Kappa Sigma Fraternity's Perdido Bay Golf Tournament, which benefited AHERO. Kappa Sigma spearheads other fund raisers for Veterans, as well. And consider reading the articles on Tai Chi, an anxiety-calming exercise, authored by members of the Poe in Action non-profit that provides supportive services to local Veterans. Also profiled here: Shad Meshad of the National Veterans Foundation. Next year's issue will have a full feature on that organization's great work.



Cpl Joseph Whitehead Detachment of the Marine Corps League contributes to AHERO.



Guns to Hammers and AHERO join forces with the Cpl JR Spears Detachment of the Marine Corps League, Diamond Contractors, Merrill Land Construction and crew members of the U.S.S. Tripoli's crew to replace the dilapidated and leaking roof of Vietnam era Navy Corpsman, George "Doc" Dodge and his wife BeBe.

Many other groups and organizations also support or advocate for the brave men and women who have taken an oath to stand up for us and America, always at a great sacrifice to themselves.

AHERO provides just a slice of the Veterans' support pie. It's our relationship with other organizations and what they bring to the table

that reflect the truth of the phrase "the sum of the parts is greater than the parts themselves."

Every one of these groups has its own mission—but all have one paramount purpose: to give back to those who gave us their all.

"AHERO provides just a slice of the Veterans' support pie. It's our relationship with other organizations and what they bring to the table that reflect the truth of the phrase 'the sum of the parts is greater than the parts themselves.'"

Editor's note: A three-times-deployed, now-retired USMC CH-53E Helicopter pilot and AHERO board member, Glassman has been a committed volunteer mover-and-shaker for AHERO over the life of the organization. Each year, he spearheads multiple AHERO events and works tirelessly to raise funds and awareness to help our injured and wounded warriors reclaim the joy of living they stepped up to secure for all of us.

Deanna Smith Joins AHERO as Interim Executive Director

By Connie Conway

The all-volunteer AHERO organization is pleased to welcome aboard Interim Executive Director Deanna Smith, Pensacola Beach resident and huge supporter of our men and women in uniform.

Smith's seven years as executive director of the Trauma Intervention Program (TIP) in Northwest Florida drew on her many strengths. TIP, a 501 c (3) organization, provided emotional and practical help at the scene during incidents of trauma, and her keen intelligence and deeply empathetic desire to help others was well suited for this. Those same qualities, coupled with her immediately obvious leadership skills, made her the perfect choice for AHERO's executive director position. Her "trial-by-fire" introduction to one aspect of AHERO's important work is described here in her compelling "54 Minutes" story.

In her first weeks on the job, which is a volunteer position, Smith's excellent managerial style and (no kidding) astonishing level of energy quickly captured the respect and gratitude of the organization's board members, CEO and Founder Lee Stuckey, and Vice President Dave Glassman, not to mention its many other volunteers, guest Veterans, and supporters.

With a head-on rush into her first big AHERO challenge, she welcomed and shepherded visiting wounded Veterans from the Danish Royal Army through the full week of the AHERO's hugely attended annual Senior Hunt in December. These stellar young men had fought alongside our forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Much appreciation was shown them here for that with Deanna writing about it in her story, "In the Company of Vikings."

Highly goal-oriented and an effective communicator whether in front of big audiences, in one-on-one dialogue, or in her writing, Smith's style and purpose are nevertheless as a listener first and then a confident, competent problem solver. These are assets for which AHERO is grateful beyond measure.

"Nothing motivates me more than heart and passion for a beautiful mission," she said when invited to join the organization. "I see passion within AHERO at every turn and a mission that is absolutely impacting and saving lives. I am all in!" So when you see Deanna Smith out there during one of AHERO's events, please say "hi" and get to know her. She'll love that!



Deanna with Danish wounded Veterans (l-r): Finn Sennick Jensen, Jamie Baker (Seven Oaks Farm manager), Poul Lange, and Jan Bottcher.

54 Minutes

By Deanna Smith

Life is a numbers game. There are 24 hours in a day, and 22 Veteran suicides happen every 24 hours, 365 days per year. Nearly one suicide every hour of every day. The reality is staggering.

For seven years, I was a volunteer with Trauma Intervention Program (TIP). We responded at the call of law enforcement to trauma scenes, most involving death. I worked as a liaison between law enforcement and survivors, providing information, counseling, compassion, and listening. Many calls involved suicide, and we would arrive when survivors were in shock and nothing made sense. So often I heard "Why didn't he (or she) just talk to me ... or someone?"

In August of 2018, I was invited to the AHERO Fish Fry during the Warrior Hook-Up and met Marine Corps Major Lee Stuckey. After hearing of my work at TIP, he asked if I would be interested in talking with Veterans when a call for help was received. Without hesitation, I was on board. Attentive listening is my forte.

Less than two days later, Stuckey received a call for assistance. A Veteran in another state was in dire need of help. Local support was being rallied but immediate contact was critical and Stuckey wasn't able to make it, so he dialed my number. "He's drinking in his truck, suicidal, with a gun," he said. "Can you call him?" I replied, "Of course."

My initial call went straight to the Veteran's voicemail. Hoping he had only passed out, I left a message with my name asking him to call me because a friend had contacted me on his behalf. I called Stuckey and said I would give it an hour then call back.

The hour dragged by. Again my call went to voicemail. Concerned, I changed the tone of my message: "Joe*, this is Deanna again. Listen, your friend is very worried about you. He feels like you really needed to talk with someone. I know you don't know me, but I would really appreciate the chance to talk with you. Will you please call me back? Thanks, Joe."

I watched the clock. Four minutes later he got back to me. I introduced myself and said I was working with AHERO and asked about his branch of service. Navy, he said, but now he was a retired law-enforcement officer. I sensed an opportunity for connection and explained my work with TIP, which included debriefing

responders such as police officers as well as survivors. "Responders carry so much trauma after each difficult call," I told him. He mentioned again about having been an officer then said, "Can I tell you my story?"

For many post-traumatic-stress victims, the details of the terrible act or events they endured might as well have happened yesterday. This seemed the case for Joe, as he told me the story.

He was not supposed to be there that day, he said. He'd come in early to replace another officer and was answering a domestic violence report. He described the road, the house—even the looks on the faces of the relatives present at the scene as he arrived. In vivid detail, he told me what he saw in the room, every aspect, as if he had been there just minutes ago.

From time to time he would pause and apologize for taking too long. "Joe, I'm on your time," I told him quietly. "Take as long as you need and tell me only what you want to ... there's nothing more important right now."

He began again, this time describing the violent attack that left a woman stabbed and bleeding on the floor and a young child in the grasp of a knife-wielding maniac. He reiterated the commands he gave the man in those tense moments, and the subsequent outcome when he failed to release the child. I could see the scene so clearly. I still see it, because his crystal-clear recollection gave me a graphic picture of violence and made me feel his fear for the lives of the mother and child. But just as intensely, it evoked a scene of bravery, discipline and definitive action in the face of a harrowing threat.

He stopped speaking. I took a breath and began to recount moments of his story, restating it nearly word for word. But it was my voice and my perspective as I repeated the commands he gave to the perpetrator: "Let the child go," I, as Joe, said. There was no reaction. "Let the child go." Again, no reaction. Then, in exactly Joe's words, I said, "Let the child go, or I will kill you."

Looking Joe directly in the eyes, the man had answered, "F**k you," and I repeated that.

"Joe," I said softly then, "Joe, he heard you. He acknowledged you. He knew the consequences and put the knife closer to the child's throat. You had no other choice, because the outcome would likely have been three lives lost." We spoke a little after that. Then Joe said, "Through

all the counselors and doctors I've had over the years, I don't believe anyone has ever listened or understood me like you have. Thank you." And as I hung up the phone, I knew I had found a place in AHERO.

I glanced again at the clock and thought how it doesn't take a lot of time to stop a suicide. I calculated my time on the phone with Joe—54 minutes. Even if I make a difference only once, I thought, it would be one less. Twenty-one instead of 22 after 54 minutes. Life by the numbers.

*To protect his privacy, the real name of this Veteran is not used.

**"Take as long as you need and tell me only what you want to ... there's nothing more important right now."
~ Deanna Smith**



In the Company of Vikings

By Deanna Smith



Quail hunting at Seven Oaks Farm, Danish Warriors JanBottcher and Mark Ingemann Peters fire as directed by local resident Rick Lane.



Deanna admires Colonel Jim Cobb's harvested buck at the AHERO Senior Mentor Hunt, December 2018.

The scars of war are undeniable. Whether it is physical scars, amputations, traumatic brain injury, or the plague of ongoing Post Traumatic Stress, most Veterans are forever changed by combat.

Imagine coming home to a country generally apathetic about supporting its Veterans. Such has been the case of our Danish brothers in arms. While there is no animosity toward Veterans in Denmark, there is also no "thank you for your service" or support. I learned this recently when I had the honor of representing AHERO at the Senior Hunt in December, in Shorter, Ala., working with Seven Oaks farm owner Jeff Welsh to host 11 Danish Wounded Warriors.

During that week I found that, as many Americans are, I was ignorant of the contributions the Danish have made to our military efforts. That soon changed.

I was honored to meet Marine Corps LtGen General James B. Laster, who hunted alongside the Danes. "I served as Deputy Chief of Staff for Joint/Combined Operations, International Security Force (ISAF) Joint Command during a year-long tour of 2011 to 2012" Laster said. "I remember the distinguished service, professionalism, and bravery of the Danes during a very dangerous period of intense combat, especially in their area of operations in the Southwest. They were a tremendous force for the insurgents to reckon with. They all have my deepest respect and are worthy of their warrior heritage. They are in essence 'major league Vikings.'"

In 2012, Royal Danish Army Master Sergeant Jacob Pantan "died" in Afghanistan. Shot multiple times, Pantan bled out and had no pulse for nearly four minutes. Miraculously, he was brought back to life, but his recovery has been long and tedious.

Pantan had to learn to walk and speak again, and still suffers from short-term memory difficulties. Spurred by his own experiences, he began working on Veterans issues in 2013. His tenacious spirit drove him to establish the Danish Wounded Warriors, a band of brothers currently 102 members strong.

"The Danes have been key allies in the fight against the Taliban," said General John Toolan, commander of all coalition forces in the Regional Command Southwest. "During a five-year period from 2010 to 2015, they joined the fight in Afghanistan. There were many contributions by these brave soldiers. I fondly remember a fearless tank crew led by Sgt Jacob Pantan. They were engaged against the enemy for several hours that finally ended in evacuation of Sgt Pantan to tend to his several gunshot wounds. The Danes truly demonstrated their Viking heritage, and were trusted partners in the war against the Taliban."



Deanna with Jacob Pantan of the Royal Danish Army.



Deanna with the Royal Danish Army wounded Veterans at the AHERO Farms, December 2018.

Welcome to AHERO 2019

Denmark's Wounded Warriors are now bringing attention to their ongoing struggles and needs, with Panton raising money and awareness for the organization. After speaking about his experiences at the Danish Embassy in Washington DC. in December 2014, he was invited to the Pentagon, Congress and the White House. He returned home determined to take the wounded Danish soldiers to Ground Zero in New York to talk about why they went to war and confirm that "it was worth it even though we had to pay a high price." Eighty soldiers plus spouses traveled to Ground Zero on September 11, 2016, and performed a wreath-laying ceremony. They met relatives of some who had lost their lives during the Trade Center attack. Inspired by this, the organization began planning future trips and events.

"They needed something to look forward to feel useful again," Panton explained about the soldiers. "Before they were wounded, they always had the next mission to look forward to. Then there was nothing."

The Danish organization provides work for its warriors, connecting them with other Vet-

eran resources. AHERO is a great complement to the program. "When I met AHERO the first time it was in the Camp Lejeune Wounded Warrior Battalion," says Panton. "Major Lee Stucky invited us and we have been doing many events together since. I invite them to Denmark and he invites us to Alabama."

During the hunt, Poul Lange, a member of the Danish organization, stressed the importance of bonding with other Veterans: "There's a special understanding between soldiers. We don't have to explain our ups and more importantly, our downs. Those feelings are without flag, nationality or gender. It can be a difficult task to break the surface with those who need it. I myself am a proud man and it's enormously hard for me to ask for help—showing my weakness and talking about it."

Each AHERO event is a chance to support other Veterans in need and to recognize the benefit of receiving help from them, as well. As Lange put it, "The best way to recovery is in opening up to one another. That's something we have to teach each other worldwide, Veteran to Veteran."

I was humbled to hear the stories of these individuals, and to learn about their lives as Danish Veterans. In one conversation, I asked one brave Dane what he viewed as his strength. "I would say before my injury, my gift was mental and physical strength," he started, "but now..." He paused for a long moment, mirroring the depth of emotion combat Veterans across every nation likely experience.

That week I saw men pushing through the pain of cold, damp weather on mended bones and damaged joints. I watched amputees jump from wheelchairs to scale stairs faster than I could climb with two healthy legs, and witnessed Danes pushing their brothers in wheelchairs through heavily mudded trails and thick cornfields so they could hunt as a team. I laughed with men joking and enjoying life—who chose to wake up another day and fight the demons and challenges that PTS and horrific physical wounds throw their way. Yes, their strength as they perceive it has been forever altered. But to one who had the honor of spending time among them, these heroes epitomize strength, and I am forever changed by the experience.

AHERO Events

Bay Area Adventure

Bay Area, Calif.

April 13–18

Veterans

AHERO Ambassador: Lee Stuckey

Gates County Turkey Hunt

Gates County, N.C.

April 25–27

Veterans

AHERO Ambassador: Lee Stuckey

Warrior Hook-Up on the Wharf at Orange Beach

Orange Beach, Ala.

May 2–5

Veterans

AHERO Ambassador: Dave Glassman

International: CATERAN YOMP

Cairngorm Mountains, Scotland

June TBD

Veterans

AHERO Ambassador: Bill Boutwell

Warrior Hook-Up Key West

July TBD

Veterans

AHERO Ambassador: Lex McMahon

International:

High Points Zugspitze Trip

Top of Germany

July TBD

Veterans

AHERO Ambassadors:

Jeremy & Meika Thompson

High Points Mt. Whitney Trip

Top of Continental U.S.

Aug TBD

Veterans

AHERO Ambassadors:

Jeremy & Meika Thompson

Oregon Fishing Trip

Newport, Ore.

Aug TBD

Veterans

AHERO Ambassadors:

Jeremy & Meika Thompson

High Sierra Trip

California

Aug 30–Sept 5

Veterans

AHERO Ambassadors:

Jeremy & Meika Thompson

Maine Bear Hunt

Host: House in the Woods

Lee, Maine

Aug 31–Sept 7

Veterans

AHERO Ambassador: Mark Oliva

Warrior Hook-Up Pensacola

Deep Sea Fishing

Pensacola, Fla.

Aug TBD

Veterans

AHERO Ambassador: Dave Glassman

International: AHERO Warrior Week

Copenhagen, Denmark

Sept TBD

Veterans

AHERO Ambassadors:

Deanna Smith & Col Jim Cobb

Alabama Deer Hunt

Shorter, Ala.

Dec. TBD

Veterans

AHERO Ambassador: Lee Stuckey



Celebrating a Beloved Family Man, AHERO Advances the Goal



Al Stuckey and Dee Davis

On Saturday, March 16th, AHERO Founder Lee Stuckey and the organization's volunteers gathered at the First Baptist Church of Wetumpka to mark a huge milestone in the life of Al Stuckey, Lee's dad.

Al's 90th birthday brought together more than 160 family members, friends, Veterans and AHERO supporters in a joyous Birthday Benefit event with a dual goal: to honor the life of a dear gentleman while calling attention to the

cause his son had set in motion—the building of AHERO's Maj. Gen. James E. Livingston Lodge at the camp in Shorter, Ala., to accommodate wounded and disabled Veterans during hunting events designed to engage them again in outdoor activities they loved.

Tables were festively decorated in red, white and blue and featured photographic memories from Al's infancy to the present. Brilliantly planned and orchestrated by AHERO Interim Executive Director Deanna Smith, the party treated guests to a wonderful video made by family friend, Kevin Reuter, showcasing photos and memory-rich videos including segments of Al showing off some of his best dance moves!

With musical entertainment provided by Veterans Bill Cody, Craig Elliott, and Lee Stuckey, guests enjoyed great food by Miss Dot's (Tyre Stuckey), Taziki's Mediterranean Café (Jason Parkman), Millie Ray's Rolls (Ben and Ryan Ray), as well as patriotic cakes and treats. The birthday cake itself was a wonder to behold, as colorful and bright as our flag and country. Special thanks to Ben Pena and Joan McDonald, and Marilyn Seale who organized the hostesses for the event.

Al spoke with great feeling at the podium. "I believe in the AHERO mission and in what Lee and the Board are doing. We need so much



Lee and Al Stuckey



(l-r) Conner Metheny, Buddy Wallace, Lee Stuckey, Dan Pose, Dave Glassman, Isaac Gallegos & Hunter Metheny



Lee Stuckey and his Dad, Al Stuckey

to reach out to these Veterans who are often unable to cope with what they have been through. Many people don't realize that up to 29 active and retired service members take their own lives each day. AHERO is making a real difference by connecting like-minded Veterans through its outdoor recreational events that are free of charge for the Veterans and that bring them together in a relaxed and casual environment, allowing them to relate through shared experiences. This 'screened porch therapy' has a very significant and positive impact and helps to save lives."

The call went out reminding us all of the need to continue the efforts of this great organization, which is working to intensify the focus on preventing suicide among our military members and Veterans. Contributions to the future building of the "Livingston Lodge" are continuing to be made in honor of Al, for which the organization is so grateful.



