

Third Annual WOUNDED WARRIORS IN ACTION GATOR HUNT

Melbourne, Florida, Sept. 30 – Oct. 3, 2011



By Duane Wallace

The Third Annual Wounded Warriors in Action Foundation (WWIA) Gator Hunt came to Melbourne on the east coast of Florida this year, hosted by local organizations rich in Florida history and service to our country.

Groups such as the Brevard County Airboat Association (BCAA), which trained Special Forces troops in airboat operations during the Vietnam War, American Legion Post #81 in Melbourne, and Camp Holly (established on the St. Johns River in 1923), enthusiastically joined the WWIA in their mission to show appreciation to our combat wounded veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Five combat-wounded, Purple Heart recipients from across America participated in this year's hunt. They were: Kevin Johnson from Minnesota, Ryan Olech from Pennsylvania, Gary Horn from South Carolina, Kyle Finley from Kentucky and Greg Amira from Florida.

Local sportsmen such as Scott Smith from the Brevard County Airboat Association summed up the attitude of the locals as follows: "I know I speak for the club as a whole when I say we feel honored and privileged to give back to these individuals in whatever way we can. If it's a gator hunt these guys want, then by hell and high water that's what they'll get! Yeeee Hawww! Let's show these men some of our Southern Hospitality and git 'em some gators."

Well, "git 'em some gators" they certainly did, but more on that later.

The event took place over the weekend of Friday, Sept. 30 – Monday,

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Photos by: Dennis Myers, Joyce Rondos,
Duane Wallace, Will Williams

Oct. 3, and the action was nonstop from the moment our heroes' plane landed Friday evening until they departed Monday afternoon.

Upon arrival, our heroes were transported from the airport to American Legion Post #81, which invited them to stop by for a delicious, good old-fashioned Southern fried chicken dinner with all the fixins. The warm reception by the post included a standing ovation and several minutes of applause as our heroes entered the building and were seated at the table of honor. The guests were presented with honorary memberships in the post. The warmth and heartfelt appreciation shown to these heroes by the members made a lasting impact on everyone in attendance.

On Saturday morning, the American Legion Riders, Post #81, gathered with their fellow motorcyclists to escort pickup trucks containing our heroes to the Brevard County Airboat Association clubhouse. There were over 70 motorcycles in the escort. The Brevard County Sheriff's Department also

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A motorcade escorted the heroes to the BCAA clubhouse.



Above: After the welcoming events, BCAA members took the vets for a tour of local campsites, and visited the only two remaining hunting cabins.

Right: Following the tour, BCAA members put on an awesome meal of wild game, including hog, frog legs, and Carol Smith's soon-to-be-famous gator cakes!



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participated with several police cruisers. The parked bikes extended across the entire front and side parking lots of the Tropical Inn Resort in Palm Bay where our heroes were staying for the weekend. Once on the road, the motorcade stretched for almost a mile. A special thanks goes to Frank Sewell, chapter director of the American Legion Riders, Post #81, for making all this possible.

Upon arrival at the BCAA clubhouse, Boy Scout Troop #365 performed the flag ceremony to begin the day's activities. Cheyenne Sandburg sang the national anthem accompanied by her mother on the flute. Lt. Col. John McDaniel (Ret.), founder and CEO of the Wounded Warriors in Action Foundation, presented a plaque to the BCAA in appreciation for their hosting of the event. The BCAA presented commemorative T-shirts custom made for this year's event to the WWIA and heroes.

After spending some time visiting and smiling for the cameras, it was time to head for the swamps to experience some real Florida! Everyone loaded up in airboats and toured some of the local campsites set up in the swamps for hunting season. BCAA members also educated the riders on local history and lore, including the still visible railroad grades used to harvest timber in days past and tales of Indian mounds and artifacts.

They also visited the only two remaining hunting cabins (Bozeman's and Bulldozer) on this part of the St. Johns River. One of the campsites would be the "rally point" during the hunt later that

evening, and several of the wounded warriors spent the night in camp during the hunt from Saturday evening to Sunday morning.

After the airboat tour of the local area, everyone returned to the BCAA clubhouse for an awesome meal of wild game, including hog, frog legs, and Carol Smith's soon-to-be-famous gator cakes! A big thanks to Chuck Pierson who killed, slaughtered, provided the cooker and cooked two wild hogs for lunch. Other cooks included John Little and Mitch Gordon. Chuck also participated in the hunt later that evening and serves as one of the leaders of Boy Scout Troop #365.

As lunch was concluded, it was time to head over to Camp Holly (www.campholly.net) on the St. Johns River to enjoy some live music and fellowship. The band and folks in attendance gave special recognition to our heroes and thanked them for their service.

As evening grew near, the anticipation was building for the gator hunt. WWIA Associate Duane Wallace led a safety briefing of what to expect during the gator hunt, including boat safety, and personal flotation device use. The warriors were given opportunities to practice harpoon throwing. Then it was time to "suit up and head out!"

Wounded Warrior Greg Amira was the first hero to get a gator. He was hunting with professional guide Scott Swartley, and they bagged a 9' 6" gator before 8 p.m.! The sun was setting and it wasn't even dark yet! Warrior Kyle Finley joined Scott on his boat, while Greg's gator was loaded onto another boat and taken back to camp.

The guides and heroes hunted hard that night. As anyone who has

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Warrior Kevin Johnson practices throwing a harpoon.

