



## COMMUNITY BOATING

# Fishing veterans lending a hand

WHEN AN EX-ARMY VETERAN FOUND NOT ENOUGH WAS BEING DONE TO HELP MILITARY PERSONNEL INTEGRATE BACK INTO CIVILIAN LIFE, HE STEPPED UP.

• BY MICK FLETORIDIS



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CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: The fish don't have to be big to put smiles on faces!

Michael Hurren (left) takes military personnel from the Soldier Recovery Centre situated in Darwin's Army base out on the water on a regular basis.

Reeling Veterans regularly takes people out on this Formosa 5.5m rear centre console sportfishing rig.

Annual mothership getaways are another way of getting groups of people with similar life experience together.

**T**here's much to be gained from the simple act of going fishing, even when you don't catch anything, or even throw a line in the water.

Just ask Michael Hurren, 46-year-old co-founder of non-profit charity Reeling Veterans, who along with his wife Christina and a small band of dedicated helpers is trying to change for the better the lives of past-serving defence personnel. Speaking recently to *The Magazine*, Hurren explained that the tragic loss of several army veteran friends to suicide prompted him to try and do something to help. Anything. Being a veteran of tours to Afghanistan and the Solomon Islands, Hurren knew firsthand the difficulties he and many of his ex-army mates faced in trying to integrate back into everyday civilian life and he wanted to put that experience to good use to help others.

"By around 2017 I'd lost quite a few of them (army veterans to suicide), and I was starting to go downhill really bad," He explains.

After approaching veteran services organisations for help, Hurren was left feeling disillusioned at the slow response to his urgent need. The final straw came





when another close army friend took his life.

“I’ve got to do something about this. So I rang up a mate that I used to serve with ... and we went and put a team together and did a fishing competition. So it was me, my mate I’d served with and a mate he knew that was struggling... he’d been shot several times, over in ‘Afghan’ (Afghanistan) ... so we just went and did it and it just made a huge difference to all our lives.”

### On-water therapy

The act of simply entering a fishing competition gave the trio the opportunity to be out on the water and talk of their shared experiences, something Hurren says is extremely difficult to do with civilians who have no real understanding of what it’s like in a conflict zone or being involved in combat.

The men attracted media attention at the event, culminating with a feature on Channel Nine, which helped promote broader awareness of veteran suicide and associated mental health issues.

Six months later Hurren was contacted by one of the fishing comp trio who had found the experience had helped greatly and he wanted to help other veterans with their issues.

## “BEING OUT ON THE WATER WITH REELING VETERANS IS PROVING TO BE A LIFELINE FOR MANY EX-MILITARY PEOPLE...”

As Hurren explains, “It changed him enough that he actually found other people that were struggling and he has now started his own organisation. He takes people kayaking. He’s taken other veterans kayaking. They’ve done the whole Murray River, Whitsundays, and they were just about to launch it all when Coronavirus hit, so it’s put it all on hold.”

Seeing how what he’d started was changing veterans’ lives for the better, Hurren decided to “just keep going.”

Helped by wife Christina, they started Reeling Veterans as a non-profit organisation in 2018. It later became a registered charity and has since continued to grow strongly.

When not working as a boiler maker, Michael Hurren’s spare time is mostly taken up trying to help others cope with mental health issues.

Unfortunately a recent work accident has sidelined him from his trade and he is currently undergoing re-skilling training in a bid to continue working.

### A growing need

Hurren acknowledges that many ex-military personnel struggle with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a mental health condition that until fairly recently wasn’t readily acknowledged.

“Be proud of it,” he says of ex-defence personnel who struggle to come to terms with life post army, navy, or air force.

“You’ve done an extraordinary job, just be proud of what you’ve done in your life.”

As mentioned, he laments the lack of support service roles manned by people who understand the war-zone experiences of defence personnel and how to help them deal with related trauma. Hurren says many turn to alcohol and drugs to cope.

Being out on the water with Reeling Veterans is proving to be a lifeline for many ex-military people who feel they have nowhere else to turn to air their problems with others who are, or have been, in the same position.

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Darwin Harbour bliss – For many ex-military personnel dealing with PTSD spending time out on the water has a beneficial effect.

A nice black jewfish caught during a trip out with Reeling Veterans.

Mateship is what Reeling Veterans is all about.

“What we have is a committee (of five) and when we take them out we (understand)...one of our skippers (is a veteran), we’ve also got partners of veterans that are struggling, so we kind of cover all aspects of it so when we take them out on the water we can talk to them. I can talk to them of my experience and all the stuff you have to go through and my wife can talk to their partners (and explain) this is how we’ve dealt with certain things, so that’s about all we do. We’re just there (providing) a sort of mateship.”

