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SUMMER 2013



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COWBOY UP

By: Neal Riley SFA Member (M-11241)

A few miles south of Santa Fe, New Mexico is cowboy country. Rolling desert hills are dotted with sagebrush and they rise up to meet big blue skies.

Pickup trucks are hitched to horse trailers and cattle dogs ride shotgun with their noses in the breeze. Pass beneath a ranch gate reading, "Crossed Arrows Ranch" and you've entered the spread of Rick Iannucci, SFA member (D-7014) and retired U.S. Marshal Special Operations Group federal agent.

After a lifetime serving his country, Iannucci dedicated his retirement time and funds to create and operate a non-profit that serves combat wounded veterans or those who struggle with combat trauma (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). Named "Horses for Heroes-New Mexico, Inc. Cowboy Up!" it is a skill-set restructuring program that utilizes horsemanship and focuses on the veteran's wellness and the transition from combat. It is free to men and women veterans of Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Iannucci and his wife Nancy De Santis, co-creator of the program and the lead on women's programs, have developed all of the program content.

"The sky's the limit to those who wish to carry on with the cowboy culture and

pursue other aspects of ranching or just come to be in the beauty of nature, bond with a magnificent creature and find that quiet place within," De Santis describes. I asked Iannucci why he would take on such a daunting project during his retirement.

"My current mission is centered on service," Iannucci replied. "I placed a reference to Isaiah 6:8 scripture on the program's website. It describes my thoughts on service."

Looking up Isaiah 6:8, I realized the source of the inscription on the base of the Colonel Arthur D. "Bull" Simons statue at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Plaza at Ft. Bragg, NC. It reads: "Who will go? Send me."

"Rick is truly a selfless servant," said Ranger Hall of Fame inductee, retired Command Sergeant Major Greg Birch. "I am honored to call Rick my friend and the work he does for young veterans gives them a network of friends, confidence, a chance to unwind, and a skill.

While repairing a fence line along the open range, Iannucci realized that cowboy work had many therapeutic benefits. Iannucci believed a horse-based program could help veterans refit, regroup and

develop the skills and attitudes needed to re-enter civilian life. He intuitively understood that veterans would respond to the camaraderie and structure of ranching life. He also understood that people have long benefitted from a connection with horses.

"Some of the most effective members of our program staff are four-legged instructors named Hollywood, Stiltz, Duke, Houdini, Saint Jack, Knight and Roper," Iannucci said. "They are American Quarter Horses and they're specially selected to work with our program veterans."

I met Iannucci at an SFA dinner hosted by the Zia Chapter in Santa Fe. After learning that I was a former 18D Special Forces Medical Sergeant, Iannucci asked if I could help him develop a medical preparedness program for his staff. I agreed and got a first-hand look at the Horses for Heroes-New Mexico, Inc. Cowboy Up! program. When I initially observed the Crossed Arrows Ranch area of operations, I could tell that the unconventional program had been planned and executed by a Special Forces non-com. The ranch had a "dress-right-dress" appearance. A "train-the-trainer" principle was embedded in the hand-picked staff comprised of veterans who

were horseman or cowboys. Participants were responsible for long days of physical and mental development built around ranch work. They ate in groups and were responsible for the maintenance of their quarters and work areas. This was not a dude ranch where veterans could get a pony ride. Participants and their full engagement were what made the program work. And the horses had a visible effect on the veterans. Once on horseback, they began to smile.

I had a personal interest in seeing how Iannucci's program approached the combat veteran's transition. A U.S. Army Combat Camera soldier attached to my team during Operation Iraqi Freedom sustained a gunshot wound to the chest on one of our missions. I treated his wounds at the point of injury and continued treating him during his evacuation to a CASH (Combat Army Support Hospital). He was saved by Army surgeons and went onto Germany and then CONUS for follow-on surgeries. Eventually his physical wounds healed but his difficulty making the transition to civilian life after his medical retirement lasted many years. He still struggles for a balance between his past experiences and his present day endeavors.

The day that I visited Iannucci's ranch, a veteran arrived for his first day of program participation. The Army sergeant had suffered a serious injury after an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) detonated near his column in Iraq. Iannucci greeted the veteran with a hug, conveying his sincerity and enthusiasm with a resounding, "welcome home, brother". During my many visits to the Crossed Arrows Ranch, I have met a handful of program graduates. Their endorsements of the Cowboy Up! program are what count.

"Rick's program in Santa Fe has helped

me build up not only my confidence but also my self esteem," said USMC combat veteran and program graduate Osvaldo "Ozzy" Mora. "I truly believe that Cowboy Up! is by far the best program out there for returning veterans."

