



# OHF INTEL

1st Quarter 2020

A Quarterly Report from Operation Healing Forces.

## Our Country's Longest War Stretches On

*Dear Friends and Supporters of Operation Healing Forces,*

As we enter a new decade, our country's longest war stretches on. The war in Afghanistan began on October 7, 2001 and is now the longest war in American history, spanning the administration of three presidents and outlasting the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and Korean War combined.

What is the price of this ongoing conflict? The burden of modern warfare increasingly falls on our nation's Special Operations Forces (SOF) and their families, who experience higher rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and death by suicide, a health problem that continues to plague military veterans.

According to a September 2019 report from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the United States has lost more veterans to suicide in the past decade than during the entire Vietnam War. More than 60,000 veterans have died by suicide since 2008, while 58,000 military fatalities occurred during the war in Vietnam.

The operators themselves are not the only ones affected, of course. Secondary trauma experienced by military spouses results in higher levels of depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, and post-traumatic stress reactions for partners of deployed service members, according to research published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. The study of 250,626 wives of active duty Army personnel shows significant increases in these mental health problems for spouses of service members deployed longer than 11 months.

Despite these challenges, the Operation Healing Forces team greets the new decade with hope, resolve, and a strong drive to continue our healing work. Thank you for your support of our expanding programs and offerings for these dedicated warriors and their families. With your support, we will continue creating bonds that cure in 2020 and beyond.

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

## What are we so afraid of?

I think shame is what we are all hiding in plain sight. Shame that we are not good enough, strong enough, "Ranger" enough. Shame to admit that we are not "ok." That we are struggling with emotions that won't stop swelling inside us and shame from our inability to silence our thoughts from the still of our comfortable homes (though we were capable of quelling them during the battle overseas).

We were taught to silence our emotions in order to execute in combat, to operate in a zero defect environment. We were taught to be indomitable, bulletproof, invincible: invulnerable. And here today, with all that training and experience, it's just not working anymore. Today we have become unable to silence the storms inside, unable to stop the memories and we are ashamed of our inability to "suck it up and drive on."

Vulnerability is not weakness.

While antithetical to your training as a war fighter, in life, vulnerability equates to strength.

Anger, fear, shame, uncertainty, pride, regret, joy and sadness. These are emotions. You are feeling again. This is normal. Welcome home. Now let's get to work.

Excerpted from "Military Training Saved You in Combat but May Bury You in Life" by Brandon Young, *The Havok Journal*, November 18, 2019

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# THE GIFT OF HEALING:

## OHF Immediate Needs Program Offers A Helping Hand

The Willis family travels often from their hometown of Holly Springs, North Carolina to Philadelphia, where 8-year-old Jensen receives medical treatment for Hypoplastic left heart syndrome (HLHS) at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. This congenital heart defect means that Jensen is missing the left side of his heart and requires frequent, lifesaving medical care, including testing, surgeries, and ongoing monitoring.

Some of these trips are planned months in advance, while others are more urgent and sudden, says Jensen's mother Amelia. Late last fall, the family learned that Jensen needed to go to Philadelphia in December 2019. The news came just as Jensen's father Jeremy Willis prepared to retire from a long Special Operations Forces career as a military linguist that included seven deployments and two overseas missions.

"We had just three weeks to arrange this trip," says Amelia. "In 2017 we went to Philadelphia five times, and in 2018 it was twice. The trips never happen at convenient times and can be a burden to pay for the airfare and accommodations we need."

The care coordinator for Jeremy's unit put the couple in contact with Operation Healing Forces Immediate Needs Program. Right away, OHF Program Manager Stephanie DeZern stepped in to help meet the family's need, says Amelia.



*The Willis Family of North Carolina*

The Immediate Needs Program covered travel costs for the December 2019 trip and enabled both parents to be at Jensen's side during several days of intensive medical testing, says Amelia. "Usually, just one parent goes, because it's too expensive to send both. This allowed both parents to be there for a child who has been through more than any human should."

Hospital stays are traumatizing for Jensen, so having both parents nearby during his most recent stay was a blessing, says Amelia.

**"Meeting our immediate need was vital to our son's wellbeing and to our family wellbeing as a whole. We are so grateful. And Stephanie has kept in contact with us to check on Jensen, which means so much to us. We can't say thank you enough."**



