

Wounded veterans treated to day on San Francisco Bay

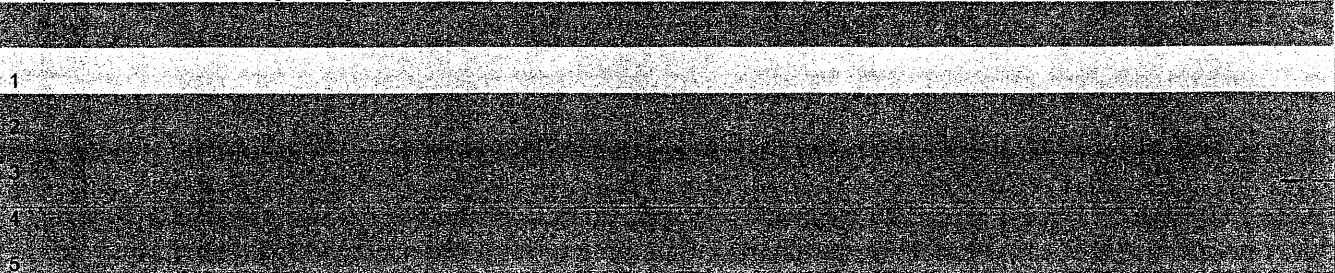
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Iraq war veteran Travis Fugate, right, followed by fellow war veterans Brian Vargas and Nathan...



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Army veteran Travis Fugate couldn't see the rolling waters of San Francisco Bay, but he could hear them lap against the sides of the schooner Eros. He could feel the breeze, and he sensed when the

sun peeked through the overcast sky.

Blinded by a roadside bomb in Iraq in 2005, Fugate was one of four honored guests on an excursion this month who were members of the Sentinels of Freedom scholarship program. All had suffered significant combat injuries, and all had received financial and logistical help from the Sentinels, a San Ramon-based nonprofit, in getting their lives back on track.

They were on the Eros, a 115-foot boat that during World War II rescued Allied troops from the beaches of Dunkirk, courtesy of its current owners Bill and Grace Bodle, of Point Richmond. The schooner departed Richmond's Sugar Dock at 9:30 a.m., passed beneath the Bay Bridge and headed for the mouth of McCovey Cove adjacent to AT&T Park, affording spectacular vistas along the way.

It was beyond anything Fugate, 29, experienced growing up in rural eastern Kentucky, where his aspirations were modest. Encouragement from an English teacher once led him to imagine a career as a reporter for his hometown newspaper, the Troublesome Creek Times. Later, after he enlisted in the Army National Guard, he thought he might return home and be a cop.

"I was going to live a simple life," he said.

Thanks to the Sentinels of Freedom, he is now studying computer science at Cal State Monterey Bay and is interested in a career in data analysis. It's not the simple life he had once envisioned. But he's OK with that.

"To me, it's an adventure to be blind," he said. "It's new training. I want to be good at it."

John Baldari, 39, is about to retire from the Army after 21 years of service. He served in Bosnia during the 1990s war, suffering a traumatic brain injury that went undiagnosed for years. Despite sleep deprivation, headaches, and muscle tension and failure, Baldari earned a bachelor's degree in physics from the University of Nevada-Las Vegas and a master's in philosophy from the University of Nevada-Reno.

He is six weeks from completing an intensive five-month inpatient stay at the VA clinic in Martinez that has helped him manage his symptoms. After that, he's off to the University of Leeds in England where he will pursue a Ph.D. in ethics. He has received a scholarship, but it doesn't cover the logistics of getting Baldari, his wife and their 7-year-old daughter from their home in Martinez to England. That's where the Sentinels of Freedom take over.

"They've really taken care of me," he said. "Anything not covered by the scholarship, they're picking up."

Brian Vargas was a Marine stationed near Hit city in Iraq when on Jan. 17, 2007, his mother's birthday, he was shot by a sniper. The bullet passed through his left hand and into his face, and ignited an ammunition drum that sprayed him with shrapnel. He spent the next 2 1/2 years "in and out of mental health facilities" being treated for a traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Now married and living in Antioch, Vargas, 26, attends Diablo Valley College and hopes to transfer to UC Berkeley or San Francisco State. Ultimately, he would like a job in social work counseling other veterans.

The Sentinels of Freedom, he said, helps him "focus on school and finances and getting treatment. These guys know what it feels like to be at the very bottom and find a way out. God put them in my life for good reason."

The fourth honoree, Ahmad (Ritchie) Mushfiq, is the first foreigner to be accepted into the Sentinels of Freedom program. An interpreter who worked closely with U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Mushfiq lost both his lower legs in a roadside bomb in April 2008. He was still in the hospital when he began receiving threatening messages from the Taliban. Because of threats on his life and his wife's, and because of his service in support of U.S. troops, Mushfiq was allowed to come to the United States on a special visa.

He lives in Fremont with his wife and 1-year-old daughter. The Sentinels of Freedom arranged a scholarship for Mushfiq at Ohlone College, where he will begin classes in September. They also have provided furniture and computers for the family's new apartment. Most important, they've set him on a course to be self-sufficient.

"The Sentinels of Freedom is doing a perfect job," Mushfiq said. "I didn't come here for luxury. I want to be independent."

The four men conversed among themselves on the boat in a relaxed atmosphere, sharing experiences common to one another but often foreign to outsiders. Once the Eros reached McCovey Cove, it was met by three San Francisco Police Department boats with lights flashing. An SFPD officer came aboard to watch Fugate, Baldari and Mushfiq receive the Sentinels Medal of Freedom. Vargas received his medal at an earlier ceremony.

Sentinels of Freedom founder and CEO Mike Conklin, boat owner Grace Bodle's brother, arranged the outing. It was the second time the Bodles have taken veterans out for a day on the bay.

"I enjoy it," said Bill Bodle, 78, a Navy veteran. "I hold these guys in very high esteem."

"We're just trying to show them something they wouldn't normally have an opportunity to see," said Grace Bodle, 72. "Being out on the bay is something special. This boat deserves having all this good karma."