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KAREN HEGG SPORTS CEN

## CONFIDENCE STRENGTH. PRIDE

*Rebuilding through Recreation*

By Elizabeth M. Lockwood

**Out on the Hunt:** Ross Colquhoun (far left) leads the Wounded Veterans Waterfowl Weekend Class of 2009 as they prepare for a live duck release. Each warrior used a shotgun donated to them through the generosity of the American Legion and their supporters.



# CONFIDEN



“ I’m always asked, ‘Can I do the things I did before?’ and I keep reiterating the same thing. The answer is 100% yes. ”

**R**etired Army Capt. Joe Potter didn’t have much to offer America’s wounded service members except his love of hunting and some land on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. So together with his neighbor, retired Army Spc. Dennis Reed, Potter founded the Wounded Veterans Waterfowl Weekend.

“It is emotional for me,” Reed explains. “I was fortunate. When I returned I had everything in place. When you see these fine young men – and we’ve had women too – it hurts. They’re just soldiers out doing their jobs.”

In an effort to give back, Potter and Reed partnered with American Legion Jeff Davis Post 18, based out of Centreville, Md. They invited

five service members going through rehabilitation at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., to come out to the shore for a waterfowl weekend, complete with skeet shooting, a live release and a wild duck hunt.

The program has grown significantly in the two years since that first weekend in 2007; the 2009 class of warriors benefited from over \$20,000 in donations, which bought them each their own shotgun, paid for a weekend of room and board and even allowed for two bountiful banquets.

More rewarding than these material gifts, however, is the emotional payoff. The community of Centreville rallied behind Potter, Reed and the local American Legion,

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**PRIDE.** *Rebuilding through Recreation*



attending the banquets, providing a police escort and making each warrior an honorary citizen of the town.

It's in these basic human interactions where the real therapy begins.

To Sgt. 1st Class Jonathan Grundy, a member of the Wounded Veteran Waterfowl Weekend Class of 2008, support like the kind he receives outside the walls

of Walter Reed means the difference between spending another day at the hospital and having the confidence to get out and try new things.

“There are so many organizations out there that do so many wonderful things for us – not only when you're at Walter Reed, but for wounded warriors when they leave Walter Reed. They go out of their way to keep in touch with us, invite us back.

They remember us, and that's good,” Grundy says.

Grundy believes that staying busy at Walter Reed was a key part of his recovery. In addition to traditional physical and occupational therapy, Grundy participated in recreational therapy as much as possible.

“I stayed very busy at Walter Reed,” he remembers. “Horseback riding, shooting,

**// To say you played basketball at the White House and the President watched you and screamed your name out during the game? That's something nobody else can say. //**

things like that. Like I say, it's a big motivator."

When Grundy got a chance to participate in the 2008 Waterfowl Weekend, he knew that the opportunity was priceless. "I've always loved being outdoors, and I've never had a chance to go duck and goose hunting before but jumped at the opportunity. I got to know the crowd here and they are really a great bunch. I've been out here a couple times."

He returned in 2009 to attend his second Waterfowl Weekend, picking right back up on Friday morning where the jovial competition had let off a year before.

Just as Grundy experienced in previous years, the interactions between wounded warriors and the weekend's planners don't end when Sunday rolls around. "The warriors receive a standing invitation to come back and visit their friends on the shore whenever and as often as they'd like," says Ross Colquhoun, Firearms Training/Outdoor Field and Stream Program Manager at Walter Reed.

The lifelong connection between warrior and host is something that Reed sees as inevitable. "We are the seasoned vets, helping out the younger ones," he says, "because one day they will be the seasoned ones."

**Skeet Shooting:** Dennis Reed (standing) watches as Army Staff Sgt. Preston Jackson, a member of the Waterfowl Class of 2009 aims at sporting clays. Jackson said of the weekend, "It makes it more bearable. This is the type of stuff

you do with your friends at home. It's nice to be able to do these kinds of things [again]."

**Hoops:** Coach Demby (center) leads the clinic in a game of wheelchair basketball.



Potter adds, “I get more of a charge out of this than they do. Because it’s helping me do something for the guys who are defending us right now, ... especially the guys who are giving up limbs for us, too.”

