

HUNTING WITH HEROES

Hunting Exotic Game In Texas With Wounded Vets

Jim Stanek struggles daily with horrific memories painfully etched into his mind. "We were down picking through the rubble for survivors. We were under 70 feet of rubble that fell from the World Trade Center, trying to move an I-beam. Underneath the I-beam I saw two hands joined together, male and female. Both of them were wearing wedding bands yet neither of the hands were attached to bodies. Even though it was a tragedy that they'd passed away so horrifically, it gives me comfort hoping they were husband and wife and that they were together until the end. I can close my eyes and clearly see that image till this day," Jim told me as our private plane hauled ass toward Uvalde, Texas. "I can't get the smells of Ground Zero and combat out of my nose. The images are permanently burned into my head. That is my cross to bear. But I am proud to truly serve my country and to be a soldier." It was due to these events and what Stanek, a wounded vet, witnessed on that fateful day in September 2001 that he decided to join the Army. "As a 21-year-old man, wet behind the ears, 9/11 was a true awakening for me. It was a calling in defense of what happened."

Hitting the rewind button, a few years ago I met this dude named Billy Hodges who founded the Hunts for Heroes program in El Campo, Texas. Personally, I'm more comfortable in my Lycra figure-skating outfit, so I don't get the whole idea of hunting. But for guys who grew up hunting furry animals, it means a hell of a lot to them...so who am I to judge? I respected Billy's cause and wanted to do whatever I could to help. So I asked "Hot Donna," the smokin' External Relations Specialist from Polaris, if her company would be interested in donating a Ranger Crew to Hunts for Heroes as these machines make the hunt easier and more enjoyable. Since Donna is both Italian and a former native of New Jersey, she knew exactly who to threaten, I mean, who to ask in order to make it happen!

Billy's reasoning for founding Hunts for Heroes comes straight from the heart, stemming from an experience that happened almost 40 years ago: "I was on the way home for Christmas leave from Fort Jackson, South

Carolina, and I was in line at Delta's luggage check-in. I was talking to a Marine captain in line behind me when the pretty girl in front of us asked the man at the desk if she could have a seat that was not next to someone in the military. I was stunned! I stared at her in disbelief as she walked past me on the way to board the plane. To this day, I still remember those hateful words." Billy, like many from his generation, wanted to make sure that today's generation of warriors and protectors of this country know they are appreciated.

With over 30,000 soldiers injured in Iraq alone, there are a staggering number of young Americans who struggle every day trying to restart their lives while coping with the massive mental and physical challenges that these injuries seem to manifest. Although these warriors' lives will never be the same, they certainly aren't over. Hunts for Heroes goes to battle for the vets to help them come to this realization!

With Billy's help, I got hooked up with the "Veteran Outdoors" TV show (www.veteranoutdoors.com). Honor is a word we've heard all our lives, but in a day and age when morons like Snookie and the Situation from "Jersey Shore" are painting the picture that all Americans are as shallow and stupid as they are, it's rarely seen. Veteran Outdoors' main purpose is to honor our country's wounded war veterans and their families by fulfilling their dream hunt wishes while giving them an outlet to tell their story along the way.

V.O. started about five years ago when host Wes Higgins returned from his deployment in Iraq. While in Iraq, he and his buddies dreamed of getting back home to do some hunting and fishing. Wes promised his friends that when they got back from Iraq, if they came out to west Texas, he would show them a good time hunting. As it turned out, a couple of the guys were hurt pretty badly during their tour, but Wes was hell-bent to deliver on his promise. After a call to his brother-in-law, Cody Hirt, they arranged to take the guys on an awesome hunt, and from that point on they were hooked. After several of these hunts, the guys felt they needed to share this experience with everyone. They were also convinced the veterans needed a platform



Words By Mike Calabra And Lance Schwartz • Photography By Mike Calabra





The Ranger Crew side-by-side provided by Polaris made hauling our group and gear easy and fun.

