

A man in camouflage gear is shown in profile, looking upwards and to the right. He is wearing a hooded jacket and has a beard. The background is a dense thicket of bare, brown branches, suggesting a wooded area in late autumn or winter. The lighting is soft and natural, highlighting the textures of the branches and the man's clothing.

OUTDOORS ISSUE

HOSTING FREEDOM

AN INCREASING NUMBER OF FOREST LANDOWNERS HAVE OPENED THEIR PROPERTY TO MILITARY VETERANS TO HUNT. THE IMPACT, FOR BOTH VETERANS AND LANDOWNERS, CAN BE LIFE CHANGING.

BY PETE WILLIAMS

A group of grizzled men, most in their thirties and early forties, stands alongside the open gate of a four-wheel drive vehicle in the pre-dawn darkness. They wear camouflage and wield rifles. Coffee and cigarettes are consumed. Plans, roles, and routes are discussed in great detail.

This scene could have played out in Afghanistan or Iraq 10 or 15 years earlier when these warriors were younger and on active duty. Instead, the scene is rural southeastern Virginia, though it just as easily could be one of an increasing number of private forest properties around the United States that allow military veterans to hunt.

Such events, organizers say, help veterans cope with PTSD and the transition to a post-military life, especially if that career came to a sudden end due to injury or disability. At the very least, the hunts provide veterans with the chance to engage in the camaraderie and teamwork they find missing in civilian life.

"They've been through a lot and experience things that most of never will have to face," said Bud DePlatchett, who helps organize events for Freedom Hunters, one of dozens of non-profit groups across the United States that believe that hunting can be therapeutic for returning troops. "For a lot of these guys, they miss being with other service members and having a mission or goal for that day. This kind of brings them back."

My family's 720-acre forestland in Windsor, Va., leased to the Central Hill Hunt Club, has hosted veterans for a hunt in recent years during deer season in December. Because of the property's proximity to Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia



"It's our way of giving back. That's the least we can do for these people who have given so much for our country, protecting us every day."

- Jack Arrington, president of the Central Hill (Va.) Hunt Club

Beach, home to SEAL Team Six, among others, the club has hosted a number of active and retired Navy personnel.

Last year the Central Hill Hunt Club took 21 veterans out, part of an all-day event where the club provided three meals and approached local businesses and neighboring hunt clubs for raffle donations, which included a shotgun and a Yeti cooler.

"You get a mix of active, retired, and wounded," said Jack Arrington, president of the hunt club, which dates back to the 1940s, if not earlier. "We had a double amputee who got a buck in the afternoon, which was awesome. We invite them to come back anytime we're going hunting and some take us up on it, which is great."

The relationship started when a member of the hunt club saw a Freedom Hunters booth at a county fair and figured the club and our land would be a good fit.

A similar chance encounter provided the inspiration for an annual hunt in southeast Georgia on land owned by Joe Hopkins, president of the Forest Landowner Foundation and former FLA president. A friend put Hopkins in touch with Friends of American Heroes, an organization that helps veterans on a number of fronts, including providing recreational opportunities.

For eight years, Hopkins's land hosted a three-day bear hunt at his camp in the fall. The veterans would arrive on a Wednesday night, hunt on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, and depart on Sunday. The group usually killed a bear, including a 300-pounder one season, but if nothing else harvested plenty of wild hogs.

While stalking prey in the forest, veterans use combat skills. They're focused and adrenaline is racing. They enjoy the hunts not because they miss war but because they miss the military lifestyle of working as a team and having a regimented, goal-oriented life.

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Special track wheelchairs give veterans with leg amputations the mobility to hunt in the woods.

Because of PTSD, some veterans are on medications. At the end of one hunt on the Hopkins property, one veteran confessed that he'd left his medications at home. But because he'd enjoyed himself and relaxed so much during the hunt weekend, he hadn't felt the need to take them anyway.

"What we're trying to do is get their minds off whatever their problems are - physical or emotional - and second to talk to them about life after the military," said Hopkins, who said he hopes to host similar events after a two-year hiatus because of scheduling issues. "So many of these young men, their career was the military and it gets cut short with an injury. They don't have training for anything else, no other skill set, and they get that mindset that my life is over because I can't do what I want to do."

Jeff Lageman, an FLA member and retired NFL player who lives in Jacksonville not far from the Hopkins property, attended the hunt several times and spoke to the veterans. Though never in the military, he said he could relate to transitioning from an intense, physical career when told his body no longer could handle the rigors of training and performing.



A group of veterans and Central Hill Hunt Club members prepares for a hunt in an open field adjacent to 720 wooded acres in Windsor, Virginia.



For many veterans, group hunts allow them to re-live the camaraderie and experience they enjoyed in the military.

"He let them understand that there were other opportunities out there," Hopkins said.

Veterans say they're tired of the perception that returning troops are unstable people that can't be trusted around guns, a stereotype they feel organized hunting trips can counteract.

For a few years some landowners were cautious about hosting events following the death of Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, who in 2013 invited an ex-Marine to spend time with him on a gun range near his home in Texas. The Marine, who had shown signs of PTSD and depression, shot and killed Kyle and a fellow veteran. The episode fueled discussion about the potential dangers of mixing firearms and PTSD.

DePlatchett had met Kyle several times and spoken to the legendary sniper about hosting Freedom Hunters events in Texas. Because of Kyle's high-profile status as the author of the best-selling autobiography "American Sniper" and the inspiration of a movie starring Bradley Cooper as Kyle, some landowners raised concerns about hosting events after his murder.

"His death took a toll on everybody but it was wrong to look at one tragedy and see it as indicative of a widespread problem," said DePlatchett, who says his group carefully screens veterans before each hunt on the phone or in person.

Hundreds of veterans apply to participate in the hunts at the Freedom Hunters website (www.freedomhunters.org) and some are active military who have been relocated to a part of the country where they don't have a network of friends and opportunities to hunt.

DePlatchett said he's especially proud of the work the organization has done getting veterans who have lost limbs into the woods. Amputees who have lost one or both legs often assume their hunting days are over but Freedom Hunters has raised funds for four track wheelchairs, all-terrain chairs that can go most anywhere.

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, an average of 22 veterans and active-duty personnel commit suicide every day. DePlatchett, who has lost an immediate family member to suicide, encountered a veteran who had lost both legs figuring he'd never hunt again until he was able to go out on a track chair.

"The change I saw in that young man over a couple of days was life changing, for him and for me," DePlatchett said. "I know firsthand what it does to surviving family members when someone takes their own life and I want to prevent other families from ever going through that."

Arrington, the hunt club president on our land in Virginia, said he's expecting the largest Freedom Hunters event ever in December. With an expected 35 veterans, the club is enlisting the help of neighboring clubs.

"It's our way of giving back," Arrington said. "That's the least we can do for these people who have given so much for our country, protecting us every day." ■

Pete Williams is editor of Forest Landowner magazine.



The author's family forestland in Windsor, Va., shown here, has hosted veterans for an annual December deer hunt in recent years.



Private family forestland, especially that managed for deer, is ideal to host active and retired military for hunts. (Photo by Getty Images)

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