

Army civilian named 'Humanitarian of the Year'

Story and photos by Mike W. Petersen, Editor

Personal tragedy has led one Department of the Army civilian on a path of healing that is changing lives for wounded warriors and garnering national recognition.

William "Mike" White, an Army veteran and transportation specialist at Surface Deployment and Distribution Command headquarters, has been named AMVETS 2010 Humanitarian of the Year by the AMVETS National Ladies Auxiliary for his nonprofit work in support of wounded servicemembers and veterans.

White is the founder and executive director of Camp Hope, in southeastern Missouri. Camp Hope's mission is to provide disabled veterans the opportunity to participate in the outdoor activities they enjoyed prior to becoming injured or disabled.

White's journey to help others started with tragedy. His son, Pfc. Christopher Neal White, a Marine assigned to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, died in Iraq in 2006 when an improvised explosive device detonated under his vehicle in al-Anbar Province. According to his father, Chris was an avid outdoorsman from an early age, learning to hunt and fish while growing up in Kentucky and Missouri.

White and his family were determined to find a way to keep their son's memory alive. The most logical choice was to do something associated with the outdoor activities Chris loved.

With this in mind, White purchased 180 acres of land – known as Chris Neal Farm – 70 miles south of St. Louis, Mo., to provide disabled veterans a hand-

Will White describes plans for the camp with Command Sgt. Maj. James Riddick during the annual Camp Hope Open House.



Will White, Camp Hope founder and SDDC civilian, is presented the 2010 Humanitarian of the Year award by AMVETS National Ladies Auxiliary President Patty Piening in a ceremony, March 20.

Photo courtesy of AMVETS.

icapped-accessible lodge and land for outdoor recreational activities, to include hunting and fishing. He named the small farmhouse on the property, which serves as the interim lodge, in honor of Camp Hope in al-Anbar Province, Iraq. A new lodge, currently in the planning stages, will become the official Camp Hope facility, with outlying handicapped-accessible cabins already in construction for visitors.

Since opening in 2007, the camp has garnered attention and support from all over the nation. Numerous organizations and individuals have lent their time, resources, equipment and





energy to build up the camp.

The AMVETS Riders have adopted Camp Hope as their first national fundraising program and are already well on their way to completely funding the construction of a wheelchair-accessible cabin. Veterans Airlift Command, a national network of volunteer aircraft owners and pilots which provides air transportation to wounded warriors, veterans, and their families, has also lent its support to Camp Hope's visiting veterans, flying them to and from the camp and elsewhere.

But for all the support Camp Hope is getting nationwide, the biggest surprise for White has been the effect a week at deer camp can have on a wounded veteran.

"My initial thing was to help them learn to work with what they had. I had no idea it would be a healing process for them," White said. "Over the week, they help each other work through their hurdles. They come in one way, and leave another. Now they keep in touch when they get home and have that added support network."

"This place is the best medicine," said Capt. Joe Bogart, an Army combat engineer who lost an eye to an IED in Iraq in 2006 and was rendered legally blind. Bogart, the camp's first hunter, has become a regular visitor and vocal proponent for Camp Hope because of his experience.

"When I first came here, I got to know some other guys and we started talking about things we have dealt with," Bogart said in an interview at Camp Hope during a turkey hunt in 2008. "You talk to other people and get to see other perspectives out here. For some people to come out to deer camp, it allows scars to heal. Scars on the outside heal, but the ones on the inside are the hardest to heal."

Since hunting at Camp Hope, Bogart has served a second tour in Iraq, competed in the Army Ten-Miler, and was present at the AMVETS Silver Helmet Awards ceremony March 20. Another early



Top: Staff Sgt. Bobby Lisek, one of Camp Hope's first hunters, prepares his turkey calls at the camp's temporary lodge. Lisek now serves as a hunting guide at the camp.

Left: Kenny Standaert, wounded Navy veteran and SDDC crane operator, stands at Camp Hope's fire pit the morning of the Open House April 17.



AMVETS Riders rumble into Camp Hope for the dedication of two handicapped-accessible cabins. The AMVETS Riders have adopted Camp Hope as their first national fundraising effort.



visitor to Camp Hope, Staff Sgt. Bobby Lisek, lost a leg and suffered a brain injury in Iraq. Lisek now serves as a hunting guide for other visiting veterans.

“The Humanitarian Award is presented to an outstanding American who serves our country in peace, as in war ... toward lasting prosperity and peace for all its inhabitants,” according to Kellie Haggerty of the AMVETS National Ladies’ Auxiliary Headquarters.

Nominations are made by local AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary Posts throughout the country. An annual winner is not always selected from the nominations; established in 1952, the award has only been presented five times since 2001. Prior recipients of this prestigious award include Sen. John McCain, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, Barbara Bush, Rosalyn Carter, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Zachary and Elizabeth M. Fisher (of Fisher House), to name a few.

White credits the award and the growth of Camp Hope to the support of volunteers. For the first two years of Camp Hope’s existence, White was commuting almost 15 hours to Missouri from his home in North Carolina, where

he worked at SDDC’s Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point. He moved to SDDC headquarters at Scott Air Force Base, Ill., in March and looks forward to working more often on the camp now that he’s a short drive away.

“I’m happy they recognized what we (at Camp Hope) do, not just Will White,” White said. “I just had an idea, but we’ve had a lot of people who made this idea happen. All of these folks have day jobs, and are volunteers.”

White envisions Camp Hope growing to the point where it requires a full-time staff, and he looks forward to the hiring process.

“When it’s time to hire somebody full-time, there’s a perfect opportunity to hire a wounded vet,” he said.

Two handicapped-accessible cabins were dedicated during Camp Hope’s Open House April 17.

