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## One for the Home Team

### Hot dogs and high fives—baseball works its healing powers on returning soldiers.

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They came with canes, in bandages and with injuries and illnesses less visible - tumors, blood clots or psyches scarred severely enough to send them home from assignments in Iraq and elsewhere.

But when Rafael Palmeiro lined a first-inning home run over Camden Yards' right field fence Wednesday night, the soldiers did their duty.

The walking wounded danced.

A dozen soldiers - all patients at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, about half of them injured in Iraq - sang their country's anthem, scarfed down hot dogs and cheered for the home team during an outing sponsored by America's Heroes of Freedom, a nonprofit organization that works to "honor and heal" injured soldiers returning from war.

The organization, started after Sept. 11 by an interior designer from Texas, has provided returning soldiers with everything from parties to teddy bears, clothing to spa treatments, all to support and speed the healing of the returning wounded.

Wednesday's Orioles-Mariners game marked the group's first baseball outing. While none in the two vanloads of soldiers were hard-core Oriole fans, they behaved as though they were, whooping, hollering and even picking up free souvenir Oriole blankets, in exchange for applying for credit cards.

And when the public address system blasted "Gonna Make You Sweat (Everybody Dance Now)" after Palmeiro's home run, nearly the whole group rose, high-fiving, dancing in the aisles and showing that, whatever else they might have lost, their camaraderie was intact.

For the 12 soldiers, some of whom have been patients for more than a year, a night away from the medical facility in Washington was therapeutic and appreciated.

"A lot of guys came back with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], and being cooped up in your room is almost like you're still stuck in Iraq; at least your mind is still there," said Michael Walcott, who was injured during a mortar attack on his unit's camp north of Baghdad.

"This kind of thing takes your mind away from what you've been through and lets you know that people care," he said. "It means everything to us."

Walcott, of Richmond, Va., has been at Walter Reed, where he is being treated for disc problems, for six months. He'd been in Iraq for three months when he first hurt his back while lifting.

He declined to ship out then. "I couldn't be leaving them behind, and the mission wasn't completed yet," he said. Six months later, during one of the near-daily mortar attacks on his camp, he reinjured his back.

"You never know where they're falling. You don't hear it first, you just feel it when it hits. If you're close enough to hear that whistling sound, it's over for you," he said.

While running to shelter, he fell.

"I couldn't feel my legs anymore," he said. He was sent to Germany, where an MRI determined he had nerve damage, and then to Walter Reed, where he will most likely receive a medical discharge.

"I can't walk, or even sit, for a long time," he said from his seat near the left-field foul line. "I'm learning to live with it, though."

In the seat in front of him, Chay Rogers watched the game quietly.

After 10 years in the Army, most of it stationed in Germany, Rogers, from Winston-Salem, N.C., was sent to Iraq, where after 10 months he was injured while on patrol. He has been at Walter Reed for seven months.

"It was an IED," he said, "Improvised Explosive Device. They build them in anything - bottles, bags, carcasses." Rogers was in a vehicle when the roadside bomb went off, knocking him unconscious and leaving shrapnel in his shoulder. He has had two surgeries to remove the shrapnel and scrape the bone.

"It will never be the same," he said. Asked what other medical problems he had, he answered, "Just bad memories."

Maurice Howie, 47, of Providence, R.I., was sent home after developing a blood clot - he suspects from spending long periods cramped in a Humvee.

A reservist, Howie was a city bus driver when called to active duty and sent to Iraq, where his unit provided security for KBR, a subsidiary of Halliburton, escorting the company's trucks on convoys.

He said he began tiring and running out of breath easily. During exercises, "I couldn't even run the lousy mile they ran, and I was tired after five push-ups."

He was sent to Germany, where the clot, which started in his leg, was found to have moved to his lung. He has been at Walter Reed for three months.

"My friends tell me I'm lucky to get back in one piece, and they're right," he said. "I really feel for the guys who have limbs missing. I don't know if I could take it."

Not all the soldiers' injuries were apparent, and not all of the soldiers were injured in Iraq.

James Hunter, an Army sergeant, was stationed in Korea when he was sent home two months ago after a recurrence of tumors he began experiencing after Desert Storm and Desert Shield.

Hunter, 42, of Charlotte, N.C., has had three tumors removed since his exposure to depleted uranium in the earlier conflicts.

U.S. forces - specifically M-1 Abrams tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles and A-10 Warthog attack jets - use ammunition containing depleted uranium because of its armor-piercing capabilities.

Hunter was in a unit sent in to "mop up" after such attacks.

The Pentagon, while it has recommended medical assessment of soldiers who fought in or cleaned up after such attacks, says the risks of depleted uranium are small.

Hunter, who has been in the Army 21 years, had a third tumor removed from his hand last week. In an earlier surgery, a tumor was removed from his leg, along with part of his calf.

"I always take the optimistic view and say it's not going to come back, but it keeps coming back," he said.

★ As the soldiers watched the game, AHOF president Susan Brewer sold teddy bears and "Defending Freedom" bracelets from a booth in the stadium.

AHOF was originally established to help families of those killed in the Pentagon attack and pay tribute to firefighters, paramedics, police and others who helped save lives on Sept. 11.

"At the time all of the focus seemed to be on Ground Zero [the World Trade Center]," said Brewer.

After Sept. 11, she said, "I started wondering what I could do to help with the healing process. I'd done a lot of charitable work, so people were calling me and saying, 'How can we help?' I decided to do what I'd told other people: put your money and your life where your mouth is."

Brewer, 48, sold her home and car and moved to Washington, first organizing a tribute to the victims and heroes of the Sept. 11 Pentagon attack, then, after the war started, turning her attention to the seemingly never-ending list of needs of injured soldiers returning from Iraq.

"To see wounded unloaded off a cargo plane, your mouth just drops open," she said. "It's very sad. I watched two American soldiers get down and kiss the ground. It's etched in your heart for the rest of your life."

At Andrews Air Force Base, AHOF began "Operation Life Line," supplying injured soldiers with underwear, socks, T-shirts and water and helping their families with lodging, travel and other needs. Later, the program was expanded to serve Walter Reed and the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda.

When a medical chief at Bethesda called and said he needed teddy bears for patients, Brewer obliged, setting up AHOF's "Operation Bear Hug."

"Soldiers cling to them; it's a source of comfort," Brewer said.

Before the Bush inauguration, AHOF provided makeovers to 10 wounded soldiers and their wives and mothers, dubbing it "Operation Cinderella."

"If you've lost an arm and you're a beautiful young woman who fought in the war, fixing your hair and

wearing nice clothes is a great morale boost. We decided, let's take this on the road," she said.

Spa treatments for injured soldiers were arranged in several cities, and the program's name - so as not to preclude participation by males - became "Operation Restoration."

Brewer said the needs of the returning wounded far exceed what the military can supply.

"The military does what it can," she said, "but there are huge gaps, missing links, and we've got to fill in the gaps."

More information about America's Heroes of Freedom is available at its Web site:  
[www.americasheroes.us](http://www.americasheroes.us).

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