

The Daily Progress

COMFORTING HIS COMRADES

By David A. Maurer / Daily Progress staff writer
Charlottesville Daily Progress, VA
December 19, 2004

ARLINGTON – The wounds range from angry red scars on furrowed flesh to invisible brain trauma injuries that manifest themselves in blank, sometimes confused stares.

These consequences of war were as evident as the sweet scent of maple syrup on a recent Sunday morning at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 3150 in Arlington. Since October the post has been hosting brunches on the second and fourth Sundays of the month for wounded soldiers from nearby Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Beginning shortly after 9 a.m. more than 100 hungry warriors will limp, shuffle and stroll into the small, cozy building that's just big enough for a bar, kitchen and small dining area. Efficient and enthusiastic volunteers will continue to serve them until 2 p.m., longer if need be.

The troops are picked up at the hospital and shuttled back and forth to the wood structure that's been tucked away in the residential neighborhood for 70 years. The current members feel they're now providing some of their most important services to their fellow veterans.

"The VFW has a motto that we remember the dead by helping the living," said J. Gary Wagner, past commander of the post and current adjutant. "A lot of guys who came back from Vietnam got mixed welcomes.

"So the Vietnam-era guys especially want to make sure that's not repeated. We go out of our way to make sure these vets are welcomed home appropriately.

"The wounded are very appreciative and really enjoy these brunches. It gets them out of the hospital for a couple of hours, and I think it helps give them a sense of a return to reality."

The First Wave

Sgt. Paul Shelmerdine was in the first wave of walking wounded to arrive for breakfast. He has been at Walter Reed since July 17, and expects to be there for some time.

Shelmerdine was seriously wounded in Iraq when a car bomb went off in front of the vehicle he was in. His right side was riddled by shrapnel, some of it tearing through his right forearm that now has a steel rod in it from wrist to elbow.

Despite having to deal with painful wounds, and being a long way from his two children and pregnant wife in Warren, Maine, Shelmerdine was in an upbeat mood.

"There's been a great outpouring of support and caring for us and this [brunch] is amazing," Shelmerdine said after finishing his meal.

"I can remember when my uncle came back from Vietnam. He never talked about his experiences, and the Vietnam veterans were kind of looked down on. That's not the feeling now. People might not like some of the decisions the higher-ups have made, but they are very supportive of the troops and it shows.

"This brunch is a good experience for us, because a lot of time when people first get to the hospital they're kind of focused on themselves and shrunk into a little ball. Being able to go out and talk to people and share experiences helps them to open up.

"The more you can talk about your injuries or experiences the better it's going to make that individual. An experience like this helps you get better."

During the brunch cheery volunteer waiters circled the dining area taking orders, serving food, refilling coffee cups, dispensing hugs and chatting with the troops. Their expressions of warmth and caring made the atmosphere seem like a family gathering.

One of the volunteers who helped mastermind the Sunday brunches for the wounded is Greene County resident John "Big John" Miska. Helping make it happen is just one of the things the Vietnam veteran has done during the past two years to provide aid and comfort to his wounded comrades.

"My involvement started when my friend Jamie Villafane was wounded and I went up to Walter Reed to see him," said Miska, minutes before taking a group of soldiers back to the hospital. "I asked him if he needed anything, and he said he was pretty much all dialed in, but his gunner in the next bed, Sergeant Charles Horgan, didn't have anything.

"It's not that the Army doesn't give them everything they need, but it's a throw-away razor, a lace-up-the-back hospital gown, hospital booties. There's something to be said for having your own underwear.

"I asked Charles what he needed and got him telephone cards and some other things. Then Jamie went home and they moved another guy in who didn't have anything so I helped him out. It sort of grew one guy after another."

Lending A Hand

After shuttling troops back and forth to the brunch, Miska spent the remainder of the day handing out comfort items and visiting with wounded soldiers at the hospital. He and other volunteers like Ray Miller, Joe Dudley and Ray Durand, who are members of veteran's groups in the Charlottesville area, never make the trip north without filling their vehicles with items to hand out to the wounded.

Miska, a disabled veteran who was wounded in Vietnam and spent time at Walter Reed, knows firsthand what the injured are going through. His personal experiences have made him determined to make sure this generation of troops get everything they want and need.

"When I got out of the service and joined the veteran organizations, there was reticence on the part of the older veterans toward us younger vets," Miska said. "There wasn't a welcome.

"Nobody really cared, and I think that was probably societal in nature. I want to make sure these guys know we won't abandon them.

"By the grace of God I was from Virginia, so when I was at Walter Reed my family could bring me everything I needed. But I still think back to those days and remember there were a lot of guys who had nobody and nothing."

Volunteers like Miska have done such a good job that not one soldier who attended the brunch could think of anything they needed. Staff Sgt. Larry Gill from Mobile, Ala., said the one thing he wanted was to see Miska get his own parking space at Walter Reed.

"They should give Big John a parking space, because he's up there that much," said Gill, who was seriously wounded by a grenade blast while serving in Iraq. "He's constantly bringing gifts and has even taken soldiers shopping.

"The support we've gotten has been just awesome, there's no other word for it. It's unfortunate that the Vietnam veterans didn't get this. I guess it was just one of those times in our history that it just wasn't clinking like it should have.

"The Vietnam vets have been fighting for everything they've got for 30-plus years. They know the problems and what needs attention. They've gone out of their way to make sure the soldiers from the conflicts now don't run into those same problems."

Although the troops couldn't think of anything they lacked, Miska could. He said with cold weather upon us, items such as coats, boots, gloves and hats are needed.

"All items need to be new and sizes tend to be more large and extra large than small or medium," said Miska, a member of VFW Post 8208 in Greene. "We also need nice, zippered toiletry kits.

