United Special Sportsmen Alliance: a really special hunt for Joe

by Anne Cassens

Wishbone Outfitters of rural Edgemont began their sixth year of guided hunts with a very special hunt.

Joe White Cotton of Bokoshe, OK, took a lovely two year old, 5x5 bull elk with ONE shot using a .308 rifle.

What’s so special about it? Joe is a disabled veteran who served in Germany after WWII. He loves all things outdoors and has spent many, many hours hunting and fishing in Oklahoma: birds, squirrels, turkeys, rabbits, even whitetail deer. But never elk.

And hunting and fishing opportunities have become limited for Joe: a few months ago he was diagnosed with terminal cancer of the bones and lungs. His left leg was amputated, and chemo began.

But Joe is lucky. He has a nephew named Charles Collins (of Booneville, AR). Joe was the one who took Charlie hunting when he was a kid “and both of us had two legs.” Charlie is also an avid hunter who knows about challenges: he too is an above-knee amputee and a veteran. Joe and Charlie are unbelievably good natured about their handicaps. I asked Joe how tall he was and he said, “6’6”, but Charlie corrected him, saying, “Well that’s only on one side, your other leg’s shorter.”

Charlie got on the internet and started looking for one more special hunt for Uncle Joe. Charlie contacted “a bunch” of organizations. Some he has never had a response from. But a woman named Brigid O’Donoghue, founder of USSA (United Special Sportsmen Alliance), responded immediately and helped him find a handicapped accessible hunt for Uncle Joe.

Wishbone Outfitters was contacted by USSA and asked to donate a hunt. Other organizations helped pay for the transportation—the family still had to pay part of it, too, but as Charles says, “Every little bit helped.”

Last week, Charles and Dale White Cotton (little brother to Joe, he’s 6’8”) loaded up Joe in Charlie’s truck and took him to Custer South Dakota. It wasn’t easy, with gas at $1.79 a gallon here, and oxygen, wheelchair and other equipment to bring along. But Charles and Dale were determined.

As for “One Shot Joe”, he says he’s never had more fun. He enjoyed it so much he wasn’t sure if he wanted to go home! And he says, “If I’m alive, I’m gonna find a way to come back next year.”

USSA is a non-profit organization that coordinates with other caring organizations worldwide to promote opportunities for disabled veterans, the aged, the physically challenged, and the physically underprivileged who wish to hunt or fish. It is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. As such, contributions to USSA are tax deductible under applicable law.
in fulfilling a dream wish: granting terminally ill and disabled sportsmen and women an outdoor adventure of their dreams.

In addition to hunting trips, USSA coordinates fishing trips, camping, and canoeing. Ninety percent of the trips arranged are for children, the others are for terminally ill adults.

As for Ken and Anne Cassens at Wishbone Outfitters, they say, "This is something we definitely want to do again. The smile on Joe's face was worth a million. Joe left with most of my recipes and photos of the hunt in his pocket, and a gleam in his eyes. What better pay is there?"

Wishbone Outfitters has several more handicapped hunts scheduled this fall in addition to regular hunts. Hunting is done on foot on the 2000 or so acre area for regular hunts: but for handicapped hunts, "we do whatever it takes to get the hunter where he can shoot the animal. You'd be surprised how much these folks with disabilities will do in order to continue to hunt." For some hunters, their handicap may be a knee replacement that prevents long hikes or a breathing condition that keeps him away from the higher elevations of Colorado; for others, it can be more severe: there will be two quadriplegic hunters and one paraplegic hunter on the Wishbone this year.

In addition to elk hunts, Wishbone Outfitters guides bison, mule deer, and antelope hunts on public and private lands.

Standing: Dale Whetcotton, Charles Collins; Seated is John WhiteCotton, hunters from Bokoshe, OK.

Other wildlife the White Cotton’s enjoyed viewing during their visit included these bison on the ranch, as well as turkeys and antelope.