(l-r) Dave Glassman, Bill Cody and Lee Stuckey



(l-r) Hunter Metheny, Conner Metheny, Lee Stuckey

For his part, Major Lee Stuckey spoke in loving recognition of his dad who has long believed in his son's mission. And in a note on Facebook, he wrote this to his dad: "Happy birthday to Alva 'Fanny Pack' Stuckey! 90 years ago began the journey to making me, and I truly appreciate you for that and all you do! I can't thank you enough for giving me the work ethic and ambition I have today and for dedicating your life to AHERO and helping Veterans. I love you dad and am blessed to still have you around, ole boy!"

CARRYING ON A TRADITION



AHERO sends a heartfelt message of love and appreciation to its Pensacola Beach community of supporting businesses and boat owners who continue to embrace the AHERO mission of reconnecting Veterans to the revitalizing joy of outdoor life and activity. It takes the help of a community willing to support meaningful experiences and inspire increased outreach and connection to create new pathways to wellness for our Veterans, many of whom are at-risk of giving up due to wounds both visible and unseen. For the past seven years, our beach dwellers and visitors have provided AHERO with exactly the kind of help needed to accomplish this.

Each year, our supporters provide a home for the annual August "Warrior Hook-Up" event. Wounded, injured and disabled Veterans travel from all over the country to join our local Veterans and citizens for a fun-filled, therapeutic extended weekend on our white sands. Boarding deep-sea fishing boats generously provided by area residents, they experience the exhilarating joy of "salt life" at its best: charging the rolling waves as they cast out for the biggest fish our Gulf-blue waters have to offer.

**PENSACOLA BEACH, AHERO SALUTES YOU
AND WE LOOK FORWARD TO THE
8TH ANNUAL HOOK-UP ON YOUR GLORIOUS
SANDS AND DEEP WATERS THIS AUGUST!**

Firehouse Subs: Proud to Serve the Spirit of AHERO

By Chris Broscius

For the past six years, Firehouse Subs of Gulf Breeze, Florida, has partnered with AHERO to support our injured and wounded active-service military members and Veterans. It has been our pleasure to provide food for the fishing expedition they enjoy during AHERO's Warrior Hook-Up event. This is something I am personally very passionate about as it's such a rewarding experience to help these heroes have a great time and create lifelong memories.

Here on the Gulf Coast, fishing is a major part of community living. My dad, Jim Broscius, has been fishing since he was a teenager, and he passed that passion on to me as a kid. We still love to go out on the water and catch

fish to this day. It's a pastime that brings up so many happy memories for my family and me.

Fishing in open waters is often best done in the company of others. So when the opportunity came up that allowed us to help with an event that brings our warriors together to enjoy this healing pastime, we jumped at it.

Helping others and giving back to the community is at the heart of everything we do at Firehouse Subs. In addition, Firehouse Subs Public Safety Foundation gives back to first responders, public safety organizations and military folks every year, with more than \$37.7 million granted in 47 states, Puerto Rico and

Canada. Here in the Pensacola area, the Foundation has granted more than \$545,000, and we're honored to be a part of that.

The opportunity to help AHERO succeed in its mission to prevent suicide among service members and Veterans gives us another way to feel connected to the community in which we live and work. America's military members past and present have done, and do, so much to protect our rights and the country we live in. In my mind and my dad's, joining with AHERO to create a positive, fun and memorable weekend for them each year is one way we can honor their sacrifices.

On behalf of its guest Veterans and Active Service Members

AHERO

would like to express its gratitude to the members of the

PENSACOLA BEACH ELKS CLUB LODGE 497

for the fabulous evening, great friendship and support all enjoyed at the
Saturday night August 2018 Warrior Hook-up Fish-Fry Dinner.

Each year, Elks Club Lodge 497 provides our Veterans with a place of
comfort and conviviality where indoors they are served delicious food and
outdoors on the veranda they take in the evening beauty of our Gulf waters,
recalling the fun and challenge of their
AHERO Warrior Hook-Up fishing adventures

Thank You!



ELKS Post 497 Board of Directors Chairman Dan Smith presents a \$2000 check from the Elks National Foundation (ENF) for the August 2019 Warrior Hook-Up dinner, to AHERO Board of Directors member and volunteer, retired Lt. Col. Dave Glassman, USMC. The ENF, through its Veterans Service and Remembrance arm, provides grants to charitable organizations with programs that aid and comfort America's Veterans in need.



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Patriotism Runs Deep

Five years ago I was invited to the Pensacola Beach Elks Lodge for a beer with a sailing buddy. As we entered the club I could see that it was packed, standing room only. My friend apologized saying he forgot it was AHERO Hook-Up Weekend and that it might take a while to get served with so many people. About that time, a young Marine got up and spoke about how he had wanted to kill himself, putting the gun in his mouth before receiving a text from his mother. It stopped him. That Marine was Lee Stuckey.

Major Stucky went on to share more about his story and how AHERO started, as well as the good it does. I told my friend if the Elks support this kind of thing, I'd like to become a member.

Although I'm a civilian, my family has served our country in every war since the Revolution. My brother was in the first wave immediately after 911. You could say patriotism runs deep in my family. I joined the Elks immediately following that AHERO event.

Today I'm still here.

Rick Reynolds,
Exalted Ruler, Pensacola Beach Lodge #497



AHERO THANKS YOU, FIREHOUSE SUBS!

AHERO and all involved with our annual August Warrior Hook-Up event are extremely grateful for the great support and delicious foods provided by Chris and Jim Broschious of Firehouse Subs Gulf Breeze during each yearly event. The generosity of spirit demonstrated to our Veterans by Chris and Jim, and the enormous support provided by the Firehouse Subs Public Safety Foundation to our greater Pensacola community, are reflections of the caring nature that continues to live strong in the American character today.

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29TH ANNUAL FAMILY FISHING RODEO

JUNE 8TH & 9TH SOUTH SHORELINE PARK, GULF BREEZE, FL

Almost half of Gulf Breeze Sertoma's member base are U.S. Veterans. Our Family Fishing Rodeo is our only fund raising event with 100% net proceeds going back to our community. It is with great pride we continue supporting AHERO and their efforts for our wounded Veterans. We invite you to participate in our event enabling us to extend our depth and reach with your generous contributions.



What happens when innovation and opportunity meet at AHERO?

DigiPro Media's Dave Glassman, a retired Marine, met Island Fiber owner Jose "Mickey" Franco, a Marine combat Veteran, at the AHERO Senior Mentor Hunt in 2017. As happens at so many AHERO events, a connection was made. After the event, both men realized they were on identical missions: to use the businesses they had started to provide better internet and website access to their communities.

DigiPro Media is a digital technology company focused on building websites that are accessible to individuals with disabilities. Island Fiber is a high-speed internet provider serving coastal communities in need of modern-day internet speeds. Both believe that access to content, goods and services on the internet is a societal imperative - a fundamental human right. Now they are working together to deliver the next generation of technology across the Gulf Coast.

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AHERO Comes to The Wharf at Orange Beach

Introducing The Inaugural AHERO Warrior Hook-Up at

The
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ORANGE BEACH

May 2-5, 2019



The Wharf At Orange Beach in Orange Beach, Ala., has confirmed its plans to host an annual AHERO Warrior Hook-Up event, expanding the joyful, eight-year-old tradition as it adds its own style and character. For the past three years of the Pensacola Beach Warrior Hook-Up, AHERO has been fortunate to have individuals from Orange Beach, Ala., participate in the event, and they have graciously brought the AHERO message home to their own beautiful Gulf-Coast community.

Now the fabulous destination of The Wharf at Orange Beach is about to host some of America's bravest at its own first annual AHERO Warrior Hook-Up. From the schedule the Wharf community has planned for our Veterans at this beautiful resort, it is clear that The Wharf—with its amazing attractions, sunny walkways, and showcase canal marina—is a perfect venue for yet another beloved Warrior Hook-Up event.

SOUTHEASTSKY

A Head For Business, But a Patriot's Heart

By Connie Conway

Art Favre is as busy and productive a businessman as you'll find anywhere. Nevertheless, he always takes the time to listen when it comes to the subject of America's Veterans. This past fall, he leant an ear to long-time fishing buddy and fellow businessman Matt McDonald's proposal to host an AHERO Warrior Hook-Up event for wounded and injured U.S. military Veterans and active-service members in Orange Beach, Ala.

"You actually have the perfect place to make the Warrior Hook-Up an annual event," McDonald suggested. As members of the Mobile Big Game Fishing Club, he and powerhouse organizer Brian Leiser had put together Alabama's first AHERO Warrior Hook-Up in 2018 out of the Orange Beach marina. Now McDonald was referring to Favre's fabulous resort, marina, and entertainment venue known as The Wharf at Orange Beach.

A relative of football legend Brett Favre, Art Favre had forged his own extraordinary success in business over the past several decades, and he acquired the 222-acre resort in 2011. Poor management had left it underdeveloped and deteriorating, but Favre saw its potential and brilliantly re-imagined its scope.

Today the contrast between The Wharf past and present is startling: A beautiful and flourishing destination resort for all ages, it offers rides, delightful dining, entertainment, shopping and places to relax. Visitors can enjoy amphitheater concerts featuring national touring acts, as well as the world class marina facilities where offshore billfish tournaments are hosted and where docked sport-fishing yachts can be seen at rest, including, on occasion, Favre's own exquisite 92-ft Viking, "A Work of Art."

"Long before the place was initially bought for development, I would come here from Baton Rouge to relax and fish," he told us in a recent interview. "The canal was just a creek bordered by woods and fields. It was basically my getaway place." The area's potential had struck him even then—so much so that he subsequently bought a condo nearby and later, built a house.

A hardworking man with vision and a plan

By nature an energetic entrepreneur, Favre had learned the value of hard work on his family's farm, where they raised everything from beef cattle to okra and cantaloupes and just about all you can name in between. "We had chickens for fresh eggs and pigs for fresh pork and bacon," Favre said. "Basically, we lived off the land. I had lots of chores, and a summer job in town stocking the shelves of my uncle's Ben Franklin store while I was still elementary school age."

A different form of work grabbed his interest as a youth: construction. "My dad taught me a lot about driving nails and such," he explained. "When I was about 13, we moved off the farm into Gulfport, Miss., and built our own house. We drew the plans ourselves and got a contractor, and I got interested in that. Once we'd moved in, I made a friend next door whose dad was in the homebuilding business. On weekends I would ride with him and help."

That was in the 'Sixties. Favre played in a rock-n-roll band on weekends as a teenager, saving for college. But his interest in construction had grown, and he found a job in a structural steel fabrication shop as a helper and weld grinder the summer before college. He'd looked to choose a school with a program in construction or building, but found no college offering one. "So I decided to go for architecture, since I liked drafting," he said, "and I was ac-



Art Favre, whose \$1.2 million donation established an endowed chair in Louisiana State University (LSU) Department of Construction Management and Industrial Engineering, receives appreciative acknowledgement from LSU representatives.



cepted at LSU, where I discovered I didn't have the artistic capability to be an architect. It really wasn't what I wanted to do, anyway." He paused, then added with a grin, "I just wanted to build things."

His first job after college was with an industrial company that built refineries and chemical plants. "I started as an estimator," he said. This gave him a basis in the practicalities of industrial construction and, over the next several years, expanded his understanding of the business. His tireless work ethic and those "apprentice years" paid off. In 1979, still a young man, Favre combined his love of building with his expertise in the industrial field to start a company he called "Performance Contractors." Now national in scope, the firm builds refineries, power plants and other industrial facilities vital to America's economic development and prosperity.

Taking it to the Vets

But Favre's interests go beyond the purely entrepreneurial. He's also a stalwart supporter of our military Veterans. "The closest I came to serving was two years of ROTC in college," he said. "I have nothing but respect for our armed services people. So many Americans take freedom for granted. And freedom is not free. We only have it because of those sacrifices they made and make every day."

It's great when a person's actions live up to his words. A few years ago, Favre instituted the Veterans Employment Program at his company. Seeking the right director for it, he recalled an Army Vet he'd met who ran a restaurant in Baton Rouge, David Theriot. David now heads up the highly successful program and you can read more about him and the program in our story in this issue.

Favre's agreement to host the 4-day AHERO Warrior Hook-Up at The Wharf in May is, as he described, "Just one of things we think will help our Vets, giving them the opportunity to do something a little different. There's nothing better to clear your head than getting out in the Gulf of Mexico and catching a few big fish." The ever-busy Favre, who owns homes in both Baton Rouge and Orange Beach, knows all about that. Business commitments keep him from spending as much time here as he'd like, he said. He's working hard to change that.

"I've been coming here to Orange Beach and the Wharf for years," he said. It's my stress relief. I think it will be that for our Veterans, too."



Art Favre and crew aboard his aptly named yacht, A Work of Art.

Making it Happen:

Jim Bibby and His Management Team at The Wharf

By Connie Conway



The Wharf at Orange Beach Management team members (l-r): Pete Bryan, general manager of The Wharf Amphitheater; Jade Hubbard, event coordinator; Jim Bibby, general manager of The Wharf at Orange Beach; Sheena Mizell, marketing director; Brad Nicks, event leasing coordinator; Lauren Lowery, marketing coordinator; Cindy Long, sponsorship and premier seat director

People who succeed in business and other fields generally do so because of what they learned getting there. That describes Art Favre and no doubt did when, in 2009, he bought the 222-acre resort, The Wharf at Orange Beach. He had watched the property being developed and knew it was faltering.

Much would depend on the staff he would need to turn things around and create the luxurious resort and getaway experience he envisioned. "I basically inherited Jim, since he was working here at the time," Favre said, referring to Jim Bibby, who was then director of security. "I needed a general manager, so we did a national search and found a management group. But after six months it was clear they couldn't do anything right." By then, Favre had known Bibby a while. "I gave up on the group and said, 'You know, Jim, you look like a good general manager.' And he accepted the job."

Mission accomplished. The Wharf has been under Bibby's management since then—thriving and living up to Favre's original vision.

Bibby's resume includes working as a police paramedic in 1976 and advancing to become

Orange Beach chief of police before leaving to work for the Bridgestone Corporation in 1991. In 2006, he began overseeing security at The Wharf and was still keeping the place safe when Favre purchased it.

The two have enjoyed a friendship as well as their employer-employee association ever since. "Art's an LSU graduate and I'm an Alabama fan, so I have to kid him about that sometimes," Bibby said. But they are on the same wavelength when it comes to The Wharf. With his clear-eyed "lawman's" attention to the details of changing schedules and situations that can shift crowd numbers and generate activity, Bibby's expertise and calm style of command are vital to The Wharf's operation.

Another of his assets that aligns with those of his boss is Bibby's ability to build and keep a loyal, remarkably efficient management team. "When Art took over, this place looked like a barebones crossroads," he said. "Maintenance was basically two people with a broom and a hammer. Now we have talented people whose commitment to the Wharf is what keeps this place running smoothly and who all feel like they're part of a family."

His pride in this "family" is very obvious, with good reason. Whether it's Marketing Director Sheena Mizell's head for publicizing the brilliance of the Wharf experience, or Special Events Coordinator Jade Hubbard's ability to put together an unforgettably beautiful happening, or Brad Nicks' expertise in leasing the perfect space for the perfect event, a most exciting beat goes on at the Wharf assisted by these and the many other people who work here.

Meanwhile, keeping the staff and The Wharf's numerous appreciative guests safe through every day and night is Director of Security Don Migliori and his capable team.

"Everybody here works long hours whenever it's necessary," Bibby said. "They take it in their stride and very few quit. I had a guy once who left for a job that he said was paying a lot more than we were. But after a few months he called wanting to leave it and come back here." Here Bibby cracked a smile. "Told me he missed the place," he said.

From this writer's perspective, anyone visiting The Wharf at Orange Beach would immediately understand why.

Call Him Zorro

By Connie Conway

When Air Force Veteran Donald Milburn, an employee at The Wharf at Orange Beach, was a seven-year-old kid living in Michigan, he was smitten with the of TV character, Zorro.

"I was so into how Zorro helped people that I decided my dad would be proud to be like him, too," Milburn said. "He'd want to show the sign of Zorro—you know, the letter Z—on his brand new '57 Chevy. And, well, a crayon just wouldn't do. So I got a river rock and scratched a big, long, perfect Z all down each side of the car. I pressed hard so it went into the metal under the paint. They were beautiful, those Zs. Of course, my old man didn't think so." He doesn't recall if he "got a lickin' for it," but his cousins called him "Zorro" from then on.

He was a nineteen-year-old, about-to-graduate senior in early 1970 when he drew his draft number: 72. "Don't even think about college, son," he was told. "You'll be going into the Army!" Milburn enlisted in the Air Force instead, and received aviation technical training to work on the KC-135 Stratotanker aerial refueling aircraft.

He was soon sent to Thailand. During his five months in country, neither he nor anyone else knew that the containers they were often resting on during breaks were full of Agent Orange. He would conclude his four-year Air Force career with an honorable discharge, having earned the rank of sergeant. In time, he would graduate college with a degree in mining inspection. But he still didn't know about agent orange.

Working with the Disabled American Veterans organization (DAV) after his service allowed Milburn—a.k.a. Zorro—to help fellow service members, many of whom had suffered loss of limbs and other terrible damages. He would go on through life finding ways to continue that service, even as he pursued a career of mining and then industrial plant inspection. But the danger of Agent Orange was being revealed, he realized that the lumps under his skin called lipomas that he had been developing had likely been caused by his exposure to the chemical.

"I was told they weren't serious, but what if one formed near my heart? Sure enough, one did—right on my sternum." That was removed, but lipomas continued to uncomfortably affect his life. Appealing to the VA for help found him hitting a wall. "I was told, 'Unless you put boots on the ground in Vietnam, you're out of luck with the VA,'" he said. And to date, in spite of his lengthy, ongoing battle with the VA, his condition has received no official disability rating.



