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Liberty Lodge Outfitters: a veteran says thanks to other 'wound warriors' with hunting trips

By David Figura/The Post-Standard

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Jim Commentucci/The Post-Standard

Liberty Lodge Outfitters owner Kevin Workman stands for a photo Wednesday with US Army veterans Brandon Moak (front left) and Randy Taylor (right) in a field adjacent to his home in Locke. Moak's business, partnered with Workman's, sees that wounded veterans like Taylor have a rewarding hunting experience.

In September 2005, Kevin Workman was in the National Guard serving in Iraq as a gunner on a Humvee escorting military convoys.

On patrol just south of Baghdad airport, a suicide bomber detonated a car filled with explosives. Workman suffered a traumatic brain injury, then a chronic lung infection and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"After the explosion there was blood coming out of both my ears," he remembered. Three years of physical and mental rehabilitation followed; Workman retired from the Guard and the South Carolina state police and moved to southern Cayuga County to be near his ailing father.

He brought with him a new mission in life: to share the curative powers of the outdoors with fellow "wounded warriors"

"I got to looking around and there are a lot of guys pretty much where I was at . . . pretty much warehoused," Workman said. "You take an 18- to 19-year-old kid, and he gets blown off from his navel on down, sometimes he thinks life is over."

It was while recovering in the Warrior Transition Program, that Workman thought about how many military

people hunt and fish, and the way he could make a difference.

"I just wanted to give back a little bit more," he said. "I'm not as bad as a lot of them."

With help of Andy Boos, a Moravia businessman and hunter, Workman set up Liberty Lodge Outfitters, a non-profit organization "dedicated to serving the wounded men and women of our Armed Forces." The idea is to engage them in "emotional and physical rehabilitation" through hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities.

Workman and his fiancée, Amy, bought a small farmhouse off Goodrich Hill Road in Locke and turned it into a lodge. The freezer is full of wild game; even the toilet paper holder in the upstairs bathroom is a simple deer antler on a wooden base

"I want everyone who comes here to feel like they'd feel right at home," he said.

Priority is given to those wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan, Workman said, but he seeks to help veterans stretching all the way back to World War II.

This spring, he leased about 1,000 acres in southern Cayuga County from local farmers and Keith Gutches, owner of Gutches Timber Products in Cortland. Others lined up to help, including Moravia VFW Post 7127, and Big Boar Lodge, an exotic animal hunting preserve in Homer, which opened its land to the veterans.

"I had one elderly guy drive up and simply hand me a \$100 bill," Workman recalled. "He said he was a vet and wanted to help."

The first soldier arrived in early September, and since then Workman's lodge has hosted four servicemen, suffering from combat wounds and problems such as Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome Disorder. One soldier who visited Liberty Lodge was nearly blind from flash wounds caused by an explosion in Iraq.

"He shot a red stag (at Big Boar Lodge). We lined him up with the cross hairs, and he pulled the trigger," said Brandon Moak, founder of a similar program — Freedom Outdoors Adventures, based at Fort Benning, Ga. — who was at the lodge this week.¶

Moak talked of one soldier, Sgt. James Shelton of Mississippi, who was at Liberty Lodge in October. He hunted with a bow and shot a buck and a 350-pound boar. In his thank you note, the soldier wrote:

"I don't know where to start or how to begin. . . . I just went on the hunting trip of my life in New York. It was so awesome. It wasn't all what I expected it to be. I thought the people would be snobby, but it felt like home when I got there."

Staff Sgt. Randy Taylor, 35, an Army infantryman wounded in Iraq, was at Liberty Lodge Wednesday morning. His smile and eagerness to get outdoors turned serious as he talked about how a roadside bomb devastated his Humvee on Valentine's Day 2005.

"I remember getting up that day for combat patrol . . . and the next thing I remember, I woke up and it was March," Taylor said. "I was stateside with no idea where I was, who I was with, who was around me."

In Iraq, he said, "complacency kills. You get complacent, you're a dead man."

Here, Taylor said, "I can be complacent. To me, that's what it's all about."

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- Franklin Shooting Supplies, the Tri-County Chapter of the North American Turkey Federation; Barb's and

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