



# Timor Awakening Program Overview

Prepared by Program Director Michael Stone, 1 April 2020



Timor Awakening (TA) is an immersive, evidence based, peer to peer wellbeing program for veterans; composing holistic health education, group therapy, mentoring, physical activity, historical commemoration and community development. The program is centred around an 11-day immersion in Timor-Leste, creating a disruption from participant's routine to take pause, learn about themselves and seize responsibility for a positive direction forward in life. Timor Awakening is available to Australian Veterans (and spouse or carer), from any state, with or without operational service. The aim of Timor Awakening is to prevent veteran suicide and improve the wellbeing of veterans and their families. Timor Awakening has a comprehensive medical support team from all streams of the mental health community. Every Timor Awakening participant conducts a range of data collection based on internationally accepted metrics for mental health contributing to detailed quantitative and qualitative reporting on each program.

By attending the program veterans have elected to participate in their own rescue, taking responsibility for the life they want. The program is intensive and obliges participants to be active in a peer group, whilst facilitating reflection time and individual mentoring. A range of stimulating activities and environments provide fertile ground for healing, growth and development. Our veteran facilitators, who are active participants on each program, demonstrate the value of becoming a healer of others and are examples that post traumatic growth is possible. The endstate of Timor Awakening is to have inspired and informed veterans empowered with tools for positive change and linked to the array of veteran resources available in Australia.

Timor Awakening embodies the relationship between Australian soldiers and the people of Timor-Leste forged in World War 2 promoting honourable values, shared identity & unified purpose. Timor-Leste, as a nation, welcomes Australian veterans of Timor-Awakening, from the President of the Republic down to the local village chief, for what is a unique life changing experience. Timor-Leste veterans provide inspiration, practical tools and lessons in overcoming trauma and re-establishing purposeful lives. With 24 years of war and oppression the Timorese veterans are world leaders in resilience, courage and discipline, and it is profound that their choice to forgive their enemies has set them free to continue serving their people with extremely low instance of PTSD and other mental illness. There are cognitive benefits for veterans to return to a former conflict zone, to experience these places through a new perspective and remove the images of anxiety that may be trapped within their minds.

The community engagement and development aspect of Timor Awakening provide veterans a sense of esteem, pride, community, hope and purpose. Riak Retreat is a major educational facility being built funded by Australian Veterans and construction has included cooperation between Australian, New Zealand and Timorese Veterans.

The program was developed in 2016 as a response to the increasing suicide crisis, as well as diminishing mental and physical health, amongst the Australian veteran community. To date over 250 Australian Veterans and partners have participated in Timor Awakening. For more information including forms to nominate to participate visit [www.timorawakening.com](http://www.timorawakening.com)

Timor Awakening has been possible due to financial support of Bolton Clarke and RSL QLD, along with major volunteer contributions of a number of veterans. Corporate partners are required for the program to continue and share the program with the wider veteran community for both domestic and international programs. **Veterans Care Association has a clear strategic aim to utilise the data and successful interventions of Timor Awakening as a model for Department of Veterans Affairs to commit to funding wellness intervention to prevent veteran suicide, broken families and injured veterans. Wellness intervention will result in considerable government budget savings compared to \$ spent on 'sickness' treatment, pensions and medication, as well as increase health and wellbeing of veterans and their families, save lives, and meaningfully re-engage some of the nation's most energetic and capable members of society.** In the soul of the veteran is a need to serve, to be of value, to contribute and to belong.

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## Timor Awakening Program Media

RSL QLD 3 Minute Video overview (2020) - <https://www.facebook.com/RSLQueensland/videos/594230674463467/>

Timor Awakening 7 Program Video - provides a snapshot of the program (6 mins) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5Xdip5bcus>

Riak Veterans Retreat and Language School - short videos about this project which is our enduring project for all veterans:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N78XE6tpnRs&ct=36s> . <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQIU9rI6OvM>  
<https://www.facebook.com/timorawakening/videos/2441330942583644/>

ABC News stories on Timor Awakening and Riak Retreat, 19 Sep 19:  
<https://www.msn.com/en-au/video/sport/veterans-return-to-east-timor-to-help-them-heal/vp-AAHvwB9>  
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-19/war-veterans-heal-in-east-timor-tour/11525170>  
<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/am/war-veterans-healing-through-community-work-in-east-timor/11526898>



## **Timor Awakening program components (content structure)**

Detailed preparation - involving individual admin/medical/mental prep, personal and group engagement.

