



VFW Racing Team Meets Wounded Warriors

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WASHINGTON — The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S.-sponsored NASCAR racing team of Kevin Harvick and Ron Hornaday have always been proud of America's defenders, and after yesterday's visit to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, they are even more appreciative of the sacrifice that is sometimes required from those who wear the uniform.

Met by Walter Reed's commanding general, Maj. Gen. Carla Hawley-Bowland, and accompanied by VFW National Commander Glen Gardner and Harvick's wife, DeLana, the team met with seven wounded warriors, all amputees from explosions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"This was an opportunity very few people get to experience," said Harvick, who along with his wife are co-owners of Kevin Harvick, Inc. "I was able to personally say thank you to some of our country's finest men and women who have given so much for all of us. This visit was an eye-opening experience at how far medical research has come, and it was truly an honor to be able to meet and talk with these brave men and women."

Harvick and Hornaday were able to trade stories with the patients about racing, and they listened intently as soldiers talked about their families, how they sustained their wounds, and how long they had been in the military.

"I could listen to those guys talk all day," Harvick said. "Just hearing about their experiences is amazing, and it helps you understand what true courage and loyalty is all about."

Hornaday, who had made a trip to Iraq to visit troops a few years ago, echoed the thoughts of his boss.

"It is incredible to listen to the stories and hear how desperately these patients want to get well only to rejoin their battalion," said Hornaday, a three-time Truck Series champion. "This visit was a real honor. I got the opportunity to shake hands with true heroes. I am so thankful for each and every person in this hospital, not only the patients, but the doctors and nurses who are taking care of them. A visit like this really makes you proud to be an American."

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"No one can meet a wounded veteran and walk away unchanged," said the VFW's Gardner. "A firm handshake or a slap on the back is wonderful, but knowing that there are grateful Americans who recognize and appreciate your service is far better. I am grateful to Walter Reed for the opportunity."

Walter Reed currently has about 30 inpatients and 680 outpatients who are Iraq or Afghanistan veterans. Since 9/11, more than 10,000 current war servicemen and women have been through the hospital, which is scheduled to merge with the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., in 2011.

The Army also used yesterday's visit to present Hornaday and the Harvicks with Freedom Team Salute commendations in recognition of their strong support of soldiers. The commendations, which are signed by Army Secretary Pete Geren and Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr., is part of a program established in 2005 to formally recognize individuals within the civilian and military communities who actively support the Army and its soldiers.