



Nassau Firefighters Give to the Wounded Warriors

By Steve Grogan

What started as a group of volunteers from the Stewart Manor Fire Department on Long Island with a simple Christmas care package to a local Marine has turned into a countywide firefighting effort for wounded warriors.

In 2004, then Stewart Manor Chief Dan O’Keefe thought of giving Christmas gifts to a local Marine serving in Iraq. His department supported the effort, and soon they had more than enough gifts for that one soldier. They decided to give the remaining gifts to the wounded warriors hospitalized at Bethesda Naval Hospital. That Christmas, three Stewart Manor Fire Department fire vehicles drove the gifts to Maryland and personally gave them to the wounded warriors in the hospital.

The following year, the firefighters continued their efforts, and besides Bethesda, added a visit to the wounded – this time to Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, DC.

By this time in 2005, word of Stewart Manor Fire Department’s gift giving had spread to neighboring fire departments in Nassau County. Soon, Floral Park, New Hyde Park, Garden City, Garden City Park, and Franklin Square fire departments offered to help.

In the third year, as the donations increased, the firefighters added two more locations, Camp Lejeune and Fort Bragg, for their gift giving.

With the additional help from other departments now, the non-profit Nassau County Firefighters-Operation Wounded Warrior (NCFE-OWW) was officially formed. Today, over 40 of the 71 fire departments in Nassau County are in the organization and each are doing their part to support the effort and raise money.

The organization is all volunteer, and except for some minor expenses, all money raised and donated each year is spent on gifts for the wounded warriors.

One of the original organizers from Stewart Manor Fire Department is Bill Grogan (no relation to me), a Marine veteran. Grogan told a North Carolina news service during last year’s trip to Camp Lejeune, “We have motivation and it started with 9/11. We deeply care about those who take the fight to those who attacked us.”

He has described the efforts of the Nassau firefighters as “a bond of service that firefighters and troops share.”

Grogan also said one of the most rewarding experiences of their efforts was meeting US Army Sergeant Eric Edmundson at Fort Bragg. Edmundson was seriously wounded in 2005 in Iraq when the vehicle he was driving struck a roadside bomb. He sustained shrapnel and blast injuries. His prognosis was not good but with the help of doctors, therapists and his family, he is slowly recovering. The firefighters first met him while he was undergoing rehab treatment.

“Our visit is a major source of therapy to Eric and his family, and they look forward to our visit every year,” said Grogan.

In 2009, the firefighters traveled to Eric’s home in New Bern, NC, and presented him with a fire helmet making him an honorary Nassau County Fire Chief.

There are many that support the efforts and fundraising of the NCFE-OWW. The Locust Valley Fire Department just hosted their fourth annual pasta dinner, which for the last three years, has raised over \$50,000. In October, the Roslyn Fire Department hosted their second oldies concert, dubbed “Roslyn Rocks for the Wounded Warriors” at Roslyn High School. In June, the New Hyde Park Roadrunner’s Club sponsored an 8 K Run, while my department, Lynbrook, held an “End of Summer Block Party and Salute to Our Heroes” event in September, and our local chamber of commerce raised money at a car show. Also in September, the first annual softball tournament was held in Floral Park, and Williston Park Fire Department held a pancake breakfast in November.

The Islanders Hockey Team has also been instrumental in fundraising and has helped raise over \$20,000 for the wounded warriors. Firefighters have worked with the Islanders to organize, fundraise and donate Islander tickets, which have been given to the families of over 500 men and women who have served in the military.

Additionally, a group of senior citizens who make quilts has donated them each year which the firefighters distribute during the hospital visits. With the money raised over the years, the firefighters have been able to purchase (besides the usual toiletries, socks, gloves, blankets, sweatshirts, and sweaters) lap tops, DVD players, video games and even a treadmill for a wounded Marine working





Nassau firefighters present a chief's helmet to Sergeant Edmundson in 2009.



Members with a wounded warrior from Yonkers at Walter Reed Hospital in 2010.

to run marathons again. Some of the departments also donate their department t-shirts for the soldiers to wear, and schoolchildren on Long Island write Christmas cards that are put into the gift bags. Toys have also been given to the children of the wounded.

Last December, the firefighters gave out over 150 gifts bags to the most serious and hospitalized wounded warriors. These were the warriors given DVD players and laptops to use while bedridden and recovering. A total of over 900 wounded warriors in rehab at all four locations received supplies and gifts from Nassau's firefighters last year.

During the visits, the wounded soldiers and their families expressed their gratitude and thanks but most said they could not believe Long Island volunteer firefighters cared that much to travel that distance to remember them and present them with Christmas gifts.

As one who has made the trip, it is a moving experience to meet those who have given so much for our country. Every firefighter, in fact every citizen, should take this trip and see true American heroes who have the greatest attitudes and are not remorseful about their injuries. In fact, all want to stay in the service and get back into the fight.

This past July, a contingent of nearly 50 Nassau firefighters traveled back to Fort Bragg after military personnel, mindful of what we firefighters are doing for their wounded soldiers, invited our members to a military family picnic and barbecue as a way of saying thanks for Nassau's efforts.

In December, three convoys of Nassau fire department vehicles, dubbed the "Long Red Line" will make the annual trip from Long Island to Washington and North Carolina, and to see Edmundson. On average there are at least 15 fire vehicles in each convoy. Those going to Fort Bragg will depart on December 4th, while the Camp Lejeune convoy will depart on December 8th, and the Bethesda/Walter Reed convoy will depart on December 9th, 2011.

"We owe these wounded men and women more than we can ever give them. We firefighters do what we do to honor their service and dedication and thank them for their sacrifice," said Joe O'Grady, of the Floral Park Fire Department, and president of Nassau County Firefighters Operation Wounded Warrior.

"We will not forget them."

Stewart Manor Fire Department's Doug Stewart, who has made every trip to North Carolina and photo-documented OWW activities, said, "We have laughed, hugged and shed tears with America's Greatest."

Anyone wishing to donate to the organization can send a check to Nassau County Firefighters-Operation Wounded Warrior Inc, 120 Covert, Avenue, Stewart Manor, NY 11530.

For more information, visit www.ncff-oww.com.



Members at Bethesda Naval Hospital in December 2009. Bill Grogan of the Stewart Manor Fire Department is on the extreme left.



Nassau firefighters at the Mologne House on the campus of Walter Reed Hospital in Washington in 2009. John Nykiel, New Hyde Park Fire Department, dressed as Santa for the wounded troops.