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Iowa camp becomes a place of respite for disabled vets



From the [*Des Moines Register*](#). In the picture, Bobby Briggs of Hillsboro gets help pulling his bow in place from Chuck Geertz, President of English River Outfitters Resort, a camp for disabled vets.

The war will be with him every day, but didn't appear to follow to the wooded hills near the English River.

He emerged from a camper and stuck out his hand in friendly greeting. It was small, shiny, flesh-colored but cold, a prosthesis.

"Sorry," said Brad Gruetzner, 27, who lost his right arm in Iraq. "I've been eating too much Burger King."

He turned to the camper to retrieve his hunting bow, his sense of humor following him. The back of his shirt read: "I've been to Iraq twice and all I got to show for it is a plastic arm and a divorce."

The Texas veteran drew back the bow, took aim and flicked a little lever with his tongue that sent the arrow dipping toward the target.

Gruetzner's Labor Day camping weekend in Iowa was courtesy of Chuck Geertz of Tipton. He bought 32 acres of land at \$2,900 per acre five miles east of Washington, Ia., and in a revelatory, nearly tragic moment one day decided to forsake a comfortable military retirement, hunting and fishing on this new playground, and dedicate it to his wounded fellow veterans to use for free.

Out here they find a little peace. And they find their sense of humor again.

Geertz jumped in his four-wheeler to show off the property, which he leased for a year before closing on last month. It butts against 215-acre Sockum Ridge County Park

and its trickling creeks, oak-filled hilly woods and wetlands that are prime for sportsmen.

"Right over here will be the lodge," he pointed. "And the bunkhouse will go over there."

The nonprofit English River Outfitters Resort is up and running, with the group of five veterans over the holiday weekend the first to stay here in donated campers. But it's only the beginning, Geertz hopes, with at least three buildings to raise money for and build, a wetland to dredge and handicapped-accessible hunting blinds to construct.

He had grown up an outdoor sportsman in rural Iowa before traipsing across the world, first as a Marine in 1974, catching the end of the Vietnam War, followed by search and seizure in Panama in 1989 and a stint in the National Guard that took him within 32 miles of Bagdad during the Gulf War in the 1990s.

Geertz, 50, had always used his leave to come back to the quiet fields of Iowa with his gun and fishing pole.

"When I go out and hunt and fish I was by myself, no one there to bother me," he said. "People annoyed me and it was everybody. First thing out of their mouths was, 'How many people did you kill?'"

So when he began planning his retirement two years ago, he dreamed of a chunk of land, full of quiet and wildlife.

"You get away from the hassles, the bankers and irrational people. Just watching animals puts you in a good frame of mind," he said. "I could sit here for hours and I can actually feel my blood pressure go down."

But by then, Geertz began hearing the reports of troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with extensive physical and mental injuries.

As of Sept. 5, 35,390 American military have been injured in the wars, including 401 Iowans, adding almost daily to the 2.3 million disabled American veterans. And that doesn't include those with mental and emotional injury.

Among them was his friend, Geertz said, stopping the four-wheeler next to the hill, where a creek runs along its base. He's a stocky, short-haired man with thick fingers. He pointed them again, up the hill.

"Last year, a vet wanted to come out and hunt," Geertz said. "So he walked up that ridge with his rifle. He sat down by the creek and just started watching. He saw deer, pheasant and bald eagles."

A day later he called Geertz.

"You know Chuck, I was really going up there and not coming back. My intent was to go in the woods and shoot myself. But something washed over me up there. I started seeing turkey and watching deer. It was so peaceful I couldn't do it."

Geertz had heard stories of what was happening to so many war veterans.

"There's a lot of traumatic brain injury and post traumatic stress disorder. They get over to the VA and they clam up about it. They don't talk. So doctors treat them for depression and wonder why the meds aren't working so they give them other ones. Now you've got a vet that's considering suicide," he said.

"But if you can get them out in nature, get them to relax with other vets, it becomes a support group."

An idea came to him, as if on the wings of a pheasant flushed from the prairie grasses: Use this land to help other vets heal.

He formed a nonprofit and told Bob Briggs from nearby Hillsboro about his plans. Briggs was an Iowa National Guard sergeant gravely wounded by a rocket blast four years ago in Iraq.

He wasn't expected to survive but the 40-year-old fought through surgeries and recovery to be able to walk, talk and father his two children. He still can't fully use his left arm and leg, however, and will likely never work again.

Geertz asked him to be his vice president. He cried.

"It's paid off. Now I can work with people not so lucky, show them how to get out in the woods and maybe it will help," he said. "And sitting around with other vets, you feel a whole lot more confidence."

The camp, he stressed, is for any veteran of any war but focuses on the disabled, the hurting.

"I think anybody who puts on the uniform is a hero to us. It takes a lot of heart to put it on," he said, then shuffled away in a sideways limp.

The day was overcast and the fellas are hung over. They partied hard the night before. Deer hunts will begin this fall and some fishing in nearby waters, but whether they catch or bag anything is immaterial. The bonding and revelry around the campfire is not.

Large high-powered rifles popped off in the distance. A couple Vietnam vets with long gray hair and wearing motorcycling gear were firing away. The Iraq veterans jumped a little with each shot.

"I've been on some hunts and got a black buck in Texas," said Brett Wolf, a large man with a military crew cut who sat in a wheelchair, both his legs gone above the knees from a roadside bomb in 2007 in Iraq.

"It meant a lot for me to be able to do it," he said. "It helps us to do what we love."

His friend Gruetzner lines up for another shot with the bow. He said his long recovery from a roadside bomb in 2006 was made worse by his wife "getting a boyfriend while I was in the hospital."

He took off his cap, exposing one side of his head that is scarred and missing hair, and aimed and fired. Thwap. Just off the bull's-eye.

"You just feel normal out here," he said.

Lt. General Leroy Sisco, a retired three-star general and founder of Military Warriors Support Foundation, which helps vets with jobs, education and recreational opportunities, brought the men out here to camp from Texas.

"They had their lives figured out with jobs, kids. Now they lost their legs and they don't want to go through this," he said. "The biggest thing these warriors need is hope."

They don't want pity; they want to shoulder a gun and aim at game like any man. Or just sit by the creek and watch the deer and turkey make their way through the world.

"Someday, one will probably go up to those woods and cap themselves," Geertz said. "It's going to happen and I'm resigned to that. But this land already saved one life. If we can keep doing that ..."