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# FRA *today*

The magazine of the Fleet Reserve Association

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## SURF PROGRAMS FOR VETERANS



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Cover: A recently injured veteran surfs at the Department of Veterans Affairs' 15th National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic, which was held in San Diego, California, in August 2022. Photo courtesy of Maggie Kremer. Above: A veteran surfs at the 15th National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic, which provides early intervention to improve veteran rehabilitation. Photo courtesy of Maggie Kremer.

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### LOYALTY, PROTECTION AND SERVICE

The FRA is a congressionally chartered, nonprofit organization advocating on Capitol Hill for current and former enlisted members of the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

## Stumbling Upon the Military Surfing Community

Last summer, I was at a party celebrating a family member's first full year of sobriety. While my husband swapped sea stories with other Navy attendees, I wandered outside and struck up a conversation with another guest. I learned that he was a former SEAL who now taught other veterans to surf, which is how he had met the party's man of the hour. It turned out that my family member had learned to surf and received a surfboard for free through various organizations in San Diego. This surf instructor had been invited to the party because he — and surfing in general — had played a significant role in my family member's sobriety. As I listened to the surf instructor talk, I said to myself, "We have got to write about this in *FRAtoday* next year!"



As I worked on making that feature idea a reality for this issue, I was struck by how many organizations there were working to get veterans on surfboards, not just in San Diego, but in beach communities across the country and around the world. It was incredible to me that so many veterans had found surfing life-changing enough to begin whole organizations dedicated to helping their fellow veterans surf. This was not a fringe movement; it was a massive community that even the DOD and the VA were getting involved in.

It is amazing that since post-traumatic stress disorder was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980, we have learned so much about how to assess and treat it — and yet, we are still learning more. The role that veterans are playing in advocating for new and creative treatment methods for their fellow service members is an inspiring reflection of the bonds formed on the battlefield, in the hangar and out at sea.

I hope this month's issue inspires you to try something new — whether it is surfing or something a little tamer that appeals to you — because overcoming a new challenge creates confidence and excitement no matter how old you are or what shape your mental health is in. **FRA**

In Loyalty, Protection and Service,  
Elise M. Howard, Managing Editor

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# San Diego Surf Pro



A Jimmy Miller Memorial Foundation volunteer instructs veterans during an ocean therapy session. JMMF hosts at least three military ocean therapy sessions per month in San Diego County. Photo courtesy of Andy Dellenbach.

*By Elise M. Howard*

A few years ago, Navy Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Jessica Nhan faced an uncertain future as she began the lengthy medical discharge process. Grappling with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression after a military sexual trauma, Nhan took a friend's suggestion to check out the six-week surf therapy clinic being offered at Naval Medical Center San Diego. Nhan described her first day of surfing as nothing short of "freeing."

"I didn't have time to worry about my medical board or whether I was going to be staying in the Navy or getting out," she recalled. "When I'm in the water, it's about being in the water. It's like living in the moment. ... [Afterward,] I was just all smiles, ear to ear."

Before she knew it, she was surfing two to three times per week, getting increasingly connected to the military surfing community and seeing the impact extend far beyond her time in the water.

# grams for Veterans

## *Finding Healing and Community Out in the Waves*



“I was less anxious. I was sleeping tremendously better,” she said. “I was like a whole other person. ... I wanted to do more core workout. I wanted to eat healthier. I needed to make sure that I was hydrated enough in the water, that type of stuff.”

Surfing gave her a renewed sense of purpose, a reason to get out of bed on the weekends, and a way to give back to her community as she began to volunteer with local military surfing organizations.

“It gave me something else to focus on,” Nhan said. “I was able to cut back on medication. I was able to completely come off of all sleep meds.”

### **Bringing Surfing to Camp Pendleton**

Nhan is far from alone in finding healing out on the waves. Twice a month, Marines from Wounded Warrior Battalion West and volunteers from the Jimmy Miller Memorial Foundation gather on the beach at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, California, for therapeutic surfing sessions.

Although the Department of Defense had not been particularly enthused about the idea at the outset, the impact on the Marines after two pilot sessions had been undeniable.

“Having these Marines change from, you



Left: Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Jessica Nhan enjoys some time with a service dog. Right: Nhan surfs in La Jolla, California. Both photos courtesy of Jessica Nhan.

know, socially isolated, playing video games in their bedrooms by themselves, to being more gregarious and interactive, ... they said, 'We need to do this on a regular basis,'" recalled JMMF CEO Andy Dellenbach. "And so, for 17 years, we've been conducting ocean therapy sessions at Camp Pendleton."

Each session of ocean therapy is an approximately three-hour event for up to 12 military participants. It begins with a therapist-led group discussion on a theme for the day, such as empowerment or resilience. Next, attendees stretch, receive a safety briefing and practice surfing skills on land before hitting the water with two volunteers each. Participants spend an hour catching waves, pushing themselves to overcome physical and mental obstacles — and working up an appetite in the process. Everyone then grabs a foundation-provided lunch and partakes in another discussion of the day's theme that is informed by their surfing experiences.

Dellenbach explained that surfing is particularly

helpful for combat veterans because surfing and combat both follow a pattern of watchful waiting in a dynamic environment interrupted by a flurry of adrenaline-pumping activity. Upon returning home from battlefield environments, some service members seek out that combat-like adrenaline rush through drugs and alcohol; one of the many goals of ocean therapy is to introduce surfing as another option.

"Ideally, they find the same adrenaline rush and passion that they're searching for in their substance and alcohol use and abuse, and replace that with a healthy alternative that's good for them physically, it's good for them mentally, it's good for the soul, and it creates a sense of community," Dellenbach said.

In addition to its work at Camp Pendleton, JMMF conducts monthly sessions in San Diego County for veterans and service members of all branches, plus four sessions a year for homeless veterans.

