

# THE SUP VETERANS

GIVING BACK & REKINDLING CAMARADERIE THROUGH  
THE HEALING BENEFITS OF OCEAN SURF

By Evelyn O'Doherty



How do you conquer fear? “You acquire the technique and skill set to put yourself in that situation and know how to manage it confidently.” - Ian Cairns

No one understands this mindset and action mentality better than the military. Putting oneself in the path of danger, taking calculated risks and sometimes bigger ones, is part of the acquisition of skills that allow military men & women to do their jobs every day.

The comment above was made at the dinner table by Ian “Kanga” Cairns

while overlooking a mind-blowing sunset at the luxury Grand Palladium Vallarta Resort and Spa in Punta de Mita, Mexico. There we were, twelve of us in total. Together, we were developing a bond of trust, humility and shared experiences with Green Berets, Naval Aviators, Army Rangers and Navy SEALs as part of the first SUP Veteran’s Stand Up Paddle Surf Retreat, piloted by GenRation (GR).

I was privileged to be there as a participant and journalist, eager to talk to these warriors about their military experiences in foreign lands, covert

operations, and the challenges of re-entry into civilian life upon discharge.

## THE SUP VETERANS POWERED BY GENERATION (GR): TOP LEVEL PERFORMANCE & STOKE

The SUP Vets is a newly hatched non-profit launched by James “Bart” Bartelloni, a “Top Gun” Naval Aviator, Wesley “Wes” Spence, a former Navy SEAL with three tours in Afghanistan and Richard “Whit” Wittington, an Army Infantry Officer with two tours in Iraq. Their mission is to bring together groups of

United States active duty or retired military members for a one-of-a-kind experience to learn how SUP Surf.

The coaching staff and background structure of our SUP Veteran’s Retreat was custom tailored by GenRation (GR), a wickedly skilled team of talent that provides high level paddle, surf and wellness experiences for water enthusiasts who want to take their performance to the next level. GenRation’s co-founders Loren Saxby and 2018 SUP Surfing World Champion Sean Poynter were both on site in Mexico to spearhead our

retreat. Also present and part of GenRation’s professional coaching staff were Sunset surf legend Ian Cairns, world class athlete and entertainer Daniel Hughes and Mexico’s own star talent of Felipe Hernandez.

It’s worth noting that GenRation provides multiple dynamic services. GenRation Xperiences (GRX), like this one, offer luxury-style wellness retreats with high quality coaching. The brand also showcases sophistication and practical knowledge through their development of a new

line of high performance SUPs. These boards, designed by legendary shaper Bert Burger (original innovator behind Firewire Surfboards and creator of Sunova Surfboards), alongside GenRation’s co-founder Sean Poynter, are manufactured by Sunova. Made from balsa wood, the boards are lightweight and designed for high performance with step up rails, pulled in tails and a shallow profile for speed. GenRation supplied 12 of these new surf SUPs to the retreat for participants. There was the Wedge, the Kanga and SP25 to choose from,



Camaraderie, an essential component to a veteran's service, is reinvigorated through skill building, laughter and learning on The SUP Veteran's Retreat.

📷 Alam Garcia



depending on one's skill level. Each board came in varying sizes and volume in order to properly match every rider's ability. This was clearly an exclusive opportunity to learn from the best on high level equipment.

This 5-day 'Active Duty and Military members only' retreat consists of 6+ hours daily in the water, multiple private and small group coaching moments from the all-star instructors including daily video review sessions where each participant's stance, power and technique from the morning's waves are analyzed in slow motion over rich coffee and home-made biscuits. Every

aspect of it was highly structured, well organized and detailed. The collaboration between Grand Palladium Vallarta, SUP Vets and GenRation was complete down to every meal, specialty drinks, snacks, daily room and pool-side service as well as available spa services and a jacuzzi tub in every room. In short, a supreme experience, surrounded by elite men of the US military in a luxurious setting made for a memorable encounter.

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Aviator, flying in F-14's, we were catapulted daily off the aircraft carrier. There is a split second after you give the thumbs up, an instant before the catapult shot, when you have to decide whether you will live or die that day. When that "cat" lets you loose, your stomach drops, your head is pinned back by G-Force and your life is on the line. One of the waves I caught that day put me in that moment where I had to choose ... and the drop in my stomach as I bottom turned and fired down the line reminded

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**INTENTION BEHIND THE SUP VETS: CAMARADERIE & STAND UP PADDLING**

The first day of the SUP Veteran's Retreat, head stoke master Bart told me to watch how the different factions of military intermingled and to discover how their military training influenced their learning process in the week ahead. That first night's dinner provided by the Grand Palladium Vallarta consisted of a private



dining experience on a raised platform just above the waterline where chefs grilled steaks, shrimp, and freshly caught fish to perfection, while coaches, coordinators and guests drank cervezas while watching the sun drop down over a vast expanse of ocean.

