



Front: Bill Colwell*, Duane Merchant*; Middle: Cajun Perry, Aaron Houser, Josh Krueger*, Emil Walsh*, John McDaniel*; Rear: Frank Finlin, Duane Wallace*, Lee Chamberlain, Jerry Wetherington, Brian Gotcher
*Denotes - Wounded Warriors in Action



United Sportsmen & Airboater's Alliance Guests-of-Honor in the chow line.

Combat Wounded Vets Treated to

By Capt Phil Walters, GatorGuides.com

Photos By Charlie Lawson

It's a long way and time from any of the creature comforts of home. Just following orders on another day in a hot, dusty and hostile environment where peril could come from anyplace, no matter how mundane, and at any moment no matter how serene. In a flash, it happens. Life is changed forever and the long road to recovery is about to begin for those lucky enough to survive. The cost of Freedom is high.

Retired Lt. Col. John McDaniel is deeply devoted to those who placed themselves into harm's way and then find themselves injured. He founded the Wounded Warriors in Action Foundation (WWIA) to assist those heroes in their long journey to healing both their physical and mental scars. John believes outdoor recreation is great therapy in this process as the mission of WWIA is to provide free world class hunting and fishing adventures to our combat wounded soldiers to aid in healing their hearts and minds.

Members of United Sportsmen and Airboater's Alliance in Alachua County (USAA) hosted its second annual Wounded Warriors in Action BBQ, fun day and alligator hunt on Saturday, Sept. 25, 2010. The event was dedicated to vets in attendance and was a special day for the WWIA vets. USAA members welcomed the vets to our playground and thanked them for their service. They were treated to a huge BBQ spread with all the Southern accompaniments as only USAA's Chef Brian Gotcher can present. After feasting and socializing with the members, the Vets were then invited onto the many airboats beached on Lake Lochloosa's shores then headed out onto the water in the warm sun for a day of riding the lakes and marshes.

USAA's honored guests had traveled from around the country to attend this event. After last year's fete, word spread of the challenge, excitement

and fun that was experienced by the 2009 participants, so interest in the celebration had grown. This year, USAA members hosted Duane Merchant, Aaron Houser, Emil Walsh, Bill Colwell, Josh Krueger and John McDaniel. After their return from the daylight ride adventure, the group once again socialized at the pavilion and was then called together for a briefing of their next mission – the anticipated gator hunt.

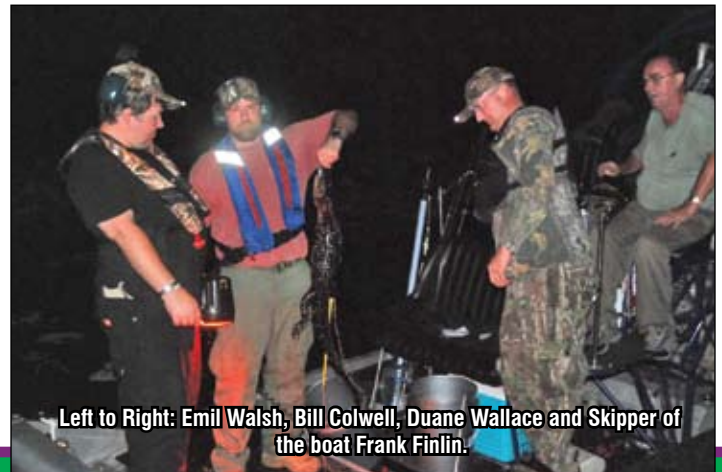
Longtime gator hunter Duane Wallace is the liaison for WWIA and event coordinator for the alligator hunt. Duane briefed the vets on what was going to happen on the airboats during the hunt. He reviewed personal flotation device use, gator hunting equipment and the attitude to be expected from a harpooned gator. At the conclusion of the briefing, Duane directed his hunters to the firing line where he had GatorStick harpoons laid out to practice with. (As was discussed after the hunt, harpooning a gator was no easy feat!) As the sun started to sink, groups were formed, gator permits were checked and hunters were assigned their guides and boats. Finally, the hunt was about to begin.

