

Camp Patriot

Fishing With Heroes

WRITTEN BY WILL JORDAN

“Everybody needs... places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.” – John Muir

One of the beautiful aspects of fly fishing lies in its ability to immerse a person in the present. An incredible transcendence occurs when the stresses of the day fade into nothing and the beauty of the moment fills all consciousness. Standing knee deep in a mountain stream with a fly rod in hand tends to foster such an experience.

A few years ago, while fly fishing on a river in Northwest Montana a young man experienced a moment that has changed his life and those of many others. That man was Micah Clark and that moment was the spark which fueled Camp Patriot. The realization that many of his fellow servicemen and women could benefit from exposure to the great outdoors was Micah's driving force. Since 2006 Micah has been facilitating outdoor trips for disabled veterans through Camp Patriot, a non-profit organization based in Libby, MT seeking to, “Give back to those who have given.”

And given they have. In the best of situations the servicemen and women of the United States return from the rigors of war with a new outlook of and appreciation for life and liberty; those are the fortunate who need nothing more than a sincere and heartfelt thank you. Those less fortunate return to us battle scarred, physically and emotionally and in need of continued support during their recovery process. Divergent opinions pertaining to the U.S. war on terror are a given, but there should be no conflict involving the support of U.S. troops, whether they are in-country or overseas. The servicemen and women of the U.S. have sacrificed much in an effort to maintain and defend this nation; they are truly heroes and heroines.

For Peter “PJ” Johns (Navy Chief) of Texas and Jamin Moore (Army, 101st) of California, a bit of fly fishing and R&R in Montana were a welcome diversion from a seemingly endless succession of medical procedures



Veteran Jamin Moore receives casting instruction from guide Monti Moniz on the banks of the Kootenai River.

(Jamin recently had his 13th surgery) resulting from injuries sustained in service. For both of these young men, accepting Micah's invitation as guests of Camp Patriot resulted in their first glimpse of Big Sky Country and their first lessons in fly fishing.

As first impressions go, the town of Libby is probably a good taste of what Montana has to offer. Rugged individualism along with a sense of community, a mix of old extractive and new tourism based economies, immense wilderness underfoot and plenty of clear blue sky overhead. As for what fly fishing has to offer, well it's tough to beat a guided float on the Kootenai River as an introduction.

Micah has developed a network of professionals in the outdoor industry who have partnered with him to assist in providing disabled veterans with incredible outdoor experiences. Dave and Tami Blackburn are just one

example of business owners who have stepped forward in support of Camp Patriot. Dave and Tami have been operating a fly fishing guide service out of Libby for 25 years. During that time they've gone on to grow their business and incorporate riverside lodging and dining into the services they have to offer. The Blackburns were gracious hosts of the Camp Patriot crew, even as their stay overlapped a large gathering of family and friends who came together to surprise Tami in celebration of her "30th" birthday.

For PJ and Jamin that first Big Sky sunrise and the sight of the mighty Kootenai River rushing by, just a stone's throw from the front porch of the cabin, was an eye opening experience. As the group assembled around the kitchen table for a hearty breakfast, there were undeniable divisions between them, military and civilian, fly fishermen and bait fishermen, guide and rookie, injured and healthy. In spite of those differences



Starting the day off with a hot breakfast as the river beckons in the background.

ON THE HORIZON WAS A DAY OF FISHING IN MONTANA, A PROSPECT THAT AFFORDS A MAN WITH HOPE OF GOOD THINGS TO COME.

there seemed to be a common bond, perhaps it was a love for country and of freedoms shared. The sense of optimism around the breakfast table was palpable and why not? On the horizon was a day of fishing in Montana, a prospect that affords a man with hope of good things to come.

In spring there is no real rush to get on a Montana trout river in the morning, the water is cold and the best fishing tends to be mid-day anyhow. As the sun rose higher in the southern sky it was finally time to pull on the waders, string up the rods, and commence the casting lessons. Instructing a new fly fisherman on the fundamentals of the sport is trying for both teacher and student; adding the physical disabilities of PJ and Jamin to the equation only increased the learning curve. At times it must have been awfully frustrating for both guys, particularly for Jamin who is not far removed from his injury and had very limited use of one arm, requiring him to improvise on techniques. Fortunately they had patient, knowledgeable instructors in Dave Blackburn and fellow guide Monti Moniz. A technique was devised by Monti that compensated for Jamin's uncooperative left hand. Upon a strike he transferred the rod from his right hand and clasped it under his left arm, then commenced stripping the line in with his right



Veteran Peter "PJ" Johns books up with a Kootenai River rainbow.

hand while using his mouth as a stripping guide. The method proved effective and allowed him to hook, play and land fish unassisted.

