

## Reel Thanx: Helping our troops heal one cast at a time

Brian Schlumbohm, Fort Wainwright PAO



Staff Sgt. Brian Beem, 5th Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division and boat captain, Buzz Otis pose during the Aug. 13 and 14 Reel Thanx fishing expedition to Valdez. The Soldiers and the Reel Thanx volunteers caught 180+ fish and brought 436 lbs of salmon fillets back. (Courtesy photo)

Six Soldiers from the Warrior Transition Battalion, B Company traveled to Valdez Aug. 12 as guests of the group Reel Thanx, Inc.

Reel Thanx was founded in Midland, Texas, in 2007 by Mike Mundy and Terry Johnson of the Show of Support Military Hunt, Inc. organization. They wanted to show their support for American Soldiers by taking them fishing. Since then, it has grown into an organization with five directors and many volunteers. The volunteers make it possible to take Soldiers on two- to three-day weekend fishing trips as many as four times a year. The non-profit organization relies entirely on the support of sponsors and donors.

Reel Thanx considers their mission "to honor Soldiers for their service, bravery and love of their country by "getting them back to nature for nurture."

Before beginning the long trip to Valdez, Alan Means, director of Reel Thanx, met with the group. He told them he was humbled and honored to come to Alaska, to get to meet the Soldiers and have a chance to show his appreciation for their service.

He also announced that a local chapter of Reel Thanx was being organized. "Our feeling was that we were not impacting enough heroes," Means said. "Taking this thing nationwide was the next step and we're excited to be here in Fairbanks, Alaska."

Means also spoke about a new outreach program called "Reel Wives" in which his wife, Renee, is involved. He said that this program is meant to support those on the home front and show appreciation for the sacrifices they've made while their spouses served. Reel Wives sends care packages to the spouses and children, filled with personalized gifts, gift cards and various items from local donors.

"We want to impact as many heroes as we can, you guys have to understand how much we appreciate you...catching fish, having fun and doing what this organization is about, which is honoring you guys," said Ronald Zamber, leader of the newly formed Reel Thanx chapter of Fairbanks.

Pvt. Joshua Beebe, WTB, was excited about the opportunity. "I can't wait to go on this trip. I think it's really going to be a lot of fun. I've actually never gone fishing up here."

Spc. AJ Simm, WTB, said fishing in Alaska had always been on his list to do and the trip was "a great opportunity, looking forward to it."

This was their first fishing experience on Alaskan seas for many of the Soldiers.

"This trip is going to be good," Tim Johnson, WTB, said. "I've never fished in Valdez."

After returning from the trip Means said "It was a wonderful weekend fishing at Valdez. The men had a great time. I truly believe there was a lot of healing going on. Healing is our goal at Reel Thanx and at the end of the day our trips aren't about fishing; they are about hugging on these guys and showing our gratitude for their service and the service of their spouses back home. It was an honor and privilege to be with these heroes from Fort Wainwright."

## NCO mentors Soldiers and student athletes

Pfc. Thomas Duval, 1-25th SBCT PAO

His hairless head reflects the small room's fluorescent lights. Sweat flows from his pores and his skin tone transforms from a light peach to fire red. Years of serving his country have etched lines of age across his face. It's a facial feature that only adds to the confidence that his rank radiates to the Soldiers gathered around watching as he submits his next student.

For the student it's just another day of combative training at Fort Wainwright, but for the man teaching the Soldiers it's years of dedication, determination and a road rarely spoken of that has brought him to this point.

Bockert's classroom often includes a mat, both during hand-to-hand combatives training for Soldiers or wrestling training for high school students.

For 10 years Sgt. 1st Class Westley Bockert has dedicated his time to bettering the lives of Soldiers and students in the Fairbanks community from the skills he's learned as a leader on the battlefield as well as the wrestling mat.

A Toledo, Ohio, native, "Wes" was a normal boy living the normal childhood. It wasn't until he went to Sylvania North View High School that he realized he wasn't just a typical student; instead he was a champion in the making.

"Wrestling was interesting because of its intensity and it's a sport with a work ethic like no other," Bockert said.

