

‘It’s All About the Camaraderie’

VFW members in South Carolina help vets overcome PTSD in the open waters through a sailing program

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For veterans with PTSD, lingering social issues such as withdrawal and isolation can remain, even after successful medical treatment. Enter Veterans on Deck (VoD), a nonprofit organization in Charleston, South Carolina, that uses therapeutic sailing to help veterans work through the continuing effects of PTSD.

Originally developed by Dr. Ron Acierno, then-director of the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Program at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center in Charleston — in conjunction with other civic leaders who were military veterans — sailing was identified as an ideal way to provide opportunity for social gathering, teamwork and a certain amount of social stress.

“Getting the social reintegration and getting integrated with the veterans seemed like a good idea,” said Paul Jacques, VoD President/CEO and Chairman of the Board. “So [Dr. Acierno] started taking them out on his boat and studied the camaraderie that developed.”

Fifteen years later, this volunteer-run organization continues its mission, which is “to prevent and treat the invisible wounds that affect members of our armed forces, during and after their service, through a sailing program that offers holistic support and resiliency training.”

In the beginning, Acierno and his medical colleagues documented decreased depression and anxiety through pre- and post-sailing assessments of their patients. The group no longer does formal medical assessments, but “the benefit is still there,” Jacques said.

WHAT YOU NEED TO ‘PERK YOU UP’

Veterans on Deck’s dedicated board members agree, citing connections, teamwork and the group’s welcoming nature as just a few of the benefits of this hands-on therapy.

“It’s all about the camaraderie,” said Michelle Pierce, VoD board member and Life member of VFW Post 3137 in Isle of Palms, South Carolina. “When you get the military folks

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together, they start talking about their military service. Once you get on that boat, we are discussing, talking and just being out on the water. Sometimes that's what you need to perk you up a little bit."

John Watson, a VoD board member and Life member of VFW Post 3433 in Somerville, South Carolina, concurs.

"One of the things we talk about is the shared experience and being a part of something bigger than yourself," Watson said. "Sailing a 30–35-foot boat requires people working together and working in a shared experience. I think that's one of the things we retired military people miss."

By 2011, the group was approved as a nonprofit organization and a community partner of the local VA. To this day, VoD continues to connect with veterans through referrals from the Charleston VA. Services also are available to any veteran suffering from PTSD, and the group attracts newcomers through grassroots community outreach.

VoD has two sailboats that can hold six to eight people for each sail. With multiple outings offered three days each week, plus additional races throughout the year, the group sailed more than 200 times in 2024. Sailing groups include men's empowerment, women's empowerment and an all-comers sail.

"With the number of people out there, that comes to 1,257 sailing experiences in one year," Jacques said. "All those rides encompassed 250 individuals."

VoD has been intentional about its work as it has expanded over the years, building a strong network of volunteers to provide training and spreading the word. It also has been thoughtful about more common challenges veterans face and has gone to lengths to ensure the therapeutic sails remain inclusive for those with limited mobility or gait problems from previous injuries.

"We acquired the J105 [boat] with a low water line so that it sits close to the dock. It's a small step up to get on and off, so anyone can participate," said Jacques, who shared success stories of veterans young and old who have garnered hope from VoD's therapeutic sails.

Just a few success stories include:

- A young veteran with PTSD who is partially blind and has mobility issues. When he first returned to Charleston, his mother was taking care of him in her home. He now sails regularly with the men's empowerment group and lives independently.
- A widower who was grieving the loss of his wife. The widower says VoD saved his life and is now one of the organization's biggest advocates.
- Two veterans who moved to Charleston to live on their own boats anchored out in the

river. Both of them were isolated and never sailed their boats. After learning how to handle the boats, one veteran weighed anchor and sailed down to Florida. The other veteran used his newfound knowledge to make his way down the intercoastal waterway.

Giving the gift of hope through therapeutic sails resonates deeply with VoD volunteers. Yet it became clear that each volunteer finds the work incredibly rewarding.

“It’s nice being part of something bigger than you but that you’re all part of the same club,” Watson said. “You have some shared experiences. They may be a little different, but it’s still working for a common purpose. We have that common bond [of being veterans] and we’re all avid sailors, because we’re out there all the time. There’s a close connection.”

Pierce added: “It brings me joy to help other people. We teach them how to sail with us. It’s nice and relaxing. Everybody’s just enjoying life. And they’re learning things — it gives them a purpose.”

Jacques said he enjoys the “sharing of life’s trials and tribulations,” and how people share their solutions or try to resolve the problems.

“It takes a coordinated effort to sail a boat,” Jacques said. “When we go out on the therapeutic sails, we have a skipper and first mate but when we get out there, everybody wants to get involved. It’s fun to see that in action. Once we’re out in the open harbor, we let anyone take the helm. It’s fun to see their faces light up.”

Jacques said the group welcomes additional support of time, talent and treasure. For more information, go to <https://veteransondeck.org>.

This article is featured in the May/June 2025 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was submitted by Jane Blumenthal Martin.