

Day on the water a way to say thanks

By RUSTY PRAY

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Lorraine Geiser, commodore of the Charlotte Harbor Yacht Club, stood at a podium on the grounds Saturday and addressed the 20 local veterans who were about to be treated to a day on the water.

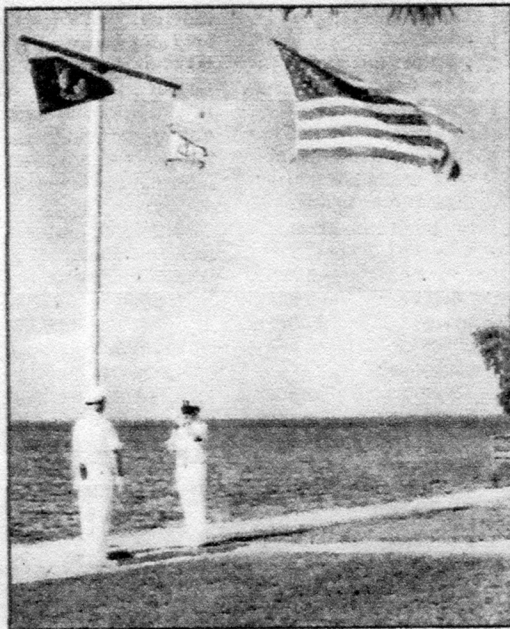
"This is one way we can say thank you for your service," she told them.

But for Geiser, the inaugural Wounded American Veterans Event was more than a way for five Charlotte County boat clubs to join a program that had begun in Pensacola in 2012 and has been spreading across Florida ever since.

"This is personal for me," she said after the veterans hopped aboard seven volunteer boats — from fishing boats to sail boats to pontoon boats — and headed out to Charlotte Harbor. "I'm retired Coast Guard. I spent 28 years in the Coast Guard, so I know what it means to serve this country. I applaud these men for all they've done for us."

"To me, it means a lot."

Members of the Charlotte Harbor Yacht Club worked for about a year with members of the Isles Yacht Club, the Platinum Point Yacht Club, the Punta Gorda Boat Club and the Punta Gorda Sailing Club to launch WAVE in Charlotte County.



SUN PHOTOS BY RUSTY PRAY

Rich Oakley, left, and Tony Geiser of the Charlotte Harbor Yacht Club raise the American flag during ceremonies Saturday as part of the Wounded American Veterans Event.

Veterans were recruited from the Military Heritage Museum, Stillwater House, Veterans Village and other veterans organizations. The program included a barbecue and sundowner ceremony after the boats returned to the club in mid-afternoon.

After WAVE was started in the Panhandle, the Florida Commodores Association "latched onto the idea and decided to expand it all over Florida," said Rich Oakley, a member of the state association and a past

Charlotte Harbor Yacht Club commodore. "It's just a way to thank them for their service with a day on the water and lunch."

"It's going to be an annual event."

When Frank Souza, a Charlotte Harbor Yacht Club member and captain of the Ms. Frisky, heard about the plans, he jumped at the chance to "take some veterans out on Charlotte Harbor."

"Plus," he added, laughing, "it's just a good day for fishing."

Nick Spallone, 67, an Air Force veteran of Vietnam,

Right: Rich Oakley, of the Charlotte Harbor Yacht Club, helped put together the Wounded American Veterans Event, in which 20 veterans were treated to a day on the water and lunch. Charlotte Harbor worked with the Isles Yacht Club, the Platinum Point Yacht Club, the Punta Gorda Boat Club and the Punta Gorda Sailing Club to launch WAVE in Charlotte County.



Frank Souza, a member of the Charlotte Harbor Yacht Club, volunteered to take veterans fishing on the Ms. Frisky on Saturday.

was grateful for the opportunity to get some boat time.

"I appreciate that people went out of their way and opened up the club to us," he said. "I'm looking forward to going out on the water."

Mike Rackl, 57, an Army veteran of Vietnam, couldn't wait to hit the water.

"I think it's fabulous," he said. "It's really great. I've never been thanked for my service more than in the last two years. It makes me feel really good."