

Local Veteran Brings Healing Out West

The Bar X Project, a Non-Profit Organization, Helps Wounded Veterans Reunite with Old Friends

by Preston Knight

A visitor's first impression of the Sweet Grass Chamber of Commerce's website is a little shock and awe at the beautiful landscape and mighty mountains of Big Timber, Montana.

The images that rotate on the front page paint a perfect picture of a free and inviting land, a place where one could most certainly envision losing him- or herself amid the endless possibilities of the surroundings.

It's postcard-worthy America, the type of scenery that would make one want to fight to protect it.

Through the help of a decorated veteran in Shenandoah County, "Big Sky Country" of Montana is giving right back to those very individuals.

Friends All Over Again

Woodstock resident Wade Zirkle served in the U.S. Marine Corps as an infantry officer from 2000 to 2005, twice deployed to Iraq. On the second tour, in 2004, he was badly burned in a deadly attack on his convoy, for which he received the Purple Heart.

As he recovered from his injuries and settled back into life in the United States, he became a vocal proponent for wounded warriors returning home from duty.

"One thing the military does really well is that it trains warriors as a team and sends Marines into battle as a team," Zirkle said. "One thing the military does poorly is reintegrate these people back into society. They're sent back to their hometowns alone. That is extremely difficult after the experiences that we've had."

In 2011, a new opportunity to assist his comrades presented itself. Zirkle and a former Marine-turned-business partner, James Moran of Camden County, New Jersey, heard from a business associate of theirs, Rob Lowe in Billings, Montana, who expressed interest in helping wounded veterans.

Lowe offered his family's 300-acre ranch, called Bar X, as a setting, with the idea of offering veterans a free weekend of fly fishing in the beautiful West.

"That was definitely the catalyst," Zirkle said. "Without their initiative and their generosity, it would not be possible."



Support was widespread from local people in Montana who donated boats, time as guides, a van and more. For the first two years, veterans from the Marine Corps' Wounded Warrior Regiment were recruited to attend what became known as the Bar X Project, a non-profit organization.

By the third year, Zirkle said the project's founders refined their approach, making it more formal and raising money to cover airfare, meals and other costs. The weekend became not just a fly-fishing and bonding trip, but one featuring educational components, teaching veterans about financial management, how to sift through the Department of Veterans Affairs, and how to transition from the military lifestyle back to being a civilian.

Another change involved the invite list, as the program's leaders switched to a rotation in which one of them would be tasked with inviting Marines from his own unit for a given trip.

"It's reuniting old friends," said Zirkle, who was in charge of inviting Marines from his platoon for the most recent trip, near the end of September. "There's more healing power when you reunite old battle buddies."

According to the Bar X website, 22 veterans a day are "feeling so hopeless that they are choosing to take their own life rather than face normal life in America."

"The lost potential of these veterans can never be measured," the site states. "It is our belief ... that reestablishing the special bond forged in combat overseas is an untapped avenue to combatting PTSD and helping Marines return to normal life."

A 'Life Saver'

The testimonials posted on the site prove that the Bar X plan is working.

"I haven't talked or hung out with anyone since I got out of the Marines. All my friends back home, I am sort of distanced with since they are just on a different path than me," wrote Lee Poziviak, of Pittsburgh. "Getting to hang out with guys that were with me through one of the biggest life-changing experiences I probably will ever have was so great. You know that no one will fully understand what we go through or experience except for those few guys that were right beside you when you were there doing it."

Matthew R. Bailey, a Marine from Medford, New Jersey, wrote that he had suicidal thoughts that got him as close as contemplating pulling the trigger on his gun at times. He once appeared on "Dr. Phil" to discuss his struggles and get him off of the medications he was on at the time.

Moran, who was Bailey's executive officer in Afghanistan, later invited him to Bar X in 2013.

“We were able to realize we weren’t the only ones dealing with combat-related issues,” Bailey wrote. “This trip was a life-saver. Every Marine returning from combat should have this opportunity. It was a time to reflect and grow together. A time to motivate each other and counsel each other over the course of a few days in God’s Country, Big Sky Country ... Montana.”

As many as eight Marines can attend a trip. Bar X holds two excursions a year — one in July and one in September — at a cost of \$10,000 per weekend, Zirkle said.

As more money has been raised over time, the project has paid for more of the services in Montana, so it does not take advantage of the generosity of the people there, he said.

“There are a lot of veterans charities out there, and a lot of them are really big and really bloated,” Zirkle said. “We decided to run our charity on a much smaller level. Every penny goes to getting wounded warriors to Montana. We’re very proud to run a very lean, efficient, and effective organization.”

The goal for organizers is to continue

offering the trips as long as possible. Zirkle said it’s “like a new experience every time” since most visiting Marines have never been to that part of the country.

But there’s certainly another motivation to keep Bar X running strong that’s as deep as the Montana sky is high.

“It helps me as much as it helps these Marines,” Zirkle said.

For more information, including on how to donate to Bar X, visit www.barxproject.com, or you can mail a check to the Bar X Project at 415 S. Main St., Woodstock, VA 22664.

Woodstock veteran **Wade Zirkle** (center) reunited with four of his former Marines during the most recent trip to Montana sponsored by his organization, Bar X Project. His comrades are (from left to right):

Corporal Bret McCauley served as a fire team leader with the Second Battalion First Marine Regiment (2/1) in Fallujah, Iraq. He was wounded by enemy small arms fire in April 2004. Cpl. McCauley remained in Iraq for rehabilitation and returned to action and was later wounded again by a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device in September 2004. He is the recipient of two Purple Hearts. He lives in Denver.

HN3 Joe Dan “Doc” Worely served as a Corpsman with the Second Battalion First Marine Regiment (2/1) in Fallujah, Iraq. Doc Worely fought in the First Battle of Fallujah in April 2004. In September 2004 he was wounded in action in a coordinated ambush, while running to the aid of his wounded fellow Marines. He is a recipient of the Purple Heart. He works for America’s VetDogs, and lives with his wife and children in Villa Rica, Georgia.

Corporal Adam Fisel served as a fire team leader with the Second Battalion First Marine Regiment (2/1) in Iraq during the 2003 invasion, and on a second deployment to Fallujah in 2004. Cpl. Fisel was wounded by enemy small arms fire in April 2004. He remained in Iraq for rehabilitation and returned to action to finish his deployment. He is the recipient of the Purple Heart. He lives in Wolcotteville, Indiana, and is engaged to be married.

Lance Corporal Ben Gonzalez served as a squad automatic weapon gunner with the Second Battalion First Marine Regiment (2/1) in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004. In May of 2004 he was wounded in a grenade attack in Anbar Province. LCpl. Gonzalez rolled onto the Marine next to him, and absorbed the grenade blast, shielding his fellow Marine from injury. He was awarded the Silver Star for his actions and is also a recipient of the Purple Heart. He lives in El Paso, Texas, with his wife and children.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WADE ZIRKLE