

# CHANGING LIVES ONE WAVE AT A TIME



OPERATION  
SURF

# 2019

Annual Report



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# 01 LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Looking back on this past year, I am in awe of how many hearts and hands it has taken to accomplish what we have done together as a community. Winston Churchill once said, "You make a living by what you get; however, you make a life by what you give." I feel this quote is a reflection of every supporter and volunteer that have graciously given through Operation Surf.

Together, in 2019 we provided over 100 veterans and military families a priceless opportunity to restore their hope, renew their purpose, and revitalize their community. More importantly, we have provided them an invaluable opportunity to heal. *Operation Surf has a vision to serve more people, and it is only together that this goal can be accomplished.*

This past year was also time of strategy, reflection, and growth through shared leadership. We strengthened our mission, vision, and values. We developed strategic teams; bringing in shared knowledge and expertise from a diverse set of dedicated individuals. We enhanced our development strategy and operations procedures to pave the way for scaling how we serve more people - none of which could be done alone.

In all of this, we are continually reminded of the importance of our work by the powerful testimonies we hear from our veterans. We acknowledge the paths we have changed and emotional burdens we have lifted, simply by serving our mission together as a community.

Surfing with our heroes, hearing their stories, and watching them light up with purpose is the greatest honor. My deepest gratitude for being the force behind our waves as we continue our mission in 2020, helping one veteran at a time.

*Amanda*





AMANDA  
CURAZA

# 02 OUR MISSION

In 2019, we strengthened our mission statement, defined our vision, and established our core values.

Our work aims to inspire wounded veterans and active-duty military to seek wellness in all aspects of their lives while providing them with the necessary resources and tools to continue this mindset indefinitely.

*Our mission is to channel the healing powers of the ocean to restore hope, renew purpose, and revitalize community.*

Our mission is built on a solid foundation of values that foster a culture of progressive wellness, community, and hope. *Our Values: Care, Inclusion, Communication, Integrity, and Commitment.*

Our mission and values continue to serve as our guiding principles toward *our vision to Serve More People.*



CARE  
INCLUSION  
COMMUNICATION  
INTEGRITY  
COMMITMENT

# WHY WE DO IT

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other traumas can have a lasting and detrimental impact on the human body. Rates of PTSD, suicide, and other lingering effects among military veterans are so alarming the matter has been classified as a National Health Crisis by the VA and CDC.



An estimated **1 in 3** veterans are diagnosed with PTSD.



**Less than 40%** seek help.



**22** veterans commit suicide daily.

## WHY SURFING?

Surfing is a form of **healing** that promotes **wellness** through nature-based therapy.

Surfing is **strength** and **confidence**.

Surfing is **hope** and **inspiration**.

Surfing **heals** the **soul**.

# HOW WE DO IT

Operation Surf aims to create an *unrivaled* therapeutic experience that continues to positively impact our participants for life. By staying true to our core values and what we do best, we change participants' lives – one wave at a time.

## **Inspire**

Through a safe, supportive environment, our participants accomplish their goals and have an experience of a lifetime, which breathes inspiration into all involved. With respite, encouragement, and increased self-efficacy, they gain the motivation needed to face their past and current life challenges.

## **Empower**

We empower each participant to live their best life and move forward in a healthy way by giving them courage, motivation, education, and *resources* to get the help they need and make positive change happen.

## **Connect**

We connect people with nature – and something bigger than self – through the therapeutic benefits of the ocean and surfing. Bringing individuals together with shared experiences creates a community where people feel they are not alone and have support.

## **Continue**

We continue to support those we serve through ongoing aftercare programs, giving them an opportunity to share their experiences, gain purpose, and give back to others.

# 03 OUR STORIES

We see the impact of our work first-hand every day – in the transformations we witness on the faces of our participants, the inspiring words we hear from these individuals, and the praise our programs receive from participants' families and loved ones.

As a results-driven organization, we believe in gauging the effectiveness of our programs through scientific research and studies. However, the magnitude of impact Operation Surf provides is realized best through the inspiring first-hand stories of our participants.





