



Merkle: Marine veteran (left) just after vehicle accident in Iraq

## SIS

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be injured or killed fighting Iraqi soldiers more than 7,000 miles from home. That night, though, it wouldn't be an enemy bullet that brought him down.

As the truck raced through the night, it suddenly came upon a bridge shrouded in darkness and careened as the driver struggled to regain control. In seconds, the vehicle and its occupants were hurled over the side of the bridge into the sand and jagged rocks below.

All were injured. Merkle landed on his head, severely compressing the vertebrae in his neck and spine—not the circumstances he would have expected to bring about such a consequence.

"For someone like me, who had always been so active—running, surfing, getting outside—it was a really difficult injury to recover from," he said, "both physically and emotionally."

### 'Physical' Therapy

Merkle is one of many Orange County veterans who have found solace in **Strength in Support**, or SIS, a Laguna Hills-based nonprofit organization that offers pro bono counseling and other services to military veterans and their families to help them deal with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and other issues.

Merkle was drawn to SIS because it offers more than traditional therapies. It incorporates physical activity into its approach, providing opportunities to golf, paddleboard, snowboard, and more.

Recent academic studies show physical activity, including structured sports and other exercise and recreation, has a significant positive effect on the well-being and mental state of combat veterans. Exercise and other activity produces chemicals in the brain called endorphins that activate the body's opiate receptors, causing an analgesic effect and thus reducing stress and anxiety.

Dr. **Evan Fewsmith**, who founded SIS in 2012 with **Jill Boultinghouse**, concurs.

"The physiological component to therapy is essential," he said. "There is a biochemical factor at play: Exercise releases endorphins, which are a natural and powerful antidepressant."

He said another benefit to providing access to physical activities is that for many veterans, recreational programs are more appealing than conventional clinical treatments.

"Initially, we didn't envision utilizing physical activities in our program," he said. "But we didn't realize how difficult it would be to get the vets into therapy. They often were closed off and untrusting—plus, they were terrified of having 'therapy' on their record. We came across a brick wall that we couldn't penetrate."

Fewsmith and Boultinghouse put their

heads together—and the idea to offer a chance for veterans to participate in physical recreation and sports was born.

### Get Out There

The organization's activities are run by volunteers who donate their time and frequently also their money. Volunteer **Tony Gilder** has been in charge of its golf program since its inception in June 2013 and also funds it with his own money.

Gilder, who has decades of professional-level experience as a golfer, spends every Thursday morning at the Mission Viejo Country Club with a group of veterans that averages about 15, rain or shine.

They meet for breakfast, then spend time out on the greens, followed by lunch at the country club.

"Our lunches are almost like group therapy," Gilder said. "Everyone shares their life experiences. Our vets feel a true sense of camaraderie, of connection."

Merkle, who was new to the game of golf when he started attending, agrees.

"The SIS golf workshops added surprising benefits to my life—fellowship with other veterans, learning to work through my injuries and control my body, and—the most beneficial aspect of the program—peace of mind," he said.

Stand-up paddleboarding has proven to be another big hit.



Fewsmith: Strength in Support president, cofounder

San Juan Capistrano-based surfboard maker **Hobie** underwrites the program, which is organized by Hobie sales leader **Mark Carlyle**, a Level 2 instructor with the World Paddleboard Association.

Other supporters include **Western Digital Corp.** in Irvine, and the **Allergan Foundation**, the charitable group established by Irvine-based **Allergan Inc.**

Carlyle said he sees the benefits of the sport for wounded veterans.

"Paddleboarding is an analogy for life," he



Golfing: veteran Jerry Woods (forefront) and volunteer educational director Adrian Michael. Veterans golf at the Mission Viejo Country Club every Thursday morning.

said. "In order to get where you want to be, you must look in that direction and keep moving forward."

Fewsmith said additional activities are planned, including snowboarding at Snow Summit in Big Bear.

"We need volunteers who can donate their expertise and time to work with our vets and their families to provide experiences they will never forget," he said. "If someone comes to us and says, 'Hey, I'd like to take your vets sport fishing or skydiving or mountain biking,' we are completely on board."

### Breaking Through Barriers

Fewsmith said that over time, the veterans who participate in the physical activities SIS offers build deep bonds with fellow veterans who understand what

enhance their sense of self-worth because they're again accomplishing things, having a positive experience, and broadening their horizons, he said.

Fewsmith added that after a few months of participating, veterans are asked to help newcomers, something he said they love because it gives them a sense of purpose.

He said that after a period of time, most vets are deeply invested in the program and have developed bonds.

"That's when we approach them and offer therapy. By then, they may be ready to trust again."

### Reaching Into the Future

Merkle participated in therapy in addition to the golf outings. He said his involvement with SIS has done more than shape his golf game—it has shaped his future.

He was unsure what type of work to pursue after he ended his last enlistment with the Marines in 2005.

"The truth is, many of the skills you learn in the military don't translate to the civilian world," he said.

Merkle went into law enforcement—the militaristic atmosphere was similar to what he had experienced in the Marines. Then he became a private security contractor and went back overseas. But neither career path felt "right" to him, he said.

When he met Fewsmith and Boultinghouse, he said he realized he wanted to help veterans in a similar way. He's now enrolled at Vanguard University with the goal of becoming a clinical psychologist.

He joined the Department of Veterans Affairs in October as its veterans outreach director. As for golf, he's at the SIS golf outings every Thursday his schedule allows.

The game gives him perspective, he said.

"Since my return, my mind has been split between the mundane existence of daily life and the idealized memories of my friends and the war. But on the green, I look down at that white ball and think only of what I need to do to hit it squarely. Whap! I look up and see it flying through the air and hear my fellow veterans in the background cheering me on. That is a great moment, one focused thought, accomplishing the immediate mission at hand, having fun." ■