(l-r): Wharf General Manager Jim Bibby with security officer, Don Milburn

The father of two grown sons could long ago have retired, but he feels The Wharf is a fantastic place to work and the people he works for and with are truly are "like family" to him. As a security guard, he is able to get out, be active, help in any given situation—and the exercise keeps him as healthy as possible. Milburn never forgets that so many did not come home as whole as he managed to do.

"The truth is, anyone who had to be in or near combat in Vietnam has some form of PTSD," he said. "They're the real American heroes. Every one of them."

From Pensacola to Alabama:

“Breathe Easy” Owners Matt & Amy McDonald Help Bring AHERO to Orange Beach

By Connie Conway

With a slight Western twang in his southern accent (Oklahoma-raised, he's been a transplant to Alabama since age 15), business owner and fishing-tournament competitor Matt McDonald explained how, in 2016, he and his wife, Amy, were introduced on very short notice to AHERO.

“Amy and I were out on the Gulf, headed back to Orange Beach from a tournament.” the Daphne, Ala., resident recalled, “We got a call from Ashleigh McKenzie, who was helping with a Veterans group planning a fishing event out of Pensacola Beach. Ashleigh's a great friend and we care a lot about our Vets, so we were interested to hear what they were doing.”

Some other owners were helping with their boats, McKenzie told the couple, but what was needed was a boat as big as McDonald's “Breathe Easy” that could accommodate disabled Vets.

Aboard their beautiful, 68-ft Viking sport-fishing yacht, the couple agreed to do it.

“We came back, told the people goodbye that we'd been fishing with, cleaned out the boat, turned around, and headed to Pensacola. Got there at about 11:30 the night before the event,” McDonald said.

He had never heard of “American Heroes Enjoying Recreation Outdoors,” or AHERO, but the idea of helping wounded and injured Vets and active-service members to enjoy the sort of deep-sea fishing he himself cherished appealed to him. “I didn't know who they'd be or what the point of AHERO was, really. But once we'd picked up our passengers, things started to change. From wondering what was wrong with this one or that one, or noticing someone a little on edge, we started to see how much they were enjoying the experience. That made the point very clear.”

The point, of course, was that most of the Vets were finding themselves having a ball doing something they loved but hadn't done in years, or never had done but had dreamed of doing. Or, most discouraging of all, had given up hope of ever doing, because of all they'd been through.

In its seventh year of existence at the time, AHERO had organized the event taking great pains to ensure that all participating boat owners, local merchants, restaurants and private citizens received a briefing that underscored how valuable their interest, time and resources were to these Vets. “AHERO volunteer Dave Glassman spoke,” McDonald recalled. “He told us, ‘I want you to be thinking about the Vets—how your efforts make a big difference to them.’”

Heading home afterward, McDonald thought of all the good that involving others in this effort could do. Blessed with business success, a lovely wife and two wonderful daughters, he thought about his good fortune and the debt we all owe those who have sacrificed guarding

our freedom to pursue our dreams.

“I told my friend, Art Favre, about AHERO's Warrior Hook-Up and the group's big fundraising drive for the lodge. I started with, ‘Hey, Art, I need a donation for this terrific organization I'm involved with.’ That was before I knew about the Veteran hiring program Art had started at his company. We discussed the respect and gratitude we both have for the Vets.”

“The lodge” that AHERO was trying to raise money to build is the Maj. Gen. James E. Livingston Lodge named for Medal of Honor recipient USMC Maj. Gen. Livingston, one of the most extraordinary heroes of the Korean and Vietnam wars. Planned for the AHERO camp in Shorter, Ala., the facility will accommodate up to 40 guest Veterans during hunting events that AHERO runs every year. There, the Vets will gather together to eat, talk, laugh, mentor or be mentored as they share experiences and concerns and forge new friendships that last.

To date, McDonald has managed to raise many thousands of dollars toward the \$1M cost of the projected lodge and other AHERO programs that encourage participation in outdoor activities.

“When we got back from that first event,” he mused, “I remember saying to Amy how big game fishing is something I love and get to do all the time, but the Vets we'd met that day didn't get to do it at all. And how grateful they were, when it's us who are the grateful ones. We agreed that if taking Veterans out on the boat fishing for just 4 or 5 hours had that much positive impact, imagine what we can do if we really get involved and get others involved, too.”

His comment proved prophetic. “Now Art Favre is making it possible to have a Warrior Hook-Up at his fantastic Wharf at Orange Beach resort in May,” McDonald said. “And, like Amy and me, he doesn't want it to be just a one-and-done deal. He plans to make it an annual event.”



(l-r.) Top: Amy & Matt McDonald, (l-r.) Bottom: Avery & Abby McDonald



Why I And Others Want to Help

By Brian Leiser

My involvement with AHERO has been incredibly rewarding. I've witnessed first-hand what the organization does for those who paid a dear price for our great nation, and I have watched communities come together on behalf of them with an "all hands on deck" attitude quick to warm the heart.

It's easy to get lost in putting on an event for our wounded Veterans. AHERO's Warrior Hook-Ups are centered around fishing in the Gulf of Mexico, but the reality is that fishing is not the core focus. The focus is on community involvement and building relationships with the

Vets. It's another piece of the puzzle answering the question, "How do we help them to go forward, now they've sacrificed so much for us?" And it adds another layer of folks they can lean on in difficult times.

By bringing together so many residents of communities where a Warrior Hook-Up is hosted, AHERO is allowing us to raise awareness of PTSD, Veteran suicide, and other challenges that so often come after discharge. Since its beginnings in 2009, this group has done an outstanding job of bridging the gap between civilians and those in the community who have

served. In this way, AHERO is making a real difference by touching the lives of many.

Personally, I get far more out of this than I could ever put in. Seeing someone light up after catching the biggest fish of their life makes it all worthwhile. Seeing everyday people asking to help out because they care so deeply about our Vets—well, I'll always have a tough time wrapping my head around that!

The communities of Orange Beach and Gulf Shores, and the members of Mobile Big Game Fishing Club feel honored to be a part of this event. We look forward to serving those who have served, and to giving back in any way we can.

Semper Fi,
Brian Leiser



Dave Riley hugs fishing Mobile Big Game Fishing Club member Brian Leiser.



Top (l-r): Dave Glassman, Dave Riley, Don Asher, Brian Leiser, Matt Kopcsak, Norm LaFountaine; Bottom (l-r): Sam Greendorfer, Nick Vassaur at May 2018 Mobile Big Game AHERO event



Editor's note: USMC Veteran Brian Leiser has been an enormous help in organizing AHERO's Warrior Hook-Up events and contributing to their success, including last year's event hosted by the Mobile Big Game Fishing Club. This year, Brian's energy and enthusiasm will help the first annual Warrior Hook-Up at the Wharf at Orange Beach be a great experience for our Vets. AHERO thanks him!

It Takes a Vet: David Theriot & Performance Contractors Veteran Hiring Program

By Connie Conway

"Working with Veterans makes me feel like I'm still contributing to the military cause," said U.S. Army Veteran David Theriot of Baton Rouge, La. That natural affinity for service along with his own military record made him a natural to help develop the highly successful Veterans Employment Program at Art Favre's company, Performance Contractors Inc., in 2013.

Theriot was born into the military. His dad was an Army finance officer, and, after starting life in Fort Hood, Texas, young David moved with his family to places like Germany, Virginia, and England before finally settling in Louisiana. "I joined the Louisiana National Guard in 1997," he told us. "I'd always known that I needed to serve when I was old enough. It's a family tradition going back many generations, and I hope one day one of my kids will continue the tradition."

What started stateside would end up with Theriot in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2004. "I left the service six months after coming back from that deployment," he said. "My reserve obligations were up and it was time to hang up the Kevlar. I toyed with the idea of going back a few times over the years because I miss service, but I'm satisfied that I've done my part and my commitments to my wife and kids are more important now."

Still, returning to civilian life was not easy. He needed to figure out what he'd like to do as a career.

"Afghanistan gave me a sense of what's truly important," he said. "Interacting with and observing the daily life of locals in that type of situation really opens your eyes. It changed my perspective and my personality immensely for the better. One of the most useful skills I acquired is the ability, during difficult times, to get out of my own head and see the larger picture at play."

Where does a newly-returned-to-civilian-life guy go with such skills? Theriot described having done retail and telecommunication sales after high school, working himself up to area manager of three cell-phone stores before his commitment to the Guard sent him to Afghanistan.

Once his deployment was over and he came home, he said, "I found I'd lost my passion for



Art Favre (far left) and David Theriot (center) are presented with the US Army's Certificate of Participation for Performance Contractor's Veterans employment program.

making sales. I switched to the restaurant business while at Southeastern Louisiana University."

After five years at the same job, and with his newly minted degree in hand, he became general manager of the restaurant.

All and all, he logged seven years in that business. Sometimes, however, life tells you to take a leap into the unknown—to try something new.

"I had met a lot of people and made contacts at my job," he recalled when asked how he came to work for Favre. "Mr. Art always stood out. I knew I wanted to work for him." As it turned out, Favre himself had an idea of where in his company—which was about as different from the restaurant business as you could get—he could use this young, hardworking Veteran.

"When he started working for us, I asked Dave what he knew about Vets coming out of the service and finding jobs," Favre told us. "We were always looking for good workers and had a program hiring and training high-school graduates. But we really needed people who already had the kind of attributes you find among the military." That meant disciplined people who had self-confidence and teamwork skills.

Theriot did indeed know how to go about finding them, and he knew exactly how most Vets would respond to opportunities to enter well-paying, career-level jobs ranging from industrial estimator to the building crafts and beyond. "Since the program started," he noted,

"Performance has hired more than 1,444 military Veterans." He seems proud of that, as well he should be.

We also found that Performance Contractors has been ranked no. 8 on the top 10 "Military Friendly" Employer" roster in the \$1B-and-above category for private U.S. companies. That's no small thing. Moreover, the fact that Performance is specifically eager to hire Vets is symptomatic of the great potential this nation's young people still bring to the table, and the incredibly valuable training that potential responds to in the hands of our top-notch American military.



*The Military Friendly® Company Survey investigates and identifies the organizations whose commitment to serving the military and Veteran community is comprehensive in scope and meaningful in terms of actual outcomes and impact.

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Coming Home to (Vet) Church

By Rev. Matt Williams

“I was given meds for chronic pain, meds for PTSD, meds to cope with myriad side effects. But the pain only worsened, while the psych drugs turned me into a zombie and the side effects worked at unraveling my personhood. I had to get off all of it.”

As a kid I was fascinated with war. I read the books, watched the movies, and talked with my dad and all the military folks I could. At 17, I tried to sign up to be a Ranger sniper. But I was colorblind. They don't let colorblind folks be Ranger snipers.

Twelve years later, I joined the Army as a chaplain assistant and went on to become a chaplain in the 1st Infantry Division, the mighty “Big Red One.” In Afghanistan from 2008 to 2009, I was chaplain of the 201st Brigade Support Battalion in the 3rd Brigade 1st Infantry Division.

As a chaplain, I wasn't on patrols but was bearing witness to the importance of the lives our soldiers were living. I was offering spiritual and moral support as I listened, talked, prayed and conducted services.

Serving mostly in Jalalabad at the edge of—and sometimes within—the forbidding Korengal Valley, I came to fully understand the mantra of “Nurture for the Living, Care for the Wounded, and Honor for the Dead.” Listening and encouraging clearly nurture the living. Prayer and sacraments are ways to care for the wounded. But it was being part of the Mortuary Affairs team that year that taught me how to truly honor the dead.

While in Afghanistan, I fell and hurt my back. I kept going until after my deployment to Iraq in 2011. Then, in May 2013, I was medically retired against my will. I became another Vet coping with pain and a million ideas no one seemed to want to hear.

With the help of a doctor I stopped all pharmaceutical therapy. Gradually I began to be able to think again. I started writing and playing music, singing about my experiences as a soldier and a Veteran. Currently I am an artist in The Last Honky Tonk Music Series.

In time, one idea I'd had grew into a plan. Although I had a tough time sitting in a church, I believe deeply in God. I didn't want to go to church and most Vets I knew didn't want to, either. I thought, why not do church on Facebook, live? So I started Vet Church, a closed Facebook group for those who are “Fed Up and F'd Up.”

Every Sunday now, Vet Church offers a five-to-ten-minute service. In addition, our Vet Church Podcast invites Veterans to tell their stories. Simple rules apply: No “C” word, No “N” word, and no “Classified Information.” And although we want to hear about personal beliefs, this isn't a forum to express denominational or political affiliations.

Our Vet Church Podcast provides Veterans and their family members and friends an opportunity to talk about anything else they desire. Feel the need to pray for someone? Come to Vet Church! You will find a friendly forum where needs are addressed and connections are made.

In July 2018, my wife Kate and I rented our house, took our two mini schnauzers and hit the highway. We drove more than 60,000 miles to carry out the mission. It's cramped in the minivan and money is tight, but showing up to offer encouragement and care is appreciated by those we reach and is its own beautiful reward for us.

A highlight of Vet Church is the pilgrimage to the National Cathedral on July 3rd at 11:30 p.m. and into July 4th, putting a new spin on Independence Day. It is high time that Veterans gained independence from the constant bombardment of PTSD, moral injury, anger, loss and suffering. I believe God helps with that, and the National Cathedral has connectivity to God. Yes, the pilgrimage takes place late at night in a crowded city and it costs money to get there. Pilgrimages, adventures and deployments always cost a lot and involve hardships. But, like AHERO, they all offer community and camaraderie shared.



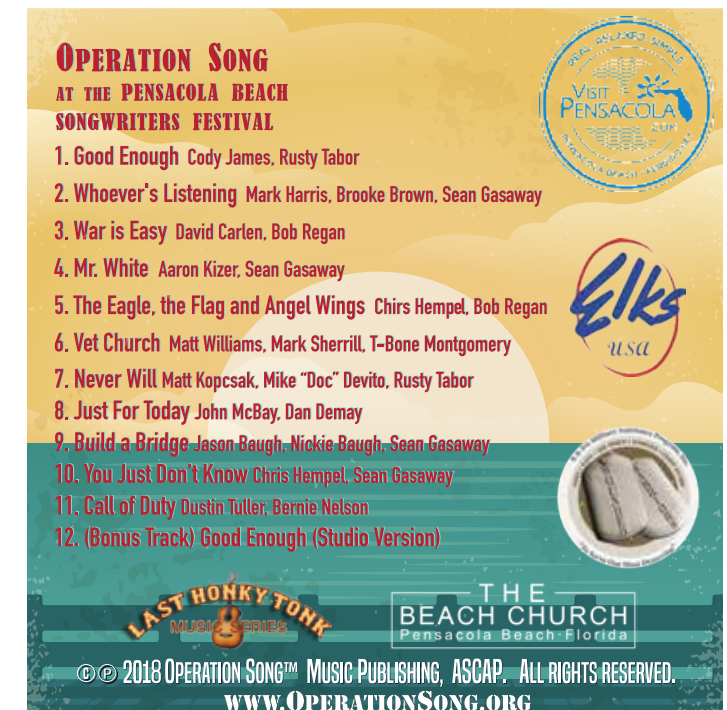
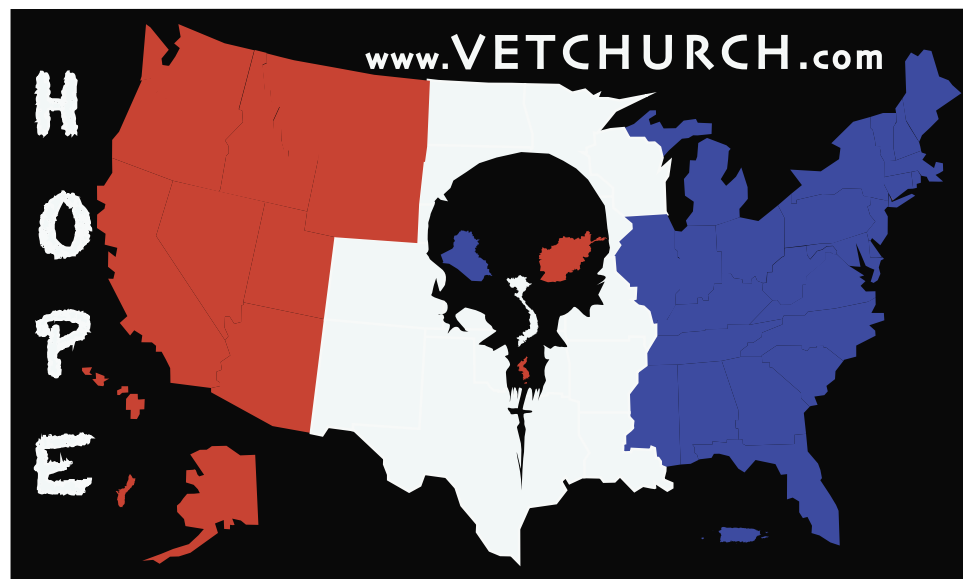
Matt Williams continues to build his legacy as a the traveling chaplain bringing therapy through song to Veterans in some of the nation's most remote areas. He is a longtime supporter of Nashville's Operation Song, founded by Bob Regan.

AHERO salutes Chaplain Matt Williams and all the military Veteran singer/songwriters who performed on the 2018 OpSong CD release.

Operation Song™ songwriting programs create an opportunity to transform service related issues, injuries and illnesses into a structured, musical outlet as an enhancement of traditional therapies and/or treatments.

“Bringing them back one song at a time”
~Bob Regan, founder Operation Song

AHERO is very grateful to Chaplain Williams for his participation in its programs. Information on Williams and the Vet Church can be found at Vetchurch.com and his music may be downloaded at iTunes. Available to speak and/or play in churches, bars, clubs, coffee shops, concerts, nursing homes, Williams can be contacted at retiredarmychaplain@gmail.com or by text/cell at 803.238.1330.



I am That Man

By Dustin Tuller

Being the son of a Navy man and grandson of a soldier much decorated for valor, you grow up strong. I knew as a teenager that I'd be in the military. Sure enough, in 1994 at age 19, I joined the Army.