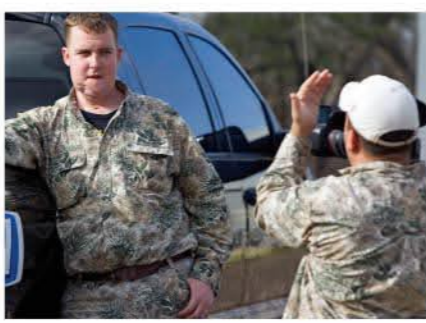


“Veterans Airlift Command flights go by the call sign of ‘Hero Flight,’ and one of the nice perks is air-traffic control typically gives those flights priority.”



to tell their stories. They set out to make a TV show about it. “I think it’s important for people to know how this all started. We aren’t some big network with an enormous production budget. We are three guys who, with the help of our family and friends, have made this a reality,” Hirt says. “The show isn’t about us. It’s about this country’s warriors and their families. One of the first things we tell them at the beginning of the trip is that it’s their show!”

Donna Beadle and I arrived in San Antonio, Texas, on a Thursday night, and by Friday morning, Staff Sgt. Jim Stanek was about to find out that he was the newest member of the Veteran Outdoors family. Jim is from Long Island, New York, where he was an ironworker and firefighter. After assisting in the recovery efforts at Ground Zero in the days following 9/11, he joined the Army and served three tours of duty in Iraq. During those three tours, his vehicle was hit with IEDs (improvised explosive devices) 27 times. These blasts, along with a close-quarters battle incident, resulted in severe injuries, including a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and they subsequently led to reconstructive surgery on his



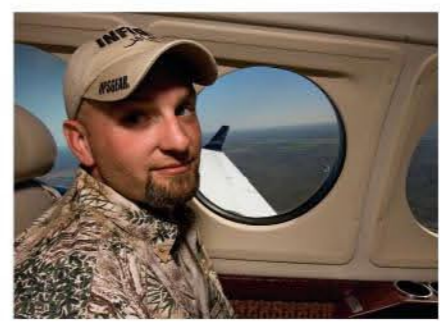
shoulder, hand and ankle. Additionally, Jim suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). His short-term memory is not good, and many of his childhood memories are lost.

Veteran Outdoors learned about Jim from his good friend, Louis Dahlman, who had been featured on a previous show after losing the bottom half of his face in an explosion in Iraq. Dahlman called Veteran Outdoors and said he had a phenomenal candidate named Jim Stanek for the show. V.O. immediately went to work to put together Jim’s dream hunt.

Billy organized all of the parties involved, and I eventually asked Hot Donna at Polaris if she could hook us up. Since Polaris is an American company that builds some killer ATVs and side-by-sides for both civilian and military duty alike, it was no surprise when Donna accepted our invite and came through with two Ranger Crews for this ultimate hunt. “Polaris was honored to provide Hunts for Heroes with a Ranger Crew,” Donna told me. “After experiencing a hunt firsthand, it felt good to give back to the veterans who give everything to protect our country.” Jim had actually used a Polaris Ranger when he was serving in

Iraq. “We used the Polaris Ranger in combat on my second tour,” he said. “We mounted 50-caliber machine guns on the bed, and the barrel went over the roof.” The Ranger Crews would also allow us to easily move our equipment and transport us during the hunt, thereby making it a more enjoyable experience.

Friday morning Louis and Jim drove to Signature Air at the San Antonio Airport where Louis, who’s a damn good liar, claimed he needed to pick up the keys to a hunting ranch from the ranch owner. Upon walking in, they were greeted by Brad Strittmatter of Veteran Outdoors, who informed Jim they were indeed going on a hunt, but that they weren’t driving. Instead, the guys grabbed their gear and jumped on board a King Air B200. The flight was donated by Bob Parker, an aircraft owner who donates his airplane and time to Veterans Airlift Command (www.veteransairlift.org).



The Veterans Airlift Command (VAC) provides free air transportation to wounded warriors, veterans and their families for medical and other compassionate purposes, through a national network of volunteer aircraft

owners and pilots. Donna and I got to join the group on the plane ride to the ranch. VAC flights go by the call sign of “Hero Flight,” and one of the nice perks is air-traffic control typically gives those flights priority, so they can get in and out of the airports quickly. Jim called his wife on the plane

to let her know what had transpired, though he still had no idea where he was going or what he was about to hunt. Despite Jim being in the dark about the trip, he was excited, even though in his words he “hates not knowing.”

Upon landing in the town of Uvalde, Texas, Jim was met by Hirt of Veteran Outdoors. Cody welcomed Jim to Uvalde, and informed him that he would be hunting a Scimitar-horned Dryx. For all I knew, that animal could have looked like a shiny unicorn. Jim, on the other hand, knew exactly what it was. In fact, it just so happened to be his dream animal. Louis was also surprised

to learn that he would get the opportunity to hunt for a trophy white-tailed deer, since his last hunt with Veteran Outdoors ended the way most of my nights do when I go out hunting for chicks: He struck out!

