

U.S. Rep. Allen West, R-Plantation, led Iraq and Afghanistan veterans on a dive Sunday to an artificial reef 60 feet below the ocean's surface off Deerfield Beach.

The shipwreck of the Ancient Mariner, about 60 feet deep off Deerfield Beach, received a patriotic decoration Sunday courtesy of U.S. Rep. Allen West, R-Plantation, and about a dozen military veterans. West and his dive companions briefly put up an American flag on the deck of the popular artificial reef, then posed for photos and videos, as several dozen civilian divers — and numerous fish — watched. The flag flapped proudly in the strong southerly current.

The ceremony was part of June's "Learn to Dive" month established by the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau to encourage locals and tourists to take up scuba diving. It was also an opportunity for military veterans — both newly-certified and experienced divers — to have fun underwater.

"I think it's important wherever we are, that the flag flies," said West, a 22-year veteran Army officer and experienced scuba diver.

His dive buddies heartily agreed. They are veterans of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps with multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, and some have taken up scuba diving to relieve post-traumatic stress disorder. They received training through Veterans Ocean Adventures based at Shake-A-Leg Miami's Coconut Grove sea base.

"I try to find the veterans who have gotten out and plug them in," said Veterans Ocean Adventures president Branson Rector, who served as a lieutenant colonel in the Army. ". . . This is the kind of training they're used to — task-oriented, and it's peaceful and relaxing underwater."

Also along for the trip on South Florida Diving Headquarters' boat Aquaview were representatives of Diveheart, an Illinois-based organization that trains disabled people — civilian and military — to become certified scuba divers through the Handicapped Scuba Association. Diveheart also trains instructors and buddies — including several in South Florida — to accompany people with disabilities on dive adventures.

After the 60-foot-deep photo op, West and the veterans returned the flag to the Aquaview. The banner will be auctioned off by Force E, a local dive shop, with the proceeds benefiting Diveheart. Then the group embarked on a drift dive along the reef just north of the Hillsboro Inlet.

Despite its strong patriotic theme, the outing was not without humor, especially in reference to the recent sexting troubles of U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner, D-N.Y.

West, sitting on the Aquaview with his neoprene wetsuit rolled down to his waist in the midday heat, joked: "If someone takes a picture of me without my shirt on and tweets it, I'm gonna kick your butt."

The dive boat erupted in laughter.

John Arrambidez, a U.S. Army staff sergeant based at Southcom in Miami, said he thoroughly enjoyed his first open-water dive — and the company of other vets.

"It was awesome," he said. "Not knowing the ins and outs, I was able to buddy up with a more senior guy. There were fish everywhere you looked. . . . It will be hard to top with the ambience. Very cool."

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