

Putting Your Muscle Where Your Heart Is

A special golf course with an extraordinary mission is managed and maintained by a devoted “band of brothers.”

BY JAMES F. MOORE



Tom Loran, a veteran of World War II, is on the Tuesday crew and is charged with mowing fairways

Back in June of this year, golfers across the world enjoyed the action at Oakmont Country Club during the 2007 U.S. Open Championship. Approximately 10,000 volunteers and employees worked diligently to prepare the golf course for 156 competitors. Tens of thousands of spectators were fortunate to be on the course, while millions more watched on television as the best players in the world put everything they had into every shot. With the players struggling to meet Oakmont’s challenges, commentators frequently employed metaphors such as “warrior,” “hero,” and “battling” to describe their play.

Two weeks prior to the Open, I was fortunate to visit warrior golfers of a different type. While none would qualify to play in the U.S. Open, their devotion to the game, their golf course, and their comrades is unmatched. To fully appreciate their remarkable story, it is first necessary to take a few brief trips back in time.

NORMANDY REGION OF FRANCE

On June 6, 1944, Private Lyle W. Hanks, a member of the 1st Infantry Division, 18th Regiment Anti-Tank Company, landed on Omaha Beach (Easy Red) during the first wave. Almost immediately, Lyle was wounded and lay in a bomb crater the rest of the day awaiting evacuation to England. Lyle spent six months in a hospital and then rejoined his unit in time to fight the Battle of the Bulge. Lyle was awarded the Bronze Star, Combat Infantryman’s Badge, and Purple Heart.

On June 7, 1944, Private Leenan H. (Red) Burton landed on the same beach as a member of the 2nd Infantry Division, 15th Field Artillery. Red said it was a wonder that anyone lived through the first wave. Red received the Bronze Star and five battle stars while in Europe.

THE "PUNCHBOWL," NEAR CHORWON, KOREA

On May 17, 1952, 17-year-old Private Richard Webster was at Heartbreak Ridge with the 45th Division, 179th Infantry Regiment. On his 17th birthday, Richard's unit was overrun and he was bayoneted in his foxhole. While recovering from his wounds, Richard went AWOL from the hospital to rejoin his unit and was blown out of his foxhole while under siege. Richard was awarded the Silver Star, Bronze Star, and two Purple Hearts while in Korea.

VIETNAM

The year was 1968 when Force Recon Marine Sergeant Russell A. Carlson endured the siege of Khesanh for nearly three months. Just after the siege had ended, Russell was hit by a mortar. His arm was shredded and his left leg was blown off. Russell spent in excess of two years in various hospitals in theater and stateside recovering from his injuries.

In 1972, First Lieutenant Bruce McKenty was assigned to F Troop, 9th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, at Bien Hoa as an AH-1G Cobra helicopter pilot. On August 23 he was wounded with shrapnel from a 51-caliber armor-piercing round when his Cobra was shot down just south of the Cambodian border. After treatment at the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon, he returned to duty. On December 3, his Cobra was hit by a SA-7 heat-seeking missile at 2,000 feet. Hitting the ground at more than 80 mph, he suffered a broken back, fractured skull, and multiple lacerations and burns. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross, Bronze Star, three Air Medals with "V" for valor, and two Purple Hearts.

In 1967, SSGT Mike Kearney was a crew chief at a forward air control post near Can Tho. Mike was responsible for the conduct of his unit's air combat operations in the Mekong Delta and supervision of 11 operations and maintenance crew members. For his efforts, Mike was awarded the Bronze Star.

JUNE 2007 — AMERICAN LAKE VETERANS GOLF COURSE, TACOMA, WASHINGTON

As amazing as these stories are, these are but a few of the 130 volunteers who run the American Lake Veterans Golf Course at the Veterans Hospital in Tacoma, Washington. These veterans, many of whom are highly decorated,

are from all wars and all services. Amazingly, this small nine-hole golf course brings this band of brothers, and in many cases their spouses, together again for a common cause — helping other vets.

Dedicated in 1929, the American Lake Veteran's Hospital added a golf course to its grounds shortly after World War II. Unfortunately, the course was not designed for people with disabilities in mind. Even so, for decades, soldiers with injuries of all types have found the golf course a haven. The VA hospital staff long recognized the value of golf as a rehabilitation



resource for injuries of all types. Then, in 1995, the U.S. Government eliminated funding for operation and maintenance of all VA golf courses, placing the future of American Lake in jeopardy. Volunteers kept the course going, and in 2004 a group of concerned citizens (veterans and non-veterans alike) created the non-profit corporation "Friends of American Lake Veterans Golf Course." Their goal was not only to keep the course in operation, but also to launch a fund-raising effort to support a wide range of improvements to make the golf course more accessible to those with disabilities. Bigger tees, accessible greens, a larger practice area, and wider and smoother paths are just a few of the improvements that needed to be made. Plus, based on their hands-on experience with the challenges mobility-impaired golfers face, the group recognized the need to modify the driving

American Lake Veterans Golf Course thrives under the watchful eyes of a multitude of volunteers who work together to produce a beautiful and enjoyable golf course. Back row, left to right: Lyle W. Hanks, Pat Gailey. Front row, left to right: Russel A. Carlson, Harold "Pepper" Roberts (yellow shirt), Richard Webster (print shirt), Mike Kearney, and Bruce McKenty.



