



MEDCOM NOW
A newsletter highlighting the challenges, successes and personnel of Army Medicine.

Inside this issue:

Conference eyes MEB changes

New phone and email contacts help wounded warriors get help

Newman's Own presents awards

Nurse enjoys WTU command

Bamberg WTU helps Soldiers recover

Wounded warrior wins Paralympic medal

Warriors enjoy Elitch Gardens

Mountain adventure for troops

New York AG visits Fort Drum

Cheek reviews WTU accomplishments

By Maj. John Heil
332nd Medical Brigade

“As long as we stay on the current operations tempo, we will continue to have mental-health conditions to address,” Brig. Gen. Gary Cheek, Army director for warrior care and transition, told a medical symposium hosted by the 332nd Medical Brigade and Southeastern Regional Medical Command on September 11 at the Gaylord Opryland Resort.

Cheek said medical conditions of warriors returning from war historically were about 44 percent orthopedic, five percent neurological, two percent post-traumatic stress disorder, and one percent traumatic brain injury, whether it be mild, moderate, or severe.

Today, those numbers are about 37 percent orthopedic, nine percent neurological, 10 percent post-traumatic stress disorder, and six percent

traumatic brain injury.

In July 2007 Warrior Transition Units had 6,000 Soldiers; by June 2008 they had grown to 12,500 Soldiers. Cheek indicated that the objective is to provide a more agile warrior transition program empowering commanders to match the provision of care to the unique circumstances of each Soldier.

Improvements have been made to processes, Cheek said. Entry and exit criteria for the WTUs have changed to concentrate resources on patients requiring extensive treatment and complex case management.

Both the medical evaluation and physical evaluation board processes presents challenges, Cheek said, while other challenges include staffing WTUs at 100 percent, processing orders and assignments timely, and improving the availability of mental-health care.

“We want to get all

cadres at 100 percent,” said Cheek, “Right now 20 of 36 (WTUs) are at 100 percent.” The number of WTUs at 100 percent staffing by position are as follows:

* Squad Leader - 34 of 36

* Platoon Sergeant - 33 of 36

* Nurse Case Managers - 34 of 36

* Primary Care Managers - 34 of 36

* Medical Evaluation Board Physicians - 32 of 36

“About one-third of our Soldiers are medevac,” said Cheek, “and we release about an average of 630 WTU Soldiers each month.” Statistics show that in April WTU gains were 1,418 and losses were 601. In August, there were 596 gains and 727 losses.

The average medical evaluation board processing time is 50 to 150 days, according to Cheek,

continued next page

Cheek

continued from page 1

depending on the medical condition and installation. Shifting focus on the building program to the performance of the program, according to Cheek, is something the Army chief of staff is interested in.

“We want to right size our population,” said Cheek, “the Army chief of staff wants us to get the right Soldiers in units that warrant the medical care we provide.”

“In order to increase access to care, Warrior Transition Units are maneuvering medical assets to key installations,” said Cheek. “We

measure key indicators to performance that get Soldiers through the process.”

Warrior Care and Transition staff is also looking at how Reserve Component health care should be managed. The same screening criteria for entry that applies to Active Component Soldiers may apply to Reserve Component Soldiers by December 2008, Cheek said.

Management options to provide medical treatment for Soldiers not assigned to a WTU; a complete assessment of the community-based WTU program to include command

and control, enrollment, and expansion capability; and ensuring there is full collaboration with the Office, Chief of the Army Reserve, and National Guard Bureau regarding options development also are on the agenda.

“The way we treat Soldiers is virtually important,” said Cheek, “the way ahead is to ensure that a Soldier steps confidently from Army into civilian life or back into the Army.” According to Cheek, the way ahead is a total transformation of the way the Army cares for Soldiers and their Families.

Conference eyes MEB changes

By Heike Hasenauer
Army News Service

Some 400 representatives from the Army, Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Labor and Social Security Administration, among others, met in Leesburg, Va., to discuss ways to improve the care of wounded and ill Soldiers.

