



OWOF entertains, educates troops to give thanks

By Pfc. Regina N. Ortiz | | October 1, 2005

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050929-M-0000A-000

A Marine brings the Chevy SSR back around to the starting point. The Chevy SSR was one of six cars and trucks on the tracks at the Operation Wheels of Freedom event that was at the Combat Center on Sept. 29 to Oct. 1.

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Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif. -- It's a widely known statistic that there are more deaths while service members are back on home ground than in combat zones, and one of the common causes of death is car accidents. So what do we do to prevent these mishaps? Educating service members about safety has been the route most commanders have taken. But how do we relay the same message in a more exciting, attention

commanders have taken. But how do we relay the same message in a more exciting, attention-grabbing way?

Operation Wheels of Freedom has it figured out. OWOF has taken hands-on training to another level with a mixture of fast, loud, flashy cars, giveaways and contests.

OWOF has nine American-made cars for the troops to drive; also, T-shirts are given away after driving, along with Hot Wheels toy car models.

The big prize for troops is given away depending on their talent as a driver. The troops sit through a safety brief and are then given poker chips to identify the car of choice they will be driving. Then, the troop drives with a professional driver in the passenger seat, who guides them on how to drive quickly, yet safely.

If the troop follows the instructions carefully and is able to drive fast and precisely, the troop is given a white chip.

The winners of the white chip are put in a drawing for whatever the prize might be for that drawing, including expensive complete sets of OWOF poker chips, khaki OWOF shirts and a one year subscription to Auto Week magazine.

Additionally, the winners of the white chip are entered into a bigger drawing that will take place after OWOF is finished touring all the bases on their schedule; the winners of that drawing and their families will be given an all-expenses paid trip to a NASCAR racing event.

The troops and their families will be behind the scenes of the event, hosted by Speed TV. It was two friends and their love of cars and country that became the seed of this groundbreaking organization.

Army Capt. Troy Postin and professional driver Kim Crumb were friends for years sharing the love of cars and motor sports.

In 2003, when the war in Iraq began, Postin was deployed and their friendship took on another meaning. Car talk, motor sports and home became a stress-reliever for Postin, as he shared his war experiences with Crumb. Through e-mail they stayed connected, sharing ideas, and one of those sparked the objective of OWOF.

Postin suggested how great it would be for his troops to have the opportunity to see Crumb in his Porsche 928 GT. Crumb thought how great it would be to show his appreciation to America's fighting men and women.

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Crumb and Postin started talking about the idea more often. More ideas came with time and things starting coming together.

There were phone calls made and the blueprint was coming to life. Dave Muyres, the dean of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., jumped on, along with Dutch Mandel, editor of Auto Week magazine. With a lot of experience in producing automotive events, John Graffius signed on to be the executive producer.

The team gathered sponsors who provided everything they needed. Wide ranges of competitors in the car industry put away business matters and now work side-by-side in OWOF in appreciation of military members.

The primary reason for OWOF was to give thanks, but a statistic geared the originators to stress driving safety as well. There is a known fact that connects service members returning from deployment with reckless driving and car accidents. It's very imperative to the founders that with the entertainment comes a necessary safety message.

The original goal of OWOF was for the crew and their cars to entertain and educate deployed service members before they return home and hit the road. They scoped out Kuwait and drew a plan of how they were successfully going to set up the event there. Then, two weeks before the day they were to leave for Kuwait, security issues prevented the trip.

The organizers were disappointed but still sought a way to give thanks to the troops. The setup was ready for fast movement to anyplace, so they decided to take the event to military bases in the United States.

OWOF aspires to reach service members overseas someday. But for now, their next stop is scheduled for Fort Bragg, N.C. No other dates have been set for OWOF, but they are eager to entertain and educate more troops.

For more information and updates on OWOF log on to www.operationwheelsoffreedom.com.

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