

Gather the Tribe

By Sean Goldsmith

It was never about treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) for us...

Even though we knew how difficult returning to civilian life after military service can be for veterans.

We just wanted to give veterans of all classes the opportunity for camaraderie and wellness while being out on the water.

Surfing had played a major role in our lives after getting out of the Navy. It was a way for us to get centered, to leave everything else behind - even if just for an hour or two. And it brought us together with other veterans who shared the same passion.

This is the story of why we created a non-profit to share surfing with veterans... and about a group of vets that got together (along with a group of world-champion, professional surfers) for a surf trip to Mexico.

We saw some amazing transformations on that trip. And I'll tell you more about it in a moment. First, I want to tell you about something that completely blew my mind...

Suicides are on the rise across the military. Defense Secretary Mark Esper says it's a "national epidemic" *without an answer*. According to the Pentagon, the rate of active duty military taking their own lives increased 6% a year for the past five years through 2018.

But suicides aren't the only problem. According to the US Department of Veterans Affairs, PTSD affects about 30% of military veterans (and 8 million adults have PTSD in any given year).

There's a clear problem here. And as simple as it sounds, we believe surfing can help.

I'm writing you today to tell you how you can participate and share our personal story...

Sharing His Place of Peace

The founders of the Stand Up Veterans Foundation, Wes and Bart, have firsthand experiences with the problems and challenges veterans face. Fortunately, Wes had a realization.

Everyone - especially military - needs *something* to balance out the stresses of life.

Wes' place of peace has always been the ocean. And he wanted to share that healing force with other veterans.

His friend, a F-14 Topgun Naval Aviator named James “Bart” Bartelloni, had recently returned from Mexico with a similar idea to help veterans...

Bart attended a stand-up paddle surfing retreat hosted by a group of world-famous surfers. He was new to SUP surfing and determined to improve. But, for Bart, the surfing wasn't the most important part. Thursday night, having dinner with his new friends in a palapa on the beach, Bart knew he wanted to share this experience with his fellow veterans.

Bart and Wes started talking about their respective visions. And after a combined 30+ years in the Navy, they had a new mission.

“Reconnecting With Your Tribe”

Bart, Wes and their friend and fellow Army Ranger veteran Richard “Whit” Whittington founded The SUP Veterans – a 501(c)(3) – on Memorial Day – May 27, 2019.

The idea was to bring veterans together to spend time together and to teach them a new skill – stand-up paddle surfing – that they can use as a “centering mechanism” for the rest of their lives.

Then, around the same time we were forming our non-profit, the Navy committed \$1 million to conduct a three-year study on surf therapy for military personnel with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression and sleep problems.

It's the first study of its kind. And almost 70 active military and reserve members participated.

The results of the study are due in 2021.

But for everyone who attended the inaugural SUP Veterans retreat in October 2019, the forthcoming results of the study seem pretty clear...

“You're reconnecting with your tribe. And it's huge to reconnect with your tribe.” Chris, a 30-year Navy Seal veteran said of his experience with SUP Vets.

From the first night at dinner, in the same palapa where Bart first thought up SUP Veterans, the camaraderie was palpable. And that's one of the biggest things the veterans took away from this event... making a group of new friends and “reconnecting with their tribe” as Chris said.

Our group consisted of seven veterans (two ex-special forces, three Navy seals and two Topgun Naval aviators), four professional surfers and a few friends lucky enough to join.

To be clear, the veterans weren't the only folks with impressive resumes. The instructors also have some medals...

Sean Poynter is a two-time ISA gold medalist and the 2018 APP World Champion – in other words, the best paddle surfer in the world.

His coach, Ian Cairns (aka “Kanga”), is one of the most famous surfers in history. He’s a former world champion and coach to many of the best surfers in the world. Most of the veterans knew of Kanga. And they were thrilled to glean just a bit of this legend’s 30 years of surfing knowledge.

Daniel Hughes and Felipe Hernández were the two other instructors – two of the best professional SUP surfers in the US and Mexico, respectively.



We met for our first group breakfast the next day at 7AM. We hit the water by 8:30.

Instructors took the new SUPers to a natural pool on the edge of the ocean to work on their foundational skills. Everyone else went to the waves.

The first day was humbling. Anyone who’s surfed before knows how challenging the sport is. It can take years before you can consistently ride waves.

Our group fell down, a lot. But they always got back up and pushed through.

Everyone was supportive. This was a tribe. Even minor achievements were met with loud eruptions of “yewwwwww!” from the group.

Kevin, ex-Army special forces, had never surfed before. He took some spills, but said “the camaraderie pumps you up, makes you want to get after it.”

After just four days, Kevin caught his first wave on his own. The biggest lesson he learned from tackling surfing – “You can go back to whatever you’re doing and say ‘Hey, I can do that. I just have to work at it.’”

Kevin’s currently a civilian in charge of training new Green Berets at Fort Bragg. And he said the lessons he learned surfing will help him relate to the new soldiers, “Learning surfing takes you back to when you were early in the military and unsure of yourself. It refocuses your leadership and helps you relate.”

