



*One of the ways that citizens honor soldiers at Warrior's Weekend is by sponsoring flags at the Field of Honor, where about 2,000 flags fly on the grounds of a Victoria church every spring.*

Frank Tilley, Victoria Advocate

# On Warrior's Weekend, the Citizens Salute Injured Troops

*Longtime Capital Farm Credit Customer Ron Kocian Commands Largest Event of Its Kind*

Everything's bigger in Texas. Just ask Ron Kocian about the hero's welcome that greets service members along the Texas coast every year.

Each May, thousands of people turn out in support of injured soldiers on Warrior's Weekend. The event brings hundreds of service members and their loved ones from all across the country to Port O'Connor, providing them with free transportation, lodging, meals and time on the water with fishing guides and sport fishermen.

The flag-waving begins at the baggage claim in George Bush Houston Intercontinental Airport, where up to 2,000 Boy Scouts, military moms and grateful members of the public turn out to show their appreciation. It continues on U.S. 59, where more than a dozen police officers escort buses filled with soldiers. Patriotic

motorcyclists join the procession as it moves past cheering crowds in the towns that line the highway to Victoria.

And the celebration doesn't stop at the dock in Port O'Connor, where soldiers who are about to get their first taste of saltwater fishing are greeted with applause. We haven't even mentioned the flotilla of fishing boats, the annual sand sculpture, the skydivers or the flyovers yet.

Showing support for America's troops is what Warrior's Weekend is all about, says Kocian, who says he never dreamed the event would get so big when he started it in 2007. An independent financial planner and a former member of the Texas Army National Guard, he's now president of the nonprofit organization that throws this massive party. It's a year-round effort that raises money by hosting



barbecue dinners, game nights, a car show and a fishing tournament called the Heroes Cup. Warrior's Weekend also invites the public to honor a favorite soldier or veteran by sponsoring a flag at the Field of Honor, where about 2,000 flags wave on the grounds of a Victoria church for three weeks in May. The nonprofit raised about \$225,000 for this year's Warrior's Weekend, he says.

That allowed about 400 service members — or heroes, as Kocian calls them — and about 175 family members to attend the event May 18-20. Participants are chosen by coordinators at 11 military installations. Some are active-duty personnel recovering from combat injuries; others are still being treated at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. For many, their days consist of medical treatments and physical therapy. Just the anticipation of this event is a way to speed the healing.

"They've heard about this," Kocian says. "They're all fired up. They're going to get more hugs and kisses than they ever dreamed."

Regardless of the nature of their injuries, some of which leave no obvious scars, all of the participants in Warrior's Weekend can find activities matched to their abilities. Service members with burns get to go floundering at night. And even those who can fish under the Gulf sun might pass up a rousing night of Texas Hold'em to quietly fish off the bulkhead with their new buddies.

"If we didn't stop them at midnight, they'd fish all night," Kocian says.

There's plenty more fishing on Warrior's Weekend, when service members and their loved ones ride into the bays around Port O'Connor with about 250 fishing enthusiasts who volunteer their time, boats and equipment. Later, volunteers weigh and clean every fish caught, shipping the fish or sending them home with the soldiers on their return trip.

## Contributing to a Worthy Cause

As Kocian will tell you, you don't have to be in the military to serve your country. He is quick to credit the event's success to the army of volunteers who keep it going, including about 50 people in the Victoria area and almost 200 others who come from around the state.

He also gives thanks to the private donors and corporate sponsors who have made it possible to bring a growing number of service members to Warrior's Weekend.

One of those sponsors is Capital Farm Credit's branch in Edna. Kocian first met Bill Baker, credit office president, when he turned to the cooperative lender for financing for some ranch property about a decade ago.

"Bill's more than a loan officer," Kocian says. "Every time I ask him for something for Warrior's Weekend, he's there for me. I can't imagine a better guy."

Baker says Kocian was president of the Texas Mid-Coast Chapter of the Coastal Conservation Association when they met and was already known for his love of fishing. Now he has another love.

