

This is a story about magic and the people who create that magic. For all its good intention, it began 6 years ago with two members of Safari Club International (Georgia Chapter), a bottle of Crown Royal, two rocking chairs, a red hot cast iron stove and an old home place in Alabama. These elements combined to create an annual



event that has made a positive difference in the lives of injured soldiers and medically fragile children. Indeed, as we look back it is difficult to imagine how such an organization developed. This is a unique and true story of how small town America combines simple humanity and outdoor magic.

The Daggerhorn Plantation, the Georgia Chapter of Safari Club International (Safari Wish-James Lakeman), Operation Injured Soldier (Tony Covell and Al Hogan) out of Michigan and a lonely old Roark home place in Ramer, Alabama started it all. The two IRS Code 501c3's Not for Profits joined with the Daggerhorn Plantation to sponsor a great American Whitetail Deer hunt. Ironically, as many things are with the Daggerhorn Golden Rule Hunt (DGR), hunting has become only a secondary reason for the event; the social aspects and fellowship profits eclipse any trophy deer ever taken. The DGR, if only for a weekend, creates a big family out of attendees who have never met one another. Like a big reunion with family members from far away, our attendees join at the banquet table of life to share stories, to be amused and sometimes even to cry. Metaphorically, our attendees are people who were dealt a rough hand of cards. You could say the Daggerhorn slides them a few Aces and a pair of one eyed Queens by taking their minds off their lives for a little while.



The first of the two attendee groups are medically fragile children with circumstances that include cancer remissions, autism, seizure disorders, muscular dystrophy as well as terrible emotional challenges. Combat wounded soldiers make up the second group and they come from the Army, Navy, and Marines. Ironically, the founders of the hunt wrongfully expected that the children would benefit greatly from being around the injured soldiers. After five years of these hunts, it is very clear that the soldiers are more heavily influenced by the children's experiences and outlooks. Now the magic of the Daggerhorn Golden Rule Hunt begins.

The five veterans crawled out of the rental car under the tall pines of the Daggerhorn Plantation located South of Montgomery, Alabama. The veterans scanned the old house and the ponds as if they were going to set up parameter security. Some habits are hard to break. They quickly concluded this is ideal deer hunting habitat, as a strange gaited man started walking toward them, carrying a pitch fork. This first person they meet in Alabama appears to be a caretaker. He's a middle-aged man with the look of someone with a very rough past. Even though his appearance was rough, it was his teeth that drew the attention of the hunters. He announced his name as Gus, Gus Burdock. They all shake hands as Gus spoke to them with a heavy southern accent. "Welcome to da Daggerhorn, how y'all during?" Pleasantries among Gus and the injured soldiers' are cut short as 10 guides and others approach from the direction of the lodge.



Each of the soldier hunters would say later they knew this was going to be quite an experience after meeting Gus. One hunter, a Texan, later commented that after meeting Gus, he knew he was deep in Alabama. The Texan heavily clothed but somewhat uneasy in manner would reveal at a later time all of the scars he was hiding. After the arrival, and with much silent drum roll, Gus would remove his fake teeth and speak as a more refined man. The hoots and hollers would drown out "Gus's" sincere welcome, all in attendance are reassured they are indeed among friends and in for quite a magical experience in the piney woods of Alabama.

Local citizens as volunteers help the hunters into the lodge with their bags and weapons. When settled, the camp cook announces that a crock pot of venison chili awaits anyone that may be hungry. The guide's and Gus reassure the soldiers that the hunt is all about them and only one concern is paramount- marksmanship. As with all things DGR, Gus is making threats that shirt tails will hang from the wall of shame for those that pull the trigger and miss. Gus points to an old plank with at least ten shirt tails of various colors and brands.

After settling into their room -the Poker room, spelled "Poke Her", the soldiers meet in the covered garage area where the potbelly stove glows red with burning white oak. The agenda for the weekend is discussed. Kelly Culver, Operations Chief, explains the three things that must be completed before hunting. There will be a safety briefing, a quality deer management briefing and all hunters must zero their rifles on the 100 yard range.



Almost unnoticed a passenger van pulls down the gravel road toward the lodge and stops. A ramp rolls out. A family from Texas joins the group. This family is blessed with three children- two of which are have Muscular Dystrophy. Concerns are quickly forgotten when the older of the two boys (Austin), flies off the van ramp laughing and "hello'ing" everyone from his electric wheelchair. He acts as if he owns the place. As he explores the lands of Evangeline Daggerhorn (a legend they shall soon experience), realization sets in he can't get through the door to



the house. Ten minutes later, a ramp is constructed by the talented volunteers granting the boy immediate access. After exploring the old house, Austin announces he prefers the Mossy Oak room, maybe for the old fashion tub or the master bathroom. The boys are at home and comfortable with the surroundings.