Dinner was a lively affair. After introductions were made, jokes and stories were told in a large family-style setting that would become a staple part of every meal on the SUP Veteran's Retreat. In the military, service men and women develop tight, long lasting bonds with fellow comrades-at-arms in close quarters and

often under extreme conditions. Upon returning home, a difficult part of the readjustment process is not having these tight friendships to count on in a veteran's daily life.

"I found the family style meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner to be beneficial. I felt like we were family! There was an opportunity to sit next to others at every meal and learn about them. What a super group of people... all different but with one core." - Pete Henderson

The SUP Veteran's retreat offers a one-of-a-kind experience to military personnel





Naval Aviator James aka “Bart” Bartelloni, SUP Veteran’s leading commander and surf coach Daniel Hughes show the healing benefits of stoke!

📷 Alam Garcia

in order to regain that lost camaraderie by bringing together individuals with a shared background and forging a bond between them by learning a new skill together, in this case how to paddle surf. Bartelloni’s vision also includes introducing the healing benefits of the ocean to allow vets to relearn how to relax, enjoy each other’s company and return home with a skill that keeps them motivated to stay connected

to the ocean. Every aspect of this retreat underscores this common thread. “SUP Vets was a great opportunity to reconnect with brothers from a different mother – and to personally get back on the water after years of absence – reminding me once again how truly amazing the ocean

experience remains.” - John Clagett a.k.a. “Rooster”

**DAY 1: THE AGENDA**  
Breakfast is served daily at 7AM in an outdoor dining room overlooking the water. Twelve to eighteen people for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day, depending on what guests, cameramen, or hotel staff decided to join us. Coffee, croissants,



From left: Green Berets and Army Infantry in ‘the pool’ receiving paddle instruction; SJ’s Publisher Evelyn O. promotes the stoke on a screamer in Mexico.

📷 Alam Garcia

omelets, fresh juices, granola and fruit fortified the group for the day’s opening SUP Surf Progression Session with coaches Cairns, Poynter, Hughes and Fernandez. After our meal, the group was split up. Half the vets who had surfed before were taken out on the water and the other half were ‘in the pool’ with Ian Cairns to learn paddle stroke technique, foot stance and turns. Those of us who escaped the legend

of Ian Cairns’ scrutiny that first day felt lucky to get out on the water to catch a few waves. After Coach Cairns’ session in the ‘pool’, everybody joined up at Bahia Royale, a world class point break right outside of the Grand Palladium Vallarta Resort, to catch a few waves. Between Kanga, Sean Poynter, Daniel Hughes and Felipe Hernandez, there were eyes on everybody’s surfing.

Plus, onshore was cameraman, Daniel Spencer of EvoLove Media, recording our session for the afternoon video analysis. I learned so much in that first session my head almost exploded. Poynter immediately changed my take-off position on each wave, showing me how to line up properly to get into the wave earlier and create more space & momentum for my first maneuver. That changed everything. Suddenly, I





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- KEVIN HENDERSON



was paddling across the lineup to take off from behind the peak, position myself in the power pocket of the wave and set up down the line. Speed, power and flow are the key points of interest and our sessions immediately got down to business.

At 11:30AM, we were called in for a break. Onshore the hotel had set up a cart in the shade specifically for our group with refreshments, fruit infused water or gatorade and fresh bananas and apples to boost our electrolytes after having been in the hot morning sun. We were given an hour and a half to rest, eat lunch (all 18 of us) and meet in the video room for our first video analysis session. These morning sessions were long, the coaches consistent, encouraging and full of quick tips and points of reference to make the session successful.

Every day, I would climb out of the water after 3+ hours, exhausted and elated, but not sure how I was going to show up for the afternoon session.

But then, the video analysis brought on the stoke.

At 1PM, we met in a private room in Grand Palladium Vallarta’s vast network of spaces, with a large screen and video monitor, freshly ground coffee and homemade pastries to settle into comfortable chairs and spend a few hours reviewing our morning waves.

Ian Cairns led these coaching sessions, while Poynter, Hughes and Fernandez added their perspectives and personal tips for additional coverage. This was really happening. Surf legend Ian Cairns, World Champ Sean Poynter, top dog

Daniel Hughes and local legend Felipe Hernandez came together to analyze every wave videotaped by Daniel that morning, offering retreat participants blow-by-blow commentary on foot stance, take off, body position, and the execution of maneuvers. Mind-blowing! Each participant was reviewed on two waves chosen by Daniel to be included in the session. Cairns led the discussion as Poynter rewound the video again & again, to make the teaching points known.

As a top tier coaching staff, this representation of some of the greatest talent in SUP and surf is formidable. Their focus is direct, their comments often multi-layered around a main point, and their skill level as coaches exemplary. These video sessions rapidly became a high

point of each day as we learned from each other’s successes and failures, applauded every effort and experienced the thrill of professional coaching in an exclusive setting. Plus, the coffee was damn good.

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Daily, the video sessions would invigorate the group. Morning fatigue forgotten, at 3PM when the review was over, we would grab our boards and head out to Bahia Royale to cement this new learning into muscle memory and mindset. Each review was revelatory. Every wave discussed made

us sit up and pay attention. This experience was too good to miss. Total stoke.

Afternoons at Bahia Royale were full of brotherhood. A shared learning experience in the morning brought this band of Army and Navy veterans together in a way that mere socializing never could. Hoots and catcalls in the lineup were a prerequisite. Long conversations drifting on the boards in between sets cemented friendships. Laughter was abundant and the ocean provided. By the time we dragged ourselves out of the water at 5:30 or 6:00PM, sunburnt, arms heavy, full of good sunshine and surf, the day was already maxed out. There was time to shower before dinner, grab a beer or two poolside and then gather under the thatched cane roof at our table set for eighteen again - give or take

depending on who was staying for dinner - to break bread and share another meal.

**CREATING DEEPER CONNECTIONS: THE SUP VETS BUILD RELATIONSHIPS**

It was at dinner that I began to get to know the men. When asked to join the retreat as a participant and journalist, I had no idea what to expect. What unfolded during our daily conversations, whether on a board or in the dining hall, shifted my perspective regarding the military forever.

Seated next to me were multiple career Navy SEALs, Top Gun Naval Aviators including Bart who flew an F-14 for 11 years and Rooster, whose career as a Hornet pilot made him one of the most decorated aviators in the Gulf War. Kevin, a Green Beret commander, educated me on how

Opposite: The ‘video room’ offered video analysis of the morning surf sessions; Chris at end of the week (no foolin’) ripping down a right hander at Bahia Royale; James Bartelloni representing the red, white and blue while wave riding.

Below: Navy SEAL Chris makes his first approach to SUP surfing to the cheers of the vets looking on.

Alam Garcia





Every one of these men had experienced things outside the realm of my limited understanding. They had witnessed the direct effects of warfare both personally and in individuals close to them. They each had a driving ambition to serve, and many, in their post-combat lives are still serving their country through military training, consultant work or coaching others. They are serious, sometimes intense, but also the most honorable and compassionate individuals I have met in a long time. Compassion and a need to serve is what drives them forward. I felt incredibly fortunate to be at that table.



Mission complete: Friendships forged through fun and shared stoke are the heartbeat of The SUP Veteran’s experience

Alam Garcia

the Green Berets function. A SEAL commander talked about heading a non-profit for veterans suffering from PTSD and the realities behind a combat veteran’s return to daily life. Not your average nightly conversation! That first night I listened to Kanga Cairns swap stories with a SEAL about putting themselves in positions of danger (Kanga in big waves, the SEAL at war) and how that changes a person’s

perspective. I began to understand these were no ordinary men. What Bart had amassed here on the ocean in Punta de Mita was a group of high ranking military veterans, many of whom were still serving their country in one form or another. Every one of these men had experienced things outside the realm of my limited understanding. They had witnessed the direct effects of warfare both personally and in individuals close to them. They each had a driving ambition to serve, and many,

in their post-combat lives are still serving their country through military training, consultant work or coaching others. They are serious, sometimes intense, but also the most honorable and compassionate individuals I have met in a long time. Compassion and a need to serve is what drives them forward. I felt incredibly fortunate to be at that table. The SUP Veterans retreat format put great emphasis on developing common bonds. We ate together, learned skills

together, relaxed together. In addition, we were offered group experiences outside of SUP Surfing in order to solidify our connection. This is where I felt the SUP Vets retreat transcended all expectations and achieved its purpose of forging connection. **MEDITATION: SOUND HEALING AND A DEEPER BOND** Twice that week, we were invited by Bart’s wife Kathy to participate in a group

