

# Surfing ‘Removes All the Triggers’

## A Navy veteran and VFW Life member from New Jersey created a surf camp to help fellow veterans suffering from PTSD and other post-service challenges

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During his tenure as commander of the VFW Department of New Jersey in 2020, Brian Wiener considered his options as to how best to help fellow veterans who, like him, suffered from PTSD and other post-service challenges.

Wiener, a Persian Gulf War veteran and firefighter in Atlantic City, New Jersey, quickly zeroed in on surfing, as that was something that had contributed a great deal to his own mental health following his six years in the Navy.

“I wanted to share that experience with others because of what it has done for me,” said Wiener, a Life member of VFW Post 6964 in Brigantine, New Jersey. “Out there, you are so far removed from work and home and all the triggers that you might suffer from. The neighborhood upstairs is never in an uproar when you are all alone at sea.”

To make this idea a reality, Wiener needed to find model examples by which to guide himself in creating a camp to dispense the therapeutic effects of surfing with fellow veterans.

He found the perfect model in the Warrior Surf Foundation, a veteran-owned nonprofit that has, since its inception in May 2015 along the shores of Folly Beach, South Carolina, addressed post-service transition challenges such as PTSD, moral injury, survivor’s guilt and TBI through surf therapy, yoga, wellness sessions and community.

Wiener said he reached out to the Warrior Surf Foundation through social media and explained his vision for the camp he wanted to start in Brigantine, which in turn was met with a very helpful response.

“They drove up here and helped me set things up and have been participating ever since,”

### 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

Wiener said. “They are all certified in CPR, as well as counseling and teaching how to surf.”

The first annual Brig-Vet Surf Camp took place in July 2022 and proved successful for Wiener, who said more than 40 veterans stormed the shores of Brigantine Beach, about 7 miles along the coast from the Atlantic City skyline.

It has since welcomed more than 200 veterans from across the country, who flock to Brigantine Beach each July to participate in the two-day surf camp, oftentimes staying at hotels in Atlantic City paid for by Wiener and his team at Brig-Vet Surf Camp.

“We usually receive a lot of ‘thank you’ letters from those who come through our camp,” Wiener said. “But there are some who you can see the impact instantly. We have one individual, a Korean War vet, who had never been in the water and was afraid because of his Parkinson’s. One of our VA counselors took him out and spent the whole day in the water with him, and he, the vet, has been surfing every day since.”

Part of the appeal is that along with surf therapy, yoga and wellness sessions, Wiener also provides an opportunity for participants to connect with other veteran service organizations and groups offering a plethora of services.

These include the free assistance of VFW Accredited Service Officers and VA outreach coordinators who often help veterans with claims and other VA-related tasks.

Registered as a nonprofit by Wiener and his team in August 2022, the Brig-Vet Surf Camp has been able to expand its vision by raising more than \$20,000 in donations, which mostly come from VFW Posts and Districts across New Jersey.

The Brig-Vet Surf Camp also served as current VFW Department of New Jersey Commander Luddie Austin’s service project, helping bolster the numbers of VFW members at this year’s camp on July 8-9.

Through the continued support and donations from the VFW and other VSOs, as well as local surf shops and a local chapter of the Elks, Wiener believes his nonprofit is becoming financially stable enough to eventually expand.

“We are just doing two days in July right now, but as we continue to grow and become financially stable,” Wiener said, “we are looking to start having it several times in the summer and eventually in the spring and fall.”

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