Orientation - Darwin concentration, team bonding, individual mentor 1 on 1, briefing, 24 hours in TL.

Self-Awareness. Improving capacity to relate to yourself and others.

Grounding (beliefs, techniques, mindfulness).

Taking ownership and responsibility of personal circumstances.

Nurturing your mind, body and soul.

Destigmatising trauma and mental health.

Anxiety, depression and stress - understanding the causes, biology, recognising the signs and mitigating symptoms.

Tools to help relax, ground and manage feelings and physical symptoms of stress and anxiety.

Communication and positive living in communities.

Restoring a sense of Identity and Purpose.

Forgiveness.

Goal Setting.

Forging a new Identity (participants form identity as alumni of program, as Australian veterans, as Australians)

Strategies to help you go back to activities or places you may have avoided since the trauma.

Transitioning back to connection with communities, support and positive pathways.

## **Timor Awakening Activities**

Group discussions

Self-awareness exercises

Physical activation (group walks, stretching, breath work, personal exercise, volunteer work)

Volunteer work on rural education projects (handyman labour, gardening, landscaping, painting)

Breathing and breath work

Mindfulness and grounding

Goal setting

Communication skills

Body Language – impact of posture, effects on communication

Introduction to Neuro Linguistic Programming

Visits to historic locations

Service commemoration: both Australian and Timor-Leste military commemoration

Community engagement with schools (Kits4Kids)

Meeting and learning from Timorese veterans

Meeting and learning from Timorese leaders

Visiting and meeting NGOs

## **Group discussion topics on Timor Awakening**

Living with purpose and identity (and helping others).

Growth mindset / Living above the line.

Addiction and relapse prevention.

Taking ownership and responsibility (of our past, present and future).

Nurturing the body – Nutrition, exercise, sleep.

Mental health – Anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress (awareness, mitigation).

Safety plans – Addiction relapse, Triggered Anxiety/Stress/Depression, Suicidal Ideation

Suicide – helping others, getting help, safety plans, processing and managing bereavement

Communication and relationships

Relationships

Forgiveness / Letting Go

Resources for veterans and families at home



## Participant Testimonies from Timor Awakening, 2016 to 2020



“There should be more programs where veterans share in their health and wellbeing environment together. instead of with civilians who don't necessarily understand veterans' perspectives.”

“This program is totally different from a doctor's appointment, specialists, open arms appointment or courses. This program is real, it is run by veterans that understand the veterans and veteran community which is better than a 20-year-old from open arms trying to have a respected impact. This program is worthy and an absolute necessity.”

“This opportunity has allowed my wife and I to go through similar experiences in a country that I served in. This has helped me to relate more and connected deeper. This holistic approach has not only helped me heal, but to have witnessed other veterans heal and have renewed outlook on life.”

“By far the best intervention I have ever experienced through military support.”

“This valuable program far surpasses any conventional treatment in Australia. it is professional and well planned and should continue to be supported completely, made available to more veterans.”

“I have got off the couch and am cleaning up my property and restoring my dignity.”

“I've been motivated to get a job and have just landed work as an electrical assistant.”

“I have managed to heal the grief I felt over a death that has haunted me for 20 years.”

“I have enrolled in a master's degree in social science to study PTSD and how I can help Vets.”

“I am now managing well in balancing family life and work.”

“I have rediscovered my identity as a veteran and have become active in my RSL Sub-branch.”

“I have discovered I can cope without my assistance dog.”

“I have renewed my relationship with my wife.”

“I am now helping my Veteran son, in dealing with traumas he hasn't addressed before.”

