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Soothing the distress of wounded veterans

Outdoors

By Paul Bruun, Jackson Hole, Wyo.

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Before last week, Robert Hudson had only seriously fished in the ocean surrounding New Jersey for hake and fluke. Given his background, he found the prevailing theory of catch-and-release for trout curious behavior. But for this Army veteran who now resides in North Carolina, slinging a 9-foot graphite fly rod and watching a dry fly drifting in the Snake River brought a broad smile to his face. So did seeing coyotes diving on field mice, grazing buffalo herds, antelope bucks studying his passing, bald eagles overseeing the river and cutthroats gulping his dry fly.

"I can't believe how much fun we're having," Robert repeatedly murmured. "Just being in this place is magical." Every few minutes he would record another digital picture of all the usual suspects: Mount Moran, the Cathedral Group, his other friends and an endless array of cottonwoods and aspens brilliantly aglow.

For the time, Robert Hudson was a man at peace.

Robert and five other wounded veterans visited Jackson Hole last week to enjoy the relaxing and sensual qualities that are the best and brightest during late September. Every fishing guide and activity sponsor with whom they came in contact had their fingers crossed that the weather would remain nice. Our weather prayers were answered.

It is easy to be captivated by inspiring advertisements such as: "Be an army of one." Every day noble and strong American youths select the honorable path of military service. Many men and women survive their duty and return to civilian life. For others, the rigors and horrors of war are physically and mentally destructive. Fortunately, these are abnormally strong men and women or they couldn't have survived the intense injuries and emotional trauma served in places such as Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo and other not-so-garden spots. No training, studying or Google-ing does the subject of being a wounded veteran justice.

Sharing Jackson's wonders

Rebuilding a wounded veteran's life is complex. Former carrier pilot Nick Strelchuk realized that fly-fishing and tying flies would be a healthy addition to include in rehabilitation programs at Veterans Administration hospitals near the Golden Gate Angling Club, where he was an active member. After retiring from commercial airline flying, Nick began volunteering within the veteran community. Nick's patience and determination helped him work through "the VA system" to implement a plan through his Reel Life Recoveries program to teach interested veterans fly-fishing skills and organize trips to fishing spots around California.

One of Nick's dreams was to introduce veterans to the wonders of Jackson Hole and here he was fortunate to meet fly-fishing and area promoter Jack Dennis at a sports show. Nick also joined forces with another true "army of one," Sandra Bockman, who works for the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce but on her own time and with her own resources developed the Honoring Our Veterans program.

Jackson Hole is the most generous site in the country. Support and donations for Nick and Sandra's veterans' visits have been impressive. Sometimes there are too many venues. Generous discounts, complimentary services, gear, instruction, meals, programs and seminars abound.

My introduction to Sandra's compassion began with an Outdoors column seeking volunteers to take active duty military personnel fishing during their Jackson assignment of monitoring air defense radar for the former vice president. When she and Nick teamed up to present last fall's first successful fly-fishing trip for wounded veterans, the column helped collect volunteer guides, outfitters and others eager to participate. "Meeting the guys," as Nick Strelchuk says, "is its own reward."

The cast of Honoring Our Veterans this fall included several members with Wyoming roots – Josh Connolly, of Riverton, Ray Dodd, originally from Wyoming but now living in Wellington, Colo., and Brian Garrison, of Jackson. Ed Anima lives in Vail, Ariz., outside Tucson and Gary Freeman comes from Pacifica, Calif.

By the time Thursday rolled around, the vets had experienced quite a lot of Jackson Hole – it's fishing opportunities and many others. Tom McKay of Signal Mountain Lodge introduced them to lake trout fishing on Jackson Lake, while Howard Cole of High Country Flies taught a fly-casting program and the inimitable Scott Sanchez presented his invigorating fly-tying class.

Western adventure

On Tuesday, A.J. DeRosa organized a group float fishing day on the Snake with a luncheon feast (A.J. specializes in "FEASTS") at his Wooden Boat Tours camp. Accompanying the vets with A.J. were his associates Dutch Gottschling and Terry Ross. They were joined by Wayne (Wayno) DeWall, Bryan Tarantola, Marc Titre of Rhett Bain's Reel Deal Anglers and John Callahan of Mike Rheam's Grand Fishing Adventures.

The veterans enjoyed a great Western music and food evening with Bryan and Scott Humphrey at the Bar J Chuckwagon. The Jackson Hole experience continued with a horse program provided by Kelly Merriott and the Jackson Hole Therapeutic Riding Association. And nearby an evening campfire cookout was facilitated by Snake River Ranch foreman Lance and Donna Johnson in collaboration with Bobbie and Tom Laughlin of the R Lazy S and Granite Ranch. Fly-fishing in Lake Creek was also enjoyed.

On Thursday it was time for the veterans to practice all their fly-fishing training on a special park permit issued for the stretch between Pacific Creek and Deadman's Bar. In almost no time after launching, veteran Snake riverologist Paul Rice (yes, that's the "father" of snowboarding legend Travis), had Josh Connolly creeping through the willows to nab a fine cutthroat in an invisible side channel.

Jason Budd, a Reel Deal Anglers guide with Rhett Bain, introduced Ray Dodd to every form of fly-fishing imaginable – from small dries to weighted nymphs and super-size Dan Delekta Madison River streamers. Rob Parkins of WestBank Anglers absolutely transformed Brian Garrison, a self-styled computer enthusiast (OK, geek!) from being a techie to firing a fly line like a champion. And Gary Freeman, the loquacious survivor of Vietnam and senior pal to the younger vets, found out he was an orator lightweight when perched in the bow of Jack Dennis' new Clacka-Craft.

Ed Anima, of Tucson, floated with Jean, my wife and serious fishing guide. Jean and I learned not to discuss the term "parachute fly" when members of the 82nd and 101st Airborne were within earshot. "Parachutes aren't something we want to hear any more about," Ed joked to my guest, Robert Hudson.

Always smiling Jamie Weeks from Mike Rheam's Grand Fishing Adventures and his big Clacka toted a load of food, materiel and Northwestern journalism grad student

Brenna Swift and other veterans throughout the day.

For eight hours, however, Robert intently watched various forms of parachutes and other patterns float lightly along the Snake. He lives in Fayetteville, N.C., the home of the massive Fort Bragg Army installation, where the 82nd Airborne is headquartered. It is also world headquarters for the famous Green Berets, the Army Special Forces, of which Robert was a team member specializing in communications.

A kinder, gentler man I've never met. Robert was interested in everything surrounding him, from the prescribed burns that were occurring in the Gros Ventre, and the lightning-caused Bearpaw Bay Fire that erupted during our float in Grand Teton National Park to the ospreys searching the Snake's surface for a fish dinner.

Battle trauma has disrupted Robert's short-term memory, but after last Thursday's outing, let's hope he'll have plenty of Jackson Hole memories for the long term. Additionally, he'll have hundreds of great photos.

Sandra Bockman's Honoring Our Veterans program is growing dramatically, and how could it not with such a caring person in charge. The organization is a 501(C)3 registered nonprofit (P.O. Box 526, Moran, WY 83013; 307-543-2135; sandrabockman@hughes.net). Sandra is always searching for more volunteers to fulfill her mission. Honoring Our Veterans is under the Community Foundation umbrella represented by Old Bill's Fun Run. Old Bill himself hosts a luncheon with friends for the vets.

Their stories and lives touch and change everyone they meet and all of us are better as a result.

Paul Bruun writes weekly on his adventures and misadventures in the great outdoors.

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