

Injured soldiers cruise on presidential yacht, meet former NFL players

By [Janet Nester](#)

Scripps Howard Foundation Wire

WASHINGTON – It wasn't the chance to see NFL players or cruise along the Potomac River, but rather a chance to spend time with his new fiancée that drew one soldier away from his hospital routine Thursday.

Army Spc. Thien Chung, 28, of the 1st 69th Infantry, met his wife-to-be, Anna Nilsson, over the Internet. She flew from Sweden to meet Chung face-to-face and they became engaged about a week ago, just days after his July 23 return from Iraq.

About 30 servicemen and women met five former NFL players and two congressmen during a cruise sponsored by the Sequoia Yacht Group, Walter Reed Hospital and the National Football Players Association.

Aboard the USS Sequoia, the presidential yacht that served Presidents Herbert Hoover to Jimmy Carter, soldiers enjoyed a hot, sunny day on the river.

Excited to be out of Iraq, Chung, of New York, said it felt "different" to be back in the U.S. He said it was hard to deal with the deaths, especially of some of his childhood friends who were killed in combat.

Chung's left foot was crushed as he rushed toward a vehicle that had been bombed. Soldiers jumped out, hitting his foot. Now walking with a temporary cast, he will have surgery soon.

While having his new fiancée there was a plus, Chung said that being on a boat with such an interesting history was enough for him.

Former Denver Broncos quarterback Shawn Moore said he was also intrigued by the boat.

"It was a no-brainer for me to come out and support the troops today," Moore said.

Other former players on the cruise included Kansas City Chiefs running back Barry Word, Washington Redskins safety Brig Owens and offensive lineman Raleigh McKenzie, and New England Patriots cornerback Otis Smith. Former New York Yankee David Winfield, who was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 2001, was also there to support the Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans.

"Stand by your man," McKenzie said. It is important that Americans don't criticize the job they are doing, and for people to give them the "same treatment that they would give me" in a football game, he added.

While he is not really interested in football, Army Spc. Nicholas Beintema, 23, of Lodi, Calif., was happy to be on the cruise and welcomed the encouragement.

"I am glad everyone is here to support us," said Beintema, who serves in the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, based in Fort Carson, Colo.

Beintema's right leg was injured when the vehicle he was in was hit by an explosive in Iraq three months ago. He was one of the few to survive.

Reps. Benjamin Cardin, D-Md., and Paul Kanjorski, D-Penn., addressed the crowd. Cardin

thanked the soldiers for their “incredible service.”

“The USS Sequoia has never had more important guests than today,” Cardin said. “We will do anything to show our appreciation.”

Thursday’s event was the third cruise the Sequoia Yacht Group has sponsored for injured soldiers.