



Going the Distance for Wounded Warriors

By John Perkinson, Staff Writer

Imagine finding a way to turn your favorite pastime into a philanthropic campaign to help others. That's just what F/O John Blonsick (Delta) accomplished, kayaking his way down the St. Johns River in Florida to raise money for the Wounded Warrior Project, a charitable program that aids injured service members.

Blonsick, a former chairman of Delta Local Council 71 and the son of a former Eastern pilot, spent last fall and winter paddling down the St. Johns, one of Florida's major interior wetlands. At 310 miles, the St. Johns is the longest river in the state and was named an American Heritage River by the Environmental Protection Agency in 1998.

Patriot Paddle

The Airbus A330 pilot completed the 160-mile journey deemed Patriot Paddle, putting in six to eight hours a day in 15- to 25-mile increments, and raising nearly \$4,500 for Wounded Warriors.

On an early leg, Blonsick kayaked from Sanford to Hontoon Island, a Timucuan Indian settlement dating back 2,000 years. "When you're on the river along

this stretch, there's no sign of civilization, which sounds nice until you're in the middle of it and need

help," he said.

Paddling past alligators and water moccasins, Blonsick was never truly alone, carrying a military-issue knife and, on occasion, a small handgun just to play it safe.

A former Navy C-130 Hercules pilot, Blonsick became involved with Wounded Warrior through an acquaintance. "A friend of mine, a civilian contractor, was in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan. He introduced me to Wounded Warrior,



F/O John Blonsick (Delta) paddles down the St. Johns River to raise money for the Wounded Warrior Project.

and I decided right away that it was something I wanted to support." An avid kayaker, Blonsick was determined to find a way to combine his longtime passion with this new one.

Raising awareness

The Wounded Warrior Project is a non-profit organization whose mission is "to raise awareness and enlist the public's aid for the needs of severely injured service men and women, to help severely injured service members aid and assist each other, and to provide unique, direct programs and services to meet their needs." For more information about the charity, visit woundedwarriorproject.org.

Blonsick continues to solicit corporate sponsors and contacts local news media to raise awareness for the program. He's been featured in the *Orlando Sentinel* and other area newspapers and has received the backing of several local restaurants, which advertise his campaign to customers and offer percentages of the tabs as donations. However, most of his support has come from individuals.

Back on the river, Blonsick spent another day traversing Lake George, the second-largest lake in Florida and the

north central section of the river just east of Ocala. He describes Lake George as "kind of dangerous when it starts getting windy and choppy." Fortunately, nature indulged him on this day, offering fair weather. Blonsick originally planned to follow the western shore to stay by the shallow part of the lake, but decided to go right down the middle to cut his distance and save time.

During fall and winter of 2011, Blonsick paddled past communities like DeBary, Astor, Georgetown, Satsuma, Welaka, Palatka, and Green Cove Springs as he worked his way north to Jacksonville. Occasionally, at the beginning or end of a leg, groups of sponsors, family members, and well-wishers would be there to cheer him on. And just as they were there for him, Blonsick was there for Wounded Warrior, helping the thousands of injured military personnel with the many donations he collected and making a pledge to continue his support. 🌊

More to Come

F/O John Blonsick recently expanded Patriot Paddle to Team Patriot Paddle, announcing a new opportunity to get others out on the water to do good things for those who have done great things for us. The first annual Team Patriot Paddle event will be held May 27, launching from Katie's Landing on the Wekiwa River in Sanford and ending at the Swamp House Grill on the St. Johns River. The eight-mile downstream trek is a great way to raise money and awareness for wounded veterans. For more information, go to www.meetup.com/adventuresinflorida/events/47110632/.

A Good Cause

If you'd like to contribute to Blonsick's efforts, go to <http://support.woundedwarriorproject.org/individual-fundraising/PatriotPaddle/>. You can also visit Team Patriot Paddle on Facebook.