Upon arriving at the Live Oak Ranch (live-oak-ranch.com), introduc-



Donna Beadle put on her best Elmer Fudd hunting disguise.



While Mike Calabro did his best Rambo impersonation.



tions were made to John Hopkins, the ranch owner, who donated the hunt and time at his ranch. Jim also received camouflage gear from Browning and Game Guard, and he was presented with a bitchin 300-caliber Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Edition Winchester Model 70 Classic Super Grade III rifle with a 24-inch stainless barrel and a Nikon scope. (Editor's Note: This is a big-ass gun.)

After Jim got his rifle sighted in, we hopped in the Rangers and busted out to separate hunting blinds where Louis and Jim would hunt while the rest of the crew observed the wildlife on the ranch. Donna was stoked about getting her "trophy" that night. She was sitting in a blind, and as they watched the fallow deer grazing, a young red stag approached them. One of the fallows butted heads with the stag and the stag's antlers flew off. Donna quickly ran out of the blind

"After Jim got his rifle sighted in, we...busted out to separate hunting blinds."

and snatched up the antlers. I wrestled with the idea of complimenting Donna's rack, but I knew it was a huge possibility that she'd punch me in the face. I certainly didn't want to cry in front of all these tough guys!

Once we were back at camp, we learned that Louis had gotten an opportunity to shoot his trophy buck. As entertainment for the vets, they got the chance to watch me witness a deer field dressed for the first time in my life. Bottom line, it's gnarly! They hung the deer by its back legs in a shack while we all stood around drinking beers. Some guy cut its anus out first, which made me giggle. Then he cut the body all the way down from ass to neck. All the guts stayed in one big piece and plopped into an old aluminum bucket. You could see the intestines, stomach and all its other nastiness. I drifted into crazy-mode and decided it would be artistic to get



This isn't a pretty sight to most, but to our group it meant a successful day of hunting.



a photo of me posing with the Bucket-o'-Guts. They all thought I was crazy, but I did manage to make them laugh when I gagged from the smell.

The Live Oak Ranch had given Jim the green light to take whichever oryx he liked. While Jim saw several over the weekend, he was never able to get into position to take down the one he wanted. Jim put it best: "Hunting has been very therapeutic for me. It's really the only therapy that has worked for me. Put me in front of a shrink and I will just laugh at him." Hunting was clearly Jim's place of Zen. Astonishingly, the most amazing part of the trip, for me, was the fact that Jim tolerated my relentless ball-busting without once threatening to kill me. For that, he has truly earned my respect! (Editor's Note: We can't believe Jim didn't kill Calabro either!)

With that, we loaded up the plane for the short flight back to San Antonio. Everyone was a little disappointed that Jim didn't get his dream ani-

mal, but what Jim doesn't know is that his adventure is not over. Cody told me, "We are going to be friends with Jim for life, and while this particular trip is over, as far as we are concerned our mission to have Jim shoot his dream animal isn't. We won't stop until we accomplish that mission." Who knows what these guys have up their sleeves now?

Are trips like this making a difference in the lives of our military members and their families? Jim's family certainly thinks so. In fact, they haven't seen him this happy in years. It's amazing that something as simple as a hunting trip can make such a big difference in a person's life. "The military does a great job of giving our warriors the tools to physically rehab, but it's up to us as a community to make sure we are providing them the tools to mentally rehab," Brad Strittmatter said. And that's exactly what groups like Hunts for Heroes and Veteran Outdoors are doing.

THE DETAILS



Hunts for Heroes (www.huntsforheroes.com) is a nonprofit organization that provides hunting and outdoor related activities to men and women wounded on the field of battle while helping to protect the world from terrorism. The organization works tirelessly and selflessly to make sure that every wounded veteran with desires to go hunting or fishing gets that opportunity.



ORYX? HUH?

Oryx are large antelope-like animals from Africa. They have incredible horns like a unicorn; except they have two of them. They get up to nearly 500 pounds. They were hunted for their four-foot horns and are now considered extinct in the wild. They are legal to hunt in Texas.

A global captive breeding program was initiated in the 1960s. In 1996, there were at least 1,250 captive animals held in zoos and parks around the world with a further 2,145 on ranches in Texas. Wild game ranches in Texas and New Mexico breed oryx for hunting and helping to preserve the animal.