Many of the discussions have



Officials discuss revisions to the Medical Evaluation Board process.

centered on revamping the Medical Evaluation Board process by which wounded and ill Soldiers are screened to determine whether or not they're fit to continue to serve, said Brig. Gen. Gary Cheek, the Army's assistant surgeon general for warrior care and transition.

“Members of the MEB determine whether or not a Soldier is fit or unfit for service,” Cheek said. “Then, the Soldier goes before a Physical Evaluation Board, which gives him a disability rating.” Because of the two processes, “there's confusion and duplication of effort,” he said, adding “We need to get the military completely out of the disability process and allow the Veterans Administration to be a single source of benefits.”

Why?

Today military medical experts are saving Soldiers' lives on the battlefield, evacuating them quickly

to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany and Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., and others, to receive the best care possible. Then, those same medical professionals who saved the Soldier are making evaluations as to whether or not the Soldier should be retired from duty. They go from being angels “to being the enemy,” Cheek said.

In July, the Army chief of staff issued a message to Army leaders indicating there had been “an explosion of Soldiers in warrior transition units” over the 16-month period since the WTUs were created - from some 5,000 to 12,000, said Lt. Col. Michael Mixen, chief of plans and policy for the Warrior Care and Transition Office.

“The numbers were way up,” Cheek said. Simultaneously, WTU

continued next page

MEB

continued from page 2

cadre were rotating out of the WTUs for other assignments. Suddenly, there were too few people caring for too many Soldiers.

The Army's then-vice chief of staff, Gen. Richard Cody, sent a message to Army leaders advising them to fix problems as quickly as possible, Mixen said.

Attendees at the WCTO conference focused on the VCSA's imperatives, Cheek said, including "right-sizing" the WTUs to ensure the right Soldiers were being assigned to the units - those who were expected to require at least six months of rehabilitation; that there was an appropriate number of cadre to support them; and that Soldiers received orders assigning them to the WTUs in a timely manner.

Discussion groups addressed whether or not the Army has enough available doctors in specific specialties to care for Soldiers, and they talked about developing a comprehensive plan to help Soldiers transition from medical rehabilitation to civilian life, developing Soldiers' life skills and occupational skills to provide them the best chances for future success.

Great strides have been made since the WCTO was established some 19 months ago, Cheek said.

"We tend to focus on the negative, but in a little more than a year and a half we've gone from no focus on warrior care to an organization of 35 separate, fully staffed groups."

Recent changes include the addition of retention NCOs as part of

WTUs, to encourage Soldiers who want to remain on active duty to stay in service or enter the reserve component.

Personnel NCOs from brigades, battalions and companies who support the WTUs have been trained on the different types of computer software used to track and record the care of warriors in transition, Mixen said.

Additionally, retired Gen. Frederick Franks Jr. — former commander of Training and Doctrine Command and also of VII Corps during the first Gulf War — has been hired to conduct an external review of the MEB process, Mixen added.

Meantime, Army leaders are looking at ways to get current legislation governing the MEB process changed, to transition it from the Army to the VA.

Lt. Col. Marie Dominguez, special assistant to the secretary of veteran's affairs at the VA's central office in Washington, D.C., is among the many people working to improve the MEB process. One of the recommendations is to have a physician complete a profile of the Soldier to determine whether or not he's ready to begin the MEB process.

Under the current system, a subspecialist [in a particular medical field] now writes a profile for one condition, when the Soldier may well be suffering from several conditions, Dominguez said. The MEB process is slow today because the starting time isn't appropriate. "Sometimes it bleeds into the

"We tend to focus on the negative, but in a little more than a year and a half we've gone from no focus on warrior care to an organization of 35 separate, fully staffed groups." - Brig. Gen. Gary Cheek

Soldier's rehabilitation/treatment phase; it's started too soon."

"The ideas we discuss this week will go into a report for consideration for implementation by Army leaders and could be forwarded to Congress in order to change the big impediments - the 'rocks' - to the MEB process," Cheek concluded.