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hunted gators will admit, after the first week or two of the season, they get really skittish around bright lights and loud sounds. Just when you think you might be in range of a gator, they go under or disappear. Our guides and hunters had their work cut out for them since they were already six weeks into the season.

In spite of these challenges, Warrior Ryan Olech harvested an 8' 6" gator that didn't go down without a fight! Between a lot of thrashing and even biting the boat, he was quickly sent to gator heaven compliments of a bang stick and knife to the spine.

Warrior Kevin Johnson followed suit later that evening by harvesting a fine 9' 1" gator.

Our remaining heroes, Kyle Finley and Gary Horn hunted hard through the night and into the next morning, but the gators remained elusive. The campfire kept burning in the hunting camp all

night, with heroes, captains, guides and others all coming and going, putting forth their best effort to make this a memorable experience.

On Sunday, everyone rallied at Chuck Pierson's shop on Story Lane (appropriately named) for the inaugural "Skin 'em & Bag 'em" gator processing experience. With the NASCAR race on the TV in the background, and plenty of chilled beverages in the cooler, our heroes, guides and everyone else swapped stories and recounted the adventures experienced over the last few days.

By the time the last bag of gator meat was zipped closed, and the last hide was rolled up Sunday afternoon, you could pretty much stick a fork in the crew because they were "DONE"! Several folks, including some of the wounded warriors, had been going nonstop since their day began before 8 a.m. the previous day. Honorable mention goes to BCAA Secretary Scott Smith and Guide Dave Popplein. These legendary men were up for the entire 34 hours of the event coordinating, supporting, guiding, and skinning until the last hero left. No sleep, just hard-core devotion to doing everything possible for a world-class experience for our veterans.

After a hearty all-you-can-eat meal at the Olive Garden, the Warriors retired to the Tropical Inn Resort for some much needed rest Sunday evening.

Monday morning dawned early, and with a 12:30 p.m. flight for our heroes to catch, final preparations had to be made quickly. Newly purchased coolers were loaded with gator meat, hides, ice and dry ice in preparation to accompany our heroes on their flights home.

Our heroes arrived at the airport with less than an hour to go before departure, but everyone made their flight with a lifetime of memories and cooler full of some of the best meat and hides known to man!

There were literally hundreds of people from the local community involved in this event to honor our wounded veterans. The following list will obviously miss some folks, but recognition is due to the best of our ability to give thanks where due.

First of all, thanks to John McDaniel for founding this great

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L to R: Warrior Ryan Olech harvested this 8' 6" hunting with BCAA member Chris Kelly.



Wounded Warrior Greg Amira was the first hero to get a gator. Hunting with professional guide Scott Swartley, he bagged a 9' 6" gator before 8 p.m.!



The heroes pose with the night's catch.



The alligators are skinned and the meat is packaged for the vets to take home.



A final group photo wraps up the successful hunt. L to R back row: BCAA member Dennis Myers, WWIA Gary Horn, WWIA Kyle Finley, WWIA founder John McDaniel, BCAA member Scott Smith, and WWIA Kevin Johnson. L to R front row: WWIA Ryan Olech, WWIA event coordinator Duane Wallace, and WWIA Greg Amira.

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organization that connects American Heroes and American Sportsmen. Thanks also to Capt. Phil Walters of GatorGuides.com who got the WWIA and BCAA together to host this year's hunt.

Scott Smith of the BCAA is the true foot soldier and key person responsible for the success of this event. Scott was the liaison between the WWIA and BCAA and also was the principal "guide in charge" in coordinating the hunts with all the captains, guides and hunters. WWIA Associate Duane Wallace and Scott worked closely together for this event and the team delivered outstanding results.

Thanks are certainly due to the following as well:

Captains/Guides: Dave Mannes, Scott Swartley, Doug Jones, Chris Kelly, Jim Rosasco, Joe Koehler, **Bait Boats:** Joe Koehler, Wade Hamant, Dave Popplein, Chuck Pierson, Kenny Sandberg, **Supplementary Support:** Walt Lorraine, Tommy Knecht, Frank Weare, Doug Hawley, Dennis Myers, Dave Porterfield.

WWIA Associate Duane Wallace, who began the annual gator hunts with the WWIA three years ago provides additional insight: "Our overall theme for the WWIA is 'American Heroes – American Sportsmen'. There is a very strong bond between the American sportsman and the men and women who put themselves in harm's

way serving our county. Many of the strongest supporters of the WWIA are those who have served our country in the past. It is the one-on-one interaction between those who have served and today's sportsman that provides healing – mentally, physically and spiritually from their war experiences."

"During this past weekend, we experienced an unprecedented outpouring of support and appreciation from the entire community for this gator hunt. This was a positive experience for all involved. We already have heroes booked for next year's hunt and are eagerly looking forward to doing this again next year."

Established in 2007, the Wounded Warriors in Action Foundation is a national 501(c)(3) non-profit organization headquartered in Apollo Beach, Florida. The WWIA is dedicated to serving our nation's combat wounded, Purple Heart recipients, by providing world-class outdoor sporting activities. This is our nation's opportunity to give something back and to express in a meaningful way, our collective gratitude for their service and great sacrifices these heroes have made.

To learn more or lend your support to the Wounded Warriors in Action Foundation, please visit their web site at www.wwiaf.org or for more information of how you can be a part, contact founder John McDaniel at 1-888-308-WWIA 1-888-308-WWIA (9942) or email info@wwiaf.org.



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