

Wounded Warriors to attend Paralympics

By Stefan Alford

LANDSTUHL REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The Olympic games may be over, but there is still a group of international athletes competing for gold in London, and a select group of Soldiers will be on hand to see the competition.

The Warrior Transition Battalion-Europe sent 18 Soldiers to watch the 2012 Paralympic Games Aug. 27-31, thanks to donations by the American Red Cross, Wounded Warrior Project and the U.S. Olympic Committee Paralympic Military Program.

The Paralympic Military Program donated the tickets for WTB-E Soldiers to view the games, while the Red Cross and Wounded Warrior Project are covering the costs of transportation and lodging. "When the Paralympics [committee] gave us the tickets, we wanted to make sure our Warriors could actually use them," said Brandi Hall, Outreach Coordinator for the American Red Cross in Europe, explaining why her organization stepped up to help fund the bus and hotel for the trip.

Hall said the invitation from the USOC is both a reward and motivational tool that stems from a June visit when a contingent of Paralympic wheelchair basketball players toured Warrior Transition Units in Europe. The Paralympic athletes played friendly matches with Wounded Warriors to encourage them to get out and participate more in sports activities.

The motivational aspect of attending the first week of the London games, which run through Sept. 9, was echoed by Chris Ebner, an occupational therapist with the WTB-E in Heidelberg.

"This Paralympic experience will provide a source of motivation for these Soldiers, as they will have the opportunity to witness firsthand that despite the physical or mental challenges that an individual may have, they can still reach great heights and achieve their dreams," he said. "We hope to inspire and motivate our Soldiers to reach their full potential in every facet of life whether they plan to return to duty or separate and transition to the civilian sector."

WTB-E Soldiers attending the Paralympics are comprised of units in Kaiserslautern, Wiesbaden, Heidelberg, Stuttgart, Baumholder, Schweinfurt, Bamberg, Katterbach and Vilseck. One of them is Sgt. Larry Watson from Kaiserslautern, who was on hand for the Red Cross' "London Luncheon" at Kleber Kaserne Aug. 17, where the tickets were officially presented to WTB-E representatives.

"This is a great opportunity to see this type of competition," said Watson, who is recovering from



Ed Drohan

Warrior Transition Battalion-Europe Soldiers show their team spirit Tuesday in the lobby of their London hotel where they are attending the Paralympic Games. Thanks to donations from the International Olympic Committee and the Red Cross, 17 WTB-E Soldiers are able to attend the games.

nerve damage in his left foot from previous deployments. The WTU wheelchair basketball participant said the chance to go to the Paralympics is just one example of the "wonderful care and treatment" he's received since coming to the unit in November.

"We wanted to include Soldiers who have been involved with our adaptive sports and reconditioning programs throughout the battalion and also those individuals who are fairly new to the organization as well," explained Ebner. Many of the WTB-E's programs mirror those that will be featured in London, like wheelchair basketball, sitting volleyball, swimming, other aquatic sports and archery.

American Paralympians will also compete in 15 additional sports, including cycling, judo, rowing, shooting, wheelchair rugby, wheelchair fencing, track and field and wheelchair tennis. The team of 227 Americans includes 20 U.S. military veterans and active duty service members, some of whom were wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to the USOC Paralympic team website.

Among them is Navy Lt. Bradley Snyder, who lost his vision in September 2011 while serving in Afghanistan. He is slated to compete in swimming on the one year anniversary of his injury.

The USOC Paralympic organizers note on their website that sports participation rates at WTUs and other Wounded Warrior programs have increased from 31 percent to 54 percent over the past two years. In all, more than 4,200 athletes will participate from 165 countries, eclipsing the previous total of 3,951 participants from 146 nations at the Beijing competition in 2008.