

Warriors take to the duck blind with Tennessee Valley SCI

By **Richard Simms**

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It was a duck hunt like dozens of others—camouflaged men (and one woman) lined up in an underground pit. Out front was a flooded cornfield, the smooth water covered with decoys. In the corner, a retriever sat anxiously awaiting its opportunity to join the fray. As night gave way to day, ducks circled overhead. Fingers rested lightly on gun safeties, awaiting the time when someone said the magic words: "Take 'em."

When the words came, shotgun barrels emerged from their hiding spots, and fury rained down on whatever duck, or ducks, had been fooled by a few dozen plastic look-a-likes and some expert calling.

There was, however, one thing very different about this hunt—for me, anyway. To my left and right were men and women who had helped guarantee that hunters, and non-hunters, enjoy the opportunity to do whatever we enjoy the most. They were members of the **U.S. Army Warrior Transition Battalion** out of Fort Campbell. Every member of that unit has been ill, injured or wounded while serving their country.

This particular hunt near Paris, Tenn., was organized by Keith Watson, president of the **Tennessee Valley chapter of Safari Club International**. The group routinely extends a helping hand, along with thousands of dollars, to provide special hunting opportunities for soldiers and veterans.

Guides **Garry Mason** and **Kenny Loudon** donated their time and place for these hunters, most of which had never seen the inside of a duck blind.

"It's exciting to see so many ducks," Specialist Barbara Alvarez said. When she was injured and transferred into the WTB, Alvarez learned of a program called **Healing Outside of Hospitals**.

"I had never been hunting," she said. "I never even knew anybody who hunted. My first turkey hunt I didn't get anything, but I got a lot of good naps. There's nothing like a good nap in the woods."

Her next turkey hunt worked out better.

"I was able to sneak up on him," she said. "There was a feeling of accomplishment that I was able to hit my mark. I remember thinking how beautiful he was, and he was huge—nothing like you see in the store. There was an element of sadness when I killed him, but more of reverence and respect."

Alvarez served three and a half years in the Army. Col. Greg Estes, however, is a lifer, having split his career between the Army and the Alabama Highway Patrol.

"I've been away from my wife and kids for 12 years out of the last 26," said Estes, all the while keeping his eyes peeled for incoming ducks. His time in the WTB is in preparation of going home for good.

"I suffered some injuries, including a torn rotator cuff, and I suppressed some things over the years," he said. "It was time to get myself fixed before I go home to enjoy a quality life with my wife and kids—to be a good father and a good husband."

Alvarez said she joined the military as a way to build a better life with her husband and daughter. Like Estes, she said she is ready to get home for some "mommy time." She said, however, that she fully intends to share what she has learned as a soldier and as a hunter with her little girl.

"My daughter is not dainty. Every hunt, she wants me to bring back something; usually, it's a head. I don't know why, but she likes heads," Alvarez said with a smile. "I want her to learn what I've learned so we can go out and hunt as a family and have that meat—and not have to depend on farms and caged animals. It's all about survival and independence."

Admiring a sleek, colorful redhead duck she'd taken that morning, Alvarez said she knows that includes care of the game she kills. On a deer hunt earlier this year at Enterprise South Nature Park in Chattanooga—also sponsored by the Chattanooga chapter of SCI and TWRA—she took a small buck.

"I could have gone out and tried to get another deer, but I didn't want to. I had what I needed," she said. "It was more than my family could eat. I even had enough to share with others. I didn't need to take more. The guys were amazed because I saved as much as I could. I saved the hooves for my dogs. I saved the pelt, and of course, I saved the head for my

daughter. We processed the meat ourselves and used everything we could."

These soldiers, although still healing, know they're lucky. Some of their comrades in arms never come home.

"Nobody understands what it's like knowing that the person to your left or right might not be there tomorrow," Alvarez said. "Everybody comes home damaged in some way, whether they're wounded or not."

They also know they have it much better compared to soldiers coming home from Vietnam a generation ago.

"I didn't know anyone in my family had ever served until after I joined," Alvarez said. "My uncle served in Vietnam as a helicopter pilot, but he wasn't even proud enough to tell any of us kids that he had served."

Estes said his family members have served in every war or conflict in the past 200 years.

"Politics and soldiering are two different things," Estes said. "In Vietnam, the men did what they were ordered to with honor and character. But the people didn't treat them with the respect they deserved. With programs like we have today and experiences like this hunt, we know people care about what we've done for our country."

Watson said as for the Tennessee Valley SCI, they will keep right on caring for every soldier and veteran just as much as they can.

Richard Simms is a contributing writer, focusing on outdoor sports.