**Special visitor unveils Hokie helmet for Military Appreciation Day**

Tech also is selling camouflage hats, with all proceeds going to the Wounded Warrior project

By Jimmy Robertson

Officially, the Virginia Tech football program plans on celebrating Military Appreciation Day on Sept. 22 in conjunction with its game against Bowling Green.

But on March 30, the players and coaches celebrated the efforts of one of the school’s own – a young man who is a member of the military and also a Tech graduate. And in turn, they provided him with the dream of a lifetime.

Minutes before the start of the Hokies’ second spring practice, Tech head coach Frank Beamer introduced Ben Kiernan to the team. Kiernan, a Pittsburgh native, graduated from Tech in 2008 with a degree in urban affairs, but enlisted as a reservist in the Marines during his sophomore year. He spent his summers going to boot camps and engineering school, and after graduating from Tech, he was sent to Afghanistan, serving as a 1371 Combat Engineer. On Sept. 16, 2010, while on a foot patrol, he suffered severe injuries when an improvised explosive device went off, nearly taking off his right leg and part of his right arm.

The 26-year-old relayed this story to the team, saying that he spent two months at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., and a month at a veterans affairs medical center in Richmond. He has spent the past 18 months learning to walk, and just recently, he began to jog.

After telling his story, he received a box from Beamer, who told him to unveil to the team the helmet that the Hokies would be wearing against Bowling Green. The helmet was in camouflage, with a maroon VT logo, bordered white trim, and a maroon facemask.

“This was awesome,” Kiernan said afterward. “I couldn’t have even imagined anything being this cool. It was so great for the Virginia Tech football team to welcome me with such open arms. It’s absolutely awesome.”

The football program teamed with the Wounded Warrior Project, a project that creates awareness and raises money for programs designed to meet the needs of injured service members, to bring Kiernan to campus. In doing so, Kiernan helped the football program announce its plans to sell camouflage Virginia Tech hats as part of its efforts leading up to Military Appreciation Day. All proceeds will go to the Wounded Warrior Project.

The hats, which cost $8 a piece, can be purchased at University Bookstore, Volume Two Bookstore and the Hokie Stadium Shops inside Lane Stadium. In addition, they can be purchased online at [www.bookstore.vt.edu](http://www.bookstore.vt.edu). The hats will remain on sale through Sept. 22, and then Tech plans to present a check to the Wounded Warrior Project, with the goal being to raise $25,000.

“Ben is the perfect example of why this program is so good,” Beamer said. “It’s a good thing, and it’s the right thing.”

Kiernan hopes to get his discharge by the end of the year, and then he plans on working for the federal government or going back to his job as a homebuilder in Richmond.

He also plans to visit Blacksburg more regularly, particularly in the fall.

“It was everything to follow the Hokies over there,” he said. “That gives you a taste of home and a sense of what home is like, and that was awesome.”