I soon found myself in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Then Panama, and Pakistan, and more deployments. I got married and in 1998, my first son was born. Two years later, another son. When 2001 rolled around, I was approved to leave active duty for college although I'd be assigned to the Florida National Guard, instructing new commanders. My third son was born that year.

Then September 11 happened.

For eight months, I was assigned to secure local airports while still in school. In 2002, my first daughter was born. I hadn't finished out the time I was given for school, but when the Army said I'd be back on active duty as of January 5, 2003, I chose to deploy a few days earlier with the unit I had trained.

In Iraq for the initial invasion, I was deployed to different units and was injured in an IED attack. I was sent on R&R to Qatar, where I lasted five days before wanting to return to my soldiers. Go ahead, the Army said, but I'd be training Iraqi forces. Did that for several months, trying to make strides mending issues between the Iraq people and our military.

December 23, 2003—nearly a year in country. My unit was conducting a raid. This would be the night I will never forget.

I had placed the machine guns in overwatch position and started toward the objective in a building with a courtyard. The assault team was at the courtyard's entrance. I heard them going inside, the first of them getting shot in the face. Then another gunshot and I felt the sting in my leg and went to the ground. Crawling to the other side of the street, I was shot again, this time where no man wants to get shot. But I'd seen a shooter in a window of the second floor with our assault team in his sights.

I concentrated on shooting at that window to draw his fire, not realizing I was getting shot some more, just knowing I needed to keep shooting until our tac lights signaled the place was clear.

My legs and body had been badly shot up. My guys did a direct infusion because I was losing blood, then got me back. I was given a five percent chance of survival. After being stabilized,

I was transported to Germany, but my internal organs shut down during the flight and I was in a coma. At the German hospital, they pronounced me brain dead. Still, they kept me on machines.

On January 7, 2004, my heart stopped for about 90 minutes. My brother and sister had come to be with me, as had my wife, whose extramarital behavior—as yet unknown to me—would lead to our divorce. The doctors were desperately trying everything then decided to take all that remained of my legs. Incredibly, life started to come back into my body.

My 50th surgery was at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. I healed quickly and did wonders with prosthetics, my rehab progress “beyond belief.” But then came the shock that I'd been medically retired.

Three Purple Hearts received. One career and countless dreams over.

Divorce loomed just as our community was building a house for me and my family. Struggling to keep the marital situation private, I put my image out to the world on behalf of non-profits and the VA. I felt I could help Veterans returning with disabilities understand that there are other things in life worth coming home to. But all the while, I was forgetting about the trouble that was going on at home.

The conflicts resulted in my being homeless for a short time. With ex-wife issues and other worries, I needed help but there was no one when I cried out for it. I fought the desire to take my own life until one day I stopped fighting it and downed enough prescription pills to end things, but something made me dial 911. The man upstairs had let me live again.

At some point, I know I heard a woman's calming voice. I didn't know her and don't remember seeing her, but I heard her voice.

Revived, I continued working to help other disabled Vets. I'd always been an active guy and was teaching them to snow-ski and play tennis, and showing kids in wheelchairs how to play basketball and such. And I was doing marathons. Skydiving with no legs? I did it! I did anything I could imagine to show that life doesn't end after you're injured.

Still, my deeper issues were unresolved. Traveling for my work, I was drinking a lot, though not at home.

“One night while in New York City with firefighter friends, I drank so much I passed out and a machine was required to bring me back. Was I working so hard to help others partly in order to forget I still had struggles of my own?”

In 2008, after finishing my 32nd marathon and going straight to the Park to watch my kids play ball, my oldest son looked at me and asked if I was okay. I admitted that my chest hurt a little. He made me promise to go to the hospital and I did so later that day. I was having stress-induced heart issues, I was told. I needed a test.

Off I went for the test, worried and feeling more and more discomfort. And as I lay there, I heard a woman's voice. I knew it was the same calming voice I had heard before—the one that had eased my exhausted, anxious mind out of despair a couple of short years ago.

After the test, I rolled my wheelchair next to her while she walked, and we talked. Her name was Cheryl. I asked for her number, and later asked her out. Then one day I asked her to be my beautiful bride and to let me be a dad to the daughter she had, just as I was to my own four



Staff Sergeant Tuller conducting operations in Sector 17 near Sadr City, Iraq - late spring 2003.

“It doesn't take a hero to order men into battle. It takes a hero to be one of those men who goes into battle.”

~General H. Norman Schwarzkopf

Trying to learn trust again in life and love is a lot like running those marathons. It's exhausting. Sometimes you feel you can't make it. But you really can, although there will always be challenges. I never figured I would have been shot so many times or I that would lose my legs or find passion in helping others. I didn't even know I could have so much love for my wife and children, but I do.

We had to be Walter Reed for five months while I recuperated, and I can tell you that was a challenge. But if anyone can handle these hurdles, I guess I am that man.



Dustin enjoys the deep sea fishing at the AHERO “Warrior Hook-Up” on Pensacola Beach, August 2018.

New Grant For Qualifying Wounded Veterans

Are you 100 percent service-disabled? In need of a handicap-accessible vehicle? What many Veterans who face this level of service-related disability may not know is that the VA offers a program that addresses this need.

The VA Automobile Allowance and the Adaptive Equipment benefit applies to active-service members and Veterans whose injuries fit the program's criteria. The program provides a one-time vehicle grant of \$21,058.69 plus full payment for adaptive accessories customized to your specific needs. Accessories can include items such as a wheelchair ramp, hand controls, self-ratcheting tie-downs, etc.

Find out if you qualify to receive the funds necessary to acquire a handicap-accessible vehicle. Request forms 21-4502 and 10-1394 from the VA or at a qualified customizing station in your area. In the Fort Walton Beach/Pensacola area, call Mobility Plus, Inc. at 850-543-6900 for forms as well as assistance with the application process and vehicle customizing services.

I Got Off My Ass And Did Something!

By Robert Donofrio

Back when I knew I'd be retiring from the Navy, I quit the gym and stopped jogging. Twenty years of exercising was enough, especially with the knee and back pain I'd developed from injuries while serving. Feeling justified and glad not to have to adhere to Navy fitness requirements, I promptly gained about 25 pounds. But, hey, I was retiring! I didn't need to subject myself anymore to a routine I had come to detest.

Within a few years I had gained an additional forty pounds. Now the pain matched my waistline.

So I made a decision. I adopted a high-fiber, low carb, reduced-serving-size and sugar-restricted diet, and off came forty-five pounds. But my knee and back pain gave me reasons not to go back to the gym. So, seeking solutions, I went to the VA.

It seemed they offered a simple, modified Tai Chi program that was perfect for me. I became hooked, and for five years have practiced with other Veterans several times a week. More weight has come off as I've "toned up," but most gratifying is the reduction in my levels of pain.

The less pain, the greater my flexibility, mobility, balance, and sense of wellbeing.

Research has revealed much about how sedentary behavior raises our risk of depression, diabetes, heart disease, etc., all the way up to pushing us to an early death. A study as reported in the Journal of the American Heart Association tracked more than one thousand adults who were limited in their ability to move around. Those logging the least physical activity had the highest risk of a heart event in the next ten years. But the researchers discovered that moving just a little bit more was enough to lower proportionally the risk of a heart event.

Other research shows that moving more in old age helps retain mobility. This parallels another study that found that getting enough sleep after age 70 significantly reduces the risk of developing Alzheimer's.

Many studies have even concluded that modest levels of alcohol consumption can have long-term benefits for the brain. On another front, research indicates that practicing meditation for just 10 minutes a day can offer a massive boost to brain health.

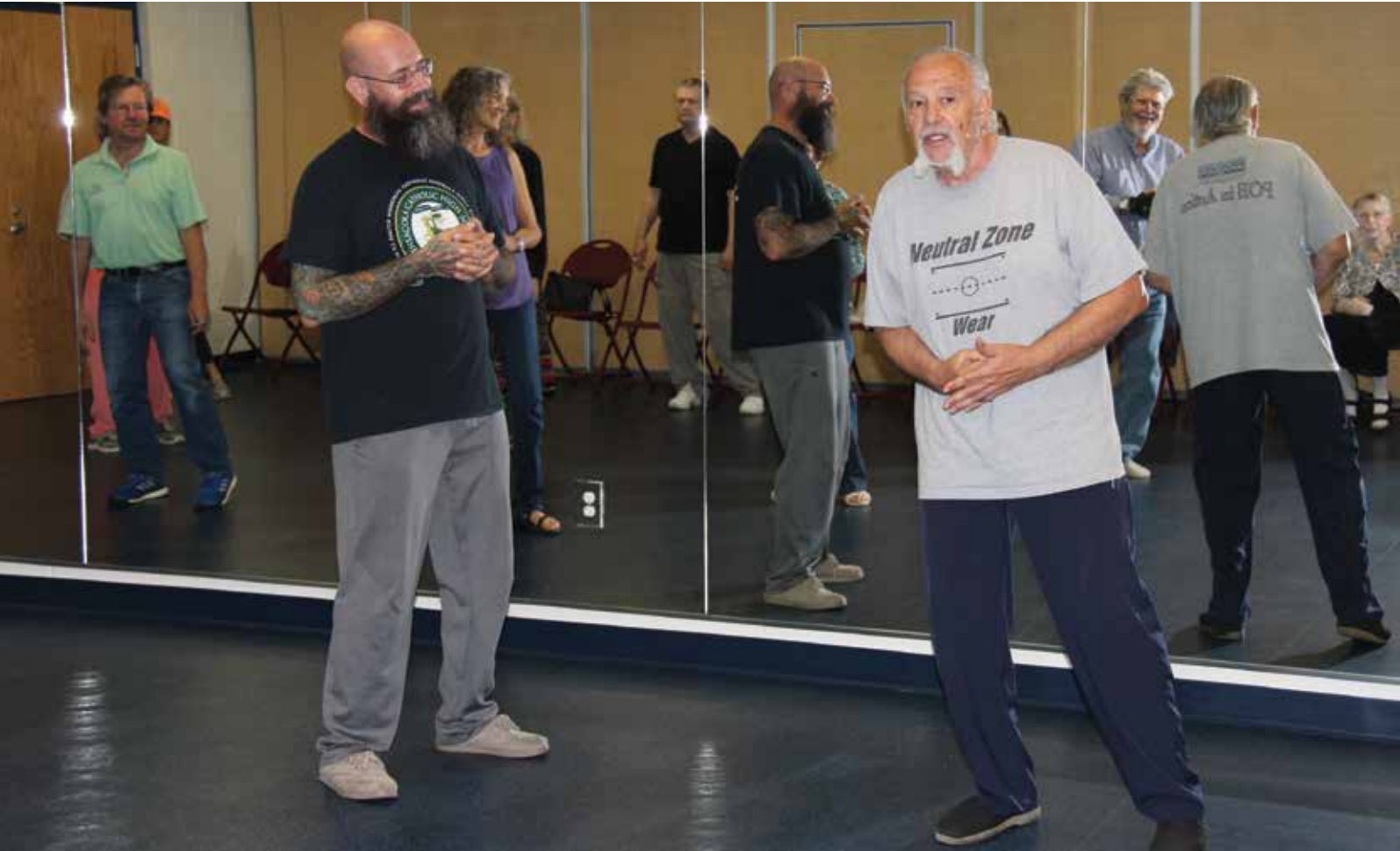
The list goes on. The ancient art of Tai Chi has unexpected benefits, reported the Journal of Neuroimaging after scientists used magnetic resonance spectroscopy to measure brain and muscle chemistry in older adults in a 12-week Tai Chi program. They found that using the discipline's slow movements to practice breathing, mindfulness, response drills, and self-defense techniques helps improve:

- ★ Brain Metabolism and Muscle Recovery
- ★ Blood Pressure
- ★ Flexibility and Balance
- ★ Mental Calm and Clarity

Doing this research has helped make my life much better over the years. Armed with the information and tools to feel healthier, be more energetic, and take control of life means that getting older does not need to be dreaded. I just had to get off my ass and do something!

Editors note: Robert Donofrio is a Life Coach with POE in Action, Inc., a nonprofit initiative whose goal is to provide educational, behavioral, mental health, physical health, and social services to others. In addition, he is a valued supporter of AHERO in its outreach to Veterans.

VA Certified Thai Chi Instructor, Robert Donofrio offers classes at no charge to Veterans of military service.



The Rediscovery of Hope

By John McBay

One of the worst feelings in the world for me is being controlled by some person, place, or thing. Having the freedom—true freedom—to do as I wish has been my primary goal since my return from active duty in Iraq.

My mobility and mental health were severely limited in 2003 due to injuries sustained in a mortar attack on a plateau between Fallujah and Ramadi. During the attack, I was blown off the roof of a building. I had to have surgery on both my knees and still have a pending surgery to correct a pinched nerve in my neck—injuries sustained in the fall from the roof. These limitations took away my freedom and significantly reduced my quality of life. I received an honorable discharge from the U.S. Army with a 70 percent service-connected disability rating from the Veterans Administration.

My mobility, mental health, and sense of freedom had all been greatly compromised. After having been hospitalized with issues related to my combat injuries, I was truly suffering and completely miserable both mentally and phys-

ically, a condition that can destroy hope and bring on despair. Waves of anxiety would wash over me and I would sometimes find myself in a full panic attack simply from waking up in the morning or attempting to shop for groceries. As time passed and the symptoms did not, I knew I had to find relief.

The answer came for me when I was introduced to a Veteran who had received training from the Veterans Administration as a Tai Chi instructor. I listened to the ways in which practicing Tai Chi, an ancient Chinese tradition now adapted as meditative exercise, can bring serenity to the anxious, overstressed mind through its gentle, flowing movements.

I began attending instructional classes at a local community center, and soon joined other Tai Chi groups at various locations in Pensacola. This practice has shown me how to slow down, connect with my breathing, and stay grounded in the present moment so that I don't become a helpless passenger of my emotions and a victim of my pain. The slow, fluid movements of

Tai Chi along with intentional breathing allows me to experience my mind and body in a more meditative state, which reduces my anxiety and seems to relieve my body pain.

I have participated in several AHERO events and was extremely grateful for the opportunity to connect with other Veterans just like myself who face similar challenges. I am always filled with a great sense of brotherhood amongst the participants and feel an overwhelming sense of appreciation from the AHERO volunteers who facilitate these events.

Practicing Tai Chi can help substantially with conditions ranging from high blood pressure, chronic pain, and addiction to PTSD, depression, severe anxiety, and beyond. I urge those of my fellow Veterans who can identify with my story to seek out the availability of Tai Chi groups in their area. And I thank all of you for your service and wish you happiness and good health.

Former U. S. Army Specialist and combat wounded, John McBay, hones his Thai Chi skills while channeling his energy and focus in positive directions.



Pushing Past My Bounderies

By Ricky Mamoran



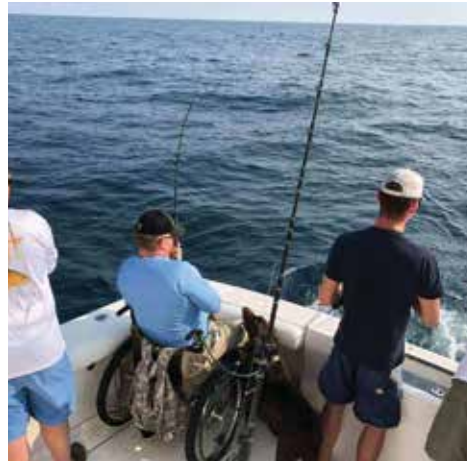
Blown into a barrier, I was knocked unconscious, with seven hits of shrapnel peppering my right thigh with entry and exit wounds. So I was deemed “urgent surgical” and medevaced out.

I was later told that, during surgery, that my heart had stopped twice. There was a 30 percent muscle loss to my right leg and lower extremities, and I eventually became partially paralyzed due to the trauma to my spinal cord. In addition, the total of 13 concussions I’d suffered during deployment, including this one, had resulted in traumatic brain injury (TBI), a PTSD diagnosis, and 80 percent hearing loss in my right ear.

These days, for as much personal independence as possible, I rely on an exo skeleton to help mobilize me, as well as my manual wheelchair and track chair, and my service dog, Asa. But it’s my wife, Summer, who is my caregiver and my greatest asset of all. Summer always has my six, which is what AHERO showed me they

The best thing about AHERO is not the fishing or hunting trips. It’s not the food or the accommodations. The best thing about AHERO is the rekindling of brotherhood during positive social interactions, when there is tactical awareness of what the needs and concerns of each participating Veteran may be.

I was a sergeant in the US Army. My unit was 1AD 1/36inf out of Friedberg, Germany, and I served with them from 2004 to 2007. We had been operating in the Al Anbar province in Iraq and it was exactly my last 15 minutes in station in the red zone, when suddenly 36 mortars bargaged our helipad hitting eight of us, including me.



