

Kayak fishing
empowers
wounded veterans

For anyone who has ever enjoyed the great outdoors, there's just something about going fishing on a beautiful sunny day that seems to make all the world's problems melt away. There's nothing more satisfying than making that perfect cast—landing your lure just off the shore line where the deep shady hole of still water is sure to be harboring a hungry small mouth bass. In today's world of media, multi tasking and traffic jams, the prospect of getting away from it all to recoup a small piece of serenity from days gone by is something that only Mother Nature's watery aquaticscape can restore.

Jim Dolan, Class of 1976, grew up in Texas and began fishing for small mouth at the tender age of 3. During his time at the Air Force Academy, he made the switch to fly fishing, scouting prime locations for trout

in many of Colorado's swift-running rivers. A life-long sportsman, Dolan is intimately familiar with the therapeutic powers that open water can have on the human spirit. His passion for the outdoors—combined with the theory that nature has healing powers which go deeper than any modern medicine—lead Dolan to found a new campaign for wounded veterans returning from war. His foundation, Heroes on the Water, seeks to go beyond the physical therapy and medication to bring a much needed peace and solace to service personnel.

Dolan explains, "We help wounded warriors relax, rehabilitate and reintegrate through kayak fishing and getting outdoors. We've discovered that getting these men and women on the water is incredibly therapeutic, especially for people who are coming back

Heroes on the Water

By Lewis Carlyle



Veterans enjoy a day on the open water

from combat situations with traumatic brain injury or post traumatic stress disorder.”

Dolan and his teams focus on one main objective: getting vets out on the water and showing them that kayak fishing is something they *can* do; and that they can have *fun* doing it. “We don’t place people on pedestals and parade them around,” he muses. “We want them to become kayak fishermen—to give them something to be a part of—a group of friends with a common bond.” Furthermore, Dolan is always taking measures to ensure that there are no misconceptions about the sport he is trying to present. “When most people think of kayaking they think of white water rapids and Eskimo rolls. Our outings are all done on calm water in what we call sit-on-top kayaks. They’re very low to the water, which makes them very stable, much more so than canoes. Our safety record is very good.”

Wounded veterans returning from war often struggle with the prospect of having to depend on others due to their injuries, which is why one of the primary objectives of the Heroes on the Water is to place these men and women into a situation where they can once again be completely self-reliant. “When you’re out on the water,” Dolan describes, “you’re responsible for yourself, you’re captain of your own ship. You don’t need anyone else because you are in complete control. For wounded veterans, this form of self reliance is tremendously empowering.”

Dolan recounts this past Memorial Day when he and his wife took a Marine who was a double amputee out for a kayak fishing trip. “Much to our delight,” Dolan says excitedly, “the kid had a blast. The following Tuesday I received a call from a Marine gunny sergeant from this kid’s regiment saying that we saved his life. Not only was this guy suffering from the mental and physical therapy of recovering from his wounds, he was also having some social issues with his family. With kayaking, he had discovered a new sport that he could do all by himself. It totally restored his sense of self-worth.”

With a slew of volunteers running their boating operations, Heroes on the Water is made up of seasoned outdoorsmen who are dedicated to helping wounded veterans enjoy the finer points of nature. “We currently have

21 chapters across the nation,” Dolan says proudly. “The majority of our chapter coordinators are fishing guides and kayakers who have been doing this for years and have a real passion for the sport. Our instructors range from former military to firemen, policemen, emergency medical technicians, nurses and even doctors. We generally try to have someone with experience as a first responder or wilderness rescue on each outing.”

In the past two years, the organization has served approximately 3,100 people. Dolan and the board of directors have plans for major expansions. “Our latest strategic planning meeting focused on getting a national infrastructure set up and getting a lot more people on board. We’re hoping that within five years we’ll be in 60-80 locations nationally, which will serve up to 10,000 people.”

Dolan says that one of the organization’s main goals is to turn people into kayak fishermen. If he can do that, then the foundation is a success. “The greatest honor I can receive is having one of these guys call me up and say ‘hey Jim let’s go fishing.’ At that point they’ve adopted this sport as a part of their occupational therapy, and this is something they can do for the rest of their lives.”

From a service aspect, Dolan says the Academy helped him realize there are a lot of people out there who could use help. Perhaps more important is the notion of teaching people to help themselves. For service personnel who have lead teams into combat, piloted aircraft or commanded tank squads, the prospect of laying back and receiving handouts is grossly unappealing. Taking control of one’s own personal safety, captaining a kayak and venturing out into the open water is a much preferred alternative to relying on others.

His paddle and tackle box in hand, Dolan will continue to serve those who have served our nation. “My father was a Marine and I have a strong heart for the military,” the fisherman says with conviction. “Our wounded Veterans—especially amputees—have literally given up a piece of themselves for this nation. We owe them so much.” 🏠



Veterans continue to prove that no challenge is too great

Images courtesy of the Heroes on the Water Foundation