# IT IS THE ANSWER TO THE EQUATION

## The Magno Ohana

"From the second we were put in training, we failed or succeeded as a group. We trained, we deployed, we embraced the suck as a group. We mourned as a group, we survived as a group. Then comes the day you exit the military and *YOU* are exiting, *YOU* are transitioning, *YOU* are making decisions for *YOURSELF*. Then enters an opportunity like Operation Surf where service members of all branches come *TOGETHER* and accomplish yet another challenge *TOGETHER*. Yes, *WE* surfed; yes, *WE* overcame obstacles inherent to our individual situations *TOGETHER*. We realized that we have to adjust our position by analyzing the horizon and the sets to come, something most of us had trouble with on our own. *It's the answer to the equation that none of us knew we were trying to solve until we rode that first wave and jumped back in for another.*" - Milo Magno, Operation Surf Participant

Milo was medically retired in 2017, after 12 years of service in the U.S Army, for physical and mental traumas he endured dating back to 2005. As an Infantryman and leader, he was expected to be a rock. To accomplish this, he often ignored his own symptoms of PTSD – undiagnosed sleep apnea, frequent nightmares, disassociation, and anxiety while also coping with pain from injuries with his back, torn meniscus and ACL, multiple hernias, and torn achilles. Even after multiple surgeries he never quite functioned the same.

His transition out of the military was difficult, dealing with PTSD became normal to him, but was challenging for all of us. Luckily, after an episode of anger that brought him to his breaking point, he admitted he needed help. The challenges brought forth by transitioning back to school and trying to find a career were evident. He felt that the identity he was once proud of was no longer the embodiment of his actions.

I feared that I may lose my husband and with my desire to help him, I reached out to a fellow Army wife who encouraged us to check out Operation Surf. Although he initially had doubts about being a participant, I had hopes that if anything could help my husband it would be the ocean and the veteran-focused staff at Operation Surf.

"Operation Surf was reawakening of his sense of self-worth and showed him he is capable of more than he thought he was. We are so grateful for the opportunity that challenged him in so many ways and showed him how to overcome the fear and conquer each wave as they come." -Lorena Magno, Army Veteran Spouse



SEAN

# VETERANS HELPING VETERANS

## Sean Meyer

Sean Meyer is a combat veteran who deployed to the mountains of Eastern Afghanistan. After being honorably discharged, he began addressing some of his physical injuries with the VA, but struggled to reintegrate back into society. His attempts to return to civilian life included returning to school and work, but he found the process challenging and incredibly frustrating. It was due to these struggles that he began to self-medicate with alcohol and began isolating himself. He was ready to give up until Operation Surf taught him to surf in 2017.

*It wasn't just the surfing that first inspired Sean - it was the community.* Sean was surrounded by a group of individuals, both veterans- and civilians, who genuinely cared and wanted to see him succeed. "That community would ultimately be the very thing to end my downward spiral and change the direction of my life."

After the program ended, Sean still faced his struggles with PTSD and continued his path toward wellness in another program in Michigan. When Sean returned, he was invited back to Operation Surf in a Veteran Support role. In this role, he was able to help a new participant experience the healing powers of the ocean and introduce them to the Operation Surf community.

*"This is when Operation Surf gave me a new purpose and a new mission."*

Once Sean returned home to Santa Cruz, CA, he and a group of local veterans and a VA psychiatrist began to meet weekly for surf sessions. During that time, Sean discovered another layer to his healing transformation; he realized that with this community, they could continue to live a healthy and supportive life alongside fellow veterans.

Fast forward to 2019, Sean, a husband and father, officially founded the Veteran Surf Alliance (VSA). As President of the VSA, his mission is just beginning, and when he feels the stress and struggle start to creep in, he says, *"I grab my surfboard and hit the waves. I don't have to do it alone. I now have a large community behind me that seems to be growing every day."* - Sean Meyer, Operation Surf Ambassador

# 04 OUR IMPACT

## THE IMPACT OF OCEAN THERAPY

Dr. Russell Crawford's book, *"The Impact of Ocean Therapy on Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,"* suggests that surf therapy offers an alternative form of nature-based therapy that could potentially be effective for treating veterans with PTSD.

