



A VISION, A DREAM, A PROMISE KEPT — Sandia retiree Mike Tachias, who also recently retired from the Army as a lieutenant colonel, and his wife Rowena, look over plans for the Cabezon Wounded Warrior Haven, which they have established at their 65-acre ranch at Cabezon, New Mexico. Rowena first thought of the idea of the Haven because, as she puts it, "We wanted to make it into a place where veterans and their families can go, because that is where we go." The Haven's slogan is, "Once a warrior, always a hero."

Cabezon Wounded Warrior Haven

Story by Rebecca Brock
Photos by Randy Montoya

Ask Sandia retiree Lt. Col. Mike Tachias what he is the most proud of in his 34-year military career, and his answer may surprise you. "My family," Mike says. "My wife, my son, and my two daughters. Looking back now, I think about the struggles they went through, but they always stayed dedicated to me."

Mike and his family spent years apart during his Army career where he served with Civil Military Affairs, Security and Intelligence Command, Special Operations, and US Central Command. His tours included Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Following his compelled medical retirement, the transition home was hard.

Mike's wife, Rowena, says, "It was actually easier when Mike was deployed, to deal. Because when he was home, I fought for his attention to be here. He wanted to be there. He had to live with the guilt of leaving his young soldiers behind."

A highly decorated American hero and veteran of the post-9/11 wars, Mike suffered from combat injuries including traumatic brain injuries and concussions from his encounters with improvised explosive devices in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"When you come back from war, you're different and your family is different. Mike had seen things as a soldier that we could not comprehend, and meanwhile the kids and I had to do different things at home without him here," Rowena says.

Reconnecting at home

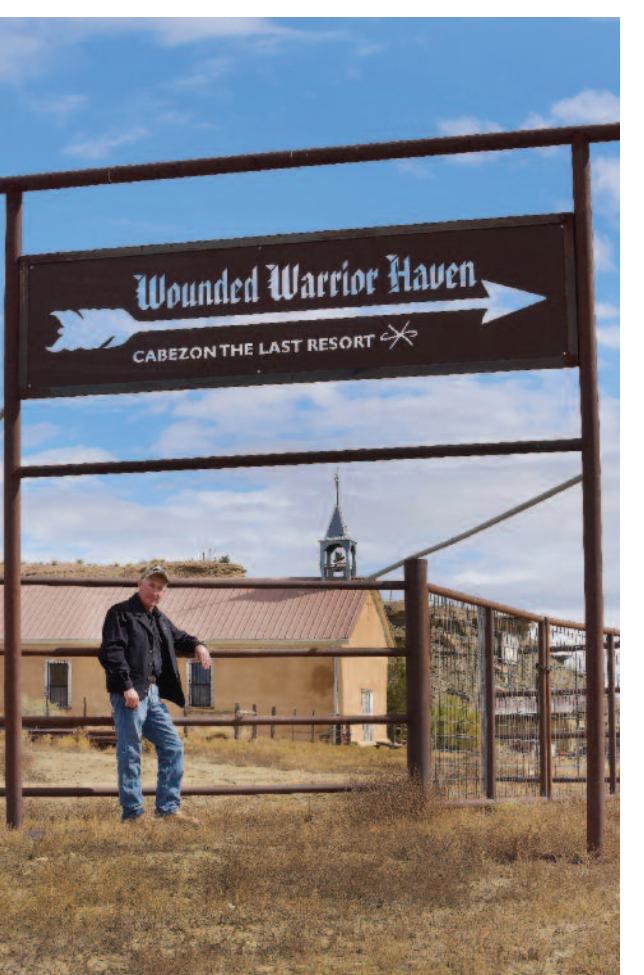
Mike says that fortunately, he and his family were able to spend quality time together on their 65-acre ranch in Cabezon, New Mexico. The serene landscape has been in Mike's family since the 1870s. The land includes the Rio Puerco River running through it, a historic ghost town, and the iconic Cabezon Peak. The remote desert resembles the vistas in Afghanistan, where Mike spent two years fighting the Taliban in the Arghandab River Valley, and Kandahar and where he earned the nickname, "The Taliban Cowboy."

