



COURTESY OF BOULDER CREST RETREAT FOR MILITARY AND VETERAN WELLNESS

A Healing Place in the Hills

A haven for combat wounded, Boulder Crest Retreat has deep roots in Vietnam

As he grew up in Alexandria, Va., just outside Washington, Ken Falke was developing a pair of strong attributes that would converge decades later to create an innovative healing haven for wounded warriors. The son of a former combat engineer turned D.C. cop worked three paper routes, showing early a knack for business that would reap great rewards. As a voracious reader of his papers, the young Falke kept abreast of the turbulent times of the Vietnam War, and living in a heavily military neighborhood he could see how returning veterans were not being welcomed home with open arms.

“Nobody deserves to be treated that way, let alone those who went to fight for their country,” Falke said. That sense of fairness and collective responsibility never left Falke, who has made it his mission to ensure “we treat this generation of soldiers much better.”

A concrete realization of that

personal commitment can be found today nestled on 37 acres in the Blue Ridge foothills about 50 miles from the Pentagon. On the edge of the tiny Virginia village of Bluemont, Boulder Crest Retreat, the vision of Falke and his wife, Julia, broke ground in May 2012 and by September 2013 was open for business.

Four large and well-appointed cabins and a lodge and wellness center facility sit atop a rise overlooking a pastoral scene, complete with a meadow, a stocked fish pond, an archery range, nature trails that meander up a heavily wooded mountainside and even a labyrinth, a special place built for rest, relaxation and healing for wounded warriors and their loved ones. The nonprofit Boulder Crest Retreat Foundation is committed to providing each year up to 500 free, first-class respite for wounded combat warriors and their families who are dealing with “visible and invisible” wounds of war.

Besides offering individual family stays, Boulder Crest is open to other nonprofits for military wellness retreats and programs. “Every day, the phone rings with some organization that wants to use the facility,” Falke said. “There are so many great therapeutic and cathartic programs for vets, it’s proving hard to turn them down.”

While the quality and caring of the Boulder Crest experience is a reflection of Falke’s long respect and admiration for those who serve, the speed with which the project went from vision to sustainable reality is a manifestation of Falke’s business acumen and entrepreneurial skills.

Just a few years after the end of the Vietnam War and an unsuccessful bid to become a professional hockey player out of high school in 1981, Falke enlisted in the Navy hoping to become SEAL. Even though he never wore glasses, at boot camp Falke learned his eyesight wasn’t up to par for the

SEALs, so he returned to D.C. to serve in the Navy's ceremonial guard, "doing funerals, White House ceremonies, that sort of thing." In 1982, Falke was assigned to the Navy/Marine Corps congressional liaison office on Capitol Hill. While there, a national tragedy changed the trajectory of Falke's life.

On Jan. 13, 1982, Air Florida Flight 90 plunged into the icy Potomac River, killing 78. Falke's military unit was among the first on the scene aboard a tug from the Navy Yard. He spent the next several hours helping pull out victims of the crash and pieces of the airplane.

"Around midnight, this little Navy dive boat comes charging up the river," he recalled. "They had pulled out all Navy explosive ordnance disposal divers, and students and staff out of training, to start diving. I jumped from the tug to the dive boat and just started helping, doing simple stuff. The chief on the boat said to me, 'Man, you're a hard worker. Ever think of doing EOD?' When I told him about my failed attempt to join the SEALs, he explained how the bomb disposal eyesight requirements were more lenient."

Falke went to EOD school in 1985 and for the next 17 years was immersed in that world.

In 1990 Falke was assigned to work with a Navy SEAL team supporting special operations missions and training EOD personnel who supported special operations. Near the end of his Navy career, Falke became a technologist working on covert nuclear detection programs and focusing on counterterrorism.

After retiring in 2002, Falke started A-T Solutions Inc., which trained the military in new technology for the war against terrorism. "Our company, which employed retired military, would learn how to use the robotics, UAVs and other new technology, and go in theater to train the troops how to utilize them in combat," he said. By 2005, at the height of Iraq casualties from improvised explosive devices, Falke's company, with about 100 retired bomb disposal experts began to focus on training soldiers for basic IED awareness.

