Disabled women veterans take to the slopes

By SASHA WOLFE
InterTown News Service

NEWBURY – March 4 was a bitter cold Tuesday on Mt. Sunapee, but that didn’t stop 36 disabled veterans who signed up for the Fifth Annual Women Veterans Ski Appreciation Day.

By 9:30 a.m., the room within the New England Handicap Sports Association (NEISA) Lodge was packed with women signing in and waiting for assistants. Each veteran was assigned two volunteers to help them get ready and get out on the slopes.

The volunteers stay with their assigned skier the entire time. This was the first time skiing for many of these women. Their courage and enthusiasm were inspiring.

“For 17 years there’s been a weeklong winter sports clinic for disabled veterans,” said Angela Neilson, NEISA Student and Family Services.

The January event is open to both men and women, but some women were unable to get clearance from their doctors to attend.

Five years ago, NEISA started the one-day, women-only event with each year attracting more participants. The attending staff and over 60 volunteers were women, a good portion of which are also veterans.

For the first time, four “blue coats” volunteered. Blue coats are from the Sunapee Ski School. Female NEISA instructors did all the baking and decorating to make the day more festive.

“You must be willing to give your country a blank check with your life,” said Kathy Simonini of Seekonk, Mass., getting ready to make her first attempt at skiing.

Simoni served in the Army National Guard in Desert Storm. She added that she’s often approached by young people who just want to carry and shoot a gun. She said that’s not a good reason to join the military. People need to think about what they are signing up for and “must be ready to die for their country.”

After the opening ceremony of welcome speeches, introductions, the Pledge of Allegiance, and a remembrance of those lost in the last year, ladies headed out to the slopes.

Those new at the sport went over to the beginner’s section where the lessons began. Some went directly to the lifts and a couple of women were led to skis with a seat. They were kind of like a dog sled with two skis beneath.

Marine veteran Micaela Britto-Patten was helped down into one seat and strapped in by her two helpers, Sue Mitchell and Amanda Lessard. Britto-Patten had hand warmers and her feet were encased in warm boots. She said that she’d come for her first time in January and was eager to try it again.

Mitchell explained that it is called a bi-ski, and pointed out the two narrow, close-together skis below. She said the seat can be pumped up so the lift chair will fit underneath for the ride up the mountain.

The women spent a couple of hours on the mountain and after a lunch break it was back out on the slopes for a fun-filled afternoon.


NEISA offers Adaptive Ski Lessons for all ages and for all disabilities, seven days a week. For more info visit mountsunapee.com/mtsunapeewinter/learningcenter or www.neisa.org and click on neisa-mtsunapee.