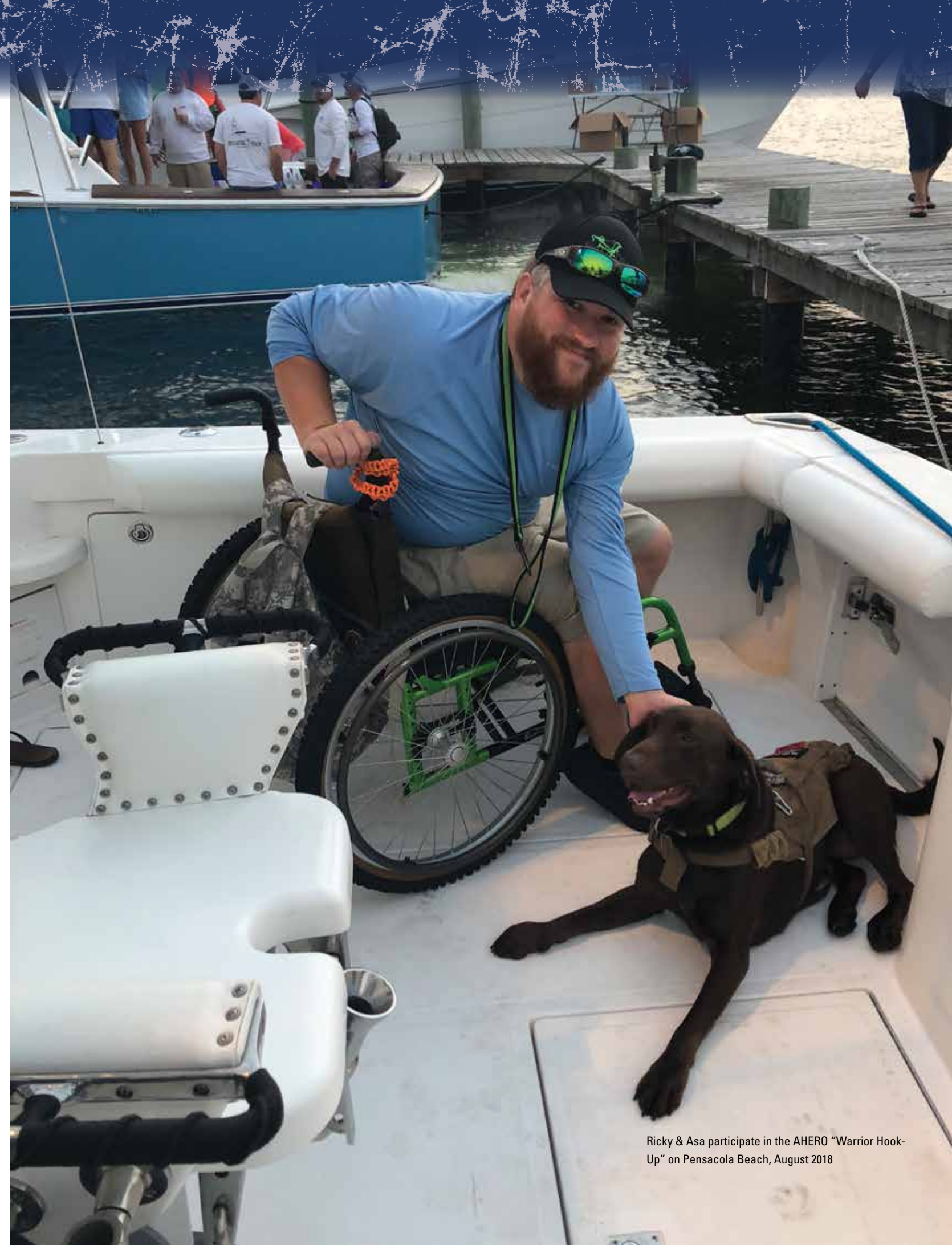
did when I first participated in AHERO’s Pensacola Warrior Hook-Up 2018 weekend.

It was a stress-free and truly adaptive social experience that pushed past the boundaries of what a disabled-Veteran like me would normally encounter. The atmosphere was relaxing and the secure setting was perfect for service members and their spouses to unwind and recover. You knew that this was where your brothers and sisters of combat always had your six. And later on that September, the Music4AHERO on Pensacola Beach was another event I was able to attend.

AHERO didn’t only have my six. They had my service dog Asa’s six, too! AHERO was fully prepared with any adaptations needed to accommodate Asa. It’s just the kind of thing they do.

I had learned that AHERO was partnering with Guns To Hammers (GTH), an organization helping to make the homes of Veterans ADA-compliant. Last year, I was invited to travel west with GTH to get a first-hand look at what they are accomplishing. In Las Vegas and San Diego, we attended a handover of an ADA-compliant bathroom that had received a makeover. While there, I saw the appreciation and admiration the Veterans had for the program, and how people would come together to help complete a project for a Veteran in their community.

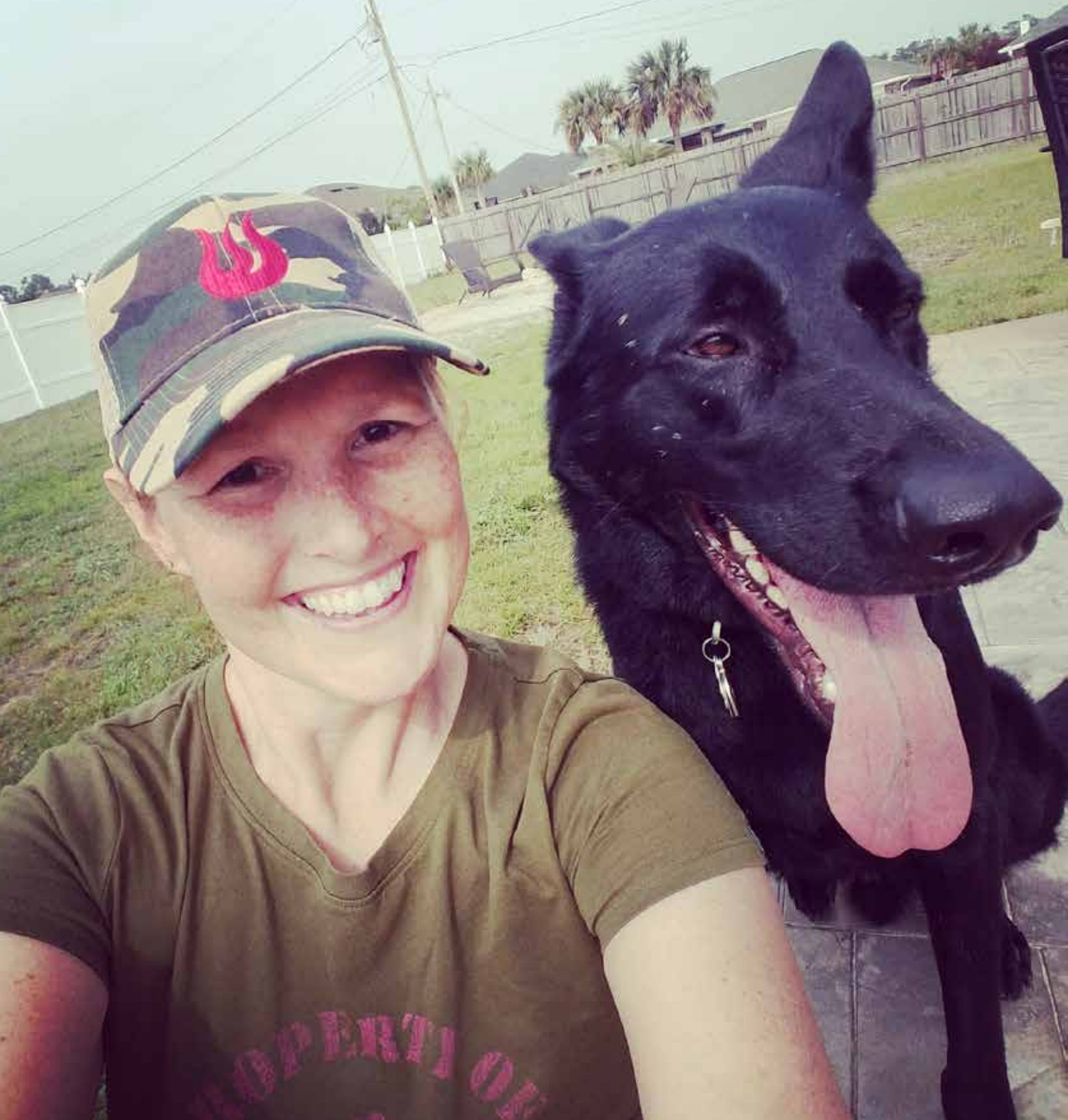
Seeing organizations with Vets at the helm is what truly gives me the focus and ability to enjoy myself during an AHERO event. It’s all in knowing that someone with an experience and situation similar to your own is in charge. I can’t wait till the next time I get invited!



Ricky & Asa participate in the AHERO “Warrior Hook-Up” on Pensacola Beach, August 2018

Finding Her Hero: Heidi's Story

By Tristessa Osborne, with Heidi Luke



As a volunteer at AHERO, you might be asked to help out in interesting ways. In my case, it was to interview medically retired Veteran Air Force Ssgt Heidi Luke for this magazine. Luke's PTSD was the result of sexual assaults during her 16-1/2 years of service. The anxiety she suffered devastated her life for years, keeping her isolated. But in early 2017, hope trotted in when a handsome black German Shepherd became her service canine.

After meeting the two and passing Hero's "sniff test"—which is a bit like getting a security clearance—I learned that Luke's initial enlistment at 17 had been in the Army's Massachusetts National Guard.

A heart set on serving

"I'm forty now, but I grew up in a small Vermont town," Luke said. "My grandfather and uncle had served but never talked about it, so I knew very little about the military. But I wanted to get out into the world and do something meaningful for my country. This was well before 9/11, and the military wasn't popular at that time. I'd go to the recruiter and see who in my community was joining, who I could talk to about serving. Now, ever since 9/11, patriotism has grown."

How did her family feel about her going in at such a young age? "My mom was supportive and signed my papers. Other people told me I wouldn't make it." She grinned. "You tell me that and you might as well be giving me the go-ahead. I was like, oh, yeah? Watch me!"

She chose to do water purification. "We'd bring purified water where it was needed and fill huge bladders. I loved the looks on people's faces when they saw this little red-headed girl driving a massive water tanker. And we did night ops, things you'd never get to do as a civilian. It was fun. But later I decided to transfer to the Air Force and at first was in the reserves." She married (the couple later divorced) and moved with her husband and children down to Florida's Elgin AF Base in 2001, working in communications.

Struggling to survive trauma

"My military service left me with a lot of mixed feelings," Luke said, when asked to evaluate the time she was in. "I was excited and proud to join and would do it again. But it was bittersweet. I had great experiences, met great people, but then I had those awful experiences, and so much trauma. Ours is still a very male oriented military."

She was referring to the sexual assault she endured. Currently the military is engaged in recognizing and dealing with the once-hidden

extent of this problem. But Luke noted the systemic flaw that, in her case, allowed the abuse to go on. "Back when I served, your first sergeant would be your judge and jury. But what if that's who the perpetrator is? You try going above that superior, then you're the one in the wrong. I'm hopeful things will get better now."

The topic is difficult territory for anyone. For Luke, it is doubly so. "My situation is complex," she said. "I was diagnosed with cancer in 2011. It's stage 4. So when I was having emotional times and things were not good, it was easy to put it on the cancer. But the bulk of my issues come from what happened to me." She hesitated. "When you have a sexual trauma ... at some point it just breaks you. I had been able to compartmentalize it, but then I couldn't anymore. And that's where the D part comes in, the 'disorder.' Because anyone who has had a traumatic experience has post-traumatic stress, PTS. But when you can't get over it, you can't go forward. That's when you end up going backwards."

Her best medicine

To have had cancer for so long and yet appear to be healthy seemed unusual. Was she in remission? Luke shook her head and Hero, ever alert, looked up. "My cancer is terminal," she said. "There are tumors in my bones." Trying to deal with the initial diagnosis, she reached out. "I joined a breast-cancer group. But everyone was older and in remission. My kids were young, just 7, 5, and 3 at the time. Also, after adopting our boys, we'd had fertility treatments and I had given birth to twin girls. But one died the day after birth."

That blow must have been intolerable. There were so many triggers to her PTSD, Luke said. "Just sleeping, I'd have horrible nightmares. I replayed bad situations over and over. I'd get so nervous and anxious, my hands and legs would shake terribly. I thought it was the medicines, but there had been lots of different ones and the shaking didn't go away. I had to get help."

That's when Hero arrived. "Early on, I was somewhere with him, and had been worried that I'd shake. But I didn't." Looking at him, tears brightened her eyes. "I didn't shake." She was silent for a while.

Paired with Hero by "Healing Paws for Warriors," an organization founded and run by Mike Arena in Ft. Walton Beach, Fla., Luke began working with him at the "What's Up Dog" kennel in Santa Rosa Beach, where He had initially been trained. "We started with 'forced bonding,'" she said. "You're tethered together all the time. It's like an umbilical cord. Hero went everywhere with me. I answered the door, he came

with me. I'd be cooking, or in the bathroom and there he was. There's NO privacy whatsoever. That's how he learned my routine."

Once home, the two passed an obedience course and Hero earned his canine good citizen rating after working in public with distractions like food, people, and other dogs. "Some people ignore the sign that says, 'Service Dog, please don't pet,'" Luke said. "And I can get anxious. But Hero creates a space around me. He's big, so sometimes fitting into spaces is tough. But he was with me on AHERO's Warrior Hook-Up last summer. A friend had talked about the fishing and meeting other Vets, and said I should go. Since getting Hero, I'd been trying to push myself a bit, so I signed up and got picked. It was my first time."

Her biggest takeaway from the AHERO experience, Luke said, was one word: "Friendships. I met a few young female service members and was interested to hear how they are coping. Hopefully I helped a little bit by listening to their stories. We've stayed in touch. Being a female in the military is still fairly uncommon and it can be rough. People say, 'Oh, you're too little or too pretty to be a Veteran.' Whereas to a man it's, 'Thank you for your service.' But it was great to be with other Vets. I enjoyed the Warrior Hook-Up weekend and I'm glad I went." She gazed down appreciatively at her service canine. "I didn't know how bad my emotional state had gotten until after Hero came," she said. "I didn't know until one day when I was out with him, around people. That's also when I realized I was okay."



Heidi Luke and her service canine, Hero

The Coincidence of Seven

By Wendell Slater



CH-46 Helicopters from the Purple Foxes on the flight line

Stephanie Hanson was adopted after her birth in April 1969, and grew up not knowing her biological parents. But when a congenital illness forced her to search for them, she learned about her father's military service, which had ended tragically on February 7, 1969.

Gary Norman Young was a 20-year-old enlisted Navy corpsman when he was killed participating in a medevac mission with the famous Purple Foxes of Marine Corps Squadron HMM-364. On that day, prepared to risk their own lives to save others, Gary and the squadron's crew rushed to carry out what would be their last mission—the Purple Foxes SWIFT MEDEVAC—when they were shot down.

After learning about her birth father, Hanson set out to rectify the fact that Corpsman Young had never received his combat aircrew wings. In 2002, with the help of Capt. Jennifer Harris, the first female HMM-364 pilot, and the crew of the modern-day Purple Foxes were able to get his wings to be awarded posthumously. In her first book, "A Corpsman's Legacy," Hanson detailed that mission and described her new-found connection with the military community. Soon she was building her own legacy as a military biographer.

The Marine aviator community had adopted Hanson as the daughter of a fallen corpsman. She had become close friends with the new generation of Purple Foxes, supporting them as they left for Iraq and war, and she stayed in constant communication with some of them.

In early 2007, Hanson had a request of the Master Gunnery Sergeant. Would they fly with an American flag honoring her father and the men he flew with? The answer was yes—and that flag happened to land on the helicopter of the Purple Foxes crew and pilot Harris. The date was set at February 7, 2007, exactly 38 years after the deaths in Vietnam of Corpsman Young and the Purple Foxes.

Stateside, as the date approached, Hanson waited excitedly. Once the mission was performed, she would receive her father's flag.

In Iraq on that day in February, Harris had already been flying when she heard the request for a needed blood supply to be delivered come over the radio. She and her Purple Foxes would do it, she said. Under radio name Morphine 1-2, Harris carried the needed blood and the flag to represent those earlier Purple Foxes. The

helicopter lifted and flew into action. But with tragic irony, these Purple Foxes, too, were shot down.

Hanson was driving to work, her mind pre-occupied with the vision of her father's flag returning to her after completing its honor flight, when her car radio announced the catastrophic news: a helicopter down in Iraq. No—it couldn't be that helicopter. But reality soon crowded in.

Thirty-eight years apart

★ February 7, 1969, a medevac helicopter from Marine Corps unit HMM-364 is shot down in Vietnam, carrying five Marines and two Navy corpsmen. Six out of seven are killed, one is wounded.

★ February 7, 2007, a casevac helicopter from Marine Corps unit HMM-364 is shot down in Iraq, carrying five Marines and two Navy corpsmen. All seven on board are killed.

"I sat there alternating between crying and just staring into space," Hanson wrote in her second book, "A Corpsman's Legacy Continues."

"I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that the Purple Foxes had lost another helicopter on the same day as the crash in Vietnam 38 years

ago ... it felt like losing my father all over again. And knowing ... that my flag had been on their helicopter, I irrationally felt like I had killed them."

Through two tragedies to a healing "happy ending"

Such devastating experiences might cause anyone to lose all hope or sense of good or even balance. Not Stephanie Hanson. During the Purple Foxes' fourth tour in Iraq in 2008, she sent copies of her first book to the new CO, Lt-Col (now Col) Mark Schrecker, who gave one to SgtMaj Rick Caisse, newly assigned to the unit. Caisse read it in one day and emailed her from Iraq. Aware of the special flag that had been on Morphine 1-2, he and the CO flew another flag that Memorial Day for her. That Purple Foxes flight with its flags landed safely.

The Memorial Day flight honoring the two fallen crews also carried the symbolic weight of the spirit of perseverance: the will to get back up after falling multiple times. This spirit flows in the blood of our nation's military men and women and its civilians, as demonstrated by The Purple Foxes and Stephanie Hanson—who, by the way, had struck up a friendship with Purple Fox SgtMaj Caisse, now retired, which happily led to their marriage two years later.



Brigadier General Davis presents 7 aircrew wings insignia to the parents of 1stLt Jared Landaker. The wings were subsequently melted into the Bell mold of the Marine Aviation Memorial Tower.