**His research on the Operation Surf program showed that participants experienced:**



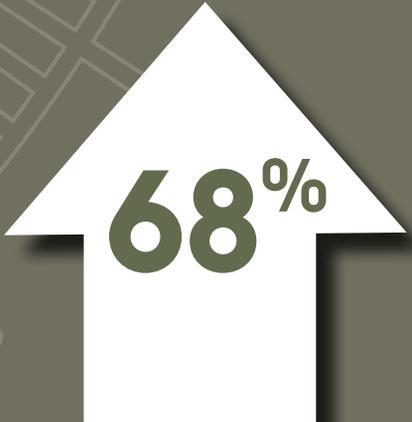
**36%**

A **36% decrease**  
in PTSD symptoms



**47%**

A **47% decrease**  
in depression



**68%**

A **68% increase**  
in self-efficacy



# 05 OUR PROGRAMS

## WEEK-LONG

During this all-inclusive rehabilitative program, large steps of healing take place for wounded military men and women from all over the nation – including addressing deep grief by honoring fallen brothers and sisters, learning to build trust with new people, and accomplishing goals.

The week consists of two days of travel and five days of adaptive surfing. Additional activities include a heroes motorcade from the airport, a powerful opening ceremony, group meals, nightly debriefing sessions, a closing award ceremony, and a healing paddle out to honor fallen heroes.

## OS6

Focusing on four key pillars, this 6-month program aims to provide local veterans with *mentorship*, support their *families*, create *unity*, and instill the peace and healing of *surfing*. It enables veterans to create relationships through shared experiences, regular communication, and common purpose.

Participants are held accountable to each other by taking on roles within the program. Regular scheduled family days and outings encourage new family relationships, and a unique sense of community develops that might otherwise never arise due to the high levels of isolation that are commonplace in veteran populations.

# PARTICIPATION IS JUST THE BEGINNING

*Every participant of an Operation Surf program has the opportunity to continue their journey with the organization in a number of ways.*

- Veteran Support: Helps guide participants through the program and shares experiences*
- Ambassador and Senior Ambassador: Promotes the message and mission of Operation Surf to others.*
- Intern: Learns skills, gains experience, and supports the organization.*
- Water Safety Volunteers: Gains skills and knowledge from top instructors to help other learn to surf safely.*



# 06 OUR FUTURE OF VETERAN SUPPORT

*I almost didn't make it to Operation Surf.* I remember feeling intimidated about meeting new people and was getting ready to walk away when a volunteer, Tony Cosica, approached me with a fresh hamburger in his hand and a goofy smile on his face. Thankfully, staying at that meet and greet barbeque has been much more filling than that hamburger. The last 12 months of my life have been deeply enriched spiritually, socially, and physically by learning to surf and being welcomed into the caring and supportive Operation Surf community. My family and personal life have improved as a direct result of the Operation Surf programs. It's unmistakably changed my life in countless positive ways. But more importantly, being "adopted" into the Operation Surf Ohana has cultivated a deep sense of belonging that was profoundly missing from my life.

I believe that to live life to the fullest one must actively work to improve the lives of others. Service to others and camaraderie are key ingredients for fulfillment and lasting happiness in life. Operation Surf enables alumni to find meaning, purpose, and connection by volunteering in the Veteran Support role. For me, my active participation as an Ambassador is essential to keep up the momentum and maintain the positive changes I've experienced from the OS6 and week-long programs. I hope to never stop moving forward while paying it forward to others as an Operation Surf Ambassador. I thank Operation Surf for its ongoing support as I continue on my journey towards wellness and belonging.

-Gary Locken, Operation Surf Ambassador 2020, 2019 OS6 and Operation Surf week-long program participant



GARY  
LOCKEN

OPERATIONAL SURFING  
10 Year Anniversary

# 07 <sup>2019</sup> HIGHLIGHTS

2019 has been an incredible year for Operation Surf. This year, we welcomed a total of nine Special Forces Operators and their spouses to Operation Surf to experience the healing powers of the ocean and support their journey to reconnect with themselves, each other, and their community. To us, this is further validation of the power our program has on all populations. We feel the difference our passion and work is making in the lives of others every day. They demonstrate that our efforts are succeeding, and inspire us to keep striving for bigger and better things in the year ahead.



