SPOTLIGHT VETERANS RANCH

Restoring spirits of men haunted by war

GRAHAM, Texas — The men crewed .50-calibers through Iraq neighborhoods, survived roadside bomb blasts, attended memorial services for buddies. Now they were being asked to cut cattle, on foot, in front of one another and a handful of real cowboys. It's safe to say there wasn't exactly a rush to start. But within a few minutes, the 15 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan— almost all of them self-described city boys whose experience with livestock extends only to the dinner plate—had learned a thing or two about patience and teamwork, and for a few minutes of laughter and sweat, they could forget about the war that still haunts them. "It's like we're back in the field now," said Jeremy Williams, a 26-year-old who lives in a small town near Huntsville and served three tours in Iraq with the Marines. The veterans came from throughout the United States to spend four days at the stylish Wildcatter Ranch, invited by the Wounded Warrior Project and the owners of the ranch to help restore their spirits. Some of the men have physical injuries, but each of them is struggling to deal with combat stress and their return to civilian society. The men went canoeing and rode horses. They got massages and shot skeet. They stayed in luxurious rooms and they visited an elementary school, where the children gave them Graham Steers ball caps. "I have never seen anything like this before," said Harvey Stubbs Jr., 32, a Chicago-area native who was medically retired from the Army because of his injuries. "The outpouring of love ... has been amazing. A lot of people give lip service to supporting the troops, but these people have opened their hearts to us in ways I can't believe."

—Chris Vaughn,
McClatchy/Tribune news

Marine veteran Jeremy Williams rides the bucking barrel at Wildcatter Ranch last week. The days spent at the ranch are an opportunity for veterans dealing with post-traumatic stress to be around others struggling to adjust to civilian life.

PAUL MOSELEY/MCT PHOTO