Kevin’s brother, Pete, also attended the retreat. And the two of them plan to buy their own paddle boards to surf together at their parents’ place on the North Carolina coast.

After the first surf session, we got back together for lunch and shared war stories (from the water). Then we watched video highlights of everyone’s session. The instructors gave personalized feedback and challenges to work on for the next session. The vets laughed and ragged on each other for their wipeouts. And a few lip readers in the group translated what the surfers were yelling as they went down.

After review, we surfed for another two hours, cleaned up and met again for dinner.

After dinner, the group meditated together with Bart’s wife Kathy, a certified Deepak Chopra Meditation and Crystal Bowl Sound Healing Instructor. Half an hour together focusing on awareness and listening to the sound bowls was the perfect way to center before tackling a new challenge the next day.



We followed that schedule for another three days. And we quickly saw the positive effects. Everyone left the retreat with a new skill set... and a new passion to carry them through life.

Wes and Bart both got their wishes – surfing as a form of therapy and camaraderie amongst veterans.

Helping the Difficult Transition into Civilian Life

John, former head Topgun instructor and one of the most decorated Navy fighter pilots in Desert Storm, said the retreat's schedule was one of the keys of its success.

People transitioning out of the military need some structure. But the busy schedule of the retreat was juxtaposed with time on the ocean, which encourages you to get into a “flow state.”

Every wave is different. And to ride them successfully, you need to be completely present – everything else but the approaching wave fades away.

No matter the stresses you have at work or home, when you're surfing, it disappears.

And John says bringing that lesson – that you can be successful outside of rigid structure – is key for anyone transitioning out of military service.

“We’ve Got Something Here”

Bart and Wes spoke with every veteran about their experience on the retreat. And the response was unanimous:

“We’ve got something here.”

No, a week of surfing and camaraderie in Mexico may not completely heal veterans with severe disabilities. But that was never the idea behind The SUP Veterans.

There are more than 45,000 nonprofit organizations in the US for our military. And many of those are excellent at treating active military and veterans with severe PTSD, physical disabilities and depression.

The SUP Veterans provides a specific tool – SUP surfing – to veterans in order to help them transition to civilian life by learning a new skill and having a way to “center” themselves during times of stress.

One SUP Veterans Retreat attendee, Pete, is a retired Navy Seal Command Master Chief. He uses his military experience to train professional athletes to break barriers and improve performance.

Pete was also the former head of the Lone Survivor Foundation, another military nonprofit.

He had never SUPed before. But he caught a wave his second day on the water... and dozens more before heading home.

He believed SUP Veterans taught veterans “a tool they can use back home.” The surfing and meditation provide “techniques you can use in a pressure environment, when you’re getting angry, getting anxiety, stressed or feeling pressure, you know how to level out.”

Learning this skill is a form of release for our veterans. Many of them have work and they have home. The skills they learn with SUP Veterans gives them that in between.



We look forward to hearing the results of the Navy's \$1 million study to prove surfing's ability to heal our veterans. And their early results are promising...

- "Surfing is a way back to a healthy life, the kind of life they had before they were traumatized." James LaMar II, a physician at the Naval Medical Center San Diego and a volunteer in the hospital's surfing program told the Washington Post.
- "Lots of times it becomes therapy under the guise of recreation," said Helen Metzger, head of the health and wellness department at Naval Medical Center San Diego. "They talk about surfing and then it gets into things that are deeper than that, common experiences, common traumas."
- "We all know it's good; we can see it," said Capt. Eric Stedje-Larsen, a pain management specialist who worked in the San Diego surfing program. "For some folks, there is nothing like it. But we need science to get the administrators onboard."

Like the people quoted above, we've *already* seen how transformative surfing is. And we want to share the healing power of the ocean with many more veterans for years to come.

But we can only do that with your help.

The SUP Veterans is a certified 501(c)(3). Any donation is tax deductible. **And 100% of your donation will go toward the costs of putting on retreats for our veterans.**

The SUP Veterans have two requests:

- If you are so inclined, please donate to enable veterans to immerse themselves into the art of Stand Up Paddleboard Surfing. See: <https://thesupvets.org/get-involved>
- If you are unable to donate at this time, please pass this article and the SUP Vets mission to anyone who might have interest in Stand-Up Paddleboard Surfing and/or Veterans causes. Please help spread the word.

Keep in mind, surfing to heal trauma is nothing new. Soldiers surfed throughout the Vietnam War to ease the stress. In fact, the California Surf Museum had an exhibit in 2017 titled “China Beach: Surfing During the Vietnam War and the Healing Power of Wave-riding.”

And the veterans interviewed for the exhibit summed it up perfectly...

“Surfing gives me peace... Surfing is freedom... There’s definitely a healing factor in surfing. It’s saved my life.”

We invite you to join our SUP Veterans Tribe to support veterans with us.

The SUP Veterans – Bart, Wes, Whit