Feb 7th, 1969 Corpsman Young died in Vietnam along with seven crew members when shot down. On Feb 7th 2007 Captain Jennifer Harris was shot down with the loss of seven crewmen. She was flying a flag in Iraq honoring the memory of Corpsman Young. Both helicopter losses belonged to the Purple Foxes.

"I sat there alternating between crying and just staring into space."



Molten brass pours into the Marine Aviation Memorial Tower's bell cast



7 sets of Naval Aircrew Wings to be cast in the Memorial Tower Bell.

The Jewel of The Bay: Veterans Memorial Park of Pensacola

“For whatever trauma came with service in tough circumstances, we should take what we learned - take our post-traumatic growth - and, like past generations coming home, bring our sharpened strengths to bear, bring our attitude of gratitude to bear.”

~ USMC General James N. Mattis, Ret.

On May 17, 2019, as part of the Memorial Day Weekend celebration, a ceremony will be held at the Park memorializing Marine aircrews and other military service members who died in the line of duty while serving with Marine Corps Aviation units. Gold Star family members, friends of the fallen, active service members and Veterans will attend this open-to-the-public tribute. Col. Michael Johnson, Commanding Officer of Marine Aviation Training Support Group-21 will preside over the ceremony, as 107 newly-inscribed granite plaques are unveiled on the baseplate of the Marine Aviation Memorial Bell Tower.

Gold Star wife Ashley Lukasiewicz, whose husband, Marine Capt. Dusty Lukasiewicz, died along with the crew of his helicopter while conducting humanitarian assistance operation in Nepal in 2015, has presented the Park with

generous donations from The Wingman Foundation, for which she is head of physical memorials. Lukasiewicz described the tower as “a testament to the legacy of our fallen air warriors, giving their families a spot to memorialize and remember, both of which are personal to me.”

On May 26, 2019, a ceremony dedicating the Persian Gulf War Memorial at VMP will take place, honoring area service men and women who fell during that conflict. Few realize that our Northwest Florida region lost brave warriors in this conflict. Fourteen airmen from Hurlburt Field died, as did a soldier from Gulf Breeze, Fla., CW04 Phil Garvey. Efforts to bring the memorial and awareness of these heroes of the swiftly successful “Yellow Ribbon War” to our community, were begun by VMP Foundation Board Member Stan Barnard, who had been a friend of Garvey’s, who worked with

Garvey family members. Barnard also located retired Army Major Rhonda Cornum, a physician and briefly a prisoner of war as a result of the crash that killed Garvey. Invited to the May ceremony, she will attend as the guest of honor.

On May 30, 2019, a ground breaking ceremony will mark the initiation of a community effort to bring a Gold Star Families Memorial Monument to the Park. CWO4 Hershel “Woody” Williams, USMC and Medal of Honor recipient from the battle of Iwo Jima will preside. The event will be immediately followed by the Cpl J.R. Spears Detachment of the Marine Corps League’s Heroes Among Us speakers series event, for which Williams will be the keynote speaker and the theme for the evening will be Gold Star Families.

“All gave some. Some gave all.”

~ Howard William Osterkamp

Sergeant, U.S. Army Purple Heart Recipient & Korean War Veteran



The Persian Gulf War & Hero CW04 Phil Garvey

By Stan Barnard

Years ago, I witnessed the half-scale Moving Wall with the names of our fallen in the Vietnam War come to Seville Square in Pensacola. And with my friends and family by my side, I participated in the candlelight vigil.

In time, Pensacola's own permanent Wall South was constructed at the Veterans Memorial Park of Pensacola (VMP). Many years later, my friend and fellow Marine Veteran, Dan Linderman, asked if I would help with the Marine Aviation Memorial Tower that was planned for the Park. I agreed and am forever thankful to Dan for enlisting me to be part of that project.

The beauty and significance of Pensacola's VMP is heightened by the individual memorials that respectfully honor our fallen. But as I participated in this structural salute to our heroes, I couldn't help thinking of an old friend of mine, Chief Warrant Officer Four (CWO4) Phil Garvey. Phil and I had both served in the Vietnam War—he in the Army and I in the Marines—and he had gone on to a military career. I thought about how he gave his life in a war that now is far less recognized than it deserves.

They called it the "Yellow Ribbon War" for the ribbons tied around trees as symbols of support for our troops. In actuality, it was the Persian Gulf War, the massive, U.S.-led "Operation Desert Storm" coalition offensive. The men and women who fought it were committed to defeating Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, whose forces had invaded and occupied Kuwait.



herself and two crew members.** Garvey had been killed. The war was declared over on February 28, 1991 ... the next day.

What I remember of Phil is that he was quiet and humble, but with a good sense of humor. He was always the kind of person you could depend on. In her book, Cornum described him as calm and relaxed. "Pilots are a special breed," she wrote, adding, "Garvey had the job of peacemaker among them. He was heavysset, fatherly looking, as nice as could be."

This only confirmed what I already knew: As a soldier and a human being, CWO4 Garvey was a credit to his country.

Two years ago, back again to being simply a visitor to the Park, I began my research on both my friend and the war he died in. It was a war fought valiantly and well. Of the 540,000 U.S. troops sent in, 149 were KIA. Any number is too high, but this was less than might have been the case. It was time to petition the Park's board members for a long-overdue memorial to the Persian Gulf War with recognition of local boy Phil Garvey who gave his life in defense of his nation's highest ideals. With support of the Garvey family, the petition was granted.

I knew it would take time, energy and dedication to fulfill this obligation but felt compelled to ensure that this generation of American warriors would now have their memorial and be represented at Veterans Memorial Park of Pensacola.

Editor's note: Stan Barnard is a member of the Veterans Memorial Park Foundation of Pensacola Board of Directors as well as a volunteer and generous supporter of AHERO, for which we thank him.

*She Went To War, by Rhonda Cornum as told to Peter Copeland, was published by Presidion Press, ©1992.

**U.S. POWs Maj. Cornum, Sgt. Troy Dunlap, and SSgt. Daniel Samaris, were released several days after their capture.

U.S. MARINE CORPS AVIATION
MEMORIAL PLACEMENT CEREMONY
 17 MAY 2019 ★ VETERANS MEMORIAL PARK, PENSACOLA

THE WINGMAN FOUNDATION
 VETERANS MEMORIAL PARK
 PENSACOLA, FLORIDA
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Q & A With Pete McKanna: Part I

By Dave Glassman



USMC Vietnam-War wounded Veteran Pete McKanna stands in solemn thought at the Wall South in Pensacola's Veterans Memorial Park

As a retired fellow Marine and member of Pensacola's Veterans Memorial Park Foundation Board of Directors, I had always known board member, Pete McKanna, as an active and involved proponent of Veterans. In all those years, I didn't have clue one about any wound or injury he might have sustained while serving in Vietnam. Pete had no visible scars, had full use of his arms, didn't favor either leg, and never talked about having come away from his war experience disabled. Still, I knew he'd had an interesting set of circumstances leading up to and while in military service, and I wanted to hear his story. Years into our friendship, I learned from retired Marine MGnySgt Robert Rivera, another VMP board member, that Pete had lost part of one leg due to combat, and that he'd been wearing a prosthesis since then. I was stunned.

DG: You're from Illinois, right? Did you play sports in school?

PM: Joliet. That's south of Chicago. Yeah, I was on the football, wrestling and track teams. Did well, although I wasn't a great student. The school said I was "too advanced" in my thinking and got bored. Ha! In 7th grade, recruiters from private high schools came to recruit athletes but I never thought much of it. Tuition at those schools was more than my parents could afford. Then Joliet Catholic High School's coaches and principal asked if I wanted to attend there, I said yes but we couldn't afford it. Later they visited us at home offering a half scholarship if I played in three sports. We accepted and my life changed.

DG: You're Greek?

PM: On my mother's side. I was raised Greek Orthodox, the first Greek to attend JCH. I wasn't required to participate in services, but I said no, I'm one of the students here, I want to do what they're doing. Sports took up a lot of my time, but I had to both maintain passing grades and play to keep my scholarship.

DG: You must have been thinking about college as you got toward graduation.

PM: I was. It was during the Vietnam war, though, and I was learning a lot from some Vets who had been there, mostly Marines. They didn't want to talk about it, but they did talk to me. About how we were losing so many guys, I mean, and all the money it was costing America. I'd been leaning left but I saw how we were trying to help these people who were struggling for freedom. I started thinking about going in.

DG: Not to college? I heard you were getting scholarships.

PM: From great schools, too. University of Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan. Full boat scholarships for football and wrestling. We had a fantastic coach at JCH—the famous Gordie Gillespie, an All-American Basketball and football player prior to coaching. One of the all-time greatest coaches. He influenced me a tremendously as

my coach and mentor. Scholarships started coming in during my senior year. My parents were thrilled.

DG: No doubt. Turning great scholarships down must have been tough!

PM: My parents had a hard time when I did. My coaches understood and supported me when I signed up for the Marine Corps. A week and a half after graduation, I shipped out to Hollywood.

DG: San Diego.

PM: We called it Hollywood. Bootcamp started in May 1968. I'd done an early graduation because I had more credits than I needed. Being sent to San Diego was odd, though, because where I lived was east of the Mississippi, which usually meant Parris Island. But lots of guys from Chicago were sent to Hollywood.

DG: Deviations happen a lot during wartime.

PM: Fortunately, I was pretty driven. I had believed that the corps was the best military force in the world, and I wanted to be one of the best. I'd done a lot of preparation and was physically where I wanted to be and got meritoriously promoted to PFC. I'd tested off the charts and qualified for OCS. But I heard from other guys that if you stayed in the ranks you often had more influence. I kept hearing how you could have a lot of pull as sergeant major.

DG: What did you want to be doing?

PM: Light weapons. I got the chance to train for that before going over.

DG: "What were your first impressions of the corps in those early months of your tour of duty?"

PM: It was a team thing and I'd been in team sports since I was in 6th grade. Except now it was more intense because we're talking about a lot of people from a lot of different places and races, different mentalities. As I progressed through recruit training, I established a strong reputation for myself among the senior drill instructors. I went through ITB ITS IBT-0331 light and heavy machine guns, all before going over. There was

Veterans Memorial Park ... A Place of Sacred Remembrance

no question about who I was and what I'd do for you. You knew damn well I'd be on your six. I earned that.

DG: How long before you went over?

PM: One month. I was assigned to 3/1 Lima Company. Third battalion, First Marines Lima Company, based in the Da Nang area. But it took about eight months of training before I got there. I was lance corporal when I arrived, then 3 months in country, corporal.

DG: What was your experience getting in country?

PM: We came in on Continental Airlines. The guys were all volunteers that flew us over there. Had our M16s, a newer version, but no ammunition. The captain says, "We're coming in" and he turns on the PA system, communications with Da Nang. "Runways clear? You got cover?" This was a big jet and we were pretty low. We started taking fire—both sides of the plane. I said, "Holy sheee ... !" They told us, "Pull the shades down!" So now I can't see anything. Nothing. But we're taking fire. When the captain realized it, he hit that throttle—the thrust. We're all yelling "What's happening?!" And he's yelling, "Hang on, I'm taking it up!" He hit that sucker and we're going this way and that, and then straight up high. The engines! I thought they were coming off the wings! Banked off to the left and got out of range. Got clearance and landed and saw how much we were hit. Those snipers you couldn't see had been 800 yards down!

DG: Guess you did some quick adjusting!

PM: Yeah. One short week before my first patrol. But we had confidence in our leadership. It was Nov 1968 and I'm patrolling or on missions every day or night before Christmas.

DG: Can you describe the missions?"

PM: Typically they're five to seven guys scouting or doing recon, or search and destroy, a squad of riflemen, radioman, corpsman, and machine gunner. I was a machine gunner before I made rank. We had great senior NCOs and officers when we went out in the bush.

Right in the mix with us. I learned so much from them. They never wore brass—If you wore brass you were a big target. But to know the brass is with you and you just being a piss-ant grunt, that gave us courage and great confidence.

DG: How long before it went kinetic?

PM: Oh, within the first month. But we didn't lose guys right away. I was lucky enough to learn patrolling before we were taking fire. That was a blessing, because now you're getting accustomed to your surroundings. But the first time out there hearing that cracking from an AK coming toward you? That's different than all the live training back in Hollywood. But I never questioned myself, like, why am I here? I was prepared. I went because I wanted to. Scared to death, absolutely. Anyone who tells you different is a damn liar and a damn fool. I don't care if you're up in the air or on the ground, if you're not scared to death going into combat, something's wrong. But you learn to deal it.

DG: That first tour, those 13 months, what did you do besides patrolling?

PM: We spent time on missions throughout the central regions, including drops into Laos and Cambodia. We'd provide security for convoys, base stations, outposts and ammo dumps. They'd drop us close to the line or over it. and we would be roping down on "snatch and bring back" missions getting high-profile targets for interrogation. We chose not to ride in the vehicles, because they were big targets for "Charlie." Back then, they had IEDs but in a different form. We didn't have today's sophisticated mine sweeps—just the hand-held kind.

DG: Any adjustment problems?

PM: On the first tour was you learned how to survive. Better yet, you learned why you wanted to survive. We all had reasons. Some had wives and kids, dreams and aspirations. My reason was to simply stay alive, to take what I could learn being a Marine and share it with others. My goal was to be a Marine for life. I would have a

family later. Of course, I didn't want my parents to get that knock on the door. I'd been close to my mom, but when I went into the corps, I went into the corps. Guys kept pulling out pictures. I saw tough Marines fall apart and that killed me. I had to be concerned. Any guy that got a Dear John, we shadowed him. Near the end of the 13 months, we were put on a drop fast-rope mission. We'd be going in heavy, lots of munitions and weapons, bazooka's, 30 and 50 cal. machine guns, mortars etc. And we were told this mission would be a very long duration, dropped in way deep in Cambodia with brass and senior NCOs. There were three gunships and four heavies, personnel and equipment. We had a welcome party, losing one helo that hit water, but the pilot and crew survived. Part of our team went to rescue them. They were busted up and we got 'em medevaced. We lost 4 guys on the ground, though. And a gunship went down in a rice patty, but they all survived. We were out there for two and a half weeks, and I saw what emotions and combat stress can really do to a person ...

DG: Just another of many missions, though, I guess?

PM: Yeah, but this one was very different. We dug fighting holes, used any kind of cover we could find. Cut trees down, used the stumps. We'd be shooting through rubber trees and banana trees, using guerilla

warfare and putting our guys up in trees just like they did. We had to protect the ammo, keep it dug in, never on the surface. By the time we got extracted out, we had several injuries besides the losses. Anybody serious we got medevaced out, but they all wanted to stay.

DG: Your first tour was pretty much all like that?

PM: If we weren't in base camp at Fort Apache outside of Da Nang, we learned to live in the bush and survive off the land. We never stayed more than few nights in one place because Charlie was always looking for us. Missions were always "head to this city, take out this building, destroy a village, head over to that area." Always moving. The highest ranks leading missions then were captains and senior NCOs. My guys knew I would take care of them and they would take care of me. I never promised to get them all home because by then I knew that wasn't going to happen. But we had dedicated Marines willing to give all. If you were shot but would heal and you could still use your weapon, well, you just wanted to stay.

Editor's note: Read Part 2 of McKanna's story in the next issue of AHERO magazine to learn how his second tour in Vietnam seasoned his combat skills and ultimately initiated the greatest challenge of his life. These experiences informed his later involvement as a member of the Veterans Memorial Park Foundation whose passion to provide the Park with care and custodial leadership has ensured that its inspiration and historical value to our community will endure.

The Park at dusk Photo credit: John Davis



The Wingman Foundation

By Chris Comeau

The Wingman Foundation was founded by three active duty Marine Corps aviators in late 2014. Each serving nearly a decade with multiple deployments, they saw many tragic losses in the aviation community. Sadly, friends and families were often left to seek support through sister organizations. On Oct. 1, 2014, a MV-22 crew chief died in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. Deeply affected by yet another loss to the community, they agreed to make a change that evening.

Remarkably, all three were in different parts of the world at the Foundation's beginnings. Jack was deployed in Japan and in Kuwait, while Ken was training in the United States. Attempting to organize and build support through the difficulties of being in vastly different time zones with spotty connectivity while in the midst of executing their missions, The Wingman Foundation was born. With the support of friends and the Marine Corps community, the three were able to successfully launch their organization without ever being in the same country at the same time.



The Foundation grew through the following year to an all-volunteer staff of more than a dozen active and former Marine and Navy pilots and civilians. The organization now supports both Navy and Marine Corps aviation on both U.S. coasts, as well as those stationed abroad.

Ashley Lukasciewicz, Wingman Foundation's Head of Physical Memorials, presents checks to the Veterans Memorial Park Foundation of Pensacola totaling \$32,500.00 in support of the Marine Aviation Memorial Bell Tower and the Gold Star Families Memorial Monument project. Park foundation members, Dave Glassman and Stan Barnard pose with Ashley

AHERO Salutes The Wingman Foundation!



The Wingman Foundation's generosity is funding projects that support U.S. Navy and Marine Corps families of fallen Sailors and Marines and memorialize the historic valor and sacrifices made by these aviation warriors through the Foundation's physical memorials program. The organization's history is emblematic of how projects with modest beginnings that go boldly forward toward noble goals can culminate in success.

"We ensure our fallen heroes are never forgotten and the loved ones they leave behind are always supported," noted retired Marine, Wingman Foundation Director of Operations Ricky Savage. AHERO salutes the promise and the proof of that statement.

In 2018, the organization donated \$15,000 to the Veterans Memorial Park of Pensacola, and in 2019, another \$32,500, for a total of \$47,500. These funds are for the ongoing maintenance of, additions to, and ceremonies around the Park's Marine Aviation Memorial Tower, with \$7,500 for the Gold Star Families Memorial.

Such generous gifts demonstrate the Wingman Foundation's commitment and underscore its members' determination to make sure iconic symbols such as the Marine Aviation Memorial Bell Tower and Gold Star Families Memorial Monument remain viable as reminders to all that our freedom comes at great cost.