Retired U.S. Special Forces Sergeant First Class Dana Bowman has partnered with Iannucci and has observed the Cowboy Up program with great interest. Bowman, perhaps more than any other, understands the challenges combat wounded veterans face. As a member of the U.S. Army Golden Knights Parachute Team, Bowman became a double amputee the day that he collided with his teammate Sergeant Jose Aguillon in midair during a parachute jump. Aguillon was killed in the collision. Bowman recovered from his injuries and nine months later became the first double amputee to re-enlist in the U.S. Army. After the accident, Bowman committed himself to motivational speaking. HALO jumping into the venue, he makes movement from the DZ to the stage where he describes how he conquered his adversity. While Iannucci was a Senior Inspector with the U.S. Marshals, Bowman was selected to serve as their official motivational speaker. "I was traveling to locations across the

country for the Marshals and Rick Iannucci was meeting me at the airport. Rick saw me explaining my prosthetic legs to a security agent at the checkpoint," Bowman said. "Rick said that I shouldn't have to go through that after all that I had been through. So, the next time I flew in for a presentation, Rick was there with a contingent of law enforcement officers and they escorted me around the checkpoint. That's the kind of guy he is." Bowman has made over 2,000 jumps since his accident. His website, DanaBowman.com displays his outlook on life: "It's not the disability...it's the ability."

"Rick's a team player and he's got energy about him," Bowman said. "He has played the game and done so many things so that when he talks to veterans they listen. One hundred percent of everything he does is about giving back. He lives it. And he asks for nothing in return."

A lifelong horseman as well as a former Special Forces non-commissioned officer on an Operational Detachment-Alpha, Iannucci identified parallels between the cowboy culture and the military culture. "When I explain to veterans how we will work cattle I use their language," Iannucci said. "Are we going to gallop



The bunkhouse at Crossed Arrows Ranch. Photo: Neal Riley



(L to R): Nancy De Santis (*Cowboy Up!* Director and Instructor), Chris Chaisson (Army Veteran) and Rick Iannucci.



Rick Iannucci and Eric Yorty (Army Veteran) tracking and roping a yearling during a cattle handling evolution. Photo: Nancy De Santis.



(L to R): Erick Yorty (Army Veteran), Rick Iannucci, and Osvaldo Mora (USMC Veteran). Cattle branding at JX Ranch in Tucumcari, NM. Photo: Nancy De Santis

headlong into that ravine to wrangle that cow? No, we're going to devise an avenue of approach and consider OCOKA." (Observation and fields of fire, Cover and concealment, Obstacles, key or decisive terrain, Avenues of approach)

One of the initiatives that the veterans are introduced to at the Veterans' Administration is mindfulness training. It is a way of thinking and focusing so that you become more aware of your present experiences. Mindfulness training is thought to be helpful in managing combat stress symptoms.

"We've made the mindfulness training ours by structuring it with the military acronym BRASS which is familiar to the participants," Iannucci said. "When veterans are on horseback we train them to breathe, relax or refocus, aim, sight, and squeeze."

But Iannucci is also quick to point out that the program is an add-on to the therapy that veterans receive from mental health professionals.

"We're not counselors, we're comrades," Iannucci explains.

Iannucci's daughter Cris named the ranch "Crossed Arrows" acknowledging her Dad's Special Forces roots and

acknowledging the San Marcos Indians who called this their backyard many years past. The crossed arrows insignia were a badge of honor and worn by the Indian Scouts and the First Special Service Force soldiers of WWII. Historically, crossed arrows represented friendship to Native Americans. That is appropriate, because today many of the veterans who walk beneath the sign of the Crossed Arrows Ranch for the Cowboy Up! program are Native Americans.

Program participants have the option to stay at the Crossed Arrows Ranch thanks to private donors who funded the construction of a western-style bunkhouse, built by local builders, veterans, and volunteers. Iannucci relied on his 18C Special Forces engineer background as he oversaw construction and coordinated electricians, carpenters, and a battalion of volunteer lumber carriers and hammer-swingers.

Iannucci's Horses for Heroes-New Mexico, Inc. Cowboy Up! program tends to attract other veterans who appreciate the "pay-it-forward" spirit of the program. When retired U.S. Army Special Forces Sergeant First Class Garrett Crawford visited the Crossed Arrows Ranch, he was inspired to contribute in a personal way. I served with Crawford in Iraq. After receiving wounds during one of our missions he

was evacuated home and medically discharged. Crawford opened a metal shop in Colorado Springs and named it Valhalla after one of our Iraqi Freedom operations. Crawford hand-crafted and donated a large steel "Crossed Arrows Ranch" sign which adorns the program bunkhouse.

