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'Returning Warriors' soak in sun, fun and

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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SALEM — "You don't see this every day. You rarely see this kind of thing at all these days."

Marine Gunnery Sergeant Chris Ovanek made that observation as he and 26 other Marines relaxed at Keowee Key on Tuesday, soaking up some well-deserved and much-needed rest and relaxation.

The "Returning Warriors" program, which continues through Thursday morning, returned to the Upstate for a second year. However, the 2010 version is even bigger with more community backing and business sponsorships.

"If more communities around the nation, like the one here at Keowee Key, volunteered to house and entertain servicemen and women, the lives of our soldiers can be improved," Ovanek added. "It is so crucial for these guys to have that down time and fun. It refreshes us to then go out and do what we've been trained to do."

More than a dozen jet skis lined the beach at Keowee Key Marina for Marines to tackle the waters of the lake. Fishing boats ferried soldiers to the best fishing spots on the lake, and catered lunches gave visitor, the fuel to go out and do it all over again in the afternoon.

"These guys have so much on their minds before they leave for combat, while they are gone and when they come back, that a span of time to relax is of the utmost importance," he said. "Here, we don't have to think about anything except having a good time."

Tracie Hawkins from Roger C. Peace Rehabilitation Hospital in Greenville said the event has grown by miles.

"I joke that this event started from a small brainstorm," she said. "We thought it would be nice to offer a water skiing event for Marines, injured and otherwise. Now, look how far it's come. And it's only going to get bigger and better."

For Hawkins, knowing first-hand the struggle service people go through,

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Upstate hospitality



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Marines are met with cheers and applause as they arrive at Gignilliat Field on Tuesday night for the Veterans Appreciation Event. For more photos, see Page A8.

'WARRIORS': Saluted

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especially when they get injured in battle, the event is a tear-jerker.

"To get to be a part of this, it's just priceless," she said. "To be able to stand here, face to face with them and say 'thank you,' you just can't beat that."

And while Ovanek and his fellow Marines were gearing up Tuesday for two more days of fun, he couldn't get over the motorcade that brought the Marines into town on Monday.

"We were all speechless," he said. "It was amazing. We never expected anything like it. We simply can't thank this community enough. For these host families to open their homes, feed us and give up their own time, it's just unreal. We all feel very lucky."

Tuesday night, the visitors were treated to a community concert and fireworks at Gignilliat Community Center in Seneca. Today, they will spend more time with their host families and enjoy the amenities of the lake. On Thursday, they will have a farewell breakfast, enjoy a quick stop at Dunkin' Donuts in Clemson and then be on their way back to jobs they have been saluted for doing.

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