

CHANGING LIVES

ONE WAVE AT A TIME



OPERATION
SURF

2020

Annual Report



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01 LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This year, I celebrated ten years with Operation Surf. It was unlike anything I have ever experienced or witnessed on many levels. The uncharted territory of uncertainty, vulnerability, grit, resilience, fear, and joy, to name a few of the emotions surrounding this year.

When the pandemic hit our nation, donations plummeted, strategies tanked, and all of our programs and events were canceled. Everything we had operated around and relied on was stripped from us. And I will tell you; **it was the best thing that could ever have happened.**

We immediately implemented strategic groups between our board and leadership staff to realign our goals, strategies, and gain any information or education we could find. We decided that what we did in the coming days would greatly affect the coming months and years for Operation Surf.

Our creative initiatives turned our mission digital, as we sheltered in place, which led us to a new permanent program in our lineup called *The Canteen*, a place to 'come and renew.'

We looked inward and cleaned house, literally and figuratively. Our leadership team gained professional consulting from The Table Group, and we learned how to operate as a high functioning and cohesive team, putting organizational health at the forefront. We developed our thematic goal to 'Adapt and Thrive Through COVID-19,' then we got to work to change our future.





We witnessed our alumni's heart-breaking reality facing suicide, increased isolation, and a mental health crisis on the rise. We brought in professionals to help us develop our C.A.R.E. program amid crisis to train ourselves and others to help someone in need.

As a team, we also had to focus on care for ourselves and each other as we walked through the hardships our world faced. We were not exempt from the weight and heartaches and found strength in our vulnerability.

As a high-functioning team, we focused our energies and resources to restart programs with safety protocols knowing our mission could not wait. We gained our essential service status within our headquarter's county and began operating in-person programs safely. We had not only adapted, but we were thriving, as our supporters gave what they could in monetary and in-kind donations. Our doors remained open, and we never had to touch our reserves. Our hard work was shining, and our community had our six.

Going into 2021, we focus on wellness as our priority as a team and an organization. We know our mission is critical, and our veterans rely on us. We have a lot of work ahead of us as we implement more programs and serve more people in the coming year.

As you read through these pages, I hope you connect with the stories, learn about our new programs, and, ultimately, celebrate the success with us. We mean it when we say you are the force behind our waves.

Amanda

02 OUR MISSION

Operation Surf's 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.



Care



Inclusion



Commitment



Integrity



Communication

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



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 that 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's curriculum-based programs aim to inspire injured military and veterans to seek wellness in all aspects of their lives while providing the necessary resources, tools, and support to continue this mindset indefinitely. By staying true to our core values and what we do best, we change participants' lives - one wave at a time.

Restore Hope

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

Renew Purpose

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

Revitalize Community

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 revitalizes community and fosters feelings of belonging and support.

03 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.

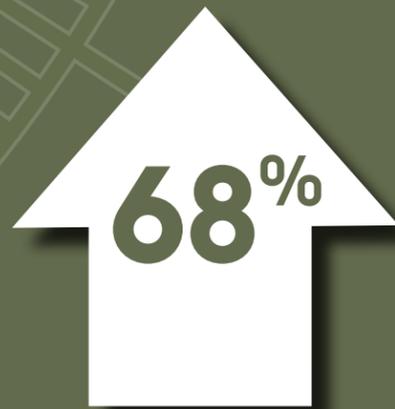
His research on the Operation Surf program showed that participants experienced:



A 36% decrease
in PTSD symptoms



A 47% decrease
in depression



A 68% increase
in self-efficacy



04 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 pre/post peer-to-peer support, a powerful opening blessing, daily yoga, mindfulness, group meals, nightly 'Recap Reel,' a closing award ceremony, and a powerful paddle out to honor fallen heroes.

OS6 - SIX-MONTH

Focusing on four key pillars, this six-month program aims to provide coastal veterans mentorship, support, and unity created through the peace and healing of surfing and community. 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 common among veteran populations.

NEW! We are now connecting earlier with our incoming program participants through *The Board Room*, an introductory virtual platform that eases anxiety and strengthens the bonds throughout our programs. Participants meet our entire staff, Veteran Support, and Instructors who they will interact with throughout the program.