# BABY ON BOARD

## Joe and Silvia One More Toy, Key West

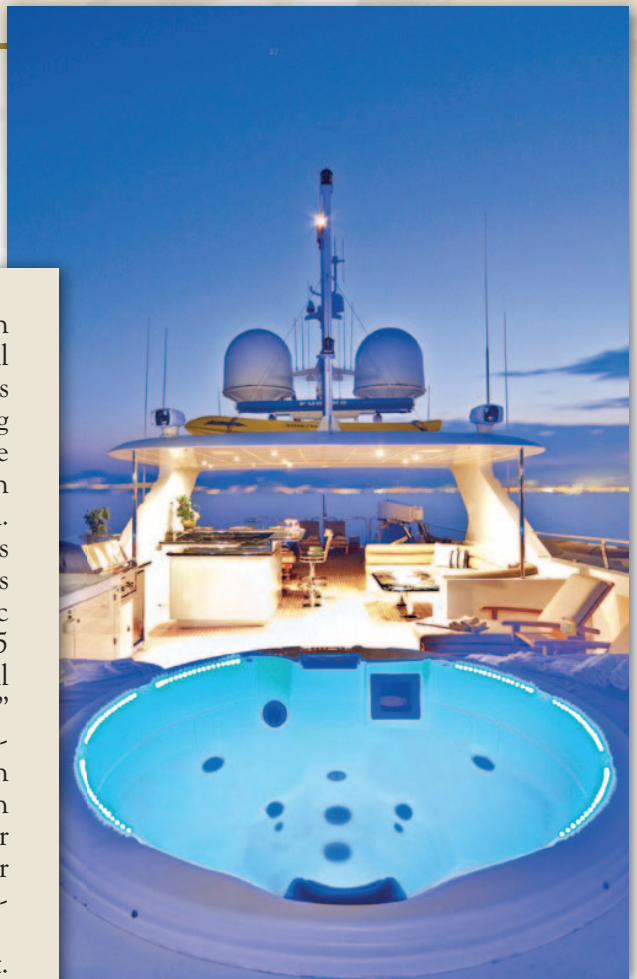
For Joe and Silvia of Nashville, the December 2019 Operation Healing Forces retreat came at the right time. Joe, a Special Operations Forces engineer sergeant with the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), was healing from a January 2019 suicide bombing in Syria that killed four Americans and wounded three service members, including Joe. He spent five weeks in hospitals in Baghdad, Landstuhl, and at Walter Reed before rejoining his team.

Over the following months, Joe's recovery included countless medical appointments and therapeutic interventions for his injuries. "I ended up with pretty severe facial burns, a traumatic brain injury, and lingering auditory issues, even though I am 95 percent healed and doing well," says Joe. "I also have neurological sleep apnea, which is a fairly common outcome after head trauma."

The retreat's timing also provided a dose of recuperative relaxation before the birth of the couple's first child, expected in spring 2020. "While this has been a blessing and something both of us have looked forward to, it is a very stressful time, both for myself and for Silvia as a soon-to-be mother," says Joe. "This year has been very busy, and I can't count the number of medical appointments we've had between my injuries and the pregnancy."

As Gary Markel's yacht *One More Toy* traveled from Ft. Lauderdale to Key West, the retreat attendees combined relaxing in the hot tub with activities on, off, and around the vessel. "We did a snorkel trip, we had a beach day, and had great dinners both on and off the boat," says Joe. "We also have great memories of our time on the boat in the hot tub and the amazing staff onboard the yacht taking care of us."

The couple's best memory from the trip was an unforgettable dolphin swim in crystal-clear turquoise waters. But their most profound takeaway was an opportunity to rejuvenate before beginning their next adventure as new parents, says Joe.



**"It was really eye-opening for me in terms of how much people care about and want to help us. It's much appreciated, much needed time for us to heal."**





# HEALING CONNECTIONS

## Isaac and Rachel, Napa Valley

Isaac and Rachel Reyes have attended plenty of military sponsored marriage retreats over the past decade. But the demands of Isaac's 18-year military career meant the couple never had a honeymoon. Now a Special Operations Forces detachment commander, Isaac was completing his selection course when the couple wed in 2007. "I actually didn't even know if I'd make the wedding," he says.

When children came along, the idea of a honeymoon fell off their priority list completely, says Isaac. Then their daughter, Avery, now 9, was diagnosed with a rare brain tumor at age 5, when their younger daughter Emma was a toddler. "There was never time for a honeymoon, and my wife handled her care while I was deployed."

Four deployments later, the pace of the SOF operations tempo was taking its toll, and pair was ready to recharge.

**"I've lost probably 6 to 7 close friends in group from Afghanistan and Iraq, and that's affected me personally. My team sergeant died right in front of me," Isaac says. "This was our chance to reconnect and heal."**

While Isaac and Rachel arrived in Napa for the January 2020 retreat, they knew this experience would be unlike any others. Although retreat lead Robert Kilmartin, US Army Major (R), told them what to expect, nothing could have prepared them for the unique escape the retreat offered, Isaac says. "We were informed by Rob that this wouldn't be like the other marriage retreats. There would be no required counseling sessions. Instead, it would be a time to just focus on your spouse."

From private wine tastings and winery tours to spa visits, superb meals, and shopping in downtown Napa, the retreat was unforgettable from start to finish, says Isaac.

The best conversations take place over a meal or a glass of wine, not as part of a required class or curriculum, says Isaac. "Not only did it get us the opportunity have a honeymoon-type experience, it really allowed us to connect with one another in a way that we wouldn't have had on a family vacation. It definitely strengthened our marriage."

