

Four Purple Heart Vets Hunt on the Great Plains

Four wounded Vietnam War veterans participated in an antelope hunt in ‘Big Sky Country’ which was sponsored by VFW magazine and Doonan Gulch Outfitters

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Hunting, much like war, forms a bond between people of different backgrounds. This holds true for the disabled veterans who participated in this year’s 35th annual VFW magazine — and Doonan Gulch Outfitters — sponsored antelope hunt. Four Vietnam War veterans participated in hunting antelope, sightseeing and conversations.

Located 25 miles west of Broadus, Mont., Doonan Gulch Outfitters is owned and operated by Russ and Carol Greenwood. Russ Greenwood said Carol and he started hosting the annual hunt in 1982 because they didn’t like the way Vietnam War veterans were treated when they came home.

Russ Greenwood also has a personal connection to Vietnam War veterans. His twin brother — Roger, a member of VFW Post 987 in Black River Falls, Wisc. — flew helicopters during the war. The Greenwoods started hosting disabled veterans 20 years ago. Since then, Doonan Gulch Outfitters has hosted veterans of every generation since the Vietnam War.

‘We didn’t dwell on the war’

George Stavropoulos, 71, was the most decorated veteran on the trip. He served as a Navy corpsman with 1st Plt., Charlie Co., 1st Bn., 9th Marines.

Stavropoulos, a VFW Department of Indiana member, arrived in Vietnam in April 1967 and was in the I Corps region — places such as Khe Sanh, Con Thien, Dong Ha and Camp Carroll — his whole deployment.

“I wasn’t there that long myself,” Stavropoulos said. “I was in no-man’s land the whole time

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I was in the field. That other part, I was in the hospital.”

Stavropoulos received four Purple Hearts for multiple shrapnel wounds on three different days. He earned his first Purple Heart after receiving a single gunshot wound to his right calf and his second Purple Heart after receiving shrapnel wounds in his back and legs from mortar rounds after an attack near Quang Tri City.

Stavropoulos received his third and fourth Purple Hearts, as well as the Silver Star, on July 2, 1967, when his unit was near Vietnam’s demilitarized zone (DMZ). That day, he was shot two times — once through his left knee and once through his left shoulder.

“After I got hit the second time, I really didn’t think I was going to live through it,” Stavropoulos said. “But thinking I was going to die kept me going. I wasn’t going to just lay down and die.”

Stavropoulos described his left shoulder wound as a “catastrophic injury.”

“My shoulder was dislocated on impact,” he said. “I was scared, and I was scared for all of us, because we got annihilated. I was afraid we would get hit again and that the North Vietnamese would overrun us again.”

Stavropoulos said that he was the last person from his company medevaced from the area at the time.

“We left no wounded behind,” Stavropoulos said. “We made it to an opening where several battalions of Marines were reinforcing us I made sure all of my guys were medevaced. I left nobody in my company — that I know of — that was wounded. I think that had to do a lot with earning the Silver Star.”

He was taken to 12th Air Force Hospital in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, where he stayed for three months. After, he was sent to Okinawa, Japan, for treatment then to a naval hospital in Long Beach, Calif. After spending a few days there, Stavropoulos was transferred to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, where he recuperated until June 1968.

After leaving the military, Stavropoulos became a police officer in southern California. He now lives in Fishers, Ind.

Stavropoulos, now retired, said this was his “first true hunting trip” and that it was “an amazing experience.”

“I will always count this VFW-afforded opportunity as one of the top things that has ever happened in my life,” Stavropoulos said. “I can’t say enough about Russ and Carol’s commitment to veterans.”

He also said that, even though he had many conversations with the other Vietnam War veterans in Montana, “No war stories were shared.”

“We didn’t dwell on the war,” Stavropoulos said. “A lot of people have a misconception of Vietnam veterans — that we all have PTSD or all of us exaggerate our wounds — and all of it is negative.”

‘It’s all about camaraderie’

Roger Canter, 68, also said the hunt was special. Canter, a life member of Post 8402 in Jackson, Ohio, said the trip meant more to him than “just a hunt in Montana.”

“It’s all about camaraderie,” Canter said. “We sat back and listened to each other’s stories about what we went through with our recoveries.”

Canter said he appreciates VFW magazine for the opportunity to hunt with fellow disabled veterans.

“I’ve had a wonderful time,” he said. “If anyone gets the opportunity to come, they should, because it is well worth it.”

Canter, who served in the Army with 2nd Squad, 2nd Plt., B Co., 5th Bn., 12 Inf. Reg., 199th Light Inf. Bde., was sent to Vietnam in September 1969. He was an infantryman and assistant machine gunner stationed at Firebase Libby, north of Saigon.

Canter was sent to Cambodia for a “search and destroy” mission on May 12, 1970, and was wounded four days later while on patrol. He received shrapnel in the elbow and shoulder from a rocket-propelled grenade. Canter said the wounds caused nerve damage in his right arm and that he now has “minimal use and feeling” in his right hand. He also received a bullet through his abdomen that exited through his right hip socket.

“It felt like a sledgehammer hit me,” Canter said. “The next thing I know, there was a boom and I went up. It was within a few seconds of one another.”

He was medevaced to a field hospital, where he spent more than two weeks before he was sent to a hospital in Japan. There, he spent more than three months in a full body cast.

After returning stateside, Canter recovered at a hospital in Valley Forge, Pa. He spent about 14 months in hospitals before his medical discharge. He served in the Army a total of two years, two months and 22 days.

Canter still suffers from nerve damage in his left elbow and left hand, and the attack also caused damage to his left rotator cuff in his left shoulder. He is rated 100 percent disabled

by the VA and visits Chillicothe VA Medical Center in Ohio for his medical needs.