Until then, medical facilities across the Army are working to streamline their own MEB processes.

At Fort Bragg, N.C., Womack Army Medical Center personnel are reducing the number of medical-evaluation boards to support wounded and ill Soldiers, according to Lt. Col. Niel Johnson, chief of the Department of Deployment Health.

New phone and email contacts help wounded warriors get help

The Military OneSource service has established a Wounded Warrior Resource Center telephone number and e-mail address for service members and their Families, if they have concerns or other difficulties during their recovery process.

Service members and their Family members can now call (800) 342-9647 or e-mail wwrc@militaryonesource.com any time or day to request support.

Assistance provided by the resource center will not replace the specialized wounded warrior programs established by each of the military services, but it will offer another avenue of assistance for military facilities, health care services, and/or benefits information.

“The department is committed to aggressively addressing the needs of our service members and their families,” said Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates.

Specially trained consultants will ensure consistent, quality customer-centric support. The consultants will identify the appropriate “warm hand-off” to either a military service or federal agency with authority to resolve the matter. The resource center consultant will maintain communication with the caller until the issue or concern is resolved.

“The term ‘wounded warrior’ encompasses the entire population of wounded, ill and injured service members and veterans,” said Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Michael L. Dominguez.

The Wounded Warrior Resource Center meets the requirements of Section 1616 of the “National Defense Authorization Act Fiscal Year 2008” for a centralized number and ensures wounded families and caregivers have a number to call at any time. (Department of Defense news release)

Wounded warrior programs get cash

Newman’s Own presents awards

By Fred W. Baker III

American Forces Press Service

Newsman’s Own awarded a combined \$75,000 in grants to 15 nonprofit organizations for their innovative volunteer efforts to improve military quality of life during the company’s ninth annual awards ceremony.

The \$10,000 award winner was Operation Wounded Warrior sponsored by the American Legion Riders of Grants, New Mexico. Operation Wounded Warrior was started by a group of American Legion Riders after a plea three years ago for comfort and hygiene items for troops who had been wounded in Iraq. The mission expanded to include Family members who were at their bedside.

Each year, a truck loaded with personal and com-

fort items is escorted by riders to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and its four Fisher Houses.

Among the \$5,000 award winners are:

— Wounded Warrior Assistance Program sponsored by Operation First Response, Inc. of Culpeper, Va. The program supports wounded warriors and Families with personal and financial needs. Financial aid varies from rent, utilities, vehicle payments, groceries, clothing, and travel expenses.

— Remote Warrior Care Program sponsored by the Madigan Foundation of Fort Lewis, Wash. The foundation places wounded, injured and ill warriors back into their hometowns to recuperate before being released from active military service or returned to active duty.

Nurse enjoys WTU command

By Kari Hawkins
Redstone Arsenal

Since going to college on an ROTC scholarship, Maj. Elizabeth Vinson has faced challenges, overcome obstacles and stretched her own abilities to provide the best nursing care possible to Soldiers. She's served in Germany, Kosovo and Afghanistan, and at various installations in the U.S.

"When I talk to my nursing classmates from college, nothing they've done can compare with the experiences I've had," Vinson said. "The Army was definitely an excellent career choice for me."

Now, this Starkville, Miss., native is serving at Fox Army Health Center, Redstone Arsenal, Ala., where she is head nurse of the center's five primary care clinics and commander of the Warrior Transition Unit.

It's an assignment that offers the opportunity to provide care to Soldiers recovering from war-related injuries, address health issues of Soldiers and their Families stationed at Redstone Arsenal, and work with an experienced staff committed to Soldier and Soldier Family care. As the primary care clinic head nurse,

she is responsible for clinic operations and the nursing staff at the health center.

As the WTU commander, she is responsible for overseeing the care of Soldiers in various stages of healing.

"I became an Army nurse for a reason. I actually like taking care of Soldiers," Vinson said. "It's a great honor."