Potter and Reed share a deep-rooted motivation: the need to give back to the soldiers fighting for them, and the feeling that they are benefiting as much as – if not more

than – the soldiers they aim to support.

This feeling of commitment and dedication is echoed in the words of retired Command Sgt. Maj. Larry Pence, who co-founded the U.S. Army Caisson Platoon Equine Assisted Program with retired Navy Cmdr. Mary Jo Beckman.

“The inspiration for the program came one day when

my wife and Mary Jo Beckman were out horseback riding,” he explains. “Our son had just returned from Iraq – fortunately he was not injured – but my wife and I had been talking and I said, ‘You know, we really need to do something to help these soldiers out when they come back.’”

Pence and Beckman drew up a plan for equine assisted therapy and approached Walter



**A Ride through Ft. Myer:**

*Michael Cain rides Bud, a horse in the equine therapy program at Ft. Myer. Cain hopes to adopt Bud when his term of service with the Caisson Platoon is up in a few years.*

**Shooting Range:** *Rain didn't stop the fun at the Wounded Veteran Waterfowl Weekend.*



Reed about the possibility of incorporating horseback riding into the suite of treatments and therapies offered to wounded soldiers. In the four trial sessions that Walter Reed gave them, Pence and Beckman's program amazed

the therapists with the obvious physical and emotional benefits of horseback riding.

Therapists tested riders before and after each session on their mobility and strength, as well as on basics like

// My wife and I had been talking and I said, ‘You know, we really need to do something to help these soldiers out when they come back.’ //



**Honor:** A soldier in *The Old Guard* at Ft. Myer prepares a horse for therapeutic riding. Both are members of the Caisson Platoon that carries out a service member’s final honor: being laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery

**Coaching:** Coach Demby uses his time on the court to improve his players’ basketball skill and remind them how much they can still do.

“Stand-Up and Go” and single-leg stance exercises. Results revealed an improvement of almost 75% following the ride, Pence said. “After the second or third ride, the degrees of improvement were so remarkable that it became obvious to the physical therapist that equine assisted therapies would in fact be extremely beneficial to wounded warriors.”

That was three and a half years ago.

The program has expanded since then, and the Caisson Platoon Equine Assisted Program now conducts sessions for patients from both Walter Reed and the Washington DC Vet Center. Riders have injuries ranging from single and double amputations to stroke and traumatic brain injury.

Physically, riding builds core balance and increases mobility. The Equine Assisted Program encourages most participants to ride bareback, allowing riders to feel the muscles in the



horses' backs. "At the walk," Pence says, "a horse's gate mimics yours and mine." Riders are encouraged to focus on the horse's motion and then imitate it in their own recovery. Pence said that the benefits are

immediately obvious: equine assisted therapies facilitate both walking and more rapid adaptability to a prosthetic.

Psychologically, the benefits of riding are just as important.

"Being on the back of that horse helps that individual regain their confidence that they are going to be able to resume physical activities that can be challenging," Pence says.

## FIREARMS TRAINING SIMULATOR

*Military Advanced Training Center, Walter Reed Army Medical Center*

The Firearms Training Simulator is a virtual reality shooting range that can be either two- or three-dimensional. It teaches warriors how to reorient themselves to a weapon system after experiencing a traumatic injury or amputation.

Ross Colquhoun, the Firearms Training/Outdoor Field and Stream Program Manager at Walter Reed, explained that all warriors who participate in an outdoor program are required to first go through the FATS system, which prepares them for the real experience.

"How do I put my prosthetic legs on and walk through the uneven terrain and then put a weapon in my hand and fire it? Fire the weapon without falling over?" Colquhoun asks. "Well, I teach this."



Another psychological benefit of horse therapy is the bond that grows between rider and horse. Pence explains that wounded warriors benefit from relationships built with their fellow soldiers, instructors and volunteers, but the relationship between the horse and rider is also beneficial. “These soldiers bond with their horses. The therapy itself, and the benefits of the therapy, are almost solely attributable to the horse – not to anything Mary Jo and I do. We try to facilitate, but it’s really the horse that’s helping the soldier.”

