



By Glenn Rolfe (<mailto:grolfe@iniusa.org>)

LONG NECK — Entering its 16th year, the Warrior Weekend Program is continuing its mission to provide relaxing, fun getaways for injured military heroes, their spouses and families.

To get it there, the nonprofit relies heavily on support from organizations and the community at large, said its president, Jim Lafferty.

Recently, AMVETS Post 2 in Long Neck offered significant assistance, a \$16,350 check raised by twice-weekly HOTSHOTS card games — a donation Mr. Lafferty called a “tremendous help.”

That’s because the average cost of a four-day trip for military personnel and their families is approximately \$5,000. The service members the program assists are patients at Fort Belvoir in Virginia.

The AMVETS funding will cover three out of the seven trips scheduled for 2023. Post 2 has been supporting Warrior Weekend for about a year.

“We’re a veterans’ organization,” said its commander, Dave Heffline. “We’re a nonprofit organization, and our sole purpose is to support veteran services and veterans throughout the community and area.

“It is what our people consider to be a fantastic program. I mean six of our board members, including myself, are basically decorated Vietnam veterans. So it’s really important to us, knowing the conditions of some of our wounded veterans.”

Last year, 118 injured heroes and loved ones were the guests of the Harbeson-based Warrior Weekend Program, in expeditions to Philadelphia, Hersheypark, Rehoboth Beach and Chincoteague, Virginia.

The enterprise, launched in 2007 and with 105 vacations under its belt, has operated annually, even during the pandemic. “The hospital let the troops out, as long as they wore masks and used their own vehicles,” Mr. Lafferty said. “Troops were exceptionally happy to get off base.”

The trips traditionally take place between spring and fall but not in August, as that coincides with the American Legion National Convention, he said.

Additionally, there are businesses, hotels and veteran organizations that partner with Warrior Weekend to give the guests royal treatment. One example is a pontoon boat company in Chincoteague, whose operators offer tours around the island and ask for nothing, other than sub sandwiches. Another is NFL Films, which has been part of the Philadelphia itinerary and gifts the visitors with regulation helmets from their favorite teams.

And the Rehoboth Beach trip often includes American Legion Post 28 Auxiliary's Elvis show, featuring Bob Loughheed & the Memphis Mafia.

Guests are not required to participate in all the planned activities. The only obligation is that everyone gathers for dinners.

"It's very flexible, and that is one of the things we liked about that. (It's) not so rigid, (like) you're going to do this, this and that," Mr. Heffline said. "We feel this is more important to veterans than anything. Basically, you get in your own space and enjoy yourself, whether it be with your family, your kids."

He said he appreciates the use of the funding locally.

"It's not like someone giving \$10,000 to a program where it is spread throughout the country, and you never know where it is going or what it is doing. Here, we know. We can see exactly what is happening," he added. "It's something we enjoy. We plan on continuing as long as we can."

In recent years, the Warrior Weekend Program has witnessed a boost in the number of guests joining the excursions.

"Now, there's a lot of senior, higher-echelon enlisted personnel and officers," said Mr. Lafferty. "They all have families and have their own vehicles. They would much rather drive their own vehicles. So, rather than use our van, we reimburse them for travel. And all meals, rooms and entertainment — we pick up the tab."

He added that, after hearing input from the effort's early guests, the initial three-day weekends turned into four.

"What we do is hand them a comment sheet, ... (asking them to) let us know (what they) think of the program and how can we improve it? What they said was the weekends were not long enough. We submitted a proposal to medical and legal staff at Fort Belvoir that we increase the weekend to Thursday through Sunday," Mr. Lafferty said.

The additional time off allows more reconnection for families.

“One of our conditions was that (the injured veterans) not be charged annual leave for that extra day and make it part of their recovery process. The government finally agreed,” he said.

With ongoing aid, Warrior Weekend remains on stable ground.

“And, to me, it’s probably the best job I’ve ever had, even though there is no salary,” Mr. Lafferty said. “Our reward is watching the smiles on their faces, of troops and families. That’s what our program is all about: It’s about smiles.”