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Markel brothers operate charity for wounded special operations troops

By JOHN RAMSEY Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Sunday, July 17, 2016, 10:30 pm

Jeff Hudson saw friends killed and severely wounded during eight wartime deployments as an Army Ranger after 9/11.

When his back gave out and forced him to leave the Army or risk spending his life in a wheelchair, he felt like a man without a mission and a stranger to his wife and children.

“Once I knew I had to leave the service, I was feeling very isolated and alone. Quite honestly, I felt like no one really cared,” the retired lieutenant colonel said last week.

“I was very angry at the world. My family was frayed. As (my wife) would say, I was a completely different person. One day she asked me, ‘Whatever happened to the man I married?’ and I said, ‘Oh, he died years ago.’”

Hudson said the generosity of an heir to one of the Richmond area’s leading businesses turned his life around and probably saved his marriage.

Gary Markel, a grandson of the founder of Henrico County-based Markel Corp., decided in 2011 to use his 150-foot yacht to send wounded special operations troops from all branches of the military on all-expenses-paid luxurious couples retreats.

Hudson and his wife were among the first six couples who sailed around the Caribbean on Markel’s dime for a weeklong trip that doubled as a fantasy vacation and as a counseling session. The injured warriors found it easier to open up around brothers who understood their experiences, and the wives shared a similar bond. But most importantly, the trip gave Hudson and his wife a chance to resurrect their relationship.

“Because of that trip, I know we’re still together today because it helped put us in a better state of mind mentally and emotionally so we could face the road ahead,” Hudson said. “It completely changed my attitude and outlook on life.”



SCUBA photo of SOF couple

A special operations veteran with 28 deployments and more than 30 years of service got to show his wife one of the environments in which he was trained to operate.



Tony and Gary Markel

Tony Markel (left) lives in Manakin-Sabot, while Gary Markel resides in Naples, Fla. The brothers are grandsons of the founder of Henrico County-based Markel Corp., a specialty insurance firm based in Innsbrook.

The initiative, initially called Operation Cruise, began with a moment of serendipity. Gary Markel was channel-surfing one evening when a show featuring Navy SEALs, many who had lost one or both legs in war, being retrained to scuba dive caught his attention.

“They were scooting down the beach to get to the water,” Markel said. “It really hit my heartstrings.”

As a third-generation leader of Markel Corp., the Innsbrook-based specialty insurance firm founded by his grandfather that has become one of the largest of its kind in the country, Markel had the means to turn that moment of motivation into a similar operation.

And with his brother, Anthony Markel, now on board, the pair are working to increase the operation with a goal of sponsoring 100 retreats, with at least four couples on each weeklong trip, during the next three years.

They learned that their connections were much more likely to offer time in a luxury vacation home than a yacht, so Operation Cruise became Operation Healing Forces.

They hired Hudson to be the organization's executive director.

Instead of licensed counselors, to whom servicemen sometimes can't relate, every trip will include Hudson or another wounded special operations vet to guide discussions and help the couples cope with what war has cost them.

So far, the Markels have funded each of the dozen retreats to date on their own.



A group of special operators and their spouses listens to an equine therapy expert discuss the healing effects of working with horses and how that work can improve quality of life.

They began their first round of fundraising last week in Richmond, hoping to secure about \$2 million in donations to cover the cost of the trips, including food and airfare.

Gary and Tony Markel have pledged to continue paying all of the overhead and administrative costs of the operation so 100 percent of all donations will go directly toward paying for the trips.

"Our program is to get these couples in a setting they've never experienced before. ... Our focus is on bonding and healing," Gary Markel, who lives in Naples, Fla., said last week at his brother's riverfront home in Manakin-Sabot.

The Markel family has a long history of philanthropy in the Richmond area, from leading the development of the region's first hospice house to involvement in the Richmond Christmas Mother Fund to raise money for needy families. Tony Markel recently led a campaign to raise \$1 billion for cancer research.

"Both of us, given our retired status and the good fortune we've enjoyed, are involved in a lot of charities," Tony Markel said. "This is one of the most compelling initiatives that I have ever been involved in."

The brothers are sensitive to the recent scandals involving military initiatives, including the lavish spending by executives at the Wounded Warrior Project.

That's part of the reason they're pledging to use 100 percent of donations on the retreats.

And they also have heard some critics say their effort offers special operations vets little more than a chance for a ritzy vacation.

But the letters and emails they receive from the couples who participate often underscore that the trips are more than a getaway.

One man described how he had filed for divorce from his wife and spent two months as an inpatient at a VA hospital as a last-ditch effort to cope with his post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries.

He and his wife had never been on a honeymoon because of his constant deployment and training. But it was a trip to Vail, Colo., sponsored by the Markel initiative, that he credits with turning around his life and relationship.

"I needed to figure out why I hurt so much, why I couldn't control many of the thoughts and emotions my brain was sending and, most importantly, why I didn't care if I was around to grow old with my wife or be involved in raising our children," he said in his letter to the Markels.

"I want to make my feelings perfectly clear. The retreat saved my life."



Diagnosed with a brain tumor, an Army special operator who lost 75 percent of his eyesight as doctors tried to remove the tumor formed a special bond with dolphin Jax, a survivor of a shark attack.