

Scuba Diving Alleviates Depression and Anxiety in Military Service Members with Combat-Related Injuries

Wounded Warriors discover scuba diving and learn they are not as limited by their physical and mental injuries as they once believed.

November 8, 2012 (FPRC) -- Athens, GA -- Veteran's Day is a time to salute the brave men and women who fought to ensure freedom and democracy around the world. At Dolphin Dive Center (DDC) in Athens, GA, owner Tim Bridgham and his staff of instructors believe service members injured in the line of duty deserve more than one day of recognition a year for their courage and sacrifices. In a program DDC launched six months ago, scuba instructors celebrate Veteran's Day once a month at Fort Gordon in Augusta, in the form of free scuba diving instruction for members of the Warrior Transition Battalion who suffer anxiety and depression from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury, and physical disabilities.

Statistics regarding the psychological effects of combat are daunting. Earlier this year 2,300 veterans responded to a survey conducted by the Wounded Warriors Project. Nearly 80 percent reported having symptoms of a combat-related mental health condition, and roughly half said they had a traumatic brain injury. And the National Alliance of Mental Health reported in 2010 that an estimated 18 veterans die by suicide every day.

"We know scuba diving can alleviate anxiety and depression in soldiers injured in combat," says Bridgham. "Depression is a killer among wounded vets. One day they're kicking in doors and defending democracy, the next day they can't do anything they used to be able to do. After an injury, they feel hopeless. But scuba shows them there are things they can do."

Fort Gordon's Judith Thompson, OTR agrees. She facilitates the selection of warrior candidates for DDC scuba instruction. Thompson shares three of the many success stories she's witnessed with DDC:

"(One service member suffering from PTSD and anxiety) came the first time and stayed above the water the majority of the time, reporting that she had a panic attack when water went into her mask. After the first session she brought a little disposable underwater camera with her. She is one of our photographers and so this was a natural fit. What she found was that when she was taking photos under water, all of her anxiety disappeared."

In another example, Thompson recalls a young man who had never dived before. "He reported that he did have a couple of panic attacks but was proud that he could finish the activity. And to prove that he did it, he wrote his name on the bottom of the pool that day."

And Thompson describes a service woman who had been certified in scuba diving prior to enlisting in the Army. "She has been diving for years and her goal was to see if she could still do the activity with limited use of one arm and her limited use of both lower extremities. She said although she realizes that she will never be able to carry the equipment into the water, she reported that it was phenomenal that almost all of her limitations that she has on land are gone in the water, and that she could do the activity with no issues at all. She is thrilled that she still has one of her leisure skills available to her, because she has lost so many others."

The weightlessness a diver experiences underwater means the activity is open to soldiers who have lost the use of limbs. It's something both men and women can enjoy. And, the element of thrill and adventure intrinsic to scuba diving appeals to soldiers, says Bridgham. It is a gear-intensive sport with plenty of gadgets, alluring to combatants used to managing life-supporting equipment. "Golf and bowling just don't offer the sense of adventure that scuba can," he adds.

"Plus," says Thompson, "you can't help but just love the smile on their faces when they take the regulator out of their mouth after a successful session."

About Dolphin Dive Center:

DDC volunteers its time and resources to Fort Gordon's Warrior Transition Battalion (WTB) every second Thursday of the month in Augusta, GA. Tim Bridgham, who is an instructor certified both through Scuba Schools International (SSI) and the Handicapped Scuba Association (HSA), and DDC's Jay Cavanaugh, who is an SSI instructor and retired military officer, load up the truck with buoyancy compensators, regulators, air tanks, wetsuits, masks, and fins and drive the 96 miles to the Base. Established in 1999, Dolphin Dive Center is a full-service dive shop in Athens, GA.

About the Warrior Transition Battalion:

Fort Gordon's Warrior Transition Battalion mission is to facilitate healing so that wounded service men and women may transition back to duty or continue serving the nation as Veterans in their communities.

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Keywords

[Dolphin Dive Center Athens GA](#)
[scuba Athens GA](#)
[Wounded Warriors Athens GA](#)

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