

The Fish Journal

"Fly Tying Is Healing Veterans"

by Dallas Cross

This past summer I attended a retirement party for a long-time colleague at the Seattle Veterans Administration Medical Center. Connie Ward and I had worked together in the Research and Development Program before I retired. I went to celebrate her successful career as a microbiologist and medical center biological safety officer.

Knowing she wanted to learn how to fly fish, I gave her a retirement gift of a fly casting and fishing lesson on the Snoqualmie River, at a time of her choice. Connie asked if she could bring along a friend and I agreed. We would find a time when her friend, Vicki Hoagland, could get away from her job as a research scientist at the University of Washington.

I am a veteran and receive my primary care at the Seattle VA Medical Center. In front of the facility I was stopped by a man who said, "I see you are a fly fisherman." Puzzled, until I remembered that the hitch cover on my SUV extolled fly-fishing, I answered, "Yes, and you also?" It turned out that the gentleman was on his way to teach in a fly-tying class sponsored by the Washington Fly Fishing Club (WFFC) and hosted by the medical center. He invited me to visit the class after my appointment and I gladly accepted.

The class was in a pleasant activity room set up with tables holding fly tying vices and containers of hooks, thread, feathers and fur. With WFFC volunteers at hand Veteran patients were busy in various stages of tying both complicated and basic fly patterns on the hooks. I learned that several of the volunteers were from Seattle area fly fishing shops and expert tyers in their own right. In the announcement schedule were outings where the veterans could participate in fishing and casting

There was an opportunity for me to assist a Gulf War veteran. He told me fly tying was helping him focus on a productive task, and that he was looking forward to casting his fly for trout. He explained he had post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the VA program at Seattle was helping him recover. He thanked me for assisting him tie the fly and praised the Healing Waters program for helping him and his fellow veterans at the hospital.

WFFC volunteers told me that the Seattle Healing Waters project is part of a national program to help patients in many Veterans Administration facilities. Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, Inc. is a non-profit organization sponsoring therapeutic fly tying and fishing activities. Members have risen to the challenge of helping wounded veterans, even to the extent of inventing a one-handed fly tying device for amputees.

I was informed Seattle VA rehabilitation staff gathered in amazement to observe the fly tying by PTSD patients when the program first started. They remarked that patient concentration times were much longer than those seen during conventional therapy.

I have dropped in to the class a couple of times since, once contributing a large piece of prime elk hair hide that was immediately cut up and put into the material boxes for the veterans.

Connie called and said that she and Vicki could go for her casting lesson on a Friday in September. I packed fly rods for all three of us and put together an après-fishing treat of some cheeses, buffalo pepperoni from Fischer's Meat Market, and a small bottle of Muscat wine. We met early morning in Fall City and carpooled to the fishing site about a quarter of a mile below Snoqualmie Falls. On the way Connie advised me that Vicki was a seasoned fly fisher and expert fly tyer.



Vicki casting beautifully and Connie Fishing

Wow, was she right! Vicki could cast a better fly line than me and it was a pleasure watching her tight loops straighten out and settle a beautifully tied fly gently on the water. Somewhat distracted, I started the lessons of fly casting 101 with Connie and soon was watching her throw respectable casts for an ever increasing distance. I sat back and watched her catch a small rainbow (or was it a young steelhead?) for her first fish. Mission accomplished.



Connie casting (foreground) and Vicki fishing

We all caught small trout and retired to a hill with a beautiful view of the falls to for our celebratory picnic. Between bites and sips, Vicki informed me that she was responsible for starting the therapeutic fly-tying program, Healing Waters, at the Seattle VA Medical Center where she was working.



Snoqualmie Falls from the hill

It began when Vicki heard of a Healing Waters program at the Madigan Army Hospital in Tacoma and wondered whether this might be extended to patients at the Seattle medical center. With determination, Vicki overcame bureaucratic snags and clinical reluctance. She successfully solicited sponsorship and volunteers from the WFFC and, as the first Seattle Project Healing Waters volunteer, got the program underway.

I not only thank my veteran brothers and sisters who have spent time in service to our country, but also salute those who, like Vicki and the volunteers from the Washington Fly Fishing Club, help heal and comfort those who have contributed much more than their time to our country.

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Après picnic