

Wounded Warrior Outdoors, Inc.

By Erica Shatzer

During a business trip in 2004, fate placed Ron Raboud, CEO of The Rabco Corporation, on a flight that was transporting young veterans from a military hospital to Disney. Raboud was reading an outdoors magazine when he realized that many of his fellow passengers were wounded veterans who appeared to be the same age as his sons. He struck up a conversation with several soldiers seated near him on the plane, and quickly learned that many of them missed being out in the wilderness as their injuries made hunting and fishing difficult.

Moved by the injuries these veterans had sustained serving our country, Raboud decided to start taking wounded vets on hunting and fishing trips as a way to thank them for their service and honor his father, a wounded WWII veteran who had recently passed away. "My motivation to found and pursue this organization is two-fold," Raboud says. "I want to honor our wounded military veterans as well as the memories of my parents."

Forming WWO

An avid outdoorsman, Raboud has been taking annual hunting trips to British Columbia for over 20 years. About a decade ago, he and his hunting partner, David Wabnegger, owner of Otter Lake Guide Outfitters, began making room in their hunting group for one special hunter each year. Prior to that flight, the special hunter was usually a young person who was inflicted with a life-changing or terminal illness. In 2006, Raboud and Wabnegger began reserving the special hunter spot for a combat-wounded veteran. Then, in 2009, after working closely with doctors at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., to select a wounded service member, the hunters were able to take U.S. Marine Blaine Scott on a spring bear hunt in British Columbia.

That particular experience was so gratifying for everyone involved that Raboud and Wabnegger decided to establish the non-profit, charitable organization, Wounded Warrior Outdoors, Inc. (WWO), to provide hunting and



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fishing opportunities to wounded U.S. and Canadian veterans. And in 2010, WWO achieved 501(c)3 status, enabling all contributions to be tax deductible.

The organization exists entirely on corporate sponsorships and personal donations. Some of WWO's sponsors include Janus International, Inside Self-Storage, and Self Storage Association. WWO has also received generous donations from Extra Space Storage.

WWO's goal is to maintain a highly cost-effective corporation, with 100 percent of its donations directly benefiting the wounded veterans it serves. Therefore, there is no paid staff members or service providers. In addition, all office space and administrative personnel have been donated to the organization. WWO covers all costs associated with its expeditions for the vets, including airfare, ground transportation, licenses, species tags and other fees, food, lodging, and taxidermy services.

The Goals

According to the organization's Web site, www.woundedwarrioroutdoors.com, WWO plans to provide outdoor trips for up to 50 veterans per year as funding allows. Currently, four trips are in the works for this year: a salt water fishing trip in Florida for 12 vets in March, a spring turkey hunt in Kentucky for eight veterans in April, and two bear hunts in British Columbia in May for a total of 12 vets.

While WWO provides unique opportunities and support to the wounded veterans it takes on its excursions, Raboud states that the organization's main goal is to help the vets gain confidence. The outings put the veterans back into the environment they were injured in to rebuild self-assurance; WWO takes the veterans out of their comfortable routine and challenges them to reach their personal goals.

Outdoor Therapy

In order to find the right candidates for the trips, Raboud works with patient-advocate representatives at three U.S. military hospitals: Brooke Army Medical Center, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and Bethesda Naval Hospital. However, WWO also accepts applications for consideration from any U.S. or Canadian military veteran who was wounded in the line of duty.

Once a candidate has been selected, WWO works closely with the veteran's doctors to establish therapeutic goals. The organization shares these goals, but is able to address them in a more enjoyable environment than a hospital setting. Many veterans have both physical and mental challenges to overcome during recovery, and WWO's trips complement their medical interventions. "These trips can be designed to help the veterans get the equivalent of three months of the therapy they'd receive in a hospital setting," says Raboud.

Each trip is structured to provide experiences tailored to the individual needs of each veteran. For example, a vet with orthopedic injuries or prosthetic legs has a chance to improve their walking and balancing skills on uneven terrain, which is difficult to replicate in a hospital setting. Veterans can improve their standing balance through the act of casting a rod and reeling in their catch. For those with vision problems, using binoculars to scan the terrain for game helps with head and eye movements. WWO also offers the serenity of the wilderness to service members suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

During the outings, the wounded warriors are challenged to be as independent as possible. WWO guides wait before providing assistance to the veterans to promote independence in a "real world" setting. In addition, participating in camp activities and sharing chores brings about a sense of camaraderie amongst the veterans.

The end result: The wounded veterans leave with an improved self-image because they were able to engage in the activities they enjoyed before they were injured.

Donate To WWO

In September 2010, WWO launched a fundraising campaign called "One for the Troops," which encourages self-storage operators around the country to donate the proceeds from one self-storage unit to Wounded Warrior Outdoors. Operators can commit to a single month or make it an ongoing donation, and can select a unit of any size.

"Every little bit helps," says Mel Holsinger, president of Professional Self Storage Management LLC, who has been involved with the organization for about a year. "It's going to pay off in the long term for these troops. This is so much more than just an outdoor trip for these guys. We're providing them a channel that will aid in their recovery." Holsinger, who also owns Midway Mini Storage in Show Low, Ariz., is donating the proceeds from a year's rental of one 5-by-10 unit to the cause. In addition, he has begun hanging posters throughout his facilities to encour-

age the general public to get involved in the campaign.

Self-storage operators can enroll their facilities in the "One for the Troops" campaign by visiting www.woundedwarrioroutdoors.com or e-mail Ron Raboud at ron@woundedwarrioroutdoors.com.

To make an individual donation, please visit www.woundedwarrioroutdoors.com or send a check to:

Wounded Warrior
c/o The First National Bank of Mt. Dora
PO Box 95
Mt. Dora, FL 32756-0095

And remember: "No matter how large our donations of time and money may be, they pale in comparison to the donations our veterans have made to preserve our freedom," Raboud says.



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