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Warriors find healing through paddling competition

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WAIKIKI -- Saturday, Aug. 22, marked the sixth annual Na Koa Wounded Warrior Canoe Regatta at Fort DeRussy Beach Park where over 80 teams competed.

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Malama Na Koa, the Warrior Transition Battalion Hawaii (WTB-Hawaii) paddling program, was started three years ago by Ka Malamahoe to promote healing for Soldiers in Transition (ST) and to embrace Hawaiian culture.

Fourteen teams comprised of Soldiers, cadre and alumni represented WTB-Hawaii at the regatta this year.

For most competitors, this was not their first regatta.

Sgt. 1st Class Rodrigo Theodoro, an ST from Bravo Company, competed in his third regatta this year.

He was drawn to paddling due to the benefits he saw in his healing process and the camaraderie of the team.

Sgt. 1st Class Jerome Amoa, an HHC cadre, was originally drawn to paddling for a much different reason.

"When I was young, it was an excuse to get out of doing chores," said Amoa.

Though many of the competitors are current STs or cadre, many of the paddlers are WTB alumni.

For example, Paul Bryant retired from the ST in September of 2014 and is a member of the team.

"When I'm out on the water, I forget everything," Bryant said. "All my troubles and worries are back on land. I just concentrate on paddling; it's just serene."

Paddling has made an obvious impact on him.

"I love it," exclaims Bryant. "This is my third canoe regatta, and I'll absolutely be here for next year's competition."

The Results

WTB-Hawaii took first and second place in the Wounded Warrior Division.

The first place team, WTU MANO, completed the quarter mile course in 58.52 seconds.

The team consisted of Danny Moncada, Jerome Amoa, Rudy Rosario, Peter Crisostomo, Alika Naluai and Scotty Thompson.

"It felt like just another practice session," said Amoa. "It felt really good."

WTU NAI'I took second place with a time of 59.38 seconds. The team included members Chris Wheelen, Issac Floyd, Fred Howard, Taliese Vivao, Lief Anderson and Mike Tosaki.

WTB-Hawaii also took first and third place in the Combat Veteran Division.

WTU 'EKAHI took first place with a time of 1:00.33.

The team members included Danny Moncada, Patrick Nunnari, Rocky Siufanua, Jerome Amoa, Shawn Rivera and Mike Tosaki.

WTU 'ELUA placed third with a time of 1:03.25. Team members included Sal Torres, Issac Floyd, Tom Brickler, Peter Crisostomo, Alika Naluai and Scotty Thompson.

"It's great to see how working as a group pays off," said Sgt. 1st Class Sal Torres, a platoon sergeant (PSG) in Alpha Company. "You practice and you execute."

Sgt. 1st Class Rocky Siufanua, another Alpha Company PSG, agrees.

"Receiving that paddle as a team, seeing all the hard work, dedication, time and effort, it's all worth it," Siufanua said.

While success is nice, it's not all about winning for those who compete.

The Na Koa Wounded Warrior Canoe Regatta has created a niche that not only promotes healing among Wounded Warriors and combat veterans, but also veterans and their families.

By taking part in this unique cultural experience, they gained more than a trophy.

The camaraderie and therapeutic benefits leave each paddler looking forward to the next time out on the water.

"It's a great honor to take part in this event to honor our fallen and honor our wounded," said Amoa.

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