A soldier with 65% burns to his body is observed at a distance watching Austin rolling fast from the fire pit to the safety briefing in an old pole barn called the Jackal's Lair. Later in the weekend this soldier will tell "Gus" a powerful story of how Austin helped to change his perspective on his own life.

As two other kids arrive, the guides immediately begin the briefings and live gun fires on the range. All are instructed and ready to hunt the following morning.

The evening meal is ready at dark; it includes two inch thick Dagger steaks, potatoes and a salad with poppy seed dressing and mandarin oranges (created by Chef Nathalie, wife of "Gus"). Deer roll ups, some with jalapeño and some not are served on platters as if dining in some ritzy restaurant. Before the steaks are cut, a prayer of thanksgiving is said for all to hear in honor of our glorious God. Michael Myers, a talented blind musician starts playing these eerie southern bluesy rock songs, he stuns the crowd with made up songs each more daring with each libation he is served. His music is so inspiring the sound should be on the radio. Troy Jens, a professional bass fisherman plays a mean guitar with awesome vocals. Troy actually has a song on the radio.



By 9:00p.m. little is left in the food except a few empty cup containers. The completion of a spooky story of the voodoo woman of Teasley Mill comes to an end. One particularly extroverted soldier falls hard when the scary punch line of the story is revealed. Jumping backwards he curses "Gus" as laughter erupts from all over the lodge. With the joke completed people check their watches knowing wake up is at 5:00a.m. Suddenly, all is quiet, as sleep falls on the Daggerhorn Plantation.



Five O'clock comes early. One soldier is the first up, then the Kids join the mix. The Camp Cook, a man in his seventies (Bill Roy) is joined by the elected Mayor (Robert Belise) from Senoia Georgia. These two men put together a breakfast feast. Tin foil is on the table for hunters to wrap up ham with homemade biscuits just in case they decide to stay in the stand for 4

or 5 hours. All are stuffed with food and coffee and excitement reigns. In the darkness 4 wheelers of numerous brands line up outside like a convoy of waiting trucks prepositioned to take soldiers into war. The soldiers gather around the "stand chooser". This "stand Chooser" is a log of pine wood with 10 holes drilled into it; each hole contains a railroad spike that has on it a name of a hunting stand. The soldiers and the kids are compelled to draw a spike to determine where they will hunt this morning. One spike is painted Gold, the unlucky one that picks gold will read he has work detail. It's a joke, he gets to draw again. The hunters quickly mount their vehicles; the guides begin their work making sure everyone is safe. After five years and no injuries the hunts are mechanical where much is not seen by the attendees. Each soldier, each child and chaperone are in their stands before light. Silence and intense anticipation comes to the Daggerhorn.

Generally the hunters stay on the stand for 2-3 hours. The guides usually eat whatever is left of the breakfast and sit by the potbelly stove talking quietly, listening intently for the report of a rifle.

Suddenly with a crack of a rifle, one of the most experienced guides states, "That's a hit!, Did you hear the thud?". A disagreement ensues on the actual direction of the shot. Listening to the



banter would make a person think all the guides hate each other. Another irony, Alabama boys don't like you if they are not picking at you- a strange custom indeed!. On a hand held radio, static is heard, the voice of a girl becomes clear. She is the sister of the two boys with Muscular Dystrophy. In a whispered voice holding back excitement comes "I got one!, I got one!". The guides all have beaming smiles, "at least we will not get skunked this weekend".

The five member Texas family are not new to the Daggerhorn. This second trip in five years has only one sad component. Clear degradation in the boy's physical capabilities is evident but quickly forgotten when we see the laughter of the two boys. Both boys are rejoicing over the success of their completely healthy sister arriving at the lodge with a seven point white tail she gassed at "Hollering Woman" stand. As the boys listen to her story, it's as if they were part of the kill. For the DGR gang- it's like getting extra sawmill gravy poured on a home cooked biscuit.

Lunch comes; Dagger burgers, home cut fries, and peach cobbler. We eat again. The sister is asked to tell the crowd about her victory. "Gus" tells her to start the story with "**Dar I was**". Of course, her cheeks are red from the fresh blood of her first kill, the DGR is rather traditional when it comes to protocol.

