



OHF INTEL

1st Quarter 2019

A Quarterly Report from Operation Healing Forces.



Creating Bonds that Cure

Dear Friends and Supporters of OHF,

On November 27, 2018, a roadside attack in Afghanistan killed three Special Operations Forces soldiers: Army Sergeant First Class Eric Emond, 39, Army Captain Andrew Ross, 29, and Air Force Staff Sergeant Dylan J. Elchin, 25. Emond, a father of three who founded a nonprofit to benefit veterans, was serving his seventh overseas deployment.

The story of Emond, Ross, and Elchin is tragic, but not unique. While many civilians have forgotten about this “endless war,” Special Operations Forces are deployed again and again, as many as a dozen times. With a ceaseless deployment cycle, high-risk, high-adrenaline missions, and toxic, depleting work conditions, they see and experience things most people can’t imagine.

Because most can’t understand what Special Operators face during deployments, between deployments, or during reintegration into civilian life, connecting with those who do offers a uniquely healing experience. The stories of two couples featured in this newsletter, Carlos and Hope Ordonez and Dave and Gina Weigel, and this [CBS News 6 interview with US Marine Veteran Ron Sloan](#), show the healing power of these bonds.

In 2011, Operation Healing Forces set out to create bonds that cure for relationships wounded by war. We believe we’re fulfilling that mission. With your help, we have served over 500 participants since 2012. With your continued support, we will expand our 2019 offerings so that more couples can experience the profound power of shared experiences, understanding, and hope.

*Very Respectfully,
Jeff Hudson,
Lieutenant Colonel (R),
U.S. Army,
OHF Executive Director*

True Patriot: Gary Markel Receives USSOCOM Patriot Award

On November 14, 2018, the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) awarded Gary Markel, founder and board chairman of Operation Healing Forces, the U.S. Special Operations Command’s Patriot Award, the highest award Special Operations Command can place upon a civilian. The award citation reads: “His continued care and commitment has allowed for wounded Special Operations warriors and their spouses to reintegrate, rehabilitate, and learn resiliency resulting in saved marriages. This unselfish support makes him a true Patriot and friend of the Special Operations community and reflects great credit on himself, Operation Healing Forces, and the United States Special Operations Command.”

The Void—Britta Reque-Dragicevic

A warrior’s life after military service ends isn’t like civilian retirement. When what you do is who you are — and anyone called into a service field, who is “born” to be what they do knows this — the end of it feels like death.

Warriors who can’t go back to war die inside. Quiet, aching, pervasive deaths.

Civilians are elated when your service ends, because it means you’re out of harms’ way. It means you survived. It means they can exhale. Finally. They expect you to find something else now to fill your time. Some of the perceptive ones will understand that this isn’t about finding a new job — this is about mourning the loss of your identity and finding a new one.

*From “When You Can’t Be a Warrior Anymore...Is There a Reason to Go On?”
by Britta Reque-Dragicevic, lifeafterwar.org*

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Words from Warriors

"This was exactly what we needed..."

"Being around other Special Operation soldiers who had to depart service due to injuries and wounds was awesome, as it allowed us to share our experiences. This was exactly what we needed, especially since I am going for another surgery on my shoulder for injuries related to my time in service. Your own neighbors and friends don't know or understand what you've been through, so this made a huge difference. We came back talking about a lot of things, and this experience will be with us for a long time. So, we would like to say from bottom of our hearts, thank you. I have never known anyone to be so giving as you."

With our gratitude, Ernesto and Tressa Chavez



"The retreat on this yacht made all of my horrific combat missions dissipate, and I thought about how all the good that American soldiers do for our country. I watched brothers on the boat cry and confide in me without even knowing me, open up, and let things out. I never talk about my deployment, which is a big part of my anger issues. Now, I see the benefit of being around other brothers who have seen similar horrifying times in war. Healing events like this bring us to a happy place to make us recognize that people like you do care, respect what we have done, given up, and sacrificed to make our country great.

I'd been fighting for my country since 2008. When I came home, I was fighting for my life with stage 4 colon cancer, which spread to my prostate, my shin bone, my back, my bladder, and killed my left kidney, which had to be removed. I don't talk about all of these things, because I don't want people to think I'm weak, and I don't want my beautiful wife to see me sick.

Thank you so much—we love you—and don't know how to convey our gratitude for this uplifting, stupendous, gratifying once-in-a-lifetime experience. May God bless you, and God bless America!

