

Time on the river helps injured combat veterans

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

There is nothing more soothing to the spirit than time on the river, drifting with the current and putting a line in the water. That's true for anyone; it's especially true for veterans who have been injured in the service of their country.

Warfighter Outfitters of Sisters (www.facebook.com/warfighteroutfitters) was founded by veterans and is run by veterans to provide fellow veterans with the opportunity to get into the outdoors and pursue activities they love — despite troubled times and injuries.

The program, which has put 130 veterans on the water in just a few short months, got a major boost with the delivery of a highly customized drift boat by Pavati Fishing Boats out of White City, Oregon.

"It's been a seven-month process," said guide Brett Miller, himself a wounded combat veteran from Sisters. "The boat has three doors in the sides. Most drift boats don't. The doors allow the most severely wounded guys with mobility problems to get

in and out of the boat on their own.

"On their own is a big deal," Miller said. "They don't want to ask for help."

The boat is designed to safely accommodate three wheelchairs through "fairly technical water," Miller said.

Pavati also provided a vinyl wrap with the nonprofit's logo on it.

"It's a mobile billboard for the nonprofit," Miller said.

The premier boat-builder made Warfighter Outfitters "a really good deal" to make the boat happen, and the nonprofit paid for the boat out of donated funds. The organization is entirely volunteer-based, which means the funds it raises go directly into equipment and transportation and other necessities to get veterans on the water or out into the hunting field.

A little goes a long way. Miller said that \$100 can get four guys down the river for a day, covering fuel, shuttles, permits, licenses, and the like.

The organization still needs some fly rods and waders and other equipment, and individual donations aren't coming in at a rate that can sustain the work.

"We're trying to get some

corporate sponsorship going on," Miller said.

Warfighter Outfitters got a major boost from a \$20,000 donation by Wounded Warrior Project, which covered two-thirds of the outfitter's \$30,000 startup costs.

The experience is a healing one.

"It really gives these guys, first of all, a break," Miller says. "Turn off the noise and just relax."

The camaraderie that develops in a fishing boat is an important part of the experience for veterans who miss the sense of brotherhood they found in the service. And veterans who have shared similar experiences can talk to each other.

That's never forced, but it does tend to happen.

"Without any cueing or saying anything, the problems start to come out," Miller says. "Next thing you know, it's a PTSD clinic on the water ... without anybody even really realizing it."

Miller, who has struggled with his own injuries and with PTSD, has found peace and purpose in helping other wounded veterans.

"It's also a disabled combat veteran taking them out on



PHOTO BY RICCARDO SAVI

Sisters fishing guide Brett Miller guided wounded Desert Storm/Iraqi Freedom veteran Michael Pence of Eugene on the McKenzie River.

the water," he noted.

And Warfighter Outfitters is a force multiplier for veterans helping veterans. It's already formed friendships and a support network for its clients.

"Almost every single guy I take out says 'Hey, if you need any help, let me know.'" And Miller urges them to "find those guys who have fallen through the cracks and get 'em out."

Getting 'em out means hunting as well as fishing.

"I had 37 veterans put in for tags this season," Miller

reported.

As it has done with fishing, Warfighter Outfitters has developed equipment and protocols to mitigate disabilities to get veterans out doing what they love. The idea is to get them to where they can pursue their hunting on their own.

"The guys just love being outside, being in a hunting camp," Miller said. "It feels like an operation to them."

Individual contributions to Warfighter Outfitters are welcome. Visit www.gofundme.com/warfighteroutfitters or donate at U.S. Bank.

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