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Mining Law for the Modern Era
Keeping ORVs on Track
Project Healing Waters

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WHealing Waters

BY SARA KAPLANIAK

On a misty, humid day in June, 12 soldiers armed with nets, sturdy wading boots and an assortment of hats arrive from temporary homes at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Fort Belvoir hospital and spread out across Pennsylvania's Conococheague Creek. A few feet away, Trout Unlimited volunteers take their places as in-stream companions, quietly coaching the soldiers, all of whom are combat veterans recovering from injuries sustained in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Among the soldiers is Capt. Ferris Butler, 30, who settles into a folding chair along the creek's bank. Breathing in air heavy with honeysuckle and wild roses, he casts his fly toward rainbow, brown and a sprinkling of brook trout teasing from waters clouded by recent rains.

Fly fishing was the last thing Butler expected to be doing since finding himself at Walter Reed two years ago after an improvised explosive device, or IED, struck his vehicle in Iraq and left him without part of his left leg and right foot. Being here was also significant because today's event was sponsored by Project Healing Waters, a

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program founded by his father's friend and former naval comrade, retired Capt. Ed Nicholson.

"I grew up fishing for bass along the Potomac River in southern Maryland," says Butler. "For years Ed tried persuading me to abandon my baitcaster for a fly rod, but I wouldn't give in."

A longtime neighbor, family friend and passionate fly fisherman, Nicholson had watched the young man answer a calling to military service, extending a family tradition rooted in nine generations. The two had once discussed the idea of introducing wounded soldiers to fly fishing as part of their mental and physical therapy,

and transition into civilian life.

"It was a fleeting conversation, as he was off to boot camp with his typical wry smile, youthful restlessness and strong sense of family duty," says Nicholson.

After Butler's injury, "Ed was standing next to my bed at Walter Reed with a fly rod in his hand," says the young captain with the same wry grin.

Ed Nicholson hatched the idea of fly fishing as therapy in 2004, while recovering from surgery at Walter Reed. After generating interest among a group of disabled veterans, many of whom were amputees and had limited mobility, Nicholson launched Project Healing Waters. Together with a cadre

of volunteers, he has taken wounded warriors fly fishing on Maine's Kennebec River, Montana's Smith River and throughout Yellowstone National Park and other rivers and creeks across the United States.

Since its inception, the program has hosted hundreds of soldiers wounded in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as disabled veterans from World War II and the Korean, Vietnam and other conflicts. It operates in conjunction with TU chapters and Federation of Fly Fishers clubs, military and Veterans Affairs hospitals, and other organizations in over 20 locations from Maine to Hawaii.

"Fishing is only half of it. Coming together...sharing stories is just as important." —Capt. David Folkerts



Project Healing Waters held more than a dozen events nationwide this summer, all of them bringing together wounded veterans and volunteers from TU and other groups.

6 JUNE 2008

PROJECT HEALING WATERS Fly Fishing OutingWaltonian Meadow / CONOCOCHEAQUE CREEK
CHAMBERSBURG, PENNSYLVANIAHosted By
Falling Spring Chapter, Trout Unlimited
Franklin County Chapter, Izaak Walton League
Penn National Fly Fishing Club**Participating Warriors**
(Left to Right)SGT Michael Ornelas
SGT Andrew Hill
SPC Andrew Hillstrom
SGT Robert Good
SPC John Goodrich
SSG Dale Cherney
SFC Grayson "Norris" Galatas
1LT Greg Cartier
1LT Ferris Butler
SFC Ceamus McDermott
SPC Thomas Wymer**In-Water Companions & Hosts**
(Left to Right)Doug Swanson
Frank Kovalak
Ben Johns
Bob Huss
Dave Lipsius
John Williams
Dale Penwell
Rod Cross
Tom Scally
Terry Ward
Bill Bashor
Bob Davis



LEFT, RIGHT AND BELOW CENTER: DAVID HILLS.NET

“It’s the program’s emotional benefits that can’t be prescribed by a doctor or medical professional.” —Retired Capt. Ed Nicholson, Project Healing Waters founder

Clockwise from above; Sgt. Andrew Hill, left, with Ben Johns; Capt. Ferris Butler; retired Capt. Ed Nicholson; Bill Bashor, left, with Spc. Tom Wymer; Capt. David Folkerts; Staff Sgt. Dale Cherney, left, with John Williams; Capt. Ferris Butler, center, with his platoon leader and section leader in Iraq.





According to Nicholson, “We used to search out areas with a veterans hospital and active local fly-fishing clubs. Now they’re seeking us out asking to get involved.”