meditation experience. Kathy is a skilled trainer, meditator and certified Crystal Bowl Sound Healing practitioner. The Grand Palladium Vallarta offered us a quiet space in a private room filled with bean bag chairs, pillows and blankets where Kathy urged each of us to get comfortable and be open to new experiences. In a grounded manner that spoke of her experiences with veterans and their mindset, she offered insight into the practice of meditation and crystal bowl sound healing. Eyes closed or

open, Kathy’s voice was enough to allow one to relax and let go. She held the space beautifully. After bringing us to a place of comfort and quietude, Kathy slowly began to introduce the sounds of the bowls. A deep, vibrant ringing coupled with occasional soft gongs, as she fluidly moved from different bowl shapes and sizes in our candlelit room and brought the men and me together in an unexpected way. To witness these elite military veterans soften around the experience of the bowls





An all-star crew of professional surf coaches, top level administrators and ambassadors of stoke, the SUP Vets elite squadron of (from top) Felipe Hernandez, Loren Saxby, Daniel Hughes and World Champion Sean Poynter make for a formidable force to raise your performance to the next level.

📷 Alam Garcia

and meditation, profoundly moved me. In addition, it opened up our realm of conversation afterwards to talk about things like faith, meditation practices, PTSD and our connection to the ocean. Meals together took on a new depth of discussion. Diving deep into values, beliefs and motivations, whatever walls had been left up began to come down. Things got real, honest and raw. It is easy to understand why men whose daily existence requires them to be in charge 100% of the time,

relish a moment to discuss the motivations that drive them. For many of us, these meditation sessions and their aftermath were a favorite part of the trip.

#### MISSION COMPLETE: OFF THE COAST & CHARGING THE FUN FACTOR

On our 2nd to last day together, many of us were physically maxed out. After surfing for over six hours daily, muscles were on high alert from over exertion. These are not men who give up easily nor go at less than full

power when given a set of instructions. As a result, our SUP surfing progression sessions with the coaches became full-out attacks on waves with maximum focus and a desire to progress beyond what a normal human being might expect.

So, on Thursday afternoon, rather than risk additional injury (there were a couple of men down already from attempting powerful surfing techniques the body wasn't ready for yet) GenRation brought in a couple of pangas - or covered boats - to

take us off the mainland of Mexico to one of the outlying islands. Boards fully loaded and beers in the cooler, we headed out across the open ocean to one of Mexico's natural preserves & hidden gems, the Marietas Islands.

Arriving, we were the only visitors on site. Rocky outcroppings plus an abundance of bird life make up most of the Marietas shoreline. We were not permitted to go on land, but could explore the islands on our stand up paddleboards. Boards were

offloaded and lifejackets donned. It is pretty funny to see a Navy SEAL wearing a bright orange, around the neck lifejacket, but regulations required it! Diving into the Marieta's deep blue waters, surrounded by the hush of emptiness and nature, our group was eager to adventure.

Our tour guide and boat captain cautioned the group to watch the swells banging up against the rocky shore. We were expected to keep our paddle boards some distance away in order to

avoid being caught in a sudden surge. As experienced watermen as these vets are, some semblance of adherence to this rule was followed. Sean Poynter found a tiny wave that wrapped around the rocks, surged through a keyhole and generated enough power to give him a ride. His excitement and laughter elevated the group vibe. We explored further.

Around a final bend, we came upon it. The perfect keyhole. Open ocean on one side with a current that generated a swell to



In that moment, laughter, excitement and anticipation sealed the bond. An element of play completed our circle. Men who spent their entire lives on intense missions, serving their country and homes, men who provide and give of themselves tirelessly became boys for one amazing instant as they huddled together, eyes laughing, anticipating the drenching to come. To witness these elite leaders laugh and play in that moment, with no agenda or mission to attend to, was a sight forever burned in the memory banks. It was the culmination of a great, rich and full gathering. It was the mission complete.

be forced through the blowhole and create, upon occasion, a violent implosion of white water. Enough to drench the group. As the divergent forces of the military - Army and Navy - banded together close to the keyhole, Sean Poynter & Daniel Hughes called the incoming swell. In that moment, laughter, excitement and anticipation sealed the bond. An element of play completed our circle. Men who spent their careers on intense missions, serving their country and homes, men who provide and give of themselves tirelessly became boys for one amazing instant, as they huddled together, eyes laughing, anticipating the drenching to come. To witness these elite leaders laugh and play in that moment, with no agenda or mission to attend to, was a sight forever burned in the memory banks. It was the culmination of a great, rich and full gathering. It was the mission complete.