Michael Cain, a retired Army staff sergeant who lost a leg in an IED blast in Iraq in April 2003, got involved in the program because he loves horses. He has stayed in the program because of one horse, a Percheron named Bud. He is aware of the important “day job” Bud has and also of the difference Bud has made in his recovery.

“I love that horse,” Cain says. “If [I] didn’t have this, I’d just be sitting at the house doing nothing at all.”

Getting out is one of the major benefits of recreational therapy. Cpl. Ray Hennagir and Lance Cpl. Justin Knowles both describe themselves as shy people who would rather spend time alone in their rooms than push themselves to try to find friends at a place as large as Walter Reed.



**Portraits:** *Recreational therapy affects soldier, veteran and program directors alike. From left to right: Joe Potter, Mary Jo Beckman, and Sgt. 1st Class Jonathan Grundy.*

**Dribbling:** *Capt. Ray Hennagir follows wheelchair basketball rules: two pushes between each dribble.*

**Passion:** *Larry Pence founded the U.S. Army Caisson Platoon Equine Assisted Program. Pence and his son are both veterans.*

But the Hennagir and Knowles who play basketball at Walter Reed every Thursday, in wheelchairs designed specifically for the sport, are anything but introverted.

“Actually the occupational therapists here were pushing me for a while just to get out, since I only have six fingers,” Hennagir, a bilateral above-the-knee amputee, says of joining Walter Reed’s team. “They wanted me to try it and see if I could do it. I came out the first time and kind of enjoyed it, so I kept coming back and then got addicted. ... It seems like ever since I sat down in a chair, my skill level has gone up.”



Neither soldier played basketball before coming to Walter Reed, and now both Hennagir and Knowles are being recruited to Edinboro University in Edinboro, Pa., with dreams of one day playing for the American Paralympic Wheelchair Basketball team.

“It’s a great booster – a great thing to just get out and get competitive again,” Hennagir says. “I’m being scouted right now by a coach ... He is also the men’s Paralympic basketball coach. He wants me to train under him for four years [in college] and then hopefully eventually make it to the Paralympic level.”

“ These soldiers bond with their horses. The therapy and its benefits are almost solely attributable to the horse. We try to facilitate, but it’s really the horse that’s helping the soldier. ”

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It's with pride that Knowles, a single-leg, above-the-knee amputee, notes that he was voted MVP in a game that the wheelchair basketball team recently played at the White House for President Barack Obama. "He was actually out there and really amazed by it," Knowles remembers. "I felt really good after. And to say you played basketball at the White House and the President watched you and screamed your name out during the game? That's something nobody else can say."

The coach, retired Army Spc. Billy Demby, himself a bilateral below-the-knee amputee, couldn't be more proud of the team that he's gathered. While it's officially a clinic, not a team, wheelchair basketball at Walter Reed draws a group of players who are dedicated to the sport and addicted to its therapeutic benefits.

Each practice begins with a set of warm-ups that include sprints, lay-ups and shooting. Then "Coach," as the players call Demby, directs a few

## Getting Back in the Field:

Recreational therapy serves to strengthen a soldier's ability and confidence. Whether they return to active duty or adjust to civilian life, wounded warriors who participate in the Wounded Veteran Waterfowl Weekend are learning how to get back in the field.

drills before the players get to compete in a loud, full-court game of wheelchair basketball.

Besides the obvious physical benefits of rolling up and down a court for two hours—shooting at a regulation net when they are sitting less than four feet from the ground, and setting up pics and traps that rival any league in the country—wheelchair basketball offers outstanding emotional and psychological lifts.

“When I came back here some years ago,” Demby remembers of his own stay at Walter Reed in 1971, “I mean, [I thought] my life was over.” Wheelchair basketball changed that for Demby. He’s been playing for 25 years, and for many of those years he has also played traditional “stand-up” ball.

When he sees wounded warriors today get involved in the sport, he knows exactly what they are going through. “They are now doing something they thought they would never do again. It has a great effect on them.”

