



REPORT – TIMOR AWAKENING 25

16 – 26 SEPT 2023



“I found this (program) was the exact thing that I never knew I needed” TA 25 participant

SECTION 1. 2023 OVERVIEW

Since January 2023, three programs have been delivered by Veterans Care Association Inc (VCA), with a final program scheduled for November 2023. Each had the objective of “raising the health and wellbeing of veterans and their families” and involves the widest range of educational inputs, reflective experiences, individual peer mentoring and culminate in the development of a Health and Wellbeing plan.

Following COVID we still see the broader veteran community impacted by social isolation and many veterans with complex untreated or only partially treated health conditions. A spike in suicides occurred over Dec 22/Jan 23. Too many veterans. Defence and the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) continue to wait for the Royal Commission (RC) findings before implementing initiatives in Health and Wellbeing.

VCA continue to deliver programs to the extent of our capacity and continue to be fully subscribed with needy applicants.

“I feel so lucky, as a spouse of a veteran, to have had this experience – keep making this available to partners and family!” TA 25 participant



Programs conducted in 2023:

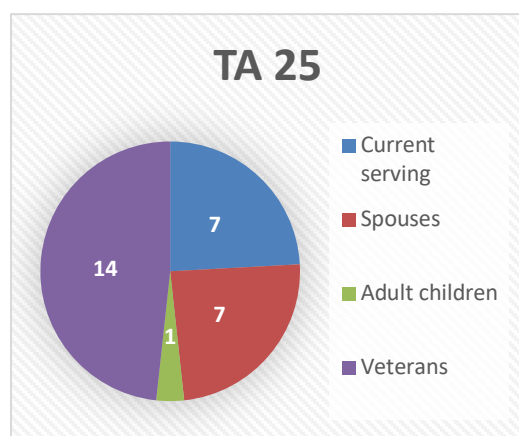
- TA22 Holistic Health Program, 25 Feb – 5 Mar 2023, St Georges, Gold Coast.
- TA23 ANZAC Peer Support Program, 22 Apr – 3 May 2023, Timor-Leste.
- TA24 Peer Support Development Program, 16 – 21 June 2023, Gold Coast.
- TA25 Peer Support Program, 16 – 26 Sept 2023, Timor-Leste.

Upcoming program for 2023:

- VCA 'Aftercare' Retreat 15 – 21 Nov 2023, St Georges Defence Suites, Gold Coast.

Timor Awakening 25 – Timor Leste

Timor Awakening 25 (TA25) commenced with facilitators, peer mentors and participants meeting in Darwin on Saturday 16 September 2023. There were anxious looks and nervous laughter as the group got to know one another before the journey to Timor-Leste the following day.



TA25 included 14 veterans, 7 spouses, 1 Adult child of a veteran, and 7 current serving ADF members. Over 10 days, the group of 29 embarked on a health and wellbeing program that created a unique bond of human connection, through extensive peer support activities and framework. The program follows a routine designed to achieve the most out of the time and remind participants the importance and effectiveness of a good routine, including morning exercise, and intentionally beginning and closing each day. The program had a focus on moral injury, forgiveness, relationships, self-help and gratitude. Throughout the program 'circle time' sessions are held on these topics, allowing participants to be and feel safe and vulnerable with like-minded peers, share their thoughts, experiences, troubles on various issues and start their healing journey.

"Relationships – this part (of the program) helped me move past some blockages, identified areas of my life to prioritise and revealed things I didn't know about myself." TA25 participant





“(Being able to...) talk about issues I’ve never shared as I felt safe in the environment to share.” TA25 participant

The sessions coincided with visits to historic sites in Timor-Leste that directly linked to the theme of the day. An example is the visit to Chega Museum, a Portuguese-era prison where Timorese resistance figures and political prisoners were interned, tortured and murdered during Indonesian’s 24 year occupation. One of the resistance fighters who was a prisoner for 10 years, Antonio ‘Green Leafs’, spoke openly with the group, recounting the horrors and challenges of life at the time. The group were inspired by Antonio’s resilience through the period, but also by his ability to completely forgive those who treated him so badly.

The group were honoured with traditional dancers and ceremony at Dili airport including the President and Vice-President of the Timor-Leste national veteran’s council and staff. Further to this the Australian Defence Advisors and Australian Head of Mission also welcomed participants to the Defence Cooperation Headquarters and for a sunset welcome function. We are appreciative of the ongoing support and cooperation with the ADF in Timor-Leste.

