

Fishing For Veterans

A VFW Post in Florida created a national fishing tournament in 2013 that has helped raise more than \$200,000 for local veterans in need

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When VFW Post 3911 in Key West, Florida, needed an innovative way to raise money for its relief fund in 2013, Powell Thomas turned to the island's roots.

Revered as a bustling fishing village with a long and celebrated history, Thomas knew Key West served as the perfect backdrop for a veterans fishing tournament to raise funds.

With a history of avid fishermen that includes Ernest Hemingway and legendary baseball player and Korean War veteran Ted Williams, fishing is either a vocation or a pastime for most locals in Key West.

"Just about everyone in Key West owns a boat or knows someone who does," said Thomas, a Vietnam veteran and a life member of Post 3911. "So I went to the meeting and said this is something we should do. I had run a few fishing tournaments before, and I knew my way around constructing them."

The Post's quartermaster at the time, Thomas believed a two-day fishing tournament would both enhance the Post's presence on the island and help raise funds to support its sizeable veterans population.

"I knew a lot of veterans in the area who were doing quite well, but I also knew a few who weren't doing so well," Thomas said. "There are many active-duty service men and women in the Florida Keys, so the Post relief fund also helps many of these people when a sudden deployment wreaks havoc on a young family's finances."

With help from Post members and the VFW Auxiliary president, Thomas launched the first "Fish for Veterans" tournament in June 2013, welcoming a modest 18 boats manned by veterans and non-veterans fishing for cash prizes.

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Since then, the tournament has grown exponentially as a result of continuous advertising in national fishing and wildlife magazines, as well as word of mouth amongst veterans and locals. And despite cancelling the 2020 tourney due to COVID-19, the 2021 event last June proved the most profitable to date.

The ninth annual “Fish For Veterans” tournament last year welcomed a record 213 participants and 46 boats from across the country. It also yielded more than \$20,000 in cash prizes for the heaviest species of mahi, tuna, wahoo, grouper and snapper caught, as well as individual angler categories that included ladies, peewee, junior, active duty, veteran, senior and first responders.

“The event has grown steadily each year with the exception of 2020, but last year was the biggest one yet,” Thomas said. “That’s a testament to how well-supported the tournament is among the Florida Keys communities and their local businesses.”

The tournament’s success over the years also has met Thomas’ expectations for its creation, amassing more than \$200,000 through 2021 for Post 3911’s relief fund. Through the fund, Post 3911 has continued to help Key West’s veterans’ population, which includes sizeable donations annually to Volunteers of America (VOA), a social services organization providing transitional housing to homeless veterans in Key West.

“Volunteers of America provides some housing for homeless veterans, and its semi-long term,” Thomas said. “What we’ve done is support them financially over the years. We also help the homeless veterans themselves, helping the individuals get on their feet once they leave there by giving them furniture, clothes and stuff of that kind.”

Though Thomas stepped down as program director after the ninth annual tourney last year, he will remain a fixture during the planning and undertaking of the event, adding that he believes it will be the best one to date.

“It will be bigger and better than ever,” Thomas said. “This year, the super prize for heaviest mahi has been increased to \$20,000 or a brand new Toyota Corolla.”

The 10th annual tournament is scheduled for June 17-19, and it will be open to the general public as always.

Further information can be obtained by visiting www.vfwpost3911.org.

This article is featured in the 2022 May issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.