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Veterans building for veterans in the Northwoods



Ryan Goodenow of Baraboo runs an excavator at Camp American Legion. He is part of a group of veterans in apprenticeships with the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 139 who are building an area accessible to those with disabilities. Credit: Mark Hoffman

By *Meg Jones* of the Journal Sentinel

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Lake Tomahawk — Leroy Miller hopped off the bulldozer and grinned.

After eight years as an Army Ranger, including two tours in Afghanistan, Miller wanted to continue to use his military skills

and serve his country. He became an apprentice in the construction trades and is accumulating thousands of hours on work sites to become a journeyman.

On a sunny day in Wisconsin's Northwoods, Miller was spending some of those hours doing something he loved — helping fellow veterans.

"President Kennedy told us 'Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.' What better way to continue that than by coming out here and building something for veterans?" said Miller, 33, of New Berlin.

Miller and five other military veterans who are union apprentices, along with other members of International Union of Operating Engineers Local 139, are building a mile-long, paved trail to accommodate handicapped veterans who visit Camp American Legion near Lake Tomahawk.

The new trail, which is being built on an existing logging road, is scheduled to open by the end of the month and will be named after Wisconsin Medal of Honor recipient Gary Wetzel, a Vietnam veteran who was hired as an apprentice through Local 139 and spent more than four decades as an operating engineer. Wetzel will attend a ceremony opening the trail next month.

Camp American Legion opened in 1925 as a respite for wounded and disabled World War I soldiers. Located between two bucolic lakes, the camp is a haven for veterans who need rest and recovery from visible and invisible wounds.

It's open to any honorably discharged Wisconsin veteran or active-duty service member with a physician-documented injury, disability or illness; service members in the state who have

recently returned from an overseas deployment; and families who have lost a loved one in service in the last year. More than 1,000 veterans attend the free, one-week camp each summer.

As the ranks of veterans swelled following the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the need for the camp grew and the season was lengthened to accommodate more people. But the 74-acre site was starting to feel cramped.

Last year the Natural Resources Board agreed to restore 225 acres that was originally part of Camp American Legion. A handicap accessible trail was planned for part of the land shaded by evergreens and tall white birch trees, and will eventually include deer and turkey blinds for hunters who use wheelchairs.

"It will allow us to expand our healing mission and allow new forms of rehabilitation we've never been able to offer before because of our limited space," said camp director Kevin Moshea. "Things as simple as hiking and biking trails and nature walks."

Construction began in April. On a recent day workers in hard hats and safety vests worked the controls of bulldozers, an excavator, road grader, roller and paver as the sandy road bed was graded and asphalt laid down. Trash was cleaned out of a former gravel pit, tons of top soil removed and stumps cleared.

Terry McGowan, president of Local 139, said the project quickly came together with donated equipment and half a dozen apprentices in the Combat 2 Construction program. Companies that donated equipment, supplies and asphalt included Miller Bradford Co. of Sussex, Mathy Construction Co. of Onalaska, James Peterson & Sons of Medford and Case Co. in Tomahawk.

The workers "come back out here every night after dinner, not

because they have to but because they want to," said McGowan.

The new trail was named in honor of Wetzel because of his post-military career as an operating engineer.

"It's symbolic of a veteran coming home and building a life for himself and for the greater good of the community," said American Legion Deputy Adjutant David Kurtz.

Wetzel was awarded the Medal of Honor after losing part of his left arm during an intense firefight in Vietnam in 1968. Despite the life-threatening wounds, he helped hold off the enemy until his helicopter crew could be rescued.

Wetzel joined an apprenticeship program after returning from Vietnam.

"The union is trying to get returning veterans into various types of apprenticeship programs, and it's good to have them working with other veterans" at the camp, Wetzel said. "I'm happy for them, and I'm happy to know people with disabilities can use the trail."

Conrad Turkowitch, 30, a 2004 Pius High School graduate in Milwaukee, worked in pipeline welding after he served in the Navy as a beach master. After the Navy, he became an apprentice with Ideal Crane Rental in Wauwatosa in 2012, working toward his 6,000-hour apprenticeship requirement.

Turkowitch had just used a bulldozer to level an area when he took a break to talk about what it meant to participate in the project.

"I've been coming up here to the Northwoods for a long time. It's so serene. The guys will be able to come here and reflect," said Turkowitch, who checked his watch and announced he had reached his 6,000 hours.

He grinned as other apprentices and American Legion officials shook his hand and congratulated him.



About Meg Jones

Meg Jones is a general assignment reporter who specializes in military and veterans issues. Meg was part of a team that was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2003, and is the author of "[World War II Milwaukee](#)."

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