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A Rough Ride is Good Medicine for Recovering Veterans

By Anatoly Medetsky

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British serviceman Scott Brown, center, chatting with vets from the United States and Russia at Friday's rally.(Courtesy of General Motors)

On a plot of land just outside Moscow, her Majesty's Lance Corporal Scott Brown put himself in the driver's seat again.

He had shunned driving since a bomb explosion tore off his right leg in Afghanistan in January 2011.

Brown was one of 16 British war veterans — either wounded or injured in Afghanistan and Iraq — who came to Russia for an off-road rally Friday in a unique effort by a London-based charity to help them socialize with their peers.

"It shows that veterans are not forgotten," said Brown, 23, who arrived from a rehabilitation hospital in Headley Court, Surrey.

The host in Moscow for the event was the Battle Brotherhood, a group that brings together Russian war veterans who saw duty in hot spots, which also include Afghanistan. Brown said he was excited to meet Russians who fought in that country.

"They served there before I was even born," he said, as a few Chevrolet Trailblazers glistened in the sun waiting to hit the track.

Six injured U.S. soldiers recovering at a hospital in Germany joined their British counterparts for the trip.

U.S. Air Force Staff Sergeant Shawn Hurst, a sturdy 44-year-old African-American, sauntered about on trampled grass, a large bottle of water in hand and headphones around his neck.

"It's a chance to meet and bond," he said about the trip.

Hurst did one tour to Afghanistan in 2004 and one to Iraq in 2006, which lasted 12 months and 15 months, respectively. He damaged his spinal discs and got a pinched nerve in the neck from lifting heavy equipment on assignments to refuel Black Hawk, Chinook and Apache helicopters. He now receives treatment at a warrior transition unit at a U.S. military hospital in Germany and will get a medical discharge.

Hurst said the event could have an added value if it prompted better understanding among the governments of the three countries and helped tone down anti-Americanism in Russia.

"This is what drew me, too," he said. "If soldiers can get together and do something like this, it can promote change in government and the way politicians think."

The British charity, Motorsport Endeavor, was the driving force behind the event. Its founder Graham Raphael, 67, said he had an affinity for cars, plus his son did a stint in Afghanistan in mid 2000s, returning all in one piece.

"I can see it's doing the chaps good," he said, observing the commotion around the place.

Raphael has organized many rallies for veterans in England. In 2007, he went on a ride from England to Russia with teams from another Russian veterans' group and has done it every year since then. Finally, he wanted to bring together foreign and Russian military counterparts for a ride in Russia.

Major Catriona Caie, assistant military attache at the British Embassy in Moscow, helped make the gathering happen. She said the event was helping soldiers to restore confidence and feel excitement again.

Raphael said he reached out to the U.S. armed forces because he knew the U.S. military attache in London. He then joined forces with the U.S. charity Wounded Warrior Project, represented at the Moscow rally by Jaclyn Hiler, a coordinator.

One of the Russian hosts was retired Colonel Alexander Milyokhin, who did tours to war zones in Afghanistan and Ethiopia in Soviet times and a tour to Chechnya during the first civil war there. He said he enjoyed himself and liked the idea of bonding with foreign veterans.

When the hosts and guests gathered Friday on a land plot that sits 11 kilometers from the Ring Road around Moscow and belongs to U.S. real estate developer Hines, they split into several three-person international crews to race on the track, one car at a time, to see who got through it the fastest. Each crew member was supposed to make one round on the Chevrolets provided by General Motors.

But the experience held some surprises, mostly because the hosts had completely reshaped the track from the day before when the crews practiced. It was no longer a more or less even field with loops but a rugged terrain that sent vehicles airborne at the steeper rises.

After a few rounds, the U.S. and British veterans began exchanging stories about car components, like the steering mechanism, going on the fritz. A reporter's cell phone flew out of his chest pocket and went bouncing on the floor as clouds of dust seeped in during one of the rounds, which had a particularly enthusiastic Russian veteran behind the wheel.

The U.S. and British crew members bolted from the car when it finished the round and never came back for their turn to drive. For some of the wounded or injured, this was not the best way to recuperate, "especially if you have a neck problem," one of them observed.

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