With the success of his business—



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Roomy cabins can accommodate families (top), and the airy lodge includes a music room. Patio fire pits (opposite) engender healing late-night gatherings.

which Falke said he would happily have shut down with the end of the wars—he and his wife started the Wounded EOD Warrior Foundation, with the primary mission of providing emergency financial relief to the families of wounded EOD personnel. "Quite frankly, like most, I thought the Iraq War would be over in a few months. Well, to date we've probably given out about \$4 million."

In 2008, Falke sold A-T Solutions to CoVant, a private equity firm, and in 2010 he left the company. He was 50 years old and admits he considered taking it easy. "But Julia and I looked at each other and said we have so much more to give." Falke enrolled at Georgetown University to pursue a master's degree in public policy, thinking he could land an appointment at the

Pentagon where he could influence policymaking around veteran affairs.

During 2010-11, with the surge of troops into Afghanistan, more than 70 amputations occurred because of IEDs, and Falke and his wife were spending a lot of time at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. It was then they hit on the idea of inviting wounded soldiers and families to their Bluemont home for barbecues and time to just relax. That experience, and seeing how important it was for the wounded and their families to get out of the hospital, served as the impetus for Boulder Crest.

"We wanted to do something, and as we looked at the problem, we looked for a gap we could fill," Falke said. "We didn't want to duplicate anything. We knew a lot of organizations paid for hotel stays and some hotels will give free



Boulder Crest's four cabins and lodge are situated on 37 acres in rural Loudoun County, Va. One of its most popular recreational amenities is the archery range.

rooms to wounded vets and families. We thought about when the war is over, and these guys are no longer in the limelight. What happens then? Will people still be giving? So I said to Julia, sort of off the cuff, we need to build a facility focused just on this problem.”

Shortly afterward, Falke came home one night from Georgetown to find Julia and two friends sitting at the dining room table with a couple of empty wine bottles. “They were talking about building a couple of cabins, with horses in the fields, almost like a country retreat,” he said. Intrigued by the concept, Falke started thinking about the venture’s sustainability and the expanded vision of a wellness center that could attract therapeutic retreats and host events.

In addition to the 37 acres, Falke and his wife have given \$1 million to build

Boulder Crest and have been hands-on in all facets of its development. Thus far the foundation has raised \$7 million in a \$10 million capital campaign, much of it coming from individuals as well as corporate donors. Falke also praised the hundreds of volunteers who have made valuable contributions of time and labor on work from land clearing to room cleaning.

Unintentionally, the entire honorary board of directors of the Boulder Crest Foundation consists of Vietnam veterans, including General Hugh Shelton, former Navy Secretary John Lehman, General Peter Pace, Admiral William Fallon, General Norton Schwartz and the newest addition, wounded Army veteran and NFL star Rocky Bleier.

The role of Vietnam veterans with

Boulder Crest has been instrumental in its success to date, Falke said. “The outpouring of support from major veterans organizations, most of them led by Vietnam veterans, has been amazing, as has been the willingness of Vietnam vets to volunteer and offer support to the families served by Boulder Crest.”

One such act of generosity, described Falke, happened Christmas Eve, when a local Vietnam veteran came to Boulder Crest unannounced and left an envelope for each of the four families staying at the retreat, containing a letter and poem he had written about his experience during a desperate 12-hour firefight in which he expected to die. The anonymous vet also put \$500 in each envelope.

Pointing to a looming crisis among veterans leaving the service as the war in Afghanistan winds down and the military downsizes, Falke predicts Boulder Crest will be doing more work with veterans dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and believes Vietnam veterans who have dealt with the trauma can be key in helping others heal. And, Falke reiterated, Boulder Crest is not simply for the post 9-11 veterans. “We’ve had Vietnam veterans as guests of the retreat.”

Ultimately, Falke is hopeful that others will replicate the Boulder Crest concept around the country, but he stressed that for such an enterprise to be successful and sustainable, there needs to be a good dose of business sense along with deep compassion, two qualities Ken and Julia Falke have in abundance.