“TA nails on the head exactly what is necessary to explain history while also attacking mental health simultaneously.” TA25 participant





TA25 was planned to ensure our presence in Dili for the INTERFET 24th anniversary. There were eight INTERFET veterans on the program who participated with other TA25 veterans in a friendly Futsal match with the Timorese veteran's council, Australian Army and Timorese Army. It was wonderful to see veterans come together, laugh at each other's skills (or lack thereof) and enjoy a sausage sizzle after the match. Deep respect and camaraderie remain between the forces, even after this many years. The Australian Defence Cooperation Team welcomed us to their headquarters, Sparrow Force House, and lead by Major Guy Warnock, they provided an outstanding walking battlefield tour of the battle of Dili Aerodrome from 19 and 20 January 1942.



For the first time in a number of years, TA headed east and the first stop was Baucau. A few veterans remembered the nearly six-hour journey it used to take, but with sealed roads nearly the whole way, the program completed the journey in two hours. TA was ceremoniously welcomed in Baucau by local veterans with a traditional lunch. The time in Baucau was focussed on giving back to the community through support to the modest Veterans clinic and dentist.

Our team supported the amazing SABEH, a Timorese clinical outreach NGO, with two clinics and nearly 135 consultations. Clinicians, pharmacists, logisticians and keen supporters all provided valuable assistance. The visit to Baucau included a visit to the colonial era fresh water spring pool and a trip to the beach.

"My mentor was there for me and provided unwavering support. As did the other mentors." TA25 participant



"I have completed many DVA funded programs with no improvement as you eventually slide back into the hole. This program opens your eyes to humanity and the positives of life."

TA25 participant





The program participants continued their journey and visited Loihuno, a key location for the resistance fighters from 1975 – 1999. The scenery changed and mountains were explored. The team walked the Wasadiga historical track, guided by former Timorese combatants and clandestine who recalled stories of how they survived in these conditions for 24 years. Stories of faith, sacrifice, discipline, self-education, patience, resilience, moral courage, celebration and endurance. It was a challenging climb for many participants, but through resilience, determination and teamwork, every member reached the top and enjoyed the beautiful views.



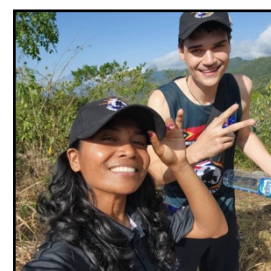
The program concluded back in Dili with extremely positive feedback from participants. An international program is not easy to coordinate and pull together and a huge thank you must be given to the support and admin team for the hard work they do in preparation for the program and the work they continue to do back in Australia.

All participants were briefed on RSL Qld, other Ex Service Organisations programs and Open Arms services. Participants shared their experiences of the range of agencies available, shown various websites and provided a USB with the full range of VCA wellbeing resources. Every participant goes through extensive one on one interviews throughout the program and leaves the program with a two page wellbeing plan that sets their intention and all they have learned into a positive plan for a healthier life.



"This was my very first program as a participant. As a GP who provides care to veterans, I have previously been aware of a range of medicalised programs. I have seen more progress in 10 days on this trip than my patients have meds over many months."

TA25 Participant, Current GP



TA25 MEDIA GALLERY



"I am so grateful for the experience, the passion and skill of the mentors and the care shown to me throughout."



"I'm feeling that my cup is full. I probably came on this trip feeling that my cup was empty – depleted. But now I feel energised, refreshed and blessed."



“I feel more in touch with myself and have a real motivation to look inward more and work on myself and allow myself to be happier.”





TA25 PARTICIPANT EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

1. How are you feeling today in comparison to how you were feeling before coming?

- *I feel more in touch with myself and have a real motivation to look inward more and work on myself and allow myself to be happier*
- *Today I have a better sense of understanding myself, how I react in situations and why.*
- *Great. Able to get weight off my shoulders.*
- *I'm feeling that my 'cup is full.' I probably came on the trip feeling that my cup was empty – depleted. But now I feel energised, refreshed, and blessed. Very grateful for the experience and equipped with some great tools and new friendships.*
- *Similar but inspired, humbled, motivated.*
- *Far less anxious and stressed, less alone.*
- *Amazing. A weight off my shoulders.*
- *I feel great, lighter.*
- *I feel humble and rested.*
- *Very good, happy.*
- *Today I feel more content and very introspective.*
- *I feel deeply grateful for TA and my partner. I felt fearful and curious before coming, mostly fearful for myself and partner.*
- *I am more understanding about myself and most importantly I have more understanding about my husband and it really helps a lot for the both of us.*
- *I'm feeling better, but with so much things to think about.*
- *I have realised trauma that I did not realise previously that I had. I feel relief with recognising this.*

2. What discussion topic was the most interesting and impactful?

- *Forgiveness.*
- *Trauma, moral injury.*
- *Trip to prison, forgiveness. Kick in the guts to wake up.*
- *I got something from each topic. I think I enjoyed the gratitude discussion the most.*
- *"Big talk."*
- *Relationships and Forgiveness.*
- *Green leaf. His forgiving.*
- *Forgiveness.*
- *Gratitude.*
- *History talk by Guy.*
- *They were all really good. Relationships was the most challenging. Joined by forgiveness. Mindfulness was inspiring.*
- *Big talk; about love and forgiveness.*
- *All the circle times have been the most insightful, both from my own perspective and contributions to listening to others.*



3. What was the most effective part of the program, in terms of education or inspiring your intention to change, and why?