OP SURF  
SLO

OP SURF  
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SLO

STORMBLADE

STORMBLADE

STORMBLADE

SLO 49

SLO 48

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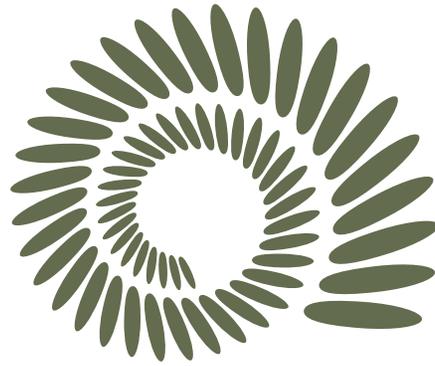
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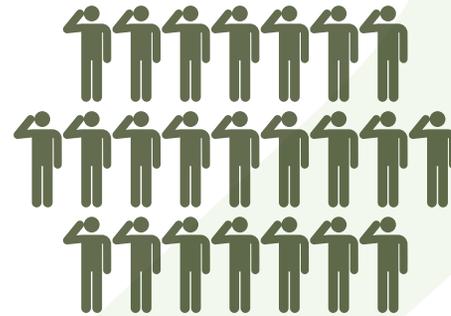


Among the 90 individuals served in 2019, we welcomed 44 new veterans in Operation Surf's week-long programs in Santa Cruz, San Luis Obispo, and Huntington Beach, CA.

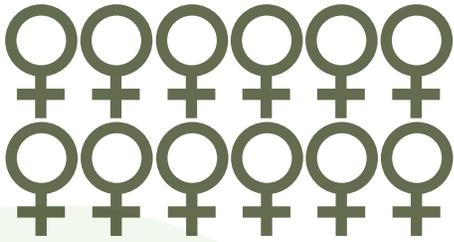
## 12 VETS/6 MONTHS



Twelve local veterans and their families benefited from Operation Surf's six-month program, OS6, in San Luis Obispo.



Over 40 past participants came back as alumni volunteers to help and give back to fellow comrades.



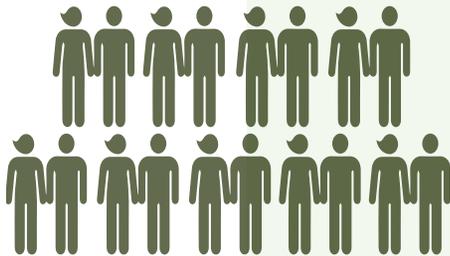
Operation Surf served **over a dozen women** throughout its programs like the week-long program, six-month program, and through collaborations.



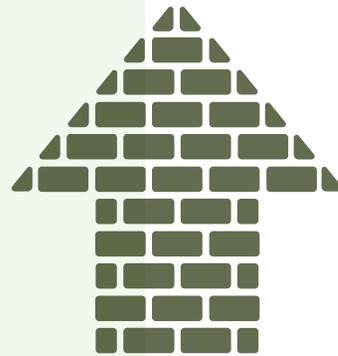
**Enhanced communications** internally and externally to highlight the impact of our programs with the addition of a Director of Communications.



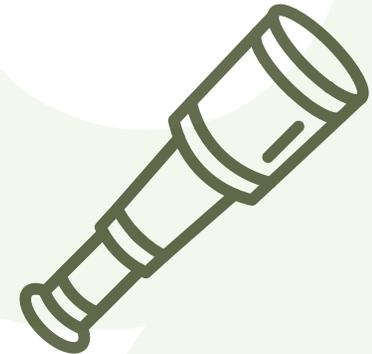
**New alumni programs** were developed and tested, providing the infrastructure for past participants to stay involved and help the organization to grow.



**Nine Special Forces Operator couples** benefited from our program through our collaboration with Operation Healing Forces. Together we created bonds that cure, one wave at a time.



**Organizational improvements** added more structure to Operation Surf, laying the groundwork for scalability and continued success.



Operation Surf held its annual **Vision Workshop** assessing current situation and future goals.

# 08 WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON

2019 has been an exciting year and we are inspired to think even bigger for the future. Here are our goals and initiatives for 2020, driven by our vision and our passion for promoting spiritual, mental, and physical healing for military heroes and their families.



# WE ARE NOT DONE YET

As we close the door on yet another incredible year at Operation Surf, we look forward to what is next on the horizon. This year, we celebrated the 10th Anniversary of the organization and with that came a lot of introspection on our past, present, future and our inspiring growth as a community. This year, we put our passion into words and worked to develop concrete values, mission statement, and vision for Operation Surf.

Our vision is clear: Serve more people; and with that mindset in place, continue to grow and push ourselves to do just that. Internally, our core team is working diligently on the structure and support within - not only regarding how to set ourselves apart, but how we magnify and maximize our opportunities to serve more.

In 2020, we continue to put our vision into action by better utilizing our veteran alumni participants and giving them more purpose within areas of the organization.

