Army Guard sergeant tackles Oregon's white water

By Maj. Kevin Hynes
Editor

The view was simply breathtaking.

Lying in a sleeping bag on the cold, hard ground as the crisp late summer air nipped at her nose and the dull roar of the nearby Deschutes River lulled her companions to sleep, Pam Whisenhunt stared upward into the dizzying black sky.

There, unfolding above her, the starry, dusty majesty of the Milky Way seemed to etch itself into the inky fabric of space. The 38-year-old Nebraska Army National Guard sergeant first class was flooded with wonderment.

"I've never seen so many stars before," said Whisenhunt, supply sergeant for the 110th Multi-functional Medical Battalion.

Lying there after a full day of river activities in central Oregon, Whisenhunt said it was hard to realize the enormity of what she was seeing, let alone doing. Barely nine months removed from a year-long deployment to Iraq, Whisenhunt was now attempting to tackle a new, much more personal challenge.

Since deploying back to Nebraska last December, Whisenhunt had been working to get her unit's supply functions back into shape while also tending to her two growing daughters.

Family activities, work responsibilities… there just was never time enough during the daily grind to simply reflect upon her experiences in Iraq and life in general.

That was until she began a five-day white water raft journey on Sept. 21, part of veterans outreach program called "Outward Bound." Funded by the Military Family Outdoor Initiative Project and a joint partnership of the Sierra Club and the Sierra Club Foundation, The Anschutz Family Foundation and the Disabled Veterans of America, the program offers 'enriching wilderness expeditions specifically designed for war veterans at no cost to the participants.'

The program includes such excursions as white water rafting, dog sledding, kayaking and sail boating.

Whisenhunt said she found out about Outward Bound while in Iraq.

"It just sounded interesting being able to go white water rafting for five days," said Whisenhunt, a self-professed nature lover. "I thought it would just be a fun thing to be able to do."

According to Outward Bound organizers, the goal of the program is to give recently returned combat veterans an opportunity to build a support community amongst themselves while facilitating discussions on readjustment and transition challenges in a re-energizing and reinvigorating outdoor setting.

It is open to all Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom veterans who were deployed overseas in support of combat operations.

Photo Courtesy of Sgt. 1st Class Pam Whisenhunt

On the River: Sgt. 1st Class Pam Whisenhunt (center) mugs for a camera with one of her raft mates while paddling down the Deschutes River in central Oregon in September. An Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, Whisenhunt recently participated in "Outward Bound," a program that gives combat veterans a chance to experience the outdoors.

Whisenhunt enrolled in the program last October while still in Iraq, marking down three activities she was interested in. She found out that she'd been selected to participate in the white water rafting excursion this past January.

That's when the nerves hit.

"I was really hesitant," she said. "I wanted to come home and be pampered. If I was going to go on vacation and spend my week somewhere, it wasn't going to be (going to the bathroom) in the forest (or going without) showers for five days."

Stewing about it for several months, Whisenhunt finally decided she had to continue on. "I told my husband before I left, well either good or bad, it's going to be an experience," she said.

After shopping for a few personal items, Whisenhunt set off for Oregon.

Arriving in Redmond, Ore., she and the other travelers were taken to a hotel for the night before meeting up with their instructors the next morning. Receiving additional gear, the group moved by van up the Deschutes River, stopping near the town of Madras where the group's base camp was set up.

Whisenhunt said her first view of the river was incredible.

"It was pretty awesome," she said, adding that unlike her expectation of a lush green forest environment, the river instead cut through high desert mountains and bluffs, often leaving brilliantly colored cliffs in their wake.

"We were on the other side of the mountains, so it was high desert… a lot of shrubs and stuff like that," she said. "But it was still beautiful with that river and those high cliffs."

She still couldn't shake her nervousness.

"I was excited, but a little apprehensive," she admitted. "Being in the military, you always have the feeling that something else can go wrong."

Formed into two four-person teams, Whisenhunt soon learned more about her traveling companions. There were several prior-service Marines, former Air Force members, a retired Navy woman and an Army Reservist. Together, the teams spent the majority of the first day simply learning how to work together and survive on the river.

"We got into the rafts and they taught us how to paddle," she said. "We (then) had to flip the boat so we would know how to get back on."