- *Circle time, watching and listening to how open and trusting everyone was showed me what a safe space it was.*
- *Talking about issues I've never shared as I felt safe in the environment to share. This taught myself better communication skills to express what I feel.*
- *Stories of forgiveness from Timorese Veterans.*
- *Going to the various establishments and seeing the wonderful work that these groups are doing to better their lives and those of others – makes me want to be a better person.*
- *Visiting organizations such as Pro Ema + SOLS + Veterans clinic. Enlightened me to see where we can provide support that results in real change.*
- *Relationships. This part helped me move past some blockages, identified areas of my life to prioritize, and reveal things I didn't know about myself.*
- *The teamwork and learning to forgive.*
- *For me, a return to a place where parts of my trauma and Moral Injury occurred.*
- *Forgiveness part. I need to forgive myself first, then I can forgive others. I need to change to be more present in life.*
- *Being able to express my thoughts and feelings openly.*
- *Connection with deep and honest insight on all sorts of things... History, present, conversations and spoken therapy.*
- *All of it can say it inspired me to be a better person.*
- *The hiking, connecting with the environment where he served. Being physically challenged.*
- *School, history of Timorese heroes, visit pro-Ema, SABEH; because I want to share what I see to my family.*
- *See how you can change one day with so little things.*
- *Moving room buddies, rotating pers in cars, mixing up/breaking up small groups so as to better meet and get to know others.*

4. How was the support provided to you on the program?

- *Amazing, from every single person involved.*
- *Peer Mentor support and discussions with other Mentors.*
- *Nonjudgmental from other members of the participants.*
- *Fantastic, both from the admin/log side of things, from my mentor and from each and every fellow participant.*
- *Excellent – loved, open, compassionate, and needed.*
- *Excellent. Peer support was highly effective. The mentors and the program staff facilitated the process and provided additional support very well.*
- *Amazing. Empathetic.*
- *My mentor was there for me and provided unwavering support. As did the other mentors.*



- *The best, the mentors were great. DCP were supportive. Manny and his team, top class.*
- *Brilliant. So much care and support.*
- *10/10.*
- *100% by the mentors. As well as the group.*
- *The support from both mentors and attendees was amazing. Everyone had everyone else's backs at all times.*

5. How does this program differ from other programs or treatment you have experienced?

- *This is my first.*
- *Experiencing and learning about the struggles of people and sacrifice. These Timorese forgiveness to move forward in the positive light.*
- *Wham in your face – real life accounts. Shows how good we've got it in Australia.*
- *I haven't done anything like this before. I think the sharing of experiences is what has been different to other counselling style of treatment.*
- *Entirely new experience – superb mix of topics – history, mindfulness and getting out and about to both sites and organisations.*
- *Far more engaging. The methods allow 'good' approached to the applied individuality. This allows individuals to take what they need and review personalised benefits.*
- *They listen. They're empathetic and inspiring.*
- *This was a profound experience for as a metaphor and life experience, "A Heroes Journey."*
- *Better than a psych appointment. So much more fulfilling.*
- *TA nails on the head exactly what is necessary to explain history while also attacking mental health simultaneously.*
- *During this program I have developed a deep understanding of myself and my husband.*
- *This was my very first program as a participant. As a GP who provides care to veterans, I have previously been aware of a range of medicalised programs. I have seen more progress in 10 days on this trip than my patients have meds over many months.*



6. What could be done to improve the Timor Awakening Program?

- *I have not one thing to add here, my experience has been amazing*
- *For DVA to acknowledge the benefits this program provides*
- *Maybe just allow a bit more time between activities – but that's it..*
- *Not sure! Maybe consider offering insight and support organisations for participants needing DVA processes*
- *Maybe include more family members like young men Connor and Brendan.*
- *I believe it's a process of reconciliation and as such TA-VCA should be allocated more resources to assist the individual.*
- *It's awesome already.*
- *Not much – paper daily layouts would've helped me, but I personally suck with times and organization. But not really anything.*
- *Extra baggage allowance to donate goods to Timor.*
- *The program I experienced now is outstanding for me, the mentors, the team and how they embrace everyone. Maybe to improve more flexible and closer to one another*

