



# OHF INTEL

4th Quarter 2021

A Quarterly Report from Operation Healing Forces

## My Heartfelt And Sincere Thanks To You, Our Loyal Contributors

*Dear Friends and Supporters of Operation Healing Forces,*

As I approached writing the introductory letter for this fourth quarter newsletter, I thought I would expound on the continuing (and growing) needs of the men and women of Special Operations Forces, but you are already aware, as donors, of the physical and psychological sacrifices they make on our behalf.

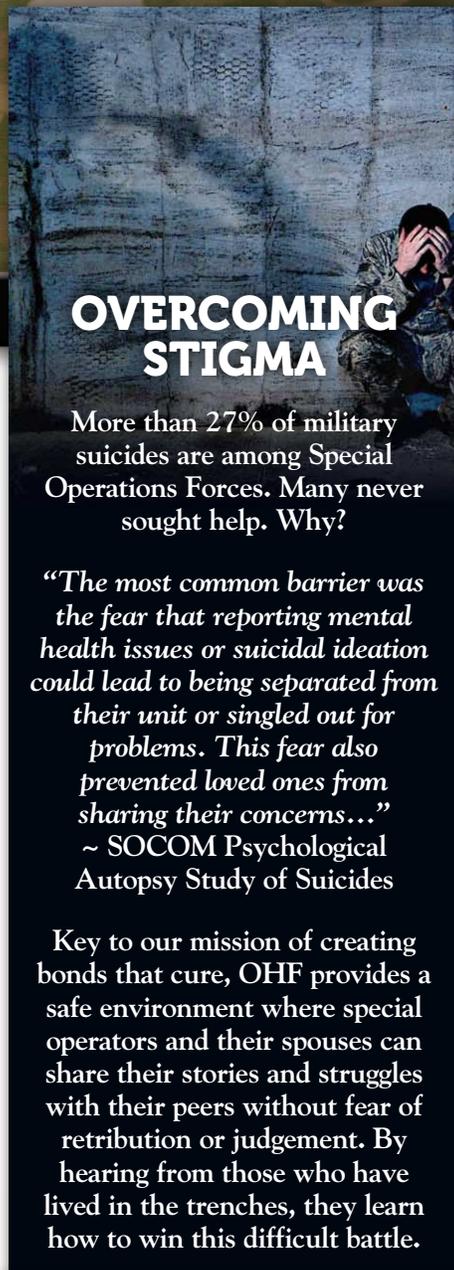
Then, I thought about highlighting the number of avenues that you can support us and the growth of our services, both in breadth and depth over the years, but this month's newsletter does an outstanding job of updating you on those.

However, I've never had the opportunity in this forum to express my heartfelt and sincere thanks to you, our loyal contributors. Given the season, this seems appropriate.

- Thanks for enabling our founder, my brother Gary, to bring his vision/dream to reality.
- Thanks for supporting the valiant men and women of the SOF community, who put their lives and well-being on the line every single day so that we can enjoy the fruits of freedom in this great country.
- Thanks for enabling our Board of Directors and staff to continue to oversee this operation with passion, sensitivity, compassion and a dedication that far exceeds the expected.
- Thanks for helping OHF become one of the most highly respected charities in the military space.
- Last but not least, a personal thanks for enabling me to participate in such a worthwhile endeavor.

*Wishing you happy holidays and a safe and healthy new year.*

Gratefully,  
Tony Markel  
Board Secretary & Co-Founder  
Operation Healing Forces



## OVERCOMING STIGMA

More than 27% of military suicides are among Special Operations Forces. Many never sought help. Why?

*“The most common barrier was the fear that reporting mental health issues or suicidal ideation could lead to being separated from their unit or singled out for problems. This fear also prevented loved ones from sharing their concerns...”*  
~ SOCOM Psychological Autopsy Study of Suicides

Key to our mission of creating bonds that cure, OHF provides a safe environment where special operators and their spouses can share their stories and struggles with their peers without fear of retribution or judgement. By hearing from those who have lived in the trenches, they learn how to win this difficult battle.

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# "AN EXPERIENCE LIKE NO OTHER"

## Travis & Jessica Johnson

tremendous stress on the couple's marriage. Their relationship became further strained due to Travis's challenges with PTSD, which wasn't officially diagnosed until after his fourth and final deployment. Travis retired from the U.S. Navy as a Senior Chief Petty Officer in December, 2020.