05 ONGOING CARE

As an organization dedicated to fostering and building a lasting community of support, it is often that we see our veterans meet challenges - some during our programs, some outside of them. This has shown us a need for more comprehensive care and service outside the scope of our in-person programs. In response, we created two new programs in 2020, The Canteen and our C.A.R.E. Program, to continue to support our veterans long after our programs end.

Coming soon in 2021: Operation Surf Recharge! We are ready to reconnect, recharge, and take surfing to the next level in our newest program dedicated to our Alumni! This curriculum-based program allows our alumni to dive deeper into personal wellness journeys and shared experiences by learning how to tell their stories. We look forward to sharing the impact of this program with you soon!



THE CANTEEN

The Canteen is our new virtual platform that serves as a place for our veteran community to 'come to renew.' We conduct *The Canteen* via video Zoom calls three times a week, and focus on building communication skills, expanding personal wellness journeys, and sharing experiences.

By extending our support beyond the ocean, we provide a continuous source of peer-to-peer support when our veterans need it most.

The Canteen has held 113 sessions, logged over 150 hours, and averages 15-20 veterans per call.

Dozens of high-level motivational speakers, ranging from authors, to big wave surfers, to UFC champions, have joined *The Canteen* calls to help facilitate communication and be part of this powerful new platform.



OUR GUEST SPEAKERS

Shawn Dollar, 2x Guinness World Record Holder



After a catastrophic, life-changing surfing accident off the coast of Big Sur, California, Shawn Dollar broke his neck and was eventually diagnosed with a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Shawn shared his healing journey with our community to bring education and awareness to progressive therapy options for healing TBIs, which is extremely common among combat military and veterans.

"My journey back to health has been painful, frightening, challenging, and it is now turning into a big adventure."

Kai Lenny, World Champion Big Wave Surfer

A big-wave World Champion surfer, all-around waterman, and sports enthusiast, Kai Lenny, joined Operation Surf for Veterans Day Special on *The Canteen* to share the stoke with our community. Kai shared our minds' power and the ability to recognize that negative mindsets derive from unhealthy behaviors. Kai shared with our community that by creating consistency in his life, he is able to refocus on activities that bring him joy, like exercise, music, and surfing daily.

Mindset plays a significant role in Kai's success throughout his career as he uses visualization techniques to prepare for riding Big Waves while he practices technique on smaller waves.



"Subconsciously, I was taking away the unknown. Fear of the unknown."



C.A.R.E. PROGRAM

Our C.A.R.E. Program was developed during COVID-19 after facing suicide attempts and psychotic breakdowns within our community. We immediately implemented a strategic working group solely focused on handling these situations and finding resources to help. We initiated our C.A.R.E. program and received professional training on addressing mental health and addiction in our veteran community.

Our C.A.R.E. Program offers a comprehensive roadmap to approaching veterans in critical need. The acronym stands for:

Community - Staying connected with our community allows us to recognize healthy behaviors and maintain a supportive community.

Assess - When we see something, we say something. Following the different paths of assessing and recognizing unhealthy behaviors, we can better identify the need for additional support.

Resources - Once a need for additional support is identified, we bring in resources and walk the individual in need directly to care.

Evaluate - We follow up and encourage them to utilize the resources or see if there is an additional need. Then return to Community to continue to stay connected.

06 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.



JORDAN

CORY

A LEAP OF FAITH *Cory*

Cory Williamson, a combat veteran, deployed to Iraq in 2005 and a prior law-enforcement officer, is no stranger to trauma and challenges. After being injured in the military and as a LEO; Cory's wife, a paramedic, suffered two-strokes - changing their lives forever.

Cory, battling his own demons, immersed himself into caring for his wife and two young children. Cory heard about Operation Surf through fellow service member, Jordan Myers. Knowing he could not continue to numb the pain with alcohol, he came to Operation Surf in search of more tools to support his severe anxiety, depression, and symptoms of PTSD.

Cory's anxiety heightened at the thought of leaving home. "If it were not for meeting everyone on the Zoom calls [The Boardroom] days before and hearing how great it was going to be, I probably would have just stayed home. I kept telling myself I must do this to make myself better."

It was his first time seeing the Pacific Ocean, let alone surfing. "Getting into the water that first time and attempting to catch my first wave was the best feeling I have felt in a long time." The energy and encouragement from the community, and fellow brother, Jordan, surrounded Cory as he stood on his first wave. "That made it into an experience of a lifetime."

