

Iraqi/Afghan Freedom Elk Hunt

By Dimas Mederos, "Former Marine"



Left: Ray Guerra, Jim Figueroa, Nick Orchowski, Mike Meinen and Tristan Wyatt

Most days my life falls into a comfortable routine; the responsibilities of being a husband, an employee, a friend create a daily standard for most of our lives. Occasionally my mind drifts to the ten days every year where I escape to the high lonesome in the company of my mules searching for the bugle of a bull elk or the wide tall rack of a rocky mountain mule deer. Most days I receive a short respite from my routine when I wander to the barn groom and saddle the "girls" for a short ride before returning to my chores.

Recently I received a vivid reminder of how blessed I am to live in a country where we have the privilege to experience a safe, comfortable, everyday normal life, a country where I am free to worship as I feel led, to work or enjoy God's creation as I see fit. I have the freedom to choose whether to own a rifle or bow to hunt or stay home. I was reminded that these routines, habits, customs are anything but in the world we live in. It is

only because we have been given the favor to live in this great nation that we get to freely make these choices. These freedoms don't come without cost nothing worthwhile ever comes without sacrifice.

A mutual friend introduced me to Ray Guerra. "Gunny" Ray has dedicated his life to serving our country. In his youth as a Marine in Vietnam and now as a mentor to our warriors returning from the battlefields of the Middle East, Ray works for the Veterans Administration in Denver, Colorado. His mission is to help returning heroes. Most if not all the troops he works with have suffered traumatic injuries; amputations, burns, nerve damage are some of the ravages of war and the cost of freedom.

Ray, an avid outdoorsman, shared his vision with me. He wanted to somehow facilitate a hunt for a group of these returning warriors. He knew that I worked in the hunting industry and wanted to know if I thought we could put

something together. His vision was to provide these men with an opportunity to enjoy the benefits they had fought and bled to protect.

Ray told me about five men he wanted to honor: Nick Orchowski a young soldier who suffered a devastating spinal cord injury; Mike Meinen lost a leg; Tristan Wyatt lost his leg in the same incident as Mike; Adam Replogle, a young tanker, who lost an arm; and Jim Figueroa, a special forces medic who had seen more than anyone should.

After making a few telephone calls, I confirmed what I already suspected, CNN has it all wrong! Every person, company and organization we spoke to responded in the same way: How can I help? What do they need? Where do I send it? None of these people wanted any recognition for their donations. They simply wanted to honor Mike, Tristan, Jim, Adam and Nick for their service. In every case it was decided that the sponsor's of this hunt would remain anonymous.

mous. Their one and only purpose would be to somehow say “thank you” to these five warriors.

The day finally arrived when we all met in Craig, Colorado. Our rendezvous site was arranged by a local outfitter and his wife. They have been outfitting in this area for nearly thirty years. Through hard, honest work they have built a first class, very successful operation. Now they wanted to give something back. They provided hunting licenses, riding stock, meals, a warm fire and a welcoming spirit, everything you would expect from a first class elk camp.

The reception was unparalleled, the guides, cooks, wranglers, everyone went well out of their way to express their appreciation to these five American heroes. We settled in and unpacked our gear. Rifles were sighted and, like any other hunting camp, the stories began to flow. I am sure you can imagine the rhetoric, after all, there were five Army “Dog Faces” and two Marine “Jar Heads” in the same room. God save anyone who missed an elk this week.

The daybreak was everything you would expect from a mid-December northwestern Colorado morning; snow on the ground, cold and breezy. The smell of elk was certainly in the air.

After a hearty breakfast the guys broke up into groups and headed up the hills with their guides. I followed Mike and Adam and their guide, John. The horses

and mules were loaded and we were off. Although it was clear that Mike and Adam would be more comfortable in a Hummer than in a saddle, they both mounted up without complaint.

It was about 8:45 in the morning when John spotted a herd bedded in a snow covered meadow. The wind direction was checked, the approach planned and we were off; John in the lead followed by Adam and Mike while I rode drag. We rode down wind until we reached ridge-line above the herd.

We secured the horses and mules and began the slow, cautious approach toward the bedded herd. The fresh snow made for a quiet climb but at the same time it made for a slow, difficult walk.



Adam Replogle with his elk

We followed John across the slope, being careful to remain concealed from the two-hundred sets of eyes, ears and noses that were in the meadow below us.

