Residents cheer heroes



GEORGE GARDNER / Staff

A large group of motorcycles escorts a group of injured Marines through the intersection of US 123 and State 130 in Seneca on Monday.

Marines enjoy Keowee retreat

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Upstate residents gathered by the roadside Monday waving American flags to welcome war-injured Marines escorted by hundreds of motorcyclists on their way to a few days of fun and relaxation at Lake Keowee.

"There were people everywhere," said Allen Funk, lead organizer of the three-day event to honor their service.

"There was a lady in a wheelchair with an oxygen tank waving a flag; a guy standing in the back of a pickup truck saluting, cars honking," he said. "And everywhere people were holding up signs that said 'Thank you,' and 'We're proud of you,' and 'Welcome home.' "

Wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 30 Marines are from camps Le Jeune and Pendleton and most hail from the Special Operations Command, said Capt. Charlie Hall of the Marine Corps Reserves and Marine for Life – a program that helps Marines transition back to civilian life.

While some have lost limbs, others have suffered traumatic brain injuries or post traumatic stress disorder, he said. And the next few days will be "therapeutic" as well as fun.

As a member of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, Marine Nicholas Gomez of Oceanside, Calif., saw his share of combat while on foot patrol in Iraq during two tours of duty. The 25-year-old saw his team leader killed and witnessed the destructive force of the improvised explosive devices.

But at the sight of the motorcade and all the people who turned out during the hour-long ride from Greenville-Pickens Speedway, he was uplifted.

"There's like hundreds of bikers out here," he said. "It's absolutely amazing."

Over the next few days, the Marines will enjoy barbecues, boating and other activities with the help of Roger C. Peace Rehabilitation Hospital and the Keowee Key community in Oconee County.

Funk, 63, is the semi-retired owner of Allen Funk's Wallpaper and a Keowee Key resident.

He was a patient at the hospital last year after Guillain-Barre Syndrome left him paralyzed from the neck down.

"To say I was terrified doesn't begin to describe it," he said of those difficult weeks.

He has since recovered. But one day while chatting with hospital administrator Stan Healy, he asked how he could help, believing his thanks weren't enough. Healy suggested the Marine outing, he said.

Peace has been offering water-ski programs for patients for years, but this is the first time it's helped host an event just for wounded veterans.