Despite marriage counseling, post-deployment resiliency retreats and other therapies over the years, the Johnsons contemplated divorce on more than one occasion.

"We basically found ourselves as parents and that's it," says Travis, who has a 13-year-old son in California, and two daughters with Jessica, ages 9 and 4.

"This was an experience like no other. Going on this trip where all we had to focus on was each other kind of brought us back physically and mentally more than anything else we've ever done," Travis continues. "It gave me an opportunity to learn how to communicate in a deeper way. I would hope everyone in SOF would be able to do this at some point so they can experience what we experienced, and hopefully help their marriage or even save their marriage if they can."

As Travis and Jessica Johnson of Virginia celebrate their 10th anniversary this December, they say the Operation Healing Forces retreat in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, was both unforgettable and instrumental in helping preserve their marriage.

Travis's demanding career in Unmanned Aircraft Systems and Mission Command for Naval Special Warfare, meant he was often either on deployment to combat zones or in training preparing for deployments. The extended absences put

**"This was an experience like no other. Going on this trip where all we had to focus on was each other kind of brought us back physically and mentally more than anything else we've ever done,"**



*Travis & Jessica heading out to scuba dive together.*

# GONE SURFIN'

## Andrew & Jessica Hoppe

Over the course of Andrew and Jessica Hoppe's 13-year marriage, the couple has endured a demanding, fast-paced Special Operations Forces' lifestyle that's included numerous transfers and frequent separations due to Andrew's many deployments and trainings. So, when all of the stars seemed to align for an escape to Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, for an Operation Healing Forces retreat, they didn't think twice.

"For the first time in our lives we were able to completely shut our brains down and just enjoy each other," Jessica says, who devotes much of her time to keeping up with their active 12-year-old son Eli, a competitive hockey player.

Without the usual pressures of work, parenting, and household chores, the Hoppes spent quality time together scuba diving, surfing, exploring, and connecting with the other retreat couples.

"It was weird at halfway through the week to realize how much stress you're normally under when you're in an environment where there is no stress at all. That was probably the best part—just being able to truly relax," Andrew says, who is with the 3rd Marine Raider Battalion and is preparing to deploy once again in February.



**"It was great for our marriage. It was great for us individually. And, I thoroughly appreciated the opportunity and the people that put it together."**



*Andrew in his element catching waves in Punta Cana.*



Alex & Jenny exploring Punta Cana.

# HANGING LOOSE

## Alex & Jenny Holt

Alex Holt of Washington wasn't thinking about himself when he heard about the Operation Healing Forces Couples Retreats. As a Battalion Command Sergeant Major in the Army's Special Forces, he wondered how he could make the program accessible to his frequently deployed soldiers and their partners. When an opening came up for Alex and his wife Jenny to experience the retreat for themselves in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, they jumped on it.

"The retreat couldn't have come at a better time for us due to the multiple stressors of work and personal life during the last few months," Alex says, who's on call 24-7, 365 days a year.

With a blended family that includes six grown children, three grandchildren and two kids still living at home, ages 7 and 17, life is busy. Jenny is also an on-call professional chef for the Four Seasons Hotel in Seattle and a language instructor for the Special Forces community. A native of Bandung, Indonesia, she received her American citizenship during the height of COVID in 2020.

Highlights of the retreat included Jenny learning to surf and Alex discovering a budding passion for golf. When he returned to work, Alex says he felt like a changed man, which didn't go unnoticed by his soldiers. "They were like, 'this isn't the same person who just left. What in the world did you do?' And I said, 'let me tell you about this nonprofit called Operation Healing Forces.'"

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# FINDING PURPOSE IN THE PAUSE

## Katie Calvillo

When Katie Calvillo of Florida set off for an Operation Healing Forces Spouse's Retreat in Georgetown, SC, she was apprehensive. While she'd participated in a couples retreat with her husband Al, an Army major, she would go on her own this time. She wondered if it would be an awkward week of polite exchanges with strangers.

"Instead, we instantly connected. Through each one of the SOF spouses, I learned about the challenges and obstacles they faced being married to a SOF warrior," Katie says.

**"These women were nothing short of amazing and the backbone of this community. We started the week as strangers with little in common aside from our husbands' professions, and we left as sisters."**

Away from the daily stresses of work and caretaking, Katie enjoyed sightseeing and wellness activities, like journaling, meditation, and yoga.



