



Marine Daniel Ribbentrop of San Antonio water-skis single-handedly with camp aides Heather Pennington, left, and Keri Petrofsky.

By Dave Martin for USA TODAY

Camp helps wounded Iraq war veterans get back on feet

By [Larry Copeland](#)

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JACKSONS GAP, Ala. — Robert Cuthbertson slices across Lake Martin, strapped onto a sit-down skier towed by a powerboat. He grasps the tow rope handle with his left hand, and holds his right hand — heavily bandaged and wrapped in waterproof plastic — high up out of the water.

Moments later, he grins triumphantly as he wades ashore. "That was fun," says Cuthbertson, an Iraq war veteran who suffered third-degree burns over 38% of his body from an improvised explosive device (IED) on March 2, 2006. "You're just gliding across the water. It's awesome."

It's the first time water-skiing for Cuthbertson, 31, of Dillon, Mont. "I'm right-handed and my right hand was the worst injured," he says. "I never thought I could come out here and do this with one hand. It kind of makes you want to go for more, once you find out you can do it. I want to ski standing up now."

He and 31 other veterans severely wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan spent the weekend rediscovering their passion for rigorous outdoor activities. For some, the boost to their self-confidence was obvious as they did things they hadn't done since before they were wounded.

Veterans and their guests were brought here from 11 states by the Lakeshore Foundation, a Birmingham non-profit that helps people with physical disabilities enhance their lives, rebuild self-esteem and live more independently through fitness, recreation and athletics.

The annual outdoor adventure weekend, at a 1,000-acre camp in eastern Alabama, is one of more than a half-dozen such programs started in recent years, says David Autry, deputy national director of communications for Disabled American Veterans, a non-profit organization with its headquarters in Washington, D.C., and Ohio. "The sports rehabilitation idea is a good thing," he says. "If you can use athletics and sports as part of your rehabilitation, it definitely improves your quality of life."

More than 50,000 veterans have been wounded in hostile and non-hostile events since 2002 in Iraq and Afghanistan. As of July, Army hospitals had treated 651 amputees from Iraq and Afghanistan, 609 of them from Iraq, Autry says.

His organization and the Department of Veterans Affairs run the nation's largest sports rehabilitation program for wounded vets. They bring 300 to 400 servicemembers to Snowmass Village, Colo., each spring for five days of activities, including downhill and cross-country skiing, kayaking, scuba diving and wall climbing.

Such programs are effective partly because of the camaraderie they offer wounded veterans, says Joyce Raezer, chief operating officer of the National Military Family Association, a non-profit based in Virginia. "You think about that phrase 'band of brothers,' " she says. "They have that common bond of their injuries, that togetherness. They get a lot from each other.

Her organization and the Blewitt Foundation will bring 20 wounded veterans and families to Baltimore for a week of activities this year.

Long, grueling journey

Specialized care is available just off the battlefield, so combat mortality rates have fallen from 30% in World War II to 24% in Vietnam to 10% in Iraq and Afghanistan. Wounded veterans face a long, lonely, grueling journey.

Many of those at Alabama's Camp ASCCA are still in rehabilitation, years after their injuries, says Ronda Jarvis-Ray, Lakeshore Foundation's chief program officer. "We expose them to opportunities so they can see what the possibilities are, what they can do," she says.

By Dave Martin for USA TODAY

Former Marine sergeant Carlos Leon of Fort Lauderdale, who lost the use of his legs in Iraq, tackles Camp Ascca's climbing wall.



Cuthbertson, a sergeant first class with the Army's 101st Airborne Division, is in rehabilitation at the Center for the Intrepid at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. He spent two months as an in-patient. "Major surgeries, skin grafting, long-term medical needs, just trying to get my body working. I was burned all the way down to the muscle. ... Now, I'm in the stage where most of my physical stuff is healed up," Cuthbertson says.

Over the weekend, he worked on non-physical things — namely, his self-esteem and confidence. "I have never done anything like this since my injury," he says. "They said, 'Go give it a shot and see whether you complete it.' After I get done here, I'm going to go scuba diving."

Families in tow

Each soldier is allowed to bring a guest. Brian Pearce brings his wife, Angie, and their children, Jordan and Logan. Pearce, a sergeant with the Army's 172nd Striker Brigade, felt he had to bring the kids.

"It's great just being able to show these kids, my kids, that I can still do some of the things I used to be able to do," says Pearce, 37. "That part of it has been important to me. Knowing that I can still do stuff has been important to them."

Pearce, who lives in Mechanicsville, Va., has severe traumatic brain injury from an IED. He is legally blind, has hearing loss in both ears and post-traumatic stress disorder. Pearce says their daughter, Jordan, 9, and son, Logan, 8, have relished the activities they've done as a family — like tubing on the lake and fishing. Raezer says programs that include a soldier's family are best "because these folks have sacrificed a lot, and they need their family to put their arms around them."

Brian Pearce says he'll keep pursuing the kinds of activities he re-discovered over the weekend. "I think they need one of these programs anywhere they have a group of soldiers," he says.