



One More Toy, a 155-foot yacht, is a place of comfort for wounded special operations troops and their significant others.

Photograph courtesy of Gary Markel

A place to heal and bond

THE LOVE BOAT

BY KATHERINE SNOW SMITH

The double amputee Navy SEAL pulled himself with his arms along the beach into the teal waters off St. Thomas where he could move freely. More than a thousand miles away, Clearwater insurance executive Gary Markel watched the scene play out on the Military History channel. It prompted him to pause during his late night channel surfing and watch the program on wounded veterans. He got an idea.

Wouldn't it be easier for these soldiers to dive or snorkel right off of a boat? Markel had a boat. A 155-foot yacht to be exact.

He made some calls and ended up talking with Gen. Doug Brown, at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa. At the time in 2010, Brown oversaw MacDill's U.S. Special Operations Command. Brown referred him to Jim Lorraine, who oversaw the Care Coalition, which offers support to wounded special ops troops

"I told him, 'I have a boat, and if you'd like to use it you are more than welcome to use it.' I gave him the name of the boat and hung up," Markel recounted.

His phone rang within minutes. It was Lorraine.

"We get people calling us, willing to donate time on a 30- or 35-foot boat but nobody has ever called with a 150-foot yacht. You bet we'd like to use it," he said.

That was the spark that started Operation Healing Forces. Markel and his brother, Anthony Markel of Richmond, oversee the nonprofit organization that hosts groups of wounded special operations troops and their spouses on weeklong retreats aboard yachts and in luxurious vacation homes. They started with five trips in 2015, 12 last year and a goal of 100 over the next three years.

The special operations troops relax and reconnect with their significant others. They share their stories and advice, their disappointments and their triumphs with the group. There are no formal therapy sessions.



Above, a breathtaking view in St. Thomas welcomes those on *One More Toy*.

Photograph courtesy of Operation Healing Forces



Elegant accommodations on *One More Toy*.

Photograph courtesy of Gary Markel

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GARY MARKEL



Gary Markel and wife Denise.

Photograph by Eve Edelheit



Lori and Richard Wultz, both veterans, have been on one of the trips provided by Operation Healing Forces.

Photograph by Eve Edelheit



The living room and bar area on *One More Toy*.

Photograph courtesy of Gary Markel



Guests at a home in Lake Charlevoix, Mich.

Photograph courtesy of Operation Healing Forces

But along the way between parasailing, yoga on the beach, gourmet meals prepared by local chefs and late nights around a fire, they lean in. They really talk.

They find love and support they didn't know they needed or desperately yearned for.

"We're still in touch with two couples from our trip," said Lori Wertz, who went with her husband, Richard, on a retreat to Virginia Beach, Va. "It was just so relaxing to connect with the other wives. We've all gotten those phone calls that nobody wants to get."

Those are the calls that bring news of a serious injury in a foreign land. The calls are followed by months and years of rehabilitation. And, in 70 percent of injured special operations members, redeployment.

"These kids go through so much. They are always thanking us (for the retreats) and we're like, 'No. Wait a minute. You are the ones to thank,'" Markel said. "My boat is called *One More Toy*. I say to these kids, 'If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't have our toys and our houses. You allow us to enjoy the lifestyle we have.'"

MORE THAN A VACATION

Markel and his brother are retired from Markel Corp., the insurance company their grandfather started in 1930 in Richmond, Va. It went public in 1986 at \$8 a share and now trades around \$900 a share. The company saw \$5.4 billion in sales last year. The Markels are involved in a lot of philanthropy, but Gary Markel said Operation Healing Forces is closest to his heart.

In 2015 he called on his friends to help him offer more retreats in more venues.

"We went to the Greenbrier and met with friends of mine who were fairly well off. One of the couples said they didn't know anybody with a yacht, but they had a gorgeous vacation home on Virginia Beach," Markel said.

Friends called friends and the collection of retreat locations grew. It includes homes in Naples; Marathon; Vail, Colo.; Lake Charlevoix, Mich.; Hilton Head, S.C.; and the Hamptons in New York. The Greenbrier historic resort in West Virginia also donates a large house.

The *Highlander*, a 160-foot yacht that can be chartered for \$150,000 a week, just hosted a retreat along the coast of Belize in January.



A luxurious vacation house in St. Croix, USVI.

Photograph courtesy of Operation Healing Forces

“It just keeps snowballing,” Markel said. Yet the group needs more homes to continue to grow.

“We need a minimum of five bedrooms and five bathrooms so each couple can have their own bathroom,” he said.

Billy DeLong, Operation Healing Forces’ program director, doesn’t use the word vacation when talking about the special trips. Yes, they are luxurious, fun and relaxing. But the participants always say they gain much more from the company than the venue, said the former Army Ranger who has had multiple deployments.

Either DeLong, or Jeff Hudson, another wounded Ranger, go on each trip to lead discussions and help the couples cope. Markel had licensed therapists on the first few trips but found the participants felt more comfortable with someone who had been in the same trenches they’ve been in.

“I was on one trip, and there was one guy who had been pretty quiet the whole time,” DeLong recounted. “Then the last day he really opened up and said, ‘I’ve been needing to talk about this for so long.’”

Lori and Richard Weltz have been married 24 years.

“A lot of special ops couples don’t get past 10 years,” she said. “(Troops) are gone so much. They get hurt. They come back different.”

She called the retreat at Virginia Beach a “safe place” to talk about everything.

“With no distractions from kids,” she added.

“It’s good for the younger guys to see what they are going to have to deal with later on,” said Richard Weltz. “We can tell them ‘This is what you are going to have to deal with the VA.’ We can advise them on things to do before their next deployment.”

Richard Weltz is the commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart chapter in Dunedin where the couple live. Lori Weltz also served in the military for a number of years and was in the Gulf War.

“We love supporting this to raise money so other couples can have the same experience,” he said.

Two wounded female special operations troops are scheduled to attend retreats with their husbands this year, according to DeLong.

In light of problems with lavish spending at some charities, Markel notes he and his brother pay 100 percent of the administrative and fundraising costs of their organization. They’ve also footed the bill for the cost of all trips until recently. But now, the Markels are trying to raise \$2 million to help finance airfare, food, activities, van rentals and other costs associated with the retreats. Even though the homes and yachts are donated, the price of retreats averages \$15,000.

Markel believes it’s well worth the cost if the retreats save a marriage or even a life.

“The military, according to various sources, has 22 suicides a day,” he said. “This gentleman told me that in an email he sent after going on a retreat. But he said ‘Tomorrow it’s now only going to be 21.’”

For more information go to operationhealingforces.org.