However, Project Healing Waters isn’t just about fishing trips. Before soldiers even get to these waters, they take weekly fly tying and casting lessons—activities that are challenging to squeeze into schedules already filled with physical and occupational therapy sessions and other medical appointments.

“Participants in the program have a thing or two in common,” says Nicholson. “Usually, they’ve spent some time adjusting to their injuries, and with a positive outlook for the future, are ready to get out in nature and transition into civilian life.”

Having lost an eye, a spleen and a portion of his right leg in a mortar attack, Staff Sgt. Dale Cherney, 43, is a prime example of the program’s participants. Cherney, who jokingly refers to the event as a “bad day at the office,” began walking again last winter after having spent months in Walter Reed. He was looking for a reason to get out of the hospital and begin talking about his experience.

“I know that people will be interested in hearing my story,” says Cherney, referring to his injuries and recovery. “I’ve already been asked to speak at my nephew’s school, and I want to be ready.”

Need for Project Grows

While Project Healing Waters welcomes any member of the military in need of the healing powers of fly fishing, most program participants include young men and women who’ve been injured in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Every war has injuries and medical advancements unique to its place

and time, and the current conflicts are no different.

Five years into the wars, physicians and military leaders see how advances in body armor have led to extremities taking the brunt of battle. Traumatic brain injury and the loss of blood and limbs have become the signature wounds in Iraq and Afghanistan. This has led to dramatic advancements in prosthetics, including state-of-the-art materials and designs that mimic functioning limbs.

However, brain injuries and amputations alone don’t reflect the mental and social trauma soldiers take home from war. According to the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, 15.6 percent to 17.1 percent of U.S. troops will suffer from a service-related mental disorder, including post-traumatic stress disorder. It already represents a primary or secondary ailment afflicting many of the nearly 6,000 wounded troops.

Nicholson thinks that fly fishing can help wounded service personnel recover from their physical and mental injuries.

“Casting a line helps soldiers with nerve damage gain dexterity. Wading through water and navigating river banks aids amputees with balance and mobility,” he says. “However, it’s the program’s emotional benefits that can’t be prescribed by a doctor or medical professional.”

Indeed, many Project Healing Waters participants find that concentrating on the process of casting and catching fish helps with forgetting their pain—physical and emotional—for at least a little while. Their confidence increases as do their spirits.

Capt. David Folkerts, 28, agrees. In 2005, Folkerts arrived at Walter Reed for multiple surgeries and recovery after an IED lacerated an artery in his arm, causing permanent nerve damage. While there, he attended Project Healing Waters meetings, and then casting practices. By the time of his first fishing trip on the



Army Spec. John Goodrich [left] and Tom Scally fish Conococheague Creek at a Project Healing Waters fishing trip.

Connetquot River in New York, he'd become passionate about fly fishing and the organization.

"I loved getting out of the hospital, away from appointments, and just enjoying the cool, clear waters and calm setting that come with the sport," says Folkerts. "But fishing is only half of it. Coming together . . . sharing stories is just as important."

Now retired from the military and newly employed as a program manager with Project Healing Waters, Folkerts also found the program essential to his transition into civilian life. "I've found my dream job and feel thankful to be getting back to doing something challenging that combines my passion for fly fishing and helping out other wounded soldiers."

Wading into the Future


A two-hour drive or less from the sterile halls of Walter Reed and Fort Belvoir, Conococheague Creek seems a world away. And as the overcast morning makes way for a sticky day, the Project Healing Waters outing takes on the air of a regular fishing trip. The assemblage of hats, nets and waders cover missing limbs, damaged nerves and deeper scars. For most of these wounded warriors, a "normal" life may have a new connotation. But for a day, they were able to put the recent past behind them and just enjoy their time on the water.

For Tom Wymer, a 29 year old Army specialist, it was his first chance to cast a fly rod. "We caught a couple of fish and missed a few, hooked some trees and bushes, got stuck on the bottom and relaxed a lot."

"We've done everything you do during a typical day of fly fishing," says TU volunteer Bill Bashor, Wymer's in-stream companion for the day.

Sponsored by TU's Falling Spring Chapter, the Penn National Fly Fishing Club, the Izaak Walton League, and numerous local merchants and community members, the Conococheague Creek event represents the type of enthusiastic outpouring that's becoming more familiar as Project Healing Waters spreads out around the country.

All of this is what Nicholson envisioned when he launched the program that brought these men together.

Capt. Ferris Butler concurs. With additional painful surgeries ahead of him, and plans to pursue an MBA at the University of Maryland after that, he's learning not only to understand the basics of fly fishing but also to once again find peace within himself. "Never say never," he says, as he looks at his fly rod and smiles. 

For more information, visit projecthealingwaters.org