



OHF INTEL

1st Quarter 2021

A Quarterly Report from Operation Healing Forces.

Courageously Fighting An Important Battle

Dear Friends and Supporters of Operation Healing Forces,

As the world shows signs of spring, we are proud to support renewal and replenishment for Special Operations Forces (SOF) families. This newsletter features stories of couples who attended recent OHF retreats in healing, restorative mountain and seaside locales. But underneath the idyllic photos and relaxing itineraries lies a deeper truth: Each and every warrior and spouse is courageously fighting an important battle.

In these pages, you'll read about Richard and Megan Stayskal, who fought to change 70-year-old case law so that soldiers could receive compensation for medical errors in military hospitals. Their story, and so many others, exemplify the courage and grit of our nation's elite warriors.

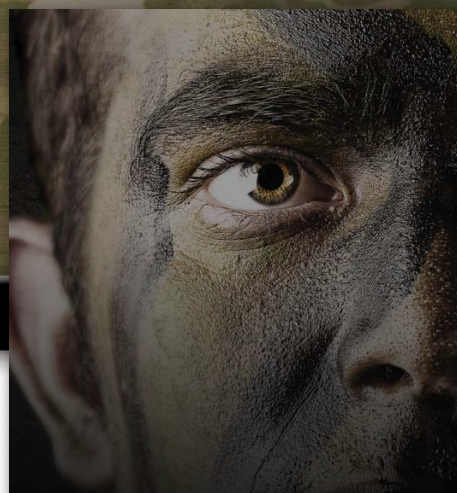
I am inspired by the fighting spirit of our nation's SOF, and I am honored to help every soldier that OHF has the opportunity to serve. The steadfast support and selfless giving shown by OHF donors and friends is also a source of inspiration. You'll find one such story on page 6 of this newsletter.

The past year has not been easy on military personnel and their families. This means that your support is more important than ever. In the words of W.C. Hunt, another soldier who shares his story on these pages:

"Don't stop giving. Dig deep, because these are life and death situations people are going through. Everyone is still fighting. You never know, as a donor, whose life you're saving."

I look forward to continuing this lifesaving work together.

*Very Respectfully,
Gary Markel
Chairman and Founder,
Operation Healing Forces*



I think back on my last trip, reflect on events that transpired when I lost four brothers to an IED.

My mind replays the event all the time. I know there is nothing that can be done, warriors do what they volunteer and train to do, but this does not make real life easier. Being at home with your wife and kids is not always a pleasant environment wearing this mask.

*From "The Masks We Wear:
SF Soldier Speaks Out"
by Joshua Thompson,
US Army Special Forces,
havokjournal.com*

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WINNING FOR WARRIORS:

Richard and Megan Stayskal

"It truly does mean a lot to my family that there are people out there that care that much..."

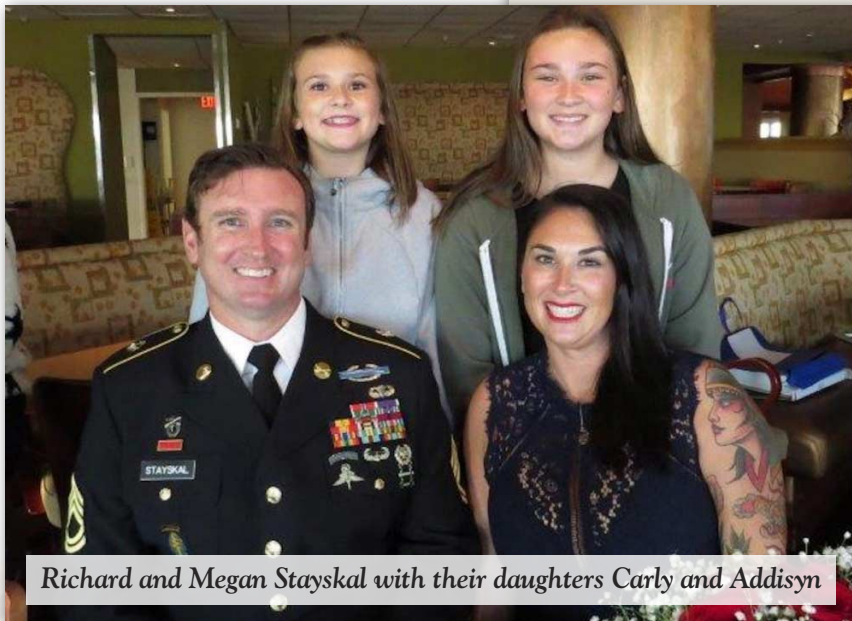
As an active-duty Green Beret for the past 19 years, Richard Stayskal of North Carolina is an expert at military warfare. But for the past four years, Richard and his wife Megan have been fighting a different type of battle.

