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Marines help build fence for wounded warrior's home



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Volunteer Marines from the 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines gathered Thursday morning in Hubert to help Johnny McCallon, a wounded Marine, with some yard work. The Marines, with help from Home Depot, power washed the wounded Marine's house and built a fence around his yard.

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Johnny McCallon felt forgotten.

Johnny McCallon felt forgotten. He served his country for 16 years and suffered a traumatic brain injury after an improvised explosive device blew him out of a second story window during a tour of duty in Iraq. He later developed post traumatic stress disorder in addition to back and leg injuries he sustained during the blast. As a result, he was medically discharged from the Marine Corps in 2007.

His PTSD consumed him and he slowly lost hope in humanity, finding solace only in his canine companions, of which he currently has eight packed into a small home in Hubert. "With Johnny's PTSD he identifies better with dogs than he does with people," said Johnny's fiancée Sandy Tonkens.

McCallon walks with a cane and his injuries make it hard to properly walk each of the dogs, so he lets them run around in their yard. But the yard isn't fenced, and the dogs often run off the property into other people's yards and even in the street.

The couple decided it was time they build a fence around their yard to give their dogs a secure place to run, but when they found out building the fence around their large property would cost \$22,000, they were crushed.

"It was devastating," Tonkens said. "We knew we couldn't get the fence and anything over \$2,000 we just couldn't afford."

But Tonkens knew how much the fence would mean to her fiancée, their eight dogs and their two children, so she started knocking on doors and asking for donations.

Someone eventually told her to contact the Semper Fi Fund, who, to Tonkens' surprise, provided money toward the fence and organized a volunteer project with the United Way of Onslow County and 2nd Marine Division to build a fence around McCallon's Hubert home.

A total of 90 Marines from 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment visited the land over a three-day period to build the fence.

"Last week (the Semper Fi Fund) told us there would be a few Marines here to help build the fence; well there was 40 Marines," Tonkens said. "(Johnny) broke down in tears and his big thing was that he wasn't forgotten. He felt like he had been forgotten. He felt like he was broken and this gave him new life."

The Marines were hard at work Wednesday pouring cement and placing the first posts into the ground to build the fence. None of them complained about the hard labor and, short of wagging their tails, they were just as happy to be outside as McCallon's eight dogs.

"The Marines out here — the junior Marines — I think they're personally getting a lot out of it," said Sgt. Ryan Burke, a Marine with 2/8. "We always talk about how there's a brotherhood of Marines... but (the junior Marines) don't always think about the outside picture of the brotherhood. We're able to come out here and say 'Look, this is what we do for Marines who are no longer in the Marine Corps. That's what a real brotherhood is.'"

In addition to building the fence, the Marines cleared out McCallon's large yard that was full of trash and overgrown grass and pressure washed his home. They organized his shed and gave him the hope to maintain his home again.

"I think it means a lot for him," Burke said. "The kind of felt like he was forgotten — that he did his part and no one appreciates him anymore — so for him I believe it sparks something back in his heart to let him know that we haven't forgotten about him and we're always going to be here for him regardless of if he's out of the Marine Corps or if he's still in."

Craig Wagner, president of United Way of Onslow County, helped organize the event with the Semper Fi Fund, providing volunteers and collaborating with local businesses like C&S Bushhogging who cleared the land for free and Home Depot who provided employees at no cost to help use some of the tools needed to build the fence.

"Our service members have sacrificed so much for our country and when we can do something like this it's really not even a fair tradeoff," Wagner said.

"It's a fence," Tonkens said. "But the meaning behind the fence is priceless. They gave him new life."

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