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## Veterans get a line and a pole

For about 70, annual trout-fishing outing a kind of therapy

by [Jordan Gass-Pooré](#) | July 10, 2015 at 2:24 a.m.

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Guide James Dillard (second from left) fishes Thursday morning near Lobo Landing on the Little Red River with Army veteran Brandon Lee (left), Marine veteran Perry Wilson and Navy veteran Clinton Scaife (right) during a fishing retreat for veterans organized by the United Methodist Men of Heber Springs First United Methodist Church and the nonprofit Arkansas Freedom Fund. More photos are available at [arkansasonline.com/galleries](http://arkansasonline.com/galleries). - Photo by Staton Breidenthal

HEBER SPRINGS -- For a moment, the scales of a small rainbow trout glistened from the hook of Little Rock resident Anthony Warren's line. He held the fishing pole in one hand and pointed at the fish, only the second, he said, that he's caught in his 58 years of life.

### Gallery: Veterans Fishing Retreat





Photo by Staton Breidenthal

Guide Chuck Farneth (left) holds up a rainbow trout for Army veteran Stuart Robinson to kiss Thursday near Lobo Landing on the Little Red River during a fishing retreat for veterans. More photos are available at [arkansasonline.com/galleries](http://arkansasonline.com/galleries).

"It felt good" to catch the fish, Warren told the others on the boat, beaming.

He had gone to the Lobo Landing Resort at Heber Springs for a guided trout-fishing tour for military veterans Thursday, traveling by bus from the North Little Rock-based Eugene J. Towbin Healthcare Center, the site of his two-decade-long journey to drug- and alcohol-addiction recovery.

For about eight hours, the steady flow of the Little Red River calmed Warren's anxiety.

Warren said he was diagnosed in 1992 with post-traumatic stress disorder, after spending three years in the Army stateside.

He was one of almost 70 military veterans on the fishing tour, about half of whom had traveled by bus from the John L. McClellan Memorial Veterans Hospital in Little Rock.

This was the third annual event of its kind hosted by the volunteer-based United Methodist Men of the First United Methodist Church in Heber Springs and the Arkansas Freedom Fund.

"If the government sends you off to war and you get beat up, shot at or harmed, you can't just bring them home and turn them loose," United Methodist Men President John Pickell said about why his organization sponsors the event.

Many members of United Methodist Men are military veterans, Pickell said.

Although he's not a military veteran, Pickell, 72, was born on an Army base. His father was a World War II veteran.

Warren, a Louisiana native, said it was initially difficult for him to accept his PTSD diagnosis because he didn't know what it was.

"The more I began to understand what PTSD is, the more I began to accept it and became willing to accept the truth," he said.

Out on the water, the people in the boat with Warren did not discuss or segregate themselves on the basis of military rank, branch of service or wars fought.

Instead, they discussed retirement plans, women and the recovery process, as Jerry Poplin, a guide for more than 40 years, steered his pontoon boat downstream.

"It's a blessing just to be able to give back for what they gave us," Poplin said about why he has volunteered to be a guide for the event every year.

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Robert Bryant, 67, of Tulsa relaxed in a chair beside Warren on the boat.

The breeze wafted away smoke from Bryant's cigarette as he described his involvement in the Tet Offensive, a series of surprise attacks by rebel forces in South Vietnam in 1968.

One in, one out, Bryant said, of the orders he received in the Vietnam War to load "98.9 pound" artillery shells into a cannon. As he pantomimed that wartime task Thursday, the white identification wristband from the veterans hospital slid up and down his sinewy arm.

The hospital required Bryant and the other veterans to wear the wristbands so it could keep track of them.

He had gone AWOL after he returned stateside from Vietnam to finish out his military service, and he got caught, he said.

Bryant had only recently graduated from high school when Uncle Sam called him up. He even voted for President Lyndon Johnson, he said.

There were moments of beauty and bloodshed during Bryant's year in Vietnam.

In monsoon season, rain fell in sheets so thick that Bryant said he couldn't see his hand in front of him. He met face to face with a cobra that was obliterated in front of his eyes by a fellow soldier's gunfire.

A Vietnamese toddler threw a hand grenade at a group of American soldiers, whose bodies exploded just feet away from him.

"This is why I don't trust kids," said the grandfather of more than 30 and a great-grandfather of nine.

Only recently has Bryant been able to discuss his Vietnam War experiences, he said.

He was honorably discharged in 1970, and his war experiences had forever changed him.

When Bryant has night terrors, a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, his wife of six years goes into another room.

July Fourth and New Year's Eve are difficult for Bryant because of firecrackers.

"Boom, boom. That's what I was used to," he said.

This July Fourth, Bryant and a friend went to a river to watch fireworks.

"I only ran three times," he said with a smile.

Memories of firefights may never disappear, but time, talking about his experiences with fellow veterans and having a friendly competition with Warren to see who can catch the most fish have helped in Bryant's recovery.

"The older I get, the better I'm getting," he said.

*State Desk on 07/10/2015*

*Print Headline: Veterans get a line and a pole*

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