"Now, on the other side of things, I have learned how to control my anxiety with other means besides prescription medication." As a regular member of The Canteen, Cory is continuing his journey. "Meeting everyone in Operation Surf and learning from their experiences let me realize that I am not alone in this. I have a whole new family that I can rely on when things get down. If I need anything, I know it is just a phone call away."

"Operation Surf probably saved my life. I was so down before. I had to take that leap of faith to better myself. Operation Surf taught me the tools to use to get control of myself and learn new experiences."



CHAM

DREAMING OF POSSIBILITIES

Cham

Chamnam, a U.S. Army Veteran, joined the military shortly after 9/11 and felt eager to serve his country, though his story began long before that. Cham and his family fled to the U.S. after narrowly escaping the Cambodian genocide, Khmer Rouge. As part of a family of seven, he fought to escape the gang violence that plagued his adolescent and teenage years, being the first to graduate from an American High School.

Admiring from afar, Cham always wanted to venture into the sport of surfing. Unable to afford surfing lessons as a child, he found an escape in bodyboarding, which he continues to have fond memories of from his time in the ocean.

Cham deployed to Afghanistan in 2003 and shares, *"Some of my memories from the army are positive, but they are painted red by the more prominent memories that still haunt me during my days and in my sleep."* Cham survived a deadly IED explosion that left scars from the shrapnel as reminders of his painful memories of lost comrades. Between TBI and PTSD, Cham found it hard to cope. Cham and his family relocated to San Luis Obispo, CA to begin healing from physical, emotional, and psychological traumas.

"I always feel calm in the ocean, so far away from concrete buildings and deserts, able to focus on the here and now with each wave, rather than letting my mind race. I had wanted to get out into the water as a way of therapy for my service-connected disabilities, but without the resources, it has felt more like a dream than a possibility."

After being referred to Operation Surf, Cham applied for a canceled program in 2020, but joined the community through The Canteen. Shortly after that, he was safely integrated into OS6, our six-month program for Coastal veterans. Cham describes his experience as an opportunity to connect with other veterans battling the same challenges and regaining the camaraderie from his time in the service. *"Most of my worries get wiped away with the waves. It allows me to focus on the now and be present at the moment. This experience has given me a new sense of self."*



RENEWED PURPOSE

Mel

"The story of how I joined the Operation Surf family is one of destiny and a relentless desire to do all I could to get and stay healthy.

Since I left the Air Force in late 2013, I've struggled to find my place in the world. Regretfully, I spent years searching in all the wrong places for fulfillment. Not to say that my time in the Air Force was without its challenges, or even some unfortunate experiences, but at the very least, it was a job that gave me a sense of purpose. I am proud of having served my country. However, I did endure some unfortunate events that tainted the experience and damaged my sense of well-being. So, as my enlistment term neared its end, I decided I would get out and begin the process of self-care and healing.

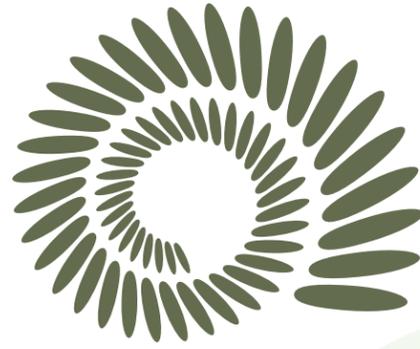
Quickly after getting out, I felt a strong sense of abandonment and hopelessness towards life. As so many veterans do, I turned to the VA for help. The VA helped me get through some dark times, but it seemed as though they only provided bandages for my wounds; no actual healing ever really took place. I knew I needed something more, so in-between my depressive episodes, I began to muster up the energy necessary to reach out to the veteran community in my area. I searched for support and connection and am so happy I persevered because I met a wonderful person (now a good friend of mine) who introduced me to the Operation Surf family. When she first told me about the opportunity to meet like-minded veterans, to connect and apply the healing powers of the ocean through surfing, I didn't hesitate for a second. It was exactly what I'd been looking for.