"We are used to taking care of everybody else," Katie says, who works as a government contractor while also raising four children, ages 11 to 18. "But, for a week somebody took care of me. It gave me a chance to press pause on real life and just focus on what makes me happy."

During the retreat, she learned she could apply for tuition assistance through OHF's Special Operations Additional Resources (SOAR) program and is now five classes away from graduating with a master's degree in Organizational and Strategic Leadership. And, a horseback riding excursion on the beach reignited a long-forgotten childhood passion.

"You literally have to turn off everything else in your life when you're riding because everything is about connection to the animal, not only to better your skills, but for your own safety. It was life-giving to me," Katie says. "When I came home from the retreat, I started taking weekly riding lessons. Seven months later, I'm still pursuing this passion. I hope one day to pay it forward and have an equine therapy program for other military spouses."



*Katie's riding instructor Macy Brown helps military & their dependents overcome anxiety & build confidence through connection with horses.*

# MENDING FENCES

## Devin Hamilton



CPT Devin Hamilton of Florida, 7th Special Forces Group, grew up helping his dad build fences and decks. Now, he's using those skills to help Gold Star families. "One of the biggest things people don't realize that Gold Star families go through is every time they've got to think about something that their husband could have done for them, it brings up that pain that they aren't with them anymore," Devin says.

Most recently, Devin helped mother of five Natasha de Alencar, whose husband Mark, a Special Forces weapons sergeant, was killed in Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan in 2017. With dogs and kids to consider, "Natasha's concern was mainly safety," Devin says. "The fence that was there previously was constructed very, very poorly. And during Hurricane Sally, it fell apart. Another windstorm would have picked that thing up and thrown it into the house."

With lumber costs skyrocketing, Devin reached out to Operation Healing Forces to seek assistance through the Immediate Needs program. Within 48 hours, the funding had been approved.

**"Operation Healing Forces was able to take a huge weight off of Natasha's shoulders."**

Devin gathered a crew of seven volunteers, including several of Mark's old teammates, to help him construct the new fence. "It was a really cool experience to have people there that knew Mark and Natasha very well and build that fence in his honor."



*Natasha's fence before.*



*Natasha's fence after.*



## Join Our Legacy

Our special operators don't rest so neither can we. With over 10,000 special operators currently deployed in more than 75 countries around the globe, we expect the demand for Operation Healing Forces to only grow.

Every time we send a couple on the brink of divorce to a retreat, provide crisis intervention for a struggling military family and support a full-time caregiver of a wounded warrior, we strengthen human bonds, the fabric of our military family and the security of this great nation. Thanks to you, in 2021, we reached 2,500 Special Operators and their families through all the OHF programs combined, including:

- **51 SOF Couple Retreats across the U.S. & Caribbean, which supported 204 special operations couples.**
- **Over 400 Immediate Needs cases, equaling close to \$700,000 in direct crisis support, that included medical emergencies, crisis intervention, adaptive medical equipment, funeral & memorial costs, aiding over 1,600 SOF and/or their families.**
- **158 SOF families with financial planning and transitions.**

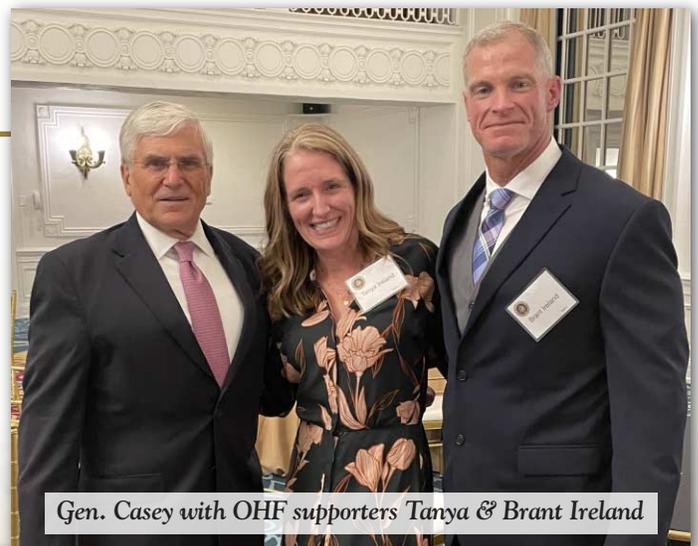
When you become an Operation Healing Forces Legacy Member, you're making an investment in our nation's future special operators, their spouses, and their families. Contact Jim Zuba at [jim.zuba@ophf.org](mailto:jim.zuba@ophf.org) to learn more or visit <https://operationhealingforces.org/estate-gift/>



