

Overwhelmed

Wounded Warriors Regiment thankful for this week's 'chart-topping' event

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KEOWEE KEY — "It was breathtaking, really," said Sgt. Joe Baker.

As a member of the Wounded Warrior Regiment that arrived in the Upstate on Monday, Baker was speaking on behalf of his buddies when he said they knew very little about what to expect.

"We were told that there would be some bikes riding with us to Keowee Key," Baker said. "But when we saw nearly 300 motorcycles and emergency personnel escorting us, I just couldn't believe it. What a way to be welcomed. It was awesome."

Having settled into their respective living quarters at Keowee Key, on Tuesday the Marines enjoyed a picture perfect day on the lake, mastering their water skis and tooling around on wave runners.

"I've been to a couple of these events before," Baker said. "But nothing like this. This is definitely a chart topper."

Fellow Marine Eric Sparks tried his hand at wake boarding behind one of the numerous boats donated by residents and area marinas.

"Obviously this is not my sport of choice," he said jokingly after attempting to get up. "But as you can see, I'm a pro at floating."

It was important for the Marines to be in a casual, civilian atmosphere, said Commander Andy Davidson from Camp Lejeune.

"These guys tend to be very isolated a lot of the time," Davidson said. "To be around a non-military atmosphere is great for them. The support they feel is through the roof."

Warriors from Camp Pendleton (California) also had no idea what to expect when they arrived at the airport.

"They thought they were coming for some sort of work duty," said Roger C. Peace rehabilitation therapist Tracie Hawkins. "They thought they were working some sort of event; they had no idea it was going to be anything like this. It was a cool surprise."

And the motorcade from Easley to Keowee Key continues to evoke a host of emotions from the Marines.

"To look up and see older veterans saluting us as we drove down the road was unreal," Baker said. "I gotta say, my jaw really dropped. People were getting out on the other side of the road and standing in the median waving flags. I couldn't stop looking out of the windows."

However, even the efforts of locals to make the Marines feel welcome can't compare to the camaraderie among the heroes.

"We get to share our experiences with each other," said Cpl. Philip Masker. "I didn't know any of these guys coming in. Now, we get this time together and it means so much to us."

And while civilians honor these soldiers as true heroes, they won't accept the role.

"They won't admit to being a hero," Davidson said. "They don't even want to be known as one."

But, ask the residents of Keowee Key and all who have had the chance to speak with these decorated servicemen, and the term "hero" might just possibly be considered an understatement.

Coming tomorrow: Residents of Keowee Key and other organizers of this week's event talk about what the Marines' visit means to them.



Jessica Nelms/Staff

Justin Kopta, left, and Eric Sparks, also pictured above, take a break from playing on the lake, Tuesday. For more photos of our Wounded Warriors, see page 8A or visit www.upstatetoday.com.