We know that our programs create massive impacts. The Operation Surf platform provides an opportunity for our veterans to talk about the things that are hurting them and create the building blocks for a better future - together. Operation Surf bridges the gap from isolated veterans to a community of veterans, families, and beyond. We remain dedicated to expanding our programs to incorporate the continuum of care and wellness while continuing to build and nurture relationships that last a lifetime.

The culture we create here at Operation Surf is our legacy. I want to leave behind that our values are instilled in every decision that we make, and we continue to put heart before dollar. Our participants always come first, no matter what.

We are becoming a force with our mission to channel the healing powers of the ocean to restore hope, renew purpose, and revitalize community. The more we grow as a community, the stronger our force grows - together, we are unstoppable in our vision to serve more people.

Van



VAN  
CURAZA

# OUR 2020 GOALS



## Scale Through Strategic Groups

Combine the talents and expertise of our committee and volunteer networks to collaboratively improve key components essential to the growth and health of Operation Surf and our participants.



## Serve More People

Develop and expand our programs and collaborate with other nonprofits to work towards our vision to-Serve More People.



## Increase Alumni Engagement

Implement a variety of different alumni opportunities year-round that creates over 100 leadership opportunities for veterans to support our programs.



## Focus on FUNDamentals

Increase our fundraising efforts, enhance our fundraising strategy, and strengthen collaborations with other nonprofit organizations.



### **Expand Resource Network**

Promote local and global resources for veterans and their families, to support them after they complete our programs and help them continue their personal growth.



### **Always Improving**

Analyze our outcomes and use them to improve wellness; create a lifelong network and sense of community, and enhance our follow up and follow through!

## **Create a Culture of Values**

In 2019, we established our core values that support our mission. In 2020, we are living into these values daily and putting them at the forefront in all our decisions.



**Care**



**Inclusion**



**Commitment**



**Integrity**



**Communication**

# 09 2019 FINANCIALS

Operation Surf had a successful year in 2019. Not only are we celebrating the 10th Anniversary of Operation Surf this year, but the healthiest financial numbers we've seen since our inception. We saw a growth in our Foundation and Grant support which in turn helped us increase our programs and serve more individuals. Our compound annual growth rate over the last four years is at a healthy 26.9%, and we are looking to keep that growth steadily increasing as we continue our mission. In 2020, we are gearing up to fulfill our vision to Serve More People.

## 2019 TOTAL EXPENSES



## 2019 TOTAL INCOME



# OPERATION SURF-A-THON

In honor of Veteran's Day, Operation Surf, together with a community of surf instructors, past participants, and surfing icons took the waves in Santa Cruz, CA to **#SURFFORTHOSEWHO SERVED** for our first annual Operation Surf-A-Thon.

We are humbled by the outpour of support by our surfing community who asked their friends and family to pledge their waves and join in support of our mission.



**25 Surfers and 1 Dog** took Cowell's Beach



A total of **283 pledges** for the campaign



**Over 500 waves** caught



**\$22,833** raised to continue our mission

*"It's a grounding and peaceful experience that is fully immersed in nature. It felt really good to be in the water with Operation Surf again and feel the stoke. I saw a very positive response to my campaign and felt proud to help." -Shawn Dollar, Big Wave Surfer, 2x Guinness Book of World Record Surfer*



OPERATION SURF



AMAZING SURF ADVENTURES



A group of approximately 20 people and a dog are posing for a group photo on a sandy beach. The group is arranged in two rows, with some people kneeling in the front. Many individuals are wearing orange caps with the word 'SURF' on them and are making a 'shaka' hand gesture. The people are dressed in casual attire, including hoodies, t-shirts, and plaid shirts. A dog is sitting in the front row on the right side. The background features two large black event tents with branding for 'OPERATION SURF' and 'AMAZING SURF ADVENTURES'. The tents also display social media icons and the ASC logo. In the distance, there are modern beach houses with white facades and blue accents, and several palm trees are visible against a clear blue sky.

# 10 OUR INCREDIBLE VOLUNTEERS

*To our incredible volunteers: we could never do this without you.*

We at Operation Surf have never ceased to be amazed at the incredible spirit, passion, and fortitude of our volunteer community.

Many times this is the first time our participants feel one with the community again. They no longer see themselves as outsiders

but join in with our incredible team of volunteers as a family - our Ohana. The passion, comfort, care, and encouragement from our

volunteers is vital to the transformations we witness every day. From past participants, local committee members, and Operation Surf

ambassadors in every community we serve, we are so grateful for all that you provide the Operation Surf mission, vision, and family.

