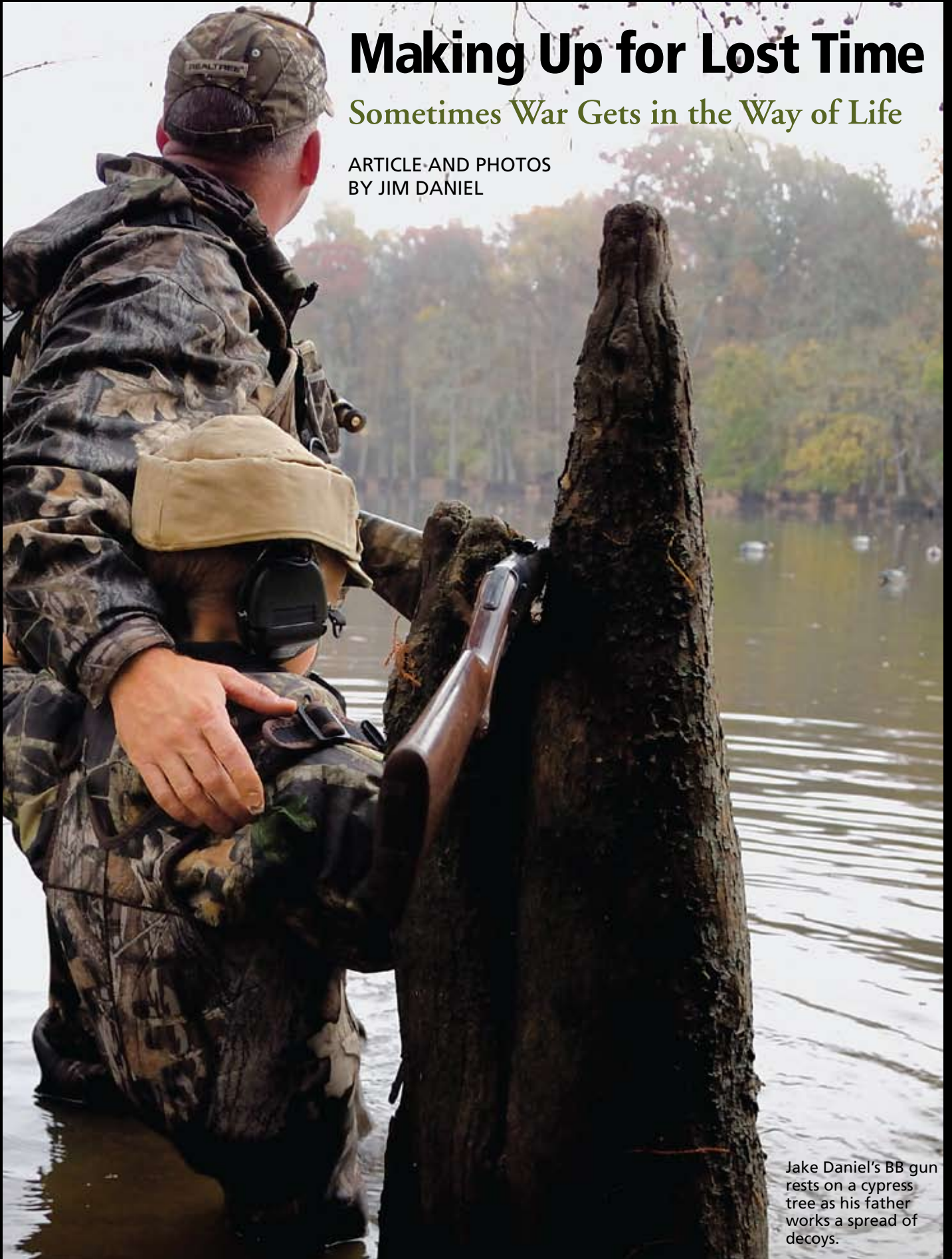


Making Up for Lost Time

Sometimes War Gets in the Way of Life

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS
BY JIM DANIEL



Jake Daniel's BB gun rests on a cypress tree as his father works a spread of decoys.



Shawn Daniel joined the Arkansas Army National Guard during his senior year at Catholic High School for Boys in Little Rock. During stints at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and numerous military training schools, he migrated to Arkansas during waterfowl season. The connection to home was unbreakable.

He was commanding a ranger company in the 75th Ranger Regiment when terrorists attacked Sept. 11, 2001. His company led America's response in Afghanistan and in October, captured a Taliban headquarters in a night-combat parachute assault called Objective Rhino.

Daddy's Moon

After the Afghanistan deployment, wives and children of rangers waited at the post airfield at midnight for their rangers to land. Among them were Shawn's wife, Dena, and his daughter Katie Grace, 2.

As they waited, Katie Grace told her mother, "Look, there is Daddy's moon." The moon she saw was the same one her father saw in Afghanistan. It gave the girl a powerful connection to her father. When Shawn returned to Afghanistan for his second deployment, his little girl's simple but profound insight gave comfort for the emptiness both of them felt – even thousands of miles away.