2019

Sponsored by: Marine Corps League • Corporal J. R. Spears Detachment 066 • Pensacola, Florida

★ HEROES AMONG US ★

S P E A K E R S E R I E S

WHEN:

Thursday Evenings,
May – October, 6 pm
See schedule for dates

WHERE:

Pensacola Veterans
Memorial Park
Bayfront Parkway near 9th Avenue

30 MAY ONLY

Seville Quarter
130 E Government St

ALL OTHER DATES

Representing those who
have distinguished themselves
in combat from every generation
and branch of the Armed Forces.

2019 SCHEDULE

30 MAY

GOLD STAR FAMILY NIGHT

CWO-4 HERSHEL "WOODY" WILLIAMS, USMC
MEDAL OF HONOR

COBRA GUNSHIP NIGHT

COLONEL ERIC BUER, USMC
DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

27 JUNE

25 JULY

COAST GUARD NIGHT

CAPTAIN TIM MCGUIRE, USCG

REFLECTION — WAR ON TERROR

LIEUTENANT COLONEL ANDREW DEL GAUDIO, PhD, USMC

29 AUG

26 SEP

STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND

COLONEL MURRY "PETE" GANDY, USAF

COMING HOME FROM IWO JIMA

CORPORAL DON GRAVES, USMC

24 OCT

This Speaker Series is made possible by the generous support of Seville Quarter.



HEROES AMONG US: awarded the 2015 George Washington Honor Medal by the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge.



Donations for the "Veterans in Distress Fund" can be sent to: EDWARD M. ROUSE, CPA, 6825 Oak Street, Milton, FL 32570. Checks payable to: MCL DET 066.

High Points Keeps on Climbing For AHERO

AHERO

A letter from Jeremy



Dear AHERO friends and family:

We have exciting news to share: High Points has gone international! In July, my family and I moved to Stuttgart, Germany. We did not expect to return to work so soon, but with the help of AHERO and friends, my recovery went well and I was ready to try my hand as a Department Of Defense civilian.

That said, the High Points mission has not stopped. In fact, we have increased our goals. We no longer seek only to reach the highest points in all 50 U.S. states, but are now setting our sights on international peaks, as well, to help raise awareness and funding for AHERO's mission.

In our first year, we drove more than 15,000 miles, climbed 38,000 feet-plus, reached 12 state high points, raised more than \$6,000, and sponsored a weekend of camping and fishing on the Oregon coast with six deserving disabled Veterans. It was an encouraging, inspiring, motivating year and I feel blessed to have met so many wonderful people willing and eager to support AHERO and our wounded and injured Veterans and active-service members around the U.S.

Our aim for our second year is to surpass the previous achievements in every category, and to share the AHERO mission in Europe. Here's our 2019 agenda to help us reach these goals:

- Winter HighPoints trip to Garmisch, Germany, for wounded US Veterans from the European community
- July international HighPoints trip with Veterans to the top of Germany, the Zugspitze
- August U.S. HighPoints trip with Veterans to the top of the Continental U.S., Mt. Whitney
- August U.S. HighPoints fishing trip with Veterans on the Oregon coast (at Newport, Ore.)
- Continuous HighPoints messaging campaign to spread awareness and raise money for disabled Veterans

If any of these events sound interesting to you, or you would like to help sponsor any, please contact me at jeremy-thompson5803@gmail.com for trip details and attendance parameters.

I would like to remind our readers that recovery for our Veterans is a never-ending process. We are never "cured." We survive and thrive by sharing our stories with others, experiencing the many positives that the world has to offer, learning healthy ways to cope with the traumas of war, to feel appreciated, and to love living every day.

Loving living,

Jeremy Thompson and Family



From top left corner...Mike Potts, Brian Forest (USMC), Bernida Flynn (Host Mom), Steve Hendricks (USMC Disabled), Jeremy Thompson (Host USMC Ret Disabled), Natalie Vines (US Army Ret Disabled), Meike Thompson-Horrer (Hostess), Steve (US Army Ret Disabled)



From left...Paul Bollinger (USMC/US Army Res Disabled), Jeremy Thompson (Host USMC Ret Disabled), Kevin Albrecht (German Naval Infantry), Marcus Lisker (German Navy Diver)



Music 4AHERO: Kappa Sigma's Boardwalk Bash Lights Up The Night!

By Aaron Goldstein

The University of West Florida's Kappa Sigma fraternity continues to help raise funds for AHERO's programs each year. Last year was no exception, with events such as its Perdido Bay Gold Tournament (read about it on these pages), 5-K runs, and music events.

On Saturday, September 22, 2018, the Kappa Sigma brothers delivered a great example of such an event, kicking off its Boardwalk Bash at 8 p.m. at Bamboo Willie's on the Pensacola Beach. American military Veterans, UWF student musicians, and local Pensacola musicians performed selections from a cross section of genres, and at 10 p.m., the popular Nick and the Ovorols band and John Hart Project headlined. Altogether it was a fabulous evening that delighted the audience throughout.

Admission was free but donations to the all-volunteer AHERO organization were requested and received with gratitude. A number of vendors sold food and merchandise, and a drawing was held with more than \$2,500 in amazing prizes awarded.

This was an evening of wonderful music and fun that individuals and families could enjoy even as they showed appreciation for our men and women in uniform who have suffered and sacrificed on our behalf. A cause such as AHERO's Veterans suicide-prevention mission is as close to the hearts of our Kappa Sigma brothers as it is to every freedom-loving American. It makes anything we can do to help AHERO continue its work a labor of love.



Enjoying great live music at Kappa Sigma's Boardwalk Bash benefit for AHERO

Nashville Singer Songwriter Rusty Tabor performs at the 2018 Operation Song event at the Pensacola Beach Community Beach.



From Biker Brigade to Riding 4AHERO: One Man's Inspiration

By Doug Pacitti



(l-r.) Dave Glassman, Matt Kopschak, Doug Pacitti



Capt Doug Pacitti conducts the Motorcycle Escort Safety Brief during the 2018 Pensacola Beach "Warrior Hook-Up"

It was the end of a great, three-day, blue-water fishing trip back in June 2016. A couple of buddies and I were on the long, five-and-a-half-hour ride back to shore, talking about the big-game fish we had chased. But once we got close enough for cell reception, I saw I had a message to call my boss.

"Would you be interested in running the boat to take some disabled Veterans fishing during the AHERO Warrior Hook-up this August?" he asked, when I called back.

Having grown up as an Army brat, and having seen my brother and some cousins and friends come home disabled after serving, and witnessing all the stuff they were going through, this was a no-brainer: Of course I was interested.

The event was in August. At the preliminary meet-and-greet, I found myself hiding in the shadows listening to stories these brave men and women were telling. I was blown away. I remember lying in bed that night thinking about how I might get more involved with this amazing AHERO organization.

So I spent the next four days out on Pensacola Beach listening, learning, and getting to know these injured and wounded military members and Veterans. I was in awe of the support of them that was coming from the community—how our area residents and business owners were opening their hearts and extending their hospitality to these deserving individuals.

After the fishing and activities, the farewell party came to an end. I had made some new friends, but I had no idea that they would become my brothers.

Fast forward to summer 2018. I had gotten more involved with volunteering for AHERO

and was developing an idea that was just begging to be implemented. As a biker, I knew the great support the biker community gives our military and its Veterans. I wanted to foster a solid connection between that community and AHERO.

I had become close with some AHERO Vets who were bikers as well, and by now we had ridden a lot together. AHERO's Pensacola Beach Warrior Hook-Up was coming up soon, so we had just a few short weeks to organize what I had in mind. The American Legion Riders of Post 378 (ALR Post 378) in Gulf Breeze, a riding group to which I belonged, were all in agreement: We would come together to escort the wounded and injured military active-service members and Veterans that AHERO was bringing in to an event off Pensacola Beach.

Plans went operational. A route was laid out and approved by multiple local law enforcement agencies including Gulf Breeze Police Chief Rick Hawthorne, who immediately committed officers to secure intersections and provide police escorts. The route took the AHERO guest warriors from Pensacola Beach's famed "Beach Ball" water tower to American Legion Post 378. The Vets were treated to a ride on the Pensacola Beach Bum Trolley and I was fortunate to be the escort road captain and lead bike. Flags flying, an uninterrupted line of cars would follow with more warriors and our ALR Post 378 riders bringing up the rear.

The event was open to bikers who wanted to ride with us, but we were completely floored when 75 bikes showed up to help escort our Veterans! Engine's gunning, our amazing entourage roared out of the Beach Ball parking lot and onto the Pensacola Beach Bridge, roll-

ing along above blue, beautiful Gulf waters and gathering speed as it swept down the ramp, turned onto Gulf Breeze Parkway and rode on to its American Legion destination.

Which was when it hit me: If we could get 75 bikes here to show support of those brave men and women on such short notice, imagine what we could do with a planned ride such as a poker run! And so the idea of Riding 4AHERO was born.

It was a chance to bring bikers and the community together with Veterans and to raise public awareness of the high rate of suicide among military service members and Veterans. This is at the core of AHERO's mission. But along with awareness, Riding4AHERO could raise donations to bring at-risk wounded Vets and service members together to experience the life-affirming camaraderie of being with others who have endured the same hell and who are able to help one another because they truly understand.

In the short couple of years I have worked with AHERO, I have seen first-hand how much its events mean to the participants. AHERO's aim is to be a game changer by giving hope, and I am proud to be a part of that. Never having served in the military myself, AHERO is a way for me to give back—to show my gratitude to these heroes who deserve so much more for everything they have gone through and sacrificed on behalf of us all.

Editor's note: Boat Captain Pacitti is owner/operator of Six Shooter Charters, whose generosity to, and enthusiasm for, AHERO's cause and activities has helped expand the organization's outreach while adding to its guest warrior's enjoyment of events. AHERO salutes you, Cap'n Doug!

Fly Fishing 4AHERO: A Relaxing Sport To Renew The Spirit

By Connie Conway

AHERO is pleased to have as one of its newest friends and supporters, Master Casting Instructor (MCI) Keith Richard, owner of the Camp Fly Fishing School based in Breaux Bridge, La. Richard has taught fly-fishing tactics in Canada, throughout the United States, and among the Mayan ruins in Playa Blanca, Mexico.

A great promoter of fishing education and conservation to young and old alike, Richard has served as a member of the Casting Board of Governors of Fly Fishers International (FFI), an organization of fly fisherman and volunteers dedicated to fly-fishing education and conservation. FFI currently certifies instructors in 44 different countries. Richard is one of fewer than 50 MCI's worldwide who are certified to test others for both initial and master-level certification, and he has authored several articles on fly fishing published by FFI.

Veterans who enjoy the outdoors and are seeking a relaxing yet challenging activity may well want to look into learning to fly fish. It can be, among other things, a healthy way to combat depression.

"We recently developed a website primarily dedicated to creating awareness of Veteran suicide rates and prevention," Richard said, "and we established an affiliation with AHERO, knowing of their suicide-prevention mission. There are more than 60 videos on various topics of fly fishing, and there are more such videos to come."

Richard explained that the beginning student as well as the highly-skilled fly-fishing enthusiast will benefit from many of these videos. Throughout the website, specific topics are covered that will take you through the fly-fishing learning and perfecting process, including:

- ★ Choosing Equipment
- ★ Accessories Used
- ★ Casting Dynamics
- ★ Advanced Casting Skills
- ★ Equipment Setup
- ★ Types of Casting Styles
- ★ Fishing Tactics
- ★ Much More

"This is a sport you can enjoy almost anywhere in the world," Richard said. "No one should assume they can't fly fish because of disabilities. Adaptive equipment today has made overcoming physical limitations possible. Instructors experienced with various casting styles can more often than not work with physical challenges their students have. From the very young to the middle aged, to 'oldsters' who want to stay active, wherever you find water, you will likely find fly-fishing folks passionate about this incredibly rewarding sport."

Feel free to email any questions or comments about fly fishing that you would like to see further explored to krichardthecamp@yahoo.com.



Keith Richard, Fly Fishing Master Casting Instructor, shows off his Bass catch



Golfing 4AHERO: Tournament on Perdido Bay

By Aaron Goldstein

On November 17, 2018, AHERO hosted a classic four-man scramble golf tournament at the Perdido Bay Golf Club. The purpose was to raise funds for AHERO while spreading awareness of its support of Veterans and its focus on preventing Veteran suicide.

In addition to the tournament, there was a spectacular awards banquet, catered lunch, and presentation by keynote speaker and AHERO volunteer, Capt Bill Cody, USMC (Ret). Cody, a singer-songwriter who goes by the name Cody James, was featured in last year's issue of this magazine. A pilot serving in Afghanistan during the winter of 2002, he barely survived a helicopter crash on a remote Afghan mountain that sadly took the lives of two fellow Marines. He waited with three other survivors for many hours, his back broken. Complications of battle-stressed forces had delayed rescue but then

help arrived, and Cody returned home.

This tournament could not have taken place without our wonderful community sponsors who generously donated whatever they could to ensure its success. Pensacola and Perdido Bay community members welcomed AHERO's Veterans and volunteers with open arms, delighted to participate in the event.

Local Volunteers from the University of West Florida's Sigma-Xi chapter of Kappa Sigma fraternity worked closely with AHERO throughout the planning and execution of the tournament. The moment these young men caught wind that it would take place, they reached out to their community partnerships, friends, and family in hopes of gathering sponsorships, donations, and door prizes. AHERO appreciates greatly the UWF Kappa Sigma chapter members who so frequently support its efforts and



Dave Riley golfs at the tournament



UWF Kappa Sigma Fraternity brothers plan and organize the AHERO at the 2018 Golfing4AHERO Tournament

who have kindly made it clear that they hope to continue advancing AHERO's mission in any way they can.

Asked about future plans for the tournament, event organizer Hunter Labbie was enthusiastic. "The planning and groundwork for a first-year golf tournament is no easy feat, but we couldn't have asked for a better turnout," he said. "The way the community, local businesses, and AHERO supporters came together was nothing short of remarkable. With the Gulf Coast having been made aware of our tournament, I firmly believe the event will double in size this coming year. The demographics of our area largely consist of service men and women, and this leads me to believe that this Gulf Coast AHERO tournament can be something special our greater Pensacola/Perdido Bay community can look forward to for decades to come."

For more information about the tournament, go to www.golfing4AHERO.com or find us on Facebook, "Golfing 4 AHERO - Perdido Bay." To learn more about Perdido Bay Golf Course, visit www.perdidobaygolf.com

Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association Rides 4AHERO

By Joseph "Freq" Garner and Joseph "Goat" Vukovcan



Combat Vets Chapter Commander, John "Goose" Kidd presents a \$500 check to AHERO's Doug Pacitti at the first Riding4AHERO event at the American Legion Post 240 in Pensacola, March 24, 2018

The Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA) Florida Chapter 20-3 recently announced that it has adopted AHERO as one of its local charities. After beginning as a club in 1999, an internet scam that sought to deceive combat Veterans came to members' attention and the original club was dissolved. Members were still interested in Veterans' issues, however, and were committed to their original mission of helping Veterans. They decided to form the CVMA as an IRS non-profit 501(c)(19) organization whose membership is strictly all-volunteer. On May 1, 2001, members were

able to carry out their mission of "Vets Helping Vets." Two distinct, shared commonalities had brought this group together: the love of riding motorcycles and the sacrifices of having served our country in combat.

The CVMA has grown and currently has chapters active in all 50 states and in Germany and South Korea. Full members must be active-duty, retired or other prior-service Veterans with combat service from any branch of the military. The chapters are also comprised of support and auxiliary members.

Individual chapters host events throughout the year to bring about awareness of the need to help Veterans. In 2011, CVMA Chapter 20-3 was chartered in Milton, Florida. Since then, the chapter has raised funds by conducting signature motorcycle rides, flea markets, auctions, baked-goods sales, and yard sales. Profits from these charitable events go to local Veterans organizations such as Fisher House of the Emerald Coast, Santa Rosa Veterans Memorial-Vets to the Clinic, Pensacola Veterans Memorial Park, Pensacola Volunteers of America, Pensacola Waterfront Mission, Hope Ministry, Operation



Finally Home, and The Equine Therapy Group of Baldwin, Alabama. These organizations provide Veterans with direct support such as housing, job training, transportation, and ramps for limited mobility persons, as well as counseling and treatment for PTSD and other combat-related injuries.

It's not all just about fundraising, however. It's what goes on behind the scenes that lets us reap priceless rewards. It's the smiles and appreciation of those Vets who are helped that make it all worthwhile.

The Combat Vets were initially introduced to AHERO through the Mobile Big Game Fishing Club and The Ironman Outdoor Ministries 2nd Annual Veterans Appreciation Fishing Outing, and at the 7th Annual Pensacola Beach AHERO Warrior Hook-Up in August 2018. One of our members was contacted about helping to sponsor the event by providing the escort from Casino Beach to American Legion Post 378 in Gulf Breeze. Veterans from around the country participated in this event. To watch them one

by one step off the bus was a healing moment for all of us ... a great honor!

This year, the Combat Vets local chapter FL. 20-3 decided to adopt AHERO as one of its local charities by attending the RIDING4AHERO First Ever Poker Run in support of this outstanding Veterans organization. We look forward to growing our relationship and association with AHERO in the future.



Sustaining The Health of Our Gulf Coast Sea Life

By Robert Turpin

Over the long history of life in the oceans, many species of crustaceans, mollusks, corals, algae, worms, fish and mammals established habitat preferences for natural formations such as coral reefs, oyster beds, rock ledges and outcroppings. These still provide optimal forage opportunities and refuge from predation, as well as substrate for attachment, spawning, etc.

A "reef community" consists of the diverse species of plants and animals that live some or all their lives on or around reef habitat. We are now learning about the important role of bacteria and protists (organisms) in food webs, and thus their place within reef communities.