Still, Operation Surf more than exceeded my expectations. It's so much more than a week-long retreat for veterans; it's a family. One that provides me with a renewed sense of purpose and a real, continuous connection to those struggling with similar challenges. Although I live in Texas, I meet with Operation Surf multiple times a week and thrive on the idea that I'll be able to return to support other veterans searching for their sense of purpose and connection. It is not hyperbole when I say that Operation Surf has changed the path of my life. I am forever thankful."

07²⁰²⁰ HIGHLIGHTS

2020 was a challenging year for Operation Surf. We had to reimagine our programs and find ways to adapt every element without sacrificing our impact, while simultaneously keeping our veterans connected to their community. After months of leaning on what we know and focusing on veterans we have yet to serve, we successfully operated four programs serving over 35 veterans in the final quarter of the year.





Served 35 veterans in the final quarter of the year in four programs following our essential status.

8 VETS/6 MONTHS



Eight local veterans and their families benefited from Operation Surf's Six-Month Program, OS6, in San Luis Obispo.



Gained essential status and implemented the highest COVID safety protocols with the support of our county and local government agencies.



Developed and trained our staff on the new C.A.R.E. Program to help our leadership and community support veterans in crisis and navigate them into proper care.



Developed a thematic goal to 'Adapt and Thrive through COVID-19' and accomplished all of the defining goals and objectives.



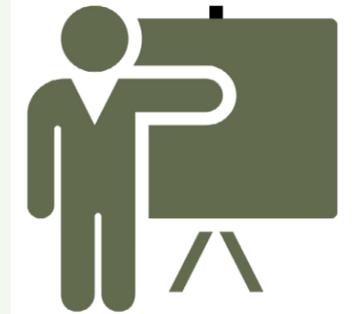
Incorporated family involvement virtually to the week-long programs by live broadcasting our daily 'Recap Reel' of the program highlights.



Adapted development strategies and finances to maximize the impact of every dollar donated to serve more people.



Elevated our digital efforts and online support groups through Facebook, The Canteen, and The Boardroom pre-program.



Strengthened our leadership by building a cohesive team through training with The Table Group.

08 WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON

In 2021, we are ready for more programs and even more connection in our veteran community. With everything that we learned in 2020, including the benefits of adapted smaller programs, we can safely serve more without sacrificing our impact. Here are our goals and initiatives for 2021, driven by our vision and our passion for promoting hope, healing, and belonging for our military heroes and their families.



THEY ARE THE VOICE

Our experiences of challenge, strength, and hope that we carry with us are some of the most powerful tools that we have to be of service to those around us. Every new veteran that comes into our community has the opportunity to hear these stories of our past participants, learning the ability to share through I-statements.

As the founder of Operation Surf, I am often seen as the face of the organization, but they (our veterans) are the voice.

This year, and moving forward, we challenge our leaders, alumni, and participants to share their stories and find the strength in vulnerability. By sharing my own story of struggle with drugs and alcohol, I have reduced the stigma and weight it carries. When a veteran might be struggling with similar challenges, they are more willing to talk about it, because of our ability to connect through similar experiences. What follows is a stronger propensity for hope and belonging, ultimately leading to personal growth.

When we don't allow our stories to be heard, we don't let them change their effect on us. Our experiences and challenges can create connection with someone else having similar experiences. By focusing on relative experiences rather than differences, we can share our journeys therefore unlocking the key to helping those around us. As a result, our strength and confidence within ourselves restored.

My darkest times have been my brightest light. —Van



OUR 2021 GOALS



Improve Alumni Engagement

We aim to provide more fulfilling opportunities that serve our Alumni better while increasing ongoing care and support.



Serve More People

Through smaller and safer programs, we continue to expand programs and impact to collectively serve more people.



Adapt Volunteer Network

With limited capacity for in-person volunteers, we are transitioning to increase strategic support from our talented network of volunteers in specific areas of need.



Focus on FUNDamentals

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



Reimagine Our Online Store

Expand and update our online store to maximize contributions to our Mission Control Fund with new, rebranded apparel and merchandise.



Adapt and Thrive

No matter what 2021 holds, our leadership team will continue to pivot and find innovative ways to support our veterans.

Operational Wellness

In 2021, our leadership team defined our newest thematic goal, Operational Wellness, to ensure all systems and operations function efficiently after redefining all our programs. Just as we support our community in their wellness journey, we strive to achieve operational wellness to continue scaling our programs to reach our vision to serve more people.