Currently, there are 13 Soldiers in the WTU. It can take up to 20 Soldiers, who report to two squad leaders.

"Our primary mission is for these Soldiers to heal," she said. "A traditional company is focused on the wartime mission and training requirements. In this company, we are focused on the physical, spiritual and mental health of Soldiers, on the overall well-being of Soldiers."

The company staff - which consists of Master Sgt. Marshall Brown, the WTU's first sergeant; Staff Sgt. Curtis Carson; nurse case manager Deborah Holden, primary care physician Maj. Michael Madkins; medical evaluation board representatives Dr. Monica Gorbandt and licensed professional counselor Karen Scott - ensures Soldiers get the medical care they



MAJ Elizabeth Vinson

need, assists with Family needs, assigns Soldiers to work assignments, encourages Soldiers to take college course, provides counseling and oversees other recovery needs.

"We want to return them to an optimum stage of health and prepare them for the next stage in their life, whether that is serving or transitioning out," Vinson said.

"We want to make sure they are a better Soldier when they leave here. It's very satisfying to see a Soldier first come to us and then see them make improvements to where they can finally say goodbye to us. We want them to have productive lives."



Goal!

A wounded Soldier takes a shot at the goal during hockey practice in Laurel, Md. USA Warriors Ice Hockey was created to help wounded warriors get out of the hospital and have fun. Sled hockey lets those who can't balance on skates participate. Photo by Elizabeth M. Lorge, Army News Service

Bamberg WTU helps Soldiers recover

Bamberg's Warrior Transition Unit has been instrumental in providing quality health care, welfare and morale to wounded warriors stationed in Bavaria. Sgt. Jamerson Hayward exemplifies the program's success.

Hayward was a 21 Echo Heavy Equipment Operator who suffered from neuromas in his foot. After surgery, he was placed in the WTU program rather than being chaptered out of the military.

"Transitioning into the WTU program has been beneficial for me and my Family," he said.

Soon Hayward will complete his MMRB, an administrative screening to determine his physical ability and whether or not he can change his MOS.

"It's always difficult dealing with uncertainty of what will happen next, for there's always the chance of being processed out," stated Hayward. In the meantime, Hayward has returned to duty as a lab assistant at the Bamberg Health Clinic where he draws blood and runs samples.

"The Warrior Transition Unit created a vision of an institutionalized, Soldier-centered WTU program that ensures standardization, quality outcomes, and consistency with seamless transitions of the Soldier's medical and duty status from points of entry to disposition.

... Sergeant Hayward was able to accomplish many of his goals, both professional and personal, while assigned to the Bamberg WTU. His prior medical experience as a Corpsman in the Navy served as a combat multiplier for the USAHC Bamberg in accomplishing its mission during numerous Soldier Readiness Processing (SRP), Pre-deployment Processing (PDP) and Redeployment Processing (RDP). I am glad to see that through the Bamberg WTU, Sergeant Hayward was given the opportunity to heal and at the same time show that he is a valuable member of the organization. Sergeant Hayward's motivation and talent is fully recognized by his command and the Bamberg community. I'll take him in my clinic at any given time, said Lt. Col. Pablito Gahol, health clinic commander.

In addition to providing medical services for the Clinic, Hayward is taking a German course through the University of Maryland-University College.

"I know I'll continue with my education, for I've shown a vast amount of interest in the foreign languages, law enforcement, law, INTEL and aeronautical aviation. The WTU program has been very encouraging in giving us opportunities that can further us in our careers," Hayward said. (Bavaria MEDDAC)

Wounded warrior wins Paralympic medal

By Donna Miles
American Forces Press Service



Scott Winkler

Former Army Spec. Scott Winkler finished fifth in the discus, and also competed in the shot put and javelin in the Paralympic Games at Beijing, China, in September.

Winkler was deployed to Tikrit, Iraq, in May 2003, when he fell off the ammunition truck he was unloading. The freak accident landed him in a wheelchair with both legs paralyzed.

