



Project Healing Waters

Story and Photos
by
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Regardless of how you feel about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, we should support our troops—those mostly very young men and women from across our nation who are exposed to danger, injury, and death for serving our country. They are not to blame for the politics that cause war, yet they are left to suffer the consequences of it, particularly those wounded in action.

Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, Inc. (PHWFF) takes the combat-wounded to the world of fishing after the world of fighting, marrying mental with physical rehabilitation. It is heartening to see this kind of support for our injured veterans. My war was similar in many ways, though it took place mostly in the jungles, mountains, and rice paddies of Southeast Asia. But I certainly did not feel much caring or support, either while there or upon my return.

PHWFF is a volunteer, non-profit group started almost five years ago in the Washington Capital Area of the District of Columbia, Northern Virginia and Southern Maryland. Supported by the National Capital Chapter of Trout Unlimited and the Federation of Fly Fishers, it teaches disabled vets how to tie flies, how to cast, and how to fly fish at no cost to them. Angling clubs and other concerned groups sponsor various angling and related events during the year. PHWFF provides a needed diversion from the rigors of rehabilitation, both physical and mental, and offers a

forum for vets to relate to each other and to concerned members of the community.

Project Healing Waters has moved from a grass-roots regional phenomenon to the national level, and now has more than 90 programs at VA hospitals, warrior transition units, and military hospitals in 32 states and in Canada. And it continues to grow.

Retired Navy Capt. Ed Nicholson is founder and president of PHW, and the Board Chairman is Douglas Dear, who opens his Rose River Farm with its stretch of the fertile Rose River for the annual Virginia 2-Fly Tournament/Fundraiser. Dear also stocks several thousand nice rainbow trout for the tournament.

I asked Dear to explain the annual 2-Fly Tournament held at Rose River the first Sunday of each May. “Every year 30 two-person teams compete to catch the most trout possible with only two flies. The 2-Fly is a competition in name but in reality is much more than a fishing contest. The tournament is structured like a charity golf event with corporate sponsors, an auction and plenty of side events that include



Wheelchairs are not a deterrent to fly fishing. These vets prove where there is a will, there is a way.

fly-fishing legends such as Lefty Kreh and Joe Humphreys teaching fly casting and water reading techniques. PHW brings in injured active-duty military and disabled veterans from Walter Reed Army Medical Center and VA hospitals around the country to fish and relax in the Blue Ridge Mountains.”

At previous 2-Fly events, vets who have taken part range from Marine Corporal Bill Johnson, who lost both legs in Vietnam about the time I was there, to Army Sergeant First Class Diane Cochran, who not too long ago was badly injured by a roadside explosive device in Afghanistan. Many young officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers sat in wheelchairs, where some would remain for life.

Several vets walk with the aid of prostheses, and some wear two artificial legs, over which waders are drawn. Some have an arm or part of an arm missing. Sgt. J. R. Salzman has a prosthesis ending in a hook. His father had fashioned a metal device that allowed his son to clamp a fly rod to the artificial arm. It worked

beautifully and J. R. is a fine caster and angler, as determined to catch fish as he is to learning to live comfortably with his disability. Sergeant Josh Williams has only one arm, but that doesn't deter him from being a fine caster and angler. He recently sold one his original fly patterns to the Orvis Company—you try tying a fly with one hand!

At the 2-Fly and other events around the country and in Canada, vets are guided by professional fly anglers or other volunteers who are expert fishers and teachers. At the 2-Fly event each guide could fish two flies, and once those were lost, must stop fishing. The veterans are not limited in the number of flies they may use. The scoring formula is based on which team members catch the rainbow trout, and the number and length of the fish taken. A volunteer stream monitor witnesses and measures the fish, and keeps score. All trout are released. The numerous suckers caught don't help the scores, but sometimes every fish is a true blessing regardless of its pedigree.

At the end of the day, just before the big barbeque feast with bluegrass entertainment began (both donated) the winners are announced, and prizes awarded. But it's obvious that all the vets are winners here regardless of their angling prowess and luck. And the May 2010 2-Fly garnered \$110,000 for PHWFF to keep working its magic.

Lefty Kreh, the world's best known and admired fly fisherman, is a concerned supporter who teaches fly casting to vets and to those who teach the vets. Most folks don't know that Lefty fought in World War II as an artillery sergeant, and participated in the Battle of the Bulge. Lefty headlined the 2-Fly this past May, gave classes, and visited vets on the water. He also aids vets with their casting at fly fishing shows.

The motions involved in fly tying, casting and fishing are wonderful physical therapy for torn and tattered bodies. Damaged hands respond nicely to the tying of a fly; injured arms and shoulders and backs get a wholesome and needed workout during



Sgt. J. R. Salzman has straps on his prosthetic arm to hold the fly rod. An excellent caster and angler, he was one of the original crew being helped by PHW.



PHWFF makes sure vets get to and from the water and are well taken care of while there.



casting, mending and retrieving—and fighting fish. Even more, the mind and heart are refreshed after the angler has been in a moving stream and felt the life-giving and therapeutic waters: the cool water presses against the legs, connecting us to the liquid world we once came from so many eons ago.

What do the wounded and disabled vets think about PHW? The folks I spoke with were unanimous in their praise for the project, the people running it, the sincere grassroots support, concern, encouragement, and yes, the genuine affection they receive from Americans everywhere.

And about fly fishing? Sergeant First Class Diane Cochran said it well: “Never have I felt less in control of my life than I did when I arrived at Walter Reed Army Medical Center with wounds and injuries sustained in Afghanistan. It is events such as a day on the river fly fishing that have allowed me to regain some control over my life and limbs. Any day on the river is a good day. The pain goes away and for a while I am allowed to be one with nature.”

As for me, in the water, my wounded leg from Vietnam doesn’t hurt as much. In and on the water, I can be so taken by my beautiful surroundings and the very essence of fly fishing that my body and soul are healed, or at least soothed—at least for awhile. And this is a peaceful place I can go to in my mind as I slip under the effects of anesthesia for yet another surgery.

If you’d like to help, contact Project Healing Waters at www.projecthealingwaters.org or call (301) 643-2148. The next 2-Fly Tournament at Rose River Farm near Syria, Virginia, will be May 1, 2011.

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