7. What have you found to be your greatest mental health challenge?

- *Admitting that I have issues too. Admitting that I have room to grow and heal.*
- *Anxiety & Depression.*
- *Quick to anger 0-100 in a flash.*
- *Negative self-talk if things in my life go wrong, lifting myself out of a negative spiral and blaming myself.*
- *Anxiety due to over commitment during partners deployment.*
- *Anxiety and stress reduction.*
- *Anxiety.*
- *Forgiving myself.*
- *Showing forgiveness; anger emotions.*
- *Clarity in my own decision making and decisiveness. Second guessing myself and procrastinating important matters and conversations.*
- *My avoidance to accept I have PTSD and to work through it and become a better person.*
- *My greatest challenge has been learning to speak up when I am sad, in the past I have not as I have wanted to support my family, I am working on this*
- *Depression, fatigue, moral injury.*
- *Navigating the DVA/veteran transition period. It makes me nervous to think about it when it when hearing the horror stories from TA participants.*



8. What is your advice for DVA and the ESO community to enhance results in reducing Veteran Suicide, domestic violence and helping veterans onto the earliest possible path of wellbeing.

- *Program to be part of March Out procedure including follow up programs to maintain a sense of grounding.*
- *Confidential counselling to current serving members, professionals being able to direct defence to rest certain members.*
- *Follow TA's lead – invest in programs such as TA and group therapy is such a valuable tool.*
- *Professional engagement in a safe environment with other veterans, with trained/educated peer support and facilitators.*
- *To please seek help as early as possible through counsellors or doctors. To know I'll hold your hand and be beside you when you don't want to get up.*
- *Listen more, find a way to help each individual, no more cookie cutters.*
- *Forgiveness in themselves, a purpose to strive towards and personal inflection with no negative judgement.*
- *The program is great. Ongoing support, CBT, and communication training to support effective interpersonal relationships would help. Also learning about the brain and how thought and emotions work.*

9. What were the highlights of visiting Timor-Leste?

- *The people on the trip, the stories, the trust, the activities.*
- *Meeting people who are willing to forgive. Seeing the environment and the struggle to live.*
- *Learning new techniques, appreciating the country's landscape. THE PEOPLE. Sharing my stories.*
- *The history piece – learning about what happened here. Visiting the various establishments – pro-Ema, the CNR, the SOLs, the medical centre and the Circle time & individual chats.*
- *Seeing progress made by Timorese from war to peace through forgiveness and generosity.*
- *Learning from the Timorese how to overcome adversity.*
- *The people. Their forgiving nature. Other participants sharing their stories.*
- *The people loving nature, kids smiling, beautiful environment.*
- *To me it was creating strong connections with everyone I interacted with. Meeting the locals and veterans, while walking through the exact places they went to war, seeing their attitudes impacted me.*
- *Visiting the schools, rehab and most of all volunteering my serves to the medical center.*



10. How do you intend to engage in ongoing support for your personal growth?

- *I intend to actually reach out to a professional and face some issues that I'm dealing with and actively try and forgive some people and groups in my life.*
- *Express my feelings earlier to prevent anger issues.*
- *Girlfriends. Family. Peer Mentor. Other participants from program.*
- *I'd like to stay in touch with a couple of the individuals I've met during TA25 as well as the group.*
- *Personal exercise, find opportunities for "Big talk", explore what I can do to further support Timorese people.*
- *Seek professional help, i.e., psychologist. Seek advice re: DVA.*
- *Reach out to the other participants when I'm sad. Speak to my family.*
- *Stay connected with veterans care and engage in well being programs.*
- *Practicing journalling and holding strong friendships. I also found great feeling whenever giving, helping and connecting.*
- *Continuing to be part of the veteran's care. Continue seeing the psych. Surround myself with positive people.*
- *I need to love myself more, through giving myself more time.*
- *Start a diary where I can write about everything.*

11. Any additional comments or feedback

- *Thank you so much for this opportunity and support during this whole trip. I'm so grateful. I couldn't have known that this is exactly what I needed.*
- *I have completed many DVA funded programs with no improvement as you eventually slide back into the hole. This program opens your eyes to humanity and the positives of life.*
- *Thanks for letting me come on the trip. Incredibly helpful*
- *I feel so lucky, as a spouse of a veteran, to have had this experience – keep making this available to partners and family!*
- *Brilliant program. Cultural immersion was a highlight as was the battlefield town and visiting places of historical relevance. The mentors and support staff are superb*
- *Mentors to have a debrief as they give so much to the group.*
- *I have thoroughly enjoyed my time on TA25. I found that this was the exact thing that I never knew I needed. I am leaving with a clear plan for a way ahead for personal/proficient growth and a strong desire to return... soon*
- *Great work everyone, in particular the peer mentors. The leadership, management, mentorship enabled the conduct of the participants, in particular their level of engagement, openness, interaction, good humour, and involvement with the Timorese*



**WE THANK ALL OUR SUPPORTERS AND SPONSORS
IN IMPROVING THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF
VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES**



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Some special photos to finish....