# THE FUTURE OF THERAPY AT THE NEW WALTER REED

*The Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., will open in September 2011, offering state-of-the-art facilities and services—including many recreational therapy opportunities—to wounded warriors.*

“The number of opportunities that we will offer our patients here is limited only by a person’s imagination,” says Capt. David Bitonti, Deputy Commander of Integration and Transition.

Warriors will be housed in Tranquility Hall, a short distance from the two main sites where they will receive state-of-the-art therapy: the Gymnasium and Building A, which is the centralized site for most therapy, such as physical, occupational and speech therapies.

## Tranquility Hall

- Accommodations consist of suites with a living room, kitchen and two bedrooms
- Outdoor playground area

## The Gymnasium

- 50-meter swimming pool
- Weight machines compliant with American Disability Association standards
- Running track
- Basketball courts
- Handball courts

## Building A

- Climbing wall
- Two running tracks, one with a harness system
- Swimming pool
- Stair ramp with harness system
- CAREN system
- Biomechanics, or “Gait,” Lab
- Driving simulator

“When I got out of [Walter Reed],” Demby continues, “I had confidence in myself that I could go on to other things.”

The team’s members, including Hennagir and Knowles, know that recreational therapy has brought them out of their shells. “My time here would probably have been different [without wheelchair basketball],” Hennagir says. “I would have been a lot less [outgoing], I would have been a lot more like a hermit, kind of kept to myself. Coming out here allows for interaction with other patients and also with some of the therapists that

come out and play with us.” Recreational therapy removes soldiers from the environment they know. Away from hospital rooms and endless doctors appointments, they find themselves challenged again by activities they’ve always loved and thought were lost.

Colquhoun understands that recreational therapy teaches wounded warriors not only how to hunt, ride a horse or play basketball from a chair, but also how to rediscover themselves and their abilities in an unexpectedly new environment. “It’s, ‘Can I do the things I did before?’ and I keep reiterating the same thing. The

answer is 100% yes,” he says. Together, those involved in recreational therapy find the confidence to continue the work necessary to heal. They find the strength to rebuild their muscles, their bodies, their lives. And, ultimately, they find the pride to step forward in their new bodies and greet the world head-on. ■

**Ducks Unlimited:** *It takes a whole host of organizations and people to support the nation’s wounded veterans. Ducks Unlimited is one of the supporters of the Wounded Veteran Waterfowl Weekend.*





# Capt. Mariah Kochavi

*“Mariah has come a very long way on riding a horse. Today she did absolutely awesome. I was proud of her.”*

This issue of MHS Profiles is dedicated to Army Captain Mariah Kochavi, 1980-2009.

Before coming to Walter Reed, Mariah was an Army veterinarian. She loved animals so horseback riding therapy was a good fit.

Her time with the horses at Fort Myer helped Mariah grow stronger physically and mentally. “[Coming to equine therapy has] improved my balance, my trunk support, and my mood,” she said. “It is fun.”

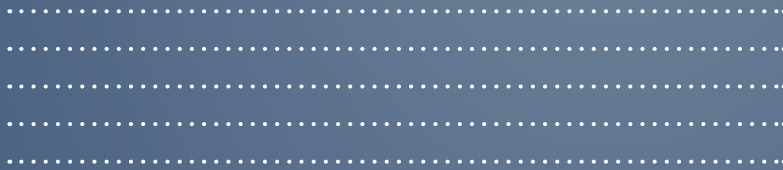
With a goal of trotting without side-spotters, she continued to dedicate time and energy to improving her riding skills.

Michael Cain, a retired Army staff sergeant, said of his time in therapy with Mariah, “Mariah has come a very long way on riding a horse. She was terrified the first time she got up there. From when I’ve seen her do it – she just keeps on getting better and better. Today she did absolutely awesome. I was proud of her.”



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# EQUIPPED FOR *success*



The next issue of MHS Profiles highlights the Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program, as they celebrate 20 years of operation to ensure that people with disabilities have equal access to employment opportunities in the Department of Defense and throughout the federal government.