While in medical recovery in Fort Bliss, Texas, Mike invited other combat veterans to come out to his ranch for comradely activities such as camping and mountaineering at Cabezon Peak. "A lot of guys had not seen the Southwest, and had never been to a ranch. So I started inviting other soldiers out here to join me," Mike says.

Opening their doors

Eventually it was Rowena, Mike's wife of 20 years, who suggested that they use the family plot to build a veterans' retreat to help her husband and other soldiers transition from combat into civilian life.

Rowena says, "I always knew my husband would have a hard time hanging up his boots. The military is what he is, it is in his soul. So converting our ranch, a property that has been in his family for a hundred years, was a way to stay connected with



THE WOUNDED WARRIOR HAVEN is intended to help soldiers transition from combat to civilian life.

Sandia retiree opens veteran retreat

the military. We wanted to make it into a place where veterans and their families can go, because that is where we go."

Mike and Rowena made it official in July 2014 by converting their ranch into a nonprofit, faith-based veterans retreat called Cabezon Wounded Warrior Haven. The Haven is a Christian-based organization that Mike says is open to all soldiers. It is Mike's way of continuing to honor his military comrades, past and present. He says, "Being in combat I was a witness to a lot of the tragedy that went on in my unit. When I got home, I had the guilt of being home; I left a lot of these guys back there. I went to a lot of funerals. In Special Operations our unit was small, and I was so blessed to be surrounded by my fellow soldiers. If it was not for them, I would not be standing here today. So creating this retreat is a way of giving back."

With the slogan, "Once a warrior, always a hero," the Cabezon Wounded Warrior Haven is open to veterans and their families who qualify through a screening with the local Army Wounded Warrior Program (AW2), the official US Army program that assists wounded, ill, and injured veterans and their families. The retreat can accommodate a variety of small and large groups, from families looking for bonding activities such as hiking, ATV trail riding, and campfire gatherings, to soldiers looking for a weekend with the guys to go camping and rappelling off Cabezon Peak. Mike describes Cabezon Wounded Warrior Haven as a healing place in a majestic setting. He says, "You're in God's country up there, and looking down from Cabezon Peak, it is breathtaking. Once you come to Cabezon, it separates you and you kind of lose contact with the world you just left. It puts you in a whole different environment."

Depending on the veterans they are hosting, Mike and Rowena invite community professionals such as therapists, doctors, and pastors to join them at the ranch to help enhance life skills and family bonding. Mike says that one of the misconceptions is that, "It's not just the soldiers who need healing. It's important that the families come together. The spouse and the kids need to be included so that they understand where the veterans are coming from."

Sandia SWAT

During his time at Sandia, Mike was part of the former Sandia Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team and was trained in counterterrorism. "Everything that I learned in my SWAT training here at Sandia, I applied overseas in my job in the Army Special Forces," he says.

When Mike was deployed following the 9/11 attacks, his col-

leagues at Sandia were here to back him up. "All of us were close and we always pulled together," he says.

Rowena recalls, "When Mike was sent overseas, his Sandia colleagues would call me and ask if I needed any help. For example, I had 10 or 12 guys come over and do a spring cleanup to help me put things on our farm away for the winter. They did it several times."

Mike says, "Sandia has always been a special place and it has always been pro-military. They made it clear to me that my job would still be here when I came back."

Mike retired from Sandia with 25 years of service.