"Everybody has ups and downs in life," he said. "Just because I'm disabled doesn't mean that it's all over. It just means that I have to find a different way to live it."

That mindset led Winkler to pick

up competitive throwing. He set a world record in shot put last year at the Parapan American Games in Rio de Janeiro. He also holds the 2007 world record in the T54 shot put at the U.S. Paralympics Track and Field National Championships in Atlanta, Ga.

"Scott didn't spend his whole life training to become an elite athlete, but athletic competition helped give Scott his life back," said President George W. Bush during a recognition ceremony for the team.

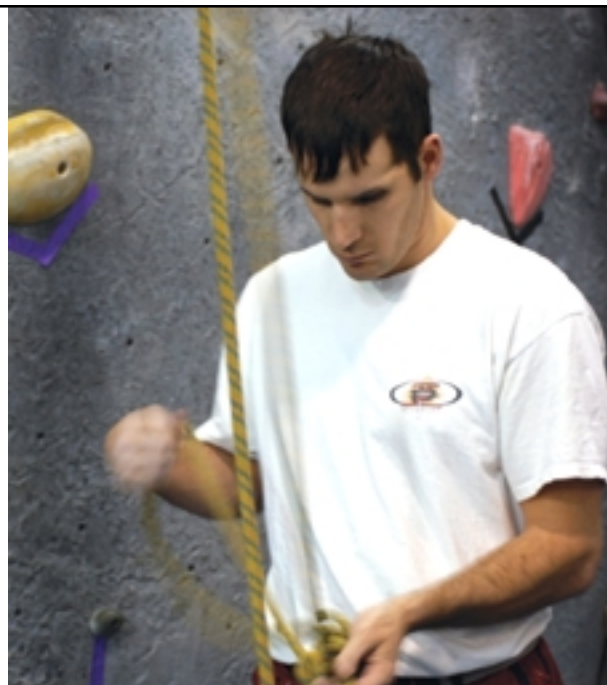
"I fought for this country, and now I'd love to win for this country," Winkler said.

Climbing heights

Capt. Scott Smiley prepares to scale a climbing wall. Blinded by a suicide bomber in Iraq three years ago, Smiley climbed 14,410-foot Mount Rainier in Washington last year, for which he won an ESPN Espy Award as Best Outdoor Athlete.

“You followed the person in front of you,” he said. “You heard their footsteps and I had two hiking poles, one in each hand. That kind of gave me the ability to keep my balance.”

Still on active duty, Smiley will be an instructor at West Point after he finishes a Master’s degree in business administration at Duke University. Photo by William D. Moss.



Warriors enjoy Elitch Gardens

By Capt. Scott Anderson
Fort Carson MEDDAC

Wounded Soldiers and their Families were treated to a day of fun and entertainment at Elitch Gardens in Denver. Nearly 300 Soldiers and Family members took advantage of this opportunity. Members of the Fort Carson Warrior Transition Unit (WTU) were able to enjoy all of the park activities, including unlimited rides, live entertainment, stage shows, and attractions, for free. Their Family members were welcomed for the price of a child’s ticket.

“It is our honor to welcome these soldiers to Elitch Gardens as our guests,” said Elitch Gardens spokesperson Megan Barber. “We are incredibly grateful for the dedication of every member of the military and hope that these veterans from Fort Carson will enjoy a day of fun with their Family.”

This event was also sponsored by American Military Family, Inc. (AMF) out of Longmont, Colorado.

“When we are able to get the warriors in our care involved with the local community in an activity such as this, it accomplishes two goals. The first is to show these Soldiers and their Families that they are cared

for and supported in their efforts and sacrifices they have made in the name of freedom. The second is to affix the face of human value to the war effort for the public” said 1st Lt. Marshall Brink, the executive officer for Charlie Company of the WTU.