"The goal of surfing is to build self-confidence and self-efficacy," Dellenbach said. "We want to show them that if they set their mind to achieving a goal,



Navy Seaman Emily Wallace reacts to a moment free from focusing on her severe pain during a surf therapy session led by Naval Medical Center San Diego staff in Del Mar, California, Sept. 14, 2017. Surf therapy is a medication-free way of assisting Wallace in managing her pain. DOD photo by E.J. Hersom.

and they have a supportive community around them, that they can actually achieve those goals.”

### The VA Gets on Board

The Department of Veterans Affairs is also witnessing the healing power of surfing through its National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic. This June marks the 16th year San Diego has hosted the clinic, which aims to introduce recently disabled veterans from around the country to a variety of adaptive summer sports. Surfing has been part of the clinic since its inception, not only for its curb appeal in getting veterans to San Diego, but also for its adaptability.

“Adaptive sports is just such a phenomenal avenue and resource to be able to highlight the things that someone can do, whether it be with modified adaptive sports equipment or modifying the activity,” said Maggie Kremer, a certified therapeutic recreation specialist who is director of the NVSSC. “Surfing is so incredible because there’s not one way to do it. ... It’s one of the most adaptable sports.”

Veterans are referred to the program by recreation therapists or others who believe that learning a summer sport would support a veteran’s treatment goals. With an eye to veterans continuing a sport at home, the VA has partnered for several years with AmpSurf — a California-based nonprofit with adaptive surfing groups on both coasts — to host the surfing portion of the clinic. But even if clinic participants can’t surf in their home states, Kremer said the VA hopes surfing and the other adaptive sports offered will leave veterans “feeling inspired, motivated [and] empowered” to pursue adaptive sports they do have access to.

Though Kremer estimated it costs \$500,000 to \$800,000 to put on the six-day event, offering veterans this once-in-a-lifetime experience is worth every penny. Kremer recalled the impact on one amputee who surfed for the first time during last year’s National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic. Since her injury, this veteran had been filled with worries about reinjuring herself, not being able to keep up



Marine Cpl. Leighton Anderson surfs during the Naval Medical Center San Diego's surf therapy clinic in Del Mar, California, Sept. 14, 2017. The medically appointed session was part of Anderson's recovery from an MV-22 Osprey crash that left him with a traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder and serious physical injuries. DOD photo by E.J. Hersom.

with her young child and missing out on old hobbies.

"She kept going wave after wave and was really bound and determined that she was going to stand up with her prosthetic leg on," Kremer said. "And when she finally did, just that look on her face of just feeling like she was unstoppable, and that smile that she had, and just the emotion in her voice. ... For some of them, [it's] a life-altering moment, to really show them that they can do anything."

### Equipping Veterans to Surf

With several organizations in San Diego teaching veterans to surf, one group of service members noticed something missing: adaptive surfing equipment.

"A couple of us, while we were still on active duty ourselves, would volunteer at the surf clinic [at Naval Medical Center San Diego] teaching folks how to surf," recalled Rob Garnett, who served as a Navy SEAL for 23 years. "A friend of ours came through the program — he was an Air Force vet that was a below-the-knee amputee — and he was just having a really hard time getting back into surfing post-his

injury. ... We got together and made this board for him, and kind of got hooked. Fast-forward to now: We've created more than 600 boards for vets all over the world."

Garnett serves as the managing director of One More Wave, a nonprofit providing free surfboards and gear to service members and veterans. The 27-step adaptive board-making process can require up to 18 hours of labor over the course of two to three months, depending on the level of customization necessary. For someone with serious physical injuries, Garnett said, it can take up to five boards to get it just right.

"When you talk about adaptive equipment, it's all so specialized," Garnett explained. "That could be handles on the back of the surfboard to hold. ... Or strengthening the deck of a surfboard because someone is trying to surf with a prosthetic, and prosthetics can be very hard on surfboards because they don't spread the weight out as much as the foot you're born with. ... [Or altering] the balance of the board, or where the fins are placed."

One More Wave also creates customized wetsuits





One More Wave Managing Director Rob Garnett (R) presents one of the organization's riders with a custom surfboard. One More Wave helps service members and veterans access surfing by providing free equipment. Photo courtesy of Rob Garnett.

for veterans who may struggle to pull a traditional wetsuit over a missing limb or a prosthetic, or who need other accommodations.

However, Garnett said the vast majority of their surfboards go to veterans whose disabilities are related to PTSD, traumatic brain injury, military sexual

trauma or a mental health condition and who are financially unable to purchase their own equipment. Regardless of the reason for the need, Garnett said the primary goal of One More Wave is to reduce veteran suicide through surfing, which can provide community, a renewed sense of purpose and the ability to live in the present moment. To create a community for military surfers, the nonprofit has organized groups around the country that get together to surf and chat.

Nhan said One More Wave made a lasting impact on her because “it was able to get me the equipment needed to be part of the community — and they treated me like I was part of the community, even though I had just started.”

### The Strength of the Surfing Community

These organizations — and several others, including local churches and women-only groups — have created a military surfing community in the San Diego area that is active, supportive and inclusive. Veterans of all eras and all service branches, disabled and nondisabled, surf together and alongside supportive civilians. This community goes far beyond high-fives on the sand for accomplishments out on the waves, offering motivation to get to the beach and support for the difficulties of life. In Nhan's case, surfers she met at One More Wave's San Diego surfing group offered their support through the two major moves she made following her medical retirement and were able to get her connected to surfing groups in each of her

new home states.

“The community is very strong,” Nhan said. “Even though I'm not somewhere now where I can currently surf three times a week like I was, I still have the ability to reach out to those members of that society, of that group, and talk to them.” **FRA**