

‘Driving for our heroes’

By Spc. John P. Zumer, 40th PAD

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FORT BRAGG, N.C. — A picture may paint a thousand words, but a smile might reveal even more. In the case of Sgt. 1st Class Shawn Streussnig, his happy grin probably doesn’t scratch the surface of the sights, sounds and smells he soaked in on a sun-washed afternoon.

“Any chance to be around NASCAR means a lot,” said Streussnig, an XVIII Airborne Corps Soldier. He was among the 200 Soldiers invited with their Families to tour the headquarters of Kevin Harvick Incorporated in Kernersville, N.C. on March 27. KHI is an auto racing company headed by NASCAR driver Kevin Harvick and his wife Delana.

The tour and a luncheon, co-hosted by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, not only recognized the contributions of United States military service members, but also heralded the racing union between VFW and KHI. The new team is known as VFW Racing.

The partnership has the potential to benefit multiple parties and not just those hosting the event said Tommy Tradewell, junior vice commander-in-chief, VFW.

“We’re delighted to welcome this new opportunity to showcase the vitality of the VFW. We believe NASCAR supporters will understand the importance of our services,” he said.

The VFW commitment to KHI is significant, with the VFW poised to commit \$1.2 million yearly.

“It’s an investment to the future,” said Tradewell. Millions of people see corporate logos on race cars and he cited the tremendous opportunity to acquaint NASCAR fans, many of whom are military Families, to VFW benefits.

Streussnig agrees. “The VFW gains sponsorship and exposure far exceeding the monetary costs,” he said.

For the majority of fans and guests, however, talk of corporate sponsorship was the last

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thing on their minds. The event was held to thank the troops for their continued efforts, said Kevin Harvick. “We really appreciate everything you do for supporting our country. This is your program,” he said.

Other KHI team members were also quick to thank everyone involved with the event, especially the Soldiers present.

“It (racing) will never be what you guys do for us. None of us can even come close to that,” said Cale Gale, VFW Racing driver, while addressing the lunch crowd.

“We hope we can give you something to get excited about on the racetrack,” added Delana Harvick.

Jennifer Myers, the fiancée of Staff Sgt. Gary Bullard, a soldier assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 82nd Airborne Division, was one of the many fans able to get an autograph and pose for a picture with Kevin Harvick. “The whole experience today was more real than just seeing them on the TV or at the racetrack,” she said.

Myers and many others toured the KHI racing facilities after the luncheon and learned about things involved with fielding a competitive racing team. John Cowart, director of sales and marketing for KHI, spoke of racing aspects that surprised some fans only accustomed to following the sport via television. He actively works with KHI sponsors.

Sponsorship is a “different sell once you have an established team,” said Cowart. Additionally, the cost of fielding a competitive team is significant, he added.

“It costs around \$6.5 million yearly to float a team with one driver,” said Cowart. Race cars, largely custom-built by the almost 80 employees at team headquarters, can cost almost \$150,000, he added.

NASCAR fans may gain another quality team to follow and enjoy this season through the KHI-VFW partnership, but the day’s focus remained on the troops and their Families. Military personnel and Families who are NASCAR fans benefit from the partnership, but more importantly, they may ultimately benefit from a larger and stronger VFW made possible by the new exposure and sponsorship.

Tommie Warren, chief of staff to the deputy commander, Fayetteville VFW Post 6018, and formerly an infantryman with the 82nd Airborne Div., spoke for many.

“I think it’s a fantastic move and it’s going to help a lot of people,” he said. For others, there were more enjoyable things to spend time thinking about such as food, fun and sun available for the taking.

“It never gets old visiting racing shops,” said Streussnig.

Note: Story is courtesy of Fort Bragg's public affairs office and was originally published in the Paraglide, Fort Bragg's hometown newspaper. VFW would like to thank the Paraglide for permission to post.