“I’ve had three hip replacements since Vietnam,” Canter said.

After leaving the Army, Canter married his wife, Barbara, and worked for the Ohio Department of Transportation as an assistant traffic engineer for 20 years. He has been married for 45 years and has two children, Laura Hays and Randy Canter. The Vietnam War veteran retired in 1991.

In recent years, Canter said he has been unable to hunt because of problems stemming from his wounds. But for the Montana antelope hunt, Canter received help from his 16-year-old grandson, Scott Hays.

“He has been doing everything for me during the hunt,” Canter said. “It’s been great having him out here.”

‘We talked about our families’

Like Canter, Harry Zimmermann, a life member of VFW Post 3972 in Cuero, Texas, said he has hunted in the past, but has been unable to in recent years because of problems stemming from his wounds.

“I love to hunt, but I can’t climb and walk very far anymore,” Zimmermann said.

Zimmermann served in the Marine Corps with 3rd Plt., Delta Co., 1st Bn., 3rd Marines. He arrived in Vietnam in July 1968 as a private 1st class. Six weeks later, Zimmermann was a part of a battle at Nui Cay Tre Ridge in the Quang Tri province, known to Marines as Mutter’s Ridge. He said two men in his fire team were killed, and he was wounded by shrapnel from mortar rounds.

“They got the rest of my platoon the next morning,” Zimmermann said. “[It was as if] my whole platoon was either dead or wounded. I don’t know how many were killed or wounded, but we took an ass beating over there. I have no desire to go back.”

Zimmermann was medevaced to a field hospital in Phu Bai after receiving wounds all over his body. One piece of shrapnel was lodged near his third vertebra.

“I had a hot piece of metal near my spine,” Zimmermann said. “The first thing that came to my mind was check and see if my legs could move — they did. When my legs moved, I knew my spine wasn’t cut in two.”

Zimmermann said he still suffers from lower back pain because of his wounds. He is rated 100 percent disabled by the VA and regularly visits a VA clinic in Victoria, Texas, and the Audie L. Murphy Memorial VA Hospital in San Antonio.

After recovering for a month at a hospital on Okinawa, Japan, and for two months at a naval hospital on Guam, Zimmerman was sent back to his unit in Vietnam. He left Vietnam August 1969 and served in an MP chaser platoon until November 1970 when he left the Marine Corps. Afterward, Zimmermann worked as a carpenter in southern Texas. He and his wife, Mae, have two sons, Dwayne and Anthony. Mae Zimmermann is a VFW Auxiliary member.

“We talked about our families,” Zimmerman said of his interactions with the other hunters. “And we bonded over our experiences in Vietnam.”

But for another veteran on the trip, those war experiences are difficult to recall.

‘What I don’t remember haunts me’

Larry Baker joined the Army when he was 17 years old and arrived in Vietnam on Dec. 21, 1967. He referred to himself as the “tunnel rat” for D Co., 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt., 11th Light Inf. Bde., Americal Div.

Years after leaving Vietnam, VA doctors determined that Baker suffered a TBI during a search-and-destroy mission. He was wounded by a booby trap bomb blast on May 1, 1968, in a small village near Mo Duc in Southern Quang Ngai Province.

He said that injury left him with “memory loss” and shrapnel fragmentation wounds to his face, left arm and chest.

He also received nerve damage to his left arm and burns to eyes and face.

The blast also distorted his recollection of the incident. Baker said what he remembers “didn’t actually happen” and, that in his mind, he ran away after the explosion — essentially abandoning his men in the field. That is not what happened.

“What I don’t remember haunts me,” Baker said. “It took me 45 years to learn that I didn’t do that.”

Baker learned about what really happened in 2012 when he went to his unit’s reunion. Baker’s former battalion commander, Col. James Franklin, also was there.

“[Franklin] told me: ‘I know who you are — I was with you when you got injured,’ ” Baker said. “He said the bomb blew me back to the door post, and I passed out unconscious — I didn’t run anywhere.

“I always felt guilty because I thought I had abandoned my guys, because I thought I ran away,” he continued. “I felt better about it. Col. Franklin told me that I didn’t abandon anyone.”

The shrapnel wounds to Baker's left arm and chest caused some loss of mobility and nerve damage. He also received a frag wound to his face, including his eyes. Almost 50 years later, Baker still has shrapnel in his right eye.

"It doesn't bother me," Baker said. "They can't take it out anyway."

After he was wounded, Baker was medevaced to a small field hospital at Landing Zone Bronco at Duc Pho in Quang Ngai Province.

Baker said he did some research and determined he then ended up at a field hospital in Chu Lai, and then went to the 91st Evacuation Hospital in Tuy Hoa, where he spent a month.

"My eyes were bandaged, and I was blinded," Baker said. "Because in the bomb blast, my eyes got burned pretty badly."

After receiving additional treatment in Japan, Baker eventually returned stateside and ended his treatment at Fort Hood, Texas.

He was honorably discharged in April 1969.

Baker returned home to Cody, Wyo., and married his wife, Adrienne. He retired in 2011 after working 27 years as an emergency medical technician in Cody.

Baker gave thanks to VFW magazine for the opportunity to hunt antelope and meet other veterans.

"It is helping veterans by giving them a chance to have some additional healing," Baker said. "It's not about shooting antelope. It goes so much deeper than that."

Baker said he appreciates what the Greenwoods do for veterans.

"I know a lot of outfitters, and they are just in it for the money," Baker said. "That's not the case for Russ and Carol [Greenwood]. They don't have to do this, but they choose to bring veterans into their home. It's their way of giving back."

This article is featured in the February 2018 issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), senior writer, VFW magazine. Photo by Dave Spiva.