

# HOOAH!

by Michele Vowell, Courier assistant editor | Posted: Thursday, August 14, 2014 6:00 pm

When Staff Sgt. Matthew Taylor returned from Afghanistan in 2011, his right hip had sustained permanent nerve damage after a freak helicopter accident.

For a while the 101st Airborne Division Soldier walked with a cane, but doctors told him there was a 90 percent chance he would use a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

“I told the wife on the way home from the doctor that day, that if I were to go into a wheelchair, me and God may have a chat in the woods and we’d see if I came out,” he said.

As an outdoorsman and athlete, Taylor said he could not deal with the prospect of not being able to walk again and needed to find an outlet for his emotions.

It was not long before a fellow Soldier invited him on a turkey hunt with Warrior Transition Battalion’s HOOAH! program – Healing Outside Of A Hospital.

“I didn’t really hunt up until that point,” he said. “I was invited on a turkey hunt. I kind of realized after I shot [one], I didn’t really need my cane – I had left it in a [hunting] blind. I was hopping around. I didn’t think of the nerve damage ... That was kind of my clue from God that it was going to be a little bit better.”

Within a year, Taylor had reconstructive surgery on his hip and left his cane at the hospital. Just months later, he took over as the noncommissioned officer-in-charge of HOOAH!

“If it weren’t for this program I would be dead. There’s no doubt in my mind,” he said.

Now, Taylor and Sgt. Justin Carter try to help other wounded, injured and ill Soldiers through HOOAH!

“In 2013, 21 Soldiers ... told us that the program probably saved their life or one of the trips did,” Taylor said. “Medical conditions vary – everything from Soldiers who have been assaulted to those



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Staff Sgt. Matthew Taylor, a Soldier from the Fort Campbell Warrior Transition Battalion, scoops a fish out of Dale Hollow Lake for boatcaptain and fishing guide Tom Weaver May 17. Taylor is thenon-commissioned officer in charge of the WTB’s Healing Outside of aHospital program, helping wounded, injured and ill Soldiers recuperatewhile finding tranquility through outdoor activities like hunting andfishing. Taylor brought six other current and former Soldiers on thethe HOOAH! program fishing trip on the border of Tennessee andKentucky.

who have been blown up or it could involve a Soldier who has given up on life. Those are the ones we try to find.”

More than 2,000 Soldiers have participated in HOOAH! events since the program began in 2007. The idea took root after Sgt. 1st Class Ronnie Gillian took his wounded buddy hunting.

“The guy was paralyzed from the waist down. Sgt. Gillian set up a blind for him and the guy got his first deer,” said Taylor. “The program came from that.”

Although it first began as a program for Purple Heart recipients, HOOAH! has evolved to offer outdoor-related therapeutic events for active duty, wounded, injured and ill Soldiers in the WTB and elsewhere throughout the Fort Campbell community and U.S. Army.

All participating Soldiers are screened by their chain of command and medical providers to ensure the best possible results for the Soldier. The program offers primarily outdoor activities – everything from hunting [to] fishing – year-round.

“Those events can take the Soldiers anywhere,” Taylor said. “We try to fit the best trip for the Soldier. If they have severe PTSD issues, if the trip involves a lot of firearms, that may not be the trip for the Soldier.

“The flip side is, we can always work around any condition – whether it be switch out the weapons – if they don’t think they can be around gunfire, I can always give them a crossbow,” Taylor added. “If they are afraid of the water, we’ll find them a short fishing trip or if they can’t be around big crowds, I’ll take them and put them on a smaller trip.”

HOOAH! leadership consists of current and formerly wounded WTB active duty Soldiers, who volunteer their time.

These leaders work with various organizations and nonprofit groups to offer these activities free of charge as a form of physical and mental therapy.

“The idea is to get the Soldiers out there to help them unwind, unscrew their heads and do something new,” Taylor said. “A lot of the ones who participate are first-time hunters or fishers. They’ve never done anything like this in their lifetime. They haven’t seen the sun come up in a while without getting shot at. It helps them really relax.”

Through HOOAH!, injured Soldiers are allowed to push themselves in a monitored outdoor environment that promotes self confidence, teamwork and motivation.

“For people especially with severe [post traumatic stress disorder], we’ll take them on these smaller trips and slowly work them into bigger and bigger [events]. A lot of these guys can’t even go into Walmart,” Taylor said. “If you start out small, eventually you can get them back into society.”

HOOAH! also allows Soldiers to connect with the civilian community in a controlled, relaxed

environment. This interaction is designed to help reduce the anxiety that a Soldier faces returning from combat or prior to separating from the military.

“It helps them interact with the civilian community,” Taylor said. “A lot of Soldiers don’t do that.”

Since offering a few trips in the early years of the program, Taylor said HOOAH! has expanded exponentially. In 2013, HOOAH! offered 68 events for more than 820 Soldiers. This year more than 100 events are planned for and an excess of 1,000 Soldiers are expected to participate.

“The trips range from super small to extremely large,” he said. “We’ve done trips which range from one person for one-on-one with a guide for a weekend on up to ... one with 100 Families last year. There’s anything and everything in between.”

Earlier this summer, Staff Sgt. Bruce Bradley, Warrior Transition Battalion, stood on the deck of a bass boat and felt a peace that had been absent from his life.

Bradley and several Wounded Warriors sailed on Dale Hollow Lake in Nashville, Tenn., to catch some bass and relax away from the hustle and bustle of Army life through the HOOAH! program.

“Being an introvert like I am, just being able to sit out there – not a whole lot going on – it’s just slow and easy,” Bradley said. “You catch something or you don’t. When you do, it really gets you excited, but even if I don’t [catch a fish] just the serenity of being out there on the lake ... was just very pleasant.”

Soldiers interested in participating in HOOAH! are encouraged to contact Taylor at (931) 561-9475 or [matthew.j.taylor48.mil@mail.mil](mailto:matthew.j.taylor48.mil@mail.mil) or Carter at [justin.i.carter.mil@mail.mil](mailto:justin.i.carter.mil@mail.mil).

“[It’s] medicine for mind, body and soul,” Taylor said.