Inspired by his grandfather's Christian faith and the motivation of his high school wrestling coach, the gentle giant began his dominance on the wrestling mats at an early age. By the time he entered his junior year his competitiveness and desire to win reached a peak as he took home second place at the national level.

But his competitive nature wouldn't let him enjoy just finishing runner-up. Bockert continued to dedicate his time to becoming a champion and was named to the All-American Team five times.

For Bockert the dream of being a champion had become a reality. But the joy of being at the top was short-lived.

"I truly believe that everything you take out of a sport you should put back into it at some point and I just felt like I was at that point," Bockert said. I realized I needed to start making champions instead of being a champion."

And making champions is exactly what Bockert did. Since coming to Fort Wainwright in 2000, the Iraq veteran has dedicated his time and effort not only to his country, but also to the Fort Wainwright and Fairbanks communities.

"It's about taking kids home that aren't your own and making them do their school work when no one else will," Bockert said. "Being able to give kids money on trips for food because the parents didn't have any to give. That's what it's all about... and I think that these kinds of things are what makes a coach a leader, because people follow leaders who care."

His passion for the Soldiers and students from the local Fairbanks high schools has made an immediate impact on those around him.

"He is not going through the motions or mimicking a manual, he is teaching something he loves to do and has put a great amount of time and effort to master over his lifetime," said Staff Sgt. Joseph Rusk, a squad leader assigned to the tactical assault command with the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division. "He focuses his time and effort on a team's success instead of an individual's success."

As the head coach of Lathrop High School's wrestling team and a head coach with Fairbanks' Interior youth wrestling program, Bockert's "team first" mentality has earned him the honor of being named coach of the year three times.

Bockert was recognized by his coaching peers when the Alaska Activities Association named him Assistant Coach of the Year. Bockert was cited for the high standards of excellence he sets for both himself and his athletes during a meeting of the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, according to a January article in the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner.

"Teaching and coaching is just something I enjoy doing," Bockert said. "I feel my experience has given me a great opportunity to teach those around me and provide them with the tools to succeed."

One of the highlights for Bockert came in 2006, when he mentored and coached Alaska's first and only freestyle and Greco wrestling national champion, Dallas Seavey.

When you coach and teach high school students it's just as much of an adrenaline rush watching them compete as when you're competing yourself," Bockert said.

With his competitive apple not falling far from the tree, the father of six doesn't have to look far for a champion. In fact there are six of them under the same roof.

All of Bockert's children have been to the state championships in wrestling, including his four daughters.

"My wife and I get pumped," he said.

Bockert's daughter, Kaylee, 11, has won six state championships, including three girls' state championships, two boys and girls' state championships and one boys' and girls' freestyle state championship. Although they have huge shoes to fill, Bockert's children seem to be right on track to carry on their dad's legacy.

"My wife and I are always proud of our children and we never pressure them to wrestle," Bockert said. "If they say they don't want to wrestle that's it they don't have to. We don't push it."

Bockert admitted there will be a time when he will leave the Army to spend more time with his family, but he said it will be a long time before he can step away from the mat.

"I love the Army and after I retire I want to be where my family is and be able to coach and mentor them as they grow up," he said.

Even with a laundry list of achievements tucked under his blue belt in Jiu-jitsu, Bockert is still quick to give the recognition to someone else.

"My wife is always supportive... when I'm deployed she dedicates her time and effort to keeping the kids in wrestling and still makes every wrestling meet. I go to PT then work and then I coach until 8 p.m. and she never complains," he said. "She often reminds me that we are setting the example for the kids to give back and mentor others in need."

For now Bockert continues to focus his time and effort into making champions, and although he said his days of being a champion on the mat are over, he has still found a way to be a champion in the eyes of his wife, kids, fellow Soldiers and the students in the Fairbanks community.



Sgt. 1st Class Westley Bockert, combative instructor with Tactical Assault Command, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team 25th Infantry Division, demonstrates how to properly perform ground techniques during the basic combative course July 19 to 27. (Photo by Pfc. Thomas Duval 1-25th SBCT PAO)



Pfc. Desminique Vaughn puts Pvt. Jennifer Hoelt into a submission hold during the basic combative course. (Photo by Pfc. Thomas Duval 1-25th SBCT PAO)