

VFW's Image 'Shines' Under the Sea

The VFW participated in the dedication of the nation's first underwater veterans dive memorial and one of its national leaders got an up-close look at the Circle of Heroes

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Just 10 miles off the coast of Dunedin Beach, Fla., in the Gulf of Mexico, exists a Circle of Heroes. It is a tranquil, peaceful place that offers comfort for veterans inclined — and prepared — to visit it.

The first-of-its-kind underwater veterans dive memorial was dedicated on Aug. 5. VFW's Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief Fritz Mihelcic took part in the first dive.

At a depth of 40 feet, Circle of Heroes currently has 12 statues, but it will feature 24 statues when finished. The additional 12 will complete the 100-foot circle and are expected to be in place in 2020.

Each 6-foot-tall statue is weighted down by a 2,000-pound base.

The middle of the circle features a 4-foot-high, 5,830-pound monument. Emblems of the five service branches are prominently displayed on the structure.

Mihelcic, a master scuba diver trainer who has participated in dives around the world, said he's never seen anything like this memorial. He noted that he has seen plaques attached to different components such as purpose-sunk ships, but in those instances, there was no connection between the plaque and the item.

"When you see the Circle of Heroes, you immediately know this memorial is about honoring our military members," Mihelcic said. "Honestly, I was blown away."

As a gold-level sponsor, the VFW was chosen to represent the "No Man Left Behind Statue," which resonated with Mihelcic, who said it is the best representation of the organization.

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“In the service, we all lived by that motto,” he said. “Now that we are veterans, we continue to live by it. We won’t let anyone fall by the wayside, and that’s why veterans service is so important to us. We live it every day, in so many forms, that we will leave no one behind.”

The idea for the veterans dive memorial came from Heyward Mathews, a professor of oceanography at Florida’s St. Petersburg College. For 10 years, Mathews has worked to get this memorial set as a place for veterans with PTSD, depression or trauma to dive for therapeutic purposes.

Mihelcic agrees that diving provides a sense of peace, which can be healing. He said that being in the presence of the Circle of Heroes brought back memories, and made him “proud” to be a veteran.

“As I dropped through the 40 feet separating the boat from the memorial, I left the real world and became part of something bigger than me,” Mihelcic said. “As the statues came into view, I was overtaken by a peace that I almost always find while diving, but this peace went deeper because I felt connected to these men and women who were standing there, staring back at me through the water. The more I looked, the more I wanted to stay.”

The nonprofit Brighter Future Florida, created by Mathews’ nephew, former U.S. Rep. David Jolly (R-Fla.), is spearheading the fundraising efforts for the memorial.

The Pinellas County Commission provided \$50,000 to get the project — expected to cost \$400,000 when finished — started. Private and corporate donations paid for the first phase. According to Brighter Future Florida, there are different levels of sponsorship available.

Mihelcic spent a good deal of time during his memorial dive cleaning the silt from the VFW name on the statue. He said he looked at the silt as a metaphor for the organization and what could happen to it.

“If we sit back and let time pass without doing something, the statue will be unrecognizable and no one will know what it is or what it means,” Mihelcic said.

“The same is true for the VFW. If we don’t continually brush ourselves off and let people know who we are and what we stand for, we will fade away. In that moment underwater, I re-dedicated myself to ensuring that, at least on my watch, the image of the VFW would always shine and people would want to be part of it.”

To learn more about the Circle of Heroes, visit brighterfutureflorida.org.

This article is featured in the November/December 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.