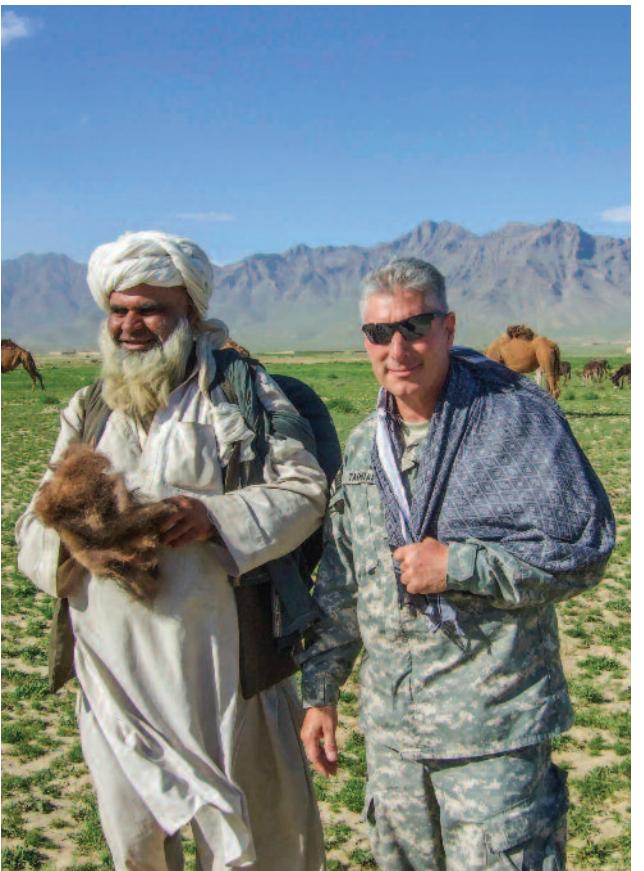
The building blocks

"Building the Haven has been a real community ground-up effort," Mike says. Currently the Haven is in a construction phase, thanks to help from volunteer veterans, friends, and fellow Sandians. Sandia manager Eugene McPeek (4236) has spent time at Mike's ranch as a volunteer, and is working to raise funds to help get the infrastructure built and sustainable.

"Mike and his lovely wife Rowena have a vision for our wounded warriors where veterans can be with other families who have shared the same type of experiences. All service men and women are a family, and Cabezon is a beautiful and peaceful place for families to enjoy nature and camaraderie," Eugene says.

Since transforming the Haven into a retreat, Mike and Rowena have welcomed more than 100 people. On site they are constructing fences, a gazebo, ponds, and gardens, and renovating old buildings into cabins for families who do not have RVs. Looking ahead, Rowena says, "Our goal is, I don't want any military families to say, 'We'd love to come to Cabezon Wounded Warrior Haven, but we can't afford it.' So we need donations."

To find out more about how to support Cabezon Wounded Warrior Haven, visit the website at cabezonhaven.org.



IN THE NORTHERN MOUNTAINS in the Kabul region, Lt. Col. Mike Tachias visits with a nomadic Pashtun herdsman affectionately called Santa Claus (for his flowing white beard) by members of the American military. (Photo courtesy of Mike Tachias)



IN THE SOUTHERN KANDAHAR REGION, Mike Tachias befriends Afghan children from a small village. During his 34-year military career, Mike was deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia, and Kosovo. (Photo courtesy of Mike Tachias)



MIKE AND ROWENA TACHIAS walk the grounds of their Cabezon ranch, which has been in the family for generations.



SINCE TRANSFORMING THE HAVEN into a retreat, Mike and Rowena have welcomed more than 100 people. On site they are constructing fences, a gazebo, ponds, and gardens, and are renovating old buildings into cabins for families who do not have RVs.

VETERANS DAY CELEBRATION



Welcoming Guest of Honor and Speaker

Rear Admiral Priscilla B. Coe

Deputy Chief
US Navy Reserve
Dental Corps

Monday, Nov. 9
Steve Schiff Auditorium

Info Fair: 11 a.m.-noon
Guest Speaker Event:
Noon-1 p.m.

See Techweb
for further information



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