

# War Heroes on Water Honors 125 Combat-wounded Military Veterans in Milestone Seventh Annual Tournament

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World's largest non-profit sportfishing tournament concludes with weigh-in celebration and awards ceremony

Army veteran Kevin Francisco and new fleet member Mi Bella sweep awards night, taking top honors with the coveted Ron Ashimine Award for Top Angler and the Josh Miles Award for Top Boat.

Including this year's event, WHOW has now:

- Raised more than \$7 million for 501c3 partner Freedom Alliance
- Directly served 550 veterans on the water
- Supported thousands more veterans and their families through therapeutic services provided by Freedom Alliance
- Hosted more than 106 yachts with crews donated by the Southern California sportfishing community

NEWPORT BEACH, Calif.--(BUSINESS WIRE)-- While the seventh annual War Heroes on Water (WHOW) sportfishing tournament has concluded, the bonds established during the event are just beginning to take root. The event wrapped up on Monday evening with the highly anticipated weigh-in celebration at Catalina Island's iconic Green Pier, followed by a deeply emotional private awards ceremony at the Hyatt Regency Irvine on Tuesday.

This press release features multimedia. View the full release here:

<https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20240925745606/en/>

annual War Heroes on Water charity sportfishing tournament. (Photo: Business Wire)

whom have been honored with the nation's highest military decorations—boarded 50 of Southern California's finest sportfishing vessels. Harnessing

the healing powers of the ocean and the thrill of team-based competition, the sportfishing tournament off the coast of Southern California helps combat-wounded veterans recover from their physical and emotional wounds.

Throughout the tournament, the theme of family was ever-present. Speaking to the support she felt from her all-women team aboard the vessel Fantail, WHOW rookie and Navy veteran Jaime Weisel said, "The weekend was rather exceptional. WHOW is family, and it's humbling and it's warming and I'm grateful for this opportunity."

Monday's weigh-in began with all 50 WHOW fleet vessels assembling just outside Avalon Harbor for closing ceremonies. The fleet held a moment of silence in lieu of the usual planned flyover by Tiger Squadron, who had tragically lost one of their own—Ryder 'Hammer' Adams a day prior. Tournament participants then assembled to cheer each other on as they tipped the scales with their catch on the historic Green Pier.

"It's pretty good fishing when we see this many boats here this late at night," said WHOW Tournament Director Rod Halperin from the pier. "The crews fished hard, and our veterans had a great time. Every yacht crew believes they had the best vets in the tournament, and all the vets think they were on the best yacht—that's the win at WHOW. Everyone enjoyed being together, and that's what it's all about."

On Tuesday evening, the veterans-turned-anglers—joined to celebrate their on-water accomplishments along with their yacht owners, captains and crews. Most of all, they continued what this event is designed to do—establish lasting connections that save lives. As the WHOW veterans and fleet shared their experiences on the water, they discussed the tournament's impact and its profound purpose in saving veterans' lives.

Addressing the veterans in attendance, while calling on the WHOW Fleet to recruit more support, Tournament Founder Anthony Hsieh shared, "This tournament is about you—there's no hidden agenda. It's about you coming here and sharing a few days with us and with your brothers and sisters. I encourage you, when you get back, to talk to more of your brothers and sisters and encourage them to join us. Because that person could be someone we all save. We've built a lot of momentum and need to use our power to continue reaching the objective this event was created for—saving and changing lives. I want to thank you all for your participation, for your time, for your love; and to our vets, I want to thank you for your trust."

Tom Kilgannon, president of Freedom Alliance, WHOW's charitable partner, emphasized the importance of the WHOW fleet by saying, "Through War Heroes on Water, we offer our veterans immediate and heartfelt gratitude for everything they have done. By inviting them onboard your personal vessels, you become an integral part of their

healing process, creating something very special that creates a long-term impact. In the next phase, when our veterans return home, there may come a day when they face challenges. Don't be surprised if you receive a call from them, and I want to thank you in advance for taking that call and for giving them what is most precious to you—your time and attention. You are part of saving lives, changing history, and creating a profound experience here at War Heroes on Water."

Before presenting the awards, Halperin added, "I want you to carry this moment and this experience and this camaraderie that you experienced in the military, I hope you got a little bit of that back, I hope you know that you've got a family here."

Army veteran Kevin Francisco had the tournament of a lifetime, bringing home four individual awards, including the coveted Ron Ashimine 'Top Angler' Award, given to the veteran who earned the most points for his catches. In addition to finishing number one in both weight and qualifying points, his efforts helped his team aboard WHOW fleet newcomer Mi Bella earn the Josh Miles 'Top Boat' Award, given to the vessel with highest average points per angler. The awards posthumously honor two beloved members of the WHOW Family.

