

‘Phenomenal’ Dinners Accelerate the Healing Process

The Aleethia Foundation has hosted Friday Night Dinners for wounded warriors since 2003 and the VFW has helped sponsor the dinners for the past eight years

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During a cool March evening at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., service members and veterans were able to take a break. They were laughing, relaxing and, even for a couple of hours, not thinking about the treatment they were receiving at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in nearby Bethesda, Md.

Since 2003, wounded warriors from Walter Reed have gathered for the Aleethia Foundation’s Friday Night Dinners. Foundation founder and executive director Hal Koster, a life member of VFW Post 2562 in Silver Spring, Md., said these dinners are an important part of the healing process.

“In the beginning, we saw mostly combat injured service members at the dinner,” said Koster, a Vietnam War Army veteran who served as a helicopter door gunner with the 174th Assault Helicopter Company. “We have now transitioned into providing a night away from the hospital to patients who have cancer, [traumatic brain injuries] and other illnesses.”

GETTING AWAY TO ‘FEEL HUMAN AGAIN’

Retired Marine Corps Maj. Richard Burkett, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, said he has attended about 50 dinners since first arriving as a patient at Walter Reed in 2012.

“This dinner is always something to look forward to,” Burkett said. “It’s great to get out of the hospital and having some phenomenal food. They made it really easy to leave the hospital to get away for a few hours and feel human again.”

Burkett, a former Osprey pilot, was injured when his aircraft crashed in northwest Africa.

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He needed to have his right leg amputated because of his injuries.

Burkett said he has been getting treatment for an infection in his left leg that developed after the right-leg amputation.

Since 2010, VFW National Headquarters has supported the Aleethia Foundation and has sponsored 17 Friday Night Dinners. In total, VFW has donated more than \$72,000 to the wounded warrior dinners.

‘THERE IS SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO’

The VFW-sponsored Friday Night Dinners also give VFW National Legislative Service Associate Director Patrick Murray a chance to connect with some of the wounded warriors.

In 2006, Murray, a former Marine Corps machine gunner, also was being treated at Walter Reed after a blast from an improvised explosive device caused his right leg to be amputated.

“I learned about the Friday Night Dinners while recovering at Walter Reed,” said Murray, who was wounded in Fallujah, Iraq. “The dinner was a really great opportunity to get out of the hospital for an evening. It was always a great escape.”

Murray, a life member of VFW Post 3150 in Arlington, Va., said it’s “rewarding” to go to the dinners, as well as spend time with and talk to men and women who are recovering from a wound, injury or illness.

“They might feel down in the dumps and that things are getting over their head, but I try to let them know there is a future and there is something to look forward to,” Murray said. “I get to go back and tell them that I was where they were a decade ago, and now, I’m here working for VFW. I let them know to keep their heads up and not let their bad situation overtake them.”

Koster said he originally didn’t plan for the dinners to go this long.

“We expected to quit these dinners as soon as the combat-injured troops stopped coming in,” Koster said. “But we learned that patients who are at Walter Reed for other than combat injuries also want a night out from the hospital and a chance to get away.”

Koster, who is retired, said he plans to organize dinners with the Aleethia Foundation for the “foreseeable future.” The next VFW-sponsored dinner will be Dec. 14.

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