

Those who have sacrificed honored by outdoors group

By Neal Fisher
Apopka Chief Staff

At the popular Catfish Place restaurant, with the smells and sounds of its wooden interior, a certain masculine image already exists. But last month, the Apopka eatery hosted perhaps the biggest of those images as eight men who are serving their nation arrived to kick-off a weekend fishing trip organized by a group looking to say thanks for their service.

A non-profit organization based in Apopka, Wounded Warrior Outdoors, Inc., organized the trip for the servicemen. As much as those soldiers once lived that masculine image as if it were second nature, traveling to Florida for a weekend of fishing was the most important of activities they could physically experience.

"There are a lot of military organi-

zations and charities," said Ron Raboud, one of the organizers. "All of them are worthy. They provide the military community a certain level of support and show respect for what the service personnel have done, but Wounded Warrior Outdoors was created with a specific purpose while keeping the overhead costs as low as possible. It offers injured service personnel the opportunity to be involved in therapeutic outdoor adventures. We have been doing something like this since the late '90s.

"We decided to go ahead and make it a formal way to support the service personnel as an official non-profit organization. We are proud it has that small-town charity feeling. Although we have a national reach, deal with and host service personnel from all over the U.S. and Canada, the infrastructure is based in Apopka. Furthermore, it is well supported by the community, including be-



Wounded Warrior Outdoors pays for all expenses in taking wounded U.S. veterans on a hunting or fishing trip.

ing chosen by the local national honor society as its philanthropic charity."

The five volunteers of Wounded Warrior Outdoor consists of Raboud, Paul Faircloth Jr., Ed Clement, Hey-

wood Gordon, and Russell Goldberg. All are from the Apopka/Northwest Orange County area.

See **OUTDOORS** Page 3A

Outdoors: Soldiers come from two hospitals

Continued from page 1A

Wounded Warrior Outdoors provides these all-inclusive adventures with no cost to the service personnel, their families, or the government. Transportation, lodging, meals and documentation of the adventure is provided free of charge.

The Web site states what is most important to the program: Active duty warriors in transition are provided with all the accessibility and equipment necessary to make it a truly memorable adventure and one in which they can participate fully.

No matter the individual's disability, the focus is on making sure he or she has the adventure of a lifetime.

Another piece of literature published by the organization also states the outdoor adventures are a form of occupational therapy and taking place in a natural setting accelerates the process.

"We take military personnel outside to participate in hunting and fishing trips," Raboud said. "That is important because taking them outdoors on hunting and fishing trips can be used as a part of their medical treatment. Each trip has a therapeutic purpose to it. Since the service personnel have been wounded, they have not been outside the hospital. A routine develops after a certain amount of time, which includes the same environment and doing the same kind of therapy over and over.

"Participating in a hunting or fishing trip provides a new environment and therapy. Also, when in the hospital, they are re-learning how to use injured body parts in a clinical environment. The therapy is quite boring and the time they have to work with the medical professionals is limited (usually one hour). A typical day on these trips lasts 10 to 12 hours while doing something they enjoy."

The organization works with the military establishment's two primary hospitals, Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., and Balboa Naval Medical Center in San Diego. Each guest (the service man or woman) applies through the hospital they are recuperating at. The doctors and other medical personnel treating the guests determine if they are capable of participating in an outdoor adventure and then what kind (fishing or hunting), as well as where.

The organization provides a total of nine trips per year to one of five states in the U.S. or Canada. Specifically, the trips are to Florida, Kentucky, Oklahoma, California, Maine, or British Columbia, five of which are hunts for duck, turkey, bear, alligator, and wild boar. The other one is to fish. Guests on eight of the trips are made up entirely of patients recuperating at one of the hospitals. The other one consists of guests recuperating at both hospitals.

All of the guests are classified as active duty wounded and have one of three types of injuries occurring from I.E.D.s (improvised explosive devices), brain, burns, or amputation. Almost all the injuries are the result of automobiles running over or military personnel stepping on roadside I.E.D.s

Because the trip is the first one away from the hospital for the service personnel, a medical chaperone accompanies the service personnel. Wounded Warriors Outdoors are

funded to provide the trips to a total of 60 service personnel per year.

"Almost all of the service personnel who suffer these types of injuries are between the ages of 19 and 28," Raboud said. "So, they are in the prime of their lives or just about to enter it. They have the ability to do a lot of different things with their lives. We want them to know and send a message that even though they are injured, they are still capable of doing most of the activities anyone else their age can do. Of course, it takes more effort on their part, but they still can do whatever they want to just like anyone else.