**WRAP UP & FAREWELLS**

The final day of our SUP Veteran’s Retreat was as relentless as the days before. After an afternoon off and muscles rested, we slid into the now-familiar routine with full vigor. A last chance to work with our world renowned coaches, a final day to relish the connection and camaraderie that had unfolded, a moment to soak it all in before

we returned to our daily lives. One final day of surfing, learning and fun.

In the end, as Bart had predicted, the varying styles of military training dictated how each man progressed. The SEALs were adamant about knowing the rules of SUP surfing and absorbing each instruction fully before demanding their bodies achieve their next steps towards the goal. The Army men were looser but still fully focused, with laughter as one of the tools to help them reach higher and progress. And those Naval Aviators? Mavericks, each one of ‘em. These men tended to launch themselves off watery cliffs and figure it out on the way down, eyes sparkling and their hoots & hollers heard by all in the lineup. As one SEAL said, “Discipline is the denial of urges that are contrary to the mission.” For all, focus was total and a resolve to succeed was absolute. Wes, one of SUP Vet’s board members and a Navy SEAL, blew out his knee on the trip but completed the mission, never missing a wave or an opportunity that presented itself.

In the exit interview, Daniel from EvoLove Media asked what I would take away from this experience. My eyes immediately welled up and my throat constricted. I could barely get the words out about my gratitude for the cast of

characters assembled there. From the legend of Ian Cairns offering insight into my fears and turning it into progression, to World Champion Sean Poynter giving personal tips on my surfing style, to Daniel Hughes keeping the laughter high with his exhibitionist style both in the surf and nightly on the dance floor at the disco, to Felipe Hernandez’s incredible presence in the water, thoughtful commentary during our video sessions and genuine warmth welcoming us all to Mexico, my surfing progressed startlingly.

Also, a deep part of the experience included Kathy Bartelloni teaching us to unwind our souls in order to connect to our inner presence and enjoy the journey as well as each other. Every day I felt and could appreciate the watchful eyes of Daniel Spencer and the EvoLove Media team as they diligently recorded every wave for our benefit and progression. These two powerful additions to our group afforded me a chance to etch every moment into my memory banks for future access when needed.

As for Bart, Wes, Tim, Naz, Chris, Kevin, Pete and Rooster, I have nothing but respect. The intention of The SUP Veterans to develop camaraderie and reestablish relationships forged through military service

**FUTURE SUP VETS RETREATS**

PUNTA DE MITA, MEXICO 2020



**MAY 4<sup>TH</sup> – 9<sup>TH</sup>, 2020**

**OCTOBER 19<sup>TH</sup> – 24<sup>TH</sup>, 2020**

is total. The men and women of our military deserve the full support an experience like this can bring. The event is a hologram. Surfing is the curriculum, but the larger teaching has so much more to do with connection to self and others in order to heal and reset one’s motivation to work on the outside. Giving vets a chance to come together, relax, share stories and learn how to SUP Surf in a luxury setting like the Grand Palladium Vallarta Resort & Spa is an extraordinary experience.

**THE SUP VETS: HOW YOU CAN HELP**

The SUP Veterans organization is committed to the care and wellness of our active duty and military members. Partnering with GenRation’s visionaries, Loren Saxby and Sean Poynter, who provide top level instruction, equipment and service, SUP Vets is focused on bringing more veterans to Punta De Mita. This is where you can help.

The SUP Veteran’s non-profit status means these incredible experiences are brought to our military members free of charge and depend on fundraising in order to pay for the next retreat. They welcome your support through monetary contributions via PayPal at the SUP Veteran’s Project. Please note that 100%

of all donations go towards funding the next retreat. If you are unable to offer support through donation, please share this information with any person who may benefit or be interested in participating in the next SUP Vets retreat.

We should all offer a little to those who’ve given so much. ☺

**LEARN MORE**

**SUP VETERANS**

**Website:** [www.thesupvets.org](http://www.thesupvets.org)

**Instagram:** @thesupvets

**Contact:** [info@thesupvets.org](mailto:info@thesupvets.org)

**Donate via PayPal:**

The SUP Veterans Project

**GENERATION (GR)**

**Website:** <https://generation.com>

**Instagram:** @generationco

**Contact:** [loren@generation.com](mailto:loren@generation.com)

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**EVOLOVE MEDIA** Nayarit, Mexico

**Website:** [www.EvoLoveMedia.com](http://www.EvoLoveMedia.com)

**Contact:** [connect@evolovemediacom](mailto:connect@evolovemediacom)

**EVOLVE HOL**

**Website:** [www.evolvehol.com](http://www.evolvehol.com)

**Instagram:** @evolve\_hol