I was privileged to host Vet Josh Krueger on my boat along with John McDaniel and Brian Gotcher as the permit holder. (The person whose name is on the permit and tags must be present on the vessel). We departed the landing at Cross Creek onto Orange Lake slightly earlier than the rest of the hunters as I wanted to attempt to drill a large gator while we still had some sunlight. We eased out of the canal, pointed the bow north and headed for the North Cove.

We were able to glass a couple of gators in the 8'-10' range, but typical for Orange Lake, these were well educated gators and they sure did not give Josh



First break: Left to Right: Aaron Houser, Jerry Wetherington, Cajun Perry and Skipper of the boat Tony Colburn.



Left to Right: Emil Walsh, Bill Colwell, Duane Wallace and Skipper of the boat Frank Finlin.



Burnt Island on Lochloosa Lake. Site of United Sportsmen & Airboater's Alliance Bar-B-Que for the Wounded Warriors



Wounded Warrior In Action Duane Merchant and Skipper Terry Cake

BBQ & Gator Hunt on Orange Lake

any opportunity to sink his harpoon into them. Guess they recognized him for the threat he posed to their well being. As the sun continued its slide past the horizon, light departed and we began night operations.

"Josh," I said, "this is going to be much more difficult than with some daylight. These are well spooked gators so always be ready to throw the pole. Are you ready?" I added. "Yes Sir, Captain!" Josh shot back. With all aboard prepared, we lit up the area with the headlight, stomped the accelerator and off to a set of glowing eyes we went.

There were hundreds of eyes staring back at us as we attempted to determine if they were worthy of Josh's harpoon. We inspected many, with an occasional eye dropping at a distance (these were the ones we wanted) to leave us nothing but a mud trail heading under the tussocks. As we approached one gator in the 5'-6" range, he gave Josh an opportunity and he took it. Josh hit the gator but not with enough force to puncture the gator's tough armor. As I'm used to informing my hunters, "Josh, if you want the gator, you got to really knock the smirk off its face. Hit him as hard as you can!" I said. He nodded in response. I'm sure he was thinking "I did hit him hard," but this is what sets gator hunting apart. You have to really DRILL the gator to be successful.

After a little more running around and "warmups," Josh got the angle on a target and buried the harpoon. I killed the engine and jumped down from the pilot's seat to instruct Josh on how to deal with the aggression the gator was displaying. After a brief struggle, Josh sent the knife home, the gator went to a better place and we "high fived" for Josh's success! After tagging the lizard, we headed out to fill the second tag.

With four guys in my boat, fuel was being consumed at a rapid rate. We

ran on a number of gators, with Josh hitting a few of them but just not enough to get them into the boat. Around midnight, we had burned the main tank's fuel and dumped the auxiliary tank. I informed the group we would work the area near the landing for as long as we could, which we did. Josh had a few more shots but luck was not to be had. We headed back to the landing, loaded the boat and headed to the rendezvous site on the south side of Orange Lake.

The boats started arriving just after we walked down to the lake. As each boat pulled up, the hunters and guides started departing the airboats with big "possum grins" being flashed by all. Success and fulfillment was floating through the cool night air as the evening's harvest was unloaded. As stories of the adventure began drifting about, Duane began the "harvest report forms" and Captain Cajun Perry started to organize the "skinning crew" for the nine gators harvested. "This was well worth the effort," I thought. I'm sure the members of USAA are already planning for next year's event.

Appreciation goes out to the members of USAA for hosting the heroes for this event. Thanks also to Brian Gotcher from GTO airboats who provided an additional airboat for the rides on Saturday.

Special thanks to Charlie Lawson, Captain Cajun Perry, Tony Colburn, Terry Cake, Jerry Wetherington and Frank Finlin for guiding, Jeff Leserra of Leserra Enterprises and Lee Chamberlain for the crossbow donation, and Duane Wallace for coordinating the event.

Pictures provided by Charlie Lawson <http://www.photoshop.com/users/eightballrvah13/albums/fe03c6763f404533954ec50da4f9fc97#page=1>. Wounded Warriors In Action <http://www.woundedwarriorsinaction.org/index.html>



Left to Right: Emil Walsh, Josh Krueger, Bill Colwell, Duane Merchant, and Aaron Houser.



At the conclusion of the successful hunt, processing the alligators begins.