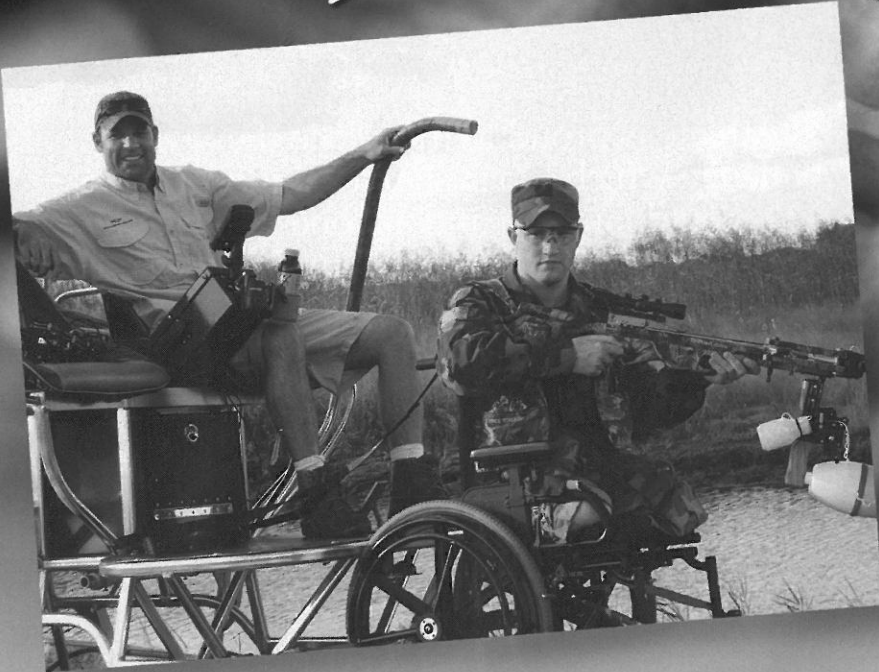


Adjusting



Therapy,
well deserved
for those
who serve.

— By Ron Raboud —



I am writing this article while sitting in a high alpine basin in southern British Columbia, the same general area that I have been hunting for the last 20 years. However, this year is much different than years past. A freak air inversion has temperatures spiking into the 90s. The mule deer bucks have headed down to dark timber along with the elk. The bulls' September love songs are silent – definitely a strange year. Even the black bears that are normally feasting on berries are absent, as are the berries.

We've been forced to adjust our hunting methods to meet the conditions. As outdoorsmen, making the proper adjustments is our key to success in our annual chess match with Mother Nature.



There is for me, however, a benefit to these unfavorable conditions. I have some additional time to reflect on the past ten years. Tomorrow, September 11, will be the tenth anniversary of 9/11. The tragic events of that day continue on, not only with continued changes to life as we know it, but also with continued life-altering injuries and loss of life. As Americans, our lives and lifestyles have been forever altered.

More than ever, I realize just how lucky I am to live in this great nation in spite of all our struggles. I'm aware more than ever how precious my freedom is, including the ability to bear arms and enjoy the outdoors that is such a big part of my life. I'm also aware to whom I owe these opportunities – our military servicemen past, present, and future. Their unselfish sacrifice has preserved and continues to preserve the freedom and safety we take for granted.

Several years ago, along with a group of business associates, we formed Wounded Warrior Outdoors (WWO). WWO is a 501(c) 3 non-profit charity established to take wounded servicemen on outdoor trips. We are completely volunteer, with no paid staff or needless overhead.

Following a trip to Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC) and a meeting with the medical staff, we established a very specific niche as to the goal of our program. It was during that meeting that the Commanding Officer of WRAMC brought to our attention the therapeutic value of outdoor activities as it relates to rehabilitating today's wounded warriors. Years later, we remain focused on providing therapeutic opportunities to today's wounded.

