

# NEWS OF VETERANS

## Blinded Veterans Take On Ranger Training

(NAPSA)—For two years, some of the toughest training in the military has been enjoyed by some pretty tough American veterans, in this case members of the Blinded Veterans Association (BVA).

With unusually high levels of strength, stamina and endurance, they spend a long weekend of rigorous U.S. Army Ranger training at Camp Frank D. Merrill Military Base in Georgia.

With travel sponsored by BVA's Operation Peer Support Committee and the idea brought to fruition by the Association's National Sergeant at Arms Danny Wallace, the trip to Camp Merrill and the subsequent training to be an Army Ranger is for the blinded veterans much like it is for actual Ranger recruits.

"We display our unstoppable drive not only to ourselves but to the elite U.S. Army Rangers," Wallace affirmed after the first Ranger experience in 2015.

Activities consist of mountaineering training that includes hiking up a rock-strewn trail toward cliffs they later climb and rappel. At the cliffs, the Ranger cadre and instructors set up eight climbing stations at which trainees can prove themselves on the vertical rock. The instructors assist them in tying knots and ascending the rock face. Later in the day, they move back to a base camp and climb a synthetic rock wall and perform additional rappelling.

"The only limitations that we face are those that we place on ourselves," said Wallace. "Words that come to mind in helping us overcome these limitations as blinded veterans are 'courage,' 'determination,' 'self-respect,' 'intestinal fortitude,' 'pride,' 'self-worth,' 'confidence,' 'commitment' and 'fellowship,' just to name a few."

The Ranger trainees also conduct a 5K run. In addition, they



**Ranger trainers and their blinded veteran trainees share unique challenges and camaraderie.**

are invited to the Gainesville, Georgia Police Department, where they shoot live fire using shotguns, assault rifles and pistols. Several eating, drinking and storytelling competitions are also on the program.

"I first attended Ranger school 47 years ago," said blinded Vietnam veteran and New Orleans, Louisiana resident Joe Burns, who is also the oldest of the participants from both 2015 and 2016. "This prior experience did not interfere with the rewards that I reaped from having the chance to do it again now."

Burns' comments were echoed by Kevin Jackson of Austin, Texas, who also praised the program and the overall experience.

"Walking up to and then climbing the rock, I paid attention to all of my body positions," he said. "This total body experience was very revealing and provided me with a sense of accomplishment that I had not experienced in a long time as I ascended to a height I didn't expect."

Jackson was as emphatic about his associations with fellow comrades as he was about the activities themselves.

"The camaraderie and companionship that were built in five days with other blinded veterans as well as our guides were beyond belief and very enduring," he said. "Our guides went out of their way to

support us in any way they could."

In addition to the rigorous physical activity, the blinded veterans are treated to a barbecue, a fish fry, and a critter cookout in the evenings.

The volunteers that Wallace recruited to keep the veterans safe, well fed and on schedule for two years straight consisted of two young soldiers who worked at the camp and a larger cadre of his Ranger friends, some of whom traveled long distances to be able to work with the group.

"The devotion and respect these warriors command is second to none," said one such volunteer who traveled across the country in 2016 and who preferred to remain anonymous. "It is times like these, now each year, that makes me appreciate the love these veterans have for their country, and the esprit de corps that we have holds a special place in my heart."

The veteran-trainees are all legally blind and from several eras of service. BVA is the only Veterans Service Organization exclusively dedicated to serving the estimated 132,000 blinded veterans and their families throughout the United States. Its Operation Peer Support initiative seeks to help newly blinded veterans look ahead to the possibilities and opportunities their lives still present, through social activities, counseling, and educational forums regarding benefits and rehabilitation.

"The purpose of the trip is to let people know that an organization for blinded veterans actually exists while building and fostering a bond of camaraderie between BVA and the elite Army Rangers," said Wallace. "It is our intent to demonstrate, not only to our veterans but to the Ranger community as well, the abilities that we possess even without our sight."

### Learn More

For further information about BVA and its programs, go to [www.bva.org](http://www.bva.org).