As we neared to within 300 yards, the elk sensed something was wrong. Several of the bedded animals rose to their feet and started milling around. As their nervousness spread, more and more of the elk got up. It was apparent that we were busted. It was only a matter of seconds before the herd’s anxiety turned into a run down the mountain.

Adam who was directly behind John took a prone position and shouldered his rifle. Mike was fifteen yards back, his clear view of the elk obscured by some low brush. We heard Adam’s .280 bark and pandemonium followed. The already nervous elk decided that this was not a good place to be. In the confusion we lost track of the cow that Adam had picked out and we watched as the herd headed down the slope. For a moment we all looked at each other almost as confused as the elk had been.

John walked down to the meadow. About 280 yards away he threw two fist-ed hands into the air in celebration. Adam’s shot had been exactly on target.

As he was filling out his tag, I congratulated Adam on his great shot. I told him that he “shot like a Marine”. I can’t recall exactly what he said, however, I am certain that if I did, no one would print it.

Once all the necessary work was completed John suggested that we mount up and slowly follow the elk herd down the mountain. There is a reason hunters listen to their guides, John was right. These elk had been nervous but not panicked. We were soon seeing evidence in the snow that they were regrouping.

After riding down some very steep snow covered slopes (love them mules) we spotted the elk across a draw. This time their numbers had doubled. Somehow the group we were following had joined another herd. I couldn’t believe my eyes, there across from us were five to six hundred head of elk.

Adam and I took care of the saddle stock while John and Mike set off on foot. It wasn’t very long until we heard the crack of a rifle followed by a familiar thump. I made it to the top of the ridge just in time to see Mike’s elk fall. He had dropped the large cow nearly in her

tracks; a perfect 420 yard shot. From the gleam in his eye I could tell it was not necessary for me mention my beloved Marine Corps.

It was about 1:00 p.m., we were headed out and there were two elk tagged and on the way to the processor. Things were going great. Little could we imagine that even better news waited our return to camp.

Gunny Ray, Tristan and Jim had all filled their tags. Only Nick had failed to drop a cow. Five out of six tags filled our first morning out. I live in Colorado and I have hunted a few elk but five out of six tags filled day one on a fair chase, free range hunt? I couldn't help but feel that the "Man Upstairs" had his hands in this endeavor.

That night the "amber liquid" flowed. We toasted everyone's success, played cards and made plans for the morning hunt. As you can imagine, the sunrise came much sooner than expected. Nick was up first and ready to roll. I can't say as much for the rest of the crew.

We spent most of the day lounging, telling stories and anxiously waiting for Nick's return. We all expected him back any moment but the day wore on and Nick didn't make it back to camp until after dark. He had missed a couple of opportunities at elk. His injuries had made it very difficult to accurately get a shot off. We all did our best to encourage him. Every hunter has a story of mis-

placed shot and everyone did their best telling him theirs.

The next morning was typical elk camp fare, hot breakfast, and strong black coffee as we sent Nick off with our best wishes. The previous day's miss had put enough pressure on him, Nick did not need an audience. We all decided to stay in camp as he and his guide headed out.

What followed in the next few hours was the best example of leadership and Espri de Corps that I have every witnessed. Mike, Tristan, Jim and Ray were discussing the difficulty Nick had during our range time our first morning in Craig. They realized that he did not have enough strength in his injured arm to hold a rifle and smoothly pull the trigger.

These men have been through a lot. Now a fellow trooper had a need and they were not about to sit by without taking action. These soldiers correctly deduced the problem Nick was having with his bolt action rifle. True to their code they also went to work to develop a solution.

What Nick needed was some way to support the rifle on his shoulder, shooting sticks were not enough. Ray recalled some Marines using a shoulder bracket on their weapons during Vietnam. In the event someone needed a back-up weapon, I had brought along a TC Encore in .300 Win Magnum. While Mike made plans to fabricate a shoulder bracket for the TC, Jim, Tristan and Gunny Ray headed to the range to make

sure it shot properly. They were not leaving anything to chance.

Mike reviewed the plan with our outfitter. Dick knew of a nearby rancher who might have some scrap metal in his barn we could use. After a short drive they were in the barn rummaging for a flat piece of metal. Mike's plan was to remove the recoil pad, construct a "U" bracket and attached it to the rifle where a recoil pad spacer would normally fit. Once reattached, the recoil pad would hold the "U" bracket in place. Nick could place the bracket over his shoulder and with the added support of shooting sticks, he should be able to get off an accurate shot.

We made it back just in time to greet Nick coming in for lunch. He had missed another shot. Understandably he was very discouraged but now these men had a plan. They enthusiastically showed Nick the modified Encore and headed out to the range. Nick settled into a sitting position with weapon comfortably supported by Mike's modification. His first shot was in the "X" ring, dead on the bull's eye. Nick looked up, a priceless smile on his face. High fives all around, a



Nick Orchowski sighting in his gun after his buddies made the U bracket to help give him more support so he could get a more accurate shot off

quick meal and he was off again.

Understandably the next few hours ticked by. The sun went down and darkness fell on the group. Optimism was tempered by some anxiety. Was it too much to hope for that Nick would get another opportunity. And if he did, would the shot hit its mark.

Once the sun was down we did not have long to wait. The smile on his face said it all. Dick had located another group of elk. From 180 yards Nick settled the cross hairs on the lead cow's shoulders and smoothly squeezed the



The Rocky Mountains are always a sight to behold

trigger. She fell in her tracks. As often happens this elk returned to its feet and attempted to escape over a cattle fence. Nick's second shot hit her at the base of her neck. Everyone had filled their tags, unbelievable!

I can't begin to tell you how blessed I feel as I write this story. Not only do I live in the best place on earth, I also realize that I work in the best industry in the world. When the opportunity to honor five of the "Best of the Best" presented itself, the hunting industry rallied. The only agenda was to somehow show our appreciation for the sacrifices these men

have made to ensure our way of life.

These men define character, honor and integrity. They are truly the best this country has to offer. They don't say much but their actions speak volumes. To me the way they rallied around Nick was extraordinary. If you ask Mike, Nick, Adam, Tristan, Jim or Gunny Ray they would tell you that it's no big deal. Looking out for others is the way they live their lives.

I know that I will never be the same. Spending time with these men has changed me. I am praying that this trip is just the beginning. I am making plans to

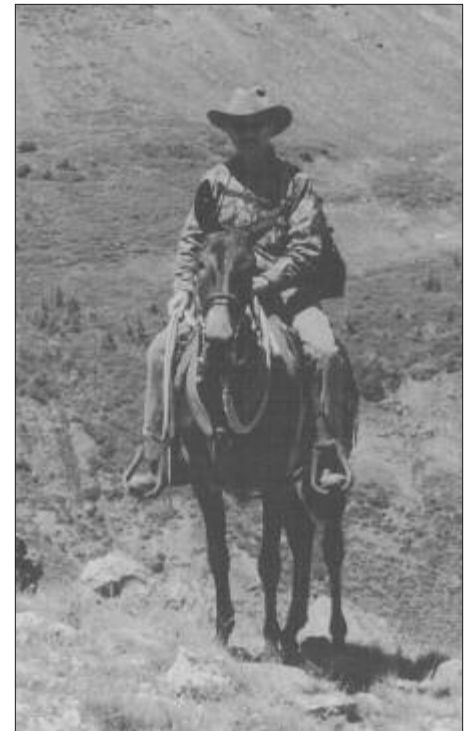
establish a foundation. Its sole purpose will be to honor our returning men and women by facilitating their return to the fields, woods and water they have sacrificed to protect for us.

Next time you covet that new shotgun or pick-up truck or you dream of the fall air and of bugling elk, or hear the gobble of a spring turkey remember the men and women who make it possible for us to dream these dreams. Keep them in your prayers.

Jim Figueroa, Nick Orchowksi, Mike Meinen, Adam Replogle, Tristan Wyatt and Ray Guerra, words are not enough but they are all I have, thank you, Semper Fi.

To the men and women who helped make this trip possible, you know who you are, words will never adequately express how much your generosity is appreciated!

For more information on how to help honor our troops please contact DC Mederos at (970) 225-0704 or e-mail jemederos@comcast.net



Dimas riding "Josie"

About the Author
Dimas Mederos is an Account Director Farm and Ranch - Sporting Goods for the Williamson Dickie Manufacturing Company.
Dimas and his wife Jan make thier home in Ft. Collins, Colorado.

