

Operation Healing Forces Unique Charity Created by Insurance Executive Markel

By Don Jergler | December 19, 2016

Gary Markel was at home one evening watching a television show on volunteers helping wounded veterans scuba dive in St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Some had missing limbs, and others had severe disabilities. They and the volunteers persevered and took the plunge.

And that struck Markel, whose name is attached to one of the largest property/casualty insurance companies in the U.S., in a profound way.

He soon after picked up the phone and reached out to his friend, Gen. Doug Brown, a four-star general and commander of U.S. Special Operations Command at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla. Markel wanted to see what he could do.

He was referred to the U.S. Special Operation Command Care Coalition, which supports special operations forces who are wounded, ill or injured, as well as their families.



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What came out of those conversations prompted Markel to offer his 155-foot yacht to take wounded veterans and their spouses on getaways to help them heal and get reconnected.

The first trip aboard Markel's yacht nearly six years ago in the British Virgin Islands included a counselor and five couples who were members of Care Coalition.

"The feedback we got from the counselor was so positive that I decided to start a charity called Operation Cruise," Markel said. So he put together a 501(c)3 and started calling on fellow yacht owners to lend their vessels to the cause. However, using yachts proved to be costly – they had to reimburse yacht owners' expenses, such as paying for the large crews required on these vessels – so the operation began soliciting vacation homes and resorts to the cause.

Operation Healing Forces Inc. in Clearwater, Fla., was born. The organization treats active duty and recently discharged wounded veteran special operations forces and their spouses, who have been screened and nominated by Care Coalition, to a week-long rehabilitation retreat that typically includes six couples.

Those who qualify are the military's most elite special operations forces who are still in combat since Sept. 11, 2001, and deployed on various missions around the world.

Each retreat has a guide or mentor who is a former special operations forces soldier who knows the medical board process, has been deployed multiple times, has had to deal with the Veterans Administration, and knows what it's like to face the daunting task of either deploying again or an understanding of how to transition to civilian life.

The charity has helped 150 couples since its inception in 2011, and is gearing up to help many times that number in the next few years. They are expecting to hold 100 retreats from 2017 to 2019.



Gary Markel lent his yacht to wounded members of the special operations, an act that led to the creation of the charity Operation Healing Forces Inc.

When asked to explain why the TV show moved him so much, Markel replied: “Unfortunately, all of the military, I believe, is overlooked, especially the special operations forces.”

This is why he had no problem donating his yacht, which he views as just “another toy,” to the cause of helping those who have served.

“That’s the reason I have my toys, that’s the reason I have the houses I live in,” Markel said. “Those guys are protecting that.”

Gary and his brother Tony Markel fund all the administrative costs, so “all donations go to these heroes,” Markel added.

One of those heroes is Lt. Col Jeff Hudson, who went with his wife, Melissa Hudson, on the one of the early retreats in 2011. Hudson injured his back during duty, and the injury had him to the point where he could no longer continue his primary functions, so he left the service in 2013.

“I knew I could not go back,” he said.

That took a mental toll on Hudson. Before long he grew bitter, and he felt abandoned because all he had known was service since age 18. At age 47 and out of the military, he was lost.

“You kind of get lost in the darkness,” Hudson said.

He connected with Care Coalition, which turned him on to Operation Healing Forces. They took Hudson and his wife along with other couples on a retreat to the Caribbean on Markel’s yacht.

“And it made a tremendous, positive difference in our lives,” he said, describing the trip as an “absolutely amazing experience.”

Hudson said he was taken aback that someone was providing such an opportunity for he and his wife to be together.

“They were actually sharing their home, sharing their property, sharing their own bed with you,” he said.

Following the trip, he stayed in touch with Markel and they soon realized they both lived in the Tampa area. They sat down one day and Markel informed him that he wanted to grow the program and he wanted to bring Hudson on to run it. After working as a defense contractor following his retirement from the service, Hudson became the executive director of Operation Healing Forces in 2015.

This gave him an opportunity to help his comrades, some of whom had endured burns over their entire body, and others who had been shot multiple times, as well as soldiers with pent up anger and post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Everybody kind of comes in at a different level,” Hudson said. “And they all leave on a better level.”

Therapeutic activities are designed to help a couple bond, such as parasailing, or riding ATVs, horseback riding, dolphin encounters, scuba diving and zip-lining.

Hudson explained that quite often these couples have marriage difficulty, and trouble returning to their past lives, so such activities serve as an icebreaker.

Hudson used as an example a paratrooper, who is familiar with being strapped into a harness and floating high in the air. They take that veteran and spouse parasailing.

“Most spouses have never been in a parachute rig nor suspended floating in the air,” Hudson said. “A look of excitement and fear fills their face, whereas, the veteran is quite comfortable and laughing. Now, she grabs him for security and reassurance. The emotional ice is broken, and the couple begins talking.”

They may also put the pair on recreational vehicles that happen to be special operations forces infiltration vehicles.

“Many special operations forces are trained on how to ride in the most arduous terrain. For the spouse though, it’s usually their first time on an ATV, jet ski, or snowmobile,” Hudson said. “The pair take turns driving and holding onto each other as the pas-



Scuba diving is an activity that’s familiar to many in special operations forces.



Getting couples reconnected is the main mission of Operation Healing Forces. One activity the couples may do together is Scuba diving.

“The wives are every bit as positively impacted as the soldiers, if not more,” Markel said. “We had a number of instances where we were told the week-long retreat saved some marriages.”

Although he’s never have been in the military, Markel said it shouldn’t be hard for anyone to comprehend why a charity like this is important.

“I am very sensitive to the role that the military plays, and the threats we’ve got staring us in the face now,” Tony Markel said. “The sacrifices that these young men and women make in terms of separating from their spouse, and in terms of injury, in terms of death, in terms of suicide, in terms of stress on the marriage, the kids, is unbelievable.”

Tony Markel isn’t a stranger to taking on charitable causes. In 2014, he was honored for his work to raise \$1 billion for cancer research as national chair for the City of Hope’s Power of Hope campaign. He was touched by the disease when his wife, Sue, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

Now, he said he feels just as strongly about Operation Healing Forces as he did with his efforts to help fund cancer research.

“This one has a really special place in my heart as well,” he said.

Gary Markel, who also never served in the military, said he hopes to continue to see the charity grow.

“It’s taken off and is becoming a wonderful retreat for these couples,” he said. “It’s something that hopefully one day will be my legacy and that’s what we’re headed for.”

senger. The veterans remember their training and their experiences, and begin to share that with their spouse. Often times, this is something they don’t disclose, but now they are.”

Maureen J. Denlea, development director of Operation Healing Forces, said it’s not unheard of for spouses to find out during a retreat exactly what the veterans they married actually did in the military.

One man had told his wife for years that his primary function in the military was to hand out supplies. During the trip, she found out he was actually involved in secretive special operations missions, Denlea said.

“He never told her until they were on the trip,” she said. “It helps the wives understand these guys, because they’re not the same people who left.”

The spouses are one of the biggest beneficiaries from these trips, said Tony Markel, Gary’s brother, who is a big part of the charity efforts.