

Tony's Trek 2026 – Paddle For Awareness

Hi Everyone,

Here's a late news item which given the date (12th April 2026) couldn't wait for the next edition of our newsletter.

A very good friend of ours, Tony Pearce is once again challenging himself with a paddle along the entire length of the Murray River. Tony has put together a comprehensive explanation of his exploit which I submit to you to read. Best of luck Tony.

What is Tony's Trek

Tony's Trek is an annual endurance event undertaken by Tony Pearce, immediate past Chair, and current Non-Executive Director of the Emergency Services Foundation (ESF), it was created in 2022 with the first event being undertaken in 2023. All events are fully self-funded, and all proceeds go directly to ESF's mental health programs.

Tony's volunteer role on the ESF Board is a profoundly personal one as he has been in the emergency services sector for over forty-three years with six of those concurrently served as an Australian Defence Force member. In that time, he has seen too many of his colleagues suffer from trauma due to their role in emergency services/management. This trauma very often results in mental injury, having lasting impacts throughout their career and their retirement. Tony has lost friends and colleagues to their illness, and we continue to see lives lost annually. He believes that it is totally unacceptable in this day and age, and in a progressive society such as ours that we continue to see those that protect us suffering so badly.

In supporting ESF's work in improving mental health outcomes for Victoria's +/-139,000 emergency workers, both paid and volunteer, in frontline and support roles, Tony decided to commit to an annual endurance event to raise awareness of the pervasive mental health issue that exists in the emergency services, the work that ESF does in response to this, and to raise money to fund our valuable evidence informed early intervention programs.

ESF History Established in 1987, the Emergency Services Foundation was created with a clear and enduring purpose: to protect and promote the wellbeing of everyone involved in Victoria's emergency services sector - paid staff, volunteers and their families. Nearly four decades later, ESF's mission broadly remains the same - to support the wellbeing of the emergency services community.

With their focus on inter-agency collaboration, ESF brings Victoria's emergency service sector together to share knowledge and wisdom, gather evidence, and collaborate on translating that evidence into leading practice initiatives. ESF creates safe spaces where workers and volunteers can develop and learn among peers who understand the unique context of their work. They translate global research into practical action, designing

programs shaped by the voices of workers, volunteers and families, and guided by the clinical expertise of their Mental Health Advisory Group.

ESF's resources and programs are shaped with input from member agencies, enabling initiatives to be adapted to each organisation's unique context. In this way, they ensure that protecting mental health and wellbeing is recognised as a shared responsibility across the sector, driving long-term preventative work that complements agencies' frontline priorities and their own prevention activities.

Previous Tony's Trek events

The first event was conducted in 2023 with planning and preparation commencing in early 2022 taking nearly 12 months. *Tony's Trek 2023 – One Step at a Time* commenced on 10 March 2023 and over 50 consecutive days Tony covered 1,506km. The route was specifically chosen to cover much of the area where the Victorian Black Summer Bushfires had occurred as an acknowledgement of the profound mental health impacts those fires had, and continue to have, on emergency workers, along with the community members themselves of these areas.

The Trek commenced at the State Control Centre in Melbourne and headed to Mallacoota in the far East of Victoria before returning to Nowa-Nowa in East Gippsland. Tony then hiked up the Alpine Way to the peak of Mount Hotham. From Hotham he walked to Wodonga and then back to Melbourne finishing on 29 April at the MCG.

The Trek visited 41 communities along the way, and more than 140 emergency services workers joined Tony at various stages of the event. The inaugural event raised \$240k which was used to fund six Residential Wellbeing Pilot Programs in which 48 volunteer and paid emergency workers from nine agencies in the early stages of their mental health journey participated. The pilots were evaluated by Phoenix Australia and Monash University and their impact as a program that improves mental health and wellbeing outcomes was confirmed. A gap had been identified in terms of early intervention initiatives for Victorian emergency service workers.

The Residential Wellbeing Program was developed to help fill that gap. There are no similar programs in Victoria that exist to provide the same sort of intensive early intervention to help avoid the risk of more serious mental injury. The purpose of establishing a Residential Wellbeing Pilot Program for Victorian emergency service workers was to:

- Assist serving emergency workers to understand the mechanisms and effects of operational stress on the body, the brain, on behaviour and on relationships.
- Provide opportunity to discuss the impact of personal emergency response experiences with peers in a systemic and professionally facilitated environment.

- To equip participants with skills for self-regulation, effective communication, and planning strategies to maintain their resilience while facing ongoing operational challenges.
- To help minimise progression to serious mental injury and WorkCover claims.
- To demonstrate through evaluation the benefit of such an early intervention initiative for participants, families and organisations.

Tony's Trek 2024 – Side by Side saw the event head overseas to Nepal to hike to Mt Everest Basecamp. Tony and 25 emergency services members participated in the event between 8 – 29 March raising \$40k to build the ESF Lived Experience online resource.

The Answering the Call study, a national emergency services mental health study conducted by Beyond Blue in 2018, highlighted that self-stigma was alive and well amongst emergency service workers. All the evidence suggests that this has changed little. ESF delved further to understand how that could be broken down and heard that people needed to hear about the experiences of people 'just like me'. And that is what the Lived Experience resource provides.

Hearing how others have made sense of their own journeys of trauma and post traumatic growth can be comforting but also confronting, however the message is consistent, 'feel no stigma in seeking help and get that help early'.

2025 - 3.65km for 365 days for emergency services mental health while not a Tony's Trek event saw Tony partner with the organisers of the 365 challenge to raise awareness of emergency services mental health and to promote Tony's Trek 2026 – Paddle for Awareness.

The challenge involved running/walking/kayaking etc., a minimum of 3.65km per day for 365 days back-to-back. Tony started the event on 1 January and finished it on 31 December and set his own target of covering 4000km for the year which was above the challenge obligation. His reason for doing this was to create an opportunity for people to ask him why? Every time someone asked the question it started another discussion about emergency services mental health (Tony's objective).

Tony's statistics for the challenge were as follows: 4,000km over 365 back-to-back days at an average of 10.96km per day. +/- 4,602,087 steps. +/- 135,000 kayak paddles strokes. 621 hours, 51 minutes of activity 2.5 pairs of Hoka shoes Challenge days completed in Vic, NSW, SA, Qld, King Island, Hong Kong

Tony's Trek 2026 – Paddle for Awareness

So, to *Tony's Trek 2026 – Paddle for Awareness* which is a 2,400-kilometre solo, unsupported paddle down the Murray River, from Bringenbrong in New South Wales to the river's mouth at Goolwa in South Australia. The purpose is as always to raise awareness about emergency services mental health and this time to raise \$50k to fund another ESF Residential Wellbeing Program for emergency workers in the early stages of their mental health journey. The

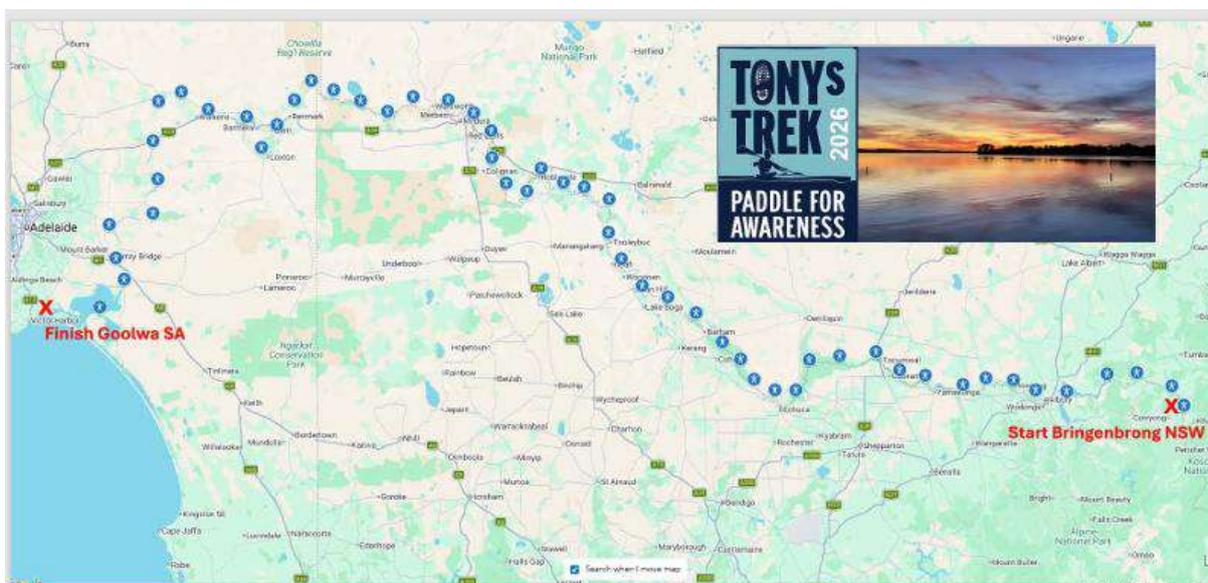
paddle will take +/- 53 days at an average of 45km paddled per day. Tony will be totally self-sufficient, purifying water for drinking, eating predominantly dehydrated foods, and sleeping in a one man tent on the banks of the river nightly. He will stop at multiple centres along the Murray where community events will be organised involving emergency services organisations, local government and community members.

How can you help?

To follow Tony's progress during the event and to keep up with his planning prior, join the Facebook event page via this link <https://www.facebook.com/groups/3954793511476192> and share the link through your networks. The greater the number who follow the page the greater the awareness created of emergency services mental health. To donate, you can access the Give Now site via this link <https://www.givenow.com.au/tonystrek2025>. You can also go to the Emergency Services Foundation website at esf.com.au, scroll down until you come to the Tony's Trek section and then click on the 'Find Out More' button, once there click on the 'Donate' button. This will also take you to the Give Now page.

Finally, the Emergency Services Foundation has been accepted as a charity partner of the Victorian Container Deposit Scheme with all donations to us going directly to *Tony's Trek 2026 - Paddle for Awareness*. If you are not currently depositing your eligible cans and bottles it would be absolutely fantastic if you could consider starting and donating your refund to the paddle. You can press the 'Donate' button on the machine and enter donation partner number C2000073327. Alternatively (this works best), you can download the VCDS App and nominate Emergency Services Foundation as your donation payout preference. You then only need to scan your barcode at the machine to start the process, and the refund will automatically be deposited in the ESF Tony's Trek account.

Please get behind this great cause and help Tony to protect those who give so much to protect us.



TONYS TREK 2026

PADDLE FOR AWARENESS



Supporting the mental health of Victoria's volunteer and paid emergency workers

After 46 years in the emergency services sector, Tony Pearce, Emergency Services Foundation Director is paddling 2,400km down the Murray River to raise awareness of the mental health impacts of emergency work on Victoria's 139,000 emergency services/management members, and to raise \$50k to fund a Residential Wellbeing Program for emergency workers in the early stage of their mental health journey.

Get behind the journey!

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