In 2017, a military hospital missed a tumor in Richard's right lung that was later identified as advanced lung cancer by a civilian doctor. The military hospital's diagnostic error allowed Richard's cancer to grow for months without treatment, resulting in a diagnosis of terminal cancer. But a 70-year-old case law called the Feres Doctrine prevented him from holding the military hospital accountable for its mistake or receiving compensation for the error.

Throughout 2018 and 2019, Richard and Megan traveled to Washington D.C. to lobby for a change to this law. After a year of this tireless advocacy work, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) was signed by President Trump in December 2019. The Act includes a provision that allows military personnel to seek compensation for medical mistakes in military hospitals that lawmakers credit to Richard and Megan's activism.

After winning the hard-fought battle, an Operation Healing Forces retreat in December 2020 gave the pair a chance to unwind and reconnect. The entire retreat experience was a wonderful surprise, says Megan. "We've been approached by so many non-profit organizations since Rich was diagnosed, and I'd heard about other marriage retreats, so I wasn't sure what to expect."

Swimming with dolphins was a highlight from a week that also included parasailing, SCUBA diving, gourmet dinners, and new friendships with other Special Operations couples. "We can't thank Operation Healing Forces and its donors enough," says Megan. "It truly does mean a lot to my family that there are people out there that care that much who are willing to financially donate and make this happen, not only for my family, but for so many others."



Richard and Megan Stayskal with their daughters Carly and Addisyn

To support retreat experiences like this one for SOF couples, please contact info@ophf.org.



Robert and Mimi Sweetman

ROYAL TREATMENT:

Robert and Mimi Sweetman

Mimi admits she wasn't sure what to expect from the retreat experience. "We'd never been to this area before, and we were going to be living in a house with people we hadn't met," she says. "But we felt welcome from the very beginning."

The couple hadn't skied before the trip, but that soon changed. "By the end of the trip, we weren't quite professional skiers, but we were getting close!" Rob says. "I went from not being able to stand up on skis, to being able to ski over a hill, jump, spin backward, and land."

Aside from the dramatic change of scenery, Robert recalls another refreshing aspect of the experience—meeting Special Operations Forces (SOF) couples serving in vastly different roles. "I've mostly interacting with other SEALs, so it was great to meet other SOF couples from the Army side," he says. "We had three other couples who were active duty Army. Every night we'd eat together and share our experiences and just enjoy the amazing house that was provided for us."

As parents of a toddler and a pre-teen, the couple rarely has time to focus on rest, healing, or one another, Robert says. "I hope the donors know that they're making a difference, and we'll never forget it. We're just so grateful."

For Robert and Mimi Sweetman of San Diego, January's Operation Healing Forces retreat in the Colorado mountains was a breath of fresh air—brisk, cold, alpine air. "It got us out of the house for the first time in a long time," says Robert.

During his eight years of service with US Navy SEAL teams, Robert deployed to Abu Dhabi and Iraq. He medically separated from the military in 2018. "The toll this took on me was both physical and mental. Yet, it may have been my wife and daughter that suffered the most. The average year for a Navy SEAL consists of 256 days away from home," Robert writes in a thank-you letter to OHF donors.

"We didn't have to save for years, plan for months and organize the whole thing. Your family and Operation Healing Forces were there for us when we needed you. This gave us the chance to decompress for once. The ski lessons were over the top. We've never enjoyed such luxuries. Then, being able to come back to your residence really made us feel like royalty."

NATURE THERAPY:

Andre and Michelle Martinez



Andre and Michelle in Aspen

"I can't thank the donors enough for this. The gratitude I have, I can't put it into words. It absolutely helped me, and I definitely came back rejuvenated."

Special Forces Operations Sergeant Andre Martinez of Florida is medically retiring after a 20-year career with the Army. His decades of service have resulted in multiple injuries and chronic health conditions, including traumatic brain injury (TBI). "It's a combination of years of explosions and hard landings," he says. "Your personality is not the same, you're irritable, your short-term memory is just gone, your head hurts, and you get migraines. All of these things just compound over time."

Some of his injuries were more recent. Last year, Andre's team came under fire in Afghanistan, and two soldiers were killed while eight others, including Andre, were wounded. "I took it pretty hard as the team leader. It has a psychological impact on me."

February's Operation Healing Forces retreat in Aspen, Colorado offered the couple a chance to step away from the stressful transition, says Andre. "Being in nature does it for me. I had never been to Colorado, and it calls to me. Being on

top of the mountain is so serene. I can just take it in and reflect on my life in a positive way. It made a huge impact on my life."

Andre and Michelle spent the week skiing and snowboarding under the guidance of a private instructor. "I was shot in my leg four times, so I didn't know if I'd be able to snowboard," Andre says. "But on the mountain, I didn't feel pain—it just didn't bother me as much."