The Kootenai River is big water; it was at its minimum flows of 4,000cfs during this trip, which is still a significant volume of water. The Kootenai is a tailwater fishery, consistently running clear and cold, with an aquamarine glacial tint. Three miles below the dam the Fisher River makes an entrance and along with other tributaries will discolor the Kootenai during periods of runoff. The Kootenai River watershed, principally the Yaak River system, provides habitat for the Columbia River redband trout, a species indigenous to the headwaters of the Columbia River. It can be surmised that the rainbows in the mainstem Kootenai River still carry some of that redband lineage and provide a rare opportunity to catch this subspecies of



Success! Jamin and Monti collaborate in bringing a fish to the net.



The Camp Patriot crew. Top (L to R): Bill Clark, Boyd Curry, Dave Blackburn, Peter "PJ" Johns and Jamin Moore. Bottom row (L to R): Micah Clark and Monti Moniz.

trout. While the average trout in the river tapes out at just 10 to 14 inches, there are some very large trout present. In fact a couple of Dave's clients landed 10+ pound rainbows last season. Prime time on the Kootenai comes in July and August when the river is flowing fat and sassy and the trout are looking up to a smorgasbord of aquatic and terrestrial dry flies. But even on this cool spring weekend there were pods of rainbows up and rising to an assortment of midges and baetis.

Once the veterans had the basics of casting and line handling down, the boats shoved off from shore and the guides settled into a rhythm on the oars. Commanding

the bow of their respective crafts, PJ and Jamin had unobstructed views of the river and surrounding mountainside. Pods of rainbows scattered under the boats and big bull trout skulked in the deep, emerald pools while soaring bald eagles and flocks of geese vied for attention overhead. PJ and Jamin started with nymph rigs and managed some good, long drifts that were enthusiastically met by the pervasive whitefish. There somehow seems to be a universal knowledge amongst anglers, even newcomers to the sport, that a whitefish isn't exactly the most desirable catch. There were missed opportunities at trout early on, as well as wind knots, tangles, break-offs and other misfortunes that all contributed to the learning process.

A couple of hours and a few river miles into the float, things started looking up a bit. The day had warmed and the intermittent sun and cloud cover was inducing some baetis hatches. Dave and Monti pulled the boats into some prime eddies and pools where experience had taught them there would be feeding trout. And sure enough there were pods of rainbows making splashy rises in the current. PJ was the first to connect with a feisty Kootenai River rainbow after precisely delivering a parachute Adams with a downstream drift; he was soon cradling his first Montana trout, caught on a dry fly no less. After a couple more hook-ups the trout wised up and the boats moved on in search of new water.

For both young men the opportunity to get outdoors and experience something new was very healthy. For Jamin, just getting away from the hospital was good medicine in and of itself. For PJ, who is a bit further removed from his injury, getting to put his rehabilitated hands to work on a new challenge was rewarding and a confidence builder. Over the course of their trip, hopefully there were moments, fleeting as they may have been, when transcendence occurred and relieved them of the burdens their injuries have placed upon them.

Camp Patriot and all those involved in making this trip a success, certainly lived up to the organization's mission of giving back to disabled veterans. Perhaps Micah summed it up best when he said that this trip and all of those that the organization conducts are, "A thank you, and hopefully more."

The mission of Camp Patriot can not be completed without the support of compassionate citizens. Camp Patriot is a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation. Donations are fully tax-deductible and will enable more disabled veterans to experience fishing, hunting and outdoor adventure trips through Camp Patriot. Donations can be made online at www.camppatriot.org or by phone at: 406-293-4376.

MSJ

Legendary Waters...

Thinking of fly fishing in Montana? How do you choose where to go for your Montana fly fishing vacation? The answer is to choose an outfitting service that tailors a fishing trip to your interests and skill level.

Big Sky Fly Fishers
406.690.4752
bigskyflyfishers.com

SOAR INFLATABLE CANOES

Go Anywhere - Do Anything

SOAR Inflatables, Inc.
www.soar1.com
800.280.7627