“The battle we fight in the WTU is on both a grand public scale and on an individual and private scale for each Soldier in our care. The mission of the warriors in transition and the staff who toil to support them embodies the warrior ethos; to never accept defeat or quit, and NEVER leave a fallen comrade. Every time we can rally public and private support for our Soldiers and their Families, we help unify America in the cause of upholding these standards,” Brink said.

Elitch Gardens has a 118-year-old tradition of family fun and entertainment offering two parks in one, a family theme park and the Island Kingdom Water Park. It has over 65 attractions and award-winning shows.

“(I) want to say thank you for an awesome time at Elitch Gardens. It was a great time to be out with the brothers and sisters that had fought for this country and yes, their Families too,” said Sgt. Manny Arredondo, a WTU Soldier.

Mountain adventure for troops

Some 45 wounded Soldiers and Marines landed in the Pennsylvania Poconos for a weekend of paintball, whitewater rafting and VIP treatment.

"We flew two Blackhawks down there with our 12 Warriors in Transition," said Capt. April D. Copeland, operations officer of the 3-85 Mountain Infantry at Fort Drum, N. Y. "The guys were as excited about the Blackhawk ride as they were with the weekend's events."

The first night, the Soldiers were treated to a large reception at the Han-Le Co Fire-Rescue, Station 33 in Allentown, PA. Saturday they went to Skirmish USA - the proclaimed second largest paint ball arena in the nation, and on Sunday, they maneuvered the whitewater rapids of the Lehigh River.

"It was simply amazing," said Spec. Keith Cahill. "With all the support and everyone down there, it really made us feel like heroes."

"The trip was really good and helped me relax a little," said Sgt. Robinson Paulino. "I enjoyed the water rafting and the paintball. But I also enjoyed the reception every time we got some place, like the fire station. There was a group of people there to welcome and receive us. Bottom line, it was very refreshing and I'd do it again in a heart beat!"

"To me the best part was getting together with Soldiers and Marines and talking about what happened to us and our other experiences down range," said Spec. Robert Straits.

"The aircrews and I were glad we could help bring these Wounded Warriors to the Poconos. We're proud to be able to support them in any way we can," said Copeland.

The all-expense-paid trip was provided by Rick Bashore, with donations by Pocono Whitewater and Skirmish. (Fort Drum MEDDAC)

New York AG visits Fort Drum

Maj. Gen. Joseph J. Taluto, adjutant general for the state of New York, visited Fort Drum and met with the 3-85th Mountain Warrior commander, cadre and Soldiers, as well as division and MEDDAC officials to discuss warrior in transition issues and initiatives.

"It was a pleasure to host Major General Taluto on his visit to 3-85," said Lt. Col. James A. Swords, 3-85 commander. "During his three-hour visit he received an update during a round-table discussion of the Army's and Fort Drum's implementation of the Army Medical Action Plan."

"He received a tour of the unit facilities and ate lunch with National Guard Soldiers assigned to the battalion as both cadre and warriors

in transition. He expressed his appreciation of how this multi-component organization is able to seamlessly integrate National Guard and Army Reserve cadre with the active component cadre, to include key NG leadership positions like battalion executive officer, command sergeant major and company commanders."

Swords said the general also expressed his appreciation of the first-class facilities Fort Drum has designated for the unit and was impressed by the overall high quality of the cadre, especially the squad leaders and platoon sergeants, both Active and Reserve Component.

After eating lunch with 12 National Guard Soldiers, Taluto handed out commander's coins of excellence to members of the unit

leadership and National Guardsmen.

"It was a pleasure to have the adjutant general of the State of New York visit and show his support of the mission of Fort Drum's Warrior Transition Unit as we care for wounded, injured or ill Soldiers, both active and reserve," Swords said.

Taluto was appointed The Adjutant General for the State of New York in January 2006. Prior to this assignment, he was assigned as the Commander, 42nd Infantry Division, New York Army National Guard. Taluto commanded the division and Task Force Liberty during its historic deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom III from 2004-2005. (Fort Drum MEDDAC)