People get in touch with Reeling Veterans in a variety of ways, but much of it has come via social media and word of mouth.

“We get a lot of partners contact us,” Hurren says.

“We’re on facebook and it just grows and grows. A lot of word of mouth. We’ve had articles in the Vietnam Veterans magazine, Emergency Services magazine, a few different magazines do articles on us. It’s just grown and grown. I wish I had ten boats to (help more people) but unfortunately I’ve only got one.”

As a result of word getting out about the charity, Reeling Veterans has, since it began,





taken a surprising number of people out on the water for a fish and a chat.

“A couple hundred I reckon, easily,” says Hurren.

Most trips involve venturing out and around his home city of Darwin where there is no shortage of suitable fishing locations. Reeling Veterans also works with personnel at Darwin’s army base which houses a Soldier Recovery Centre for wounded defence personnel from all forces.

“Every Tuesday I take them out fishing, every week I take three people out from there.”

Hurren is quick to stress that fishing really takes a back seat to what Reel Veterans is all about.

“I did one (trip) last week with the Soldier Recovery boys and I don’t think we even dropped a line in. We sat there for four hours,” he says.

“I just took them out in the harbour and they were just asking questions; they were getting kicked out (of the army) for medical reasons.”

### Bringing people together

As well as day trips to local destinations, Reeling Veterans has also undertaken extended annual getaways by mothership with up to 30 or more

ex-defence people and emergency workers to the nearby Tiwi Islands. Hurren says the team was hoping to visit the remote Perron Islands this year before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

“It’s not like a ‘mates’ fishing trip,” Hurren says in reference to the extended outings.

“It’s not that at all, it’s about finding the people that best suit, and we never take people that know each other.”

Careful planning is key for the best outcomes for attendees. Hurren explained that several people on the last four day trip had attempted suicide in the six months prior.

He says bringing together people with shared experiences from all over Australia helps participants form networks which can provide ongoing support. Unfortunately due to COVID-19, people have been prevented from travelling to the Northern Territory due to border closures, which has impacted Reel Veterans’ ability to help people from interstate. While the majority who contact the charity are linked to the defence services, the recent devastating bushfires in southern states saw the

organisation inundated with calls from partners of firefighters suffering from PTSD.

“I’ve got a list of people who want to come up here but we can’t really do anything at the moment,” (due to travel restrictions).

In the aftermath of the pandemic, Hurren expects there will be a lot more people in need of help due to mental health issues, especially frontline medical workers and emergency responders.

### Helping hand

Keeping the charity afloat is an ongoing commitment says Hurren who spends a great deal of time sourcing funding.

“We sell a lot of sausages,” he laughs, referring to regular fund raising events the charity holds in the local community.

“We apply for grants, but obviously in the current world we’re in grants are very hard to come by now. We do a lot of trivia nights and a lot of organisations donate to us, donate prizes and we charge a small fee. A lot of it is just fund raising. We wish someone, like a big organisation would support us ... but unfortunately no one has come on board. Mental health is a very tricky thing to talk about, not many people want to talk (about it) I think it’s getting out there now, but no one wants to talk about suicide.”

Hurren says the charity has helped many people, including some having no connection to defence or emergency services. He relates how he was recently contacted outside “regular” hours by someone in a dark place who “just needed to get out on the water, have a fish and talk about how they’re feeling”.

For such situations, Hurren says his boat is fuelled and powered, ready to hit the water at a moment’s notice. While he has also used his personal boat to take people out fishing, Reeling Veterans has begun to receive some support from within the marine industry, starting recently with a new purpose built boat.

“We’ve got a boat Formosa built for us,” Hurren explains.

“They helped us out, obviously we paid for it ... so, Formosa (Boats), Suzuki (Marine) and Dunbier (Trailers) all hooked us up with that. It’s a five and a half metre centre rear console. We use it for the tournaments, we go in the girls’ fishing tournaments, as we take female veterans out fishing.”

Hurren also acknowledges the support of Lowrance and Quality Marine. Nautilus Marine sponsors the charity’s boat insurance. For now, Michael and Christina Hurren and the rest of the Reeling Veterans crew will be quietly going about doing what they can to help veterans and others enjoy time on the water.

**For more information on this worthwhile charity go to: [reelingveterans.com.au](http://reelingveterans.com.au)** 