



Veterans Group

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NALC vet's group is giving sick kids military honors

It has become a common sight: A military honor guard stands to assure that a fellow veteran is not alone. Now one group of Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) members is extending that honor to children with illnesses or disabilities to recognize their courage.

The group is led by Alton, IL Branch 309 letter carrier **Wayne Able**, a Navy veteran and member of Alton VFW Post 1308. The program, called "Courage, Inspiration, Determination" (CID), awards citations to children and brings a measure of joy, with a military twist, to their hospital rooms or summer camps.

"We want to recognize these kids while they're going through this," Able said. The children receive a specially designed medal and military-style certificate explaining why they earned the honor. "We either do a military ceremony, or we go from room to room at children's hospitals," he said.



Able was inspired by the story of a 12-year-old Indiana boy who had battled leukemia three times in his short life and had dreams of joining the Marine Corps. A group of Marines in the area was moved by the boy's determination and made him an "honorary Marine," with one Marine standing in full dress

uniform outside his door until the boy succumbed to the disease.

Able founded the program four years ago with fellow postal employee and VFW member William Perkins. Able estimates that they have served more than 300 children to date.

The volunteers go to great lengths to assure that a child enjoys the experience. Last summer, Able heard from the father of 6-year-old Hayden Brown, who has a rare, terminal degenerative disease called metachromatic leukodystrophy that causes difficulty with talking, walking and other motor skills.

"The father said, 'We don't want money; we just want him to enjoy life as much as he can,'" Able said. Working with Air Force personnel at nearby Scott Air Force Base, Able's group gave the boy a day to remember. Wearing his own kid-size Air Force uniform, Brown was promoted to "honorary airman" and, with his family, had an adventure on the base. More than 30 VFW and Air Force volunteers created a scenario involving Hayden's favorite superhero, Batman. Hayden not only helped Batman capture his nemesis, the Joker, he also had the chance to sit in an Air Force jet. He met the dogs in a K-9 unit and an explosives-handling robot, and he watched a fire crew shoot water from their hoses.

"These folks really went way above and beyond to show my son that life's about smiling and enjoying life," Hayden's father, Jonathon, said. "My little man went to sleep smiling."

The group has even gone to camps

Below: Scott Air Force Base personnel put on a fun mission for an ailing boy to help Batman capture the Joker. Bottom left: Wayne Able (l) and William Perkins



sponsored by the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA), NALC's official charity. At an upcoming camp, Able plans to hold a fun "boot camp" workout suitable for kids and then award medals to participants.

"The children are very happy to receive this recognition, but you can really see how much it touches the hearts of the child's parents," Able said.

Able is looking to expand and broaden the program to other VFW posts and beyond. "Every post that I've been to has been really willing to help out," he said. Any NALC members who are veterans and would like to get involved are encouraged to contact Able at wayneable@yahoo.com or Perkins at gunnyperk@gmail.com.