"Ron is very passionate about this project," says Baker. "They wait on those soldiers hand and foot."



David Sikes, Corpus Christi Caller-Times

Army Infantryman Daniel Brown of Mississippi, left, who was injured three times by roadside bombs while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, had his first saltwater fishing experience last year with the help of volunteer Jim Leavelle, a former professional fishing guide.



Frank Tilley, Victoria Advocate

Crowds line the streets and highways from Houston to Victoria to cheer the soldiers arriving for Warrior's Weekend each May.



*Warrior's Weekend isn't the only time troops are treated to fun and fishing. Volunteer Sally Moffet Black, left, took Army Sgt. Stephanie Maniglia of Tampa fishing at Baffin Bay last October during a fundraiser for the event. "I never got a welcome home until this trip," Maniglia later wrote on Facebook.*



Beyond the annual event, Warrior's Weekend also funds other causes that benefit wounded soldiers. The nonprofit made it possible to buy a golf cart and an ATV so that injured men and women could have their own transportation at Brooke Army Medical Center. It helped build a home for a local soldier who lost two limbs. And it bought a Sleep Number bed for an Army medic who had survived 19 explosions but was experiencing so much back pain that he had to sleep on the floor instead of in bed with his wife.

Now the group is looking beyond serving those wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is reaching out to veterans of other eras. Last year it held a dinner for more than 1,200 veterans and spouses in Victoria.

But the greatest benefits of Warrior's Weekend can't be measured in tangible ways.

"I wish we could convey what these soldiers say to us," Kocian says. "They tell us they don't get this anywhere else. They're just overwhelmed by it. Some of them say we've saved their marriages, some that we've saved their lives. It shows them that somebody cares."

That's why Warrior's Weekend has grown into the largest event for wounded warriors in the country, Kocian says.

"I had no idea what effect it would have on these people," he says. "It's been quite a revealing thing. We want to touch as many lives as is possible."

If you'd like to support the event, you can make a donation at the nonprofit's website, [www.warriorweekend.org](http://www.warriorweekend.org). But little actions make a big difference too, Kocian says.

"I would ask everyone, when they see a soldier, to buy their lunch, give them a hug," he says. "It means the world to them. It's an opportunity to say thank you."

*The highway between Houston and Victoria is a sea of red, white and blue as troops arrive. "The town will turn out in force," says Bill Baker, credit office president at Capital Farm Credit's branch in Edna.*

## Capital Farm Credit Gives Troops a Night at the Rodeo

Military heritage runs deep in Texas, and the state's service members and commanders have played a vital role in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Especially important to the effort are Fort Hood near Killeen, one of the largest military bases in the world, and San Antonio's Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC), one of the armed forces' busiest medical facilities and a leader in the treatment of burns and limb injuries.

So when injured service members returned to the facilities from Iraq and Afghanistan, Capital Farm Credit saw a chance to team with the Rodeo Ticket Committee of the San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo to give them a "Rodeo Star Experience." That's what the San Antonio rodeo calls its \$200 night on the town featuring the best food, the best seats and a chance to meet the contestants before each rodeo performance.

For three years, Capital Farm Credit has been a sponsor for the military outreach program, which gave the star treatment to 1,850 injured Fort Hood and BAMC troops and their loved ones this year. Leading Capital's effort is Matt Seymour, the director of marketing in the Bryan corporate office and a Vietnam veteran.

"It's a ministry for me," says Seymour. "I want these kids treated well when they come back home."

A lot of patriotic rodeo fans feel the same way. Together, attendees at three livestock sales gave more than \$10,000 for the program when the hat was passed early this year. Farm Credit Bank of Texas, Capital Farm Credit's source of funds and a co-sponsor of the program, contributed another \$5,000 this year. And thanks to the generosity of a Capital Farm Credit customer who donates dozens of tickets for each day of the rodeo, even more service members can attend the events and entertainment.

"They're going through a very traumatic part of their life," Seymour says of the injured veterans. "We try to get their minds off their problems for a night. I just wish we had more time."