



## Project Healing Waters | Commandery of St. Francis

### ***“Healing Our Heroes”***

What does a 900 year-old chivalric Order headquartered in Malta have in common with the Project Healing Waters fly fishing programs in San Francisco and Martinez, California? A shared passion for helping those in need.

Merchants from Amalfi founded the Order of St. John, Knights Hospitaller in Jerusalem in the 12th century to care for the poor and the sick. To this day, the 900 members of the Order continue to provide respite through Pories and Commanderies in 13 countries. The Commandery of St. Francis was founded in San Francisco in 1989 by six WWII Army veterans, with the vision of taking the broad mission of the Order and focusing on funding local programs that help heal military veterans disabled by physical and/or psychological wounds left from service to their country.

In recent years, the Commandery has funded a range of impactful Bay Area organizations: Project Healing Waters, Wooden Boats for Veterans, Homeward Bound, Community Action North Bay (CANB) Veteran Housing, Honor Flight Bay Area Foundation, Community Horse Advocacy Program (CHAP) of San Mateo, Bay Area Association of Disabled Sailors (BAADS), Stanford University Veteran Entrepreneur Boot Camp, Horseshoe Bar Preserve Veterans Program, Canine Guardian Assistance Dogs, UC Davis Veterans Success Center, Veterans and Equines Together (formerly Project H.O.P.E.), Hooves for Heroes, Lava Lake, Ranger Road, SpiritHorse, Equine Assisted Therapy (NCEFT), The Veterans' Home—Yountville and Overwatch suicide prevention.

On the other hand, Project Healing Waters (PHW) is a relatively new nationwide organization founded at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in 2005. PHW is now celebrating 20 years of providing outdoor therapeutic recreation through fly fishing to veterans returning from more recent conflicts. PHW's impact is accomplished through the hard work of 167 volunteer-run local programs across the country, serving more than 7,000 wounded active military personnel and disabled veterans by using fly fishing as a vehicle for building camaraderie, connectedness, and ultimately healing.

The similarities between their missions are clear, but the actual connection between the two groups was much more serendipitous. *“The Commandery is a great organization, and we're lucky to have run into them, quite literally!”* said David Lipscomb, founder of the PHW Martinez Program.

The ongoing relationship between the Commandery and Project Healing Waters sprang from a chance meeting in a San Francisco café. As Bill Chadwick, Prior of the Commandery describes it, *"I was walking down the street with my son when he spotted a college friend through the café window, and we went in to say hello."* As it turns out, that friend (Samantha Brophy of Golden Gate Angling & Casting Club) was sitting in Squat & Gobble with veterans Henry Little and Cal Nakanishi, helping plan the launch of a PHW local program in San Francisco. Their conversation began a partnership that has literally saved the lives of scores of veterans and touched all those who are a part of this ongoing story. As Bill puts it, *"This is my heart business—supporting people and taking care of veterans. I'm very proud of what we've done."*

From that first \$5,000 grant, the Commandery has been a key supporter in the rapid expansion of PHW in the Bay Area. The PHW Martinez program is now taking the lead to manage the numerous fly fishing trips generously sponsored by the Commandery annually—trips that promote healing and camaraderie among veterans in the San Francisco and Martinez programs. Says Brian Miller, PHW Martinez Program Lead, *"With the generous support of the Commandery of St. Francis, Project Healing Waters delivers on our promise to heal the wounded bodies and souls of our nation's warriors on some of the most beautiful waters on earth."*

For the growing number of veterans and active military personnel who participate in PHW programs, these outings are what they most anticipate and appreciate—trips that are literally a lifeline for many participants, echoed time and again in their comments in the "PHW Mountain Book," a small green journal that accompanies the outings to capture their healing experiences on and off the water. As Chris Saito, PHW San Francisco Program Lead says, *"Outings are where the healing happens—the camaraderie on the water is key."*

At the conclusion of a recent Commandery-funded trip, one participant wrote: *"I only wish mere words could describe the needed healing that happens in my heart. To be a small part in such an organization is an honor in itself. Veterans (ME) sometimes have a hard time accepting such grace and generosity. For that I am a blessed man! Thank you PHW."*

Levie Isaacks, a Vietnam vet and PHW San Francisco participant measures the impact of this program on his life in more concrete terms: *"I have PTSD. I had been having 3 to 4 nightmares a week before I started this program. Now I have 3 to 4 a year. It's a definite 'return' for me—I am very grateful for that. The camaraderie between us [vets] is phenomenal—it's a gift."*

Veteran Lorina Walker-Kaloi is thankful for the connections she has made since she joined: *"I now have four or five people in my phone I can call and hang out or go fishing with—I didn't have that before. This program has been life-saving and life-changing. The trips are where I discovered how much I love fly fishing—nothing makes me happier. I could never afford to do this on my own."*

*"My second trip with PHW. Both trips have come at critical times when most needed. The fellowship with likeminded folks is lifesaving. I don't know how else to say this, just a from-the-heart thank you to all those up in this magic venue. Tight lines and success in such an important cause"* wrote another veteran, reflecting on his time on the Trinity River outing funded by the Commandery in 2024.

For the Knights and Dames of the Commandery, the ability to make such a profound difference in veterans' lives is equally rewarding. Christopher Barnes, Bailiff of the Order of St. John, appreciates how much effort the PHW program leaders and volunteers put into their activities. *"It's incredibly well-run. It has been very gratifying to see the growth and the doubling of veterans supported through this work."*

Steve Foster is the Commandery's liaison with PHW San Francisco, and puts it this way: *"I do it because it gives me a sense of community with people I like and respect. It's service...they're my people."*

*"The Commandery has been extremely generous to us,"* says Henry Little, one of the guys sitting in the café on that fateful day some years ago. That has allowed the PHW San Francisco and Martinez programs to thrive and extend their reach to even more veterans. *"The growth has been tremendous!"* says Brian Miller. *"The relationship we have with the Commandery is a shared passion about the veterans we heal, and that passion is shared by those whose lives have changed forever."*

Going forward, both the Commandery and PHW San Francisco and Martinez are working to expand their reach. The Commandery is looking to expand its complement of Knights and Dames and continue fundraising through its annual Wounded Veterans Polo Benefit to support even more worthy projects for veterans. PHW is extending its work in the Monterey and Sacramento areas to meet the tremendous need for therapeutic programs for our vets.

For both groups, the synergies they have found with each other have been especially rewarding. The matching funds the Commandery has provided allow PHW San Francisco and Martinez to jointly host four to five more fly fishing trips a year, meaning that 25-30 additional vets get a chance to experience the healing power of being out on the water with their comrades.

As one volunteer wrote in the PHW Mountain Book, *"Our sincere thanks to Diablo Valley Fly Fishing and Golden Gate Angling & Casting Club for your undying support of Project Healing Waters. And our deepest appreciation goes to the Order of St. John and Commandery of St. Francis. You are the ones that have made this incredible healing experience happen!"*







*2025 PHW Trinity River outing funded by the Commandery of St. Francis*



*PHW Veteran Dan Johnson with a beautiful Trinity River Steelhead ... the smile says it all!*





*2024 Trinity River outing funded by the Commandery of St. Francis*



*Veteran Lorina Walker-Kaloi with a mighty Trinity River Steelhead ... well done Lorina!*





*The Commandery of St. Francis Wounded Veterans Polo Benefit*



*The Commandery of St. Francis \$10,000 grant and matching grant challenge!*