

'A Lot of People Were Searching for Activities'

COVID-19 restrictions hit Just as a Post on Maui began hosting events last year that brought veterans into its facility, so they took advantage of opportunities to do service work outside

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The outbreak of a global pandemic in 2020 has proven challenging to the VFW's core mission of fostering camaraderie, serving veterans and communities, and advocating on behalf of veterans and their causes.

At the national level, the VFW's #StillServing campaign was established in early 2020 to showcase local Post activities in support of veterans and their communities. On Maui, home to an oceanfront VFW Post in Hawaii, members of Post 3850 have stayed engaged with each other and their community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the chief concerns of Post members over the last year was mitigating the stress, anxiety, loneliness and isolation that are a danger during COVID-19 restrictions. This concern is even more prevalent for those diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

When restrictions were implemented last year, VFW Post 3850 and the Maui Veterans Center had just begun a regular weekly schedule of barbecue cookouts to bring together veterans in transition, VFW members and counselors.

Those restrictions effectively shut down the original plan, but flexibility around outdoor activities allowed the team to shift group activities to beach walks, weekly yoga and wellness instruction from Post Surgeon Alton Sanders, outdoor socially-distanced circles to "talk story" and even two new outrigger canoe paddle groups.

CLEANING UP A SACRED SITE

After the initial flurry of long-neglected home projects died down during the first few

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months of lockdown, VFW Post 3850 Sergeant-at-Arms Mark Fies recognized that almost everyone was frustrated and bored.

“I saw that a lot of people were searching for activities that would safely allow them to be outside doing something constructive and productive,” said Fies, who served with the 3rd Bn., 41st Inf., Tiger Bde., 2nd Armored Div., in the Persian Gulf War. “So I took the initiative to organize and promote a clean-up project for Kahului Harbor and the surrounding shoreline.”

An avid scuba diver, Fies also sought and obtained additional local divers to join the effort and secured dumpster donations from Aloha Waste Systems.

“We anticipated and received broad community support and recognition for the project because of the historical place it holds in the hearts and minds of many locals,” Fies said.

Before it became a major industrial and commercial site, Kahului Harbor was the site of Loko’i’a ’o Mau’oni — a 183-acre fish pond that has been sacred in the Kingdom of Maui since before the 1500s. It was a favorite spot for Queen Lili’uokalani to visit.

After the first oil wells were drilled in Pennsylvania around the time of the Civil War, the whaling industry began to decline dramatically, and Maui’s economic engine shifted to agriculture, specifically sugar.

That shift led to the first dredging of the harbor in the early 1900s, and the local sugar mill operated continuously thereafter until 2019.

Members of Post 3850 decided that the special site had become neglected, so they focused their first cleanup effort on Kahului Harbor in August 2020. A follow-up project in March 2021 centered on Ulunui Road near the beach of Maalaea Bay on Maui’s southern coast.

At Kahului Harbor, solid pre-event planning paid off. Post members set up their VFW canopy, provided masks, gloves and hand sanitizer to all the volunteers, and organized clean-up sections by family-sized units.

Divers used lift bags to ferry items up from the sea floor. Support teams emptied the bags and passed them back to the divers throughout the entire clean-up. At the same time, other teams worked the shoreline and parking lots in their pre-assigned areas. The entire operation was completed in slightly less than four hours.

Altogether, the two projects attracted about 65 volunteers who helped VFW members remove more than 1,500 pounds of debris. This included waste plastic, monofilament line and other materials that are hazardous to marine life. Based on the success of the original

events, Fies has continued beach cleanups on a regular basis and is currently planning some major activities in support of Maui Special Olympics.

The pandemic has challenged all VFW members to break from the traditional way of doing things on multiple fronts. Some of those changes should and will continue once the pandemic is over. VFW is sure to be a better and stronger organization for having gone through it together.

This article is featured in the June/July 2021 issue of [VFW magazine](#). It was written by Ed Dille. Dille is the quartermaster of VFW Post 3850 on Maui, Hawaii. A Persian Gulf War veteran, Dille is a 1982 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy.