

Letters

from

Combat Wounded Warrior  
Couples

Winter Retreat February 2024

Warrior Beach Retreat, Inc.  
[www.warriorbeachretreat.org](http://www.warriorbeachretreat.org)

To the community of Panama City, Florida, my husband and I would like to extend the opportunity to thank you for the great and generous support you have shown to the combat-wounded veterans and their spouses during the “Warrior Beach Retreat”. The vision that the Cope Family has created from their family tragedy, whose son is also a combat-wounded veteran, has been sent to the veteran community as a blessing from God.

The community and the Cope family’s support from day one has been nothing short of amazing. All supporters and volunteers involved in this event have made each one of us feel loved and appreciated. It started from the moment we arrived at the Hotel (The Hyatt Place), the gifts, upon arrival (especially the flower bouquet), from the first escort to dinner, the spa day with Limo service (Serenity by the Sea Spa), and gifts, deep sea fishing (Jubilee Deep Sea Charter), the Salon and makeup (Ulta and Dillard’s), and haircuts for the men (Great Clips).

The parade and escorts were phenomenal! I think this was the highlight for ALL the veterans. Why? Most veterans do not receive a welcome home when they return home wounded from combat. It was so emotional to see the community (not our own) and especially the sailors that lined the fence saluting us as we drove by in the convoy.

We would like to thank each restaurant, Captain Anderson’s, Serenity by the Sea Spa, Saltwater Grill, Longhorn Steak House, J Michael’s, O’Charley’s, The Pancakery, Oakland Terrace Clubhouse (Fish Fry), Rudy’s Real Bar-B-Que, and Bayou Bills Crab House, that provided the awesome food each day for lunch and dinner. Thanks to the First Baptist Church of Panama City for hosting the ceremony and dinner.

Also, to LTC Allen West for being a dynamic speaker for this occasion. I am equally grateful to the businesses: Zoo World, Wonder Works, Ripley’s, Sky Wheel, Gulf World, Sweet Frog for our free access, which we enjoyed to the fullest. Most of us attended the activities together and it was priceless. It was a blessing to be able to attend this retreat and I love the way that Christ was a part of every aspect of this retreat. A warm and genuine thank you to all who made this possible. If only for this weekend, we were able to feel whole again.

We also would like to thank the deputy sheriff’s escorts, Retired Deputy Tim Bentley and Lieutenant Larry Granger for that awesome escort! Again, we are eternally grateful to the community of Panama City, FL, Warrior Beach Retreat, and the Cope Family for this retreat.

**Sincerely, US Army Sgt. Arthur L. Donaldson**

**US Army Spc. Joanie T Donaldson (Combat Wounded)**

Thank you to Warrior Beach Retreat and the Community of Panama City Beach I would like to take this opportunity and say thank you to the Cope family along with everyone else involved with the Warrior Beach Retreat program. This experience has been nothing short of a god send and life-changing in so many ways for my wife and I. The overwhelming love and support we received from not only the people involved with the program but, also the community of Panama City Beach really meant a lot to us. Having had my military career end early due to injury, I have often found a lack of understanding for the experiences I have endured. This retreat, however, brought seven other people together with similar experiences, making for an almost instant bond between us. Allowing us to be able to relax and be comfortable with each other and not worry about being judged or labeled, as most of society tends to do once they find out we are combat vets.

The experiences we had while on this retreat were something I will treasure for the rest of my life. I can't thank everyone involved in this enough. From the way we were escorted to dinner every night by the Bay County Sheriff's Department. Our dinners at Capt. Andersons, Saltwater Grill, and Bayou Billy's were excellent. Every single one of these places did an outstanding job and treated us great. All of the restaurants that welcomed us for lunch, we also want to thank you for your delicious food and amazing support.

I would love to give a huge shoutout to the absolutely outstanding fishing trip we were treated to by Jubilee Deep Sea Fishing. Captain Charlie went above and beyond to make sure we all had an excellent trip and made memories on his ship, even if the dolphins tried to ruin them! The fish fry we attended was another very special night to myself and my wife. The amount of work and dedication everyone put into that event didn't go unnoticed by us. Captain Charlie and his crews gifts, photos, and food were all very appreciated. The quilting guild and their beautiful

gift to us will be forever cherished. The gentleman who made the serving platters and clock taking the time out of his life to honor us was a true gift as well.

Our ocean-view room at Hyatt Place was immaculate and came to be the perfect place to return to after a busy day. Watching the ocean was very peaceful and hearing the waves really provided a relaxing atmosphere. The daily strolls along the world's most beautiful beach, definitely allowed my wife and I to reconnect. Even sitting in the sand and watching in silence was the calm we needed. When we found ourselves with some free time Ripley's Believe it or Not, and Wonder works were just the ticket for some team building among our group. What an amazing time and great memories we made during the visit to these locations. We also visited Zoo World the highlight was seeing the capybara. The Skywheel provide stunning views and really was a great way to take it all in, and capture the true beauty this area holds. The tour our group had of the Naval training center was much appreciated as that is something that most people will never get a chance to see. The amount of hard work and dedication our service divers put into training is eye-opening. Facilities like that make me proud to have been a part of the finest military in the world.

Lastly, the parade for us leading to the presentation by LTC Allen West at First Baptist Church of Panama City was the highlight of the trip for me. Not only did we have a fly over, but I feel as if the entire town came out to show us support. This truly was an honor and I feel privileged to have been chosen to be included. The patriotism that is in the town of Panama City Beach is second to none. I truly felt appreciated for my service and the sacrifices I had made for our country. I know I am probably forgetting some important people and I'm sorry for that, the whole experience is hard to put into words. The amount of gratitude I have for the volunteers and donors also can't be expressed enough. You all were able to give my wife and I something that money can't buy and that is memories of an amazing event with even more amazing caring people. This is something we will cherish and remember forever, so I thank each and every one that was involved in creating this retreat. May God bless you and enable you to continue touching the lives of other Veterans who need you.

**Very Respectfully,**

**USAF SSGT. Randy M Shimmel and his Wife Jacqueline**

Dear Panama City Beach, Florida; and Panama City, Florida Communities,

We wanted to take a moment to express our deepest gratitude for the incredible outpouring of warmth, support, kindness, and generosity you showed us during the February 2024 Warrior Beach Retreat. Your efforts went above and beyond to make us feel welcomed, appreciated, and recognized.

From the moment we arrived, we were greeted with open arms and genuine hospitality. The thoughtful welcoming from the “Warriors Watch Riders” with flags, bikes, hugs, and unwavering support set the tone for our entire experience. Their presence was a powerful reminder of the camaraderie and solidarity that exists within the veteran community.

The thoughtful cards from the elementary school kids and handwritten notes from school clubs touched our hearts deeply. It meant the world to us to feel so welcomed and recognized by the younger members of your community. Thank you for taking the time from your learning to write to us.

We are also grateful for the opportunity to explore and enjoy the offerings of your local businesses during our stay. The access some provided us truly enhanced our experience and allowed us to fully immerse ourselves in the beauty and vibrancy of Panama City, & Panama City Beach.

A heartfelt thank you goes out to every first responder who helped with our parade routes and transportation needs. Your dedication and commitment to ensuring our safety and comfort did not go unnoticed. Especially those dispatched for a potential fire call as the hotel is evacuating and it turned out to be burnt popcorn at 11pm.

The flyover with two F35's during the parade was a breathtaking moment that was just for us. Or it really felt as such with all the effort and details that went into the parade. We will forever remember the signs, waves, heartfelt thank yous, salutes, cheers, smiles and whistles.

The day of deep-sea fishing organized by Charlie Paprocki of “The Jubilee” and fish fry dinner were a few highlights of our trip. The beautiful handmade quilt presented to us from the St. Andrews Bay Quilter’s Guild really has love sewn into every stitch. It will be cherished for years to come.

We also want to extend our gratitude to Serenity by the Sea Spa and its amazing staff for providing us with moments of relaxation and rejuvenation. Your

hospitality and care were truly exceptional. As well as for the wonderful hair and makeup services provided by The Black Swan Studio, Ulta, and Dillards. Your attention to detail and expertise helped make our experiences memorable.

Our hearts are full of appreciation for the First Baptist Church of Panama City, Bill Byrd KIA, and the US Naval Diving & Salvage Training Center for their support and contributions to our retreat. Your commitment to honoring veterans and their families is deeply inspiring.

We would also like to express our sincere thanks to every meal provider and their staff for the delicious meals and wonderful service:

- Capt. Anderson's Restaurant
- Saltwater Grill
- Longhorn Steakhouse
- J Michael's Restaurant
- O'Charley's Restaurant & Bar
- The Pancakery
- Rudy's Real Texas Bar-B-Q
- Bayou Bill's Crab House
- Hyatt Place
- Hilton Sandestin for our spa breakfast & lunch

Our heartfelt appreciation also goes out to Linda, Philip, the founders of the Warrior Beach Retreat, and their son Jonathan Cope for their vision and dedication to supporting veterans and their families. Your efforts have made a profound impact on our lives as well as others.

Special thanks to Tim Bentley for his parade escort/security, Larry Grainger for his parade route coordination, and Mike and Tabitha Nelson for their hospitality and friendship throughout our stay.

As a veteran spouse, it was deeply moving to witness the incredible community effort that went into making the Warrior Beach Retreat a success. Your kindness, compassion, and support have touched our hearts in ways we cannot fully express. We know that hosting such an event can be demanding, and we are truly grateful for your willingness to go above and beyond to make us feel special during our time in Panama City, & Panama City Beach.

Every smile, wave, door held open, and thank you was heard, felt, and deeply appreciated. Panama City, & Panama City Beach will forever hold a special place in our hearts, and we are grateful for the lifelong memories we made during our time there.

**Sincerely,**  
**Cpl Ben & Amanda Dockendorf**

Dear Editor:

My husband and I attended our very first Warrior Beach Retreat in Panama City Beach, Florida in February 2024 and what a very profound time we had. I must admit that the experiences had at this retreat for combat veterans and their spouses/caregivers are something that will be remembered and cherished for a lifetime. This retreat was more than just an “all-expenses-paid” week away from home. For us participants, this was a small moment in time where we all got to feel “normal”, “loved unconditionally”, and “not judged”. Events like the Warrior Beach Retreat are impactful, special, and meaningful to combat veterans and their spouses/caregivers because they afford us the opportunity to be around others who live life similar to ours and can relate to what each other is feeling. Philip and Linda Cope, who graciously hosted this event, never once made us feel like any of us were there to be counseled about our problems or issues. We had moments where we shared our thoughts and feelings with one another, but not in a way where any one of us felt forced to do so or judged afterwards. The fellowshiping was honest, sincere, and refreshing.

My most impactful moment experienced during the Warrior Beach Retreat was witnessing the impact of the parade on my husband. That parade was everything and so much more! My husband was an explosives K-9 Dog Handler in the US Army. Although he had been on several combat deployments during his time in service, not once did he ever get to experience a homecoming parade. Seeing him smile and wave his flag SO PROUDLY at all in the community who graciously came out to support the parade, made me feel even prouder; so much so that I blew my car horn for the majority of the 25-mile parade route as a way of announcing, honoring, and alerting everyone along the route that some very special people were coming through and as my way of thanking everyone who selflessly gave up their time to come out in the breezy weather in support of the parade. During that moment, my husband was not suffering from pain, anxiety, nightmares, depression, or any other health ailment veterans experience on a daily basis. During that

moment, my husband was smiling from ear to ear, beaming with a ton of joy and pride, and he even shed a few happy tears because that was how much the parade, the police escort, the flyover of the two F-35's, the community's support, and seeing of the signs of heroism held up and waved as we passed by meant to him. THIS was a very impactful moment and experience for both me and my husband and what was even greater about the moment was that it was something we got to experience together.