We work in cooperation with both Walter Reed and the Balboa Naval Medical Center. Our wounded guests are all recently wounded "active duty" members of the Armed Forces. All are current in-patient wounded at either Walter Reed or Balboa. They are selected to participate by the medical staff at each hospital. They travel to each location and return back to the hospital at the end of each adventure. WWO covers all costs associated with each trip, including those of the chaperone. No taxpayer money is used as part of our program.

Having hunted and fished my entire life, I never thought of either as therapeutic. To understand the therapeutic value, one must first understand the injuries. Being a structural engineer and not in the medical profession, I will do my best to explain them.

The bulk of the injuries to our servicemen fall under the following descriptions: amputations, burns, orthopedic, traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Each of these injuries benefit greatly from time spent outdoors. Amputations, orthopedic injuries, and burns require typical types of physical therapy in the healing process. Exercises that help establish or re-establish balance, endurance, flexibility and mobility. For those with injuries resulting in amputations, everything begins with the introduction to their new limbs.

Today's prosthetics are complex marvels of engineering and computer technology. Their complexity requires hours of practice to master, especially for those with either hand or above the knee amputations. In a hospital environment, this training and therapy takes place using standard equipment and techniques and scheduled appointments with predictable routines and exercises. After a while, boredom begins to limit progress. Predictability limits attention spans and challenges not only the patient, but also the staff dedicated to their most deserving young patients.



For those of us who have experienced physical therapy ourselves, we know that two important keys to success are repetition and duration. As outdoorsmen, we are accustomed to long days investing many hours in pursuit of our targeted species. Combine those elements, physical therapy, repetition and duration and you have just described the typical hunting or fishing trip. Replace treadmills and exercise equipment with tall grass, mountains and uneven terrain. Replace limited therapy schedules with long days and countless repetitions. Replace monotony with excitement. Combine all of this over a trip's duration of five to seven days and the results are amazing. Hunters who come depending upon canes or crutches for support and balance are walking unaided for considerable distances. All of them are accomplishing tasks that weeks previous seemed unimaginable.





Due to the fact that the majority of our guests were wounded as a result of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), a large percentage also have some degree of TBI. Both TBI and PTSD are very real, very complex and very devastating injuries. This holds true for several reasons; they are invisible, silent injuries known only to those who have been injured. Secondly, the injury involves the least understood component of the human body – the brain.

Some of the most common effects of these types of injuries deal with social anxiety, limited attention spans, and disruption the brain's cognitive ability. The connection between what our eyes see and what our brains process is delayed, interrupted, or broken. When you consider the effects of this type of injury, one can comprehend the true devastation. Spoken words don't come easily – sometimes not at all – and physical responses are slow. Everything is mentally intact, just short-circuited by an injury.

Again, therapy for this type of injury involves repetition and duration. Circuits opened to be rewired and areas of the brain retrained, both are a very slow and extremely frustrating process.

In our outdoor world, those types of therapeutic opportunities abound, mainly on our fishing trips. On all of our fishing trips, we



have selected trips and species that contain a visual component. Presenting a lure to a tailing redfish in Florida or a fly to a rising Rainbow in Alaska is pure therapy. One must recognize the target, then process the presentation time and time again.

Replace hospital facilities with the peace and serenity of the outdoors; replace appointment times with sunrise and sunset; and replace crowded waiting rooms with the camaraderie of hunting camps and fishing lodges. Throw in a large dose of community support and compassionate volunteers and you have our program.

We don't adjust our trips or destinations to fit our guests; they adjust to fit our destinations. Most are challenged but none are "disabled." All are capable.

Our trips for 2011 are complete and those for 2012 are scheduled. In 2012, we will host 50 wounded warriors on ten different trips beginning in March. Until then, we will adjust to our greatest challenge – fundraising.

We leave each trip both inspired and humbled by our wounded warriors. With all that they have done for us, the very least that we can do is provide them therapeutic opportunities on their healing journeys. 🗣️