“Circle time was awesome”, Being in Timor with the veterans was humbling and truly allowed us to understand the process of forgiveness. Helping to build at Same was amazing.

“Thank you to all involved in the for making me believe in myself, to make a better path for myself and the opportunity to help other's believe in themselves to achieve their goals.”

“It has assisted me with looking at what is needed to improve my life and wellbeing. And to eliminate the negativity in my life.”

“This took me out of my comfort zone and I hope it will flow in to my treatment and appreciation of others.”

“Feeling more open to trying new things and open in my mind to other activities to help heal.”

“Timor Awakening experience is a great way to sort out your problems by showing you how to move forward... I have a clearer sense of what I need to do to improve my state of mind/situation.”

“This journey gave a sound basis for self-reflection, mind and body rejuvenation within the companionship of kindred souls.”

“This trip has changed my life. I no longer want to kill myself.”

“I have gained a clearer understanding of my own needs and an enlightenment of my own capabilities, and I don't need to save all people.”

“I have been in treatment with a psychiatrist for 3 ½ years. TA was more benefit than that time on medication.”

“My anxiety has diminished. I am feeling an inner peace. I am looking at things with a better internal lens.”

“I am more relaxed, more connected, more open. More sympathetic to people in general.”

“I just want to say it's the best and most rewarding adventure I have ever done. Thanks from the bottom of my heart.”



“It is extremely positive and supportive program that enables participants to improve their personal lives and consequently their family’s as well and be great contributions to society.”

“Thank you for making this venture possible and I can only hope that you find it possible to continue supporting what is an amazing health initiative for veterans, their families and the wider community.”

“I am a veteran of East Timor, I also served in Iraq and Afghanistan as a security contractor for 12 years, this course taught me to accept Australia again.”

“Words can’t express my appreciation to the opportunity of being part of the experience, Thank you just doesn’t seem enough.”

“I am so thankful to have been given this opportunity, it has been the best experience of my life.”

“Australia was still foreign to me before I went on TA7, I refused to accept my own country from being away for so long, this course has brought me back home and given me hope and reminded me that Australia is my home.”

“This is the only program that has encouraged and embraced equal participation of spouses/ partners. Being able to experience and participate together sets us up for greater chances of success.”

“This program works it has a profound effect on not only veterans, but their families. We are so grateful for having the opportunity to participate in this wonderful life changing trip.”

“The staff are and have done a brilliant job in coaching and nurturing members through the program they are very approachable and are very knowledgeable.”

“This is a pathway to a longer life.”

“Keep supporting the program. I have had four hospital visits for mental health issues and this program has been more effective in my recovery process.”

“Unique program achieving excellent results in the veteran community that definitely contributed to reducing the incidence of veteran suicide.”

“This program is great for all veterans it’s a good way of expressing your feelings and experiences and to hopefully come to leave with it all.”

“Very helpful and fulfilling, talking and listening to others has helped me wake up to the crap I have been putting up with in my family life, it will help me decide with my wife if we should stay together.”

“Very helpful, I feel I am transitioning to the next stage of my life and this has been an incredible catalyst that I will be forever grateful for.”

“I found it much more valuable than 1 year with a psychologist in a clinical environment.”

“Life changing, if the people who experienced decades of war, assaults and death can forgive then I will work to do the same.”

“Very, again I feel like I am in control of my destiny.”

“Best thing I have done, I believe I have learnt and left behind old demons, now time to look forward.”

“It was extremely helpful in that it has changed my mindset. I now look at the positive things I came away with and the changes I will make to my life that will impact positively on my family.”

“Timor awakening changed my life and has given me a clear view ahead for the future.”

“This is an exceptional program, you’ve nailed it. One of my roles in life is educationalist and this program has A+ in all categories, immersion and experience, reflection, listening and responding and allows plans for future growth, are all encompassing with this program.”

“The program itself is great and I don’t feel it needs to change. The only thing I would like to see is for it to go national, so more people can experience what we have experienced.”