My husband and I would like to say "Thank You" to The Cope Family, the many volunteers, the businesses/restaurants, like WonderWorks, Ripley's Believe It Or Not, Gulf World Marine Park, Zoo World, Coconut Creek Family Fun Park, SkyWheel, WaterWorx Car Wash, Dillard's, Ulta, Great Clips, Jubilee Deep Sea Fishing, Serenity by the Sea Spa, Sweet Frog Premium Frozen Yogurt, Captain Anderson's Restaurant, Saltwater Grill, J. Michael's Restaurant, Longhorn Steakhouse, O'Charley's Restaurant, The Pancakery, Rudy's, Bayou Bill's Crab House, the volunteers who made the fish fry possible at the Oakland Terrace Clubhouse, Tim Allen Photography, First Baptist Church of Panama City, and the US Naval Diving and Salvage Training Center who provided no-cost services to us, the Hyatt Place for providing wonderful accommodations and hospitality, the speakers, community leaders, military and law enforcement personnel, and special guests who attended some of our events with us, and especially to the Panama City and Panama City Beach community as a whole for opening up your arms to us, breaking bread with us, making us feel loved and appreciated, and treating us like we were family.

To be honest, the entire week was impactful, as well as memorable and a blessing to us participants. A group of people who met up at the beginning of the week as strangers in Panama City Beach, Florida, left at the end of the week feeling like family. Warrior Beach Retreat did that for us. We hope that the community continues to support Philip and Linda Cope with their vision, Warrior Beach Retreat, and help with making it bigger and better for future participants in the years to come. You all have no idea how an event like this retreat can make such a difference in the lives of others, especially a combat veteran.

**Sincerely,**

**SSG (Ret) William and Laneesha Brown**

**Warrior Beach Retreat – Winter 2024 Participants**



We had the honor of attending the Warrior Beach Retreat it was the most wonderful time ever being around other veteran couples. The Copes are some of the nicest people we have met. The community coming together and supporting this cause for veterans was so eye-opening and made us veterans feel appreciated. From all the volunteers, the restaurant we ate, the sheriff's department, and the people at the parade waving and holding flags. It felt so welcoming. We really do appreciate the opportunity. We will tell this experience for a lifetime to everyone we know. Panama City Beach and Warrior Retreat treated us like royalty.

**Thank you all,  
SPC Raymond and Tiffany Smith**

From the time we arrived in Panama my wife and I felt the love and affection the community had for the military community. Coming from a small town where people have lost touch with what it means to be an American, we really appreciate the affection we felt from everyone all the places we went, and everything we have seen. We would like to thank the Cope family, all the volunteers, all the local businesses, and anyone else behind the scenes who made the Warrior Beach Retreat possible for my wife and I to attend. It was food for our souls and an emotional adventure that will never be forgotten. I pray that everyone involved will continue to support the retreat for years to come so other veterans can get the same feelings that we felt. May God bless this organization, the City of Panama, and everyone involved.

**Sincerely,  
SGT Christopher and Laketia Pullen**

From the time we landed to the time we left, the Warrior Beach Retreat was absolutely amazing. I was amazed by the kindness from the Cope family and from the entire community. The amount of work that went into planning and executing everything for us was absolutely wonderful! This retreat was nothing short of perfection. We were moved to tears on so many occasions by all the patriotic support in the community and the Cope family. I want to say thank you from the bottom of our hearts. This retreat has helped my mental health more than you can ever know. It also repaired my marriage. I hope this retreat helps many other wounded warriors and their caregivers in the future. Again, thank you the Cope family and the amazing community in Panama City Beach!

**SSG Daniel & Alexia Morgan**