

Burn victims retreat funded by air show

Military participants received injuries in Iraq, Afghanistan

By Mitzie Stelte
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Lounging outside at the T Bar M Resort on a sunny afternoon in New Braunfels, Staff Sgt. Micheal Hardin was miles away from Brooke Army Medical Center's Burn Unit in San Antonio, and worlds away from combat in Iraq.

Hardin, who has spent the last six months recovering at the Burn Unit, was hit with 300 pounds of explosives while traveling in an armored vehicle in Iraq. The lone survivor of the accident that killed his fellow members of El Paso's Fort Bliss, he was thrown 100 meters from the vehicle and suffered brain injuries and extensive burns throughout his body.

But this past Saturday, no one would have ever suspected the pain he was in or the horrific things he had witnessed just months earlier, as Hardin, whose arm was wrapped in a tight compression garment intended to keep pressure on his wounds, sat with a huge grin, laughing and joking with other soldiers.

The staff sergeant spent the weekend relaxing at the

resort along with twenty-eight other BAMC burn victim patients, who were either injured in Iraq or Afghanistan, at a retreat funded by the Moonlight Fund and the Texas Resources for Iraq-Afghanistan Deployment Fund.

"I'm very pleased with it," said Celia Jones, Moonlight Fund co-founder and the organizer of the first annual retreat. "It's a great location."

The Moonlight Fund raises money to assist burn survivors and their families with medical bills, rehabilitation care, funeral expenses, housing, airfare and emotional support throughout treatment.

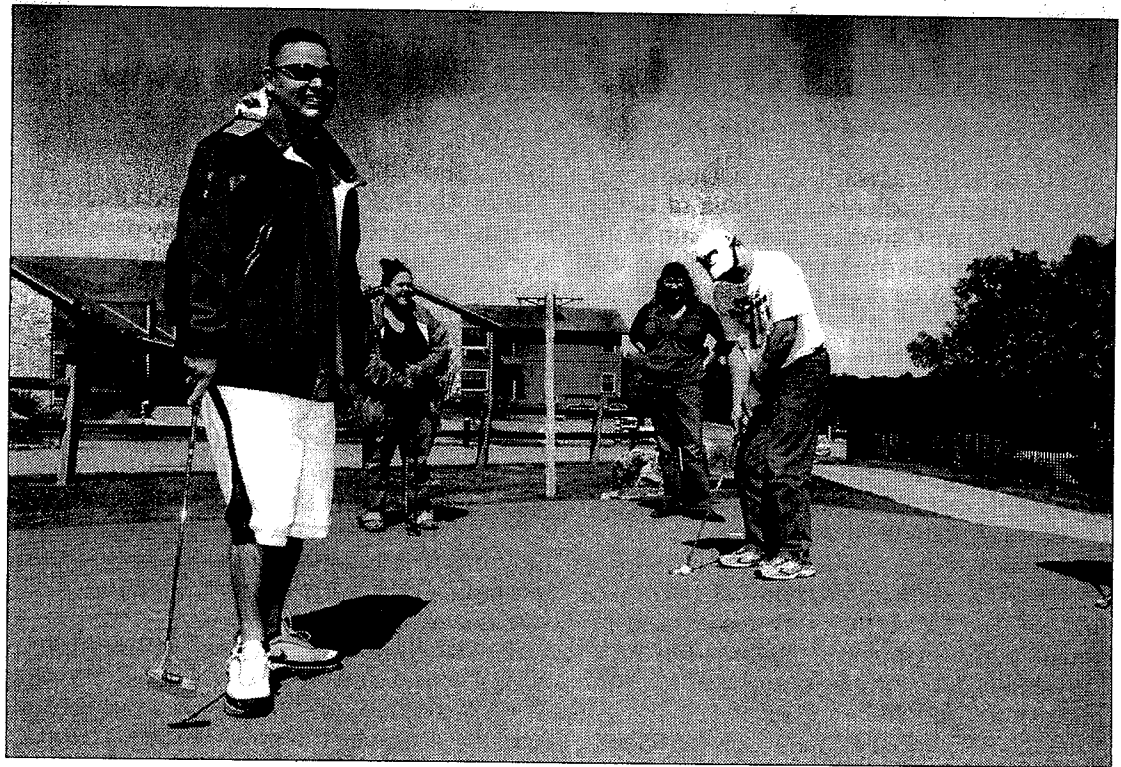
Jones said all expenses are paid for and all the needs are met at the retreat for the burn victims who are all at varying stages of treatment.

The soldiers, many who came with their spouse who doubles as a caregiver, did not have to adhere to a schedule, which Jones said was a relief to all those who participated.

"It's about giving your mind a break," said Jones. "They were allowed to do what they want and they are making good use of it."

Many took advantage of the resort's many activities including mini golf, ping-pong and tennis.

Jones also planned massages, cocktail hours, card



KARLA HELD/Herald-Zeitung

Sgt. Rafael Lopez, who has spent the past 20 months recovering at the Brooke Army Medical Center burn unit after suffering second-degree burns over 16 percent of his body, plays mini golf Saturday at T Bar M Ranch with Sgt. Scott Johnson, his wife Nancy, and Amanda Birch, wife of Sgt. Lee Birch, at a retreat for soldiers injured in Iraq and Afghanistan hosted by the Moonlight Fund.

games and a movie night for those interested.

She said that many more people had signed for the retreat, but they had to cap it off due to money concerns.

The Moonlight Fund, whose main fund raising event is the annual Moonlight Air Show held in New Braunfels, has been an extremely popular event, attracting almost 20,000

people last year, but lack of sponsorship may threaten this year's show scheduled for Oct. 18.

Sgt. Scott Johnson, who suffered injuries in Iraq, and his wife, Nancy, expressed hope that the retreat would have the resources to continue.

"It's nice to get away from the hospital environment," said Johnson, who has been treated at BAMC for

the last 18 months. "It's a chance to get off base where there's no military and no real agenda."

His wife Nancy agreed, saying that she believed divine intervention allowed for them to be able to attend this retreat.

Having this to look forward to has really gotten us past the last two weeks," she said. "It was really God-like."