After learning some additional safety and equipment techniques, the group set off on the journey downstream. Whisenhunt said she quickly learned the expedition would be anything but what she'd expected.

"I expected to be on the river for five days rowing ten hours a day, so I was nervous because I really hadn't been working on my arms or lifting weights," she said. "But it wasn't at all like that."

Whisenhunt said the group would paddle down the river for a few hours in the morning, often working their way through a few rapids.

They would then take a break and tackle a different challenge, like climbing a steep mountain trail, jumping from a cliff into the river below, learning how to rappel down the sheer rocky walls, or swimming into the icy current and learning how to take refuge behind protective rocks if they fell overboard.

They also spent time each day journaling or contemplating the experiences of the day.

Whisenhunt said the instructors constantly told the participants to "stay within the moment." That's why things like cellphones, the Internet and Ipods were expressly forbidden on the journey.

"We left all that stuff behind," she said. "They really concentrated on being here, being in the moment, taking it all in because it was going to go fast."

Whisenhunt said each afternoon the teams would paddle again for a few hours and then take a break for "personal time," allowing each of the participants to reflect upon the journey or other experiences within their lives. Whisenhunt quickly realized how important this was to the overall journey.

"It made me realize how distracted you can be… you just have all these outside distracters, all the stimulus around you,' she said.

"Coming back home, people really don't have the chance to brain dump, you know? There's always something going on. There's always family that you've got to meet. There are always jobs that you've got to get back into. There's always house bills and stuff like that."

"This is just a great opportunity you don't get anywhere else that you can just forget all of that and actually be able to think about your thoughts and to understand that process," Whisenhunt added. "It's very rare that you get that chance to have the time to process the things that you've been through, where you want to be."

Whisenhunt said that while traveling down the river the traveling party learned more about how hydrology makes the river function, how to map routes through boulder-strewn rapids and the importance that conservation plays in maintaining a healthy river ecosystem.

They also learned about their roles in conservation, about how ensuring the environment is left as pristine as what they found is extremely important.

The groups also talked during moments between navigating through the rapids, learning about each person's individual experiences as well as what they're doing today.

Each member of the team also took turns captaining the raft through the rapids.

"I'm thinking, 'How am I going to tell those guys which way I want to go, back or forward,'" she recalled. "That kind of intimidated me, but once you got the hang of it…"

Running the rapids was definitely an adrenaline booster, she said.

"That was kind of the exciting part when you hit those rapids," said Whisenhunt. "You get a little bit of an adrenaline rush, depending upon what size of rapids they were. Sometimes it was challenging, especially when you were the one who was captaining."

Still, the best time was at night, staring into the enormous depths of the Milky Way, Whisenhunt said. "It was just amazing… beautiful," she said. "We didn't have tents, we just laid down our sleeping bags and that's where we slept for the night."

"It would dip down into the 40s and you would feel a little nip on your nose or a little breeze in your sleeping bag," she added. "You have the roar of the rapids putting you to sleep… it was awesome."

Before long, the five-day journey was over. The discoveries made during the expedition, however, still remain according to Whisenhunt.

"I definitely got more appreciation for nature, the outdoors, quiet time… time for yourself," she said. "I mean, it was really just an experience of a lifetime that a lot of people don't get."

For more information about Outward Bound, check out the organization's Website at www.outwardbound.org.

DRAGON CHALLENGE

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"It's really good for Soldiers who haven't been deployed, "said Sgt. Lindsay Loftus, chemical operations NCO for HHD, 126th Chem. Bn. "These are some of the things that (Soldiers) that have been deployed have already been going through… It helps prepare us for deployment."

The final team building event was a five-kilometer road march.

At the award ceremony the prize of a commandant's coin from the Chemical Corps School was presented to the first place individual and team.

Along with winning the individual competition, Noyes was also the team leader for the first place team. Working with him were Spc. Delbert Goedeken and Pvt. Aamee Johnson, who are both chemical operations specialists with HHD, 126th Chem. Bn.

During the ceremony Loftus also received a commandant's coin for achieving the high score on the physical fitness test with a score of 299.

