

A Return to Adventure Duck Hunt.

By Steven J. Lair (AKA Flamingo 7)

It's been a rough year, but occasionally even a blind pig finds an acorn. I was bemoaning an old injury that threatened my hunting season, when I returned home to a hopeful message on the answering machine. The message went something like this...(COL B) "Hey we've been knocking around the idea of doing a hunting trip for RTA for a while. Congressman Crawford knows a guy who operates a world class hunting lodge in NE Arkansas. The guy wants to sponsor a duck hunt for some of our wounded guys, but they didn't know anyone who hunts that could run the logistics." COL B. said "I might know a guy" and asked if I was interested. Now, when one is asked if they'd like a couple fingers of The McAllen, one does not reply with "No thanks. I'll just have a light beer". And so a plan was hatched.



THE PLAN

COL B is a former Commander and an old friend of mine who now works inside the Beltway. We've stayed in touch over the years and he has begun an organization called Return to Adventure

(RTA) (<https://www.facebook.com/ReturnToAdventure>); a non-profit designed to get wounded Explosive Ordnance Disposal Operators reengaged with the outdoors. They've done ski trips, ice-climbing, float trips and what not. They've continued to look for ways to expand the opportunities they offer.

The Stan Jones Mallard Lodge (<http://www.stanjonesmallardlodge.com/>) is located in NE Arkansas near the small town of Alicia. The trip was to be a three day op. Arrival and check in on Wednesday, gun the morning flight on Thursday, return to the lodge for breakfast, and then hunt pheasants in the afternoon. Again gun the morning flight on Friday, have breakfast and head for home. We had hoped to have six hunters, and early on we had more than enough takers. However, by the time of the hunt we were down to four.

THE PLAYERS

First was RB: A sailor who lost a leg through a HALO training jump. A novice hunter (never hunted previously) and fitness nut that still competes in distance runs (half marathons and working towards a triathlon).



Second was CF: An Airman who is a bilateral amputee after hitting an IED in Iraq; an avid fly fisherman, but novice hunter; still works intel inside the beltway.



And JL: a Soldier who caught a ride on a 200 pound IED in Afghanistan and managed to walk away, but not without cost; several broken facial bones and lacerations, a ruptured eardrum and a variety of other injuries. He's still on active duty as an EOD Operator.



Stan Jones: a devout Christian, farmer and duck hunter, and the owner and genius behind the Stan Jones Mallard Lodge.



Congressman Rick A. Crawford (and his gracious wife Stacey): a former EOD SGT and current congressman who helped plant the seed for this event (and I suspect much more).



Col B. and Alex: co-conspirators' and the Genesis of Return to Adventure, close friends and former commander. Note: While Alex is not technically a former commander, if confronted by her, I suspect I would say "yes ma'am" and carry on.

COL M, another close friend, former EOD Combat Commander and the guy who made the airline tickets happen through Fisher House Hero Miles.

Armando Fonticiella: the manager of the Lodge, a Cuban by birth and an absolutely wonderful person and great field shot.

Jason Housley: the GM of the lodge. I don't know the background of this guy, but the Army is missing a GREAT First Sergeant in him. He makes things happen.

Jay Taggart and his wife Judy: I've spent a lifetime eating Military rations. Not just the ones prepared by Brown & Root but MRE's, C-rats, and Navy coffee. I can survive. I think that people who put pictures of what they are eating on Facebook are fools. I took a picture of Jay's food for Facebook. Talk about casting pearls before swine... Judy works alongside Jay in the kitchen and helps in planning the various events at the lodge. This is a legitimate five star chef.



CPT Edwin Wolfe and Richard Weaver: Members of the Little Rock Bomb Squad and fraternal members of the International Association of Bomb Technicians and Investigators. Fraternal If not blood brothers.

THE PLOT

CPT Edwin Wolfe, of the Little Rock Bomb Squad met me at the airport and helped shuttle us the two hours north to the Stan Jones Mallard Lodge. We were met by chef Taggart and GM Housley. They quickly moved us into our rooms and showed us around the Lodge, introducing us to its amenities.

Now most of you here that know me, recognize that, while I'm not destitute, people do not flock to my door seeking financial advice. And while I've been able to hunt in some pretty enviable spots, you would not expect to bump into me at some fashionable hunting lodge, chasing buff in Botswana. In short, while I'm imminently capable of identifying a "world class" hunting lodge, it's not a place you'd expect to find me. The term "world class", like so many superlatives is abused and overused, but I can think of no other term for the Mallard Lodge. At 15,000 sq. feet, it's large, plush, and with the functionality a hunting lodge deserves (and that too many have far too much of. An outhouse is functional. A handicap accessible shower with a seat is just what the Dr. ordered when returning from a morning hunt in freezing rain.)



The bedrooms were terribly spartan and hideous as well.



About that time Mr. Stan Jones caught up and moved us into a quiet corner of the great room, where we introduced ourselves. He went over the plans for the stay, and expressed to us what it meant to him to have us there. He spoke from the heart about the hardships and blessings he has been allotted and spoke with the Warriors as an equal and proud to have them as guests. Shortly afterwards we broke up to get settled, working with GM Housley to ensure we had appropriate guns, shells and waders. Armando then asked if we'd like to shoot skeet and we adjourned to the shooting grounds. Now I love shooting skeet, but what we embarked on was not skeet, though if Armando wants to call it skeet, that's Ok with me (if he wants to call it Rhythmic Gymnastics I'm good with that as well).



What we approached was a large wooden structure with spots for six to eight shooters (the normal number in a blind). Three traps lay beneath you with the center one a wobble trap, and three more traps arrayed out in front, skirting the edges of the shooting field. Armando brought out two flats of target shells (250 rounds a flat.) and we began to blast away. While I'm reasonably proficient with a shotgun (birds have been known to expire in greater numbers in my presence than chance would suggest), this was a hoot. In fact, I would call this game a "Hoot" but I'm not expected to achieve a membership on the executive committee. One of our participant's had never hunted before, his firearm experience mainly limited to military service; however he acquitted himself quite nicely. I had hoped to focus this trip on those with whom this trip had been planned, but the siren song of the clays soon pulled me in. All the shooters proved themselves more than adequate gunners, with the ratio of fun to work being something akin to 50: .0006. In any event we had a "hoot" on the skeet field, working out a number of problems that could impede us in the blind.

After shooting skeet, we relaxed in the lodge, readied gear for the morning hunt and generally kept to our own thoughts.



We dined at 1930. One can eat for sustenance, scavenge for survival, but we dined. Two great tables seated about two dozen guests and friends. Stan introduced the various groups in attendance and said grace, and then it was time for Chef Jay's show, and he did not disappoint.



Desert was bananas foster (I know that now, because someone told me) and the wonderful conversation that ensues amongst strangers thrown together by a common passion. After a final warning order with Stan laying out the next morning's plans we retired to our rooms for last minute equipment checks and bed.

THE HUNT

0430: Wake up by Jason. Boy, did this take me back to my early days in the Army. Not a gentle knock and a whispered "hey guys it's 0430"; noooo, pound, pound pound,... "first call". Scramble into

clothes and a quick trip to the dining room for coffee and a light snack; departure is set for 0515. It's in the low 40's with an overcast sky and wind from the NW. We struggle into waders and gather our gear. Our guides (Chad & Maggie/ Dustin & Mattie) meet us in the mud room as we're getting ready.



We'll be driving a short way in Ranger ATVs' to a flooded rice field with a Pit blind. The lights of the Ranger show an incredible number of ducks taking flight. As soon as the engine is silenced the din of thousands of ducks and geese fills your senses. Looking up in the darkness you can see a continuous flight of ducks, their lightly colored underbellies showing up against the dark clouds. The guides prepare the blinds and then help the two amputees into the blind. Walking in twelve inches of water and six inches of mud was hard enough for me. I had to move slowly as the mud tugged on waders that were just a wee bit large. For CF and RD it was a moment that could make or break a hunt. Today's prosthetics are a wonder of technology, but having a prosthetic leg come loose, in a wader, in the dark, in the swamp can cause something of a goat rodeo. Chad and Dustin were extremely patient and helpful, and the transfer from ATV to blind went off without a hitch.

The guns are seated, the decoys are out, the dogs whining, the blind is closed and all we have to do is settle in and wait. Twenty minutes until shooting light. We can begin to see the marsh settling down as the light begins to creep into our world.



Ducks are working the decoys, the guides begin calling; birds begin to circle and land. A hushed "what time is it" between the guides; five more minutes, a whispered warning to make ready, and then "Take em!" The roof of the blind is thrown off, six guns stand and for 15 seconds it's pandemonium; gunshots, birds in the air, on the water, bolting for safety in every direction, dropping from the sky into the flooded rice field. The bedlam continues long after the gunfire ceases as the marsh comes alive. We

look at each other with grins that Ajax couldn't remove, and begin to soak it in as the dogs begin their work.



Time and again the scene would be repeated that morning. Finally at 1000, we decided to call it quits as the birds were no longer responding to the calls or deks. Each of us had done respectably (though there was one barrage that resulted in exactly 0 ducks from 15 shells followed by mumbles, sheepish grins and frowns from the dogs).

On arrival back to the lodge, we quickly shed waders (a somewhat more difficult task with prosthetics), jackets and then headed for the dining room. Chef Taggart and crew had breakfast made to order. Just about anything you could imagine came from that wonderful kitchen (and a cold hungry sleep deprived duck hunter can imagine pretty much anything).



