

HUNTING

Wounded Warrior elk hunt memorable for all

BY ED NOONAN

For The Daily Gazette

When Dave VanDerzee, proprietor of Easton View Outfitters, asked if I would like to participate in a Wounded Warrior elk hunt on his preserve, I accepted immediately.

Having heard and read about the good things that this program has accomplished, I looked forward to having the opportunity to experience it in person. Seldom do we hear about those brave men and women who return home from a war zone facing great challenges — lengthy rehabilitation and/or having to live the rest of their lives with disabilities.

I'll never forget that September morning of the hunt, when I first met Sgt. Eddie Ryan and how proud I was to shake his hand and to thank him for what he had done for us. For me, it was a firsthand look at the true meaning of courage and patriotism.

On April 13, 2005, on his second tour of duty, Eddie and his elite sniper team were positioned on a roof top in Hasaybah, Iraq, when he was hit in the head with two .30-caliber rounds. Immediately, his fellow Marines did what had to be done to get Eddie off the roof and on his way to a hospital.

It was just the beginning of Eddie and his family's most challenging battle. The doctors told them Eddie was in grave condition, but his

parents, Angela and Chris, and his sister, Felicia, never stopped praying and never gave up hope.

"We knew he would live and he would again come home to Ellen-ville," Angela told me.

For two years, and at four hospitals, Angela never left her son's bedside. And now on this autumn day, I was sitting at a picnic table eating wild boar sausages with this courageous young Marine, who would shortly be placing the crosshair of his rifle on a trophy bull elk. And he was definitely ready.

Eddie's dad told me that months before the hunt, he began his shooting rehabilitation in preparation for the hunt. He started with a Gamo air rifle to regain his shooting skills, and it didn't take long before he moved up to a .22-caliber rifle and began using a special shooting device on his wheelchair, which a little assistance from his dad.

The final step was getting familiar with the specially engraved McMillan M40 Tactical 308-caliber rifle and matching 2.5-10 x 50mm tactical scope, the rifle of a Marine sniper. This rifle was presented to Eddie by the NRA.

To help Eddie navigate the 200-acre preserve, VanDerzee solicited the help of four local volunteers — Josh Waytkus, Joe Barron, Jarred Steeves and Kenny Sicko Jr. — three of whom just happened to be ex-servicemen. Using a small utility trailer, they added sides, a solid platform, on/off ramp for

this wheelchair and covered it all in camouflage. To pull Eddie and his dad up the hills and through the fields, they planned to use an ATV to reach an upper field just below a hardwood covered ridge where the elk usually bedded. When Eddie first saw the make-over trailer, he just smiled, gave a thumbs up, and called it his hunting chariot.

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I think Eddie's entourage was anxious and apprehensive that day when we headed up the hill, and the sightings of some of the other trophy game that roamed the Easton View preserve added to the excitement.

Large-racked fallow and white-tail bucks, Arkansas razorback boar, and sika deer were all a part of the welcoming committee and set the stage for what was about to happen. And as if planned, a bull elk's bugle echoed across the mountain above us — something you don't normally hear in New York state.

Sitting in an elevated blind in a hedgerow about 75 yards from the hunter and his family, I had a front row seat of what, for me, would be a very memorable hunt. Eddie would be sighting through the scope with his right eye and squeezing the trigger with his left hand. I could see the tension on faces of the family, but Eddie seemed all business and still wearing that confident smile. Earlier that day when I asked him if

he was ready, he raised his left arm and wiggled his trigger finger and said: "It still works. Hooah!"

With everyone in position the guides moved out, hoping to circle above the elk and that their calling would bring them down and into range where Eddie could get a shot. It was about 45 minutes later when I saw movement in the woods to the right above where Eddie was waiting. Not long after, I saw those big white antlers just about 100 yards from the field where the wounded warrior was waiting.

Stopping just on the edge of the field, the bull was cautious and scanned the terrain. But a soft cow call got him to step out and when he did, Eddie's dad helped him raise the McMillan and the young Marine placed the crosshair on the bull's front shoulder and squeezed off the shot. Stumbling backwards but not falling, the father and son team ejected the spent shell and cycled hi a live round.

Again the McMillan barked and the big bull crumbled. I don't think there was a dry eye in the field at that moment when we saw the smile on this young wounded warrior's face. Well done, Marine.

As for Eddie's elk, it was a true trophy. Weighing over 800 pounds, it carried a 14-point rack with a 40-plus-inch spread which Dave estimated would score over 320 points; and would qualify it for the SCI record book