

Mission accomplished!

Family, friends and ADF welcome wounded Defence Mates after marathon Sydney-Brisbane kayak.

After three weeks tackling 980 kilometres of unpredictable waters off Australia's east coast, a team of wounded Australian Defence personnel has charged across the finish line of an extraordinary kayak from Sydney to Brisbane.

The group set off from Sydney Harbour on October 19 determined to complete one of Australia's longest and most demanding charity challenges.

Today, families, friends and Defence dignitaries joined the homecoming celebration at Brisbane's Riverside Centre.

"It's awesome to see so many people come out to support us," team leader Ricky Dumigan said.

"The servicemen and women who took part in this challenge are absolute champions. They wouldn't give up, despite some tough conditions."

The inaugural *Mates4Mates Sea Kayak Adventure Challenge* aimed to help wounded, injured and ill Defence personnel rebuild their life skills and personal resilience, as well as raise awareness of the emotional, economic and social challenges facing many returned service personnel.

Soldier and Brave Mate Dean West and his young daughter Taleah were among the well-wishers. Taleah had written a special letter to inspire the kayakers during their arduous expedition.

"I wanted them to remember all the people they were helping like me and my dad," Taleah said.

One of the kayakers was Sapper Curtis McGrath, who lost both legs when an Improvised Explosive Device detonated while he was on patrol in Afghanistan last year.

He was motivated to battle through the aches and pains by his mum and dad joining the challenge.

"Although we did some really serious training before we left there's nothing like the real thing to test you out. Your hands and shoulders get really sore, there's wicked blisters, and sitting on your bum for hours on end can be really uncomfortable," Sapper McGrath said.

"It was terrific to have my Dad on board as moral support for the other blokes and me.

"We were kept well fed by an incredible support team – we had to keep paddling so we didn't put on weight – but I can't wait to get into my own bed."

Fellow kayaker Corporal Tyson Murray has been suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder since two of his mates were killed in Afghanistan in 2010.

He said there was a great sense of camaraderie on the water because they could relate to each other's situations.

"We all supported each other when we were on active service and we supported each other during the paddle. We were a team back then and we're a team now," Corporal Murray said.

"We saw turtles, dolphins and sharks - if there's one thing to keep you upright in a kayak, it's a shark!"

Team leader and Mates4Mates Rehabilitation Manager Ricky Dumigan said the challenge had given them a great sense of accomplishment.

"It's particularly important for our wounded, injured and ill Defence personnel to find a range of ways to achieve productive, meaningful lives," he said.

"Taking on physical and psychological tests like this is an excellent way to improve self esteem."

Based in Brisbane, Mates4Mates harnesses the strength of an iconic Australian trait – mateship - to help current and ex-service personnel rebuild their life skills and emotional resilience.

Mates4Mates Chief Operating Officer Michael Quinn said individuals and whole communities were dealing with the effects of deployment.

"Every operation is unique but Mates4Mates provides a bond between veterans from different deployments or different wars," Mr Quinn explained.

"By taking part in programs such as sailing, trekking and kayaking, our Mates help each other to build strength and fortitude.

"We also offer welfare including confidential counselling, employment support and mentorship."

Mates4Mates provides tangible, long term support and comfort to the families and dependants of wounded, injured and ill servicemen and women.

"We make a concerted effort to reach out to their loved ones and look after their wellbeing because we know how testing and lonely it can be on the home front," Mr Quinn said.

"Mates4Mates is open to all wounded, injured and ill Defence personnel; ultimately we want to provide a network of family recovery centres around the nation to ensure servicemen and women can get any ongoing support they need."

Broadcast quality vision, photos and audio are available for download here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/n9j88cqwwemo9ml/7amSKb2Ci5>

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