By Shawn's third deployment, this one to Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division, his family had grown to include Katie Grace, now 5, and Jake, 2. The kids understood only that, "Daddy's gone to get the bad guys."

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Shawn and Jake Daniel decked out for ducks.

Jake Daniel shows off the spoils of his first duck hunting trip.



Before he shipped out, Shawn gave Katie Grace a diamond cross necklace to symbolize their connection of faith. Jake received his first shotgun, to be used when he was old enough.

For 12 long months, Daddy was gone.

Hard to Figure

A 3-year-old boy can't comprehend war or why his father is away. Jake began sleeping with his father's sweaty West Point T-shirt because, "It smells like daddy." It wasn't long after when he told his mother, "I don't know what Daddy looks like."

When Daddy called, Jake cried rather than talk to his father.

Jake watched the Outdoor Channel rather than cartoons. He clapped and cheered when hunters were successful. He mimicked adults around him, clearly having fun. If an adult cocked his Daisy air rifle, Jake would put the stock under his arm and shoot paper targets until the BBs ran out.

Jake got his first camouflage hunting outfit, complete with Muck boots, when he was 2. He and his grandfather spent the next cold December morning on an ATV on Bald Knob National Wildlife Refuge. He was awed by meeting two wet, cold and exhausted duck hunters sporting several ducks. He told his grandfather that the ducks were "greenheads." Perhaps a connection was forming.

Father Returns

When the 101st returned to Fort Campbell, Ky., from its year in Iraq, the welcome ceremony was full of relief and joy. Katie Grace cried and held her father's hand while Jake hid behind his mother when his father knelt down to greet him. The little fellow had lost his connection with the man who was absent for a third of his life. A connection similar to the one Katie Grace had found in Daddy's Moon had to be found for Jake.

That fall, father and son migrated to Arkansas. Pat Demaree, a Korean War veteran and Arkansas outfitter, donated a special blind for Jake's first duck hunt with his father. Licenses and duck stamps were in hand, the ducks had arrived in big numbers and conditions were perfect.

Jake came to the breakfast table the next

morning with his tachometer pegged. At first, he talked 90 mph during the drive to the lodge; then, in true 3-year-old fashion, crashed until the Suburban reached the hunting lodge.

Wearing waders and a headlamp, and armed with the old Daisy, Jake walked into the darkness holding his father's hand.

Deep connections had been established in the months since the homecoming.

Timber Bonding

Wood ducks and gadwalls arrived at legal shooting time. Although the blind was comfortable, Shawn decided to work nearby trees instead of waiting for passing shots from the stand. He eased out of the blind and hugged a cypress tree. Jake was intrigued by the shooting and passing ducks. He traded high-fives with his grandfather when his father connected with a particularly nice shot. His blind manners were impeccable.

As the newness of it all began to wear off, Jake discovered he could hit decoys with his BB gun by shooting through the floor-level dog door. Although shooting the decoys is typically not the goal during a duck hunt, Jake found it great fun and the adults didn't see any harm in the sport.

As Jake's young attention span roamed from shooting his BB gun, he decided to join his father in the water. He waded through the thigh-deep slough to his father and took his hand. Shawn put Jake's air rifle in a cypress knee and continued to call and work passing groups of ducks. Each time ducks came into range, Jake stood back while Shawn stepped forward to shoot. Jake obviously was proud to be alongside his father. He had come a long way from hiding behind his mother.

Shawn had his limit by midmorning. He and Jake gathered the birds and hopped into the boat. Both were grinning from ear to ear as they pulled into the boat landing with the full game strap. Jake's chest swelled with pride and happiness during hero shots with ducks.

Food usually is the main attraction during breakfast at Demaree's lodge, but Jake stole the show. He was comfortable among adults. His "yes sir" answers and good manners were impressive.

Catching Up

Katie Grace says when her father is deployed, she misses the three kisses he gives her at bedtime. Daddy's Moon, a cross necklace and a bedtime ritual – each one is a connection.

Jake's first duck hunt may have made up for missed moments and established a life-long connection to his father. Someone asked him recently what he liked most about playing soccer this season. He said, "My daddy is my soccer coach."

Perhaps establishing one connection makes others possible. Shawn's fourth deployment is complete, and another young hunter is anxious for his next migration to the wetlands of Arkansas. **AW**

Harvest Talled And Translated

Arkansas hunters killed more than twice as many mallards as were killed in any other state during the 2007-08 season, but it wasn't a record. Arkansas's record-breaking harvest belonged to bear hunters in 2007 with 400 taken during the two-month season.

The *Arkansas Game and Fish Commission 2007-08 Annual Harvest Report* gives the lowdown on all Arkansas's top game animals. From turkeys taken on Sylamore Wildlife Management Area to deer harvested on Choctaw Island WMA, results of hunting in Arkansas are explained in detail. AGFC biologists offer findings from their latest studies and translate those numbers into real-world impacts on hunting in The Natural State.

Call (501) 223-6352 or visit www.agfc.com for a free copy of the report and stay in touch with every season.