Please help us continue to make a difference by completing this confidential survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/OHFLegacy>

## CHANGING LIVES

Special guest speaker General George Casey, U.S. Army, Retired, Former Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, 2007-2011, joined Operation Healing Forces and 130 generous donors and their guests in Richmond, VA at The Jefferson Hotel on Tues., October 19. At the special OHF Donor Appreciation Dinner Gen. Casey noted: *“OHF is an organization that changes the lives of our special operators, their families, and provides the necessary support so our warriors can focus on the mission.”*



Gen. Casey with OHF supporters Tanya & Brant Ireland

# CONNECT WITH OHF

**Help expand OHF's impact –  
Please share this newsletter.**

Help spread the word about Operation Healing Forces and the battles faced by our nation's Special Operations Forces. Forward this newsletter to a friend, relative, or colleague today. You may end up connecting OHF with its next donor, supporter, or recipient family.

*"I read an article online about Operation Healing Forces a couple of years ago and as a U.S. Marine Corps veteran myself, I felt compelled to get involved."*

— OHF Supporter David T. Maccagnone, CEO Multi-Bank Securities Inc.

## Helping SOF SOAR

Now more than ever, SOF couples need your support. OHF is expanding its support for immediate needs, crisis needs, career transitions, employment, caregivers and spouses, and financial planning. To contribute or learn more about these programs, please contact SOAR Program Manager *Stephanie DeZern* at [stephanie.dezern@ophf.org](mailto:stephanie.dezern@ophf.org) or (619) 316-7043.

### SOAR (Special Operations Additional Resources) Programs

#### OHF's Immediate Needs Program Offers:

- OHF Employment Services
- SOF Caregiver & Spouse Retreats
- Alumni Support
- Ambassador Dinners
- Financial Planning
- Legal Assistance Program

## A Home for Healing:

The phenomenal growth in our retreat numbers means more couples can participate. This growth also means that Operation Healing Forces needs homes to house our heroes and their spouses.

Providing a home for an OHF retreat is an unforgettable gift and an extremely rewarding way to support SOF couples.



#### OUR NEED:

5-bedroom, 5-bathroom destination locales throughout North America.

#### TIMING:

Retreats take place over 5 days. We have immediate needs for retreat locations in 2022 and beyond.

#### LEARN MORE:

Contact *Jim Zuba* at [jim.zuba@ophf.org](mailto:jim.zuba@ophf.org) to learn more about opening your home or how else you can aid our nation's Special Operators and their families.

# Four Ways You Can Help!



**1** **Cash Contributions**  
(100% to program costs)



**2** **Donate a 5 bedroom/  
5 bath Home for a Week**



**3** **Donate your Airline Miles**  
It's easy. Call or email Desiree Holley  
to find out how. (813) 480-6078  
desiree.holley@ophf.org



**4** **Donate through Amazon Smile**  
Search for Operation Healing Forces at  
smile.amazon.com, and Amazon will  
donate a portion of sales to OHF.

A major reason OHF retreats, Immediate Needs, and other programs OHF offers to support the Special Operations community mean so much and are so healing is because they are offered at no cost to the participants. This provides deserving elite warriors and their families much needed respite to fully relax, focus on one another, alleviate financial stress and burden, and greatly aids in their healing process.

Offering these restorative, life-changing programs takes the support of dedicated donors like you. Please consider making a tax deductible donation to OHF to support the special operations community. Please note, all donations go 100% to program costs to support our special operators and their families as Gary & Tony Markel personally cover 100% of OHF's overhead expenses. *Every dollar you give will go directly towards benefiting Special Operators and their families.*



OHF has achieved Charity Navigator's top ranking of Four Stars. Described as "Exceptional" - Exceeds industry standards and outperforms most charities in its cause.



OHF has achieved the GuideStar Platinum Seal of Transparency Rating, the top 0.1% of the nation's non-profit organizations in terms of transparency.



OHF received the "Top Rated" rating by Great Nonprofits. Rated highly by people who experience their work first hand - clients served, volunteers and donors.

## Thank you for your support of Operation Healing Forces

### Comments? Questions?

Please tell us what you think about our quarterly newsletter. Direct questions, comments, or to unsubscribe, e-mail us at: [info@ophf.org](mailto:info@ophf.org) or by mail to:

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**Creating bonds that cure.**  
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