

Wounded warriors hunt for wild turkey in Fredonia Valley

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Four young men were in Fredonia Valley earlier this week proving that though they've been wounded in war, they can still do anything they choose to do.

The four are active duty soldiers undergoing treatment for their war wounds at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. They came to the valley at the behest of Ron Raboud, president and founder of Wounded Warriors Outdoors, to participate in the opening of wild turkey hunting season. They were successful in taking a tom home for their tables.

Zacery Blaisdell, 20, who was wounded last Sept. 1 in Afghanistan when his truck was hit by a rocket propelled grenade, was especially impressed with the adventure.

"It's awesome," he said. "Before I joined the Army, I loved to go hunting and fishing, and coming out here is amazing.

"I was a deer hunter, now that I've come here, I think I might switch to turkey," he said, noting that he had not hunted turkey before.

Blaisdell, who is from Minnesota, is unsure how long he'll have to remain at Walter Reed.

"I have a surgery in December, and so after surgery, it's just a matter of time getting everything back to where it was," he said.



Members of the Wounded Warriors Outdoors hunting party are shown with the turkeys they killed during their hunting trip to Fredonia Valley. From left, front row are: Paul Godwin, Ross Colquhoun, Bryan Raboud, Zac Blaisdell, Chris Denham and Jim Sursely. From left, back row are: Kyle Finley, Bill Riddlehoove, Ron Raboud, J. L. Hendricks, Jack Sammis, Chris Whitney and Brian Combs. - Photo furnished

After he recovers from his wounds, Blaisdell hopes to return to his unit.

Each soldier hunting was paired with a caller/guide. And ironically Blaisdell was paired with Kyle Finley, 24, also a wounded warrior from Trigg County.

"I was the guide for Zac when he killed his turkey," Finley said. "I called them in, and helped him out."

Though he was using a wheelchair, Finley said that was the result of a recent car accident not

his war injury.

His war wounds were sustained in Afghanistan in June 2007 in the same type scenario in which Blaisdell was hurt, and they were in the same unit though at different times.

"An RPG was shot at my truck, and it blew up and injured everybody inside," Finley said. "When I got blown up, I had a piece of metal in my thigh, and they had to do four or five surgeries, and it tore up so much muscle they just had to keep going in there and

getting all the bad muscle out. I lost a lot of muscle in my leg."

He retired from the military in 2008.

"I got retirement benefits — they wouldn't let me return to my old job so I decided to come back to the community and find a job and start over," he said.

Finley works for a Clarksville, Tenn. contractor now.

Jim Sursely, a volunteer mentor and disabled Vietnam veteran, bonds with the young men through "that old Army

or military language."

"I think that's the thing that breaks down the barriers fast," said Sursely, who lost both legs in Vietnam in 1969. "We've all been through the same thing, so we can have a very open and candid conversation. It's real enjoyable for both of us, and I probably ask more questions to find out where they are coming from than I really give them answers. It just helps them open up a little bit."

Sursely, a central Florida real estate agent,

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Wounded warriors hunt

At right - Linda Bennett presents a Coon Dog Restaurant T-shirt to wounded warrior Zac Blaisdell.

- Bobbie Foust/Herald Ledger



At left - Kyle Finley was the caller/guide for Zac Blaisdell. Finley, of Trigg County, was wounded in Afghanistan in 2007.

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has been mentoring for Wounded Warriors Outdoors about a year, but he has mentored young soldiers and wounded

veterans since recovering from his own wounds.

He called Fredonia Valley "gorgeous, lots of great turkeys too."

Through help from volunteers, private and corporate donations, Wounded Warriors Outdoors takes up to 60 active-duty wounded warriors on outdoor experiences each year, Raboud said. "All of our guests are either patients at Walter Reed Army Medical Center ... or Balboa Medical Center in San Diego, Calif.," he said. "All have been either wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan. They are from all branches of the military service — men and women who have been wounded serving their country."

nine trips a year if funding permits, owns about 2,000 acres of hunting and farm land in Fredonia Valley, though this was the first time he has hosted wounded warriors at his Fredonia home.

The wounded soldiers, dined at the Coon Dog Restaurant for lunch Monday and were scheduled to fly back to Walter Reed from Nashville, Tenn. on Tuesday.

Raboud, who hosts

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