Ancient peoples learned that placing trees in water increased certain organisms, which they could then harvest for food. Modern day anglers and divers observed reef communities around shipwrecks and other man-made

objects, leading to the science and practice of building artificial reefs. This expanded to habitat creation in marine, estuarine, and fresh waters on a global scale.

Although there are several rock ledges and outcroppings in nearshore Gulf waters around Escambia, the seafloor is predominantly sand. Artificial reef building here was begun by anglers and divers to establish reefs closer to shore and Pensacola Pass. Most were deployed by charter-boat operators, and consisted of various "materials of opportunity," including old automobile bodies and other scrap steel objects and concrete. Many such "private" reefs were known only by the persons who deployed them. Larger reefs were soon built for public use by sinking barges, airplanes, concrete rubble from demolition sites and even a war-era Liberty Ship.

US military operations resulted in two of the largest local artificial reefs: the former battleship USS Massachusetts and freighter San Pablo. Decades of military aircraft operations out of Naval Air Station Pensacola resulted in a number of military aircraft on the seafloor here.

In the 1980s, state and federal agencies began to regulate the deployment of artificial reefs under the following legislation:

- ★ The Clean Water Act
- ★ The Rivers and Harbors Act
- ★ The Endangered Species Act
- ★ The Marine Mammal Protection Act
- ★ Other federal and state regulations

Escambia's formal artificial reef program was begun by a volunteer marine recreation committee in the mid-1980s. The committee obtained site permits from the Army Corps of Engineers and the State of Florida, and constructed numerous reefs by sinking material such as bridge demolition debris, scrapped barges and tugboats, and other materials.

In early 2000, Escambia's county commissioners established the Marine Resources Division to manage the county's growing artificial reef program. In 19 years, Escambia County has developed 10 reef sites and deployed hundreds of new artificial reefs. The first "snorkeling reefs" in Florida's Gulf of Mexico were accessible to divers by swimming off the beach at

the Park East public beach and at Perdido Key's public beach (Access #1).

Snorkeling reefs were built in Pensacola Bay and Santa Rosa Sound. In addition, the world's largest artificial reef was created by deploying the decommissioned USS Oriskany aircraft carrier 18 miles south of Pensacola Beach in the Gulf.

Site location, water depth, materials, size and configuration of reefs are subject to regulations in the permits issued by Florida's Department of Environmental Protection and/or the US Army Corps of Engineers. Public input is obtained through monthly meetings of the Marine Advisory Committee. The county's Marine Resources Division and Natural Resources Management Department also consider physical and biological/ecological environments, funding, and other factors to plan and create stable, durable and effective reefs and reef communities.

A 2015 socioeconomic impact study conducted by Dr. Bill Huth at the University of West Florida determined that fishing and diving around Escambia's artificial reefs are responsible for 2,345 area jobs and \$150.8 million annually in benefits to the local economy. It is impossible to measure the quantity of marine life now inhabiting these reefs and to assess the quality-of-life benefits they offer our citizens and visitors each year.

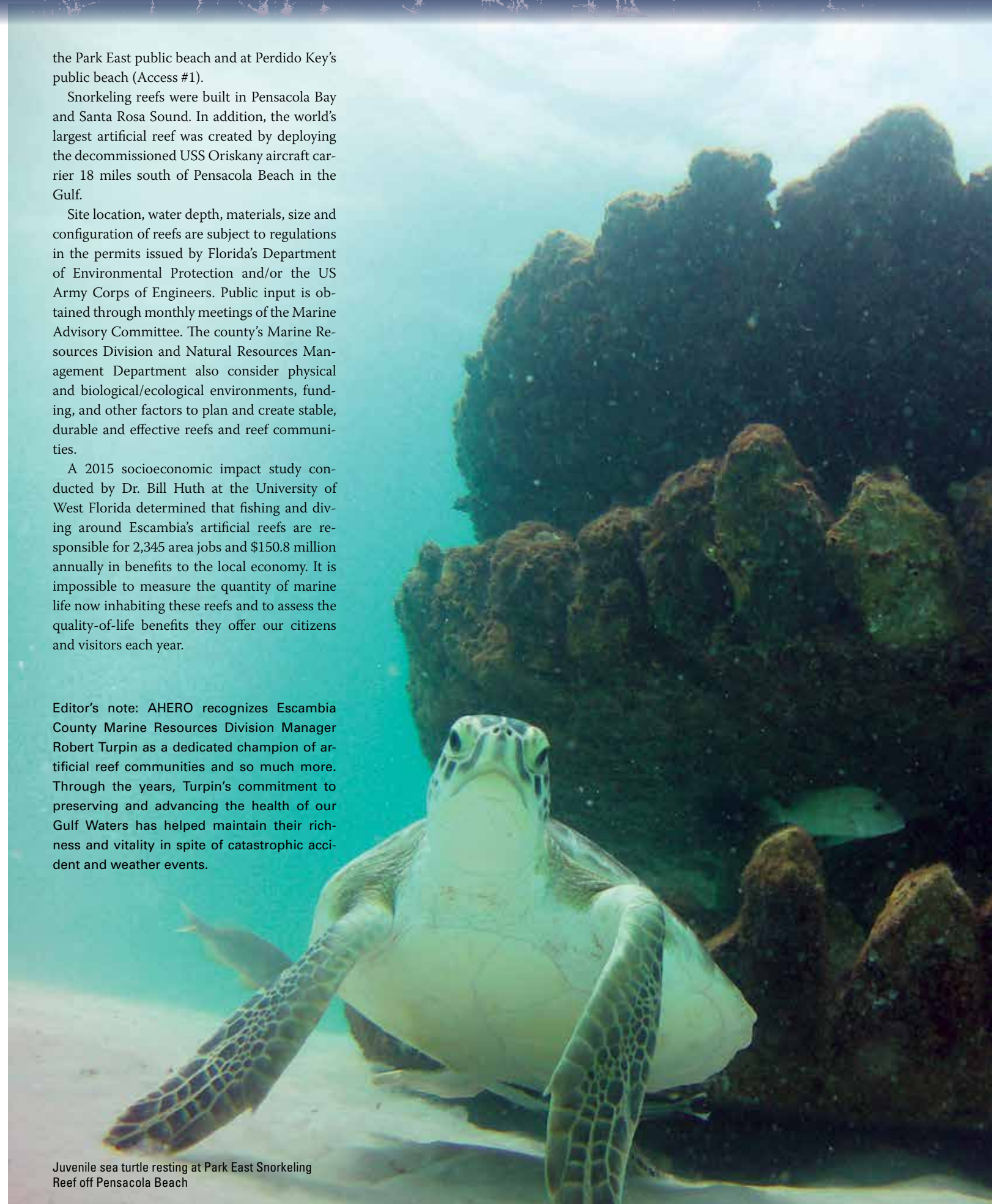
Editor's note: AHERO recognizes Escambia County Marine Resources Division Manager Robert Turpin as a dedicated champion of artificial reef communities and so much more. Through the years, Turpin's commitment to preserving and advancing the health of our Gulf Waters has helped maintain their richness and vitality in spite of catastrophic accident and weather events.



Tug "Ocean Wind" being submerged to create another reef to improve habitat and recreational fishing and diving



18 ft concrete module being deployed as artificial reefs in Gulf of Mexico approx 8 miles off Escambia County



Juvenile sea turtle resting at Park East Snorkeling Reef off Pensacola Beach

The Saga of Sneaky White

By Norm "Frenchy" LaFontaine

Coming back to life-as-usual at home after having been trained to fight hard and then being in combat presents huge challenges to Veterans. For decorated Marine and three-tour Vietnam Veteran James A. White Jr, CWO3, those challenges became insurmountable. So much so that White was sentenced to life in prison after taking the life of a man who had abused his wife and stepdaughter.

It was the massive challenge of his harsh sentence, however, that would empower White's extraordinary work on behalf of incarcerated Veterans—work that would shape his life story.

Friendships that last are an unlikely outcome from war, but they do happen. Many begin after service, as well, as mine did with White, and I know the value of having them. In fact, it was AHERO's mission based on the belief that friendships between Veterans can save lives and foster hope that inspired me, a medically retired Marine Veteran of the Vietnam War, to become a steadfast proponent of AHERO and a constant volunteer within its organization.

So meet my friend of fifty-three years, "Sneaky" White—still going by that nickname since earning it for sneaking through a minefield on an unauthorized liberty run.

After starting as a Marine CH-46A crew chief in Vietnam, White became the first Marine enlisted aircrewman to be awarded a Distinguished Flying cross since WWII. This got him a shot at becoming an Army helicopter pilot. He excelled at it, flying three 12-month tours. Only his diminished hearing grounded Sneaky White from flying for the Army, but he flew two more years for Air America!

When White came home, PTS and PTSD had not yet been heard of, much less been used as a defense in a murder trial. In a March 2018 interview by Alix Wall* for The Jewish News of Northern California, White said he'd since learned much about the PTSD he sustained. "I haven't gotten over it," he told the interviewer, adding, "you don't get over it ... it's impossible to forget all the Vietnam stuff that I carry."

Like so many Veterans, he'd "made it through" his tours with no visible wounds (although he was awarded at least three Purple Hearts). But he was a troubled man and had returned to a hostile environment. Soon he was convicted of a murder. There may be a movie on White's story in the near future. If so, it is likely to show that going to prison was his wake-up call. Believing his creator put him there for a reason,

he turned his sentence into an opportunity to help others.

White established Veterans groups in every prison he was assigned to. He used his organizational talent to develop a college degree program that has helped more than 1500 inmates earn degrees and go on to productive lives after release. Always proactive, he has raised nearly a half million dollars from behind bars for non-profit Veterans' and children's organizations. And recently, his important work and stellar record have gained this hero a much-deserved chance at a release from prison.

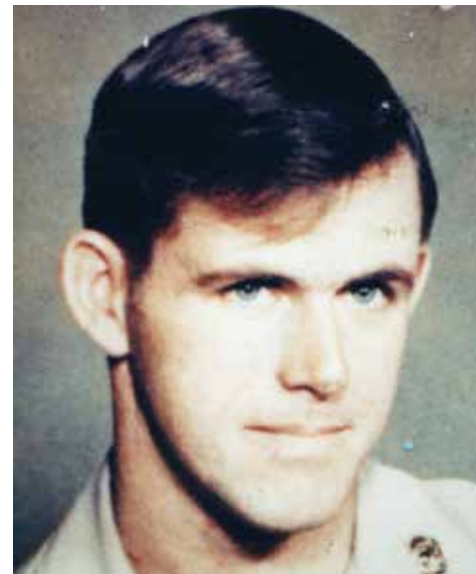
Many Veterans feel that they have been given their own kind of "life sentence" to fail. Too often such hopelessness feels like it can only be changed by ending life.

Through AHERO and in my own life, I have learned that what's needed at those times goes way beyond what can be asked of a casual friend or neighbor: It's the strength to regain enthusiasm for living—strength that comes from fellow Vets who know your pain. At its Sneaky White and AHERO best, it is friends reminding friends that they help themselves through helping others.

That works for me!

*The full article by Alix Wall is online at jweekly.com/2018/03/22/sentenced-life-murder-helped-1500-fellow-inmates-earn-degrees/

James A. "Sneaky" White as a young Army Cobra helicopter pilot. 1971



Crew Shot. UH-34D Helicopter Crew, USMC, HMM-162 Vieques, PR, November of 1966. Fred Christman, (Parachute Rigger/Flight Equipment) "Frenchy" LaFontaine First Mech/Gunner, Sgt. Bobby George, Crew Chief



Trailblazers: Shad Mashad and The National Veterans Foundation

By Connie Conway

When Shad Meshad, founder of the National Veterans Foundation (NVF), was a young U.S. Army Medical Service officer, he served in the Vietnam War. Soldiers would often speak honestly to him about the emotional and mental difficulties they struggled with due to combat. Today we know this as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, a term not formally defined until the American Psychiatric Association named it in its manual of disorders in 1980.

"They'd try to describe their situation to me," Meshad said in an interview with AHERO. "How it was like being on patrol and suddenly everyone's gone ... no medical officer, no radio man. You're alone. Nobody talks to you, and then when there are people talking to you, it's just ya-ya-ya and they don't understand anything you say. They weren't there."

With a lifetime commitment to addressing these massive problems suffered by our Veterans, Meshad's story has become legendary. And his focus remains on those who bear the seen and unseen devastation they live with after years of service ... and then years after that.

"For so many, it's never having a chance to explain why they changed," he explained. "Instead, they may think, 'I'm just going to numb myself.' That might be by self-isolating and/or by using drugs. But for so many, it's putting a gun to their head. So listening to them becomes the most important thing. And working against the segregation between groups who can help—that is key, too, because such groups are all over the place."

Networking and partnering with the many and varied organizations that work on behalf of Veterans is a principle that also guides AHERO. So in the next edition of this magazine, you'll be able to read the full story of the NVF, its extraordinary reach and effectiveness, as well as about other groups working on behalf of our brave warriors.



Shad Meshad & US ARMY "Dustoff" (Medevac) Pilot in Vietnam, 1969. Shad was a Commissioned Army Captain, Medical Officer, and flew Dustoff Missions. Shad and Frenchy LaFontaine looking at a print of GySgt Carlos Hathcock, USMC, Ret. GySgt Hathcock was a legendary Marine Sniper in Vietnam.

Guns to Hammers Raises The Bar For 2019

By GTH Marketing Director Bob Morey

"This past year, 2018, was magical for us," said CEO JR Smith of Guns To Hammer (GTH) in a recent interview. "We had no idea that by year's end we would have helped as many Veterans and met as many people as we have."

The 501 c (3) nonprofit GTH was founded by Veterans. Dedicated to aiding America's disabled warriors, the group provides much-needed home remodeling in compliance with the Americans With Disability Act (ADA). "Our mission is two-fold," Smith explained. "First, we try to leave no Vet with ADA needs behind. Second, we provide training to individuals leaving military service who want to build a career in construction. We enlist them to help fellow Vets and eventually to run their own ADA remodeling projects."

Smith believes connecting Veterans with Veterans promotes camaraderie and supports those who need it most. This is a key principle GTH shares with AHERO.

This past year was the second for GTH operations. Most nonprofits barely make it out of the gate, but the GTH jeep affectionately called "the Gunny" completed its successful second national tour, a 7,500-mile road trip, meeting with Veterans groups along the way. It drew coast-to-coast media attention to the plight of our disabled Veterans and the shortcomings of the VA's compliance with the federal ADA program.

Highlights of 2018 for GTH include a project in Las Vegas for a Navy corpsman Vet named Ed who needed a bathroom he could safely use. This meant widening doorways and building ramps to accommodate his wheelchair. "We met Ed on our first national tour," said Smith. "When we heard he'd had a setback, getting this job done for him became personal."

By job's end, Ed had full access to his home for the first time in months. "I can't tell you how much this means to me," he told us. "JR and his guys were a Godsend!"

Guns to Hammers members JR Smith & Kevin Jackson, along with the Southern Saints Riders, and Dave & Yvonne Riley at the Pensacola Bay Brewery fundraiser, Memorial Day 2018



AHERO: The Story Continues ...



JR Smith of Guns to Hamers accepts a donation check from Terry Runyon, Chapter President of the Vietnam Vets/Legacy Vets Motorcycle Club.



GTH relies on donations from those with respect and concern for our disabled Veterans. In Las Vegas, friends of Ed's at The Leatherneck Club, a Veteran-owned establishment, hosted fundraiser nights. From April through July, Tenaya Creek Brewery donated a dollar per pint of its flagship Bonanza Brown Ale sold in its tasting room. And the Findlay Automotive Group made a donation for each Kia and Volvo it sold in June. The community and media came together to make sure the project was fully funded.

Navy Corpsman George "Doc" Dodge, a Pensacola-area resident, is a Vietnam-era disabled Veteran and a huge presence within Pensacola's Cpl JR Speers Detachment of the Marine Corps League. Dodge has assisted countless Veterans through the VA's red tape, and he's known for providing Vets with transportation to appointments and even accompanying them when asked. But getting the major heart surgery that he'd long avoided meant he and his wife, "BeBe," could no longer make repairs themselves to the badly deteriorated roof of their house.

In October, GTH and AHERO combined forces with Marine Veteran Jim Lawry's Dia-

mond Contractors roofing company and volunteers from the crew of the USS Tripoli to provide a new roof on the Dodge's home. Alerted to the Dodge's plight, the Speers Detachment joined GTH and the Merrill Land Construction company to cover a large part of the estimated costs.


This year, even more GTH projects are underway. Partnering with the nonprofit NOLAH, GTH is providing an ADA-compliant kitchen for wheelchair-bound Dennis in San Diego, a Vietnam-era Vet. In addition, needed renovations on Veteran Dave Riley's house in Mobile, Ala., are planned. A quadruple amputee, Dave is familiar to AHERO's volunteers and donors. The estimated combined cost of the two projects is \$48,000. At GTH, fundraising for projects such as these is always ongoing.

GTH was founded in response to the exhaustive time delays and red tape Vets in need must go through to receive help from the VA. They deserve better, Smith believes. "The VA asks contractors to cover half or more of the cost of a job," he said, "and it takes a year or more after the job's completed for the VA to pay its agreed share!"

To help streamline the ADA and solve these VA issues, the GTH team met with Congressional staffers on crafting what we hope will become the VA-ADA Act. Our government has spent massively on military ventures over the years. Taking care of our Veterans—especially our disabled Vets—should be its first priority as part of the human cost of going to war. Learn more about GTH at gunstohammers.com. Like us on Facebook, where you can follow our progress in assisting America's disabled Veterans.



God uses all hardships and obstacles for our spiritual growth. To strengthen us to help others heal. The selfless love of Jesus is in all of us. God is love.



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