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## How surfing relieves ex-soldiers' post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

**The next wave is all that counts for former gunner and tank driver Mathew Whitehouse when he's able to forget the horrors of Kosovo**



Ride a wave: Surf Action gave Mathew Whitehouse his confidence back

When former soldier Mathew Whitehouse goes surfing, he has no anger, no bad memories and no suicidal thoughts.

He forgets everything he witnessed during his time in Kosovo and every challenge on civvy street since. All he thinks about is the next wave.

“It’s freedom,” says the 37-year-old, who was a gunner and tank driver in the Queen’s Royal Hussars for five years. “You’ve got nothing to worry about out there. It’s a happy place.”

Mathew is living proof of research published last month showing that surfing can improve wellbeing in combat veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and even avert suicidal feelings.

Over 18 months, Nick Caddick, a Loughborough University researcher, interviewed 16 men attending weekly sessions at Surf Action, a Cornish charity for combat veterans, founded in 2009 by an ex-soldier who discovered that surfing eased his own PTSD symptoms.

The men had served in Iraq, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland, the Falklands and, like Mathew, in former Yugoslavia. Nine had contemplated suicide, four had made previous attempts. But Caddick found that surfing gave all of them respite from PTSD symptoms of nightmares, flashbacks, severe depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

It is the first time a study has explored so-called Blue Gym therapy; the theory that exercise, in a natural aquatic environment, can be an alternative to antidepressants for treating anxiety.

Like many fellow veterans, Mathew has never been formally diagnosed with PTSD. "There's a military saying: soldiering on," says the father-of-three, who lives with his wife Kerry near Newquay. "So that's what I did for over 10 years after leaving the Army. It's an unwritten code that you don't talk about it even when you're at rock bottom."

He broke his silence to help the estimated 6.9 per cent of British veterans who have PTSD, which is caused by witnessing frightening or distressing events.

In 2001, aged 24, Mathew was among the peacekeeping troops posted to Kosovo, where he witnessed the horrific aftermath of ethnic cleansing by Serb forces against the Albanian population in 1999 and the fighting that endured between civilians. "There'd been a lot of massacres, and you'd get people taking you to the spot where their children had been murdered," he recalls. "It wasn't too good."

Mathew left the Army at the end of 2001, settled down with Kerry and became a window fitter. Then in 2008, the recession struck and his business nosedived. The nightmares and bouts of anger that had plagued him since leaving the Army became impossible to ignore. He contemplated taking his own life. "The one thing that stopped me was the thought of my kids [Chelsea, 10, Harry, eight, and Tyler, two]," he says.

Eighteen months ago, Mathew was referred to Surf Action by the Job Centre. He'd never surfed before, but was standing up on his board within 20 minutes

of getting in the water. The charity, which also offers advice, training and psychotherapy, helped him rediscover his confidence: he is now assistant manager at a local holiday camp.

Caddick says the ex-servicemen enjoyed being “pummeled” by the waves. “Being in a group of like-minded people, absorbed in a physical challenge in a natural environment, took them straight back to the positive aspects of their past military life,” he says.

“They said that having surfing to look forward to was really important to them and kept them alive.”

[www.surfaction.co.uk](http://www.surfaction.co.uk)

By Ruth Wood

7:04PM BST 05 Oct 2014

The Telegraph



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