

Army Chief of Staff Praises Soldier, Patriot Foundation As of Wednesday, September 21, 2011



Every year it's the same story.

The Patriot Foundation - headed by Chuck Deloet, a local retired Navy captain - raises more money and helps more military families devastated by wartime loss.

Sometimes it's a soldier so badly wounded that continued service has to end and transitions to civilian life begin. Sometimes it's the children of an American whose life was lost in some faraway battle.

This year, the top soldier came to Pinehurst to pay tribute to the foundation, accept an honor and praise the nation's warriors.

Gen. Ray Odierno, U.S. Army chief of staff, spoke Friday night at the foundation's ninth annual Soldiers Appreciation Dinner at the National Golf Club. He helped distribute checks totaling \$500,000 to five military charities.

Odierno also had particularly high praise for an Aberdeen soldier, Lawrence K. Wilson, who served as his Command Sergeant Major in Iraq.

"He's a good person, good soldier, good man in combat," Odierno said. "He has the respect of all the soldiers that work for him - someone we can rely on completely. He's dedicated himself to the Army and to his country and done a tremendous job."

Wilson handed over the staff at the change of command ceremony when Odierno left Iraq and combat operations were turned over to Iraqi forces. Today, Odierno is optimistic about the course of events since leaving Iraq, and even hopeful about progress in Afghanistan.

"We have made incredible progress," Odierno said. "We trained Iraqi forces to take over security. It is now time for them to take on that responsibility. I am very confident in what they have been able to do over there."

The nation still has a way to go in Afghanistan, Odierno said.

"We have definitely improved the training of the Afghan police, Afghan Army," Odierno said. "They've made significant progress. We still have some work to do. Against the Taliban, we've made quite a bit of progress in the last couple of years. I expect us to

continue to make progress. The tribalism, the isolation of it. It's very hard for us to understand. It's not a country as we would know it. It's a country with lots of tribes, lots of warlords. It's a very difficult terrain, very difficult situation.

"Although there is still lots of hard work to do in Afghanistan, I think we're heading in the right direction. We are making the progress so the Afghans can take care of it themselves. The only thing I would say is, I am very proud to be a soldier.

"I am proud to be part of this Army and to watch these men and women - what they sacrifice. As was pointed out in Time magazine, they are in fact the next 'greatest generation.' I am proud to lead them and to be with them every day."

Total Keeps Climbing

The Patriot Foundation started in 2003 with a golf tournament that became an annual event. The first one raised \$10,000, but the total has climbed every year since.

Deleot and a few friends came up with the idea of helping military children, spouses - and now wounded warriors - over coffee one day.

"Spike Smith and his wife invited us over to his house in 2003, and we sat around the kitchen table and talked about doing something for soldiers' kids," Deleot said. "Spike is an elite golfer, one of the top in this area for some time. We put something together - just a golf tournament, since he knows everybody in the golf business - so we did that.

"It took us about two months to do, and we raised \$10,000 for scholarships for special operators' kids. Spike is still in it. He ran it for four years. I've run it for five. I was his deputy, and now he's my treasurer."

That local golf game has reached a whole new level. So far, the foundation has raised and distributed more than \$1 million. Charities include the Airborne Scholarship Association benefiting children of the 18th Airborne Corps, the All American Strategic Response Force Charity, the Unit Scholarship Fund benefiting children of Army Special Operations and the Warrior Transition Battalion benefiting children of Fort Bragg Wounded Warriors.

"Tonight we are going to issue support checks for \$500,000 to five charities over at Fort Bragg," Deleot said. "We started with just the special operators' kids. We added the 82nd Airborne. We added the 18th Airborne Corps, the Warrior Transition Battalion and Survivor Outreach Service. Through those organizations now we will probably be able to touch just about everybody at Fort Bragg.

"We support the families of killed, wounded and injured primarily. My way of thinking, the soldier that comes back with PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and drives his car into a tree is just as much a hero."

The packed house of supporters included many general officers, both active and retired.

Deleot himself retired after a 34-year career in the Navy. He has poured himself now into this cause. The foundation is spreading its focus beyond Fort Bragg.

"These total \$500,000, but there is more money coming in," Deleot said. "We've been focusing on Fort Bragg, but I think we are going to be able to help the children of SEAL Team Six that was lost in early August. The few who comprise the Patriot Foundation are consumed with helping."

The renowned 82nd Airborne Chorus entertained with songs both rousing and moving, with each soldier - active or retired - standing as they reached refrains for Army, Navy, Air Force or Marine Corps.

"We have these guys every year," Deleot said. "We are getting used to it."

Sen. Kay Hagan had prior commitments that would not allow her to attend in person, but she sent a video greeting. Hagan described North Carolina as "the most military friendly state in the nation."

"Our military service members are the best in the world," Hagan said. "We owe each and every one a debt of gratitude. Congratulations to my friend Gen. Odierno, our newest army chief of staff and Patriot honoree. His distinguished career on the battlefield is matched only by his commitment to supporting our military families and communities."

Real Heroes

The foundation presented a plaque - signed by all present and all corporate sponsors - to Odierno as the foundation honoree for 2011.

"I came here because of what you do," Odierno said. "You represent what I have never seen to this extent before: a dedication to our soldiers and their families and an appreciation for the sacrifice that they have shown over the last 10 years. I talk a lot about our children. There is nothing more precious, and what you do directly impacts their ability to improve themselves, become good citizens and contribute to this country of ours."

"That's what makes this country different than any other country. When you have an opportunity to spend some time in other countries, you realize what we have, how unique this country is."

He asked the 82nd commander, Maj. Gen. Jim Huggins, to come up with him. There was a bit of by-play between the two old friends and comrades-at-arms, with Huggins standing well back from Odierno as if wary of what the chief of staff might have in mind.

"This guy is getting ready to deploy to Afghanistan (he was to leave Sunday), but he is here tonight, because this is about his soldiers and their families," Odierno said. "I also want you to look at his right sleeve."

On Huggins' dress uniform, 10 narrow gold stripes marched up the sleeve from the cuff.

"Each one of those bars means six months in combat," Odierno said. "I want you to see how many he's got on his right sleeve. In fact, I thought I deployed all the time - but every time I'd deploy, he's there (laughter). I'd leave, go back - he's still there! That is a hero, somebody we owe a lot to. Jim, good luck to you as you go.

"That's why I want to serve. We have hundreds of thousands just like them. We just passed 9/11 - it changed our lives. We lost 6,000 lives. We have 40,000 wounded. Behind each patriot father are others who played a role. Our nation needs to keep faith with them.

"Times are always uncertain. We are always surprised by what is ahead of us. We need adaptable, thoughtful, discerning and flexible leaders able to maintain trust with soldiers, between soldiers and their leaders, between the Army and the American public.

"God bless all of you, and God continue to bless the United States of America."

Odierno received a standing ovation.

To make a contribution or to obtain more information, write to Patriot Foundation, P.O. Box 5069, Pinehurst, N.C., 28374, or visit the website at www.patriotscholarships.com. It is a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization.