

ESO CORNER

In each edition of *Queensland RSL News*, the ESO Corner will shine a spotlight on different ex-service organisations. These groups provide valuable assistance to the Defence community, and RSL Queensland is proud to partner and collaborate with many of them.

RIVER PEACE

at Pandanus Park

Sitting peacefully on the northern bank of the Normanby River near Rinyirru National Park, Cape York, Pandanus Park is a place of healing and mateship for all veterans of the Australian Defence Forces.

Pandanus Park Veterans Retreat, a 10km riverfront Cape York paradise, is almost too good to be true.

From the small township of Laura, guests travel 100km inland on dirt roads, leaving civilisation (and amenities) behind. The remoteness of Pandanus Park and the self-sufficient bush camping add to the peaceful experience.

Since 2007, the riverfront land has been leased from the Kalpowar Land Trust and it is intended as a retreat for returned and active service personnel and their guests.

While it is sometimes mistakenly referred to as a Vietnam veterans' retreat, Pandanus Park President Peter 'Feral' Hannah says it is open to veterans of all conflicts and their guests.

Over the years, the number of younger veterans visiting Pandanus Park has increased. Guests can visit with their mates or family and camp for as long as they like.

The park is open from ANZAC Day to Remembrance Day each year, subject to road closures.

The site is big enough to be all things to all veterans.

"It depends how you want to use it. If you want peace and quiet, and to get away from everything and everybody, you can find a remote camping spot here on your own piece of riverfront," Peter says.

For those who want a little more social contact, there are plenty of campsites closer to the unofficial 'RAP' – a cleared area where guests can bring something to sit on and join together for a few hours of lively discussion each afternoon.

There is little to no formality and few rules, other than simple 'housekeeping' rules, including removing your own rubbish, not cutting down trees (there is plenty of firewood available from fallen timber) or damaging the pristine environment.

The fishing is usually fantastic, with cherabin (freshwater prawns) and





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Phone Peter (0438 676 495), Ivan Bunn (0427 660 404) or former 2RAR and RAEME soldier Craig Rhodes (0476 106 395) who will happily answer questions, offer advice about what type of gear to bring or provide information about the best travel route to get there.

Visit pandanuspark.com.au.

barramundi for guests to hone their fishing and cooking skills on.

There is usually an orientation period in early August, when events such as a car rally, bush barbecue and pancake day are organised to help newer visitors meet people and get to know the park and its attractions. Vietnam Veterans' Day on 18 August is always well attended, with a 7am service followed by a gunfire breakfast.

The lack of social media is a plus at Pandanus Park. No reception means no interaction or pressure from the outside world. There are emergency

arrangements in place if needed.

Many great stories have emerged from Pandanus Park over the years. Some attendees who had little success with formal programs such as hospital lock downs, alcohol dry outs and psychiatric counselling, looked at life in a different light after a few camping trips at Pandanus Park.

Peter says several suicides have been prevented by a person's experience here.

"We have enabled veterans and their families to lead proud and independent lives by giving them the Pandanus Park option," Peter says. ←

At the time of publishing, Pandanus Park was temporarily closed, in line with the Public Health Emergency Amendments Bill 2020 restricting gathering numbers and non-essential travel. The park will abide by government directions and reopen when it is safe to do so.