"Through the good graces of the VFW's state headquarters, we've gotten an entire pallet of Mach 3 razors. We have shaving cream and all that sort of thing, but we want to make up toiletry kits so when guys come in we can just hand them out.

"Phone cards are always helpful, but at this time donations for those can be sent to Operation Uplink. We provide the brunch for the troops free of charge, so if people would like to help with the cost of that they can send donations to the Adopt A Soldier program or they can donate directly to the post here because they have a fund set aside for this."

Greg Moscatel, commander of Post 3150, said he and his fellow veterans are ecstatic that they can provide a respite from the hospital setting for the injured soldiers. He knows it helps more than hunger pangs.

"There was a wounded Army colonel who came to one of the first Sunday brunches," Moscatel recalled. "He seemed pretty depressed and was really quiet and kept to himself.

"About three weeks ago we were visiting the troops at Walter Reed and I saw the colonel. He told me how much he was interested in coming back to have breakfast with us.

"I saw a real improvement in him. I think coming here helped pick up his spirits."

Sgt. James D. Wilson and his wife, Heidi, need all the picker-uppers they can get these days. The 23-year-old soldier from Daytona Beach, Fla., was serving with a U.S. Army Special Forces unit in Iraq when he suffered head injuries as a result of an explosion.

Recalling War

Wilson remembers little of the ambush that landed him in the hospital several weeks ago.

"We went into this area to get some wounded Marines and on the way back we got ambushed pretty bad," Wilson said as a heaping plate of eggs, sausage and fried potatoes arrived.

"I remember shooting my fifty [50-caliber machine gun] and then I woke up in the hospital in Germany. Three IEDs (improvised explosive devices) went off under our convoy and car bombs came from the sides.

"The explosions slammed my head down hard. I don't remember anything after that."

Wilson apologized for not being able to arrange his thoughts more clearly. He struggled to articulate how much the brunch means to him.

"This cheers me up," Wilson said. "I'm not feeling well right now, but I feel a little better coming out."

Heidi Wilson nodded her head in agreement. She doesn't plan to return to their Florida home until her husband can come with her. The outpouring of support she has received from veterans' groups such as Post 3150 is making her ordeal easier to manage.

"This is such a nice feeling that we have this," Heidi Wilson said of the brunch. "It's very helpful. They even take us on tours and things like that, which keeps us busy. "

Army Specialist Randall Clunen said he spends a lot of time alone in his hospital room. He said he greatly appreciates the brunch because it gives him a chance to get out and be around other people and veterans who don't stare at his injuries.

Clunen was serving with the 101st Airborne Division north of Mosul, Iraq, on Dec. 8, 2003, when he was hit in the face by shrapnel. The day he almost died happened to be his 19th birthday.

"The shrapnel came from a suicide car bomb that exploded about 30 feet from where I was," said the young soldier from Salem, Ohio. "I remember the explosion and getting up and walking over to the aid station on my own.

"After that it's a complete blur. The shrapnel shattered my teeth, jaw bone and cheek bone. I have a titanium plate in my face now.

"When I went back home people stared and pointed at me, but they wouldn't come up and say anything. The past year has been rough, but at the same time I'm engaged now, and I just want to get out as quick as I can and get back home to my family.

"This brunch means a lot to me. I've become a lifetime member of the VFW."

As soon as the airplanes bringing in the wounded land at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, the injured are welcomed home. At least three times a week Tanya Cobb makes the trip from her Alexandria home to the base to greet the incoming wounded.

The irony of this is not lost on the former lieutenant who served with distinction in a special forces unit with the Army of the Russian Federation. During her seven years of service she was wounded five times in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict in Azerbaijan.

"Being a wife of a Vietnam veteran and a foreign veteran myself, I call the returning wounded our American heroes," said Cobb, who was invited to join the elite Russian unit by its commander after he saw her in action.

"We greet them and welcome them home as well as bring them donated items on behalf of the Military Order of the Purple Heart ladies' auxiliary and VFW Post 3150. We're just trying to make sure everybody feels welcome and there's no generation, especially after the Vietnam War, that comes home without getting a hug and a smile.

"After we thank them for everything they've done, we ask them what we can do to help."

Many Ways To Help

Cobb said help may take the form of giving break-away sweatpants and sweatshirts to people with casts on their arms or legs. Sometimes it just might be holding someone's hand through a long, scary night.

"I met a girl who was in a medical unit taking care of Marines in Iraq," Cobb said. "She was wounded emotionally. Until I met her she hadn't been able to sleep for more than five or ten minutes at a time in weeks.

"I spent almost the whole night with her after she arrived. When I returned to the base to welcome home another group, she had left me a note.

"She thanked me and said that was the first night of sleep she had gotten in weeks. She said if she had difficulty sleeping again she promised to pick up the phone and call me like I told her to do."

As hungry troops keep filing in, Eric Anderson works the grill like a pro. The Vietnam vet has been up since 5 a.m., but doesn't mind a bit.

"It's just real nice having them here," Anderson said as he nodded his head toward the soldiers in the dining area. "The only thing I'd like to say to them is, God bless you, thanks for your service and you're always welcome here at VFW Post 3150."

Those wanting to help can send donations to Virginia Organizing Project, 703 Concord Ave., Charlottesville, VA 22903-5208. Put "AdoptaSoldier" in the memo notation space on checks. Donations to help defray the cost of the brunch can also be sent to VFW Post 3150, 2116 N. 19th St., Arlington, VA 22201. Write "troop's brunch" in the memo section of the check. Donations to purchase phone cards can be sent to Uplink VFW Foundation National Headquarters, 406 W. 34th St., Kansas City, MO 64111. Those interested in helping Miska with his ongoing efforts can reach him at (434) 760-1940.