SHOOTING

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PRO 1st Place, Staff Sgt. Chad Engen

Team Competitions:

Match # 240M (General George S. Patton Combat Pistol Team Match – Requires a four-person team to engage six targets at various ranges concentrating on fire distribution.)

1st Place, LRS(Staff Sgt. Steven Brewer, Staff Sgt. Joshua Ames, Sgt. Chris Brammer, Sgt. Jonathan Terry); 2nd Place, FNG (Staff Sgt. Adam Borer, Sgt. Herschel Talley, Sgt. Nathan Rutter, Sgt. Jessie London); 3rd Place, WLC #1 (1st Sgt. Stephen Osier, Staff Sgt. Chad Engen, Staff Sgt. William McClure, Staff Sgt. Joseph Serkiz)

Match # 250 (Combat Pistol Team Championship – Combined aggregate of all four team members 225 Individual Aggregate and 240 General George S. Patton Combat Pistol Team Match.)

1st Place, LRS (Staff Sgt. Steven Brewer, Staff Sgt. Joshua Ames, Sgt. Chris Brammer, Sgt. Jonathan Terry); 2nd Place, FNG (Staff Sgt. Adam Borer, Sgt. Herschel Talley, Sgt. Nathan Rutter, Sgt. Jessie London); 3rd Place, RamRod (Sgt. Abraham Garcia, Sgt. Tyson Gould, Sgt. Kole Talkington, Sgt. Dustin Bruckner)

Match # 340 (General John J. Pershing Team Rifle Match – Requires a four-person team to engage six targets at various ranges concentrating on fire distribution.)

1st Place, Team S (Staff Sgt. Timithy Brewer, Pvt. Alexander Bristol, Spc. Jessee Daberkow, Sgt. Dennis Sedlacek); 2nd Place WLC #1 (1st Sgt. Stephen Osier, Staff Sgt. Chad Engen, Staff Sgt. William McClure, Staff Sgt. Joseph Serkiz); 3rd Place, Lost Boys (1st Lt. Clinton Brady, Sgt. Kurt Lillesten, Sgt. Chris Loomis, Sgt. Mathew Brown)

Match # 350 (Service Rifle Championship Team Championship – Combined aggregate of all 4 team members 340 Pershing Team Score and 325 Individual Championship Score.)

1st Place, WLC #1 (1st Sgt. Stephen Osier, Staff Sgt. Chad Engen, Staff Sgt. William McClure, Staff Sgt. Joseph Serkiz); 2nd Place, LRS (Staff Sgt. Steven Brewer, Staff Sgt. Joshua Ames, Sgt. Chris Brammer, Sgt. Jonathan Terry); 3rd Place, Team S (Staff Sgt. Timithy Brewer, Pvt. Alexander Bristol, Spc. Jessee Daberkow, Sgt. Dennis Sedlacek)

Match # 355 (Team Assault Plate Match –Teams negotiated an obstacle course and then fired 10 rounds each at 12-inch plates from 200 yards.) 1st Place, OCS (Sgt. 1st Class Marc Sheehan, Staff Sgt. Deric Day, Staff Sgt. Jason Isaacs, 2nd Lt. Timothy Wobig); 2nd Place, RamRod (Sgt. Abraham Garcia, Sgt. Tyson Gould, Sgt. Kole Talkington, Sgt. Dustin Bruckner); 3rd Place, FNG (Staff Sgt. Adam Borer, Sgt. Herschel Talley, Sgt. Nathan Rutter, Sgt. Jessie London)

Match 625 (Gary Anderson Trophy – This award was created in 2007 and is awarded to the shooter who has the highest combined aggregate in Match 221 and 321. Gary Anderson is a former Nebraska National Guard shooter who is now the director of the Civilian Marksmanship Program.)

Staff Sgt. Adam Borer, HQ, 209th RTI

Match 621 (The State Sergeant Major's Match – The winner of this match is the shooter with the highest combined aggregate scores in the Service Rifle and Service Pistol disciplines.)

Staff Sgt. Adam Borer, HQ, 209th RTI

Match 650 (The Adjutant General's Team Trophy – This award is given to the top overall team.)

LRS (Staff Sgt. Steven Brewer, Staff Sgt. Joshua Ames, Sgt. Chris Brammer, Sgt. Jonathan Terry)