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'We are the lucky ones'

Marines, residents revitalized by visit

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Their visit came and went far too fast.

As 25 Marines from the Wounded Warrior Regiment prepared to end their three-day visit to Keowee Key on Thursday, local resident Allen Funk reaffirmed why the community members were the lucky ones.

"We get to spend time with these guys. We get to hear their stories of bravery and struggle. We get to feel that first hand," Funk said. "We are the lucky ones."

The servicemen traveled from Camp Pendleton in California and Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. On Monday, after landing at Greenville-Spartanburg airport, they were greeted by a surprise motorcade. It was only the beginning of a very special week for the Marines and their local hosts.

Referring to the hundreds of motorcycles that led the procession from Easley to Keowee Key, Sgt. Joe Baker, who comes from a biker family, said it was a very special way to be greeted.

"We had no idea it was going to be anything like that. You know, a few bikers is one thing, but nearly 400 is quite another," he said. "It was so awesome."

It also meant a lot to Marine Jonathan Delaney.

"A welcoming ceremony like that one just doesn't happen very often," Delaney said. "Guys come back from battle all the time. I wish they could experience what I just did. It's something you would see in the movies."

Once the fleet arrived at Keowee Key, the fun began right off the bat. A block party at Spinnaker Cove kicked things off. Marines interacted with each other while residents personally welcomed their heroic visitors.

"I live off of the base in California, but these types of events and gatherings are rare for me," said Nick Gomez. "The way they all get together and just hang out is a great thing to be a part of."

And while the Marines had access to just about every recreational activity that Keowee Key had to offer, a standout favorite had to be water sports.

"Yeah, Nick (Gomez) was a pro out there," said Cpl. Philip Masker through a smile. "I eventually got up on the water skis, which was a lot of fun. They even had people out there teaching us how to do it."

The Marines also utilized numerous jet skis provided by Keowee Key residents.

With access to golf, tennis, fishing and more, the Marines had their fair share of fun in the sun.

"Some guys even went back to their homes to rest up," Funk said. "Remember, many of them just recently finished their stay overseas."

But with all of the parties, meals, events and activities that were planned for the Marines, the word "humble" kept coming to mind.

"You could see in their faces that they thought, 'All this for me? Why?'" said resident and host family member Jane Rogers. "They really couldn't get over the extreme outpouring of support and appreciation for them."

And that support was felt by each Marine in attendance.

"It's nice to see that, because it just reminds us why we do what we do in the service," Gomez said. "It's touching."

And as the Marines said good-bye to their hosts on Thursday morning, Funk wanted them to know one thing.

"We all fight our own battles, and we all have our own stories. But urban warfare is of horrific proportions," he said. "We can't possibly imagine what these young men have endured. Some of us may not even want to hear it because it's beyond our comprehension. I am honored — and I know everyone here is — to have been able to get to know these guys. I thank them from the bottom on my heart."

"This entire setup has been incredible," Baker said. "I'm not sure what I expected, but I can tell you it wasn't anything like this."

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