09 ²⁰²⁰ FINANCIALS

For Operation Surf, 2020 was a year of adaptations, and refocusing our finances was a critical component. When the pandemic hit our nation, our income dropped dramatically as our whole world struggled to survive. Thanks to our community's incredible support in previous years, we had a healthy reserve prepared to carry us through.

Our leadership and strategic team volunteers went to work to make up for lost sponsorship opportunities, in-person merchandise sales, and fundraising events. Our team immediately realigned our efforts to focus on research, innovative strategies, and new goals.

With our new mindset, we held our most successful virtual peer-to-peer fundraiser to date: the 2020 Operation Surf-a-Thon. Our community continued to support us as we changed the way we served our heroes, and we did not have to touch our reserves. We are beyond grateful for those who were able to give during such a challenging year, and for those who supported us in other ways. Each of you helped carry us through, and because of you, we are now able to serve more people.

2020 TOTAL EXPENSES



2020 TOTAL INCOME



OPERATION SURF-A-THON

Operation Surf-a-Thon went global in 2020 with epic results in our most extensive peer-to-peer digital fundraising campaign to date!

Our community united behind Operation Surf to raise critical funds to serve our Nation's injured military and veterans. On November 6th-8th, 2020, at beaches, mountains, lakes, and gyms across the globe, our 'Ohana stood with Operation Surf, asking friends and family to support the mission!



26 Teams and 100 Individuals registered to pledged their "waves."



600 individual family members and friends united to donate.



1200 "waves" surfed across the globe.

Together, we raised over \$60K for Operation Surf!

The result of our community's support will fully fund our first two week-long programs in early 2021, and more. Bringing veterans across the Nation to channel the healing powers of the ocean to restore hope, renew purpose, and revitalize community.

Operation Surf-a-Thon Champions "The Manhattan Beach Surf Force" raised over \$15,000 for Operation Surf's mission.



10 OUR WORK WITH THE TABLE GROUP

Operation Surf's leadership staff and board members have adopted a culture of constant learning and growing. What began with leadership books from best-selling authors led to Operation Surf's Board Chair, Kimberly Kuden, recommending Patrick Lencioni after diligently following his methods and teaching throughout her career. Patrick Lencioni, Founder of The Table Group, is a best-selling author that has published 11 books and sold more than six million copies. The Table Group was developed to help businesses and organizations change the world of work with the belief that organizational health is the single greatest competitive advantage in any business.

Inspired by our mission, The Table Group was eager to help create a high-functioning team and improve our organizational health to serve those who depend on our care. The Table Group helped facilitate our growth using exercises and tools to embrace healthy conflict to improve clarity, align priorities, build trust, and empower staff into leadership positions; essentially creating an entire playbook to carry us through the challenges of 2020 and beyond.

Casey Thompson and Daniel Massick led our leadership staff through a virtual multi-day workshop in April that began with individual and team assessments to get a baseline of our team.

We quickly identified where our team was amid a challenging time for most people around the world. Through our 'Playbook,' a tool for organizational health, we established:

Why do we exist? To bring hope, healing, and belonging to all people.

How do we behave? Through our values: Care, Inclusion, Commitment, Integrity, Communication.

What do we do? Take people surfing and foster community.

How will we succeed? Transformative adventure, supportive community, participant wellness focus.

Our thematic goal - What is most important right now? Adapt and Thrive Through COVID-19.

With The Table Group's help, our thematic goal of 'Adapt and Thrive' was developed along with the several defining objectives. Our team implemented new behaviors creating more efficient meetings, better clarity around decisions, accountability, engaging through healthy conflict to avoid artificial harmony, and most importantly, prioritizing our thematic goal, which echoed through every level of our organization.

Beyond that, our team began to understand each other on a deeper level, understand individual working styles, build cohesion, enhance communication, and lean into each other's strengths. The results were astounding as we achieved our first thematic goal and established our second; changing the world of work at Operation Surf for those we serve in years to come.



11 GET INVOLVED

With your help, we can help so many more. There are many ways to contribute to our mission! The life-changing programs of Operation Surf are made possible by contributions from people just like you.

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 program expenses are fully paid for by our generous donors and sponsors.

DONATE

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

Find out more at operationsurf.org





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