Like a lot of the volunteers, some of the equipment is a little dated, but it works hard and gets the job done.



The Friends of American Lake Veterans Golf Course provide instruction and encouragement to help disabled players find their swing.

range, allowing it to be converted into a three-hole short course. This course is specifically designed as an introductory area to help players learn the game of golf and maneuver their specialized carts around a golf course.

Their efforts have been remarkably successful, with more than \$470,000 raised and invested in the course. And every dollar is stretched to the maximum, thanks to the willingness of the volunteers who do so much of the work on their own. For example, a new irrigation system was installed at less than half of the normal cost, as a result of the back-breaking manual labor performed by volunteers — the average age being 76! The driving range/short course has been completed, new paths installed, and a much wider practice tee put into place.

Volunteers are organized into crews who perform all the golf course maintenance tasks (with good-natured competition existing between the crews). Yet another volunteer maintains the equipment. Volunteers also staff the small clubhouse and pro shop. Most importantly, volunteers are available any time of the day whenever a disabled player needs help.

While players fortunate enough to qualify for the Open at Oakmont received keys to a new Lexus for the week, the disabled golfer who comes to American Lake receives the key to a solo-rider golf cart, specially designed for golfers with amputations and mobility disabilities. And a volunteer will be there to help the player learn how to use the cart and offer assistance in getting around the course.

The golf course even has a volunteer teacher of the game. Retired golf coach "Pepper" Roberts organizes clinics to introduce players to the game, regardless of the types of their injuries. Pepper's efforts are supplemented by other golf professionals who come from all over the country to help out during these clinics. The instruction is coupled with the skills and knowledge of the VA hospital physical therapists and staff as they help disabled players utilize golf in their rehabilitation.

All of these efforts are paying off in many ways. For example, on Mondays, residents of the Orting Soldiers Home in Orting, Washington, join the patients of the American Lake VA hospital for golf lessons and a picnic lunch. Sgt. Jerry Reed of the 654th Medical Holdover Company at the Madigan Army Medical Center and approximately 20 other soldiers charged

with the care of veterans also make the trip and enjoy a little downtime at the course.

Along with all of these dedicated volunteers, Lyle, Red, Richard, Russ, Bruce, and Mike once again find themselves on a mission for the military. Fortunately, this time their duties are much less dangerous. Lyle repairs golf clubs and has been a volunteer for 18 years. Red, together with his wife Ronnie, volunteers behind the desk at the caddie shack. Richard takes care of the driving range, picking up the balls, washing them, and making sure the electric carts are charged. Russ works behind the counter at the caddie shack and works with disabled golfers who are learning to play golf. Bruce is a volunteer course marshal and member of the board of directors of the American Lake Veterans Golf Course. Mike is the manager of the golf course, is also on the board, and has logged more than 9,000 volunteer hours.

As I toured the course with Pepper and Pat Gailey (Pat is a retired construction manager who has successfully twisted the arms of practically everyone in Tacoma in the construction business to donate equipment and materials), I was amazed at the quality of the playing conditions the volunteers had achieved. From personal experience as a golf course superintendent, I know firsthand how difficult it was for me to

get 15 to 20 paid employees on the same page when it came to golf course maintenance. At the American Lake Veteran's Course, somehow more than 130 volunteers work together to produce a beautiful and enjoyable golf course with just a tiny budget. The obvious secret to their success is the shared desire to help their comrades in arms recover as well as possible and to play the game of golf in its purest form — for fun.

EDITOR'S NOTE: It should come as no surprise that many of the photographs used in this article were taken and donated by yet another American Lake volunteer — Rick Scott of IFTS Digital Photography. Rick retired from the Army after 27 years and is proud to be one of the Friends of American Lake.

The USGA, through its "For the Good of the Game" Grants Initiative, has awarded a \$35,000 grant to the Friends of American Lake Veterans Golf Course to improve the accessibility of the course's teeing grounds for the many individuals with disabilities served by the facility. Information about the USGA Grants Initiative can be found in the Grants section of www.usga.org.

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As is the case with every aspect of the golf course operations, the "caddie shack" is run by volunteers who take turns making certain everyone is welcome at the American Lake Veteran's Golf Course.

