

Soldier for a day

Boy's dream comes true as Make-A-Wish visits post

Bridgett Siter, Bayonet staff

Ethan Hobbs wants to be a Soldier, and the folks at the Make-A-Wish Foundation figure he's earned the right. The 5-year-old has been fighting for two years, battling a killer whose name he can't pronounce, much less spell.



Rhabdomyosarcoma is a rare and elusive form of cancer that attaches to the wall of a muscle. The cancer attacked Ethan's right eye, causing it to droop, a symptom his doctor recognized immediately, prescribing aggressive treatment. Ethan was lucky. The cancer is now in remission, and the kindergartner from Thomson, Ga., is back to doing what he loves best - playing Soldier.

Judy Hobbs attributes her son's recuperation to something she called the power of a wish. Nearly a year ago, Ethan, who carried his favorite G.I. Joe action figure to the hospital for chemotherapy treatments, told Make-A-Wish volunteers he wanted to be a Soldier, and they set out to make it happen.

Monday, Ethan, his parents, Mike and Judy Hobbs, and his siblings, Ben, 11, Jordan, 9, and Elizabeth, 4, visited Fort Benning. He completed basic training and Bradley master gunner training by lunch, Airborne School by mid-afternoon, and was well on his way to being a ranger before suppertime.

Disney World does not compare to this. He's having a ball, his mother said, as Ethan practiced exit jumps on the Airborne School's mock aircraft training site. We all are. That's what makes this so cool. Everybody gets to participate. That's because life-threatening illnesses affect the whole family, said Nancy Nyswaner, a volunteer wish granter who accompanied the Hobbs' family throughout their tour.

When you have a sick child, so much time and energy is focused on him. Other children can feel left out, she said. That's why (Make-A-Wish) likes to give the whole family an opportunity to do something extraordinary together. Everyone feels included, and everyone has a good time.

Decked out in BDUs donated by the Sand Hill Post Exchange, Ethan and his family started the day at a Sand Hill dining facility before joining the troops at the 1st Battalion, 19th Infantry Regiment, where each was assigned a battle buddy. Together they tackled the obstacle course.

Ethan was tickled to see a drill sergeant make a trainee drop for push-ups. His battle buddy, Pvt. Jantzen Herring, pointed out that, as an honorary first lieutenant, Ethan had the authority to make anyone do the same. OK, drop and give me 40, Ethan said to Herring, who promptly complied with Ethan on his back.

Shortly after, the Hobbs family was introduced to Staff Sgt. Steven Lee, the Infantry Training Brigade's Drill Sergeant of the Year. Can I get one of those? Ethan asked, pointing to Lee's Expert Infantryman Badge. Using a pocketknife, Lee removed the EIB and gave it to Ethan. That was awesome, the most touching thing I've ever seen, said Dwaine Scott, a cameraman with NBC, which will air Ethan's story on Thanksgiving Day.

Ethan was promoted to colonel before noon and named the honorary commander of the 29th Infantry Regiment, where he and his family learned the ins and outs of the Stryker and Bradley fighting systems.

After lunch, the Hobbs dropped in on the Airborne School, where Ethan was named the school's honorary sergeant major by Staff Sgt. Keith Thompson, who obviously had no idea he was hoisting a full-bird when he tossed Ethan over his shoulder. And Ethan didn't seem to care. I did the obstacle course this morning. I had a buddy, he told Thompson. Now you'll be my buddy.

The Hobbs spent the afternoon at the Ranger Training Brigade, where Ethan earned his ranger tab. Afterward, they met with Fort Benning's commanding general, Brig. Gen. Benjamin Freakley, who roughhoused with the children, dangling first Ethan, then his sister, upside down, and quizzed them about their day. Fort Benning, Freakley said, was honored to host the Hobbs. This is where we make Soldiers, he said. It's all about supporting (Ethan's) dream.

Fort Benning was just the first stop along Ethan's road to becoming a Soldier. Tuesday, the Hobbs traveled to Fort Stewart, near Hinesville, Ga., and on to Fort Gordon, near Augusta, Ga., where the mayor of nearby Thomson proclaimed it Ethan Hobbs Day.