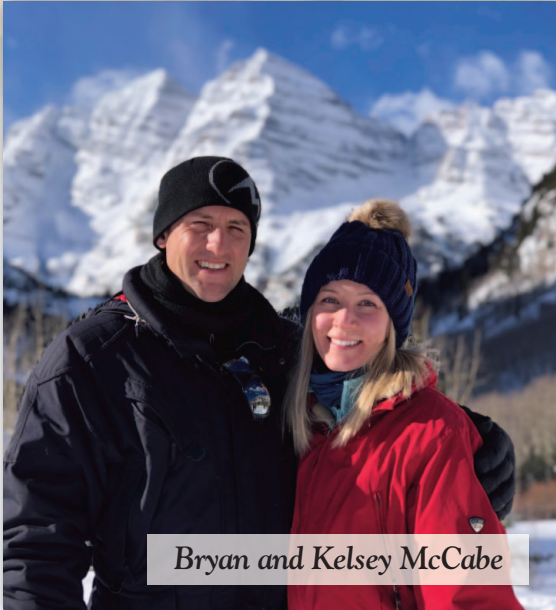


*Isaac and Rachel Reyes in Napa*



# MOUNTAIN MAGIC

## Bryan and Kelsey, Apsen



*Bryan and Kelsey McCabe*

For Bryan and Kelsey McCabe of Gulfport, Mississippi, the January 2020 Operation Healing Forces retreat in the Colorado mountains was more than memorable. The pair gained a new shared pastime—skiing—along with meaningful connections to other Special Operations Forces couples.

Bryan, a Navy Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewman (SWCC), was already a seasoned skier when the couple arrived in Aspen. Kelsey was a novice on the slopes, but not for long. Each couple had a private ski instructor for the first three days of the retreat, so Kelsey received one-on-one coaching while Bryan skied.

“By the third day, I was feeling comfortable and we were skiing together,” Kelsey recalls. “We got confident out there, and it felt great to master it and go fast. My husband has been skiing all his life, so to be able to ski with him made me pretty proud.”

The couples spent time off the slopes, too, touring craft breweries, boutique shops, world-class restaurants, and snowmobile trails. One highlight was a sleigh ride to a mountain cabin for lunch, says Kelsey. “It was snowing, in fact it was almost a blizzard, and it was beautiful.”

The camaraderie of the retreat group, bolstered by the shared experiences unique to Special Operators and their families, made this retreat unique, Bryan says. “As a special operator, I know I couldn’t have attended a retreat like this with civilians. There’s just something unique about the way SOF couples can connect right off the bat.”

“We can’t thank the donors enough for this once-in-a-lifetime trip,” says Bryan. “We never would have had that experience on our own without the generosity of OHF donors. It was a dream retreat. We’re more than thankful.”

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*Jerry and Ann Samford*

# GROWING THE OHF FAMILY

## OHF Donors Jerry and Ann Samford

Jerry and Ann Samford joined the Operation Healing Forces family in 2015, when they attended an informational event at the home of co-founder Tony Markel to learn more about supporting OHF. But the couple already had a strong family connection to the organization: Ann is the daughter of Gary and Tony's father's twin brother, making her their first cousin.

Since 2015, the couple has hosted several retreats at their property in Nelson County, Virginia, including the first OHF Caregivers Retreat in 2019. "We heard the stories of the successes the organization had had with reintegrating OHF families through the retreat process. This was obviously a needed and worthwhile process. We appreciate the sacrifices these families have made and are proud to be able to help them," says Jerry.

Supporting Special Operators and their families doesn't end when a retreat concludes, and couples who attend an OHF retreat join a robust, supportive family of OHF friends,

supporters, and alumni. "I really like the efforts OHF is making to stay involved in the lives of those who attended the retreats, and the help they give the couples to maintain the bonds formed long-term," says Ann.

Investing in OHF makes a meaningful contribution to a vital cause, says Jerry. "All donations go to programs as overhead costs are covered by the Markel family. The staff and special operations families are very respectful of the opportunities offered them and return your kindness one-hundred-fold. We are happy to support this organization and plan to continue our support for the indefinite future."



To learn more about making a tax-deductible stock gift to OHF, visit [operationhealingforces.org/donation](https://operationhealingforces.org/donation).

# Please Consider Supporting OHF



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.

One reason OHF retreats are so healing is that they are offered at no cost to the participating couples. This gives deserving warriors and their spouses a rare chance to fully relax and focus on one another. Offering these restorative, life-changing experiences takes the support of dedicated donors like you. Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to OHF. Your gifts enable OHF to continue making these transformative retreats available to more couples.

## 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 2020 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 spouses.

## Four Ways You Can Help!



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



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



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



- 4** **Donate through Amazon Smile**  
Search for Operation Healing Forces at [smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com), and Amazon will donate a portion of sales to OHF.

## 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.

[www.operationhealingforces.org](http://www.operationhealingforces.org)

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