Sincerely, Michael and Belle Morse

"Time for me to heal..."



Carlos and Hope Ordonez

A 2018 call about Operation Healing Forces was an unexpected lifeline for Team Sergeant Carlos Ordonez. After over a dozen years in Special Forces, Carlos was managing multiple health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, and chronic nightmares.

His health took a toll on his family, and Carlos realized he needed a change. "I needed a break from the world, a break from everyone," he says. But between the realities of military life and parenthood, the chances of Carlos and his wife Hope getting such a break seemed slim.

"I was sitting at work praying to God to please help me as my life was spurring out of control and that's when Jeff Hudson called," Carlos says. "When he told me about the retreat in the Caribbean, it was the prayer being answered. That's how I knew it was time for me to heal."

The opportunity to rest and recharge in the Caribbean seemed like a sign from above, he says. "One of the fondest memories of my life is scuba diving. I can spend hours at an aquarium, just staring at God's creation."

Diving in the Caribbean's crystal-blue waters was remarkably restorative, says Carlos. "It was extremely therapeutic for me. I probably spent more time in the water than anyone else there."

Health conditions like TBI can isolate warriors like Carlos, Hope says. "Before the retreat, he had become a lonely person. He just wanted to stay home. Seeing him relax and open up was one of my favorite parts of the retreat."

"My wife had become my caretaker, and this lifted the burden," Carlos says. "At the retreat, we danced, stared at each other, and smiled. I don't remember the last time we've been able to be that happy together."

The retreat brightened a dark period and marked the start of the family's next chapter, Carlos says. "We've been back several weeks, and my wife has seen a change in me. I'm happier. I'm starting to enjoy being alive."

"What OHF has done for me, I can't really put into words," he says. "It's allowed me to live again."

"We found our people..."

Dave and Gina Weigel know military life. After spending most of Dave's 23-year military career at two of the world's largest military bases, Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington State and Fort Bragg in North Carolina, where Gina also enlisted, the couple have strong military connections spanning the country. Now settled in Steilacoom, Washington, they're both active in the local community on and around base.

So when Dave learned about Operation Healing Forces last fall—a program none of his colleagues had ever mentioned—the couple was surprised and intrigued. They were offered a spot at the 2018 Virginia Beach retreat, where they looked forward to reconnecting without the demands of parenting, work, or daily life.

Tucked into a charming beach town, the retreat offered both rest and recreation, a restorative combination for the busy pair. With a slate of planned activities that set just the right pace

for the group, they took part in surfing, jet skiing, a challenge course, horseback riding, and paddle boarding.

But their most treasured takeaways were new friendships with the other couples in attendance, and access to a pipeline of SOF support that they never knew existed. "At the retreat, I just had this moment, like oh my gosh, there's a community. You're our people," said Gina.

Finding solidarity through shared experiences was unexpectedly therapeutic, says Dave. "They knew the things I've been through; the injuries and the things we can't talk about with civilians, because they just can't relate. I shared things I hadn't been able to share before. It's been pretty healing."

Their strength and spirits renewed, the couple is ready to embrace their next adventure—a 2018 move back to Fort Bragg, where Gina plans to resume nursing school.

"There's true value in a community," says Gina. "We've met people through the military all over the country, but this isn't the same. This experience removes boundaries and facilitates these deep friendships. Learning that our special operations community is bigger than our geographical space and that we have this wide net of resources is just the biggest relief."



Dave and Gina Weigel





A Home for Healing:

Operation Healing Forces staff plan, implement and personally oversee incredible, once-in-a-lifetime retreats for our couples. Every detail, every meal, and every activity are planned to maximize our participants' relaxation, healing, and personal and relational growth. But our retreats can't take place without the homes provided by generous donors.

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.

OUR NEED: 5-bedroom, 5-bathroom destination locales throughout North America.

TIMING: Retreats take place over 7 days. We have immediate needs for retreat locations in 2019 and beyond.

LEARN MORE: Contact Jim Zuba at jim.zuba@ophf.org to learn more about opening your home or how else you can aid our nation's Special Operators and their spouses.

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.

Thank you for your support of Operation Healing Forces

Comments? Questions?

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Operation Healing Forces

380 Park Place Blvd, Suite 175, Clearwater, FL 33759
(727) 221-5071



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www.operationhealingforces.org