

# 'They are My Heroes'

## Disabled veterans enjoyed free hunting trips to Montana for nearly 40 years courtesy of VFW and Russ Greenwood

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It's clear that veterans hold a special place in the hearts of an outfitter and his associates in the rolling hills of southeastern Montana. Russ Greenwood and his wife, Carol, are the owners of Doonan Gulch Outfitters near Broadus, Montana. For more than 40 years, they hosted and sponsored free antelope hunting trips for disabled veterans at their ranch, about 170 miles east of Billings, Montana.

The idea for the hunt began formulating in Russ's mind in 1975 after the fall of Saigon, two years after U.S. troops had returned home from the Vietnam War. Russ's twin brother, Roger, served in the war as a pilot with the 336th Assault Helicopter Co., 13th Combat Aviation Bn., 1st Aviation Bde. Roger was based at Soc Trang, about 100 miles southwest of Saigon in Vietnam's Mekong Delta region. He served in country from December 1966 to December 1967.

Russ says he was angered by the treatment his brother and other Vietnam War veterans faced at home after the war.

"I wanted to show my appreciation for their service," Russ said. "They didn't get the respect they deserved for what they sacrificed over there."

### **'THEY NEVER COMPLAIN'**

Roger, who retired from the Wisconsin Army National Guard in 1992 as a brigadier general, served as a captain and flew Huey helicopters during his tour in Vietnam. He turned 27 while in the war zone and called it "the best job I ever had."

He noted that he flew 1,079 hours, including 750 combat hours, while in Vietnam without "ever taking a hit or losing any of my crew." Roger says the fellow Vietnam veterans he's met in Montana on the antelope hunting trips through the years reaffirmed the quality of character he experienced among the troops who served alongside him in Vietnam.

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“Memories from the war fade, but these guys live with what happened over there every day,” Roger said. “They deal with it daily, and they never complain. They are my heroes.”

Roger was accompanied on a September trip to the ranch by his son, Kevin, a veteran of 1991’s Persian Gulf War who also served as a helicopter pilot. Both men are life members of VFW Post 987 in Baraboo, Wisconsin. The Greenwood Memorial Post is named for Roger and Russ’s father, who served in the Navy during World War II.

Through the years, many catastrophically wounded vets — several of whom are triple amputees as a result of their service — have participated.

Their upbeat demeanor despite their grievous wounds has been a source of inspiration and awe for those who worked the hunts.

“I never heard any of them complain,” Russ said. “After hunting all day, their stumps were always sore, and it can be tough on a lot of them. But no matter how they were hurting, so many of them would be smiling, cracking jokes and enjoying the camaraderie. It was always amazing.”

His wife, Carol, who has received effusive praise over the years from visiting hunters for her “wonderful” homecooked meals and warm personality, noted the graciousness that vets have showed her.

“They always strived to do for themselves,” said Carol, who has been married to Russ for 57 years. “Whether it be pouring coffee for others or helping to clear the table, I don’t recall hunters on our non-veteran hunts doing that.”

Carol added that she gets “Christmas cards from all over the country” from veterans who have visited her and Russ’s ranch. Indeed, Russ and Carol’s large wooden dining table, where meals are served to hunters three times a day, became a favorite gathering place. An important part of the experience for many was sharing the camaraderie and stories that had led them to Russ and Carol’s ranch.

### **INSPIRED BY DISABLED VETERANS**

VFW’s involvement began in 1984 when it first sponsored a trip to Montana for a disabled Vietnam veteran. The trip expanded to include four disabled veterans — one sponsored by Russ and the other three sponsored by VFW magazine — in 1997. That continued until the final VFW co-sponsored hunt in 2019. In recognition of Russ’s nearly 40 years of hosting the hunt, VFW presented him with a plaque this year recognizing the commitment.

Many interesting characters have been part of the hunts over the years. One is John Smith, a neighbor of Russ and Carol’s, who has served as a hunting guide for the last 25 years.

Smith, a third-generation rancher whose family has owned the land he, his wife and daughter live on since the early 1900s, has always been popular with the hunters. An unassuming but genuine cowboy, Smith enjoys recalling his time spent over the years helping guide the disabled vets on their quest for an antelope.

One of Smith's favorite hunters was Gary Bartlett, an Army infantryman from Kansas who lost both legs at the hip when he stepped on a land mine in 1968 in Vietnam. Smith remembered a story Bartlett, who participated in the 1998 hunt, told him about returning to Kansas after his recovery at Fitzsimons Army Medical Center in Aurora, Colorado.

"Gary kept us laughing the whole time he was here," Smith said. "He told me he got a new car when he got home from Colorado and promptly wrecked it and skidded into a cornfield.

When the police arrived and found him in the car, he began yelling, 'Find my legs! Find my legs!'"

Through the years, Smith said he's learned a lot from and been inspired by the positive attitudes and behavior of men whose service to the nation have left them permanently disabled.

"I have the utmost respect for these veterans," Smith said. "Patience is not my thing, but I learned that I just needed to slow down and give them as much time as necessary. As I get older, I see the younger veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan who are disabled, and it really bothers me knowing what they will face later in their lives."

## **PASSING THE TORCH**

Russ, now 81, has turned over his hunting business to his and Carol's daughter, Vicki. The veterans hunt has been a huge part of Vicki's life. She moved to Montana with Russ and Carol at the age of 10. Vicki herself has hunted since she was a child in Wisconsin and continues to serve as a guide. She works as a 911 coordinator in Belle Fourche, South Dakota, about 95 miles southeast of Broadus, where she has worked for more than 20 years. She lives in Spearfish, South Dakota.

Vicki said she keeps in touch with several vets and even got her dog from one who came to Montana from Alaska. She remembered on one occasion taking some of the vets to a local bar and, as she held the door open for a veteran amputee, he told her as he wheeled past: "If anyone asks, I'll tell them it was a hunting accident gone horribly wrong and there's the guy responsible."

Vicki, who added that she gives veterans a 10 percent discount on hunts at Doonan Gulch, said she gets regular texts and emails from veterans who have participated in the hunts over the years.

“It’s like a family and it expands every year,” she said. “It’s the best part of guiding.”

A visitor to the friendly atmosphere at Doonan Gulch Outfitters notices quickly how the Greenwoods and John Smith speak with great reverence and admiration for the veterans who participate. But none of them evoke sympathy or pity.

Life in southeastern Montana can be as tough as it is liberating. These folks are shaped by their way of life, and for that reason, it is not surprising that they respect what these disabled veterans have had to overcome to live productive lives.

For Russ, offering these hunts to veterans over the years has been extremely fulfilling. He’s been able to pay tribute to his brother and all Vietnam War veterans.

“It’s great to do something for these vets,” Russ said. “They never expected a ‘thank you’ like this, and they are always very appreciative. It’s the highlight of our year to host veterans on this hunt.”

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