



Locals Share Hope & Light with Veterans

By Brian Whitt
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How do you repay the veteran who has fought and bled for you, and come home weary and scarred?

Can you even begin to understand their sacrifices, beyond what you see in the news?

In the past few years, several Mills County landowners have taken part in an effort to give something back to those who give so much for this country, and in doing so have found a sense of satisfaction and connection both humbling and inspiring.

Rickie and Janice Smith are among the Mills County families who host deer hunting for soldiers each year. Through a contact they made at Fort Gates in 2016, the Smiths were able to give seventeen U.S. Military officers a place to unwind this year, and the rewards have been great for both the hosts and their guests.

"It's been a great thing for us and for the soldiers," Rickie Smith said last week.

What the Smiths and other Mills County landowners offer U.S. soldiers is an experience they will never forget, a combination of local hospitality, friendship, outdoor adventure, and relief from the weight of their duties. In other words, the soldiers are treated like family. Both sides learn something in the process - local families learn what it means to fight for this country, and the soldiers learn about life in Mills County.

Smith has no difficulty recalling the first veteran his family hosted for a hunt. The soldier's reaction to bringing down a six point buck was unforgettable.

"You would have thought his team won the Super Bowl. You know, this is a guy who'd been to combat and everything else, and to see that was pretty awesome," said



A few of the veterans who have hunted deer on Rickie Smith's property in Mills County.

Smith.

About four years ago, Janice Smith accidentally grazed a veteran's car with her bumper while she was in a Killeen hospital parking lot. In speaking with that lieutenant, contact was established with other veterans, and the men and women who came to hunt at the Smith place as a result enjoyed it so much they recommended the experience to their friends.

"We just kind of branched out, and this year we (through the Southern Anthem family band - they went and they entertained the troops over at Fort Gates) and we told them, you know, 'If you see somebody down there that you just feel like [might be interested in hunting in Mills County] just pass our number and information on to them. Well, she did - it's the liaison who lives in Gatesville," Smith said.

That liaison attends the First Baptist Church in Gatesville and has contact with many reservists, and

she passed the Smiths' information on to their commander.

"Then it has just grown from there," Smith said.

The Smiths, Rickie's brother Chuck, Sandy Dennard, Hubert Berry, and other members of their families - along with other landowners in this county and neighboring communities - serve as guides and provide the soldiers with everything they need to enjoy a successful hunt. This year, the Smiths even hosted a soldier from the United Kingdom currently serving with U.S. forces.

"Some of these guys have never been hunting in their life. Like the guy from UK, he explained to us that you're not allowed to own anything other than a double-barrel shotgun at the most, and you have to be rich to go into the deer hunting areas and hunt," said Smith, adding that the soldier liked Mills County so much he told Janice Smith he might retire here.

Mills County has welcomed scores of hunters from our military over the years, and the Smiths and like-minded families are determined to keep the tradition going. Smith said they will continue to host soldiers as long as they are able.

"This county's been more than generous to let guys come and hunt, especially our military," Smith said. "We want you [the soldier], as an individual, to come out, spend time with us, enjoy what we've been blessed with, and we're just gonna share out of our abundance and out of the hospitality with these guys and just let them experience something they might not ever get to experience again."

Smith said the liaison from Fort Hood expressed her appreciation for the "Texas love" shown to the soldiers who have hunted here. He also quoted two well-known passages from The Bible he is guided by, John 15:13 and Matthew 25:40.

Sometimes, soldiers come here just to enjoy Mills County, no hunt required. Some request the chance to work on a ranch, or just relax in the beauty of natural surroundings.

"I've had a couple of soldiers that didn't want to kill anything. They came, brought their guns, geared up and just sat in the blind and just enjoyed watching the deer," said Smith.

There is a bond that forms between the soldiers and landowners worth more than anything else they find here. The hosts become another family to these men and women, sharing their stories and staying in contact after they leave. Smith said he sent photos of new calves to one lieutenant recently, and she shared them with her relatives saying they were from her "Texas family."

Continued Next Page