

Veterans find healing on the water

October 19 2009, By JESSIE L. BONNER , Associated Press Writer



Former U.S. Marine, Angel Gomez of Fresno, Calif., listens to his fishing guide Jess Kiesel as he casts his line out onto a pond on Wednesday, Oct. 7, 2009 outside Ketchum, Idaho. Gomez traveled to Idaho to participate in a Sun Valley Adaptive Sports program which uses sports and recreation - such as fly fishing - as therapy to help heal and rehabilitate severely injured men and women of the armed forces. (AP Photo/Charlie Litchfield)

(AP) -- Standing at the edge of a clear pond in the Idaho mountains on a cold day in early October, former U.S. Marine Angel Gomez made a timid cast with his fly fishing rod.

The surface rippled under a sweeping wind. The line as thin as dental floss billowed down to the water, the hooked fly slapping the surface first. A weathered American flag flapped against a backdrop of snowcapped mountains.

Gomez was on his second deployment to Iraq in 2005 when the seven-

ton truck he was driving was hit by an improvised explosive device. A piece of shrapnel, about the size of a quarter, struck Gomez in the head and penetrated his skull, leaving him with [traumatic brain injury](#).

Now 24, he came home unable to read or write, without any sensation on the right side of his body, a half-moon shaped scar carved into the side of his head.

He had to relearn everything.

And here he was on this frigid day, attempting to coordinate mind and body, casting line after line out into the water as part of a Sun Valley Adaptive Sports program designed to help wounded service members rebuild their physical skills, rediscover their confidence and independence, and reintegrate into their communities through sports and recreation.

The weeklong fly fishing program is one of eight sports and recreation camps held each year in this central Idaho resort region for wounded service members. This fall, the fly fishing camp was designed for veterans with severe traumatic brain injury.

The men carry postwar burdens that include chronic headaches, post traumatic stress disorder, hearing and short-term memory loss, renal failure, seizures and spinal injuries.

At a private estate along State Highway 75, the seven men embarked on their first day of fishing, practicing awkward casts in the grass before their fishing guides deemed them ready.

Two of the veterans at the [pond](#) are in wheelchairs, some use canes. Knit caps are eventually removed, revealing scars and offering a small glimpse into the turmoil these men and their families have undergone.

Lisa Antoine sat underneath a tree, grinning at her husband David, an Army reservist who was called up in 2007, as he worked his fly line. Last February, she received in the middle of the night a phone call telling her that David's military vehicle had been hit by a roadside bomb, and that he had suffered nerve damage to his back and neck.

Now 44, he continues to suffer from headaches, photosensitivity, blurred vision and severe hearing loss. Along also struggles with post traumatic stress disorder.

"He still can't deal with it," said Lisa Antoine, 44, a certified nursing assistant who has watched her formerly outgoing husband withdraw since he came home. "He doesn't like to go anywhere, I have to drag him."

Her hope for the fly fishing camp is that it will inspire her husband to realize "you don't have to be secluded from everybody." She then leaped to her feet as David reeled in a trout.

She squealed in delight, screaming, "Go get it, honey! Go get it!"

Across the pond, Jordan Riddle watched the fun, but was determined to claim the most fish. The former Army combat medic was the only member of his platoon to survive after a building they occupied was blown up.

Riddle, 26, was in a coma for nine weeks. He said his family and a former high school classmate were the only outside contacts he had during his long recovery. He and his classmate married Sept. 26.

His new wife, Hope, traveled here with him from Arlington, Texas.

"I'm looking for a break, I'm looking for my soldiers because ever since

I've retired from the Army I've felt like I'm alone," Riddle said, his voice choked with emotion. "I don't have my brothers anymore."

During the weeklong fly fishing program, the veterans will hear about different ways to combat their depression and isolation, about how to harness the frustration and anger that erupts when they can't perform what used to be simple tasks. They'll talk about their struggles with their spouses and other veterans who suffered traumatic brain injuries.

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports is one of 100 chapters of the Disabled Sports/USA, a national nonprofit established by Vietnam veterans in 1967 to serve the wounded after they return home from war through sports rehabilitation.

The Idaho organization started a sports and recreation program for severely injured service members about five years ago, adding the fly fishing camp last fall. The nonprofit has since held three fly fishing events, covering all expenses for the veterans, their wives and offering to pay for any child care they may need while traveling to Sun Valley.

Therapists consult with each service member before and after their Idaho experience, helping them identify goals and map out a plan to achieve them. The organization will follow up with the veterans for three years, said Tom Iselin, Sun Valley Adaptive Sports executive director.

Before the veterans even touch a rod, the fishing guides from Silver Creek outfitters and the adaptive sports employees are briefed on the injuries and needs of each veteran. They are shown what to do in case someone has a seizure. They learn how to help the veterans recognize what triggers their stress, and how to better manage it through recreation.

Over the course of the week, their confidence builds. They hear words of encouragement from their guides and the adaptive sports team.

But on this day, at the beginning, retired Marine gunner Christian Ellis, among the first vets to participate in the camp last year, knew just how the new men felt - skeptical that a week of fly fishing could help chase away mental and physical demons.

"When we first got there, you could see in our faces, we don't want to be here. We're very suspicious, we're on edge," said Ellis, who was part of a convoy in Fallujah insurgents ambushed in 2004.

His back was broken, he suffered severe spinal injuries. The [post traumatic stress disorder](#) would come later, invisible scars he took with him after he was discharged in 2007 and described as "a giant hole you can never jump over."

Ellis had previously participated in another weeklong recreational program for wounded soldiers at a ranch in Texas.

"It was great, but once you leave that environment, you end up feeling twice as lonely, twice as worthless," said Ellis, who lives in San Diego.

When his Veterans Administration social worker recommended the Idaho program, he was leery. He had never gone fly fishing. It didn't help that this program included spouses, he was gay and might have to explain this to other veterans.

But with Sun Valley Adaptive Sports, he found himself, over the course of the week, opening up.

"I didn't even know I was talking about issues that bother me," Ellis said. "I didn't have any nightmares, I didn't feel any anxiety. They made us feel important."

The organization also found out that Ellis, who had been classically

trained in opera before joining the military, wanted to start singing again. A week after he returned to California, the San Diego Opera contacted him and he started voice lessons, which Sun Valley Adaptive Sports has paid for over the past year.

The last group of [veterans](#) to participate in the fly fishing program left Idaho last week. The organization is now working on helping them achieve a new set of goals, which include securing jobs they can do with their disabilities. Others want to go back to school and need help.

It all worked for Ellis. Sun Valley Adaptive Sports also put him in touch with a nonprofit that helped him get a car. He's enrolled in community college. And he's singing.

"Everything I lost, they gave it back to me tenfold," he said.

On the Net:

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports: <http://www.svasp.org>

Disabled Sports/USA: <http://www.dsusa.org>

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