In addition to the hunt, the little town of Ramer has a Christmas Parade each year. At midday and on purpose the Montgomery County Volunteer Fire Department (Fire Chief David Miles) takes the medically fragile kids and other children in attendance on a parade route through Ramer. The kids



climb aboard a huge fire truck and take positions



with the Firemen and Firewomen to throw candy and stuffed animals to the people standing all over the roads on the route. This small town parade has at least 50 different contributors; it really is a stunning event- an event the children think is awesome. A boy named Joe

with Spina Bifida rides shotgun in the fire truck. These firemen provide the Daggerhorn medical coverage in recognition of our injured soldiers and medically fragile guests- priceless.

In the afternoon the soldiers will take the lead, six deer will fall to their rifle reports over the rest of the weekend. Taking a few shirt tails earlier in the morning tightened up the veteran's marksmanship skills. It's a bad day for the great

American whitetail in Ramer, Alabama. In addition to this harvest the soldiers will release their stories, some quicker than others, some only after three brown water drinks and the warmth and roar of a body warming bon fire. For the most part, this dialog occurs in private and in one on one sessions. Each story seems to captivate the listener because details are so traumatic. South West Asia has been tough on our military. We also have stories of Vietnam Veterans, a sad contrast when compared to the treatment for returning soldiers in our most recent conflicts. Some



details need to be told and they follow. A Marine received a near fatal wound in Iraq with a bullet to the head. Clearly he owes much to the technology of the Kevlar helmet and the military medical systems. Another, sustained third degree burns over 65% of his body. The suicide bomber who specifically targeted this noncommissioned officer had no idea his attack would fail. We will remember his words forever, "I look like a raggedy Ann doll without my cloths on", a comment about all the graphs with his 30 plus surgeries at Brook Army Medical Center. You can see the wrist watch shadow on his arm. Then there was the soldier from the Wisconsin milk country, who sustained knee injuries kicking down doors trying to stay alive. Another veteran just hasn't done well with the things he experienced; the unspeakable things are locked in his memory. We have stories of bullet holes, burns, nightmares, courage and tears. We hear about a wounded soldier (shot femur, gut wound and burns) at Walter Reed talking to the wife of his Commander. He said she asked about the last minutes of her husband's life. It's touching that in spite of the soldiers near fatal wounds, he stated that of the nine months at Walter Reed, that day, the day with his Commander's wife was the toughest. An

infantry man explains that a suicide bomber exploded a truck just beside his armored vehicle and that the soldier was thrown over thirty yards. He had a piece of shrapnel lodged in the top of his foot but there was not a hole in his bloody boot? Today, he looks normal and sustained only minor physical injuries. Another soldier from his squad lost his arm at the shoulder. A military police sergeant was shot in the throat. "I died twice they told me." Beyond his scar he seems like a normal person, his speech is impeccable after nearly two years of speech therapy. One soldier had a breast implant in his leg, just to give the form of a calf muscle after being burned. This represents a vivid memory for our guides. Old "Gus" felt the calf (breast) implant saying, "This feels pretty good" followed by the soldier yanking his leg away and saying "that's enough high-speed!" To understand the sacrifices of these veterans you really have to try and live just one of the memories they are hesitant to share.

Here is a picture of the magic of the Daggerhorn Golden Rule Hunt. A boy in an electric wheelchair pulls up to a kitchen table that is covered with sweet cinnamon rolls. He reaches for a plastic knife and as he attempts to cut the roll, his efforts have no success



because Muscular Dystrophy is robbing him of his strength. From across the room a US Marine witnesses this and walks over and asks if the boy needs a hand with that cinnamon roll. The boy responds "can you help me?" "But of course!" the Marine states aloud. It doesn't end here; the Marine sits with the boy, cuts his roll and assist him in eating it. They talk for thirty minutes, thirty

minutes of heart slamming magic. It all happens while people are getting coffee, talking trash and just living for the day. Kelly and "Gus" back away touched by the emotions of the moment.

The Annual Daggerhorn Golden Rule Hunt (DGR) brings together two 501c3's to create what has been described as a magical event. It all happens because of volunteers and

the desire of man to do something for others. Gus Burdock, although imaginary is happy and so is “Gus’s” wife Nathalie (Gus is the alter Ego of George Roark of Newnan, Georgia). The Georgia Chapter of Safari Club International (SCI) Safari Wish program joins with the Injured Soldiers Foundation’s Operation Injured Soldiers program to mix medically fragile children and wounded and recovering soldiers on a weekend hunt. The DGR includes safe and systematic hunting, entertainment, “fence post” digging foods,

and camaraderie of families, volunteers coupled with hunting the great American Whitetail Deer. In December 2010-we do it all again! We ask all that read this to consider this statement. What footprint have you made, what chapter have you written?

