

West Plains Daily Quill



ELEVEN SOLDIERS and their major and first sergeant have been treated to an overnight stay at River of Life Campground near Dora. This is the second time campground owners Myron and Annie McKee have hosted soldiers recuperating at Fort Leonard Wood for a day of floating, fishing and fellowship. From left: Sgt John Davis, Sgt. Nik Pascal, 1st Sgt. Gil Salcedo, Major Ron Johnson, Spec. Robert Harvey, Spec. Kenneth Mayo, PFC Luis Rodriguez, Sgt. William Glenn, Spec. Victor Deleon, Staff Sgt. Larry Johnson and Spec. Luis Escotto. (Quill/B. Womack)



SINGING FOR HIS SUPPER - Sgt. William Glenn's a capella rendition of "Amazing Grace" left tears in the eyes of Eloise Epley, Dora, at the Heroes Banquet at River of Life Campground near Dora. Glenn, among soldiers from a medical unit at Fort Leonard Wood invited to an overnight stay, was a contestant in an upcoming Fox Network Television production, the Department of Defense Military Idol. The show is a spin-off of the hit show, American Idol, and will air in July. He said, and The Quill confirmed, he won. (Quill/B. Womack)

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Some Fort Wood Soldiers Find Healing Day In Ozarks Outdoors

BY BETTY WOMACK

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The 11 men sat drowsily in cabins along North Fork River, the only sound gurgling water cascading over rocky shoals just a few yards away.

“Can you hear it?” they continually asked one another.

“They were talking about the water. It was so peaceful, they were so relaxed. It’s good to see them relaxed,” said 1st Sgt. Gil Salcedo, who with Major Ron Johnson accompanied the soldiers from a medical hold unit at Fort Leonard Wood.

The soldiers had spent the day floating the river, guests of Myron and Annie McKee at the River of Life Campgrounds near Dora in Ozark County.

“It is overwhelmingly peaceful after what they’ve been used to,” Salcedo said of the atmosphere found there. This is the second time the McKees have hosted such a visit for soldiers from Ft. Leonard Wood, the first was in September 2005, and both visits included canoeing, fishing and fly-fishing and a Heroes Banquet. They hope to make the event an annual one, and even more they hope to see others in the area with similar facilities open their homes and businesses to soldiers for rest and relaxation, either by hosting a visit or by sponsoring one. The soldiers came from all across the country, were mobilized to active duty from Fort Wood, and returned there again for demobilization following tours of duty, a process that includes making sure they are medically fit before they are released, Salcedo said.

Even if a soldier does not suffer extensive injuries, being at the base hospital for treatments means daily seeing signs of trauma, making the quiet peacefulness of the river valley that much more pronounced, he added. And although many, if not all of them, were wounded in war, at the Army’s request, questions of that nature weren’t the focus of this Quill staff writer’s conversations with the soldiers.

Ladies from the Dora Assembly of God provided a potluck dinner for the banquet. Later, some of the men played instruments and everyone joined the singing. A few families that camp at River of Life each summer quietly joined the gathering, making their way to each soldier for a handshake before strolling back to their camps.

“These people are holding the front lines,” Sgt. Nik Pascal said as he surveyed the scene. “This ‘front-porch atmosphere,’ singing salvation songs for soldiers sitting on the front porch.”

It brought back memories, and answered a question he had been puzzling over for nearly 40 years. Originally from Boston, Pascal was sent to Vietnam from an Alabama base. A small community nearby hosted a going-away party for him.

“There was food, fellowship, singing. Our differences melted away and they became family. That stuck with me, but until today I could never quite put my finger on what was different about me as I watched fellow soldiers crumble and fall apart around me during and after the war.”

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Three young soldiers, affectionately dubbed the “tres amigos,” are independent ready reservists (IRR), Pascal their non-commissioned officer in charge. It was while watching them Thursday catching crawfish and paddling canoes that he recognized what made the difference in him 37 years ago.

“They are overwhelmed by this heartland. We’ve been here a day, but the treatment we’ve received makes it feel like we’ve had a week off. I watched their transformation, and we’ve all experienced it today. All that tightness inside loosened up.”

Young soldiers are used as an indicator of how all soldiers are impacted by their environment, Pascal said. That day, they were uplifted.

“It’s the best time I’ve seen them have since being on medical hold,” he said.

“They are young, everything is new, but I’m glad they were exposed to the real people of this beautiful country. The outreach from a community like this is ‘value added’ to their experiences so far, they’ll never forget this, no one can ever take this away from them.”

Although the premise of the complimentary visit is so the McKees and the community can show the soldiers appreciation, the gratitude and enjoyment the soldiers experienced made them want to do something in return.

“We will give something back to these people for doing this for us,” Pascal said.

Asked why, another soldier answered.

“This man has a heart as big as anybody I know,” he said of Pascal. “When he returned from Vietnam, he was spat upon, called a baby-killer, shunned, so he, more than anyone else here, knows how much this means to all of us.”