

VFW Members Operate Retreat for Wounded Vets

A cabin nestled in South Dakota's Black Hills has offered respite for nearly 140 veterans and their families for more than a decade

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For the past 12 years, family after family has asked, “Why are they so kind?” The question refers to the community welcome and support experienced by combat-wounded veterans and their families during a week spent at a cabin in Custer, South Dakota.

The cabin experience, offered by the 501(c)3 non-profit called [Operation Black Hills Cabin](#), is a therapeutic respite for disabled veterans and their families. It is no secret that when a service member is wounded in combat, it affects the whole family. The structure of the family is permanently altered as it focuses on providing the care the veteran needs, and “family time” takes a back seat to the recovery process. Military families have observed that time is of the utmost importance, but it is lacking in their new normal daily lives.

Operation Black Hills Cabin responds to this need and provides unparalleled quality family time. The peaceful, leisurely environment gives them an opportunity to disconnect from the stress of their post-combat daily routine and reconnect with each other.

The idea for Operation Black Hills Cabin originated in February 2011. Jeff and Pat Baird were watching a segment of the “The Oprah Winfrey Show” about the difficulties faced by a combat-wounded Afghanistan veteran and his family. At the conclusion of the segment, Oprah challenged the audience and viewers by saying, “What can you do to help?”

The Bairds are a retired military couple, each of whom served 20 years in the U.S. Air Force and North Dakota Air National Guard. They felt a special bond with the wounded veterans who were coming home after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Wanting to do more than simply write a check, the Bairds decided to capitalize on the “paradise” where they live — the Black Hills.

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“What better place to provide a chance for these families to reconnect with each other and enjoy our area and all it has to offer,” Pat said.

And so, Operation Black Hills Cabin was born.

SAYING ‘THANK YOU’

The concept was immediately embraced by Custer City and the surrounding community because it was seen as a way to say thank you to the veterans and their families for their service and sacrifice.

Perhaps the kindness and compassion shown by the community coincides with the fact that so many of the volunteers, donors and supporters of the operation are veterans themselves. These vets have seen combat in Vietnam, the Gulf War, the Balkans as well as Afghanistan and Iraq, so they know first-hand the sacrifices involved in military service.

Operation Black Hills Cabin is run entirely by volunteers and donations. The Cabin itself was donated by the South Dakota Housing Authority. It was escorted 375 miles to Custer by the Patriot Guard Riders.

The 1,200-square-foot cabin sits on a wooded one-acre lot that has been leased from the city of Custer for 30 years for \$1 per year. It is handicap accessible and has three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a fully stocked kitchen and laundry room.

There is no television or internet at the cabin, but the families stay free, and they have a wide variety of possible activities in the Black Hills.

The local business community enthusiastically supports the cabin, and each family is given coupons for free admission to many local attractions, such as Mount Rushmore, the Crazy Horse Memorial and Custer State Park. Free or reduced-priced meals at local restaurants also are provided.

Many of the volunteers and supporters are not only veterans from all branches of military service, but also are members of VFW Post 3442 in Custer.

This includes four of the five members of the cabin’s board of directors. Jeff and Pat served on active duty in the Air Force during the Vietnam era and subsequently in the North Dakota Air National Guard.

While assigned to the 23rd Bomb Squadron as a B-52 Tailgunner, Jeff deployed twice to Southeast Asia in 1973. His unit operated from U-Tapao Air Base in Thailand and Andersen Air Force Base on Guam. Jeff is a VFW Life member. Pat is a life VFW Auxiliary member.

Martin Mahrt, another VFW Life member, is a decorated Vietnam War fighter pilot.

Assigned to the 333rd Tactical Fighter Squadron based at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand from 1965-66, he flew the Republic F-105 Thunderchief on 102 combat missions in Vietnam.

The fourth board member, Mary Burns, is a VFW Auxiliary member. She is married to cabin supporter Dale Christensen, a Vietnam War veteran who is a VFW Life member. Christensen served in the Air Force as a patrol dog (K-9) handler. Deployed to Vietnam from 1971 to 1972, he served with the 12th Security Police Squadron at Phu Cat Air Base and the 483rd Security Police Squadron at Cam Ranh Bay Air Base.

The fifth board member, Ione Fejfar, was a prominent member of the Custer business community and is a native of South Dakota.

VFW Post 3442 supports Operation Black Hills Cabin. It donates, in collaboration with Jenny's Floral, a bouquet of fresh flowers to each family on their day of arrival at the cabin. It also donates a free dinner to the family during their stay when the VFW is serving meals.

More than 150 local businesses, churches, schools and various organizations support the cabin, along with hundreds of individuals, all of whom have contributed time and a wide variety of unique items and services.

Donations to the cabin are only limited by people's imaginations. Area quilt guilds make and present a Quilt of Valor to eligible veterans.

Another local resident donated Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine flags so that each family would not only see a U.S. flag at the cabin during their stay, but also the flag of the veteran's service.

The 34th Aircraft Maintenance Unit at Ellsworth Air Force Base, along with the students of the South Dakota School of Mines, built a Healing Hike course on the cabin's property. The hike is a path that winds around the property and includes picnic tables, benches, a hammock and inspirational quotes sand-blasted into the rocks along the way.

It is a quiet, natural setting for reflection and viewing local wildlife. A Custer Boy Scout, for his Eagle Scout project, built and donated a shed to store supplies and lawn maintenance equipment for the volunteers who maintain the property and clean the cabin every week.

The local elementary and high schools also contribute. For example, one Custer High School senior raised funds to buy and donate a microwave oven. This past spring, the fifth-grade class at Custer Elementary School donated \$747, which they raised at their annual Living History Fair.

The cabin operates from Memorial Day to the end of September and can host up to 17

families a year. Since its beginning, 139 families from 36 states have stayed at the cabin.

The biggest challenge Operation Black Hills Cabin has faced over the years is getting the word out about this unique opportunity for qualified veterans. To qualify, a veteran must be a minimum of 30 percent combat injured from any post-9/11 military operation. Warrior Transition Unit members also are eligible. Qualified veterans can apply at any time. The application and further information are available at: www.operationblackhillscabin.org.

This article is featured in the 2023 August issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Retired Army Col. Deborah Hanagan who is a volunteer with Operation Black Hills Cabin.