

Over the summer of 2014, a friend and fellow veteran told me about Brian and Heroes Hunt For Wounded Warriors. He didn't give me any background, so I didn't know at all what to expect. But he did mention three key elements.....a name, a phone number, and deer.

After meeting Brian over the phone and making arrangements, I pointed me truck south towards Waupun, still without much of an idea of what to expect. Upon arriving at the motel Brian told me I would be staying at, I was immediately greeted by FIRST NAME by the manager and the employees. They told me what an honor it was to meet me and they were so pleased I was staying with them. This took me completely by shock. I was even more amazed when I found a care package, patriotically decorated, and a hand written letter (which I kept and still have) thanking me and offering any services to make my stay as comfortable as possible (this included setting out breakfast hours early, just for me, even after I insisted not to trouble themselves). I began to feel a lump growing in my throat.

After meeting Brian in person, we enjoyed some great conversation in his incredible hand built cabin, and squeezed in an evening hunt. After the evening hunt, Brian and his lovely wife escorted me to dinner at a wonderful local restaurant, where I got the pleasure of meeting the owner. He too thanked me for my service, and offered their house specialty prime rib dinner, on the house, which I happily accepted and enjoyed. The lump in my throat continued to grow.

The next morning I was picked up at the motel before the sun, but after enjoying a wonderful complimentary breakfast. For the morning hunt, I was guided by an HHFWW volunteer by the name of Dave. Dave and I hit it off famously, and spent the entire morning talking about hunts of yesteryear that we enjoyed in the great Nicolet National Forest in northern Wisconsin. After the hunt, Dave brought me out for a phenomenal breakfast, which once again was covered by the incredibly generous owner. I felt the lump in my throat grow even bigger.

That afternoon found Brian and I debating over an evening hunt in the duck blind, or in the deer blind. My passion for whitetails won out. We didn't have to wait long until our conversation was interrupted and we were surrounded literally on all sides by deer, including one handsome buck. I was fortunate enough to harvest not one, but two healthy, mature and delicious adult does. Brian helped me dress the deer, load them, and we bid farewell before I headed home to display my trophies to my wife, friends and family.

On the way home, I had time to reflect upon the incredible weekend, and why it left me with such a lump in my throat. Up until this point, I have never shared this bit of information with anyone, including Brian.

After I returned from serving in Iraq and completing my demobilization process, I simply drove myself home in the middle of the night, back to my farm house at the end of a dead end road in deep forest of northern Wisconsin. There were no lights and sirens, banners or parades, music or parties. I simply came home and went back to work. The more I realized life around me had continued while I was gone, the more I wondered how much my absence had been noticed. It is a dark, scary and sad place for a veteran to be when they feel they have been forgotten. My love and passion for the outdoors, and the healing powers of the northern wilderness helped me heal, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. I didn't feel I was missing anything, until I became a part of Heroes Hunt For Wounded Warriors. It has been 8 years since I returned from Iraq, but I feel Heroes Hunt For Wounded Warriors gave me the welcome home parade I never had. From hunting and bonding with Heroes Hunt For Wounded Warriors volunteers, to having meals bought for me, to being given a hand written thank you letter, to Brian simply introducing me to folks at the local gas station, I felt welcomed and embraced by an entire town. I felt like I was being welcomed home at last.

That night while driving home, I felt that lump in my throat continue to grow, and I can feel it still today as I write this. Heroes Hunt for Wounded Warriors gave me so much more than just an appreciation hunt. They gave me a homecoming I will forever appreciate and never forget. I am honored to be a part of Heroes Hunt For Wounded Warriors, I am humbled to now call Brian, Dave and the volunteers my dearest friends, and I may God bless the program and each person involved. Thank you, thank you, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Levi Koski

U.S. Army Infantry