

Operation Open Arms comes first for local founder; Bunch chooses charter over meeting president

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For the last three years, Capt. John Bunch has brought joy to dozens of soldiers who come home on leave from foreign outposts and war zones. The Pine Island charter captain has taken a number of the nation's finest out on the water for free fishing trips and helped America's heroes take their minds off of the mission, even if it is for a short while.

When President Bush touched down in Southwest Florida late last week, Bunch was to receive personal thanks from the commander in chief. Honored, Bunch initially accepted, but when he realized that the president was coming on the same day the captain pledged to take an Army sergeant out on a charter, Bunch stuck to his word.

"I made a promise to this guy six months ago and I made a promise to a father and son later that day and I am not the type of person who breaks a promise," he said. "Would it be worth breaking a promise for 45 seconds of having the most powerful person in the world slap you on the back, joke with you and say, 'Good job with Operation Open Arms'?"

When he landed at Southwest Florida International Airport, Bush instead met with a Dunbar High School graduate and gave him the President's Volunteer Service Award for the student's work in the Freedom Corps. He then spent the lunch hour at a fundraiser in Naples before heading to North Carolina.

Bunch said his decision was "not personal," adding that he looked forward to meeting the president of the United States.

"It's probably the ultimate validation for Operation Open Arms," he said of the president planning to honor the organization. "It's the ultimate validation for a program that has been so successful because we have the type of people in Lee County who don't break their promises."

But despite the honor, the charter captain could not ignore a soldier returning home from Iraq for two weeks. The soldier, whose home base is Fort Benning, Ga., specifically asked for the Operation Open Arms founder's help to unwind and to take him out fishing in the Gulf.

"This could have been the last time he had the opportunity to fish with me," Bunch said. "I was not about to turn him down for any reason."

Always the character, Bunch said that his commitment to his word dates back to a time when he ran away from home at age 12. His parents had promised to take him to Darlington to watch the big auto racing events but the family never made the trip.

When he reached that preteen age, Bunch finally had enough.

"I'm tired of your idle promises and I'm going to see the races," he wrote in a note to his parents.

"From that day I have never broken a promise to anybody. It is just against my personal constitution," Bunch added.

Staffers for U.S. Rep. Connie Mack, R-Fort Myers, worked furiously to get Bunch in the welcoming party at the airport. Mack's chief of staff, Jeff Cohen, helped the charter captain through the vetting process and explained to the White House the reason Bunch deserved to meet the president.

When Bunch opted out, he tried to get the invitation transferred to Pine Island Chamber of Commerce head Lisa Benton and Pine Island Eagle editor Marianne Paton. But the invite could not be transferred as there was just nine days between Bunch's decline and the president's arrival.

"The invitation was for Capt. Bunch and for Capt. Bunch alone," said Stephanie DuBois, press secretary for Mack's office. "It was an exclusive invite."

Even though there was no one for Bush to meet from Operation Open Arms, Bunch does not regret the choice he made.

"I still believe I made the right decision," he said.