Without all of you, we would not be able to create change and help others seek wellness and purpose. *For that, we are eternally*

*grateful to all of you - the force behind our waves.*



### 10 Years of Service

Many of our volunteers have been with us since the very beginning and supported over 30 programs throughout our ten years.



### Travel the Distance

Our volunteers travel from all over the world, including United States, Chile, Brazil, Canada, Puerto-Rico, and the UK, at their own expense to join in support of our mission.



**In 2019 alone, 500 volunteers** helped Operation Surf carry out its mission, from event planning to fundraising and operations with over **1000 volunteer opportunities** across the state. This equated to over **11,000 volunteer hours.**



# 1/1600 OF A SECOND

## Roger and Cory

*This photograph demonstrates nothing remarkable on my part, no great sacrifice, no great adventure. Yet, it has absorbed deeply into my soul.*

*In 2019, I volunteered as a photographer for Operation Surf. To this day, I continue to shed tears of joy and sadness about the experience, the people I've met along the way, and the stories I've been privileged to photograph and hear.*

*This is Cory. After two successful deployments, Cory was severely injured during a stateside military training exercise. His injuries include bilateral amputation, one above and one below the knee.*

*The photograph was captured on his first day of surfing at the Huntington Beach pier. In it, Cory and his team are working their way out to the lineup. Cory could not see the head-high plus waves in front of him because the accident also left him blind.*

*Cory, with the help of his instructor Richard "Riku" Rodriguez and two deepwater safety volunteers, caught several waves that session. Smiles and cheers from the water and from supporters on the beach got bigger and louder with each success.*

*Cory's, "No shit there I was..." story—detailing his first day of surfing—is common during these Operation Surf programs. With the help of amazing instructors and volunteers, the participants—often with severe physical or emotional issues—paddle out into the water with no experience and are fearlessly determined.*

*"As a photographer, I capture their strength of will and determination; I am a voyeur at the time of healing and transformation."*

*Consider that a photograph is a snapshot of one's life, an unseen or unspoken world that can be discovered. It can illuminate the subject's soul. As a photographer, it is deeply humbling to record this moment. Through the lens, I've captured more terror caused by the power of the ocean than I was comfortable in witnessing.*

*"I've captured pure joy, deep frustration, the welling of causation, pain, humbleness, confusion, anger, teamwork, the rebuilding of family, and the power of healing. A camera allows for this magnification of physical time and emotional space."*

*What consistently leaves me in awe during these programs is the level of commitment, determination, and the will of people like Cory and countless others like him that I have met over the past year. The physical injuries can differ, some more severe, some less; almost all include PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, deep guilt for fallen teammates, and other penetrating and emotional scarring. Families, too, are left bruised, battered or broken. Some never recover from that original commitment despite their determination and will.*

*To be a part of the healing power of surfing and the ocean is a gift of high magnitude.*

*"It is my continued hope to capture, honor, and share these truths with those I photograph and those who help in the healing process—1/1600 of a second at a time."*

*-Roger Aguirre Smith, Volunteer Photographer*





# 11 GET INVOLVED

*With your help, we can help so many more. There are many ways to contribute to our mission.*

## **SPONSOR**

Without support from our generous sponsors, Operation Surf wouldn't be able to provide these life-changing experiences to our military heroes who have given so much for our country.

## **VOLUNTEER**

So much time and energy is required to accomplish our mission and work towards realizing our vision. Without the help of our dedicated volunteers, our programs wouldn't be possible.

## **PARTICIPATE**

We are very proud of, and grateful to, our military personnel, and it's our honor to be able to make our programs available to them at no cost. All housing and event expenses are fully paid for by our generous donors and sponsors.

## **DONATE**

The life-changing programs of Operation Surf are made possible by contributions from people just like you.

Find out more at [operationsurf.org/get-involved](http://operationsurf.org/get-involved)



OPERATION SURF

CrossFit

10 YEAR ANNIVERSARY

TESTORFF

INDEPENDENCE

FRAMING

Western Digital



*This Annual Report is dedicated to John Backe and Backe Marketing  
for the years of dedication to Operation Surf's mission.*



A 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in Avila Beach, CA.  
P.O. Box 1581 • San Luis Obispo, CA 93406 • (805) 544-7873  
[operationsurf.org](http://operationsurf.org)



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