



A Bunker for the Brave

by JIM DUCIBELLA

Joe Hanna of Buffalo, N.Y., has never fired a shot at an enemy of the United States, never pulled a comrade from a burning tank, never hoisted a wounded buddy onto his back and carried him to the safety of a medic's tent. But the 32-year-old sports and entertainment attorney is an American hero.

Now before you go into a rant about how tiresome the use of the word "hero" has become – know that one of its less-recognized definitions is "noble."

And what Hanna and partners Jenn Weintraub and Dr. Jon Beck do for our armed forces is truly noble.

It started in 2008 when Hanna saw a segment of "60 Minutes" about soldiers hitting golf balls in the desert. Then he read a *GOLF Magazine* piece by David Feherty about his experience on a USO trip to Iraq and Kuwait. Hanna began to wonder why he couldn't send golf equipment overseas to help our soldiers steal a minute or two of relaxation.

And that's how Bunkers in Baghdad was born. The non-profit organization recently passed a phenomenal milestone when the number of golf balls they've mailed out reached 3.1 million and the number of clubs dispatched hit 62,500.

"I originally thought that I was going to send 'some' of my golf equipment for our soldiers to use overseas," Hanna said recently. "Fortunately, that 'some' has turned into more than three million golf balls and 60,000 clubs."

Hanna, Weintraub and Dr. Beck have hardly done this alone, which makes the story even nobler. In four years, the "Bunker Buddies" program they instituted has enrolled students from 135 schools and 34 states to assist them.

Here's how it works: Hanna et al receive a request for golf equipment from a soldier. He may be asking for his unit; he may be asking for his unit. If, say, he's asking on behalf of 10 soldiers, the order he'll receive will include 1,000 balls and a couple sets of clubs, nets, maybe even some shirts and caps. No one receives a salary. Every cent that is donated goes into the operation.

Kids from the Buffalo area come to the "Bunkers" office to help put the packages together. Students from other states organize drives to collect equipment to send to Buffalo, supplemented by all walks, from golfers cleaning out their garages, to PGA professionals to country clubs and golf associations to the organization's biggest partner, Callaway Golf. Meanwhile, the kids also write letters and draw pictures that are included.

"We hear more feedback from the soldiers about the letters and pictures than we do about the golf equipment at times," Hanna says. "The letters remind the soldiers of their kids and families back home – so it is very special for them."

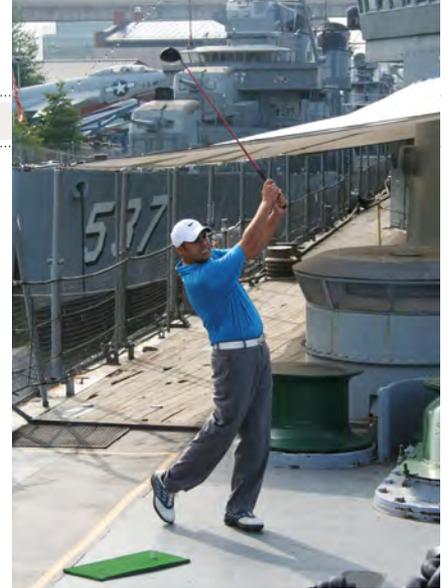
The mail carrier often brings letters that are heartwarming and heartbreaking. An 8-year-old girl in Iowa wrote that she was running a lemonade stand so she could raise money to send her dad in Iraq a dozen golf balls. A sergeant major overseas wrote that he'd recently lost several members of his unit – and that a gift from Bunkers in Baghdad had brought his men much closer together following the deaths.

"It just makes you think how much of a difference we are making in the lives of our brave men and women through the game of golf," Hanna says.

Virginians have played a critical role in the development of "Bunkers."

One of the first shipments of balls to go overseas – numbering 1,000 – was donated by the United States Marines Medal of Honor Golf Course in Quantico. Children from schools in Stafford, Ashburn and Fredericksburg are Bunker Buddies.

Conversely, Hanna has shipped equipment to Wounded Warriors at Quantico (and plans to send more in the near future), Fisher Houses in Portsmouth and Richmond, and Veterans Administration hospitals in Salem and Richmond.



Bunkers in Baghdad has collected and shipped more than 3 million golf balls to U.S. soldiers and wounded warriors around the world.

"Bunkers" also supports a Paralyzed Veterans of America event in Virginia.

There are weeks, Hanna admits, that "Bunkers" could be a full-time job, especially now that the weather has turned and donations are flowing in daily from around the country. Between picking up the equipment, working with schools to package it, filling out and signing customs forms, setting up events and speaking with contacts at the 20 or so professional sports teams that work with Bunkers, there's plenty to keep them busy. Add in returning calls and e-mails, and most importantly, speaking with and/or e-mailing soldiers and wounded warriors, Hanna, Weintraub and Dr. Beck can each spend 40 or more hours a week on the charity.

"The question I am most often asked is (whether) I thought the charity was going to be so successful and grow so large so fast?" Hanna says. "The short answer: Yes."

"Any time you bring together our military, schools and the great game of golf, you have a winning combination. People are so generous and always willing to help, especially when it comes to the military. We are very fortunate to partner with and work with many great people throughout the United States. This is a great country, and we are proud to do whatever we can do to help our soldiers and wounded warriors around the globe." ♣

Columnist Jim Ducibella retired in 2008 after 27 years at The Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk. A 2010 inductee into the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame, his second book, King of Clubs: The Great Golf Marathon of 1938, is now available in bookstores or by ordering online at www.potomacbooksinc.com.