This year's Founding Fleet honoree was Ivan Zwart. Ivan and the Zwart family have enthusiastically volunteered their time and talent—in addition to being dedicated event sponsors—since 2018.

Retired Marine Corporal Larry Draughn, a four-time participant and previous recipient of the Ron Ashimine Award shared, "When I'm out on the water—from my first year to now—all the pain and suffering I've been through, and the other veterans have gone through, just disappears. What fishing has done for me is incredible—it's healed my soul, and it's healed my life. This year has been especially tough for me. I battled some demons and had thoughts of suicide running through my mind. I couldn't think, I couldn't sleep, and the only thing I could do was reach out to my brothers and sisters in arms—the ones I've served with and the ones I've met here at WHOW. They guided me to get help when I needed it most. I know that everyone in this room who has served has faced those same demons."

Draughn continued, "Events like WHOW—being here, sharing memories and camaraderie, being on the boat, and competing—give us purpose. I lost a friend last week, and I knew this is where I needed to be—so we can touch each other's lives and stop veteran suicide. That's what this is about: healing our hearts, our minds, and our souls, and providing the support system we need to push those dark thoughts out of our heads."

A total of 19 trophies were handed out during the celebration, including the awards for Species, Qualifying Points, Weight Points, Top Angler, Top Boat and the Founder's award:

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Top Angler	Top Boat	Weight Points	Qualifier Points
1. Kevin Francisco, Mi Bella *Ron Ashimine Award	1. Mi Bella *Josh Miles Award	1. Kevin Francisco, Mi Bella	1. Kevin Francisco, Mi Bella
2. Reynaldo Baldoza, Mi Bella	2. Patriot	2. Reynaldo Baldoza, Mi Bella	2. Reynaldo Baldoza, Mi Bella
3. Chad Artimovich, Castigo	3. Legend	3. Jaime Weisel, Fantail	3. Fermin Iturbide Little G

Species Winners	
Calico Bass:	Reynaldo Baldoza, Mi Bella
Rockfish:	Nathan Rehl, Merityme
Halibut:	Matthew Bein, Bad Company 92
Yellowtail:	Kevin Francisco, Mi Bella
Yellowfin Tuna:	Drew Lavoie, Second C
Bluefin Tuna:	Andy L'io, Legend

More than 357 new and returning corporate and private donors and sponsors helped bring the total raised for this year's tournament to more than \$1.1 million, and the total raised since inception to more than \$7 million via charity partner Freedom Alliance, which provides year-round programs that support the rehabilitation needs of wounded service members, combat veterans, and military families.

The WHOW tournament could not happen without the dedication and support of dozens of participants and volunteers, as well as the extreme generosity of the WHOW fleet owners, captains, and crews, whose collective contributions represent a significant financial and time investment.

Peter Thomas, owner and captain of the sportfishing vessel Dignity, a multi-year member of the WHOW Fleet shared, "I've done this for three years and have had a magical experience every time. As a boat owner and captain, we donate our time, but I have to tell you, it touches you on the deepest level. Each year, you reach an even deeper understanding of why you're doing it. This year epitomized that. I had three Marines onboard—these guys were just epic, the real-life experiences they shared with us were nothing short of incredible. In life, if you don't give, you don't get. That's so true, and I've gained so much from these guys—the love, the experiences, everything."

## About War Heroes on Water

War Heroes on Water (WHOW) is an annual sportfishing tournament of unprecedented scale that supports combat-wounded veterans' programs. It was created in 2018 by loanDepot Founder and Chairman Anthony Hsieh, who is also the owner and leader of Team Bad Company, a world-class, record-holding competitive sportfishing fleet. Through Hsieh's deep connections with the country's sportfishing and business communities, WHOW has grown exponentially and is now the largest non-profit sportfishing tournament in the US.

Additional information, including photos and videos from past tournaments, may be found at [www.warheroesonwater.com](http://www.warheroesonwater.com) | Instagram: [@warheroesonwater](https://www.instagram.com/warheroesonwater) | Facebook: [www.facebook.com/WarHeroesonWater](https://www.facebook.com/WarHeroesonWater) | YouTube: [War Heroes on Water Fishing Tournament](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WarHeroesonWater)

## About Freedom Alliance

Freedom Alliance is a charitable organization which provides help and support to wounded troops and military families. Freedom Alliance has awarded more than \$25 million in college scholarships to the children of military heroes killed or disabled in military service and has spent millions more helping injured veterans and military families with outdoor recreational therapy trips, Heroes Vacations, care packages for deployed troops, mortgage-free homes, all-terrain wheelchairs and much more. To learn more, visit [www.FreedomAlliance.org](http://www.FreedomAlliance.org) or [Facebook.com/FreedomAlliance](https://www.facebook.com/FreedomAlliance).

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