

Wounded Soldier may get second chance to play competitive hockey

GARY SHEFTICK

Army News Service

WASHINGTON — Among more than 900 Soldiers watching the Washington Capitals beat the St. Louis Blues, 5-4, Jan. 19 in an overtime shootout, was a wounded warrior who aspires to one day play competitive hockey again.

Spc. Tim Taylor played hockey 14 years in high school and city leagues before most of his left hand was blown off in Iraq. Now he says Walter Reed Army Medical Center will provide him with an adaptive hand so he can compete again.

Taylor said he was his team's leading scorer in Savannah, Ga., before he deployed with the 3rd Infantry Division's 1-76th Field Artillery. While guarding a convoy near Baghdad Oct. 27, his vehicle encountered an improvised explosive device.

The first time Taylor left Walter Reed on a four-hour pass was to attend a Capitals' hockey game last month.

Taylor was taken to the game by Cindy McGrew of "Operation Second Chance." She bought him a jersey emblazoned with Number 8 and the name of his hero, the Capitals' rookie star Alexander Ovechkin.

Taylor hung the jersey above his bed at Walter Reed. And he proudly wore it to the Capitals' Military Salute Night Thursday. He cheered for the Capitals, despite being a St. Louis native and having played hockey there at McCluere High School.

McGrew brings at least three servicemembers from Walter Reed to every Capitals' home game. She brought a dozen to the Jan. 19 game in which the Capitals gave several thousand free tickets to servicemembers. For other games, businesses such as Comcast donate tickets to her group.

McGrew's group consists of five women who donate their time to helping Walter Reed patients. They're not affiliated with the military and just want to help the patients gain a "second chance," McGrew said.

McGrew leaves her day job at Legg Mason every day at 4 p.m. and heads straight to Walter Reed.

"That's the greatest part of my day," she said.

"We're just trying to help one hero at a time," McGrew said about Operation Second Chance.

The volunteers help by giving patients portable DVD players and movies to watch in the hospital. They help by providing airline tickets so patients' families can come and visit, or so patients can travel home.

They help by providing financial grants. Last week the group gave patients three grants totaling \$7,500.

They help by taking patients to see professional sports and other events. Jan. 25 they took a bus full of Walter Reed patients to the Medieval Times dinner theater near Fort Meade, Md.

Thursday night's outing was the first hockey game for a number of the Walter Reed patients, including Staff Sgt. Robert Huegel.

"It was great!" Huegel exclaimed after the Capitals' Matt Pettinger scored the deciding goal in the shootout to win the game.

Huegel said he and the other patients like to joke with each other and make light of their injuries. For instance, he said a Marine corporal who lost two limbs in Iraq, joked at the game that "they charge an arm and a leg for food around here."

"We bust on each other," Huegel said. "It's all in fun," he said, adding that it helps them cheer one another up.



BETH REECE

Maj. Alan Rogers, right, Maj. Jeff Becker, 6-year-old Cole Becker and mother Jenelle applaud the Washington Capitals Jan. 19.

Staff Sgt. Carlos Farler agreed. He was injured in Karbala while on patrol with the 940th Military Police Company, Kentucky National Guard.

"The people were so appreciative," Farler said about the Iraqis. He said while on foot patrols, many Iraqis would walk up and shake his hand, thanking him for keeping the streets safe.

Now it is people like the five in Operation Second Chance that are showing their appreciation.

"Cindy's good about having stuff for us to do," Fernandez said about McGrew and her four helpers.

Operation Second Chance marks its one-year anniversary as a nonprofit entity this month, McGrew said. She started the organization after a friend of hers went to Iraq to work as a DynCorp employee attached to the Stryker Brigade Combat Team in northern Iraq. She began reading about the brigade and about Soldiers who were injured and ended up at Walter Reed. She went to visit some of the Soldiers at Walter Reed in October 2004. From then on, she has spent most of her spare time trying to help patients get a "second chance."

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