"We want to show them that it is a matter of putting their minds to it. Disability is as much about attitude as it is physical limitation."

The organization has also received several letters from professional and military personnel validating the effectiveness of, as well as lending credence to, the significance of the trips.

Sent as a personal letter, part of one written by Carrie W. Hoppes follows: "Besides the day-to-day formal therapies they receive in the hospital, trips with programs such as the Wounded Warriors Outdoors offer unique experiences to complement medical interventions," Hoppes wrote.

"Trips into the outdoors offer a variety of challenges to our wounded warriors and with each challenge comes the opportunity to overcome and gain confidence. Many of our soldiers, Marines, sailors and airmen have amputations and other severe orthopedic injuries. Trips into the outdoors offer them a chance to walk over uneven terrain, inducing challenges to their balance and walking skills.

"Hiking up and down hills, over grass, rocks and dirt offers real challenges to these wounded warriors that are difficult to replicate in a hospital setting. Fishing, casting and reeling in their catch also challenges their standing balance.

"In addition, sequential tasks can be cognitive therapy for service members with traumatic brain injuries. For those with vision problems, scanning the terrain for game can help with head and eye movements. And for service members suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, WWO trips offer the serenity of the wilderness."

Raboud is the founder and president of The Rabco Corporation, which provides innovative self-storage building systems. About 12 years ago, as a part of his business activities, Raboud began entertaining clients by taking them on the same kind of hunting and fishing trips.

After several months, the trip began to include one terminally ill youth. When the downturn in the economy hit a few years ago, he had extra time to move the trips toward being a more formal charity and on a larger scale. He put together a team of founders and directors.

Then, during 2006, while on business, he found himself aboard a plane from Houston whose passengers were mostly injured service personnel (only two weren't non-injured service personnel). During the flight, he talked to several of the service personnel and the main theme was a love for the outdoors and the idea of taking injured service

personnel on these trips was born.

However, shortly afterwards, the team decided it would do more good if they could create some kind of formal relationship with the military. The then-director of Walter Reed Army Medical Center is originally from Mt. Dora, just a few miles northwest of Apopka. Raboud used that connection as an in and a formal relationship with the director and the hospital was formed. Upon the then-director's request, patients who are being treated at Balboa Hospital in San Diego were included. In 2009, the group formally organized and continued its operations as the Wounded Warriors Outdoors.

"The vision of Wounded Warriors Outdoors is to keep the organization completely staffed by volunteers with no unavoidable overhead expenses," Raboud said. "It assures donations go directly towards benefiting the wounded warriors while remaining in the context of providing therapeutic opportunities in the outdoors. We founded the organization in memory of our fathers, all of whom served in the military."

Hoppes also stressed several other aspects of the service personnel's recovery being assisted by the organization providing hunting and fishing trips.

"Wounded Warriors Outdoors offers unique opportunities outside of the hospital at no cost to the service members. Trips like these normally cost sportsmen thousands of dollars and are a rare pleasure. WWO facilitates these opportunities for combat-wounded veterans and directly, positively impacts their recovery with incredible guided hunting and fishing trips. The chance to go hunting and fishing allows wounded warriors to return to the activities they enjoyed before they were injured.

"They gain confidence and an improved self-image when they can do things like hike, camp, hunt and fish. As a licensed physical therapist and an operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, I can personally attest to the therapeutic benefit of the outdoors and the difference WWO makes in the lives of our disabled veterans."

On the most recent trip, a total of eight service personnel flew in from both hospitals on Wednesday, March 14.

After the plane landed at Orlando International Airport, they were taken by limousine to the Catfish Place for a seafood bonanza with that special Apopka touch as an epitome of what their service has meant.

The next morning, the group was driven to Chassowitzka Island Lodge, just south of Homosassa Springs, where they spent the next two days fishing in the Gulf of Mexico.

They returned to Apopka on Saturday afternoon and enjoyed a wrap-up barbecue. They were then flown back to their hospitals on Sunday morning.

Part of another letter written by Gary H. Cheek, brigadier general U.S. Army, is also included in the packet.

"Wounded Warriors Outdoors has had a profound impact on the attitude, focus and well-being of many soldiers and family members from units all across the country.

"Our soldiers only need an opportunity to realize that despite their injuries they can have a rich, rewarding and productive future. WWO is a critical tool in them finding that future."