The bunkhouse sports a large wrap-around porch where veterans can take in the surrounding mountains on rocking chairs. Iannucci's concept is that the bunkhouse could be like a Special Forces team house for the program participants. After a hard session of riding, horse care, or stable clean up, participants connect around their "Ranger TV" campfire or on the porch of the bunkhouse. Here amongst fellow veterans, they can let their guard down a bit over cowboy coffee and take in a serene view of the open New Mexico range.

"I couldn't have veterans drive five hours from home at zero-dark thirty and then put in a demanding eight hour day and then drive back home five hours in the dark," Iannucci explains. "After several years of veterans sleeping on our couch and living room floor, we recognized the need for the bunkhouse. I have spent many all-nighters with these warriors as they struggle with their own personal transition. So, they need their own place

when they're here. The bunkhouse belongs to these veterans and is an integral part of the program."

Iannucci utilizes his local area assets to develop ranching skill sets in the participants. Partnering with local ranchers, the participants get opportunities to refine their newly acquired skills and boost their self-confidence. Past participants have been placed on ranches, working cattle after Iannucci has given them his stamp of approval signifying that the program graduate possesses basic ranching skills. Iannucci encourages accountability and independence in the veteran participants.

"From day one, participation is hands-on with horses," Iannucci said. "Veterans develop at their pace. They begin with grooming and horse care, progress to riding, and may even work cattle if that is their goal. We train to standard, not to time. Our program is self-paced and outcome-based."

Iannucci's "Rancher Starter Kit" has promoted independence in local Native American participants by providing young cattle so that they could initiate a self-sustaining ranching operation on their tribal lands. Combat wounded Army veteran Alroy Billiman was the first Native American program graduate and runs the Buell Mountain Ranch on the Navajo Reservation with cattle gifted by the Cowboy Up! program.

Darrell "Moe" Elmore, a retired U.S. Army Special Forces Lieutenant Colonel, has provided advisory assistance to Iannucci's program.

"Cowboy life requires an individual to work with others but also be independent, to make logical decisions, to accept that life is not necessarily fair, and that individual acts have rewards and

responsibilities," Elmore said. "Horses are not judgmental and while they can be demanding, they are also loyal and respond to proper care."

In addition to the Horses for Heroes-New Mexico, Inc. Cowboy Up! program at the Crossed Arrows Ranch, Iannucci has developed a program for specially selected and honorably discharged veterans who are incarcerated in the New Mexico state prison. These veterans are level 1 and level 2 low-risk inmates who are serving time for minor offenses and have been identified as candidates for an unwanted horse rehabilitation and therapy program as a part of their own rehabilitation and re-integration into society. This special initiative is in cooperation with the New Mexico State University, the New Mexico Department of Agriculture, the New Mexico Department of Corrections, the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services and the New Mexico Livestock Board.

Tim Hale, New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Cabinet Secretary and retired U.S. Air Force Colonel spent most of his career piloting special operations C-130s and served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today he works closely with Iannucci and Horses for Heroes-New Mexico, Inc. Cowboy Up!.

"Rick and Nancy at Horses for Heroes lead the way in providing specialized care for our warriors," Hale said. "They not only understand the impact of war upon veterans and families, they are doers. They have run to the guns and developed a program to help heal. Their organization has had a tremendous impact upon warriors from New Mexico. They saw the needs, developed a plan and took action. It's a model we need throughout the veteran care community." As I witnessed OIF and OEF combat veterans of my generation participate in

the Cowboy Up! program, I was inspired to write this article for The Drop, the voice of the community for the U.S. Army Special Forces. I felt compelled to share how a member of our community was serving our veterans through decisive action and from a perspective unique to a Special Forces veteran. As soldiers return from combat by the thousands, I'm confident that Iannucci's program can serve veterans as a tool added to their transition toolbox.

When a posse composed of combat veterans don spurs, cowboy hats, and boots to rally around Rick Iannucci in the pre-dawn light for a cattle drive, they may feel the camaraderie and sense of purpose that was familiar to them as soldiers. For Iannucci, it is simply an extension of who he was on a Special Forces Operational Detachment or the U.S. Marshal's tactical team. It's about passing along what you have learned. It's about service.

Horses for Heroes-New Mexico, Inc. Cowboy Up! is a 501(c) (3) program. It is not affiliated with any other horses for heroes programs that exist across the country and it relies on donations and grants to exist. Endorsements include the Albuquerque Chapter of American Gold Star Mothers, the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services, The New Mexico Cattle Growers Association, the Military Order of World Wars, and is one of only five organizations nationally selected for the Wrangler National Patriot Program. To see more about how an SFA member helps veterans "cowboy up", visit the blog on the organization's website at: www.HorsesforHeroes.org. The author served with C/2/19 SFG (A) from 1995 to 2007. He currently volunteers as an advisor to Horses for Heroes-New Mexico, Inc. Cowboy Up! and teaches tactical medicine in the U.S. law enforcement community. ✂