The conversation flowed as the other crews came in (generally 4-6 hunters and guides), everyone comparing notes. One of the crews there were the folks from Red Arrow TV from the Outdoor Channel (<http://www.redarrowtv.com/>). Kip Campbell along with his wife Kat and camera man Josh Bartlam

were going to attempt to hunt ducks with a bow. The first mornings hunt was unsuccessful with a bow, but they were not disappointed and would try again the next day.

After a late breakfast we prepared for the pheasant hunt. These are game farm birds from Nebraska, and hunted much like a continental driven pheasant shoot. The “buts” or blinds are large round bales of rice straw and one rotates through the butts as the hunt ensues so everyone has an equal chance at the birds. It’s a great hunt and something of a challenge, as you need to mind where the other hunters are. A smart bird will drop low leaving you no shot until they are past your blind and well up to speed. The birds flew wild and well, and several made their escape. I shot remarkably well that day, though there were some spectacular misses; one bird nearly colliding with me as he bore down on the blind. He escaped.



The rain and wind grew stronger as the day advanced, the temperature continuing to fall. A major winter ice and snow storm was headed our way and expected to hit overnight. Weather plays a pivotal role in water fowling. The nastier the weather the more ducks, but a freeze up makes it almost impossible to draw ducks in. With no open water for them to land in, they'll bypass you well out of range. Back at the lodge, we showered and adjourned to the various comforts of the lodge to kibitz and exchange stories. A new group of hunters had arrived and we introduced ourselves and chatted about today's success and tomorrow's prospects.

Our nightly repast offered as it's centerpiece an exquisite prime rib. Again, Stan took center stage and introduced our special guest, Congressman Crawford of Arkansas, who had come down to eat with his fellow EOD Operators. He called them up one by one and introduced them to the group, and then had his young son give each one a "challenge coin" from the congressman.



One of the other groups at the Lodge that night was a group of executives from Tyson Foods. One of their numbers, Victor, was a native of Ukraine who stood up to propose a toast to the US. He explained that he with his family immigrated to the US as a youth. His Dad worked hard at various jobs eventually moving the family firmly into American middle class. Victor had profited from his family's work and had continued on, becoming a very successful business man. He made clear he's not a

Ukraine-American. He's an American who happened to be borne in the Ukraine. A very heartfelt speech and a toast to that particular political experiment called America.

Again, Stan went over the orders for the next morning and we retired early. At 0430 the door again rattled with our wake up call. Scrambling into clothes I went down to the dining hall to grab some coffee. Stan, the GM and the various guides were there, with rather long faces. The storm was in full bloom and the fields quickly freezing over.



After some quick discussions it was decided the better part of valor would be to forgo the morning hunt and make our way to the airport in Little Rock. The trip home would be quite another story, but even with the disappointment of calling off the mornings hunt, I wouldn't trade the experience for anything. New friends, good food, new country, a common bond, and an amazing hunt. What more could I reasonably ask from life?

FINALE

A final note or two. As introductions were being made at the final night's dinner, an older Gentleman was introduced as the grandfather of Kip Campbell and a WWII combat veteran of the 82d Airborne Division. He was seated next to his daughter, Kips mother (I believe I've got this lineage correct). The gentleman was recently widowed and suffering from Parkinson's disease. After dinner I went over and introduced myself and told him that I too could wear the 82d ABN patch as a combat patch, having

served with MG Vines and the 82d in Afghanistan. His face lit up and we exchanged stories for several minutes, brothers of different mothers.

As I said at the outset of this tale, I've been nursing an injury that may, in the end require me to reevaluate the way I hunt, and even what I hunt. I would say that it has been a miserable 10 months, but that would be an outlandish lie, I've never really known misery. I've been blessed to spend time throughout this past year with some very special people in some very special places. I've been given opportunities beyond any reasonable expectation, and rubbed elbows with some very special people. Over my lifetime I've been fortunate to get to know people and witness events that changed the world. I am blessed on such a foundational level that if I lost everything today, I could (and would) still count myself blessed. There's a picture of Timberline in the den, across from the chair where I begin the day. It was taken a few days after he tore up his knee on an antelope hunt; he's in shorts, on crutches, with bow in hand and grinning in anticipation. His tag line was "Don't let the things you can't do keep you from doing the things you can do." For Chris, Bobby and Jimmy (and Timberline), that's not just a tag line, they are the proof. Tag lines are easy to come up with and attach to your correspondence. Living them is much harder. The three Warriors who made the hunt are but a few of the hundreds of Warriors who came home bearing the scars of war. I've known quite a few of them and by in large the thing that strikes me is their resilience; their ability to accept a new baseline for their life and move forward from there.

It's all too easy to look at current events and lose faith in people and bemoan the values we see on display. But there are good people out there, people willing to lend a hand to those who sacrifice, people who have been dealt a bad hand and play it to win. There are people who give with their heart, their time and work; people who face enormous odds not by their own choosing, and not only carry on but thrive. There are giants that roam the earth; we are blessed to be among them.