

Community cruises for wounded warriors



Neckarsteinach was the destination for the four-castle illumination cruise the Rhein-Neckar Silver Chapter of the Warrant Officer Association held for about 50 wounded warriors stationed in Heidelberg, Landstuhl and Mannheim.

Warrant Officer Association provides day of fun, relaxation for local injured troops

By Kristen Marquez
HERALD POST STAFF

The Rhein-Neckar Silver Chapter of the Warrant Officer Association hosted a day for wounded warriors Saturday, treating them to a barbecue and riverboat cruise to Neckarsteinach for the annual four-castle illumination.

Around 50 wounded warriors, some from Landstuhl Regional Medical Center and others from the Heidelberg and Mannheim Warrior Transition Units, were treated to the day as guests of the association.

This was all in cooperation with the Wounded Warrior Program, a one-man volunteer program started and run by retired Marine Chief Warrant Officer 3 Bill Black, who said he started

the program simply as a way to give back to those who are doing so much for the country.

"Their enthusiasm is overwhelming," he said. "It's the first day for them in months when they haven't been told what to do or where to be, and a lot of them are still in what I call their 'force-protection mindset' - very jumpy, watching people for some suspicious movement, observing bridges and buildings as if they were potential ambush sites. There's only one order I give them on the tour - 'Relax and enjoy yourself; let me do the worrying for the day.' And by the end of the day, they've always decompressed enough that they're laughing and joking, like any other tourist. It's worth it every time I do it."

Beginning with a barbecue cook-

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-Chief Warrant Officer 4 Tom Fisk, WOA president

out at the Warrant Officer's Hut on Tompkins Barracks in Schwetzingen, the warriors then went on a tour of the Heidelberg castle before boarding the "Alt Heidelberg" for the approximately four-hour cruise on the Neckar River.

The Warrant Officer Association has been doing the river boat rides since 1992 as a fundraiser for scholarship donations, according to current chap-

ter president Chief Warrant Officer 4 Tom Fisk. Last year, the association donated \$5,500 in scholarships to graduating seniors from Heidelberg and Mannheim high schools.

"Since 2004 we started inviting the wounded warriors to participate in our boat rides," Fisk said.

Lance Cpl. Casey Holliday, 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, 2nd Marine Division, was one of the wounded warriors from Landstuhl who attended the day's activities.

"They took us to a barbecue in Heidelberg, Germany, and they are here to support us," he said. "During these events ... we get to meet other Marines, other warriors from down-range, down in country that have similar issues that are wounded, and we all get to come together to talk to each other, explain each other's situation. People from the same place that you're at makes things a lot easier."

In total, 307 community members and wounded warriors took the boat ride together, to see the illumination of four castles high above the river in Neckarsteinach, followed by a fireworks display. Community member Michele Barber said the trip was enjoyable.

"Seeing the four castles smoldering as if they were in flames on the hillside was like nothing I've ever seen before," she said. "I had no idea we'd be able to see all four of them at the same time. Fireworks are always fun, and this was a good show. They saved the best for last with the waterfall fireworks on each of the castles. It was a really spectacular show and cruise."

Throughout the cruise, passengers could purchase raffle tickets for prizes, ranging from portable DVD players to cases of wine. The money from the raffles also goes back into supporting the community through the WOA.

"For the wounded warriors, it is a chance to sit back and enjoy a good meal and great conversation, and it allows them to unwind and forget for a moment the events that brought them to us," Fisk said.

The next WOA river boat cruise is scheduled for Sept. 5 for the Heidelberg Castle illumination. For details, call DSN 370-8286, civ. 06221-57-8286 or visit www.Rhein-NeckarSilver.com.