As homeschooling parents of two young children, Andre and Michelle don't expect to make it back to Aspen any time soon. Knowing the trip was a once-in-a-lifetime experience made it even more meaningful, says Andre. "I can't thank the donors enough for this. The gratitude I have, I can't put it into words. It absolutely helped me, and I definitely came back rejuvenated."

DON'T STOP GIVING:

W.C. Hunt

After a string of setbacks in 2019 sent a Georgia Special Operations family into a crisis, W.C. Hunt attributes the family's survival to Operation Healing Forces and its Immediate Needs Program. "The help you provided was life-changing," he says. "I don't even want to think about the position I'd be in without Operation Healing Forces."

A former Army Ranger sniper with the 75th Ranger Regiment, W.C. was medically retired from the military in 2014 with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and other lingering health problems. In August 2019, a letter informed W.C. and his wife Candice that W.C.'s disability compensation was being slashed without explanation or warning. As their main source of income evaporated, the family fell into financial crisis. Within four months, W.C., Candice, and their two young children were homeless.

Abruptly uprooted from their local community, the family spent the next four months sleeping on the floors of relatives' homes and in tiny rented rooms. W.C. believed the swift change in his disability compensation was a mistake, but couldn't make progress with the Veterans Affairs office without legal help. In the meantime, his family needed assistance with basic needs like food, gas, and safe housing.

W.C.'s care coalition representative put the family in touch with OHF. Right away, the program provided financial help for essentials like groceries and transportation. Just as importantly, OHF connected W.C. to an attorney who helped start the process of correcting the paperwork mistake affecting W.C.'s pay. Within several months, his compensation was partially restored, and the family found a small rental where they could begin rebuilding their life.

Military personnel are told to do their jobs and that they'll be taken care of if they're injured, W.C. notes.



W.C. and Candice with their children Alice and Eric

"When the ball gets dropped and that support is stripped from you, it turns your life upside down. It worries me to think of others who have gone through this. Lives have literally been ruined or even ended by suicide because of these types of things. That's what makes programs like OHF so critical."

"I want the donors to know that you guys were the ones to help us when our backs were against the wall and we had no other options, and that's what helped us survive and move forward," W.C. says. "Don't stop giving. Dig deep, because these are life and death situations people are going through. Everyone is still fighting. You never know, as a donor, whose life you're saving. But I believe this money is actually saving lives."

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

OPEN ARMS:

"These young men and women are the peers of our children; they're just an extension of our family and that's why we want to help. Our Christian faith tells us to help others, and we're taught to do it as a gift of God. That's why we do it in anonymity."



Retreat attendees in the Pensacola, Florida home of OHF donors.

In the final week of February, with much of the country was still wrapped in winter, a group of Special Operations Forces couples spent a restorative week in Pensacola, Florida. The retreat took place at the home and expense of Alabama-based donors who prefer to remain anonymous.

This retreat is the first one sponsored by the couple, who learned about Operation Healing Forces through their youngest son, a Special Operator himself. "We were looking for a new mission, and we have a strong affinity for kids—and these are kids—who are being sent overseas from all parts of the world," says one member of the couple. "Our son learned about the retreats from another soldier, and said 'Mom, you have the perfect home for one of these!'"

As parents who welcome their children's friends with open arms, OHF gave the couple

the opportunity to extend hope and healing to the peers of their own children. "We're the parents waiting outside the gate when our child finishes basic training, waiting to take our son and his six friends to the laundry," says their partner.

"These young men and women are the peers of our children; they're just an extension of our family and that's why we want to help," he continues. "Our Christian faith tells us to help others, and we're taught to do it as a gift of God. That's why we do it in anonymity."

"I think we're more excited that OHF picked us. We love doing this for these kids who deserve it so much," adds one spouse. "I feel like I'm doing this for somebody's son. And maybe someday, somebody will have the opportunity to help mine."

CONNECT WITH OHF

Please share this newsletter.

Help spread the word about OHF and the battles faced by our nation's Special Operations Forces. Forward this newsletter to a friend, relative, or colleague today.

"In an environment of quiet professionals, sharing is not the first response, especially if it exposes a vulnerability. So, articles like these give us a glimpse into a world we otherwise would not have. It helps us take action to heal our families and care for our spouses, instead of being a bystander, watching the train wreck without the tools to stop it. Thank you for what you are doing."

— Autumn, SOF spouse

Helping SOF SOAR

Now more than ever, SOF couples need your support. In 2020, OHF is expanding its support for immediate needs, crisis needs, career transitions, employment, caregivers and spouses, and financial planning. To contribute or learn more these programs, please contact SOAR Program Manager Stephanie DeZern at stephanie.dezern@ophf.org or (619) 316-7043.

SOAR (Special Operations Additional Resources) Programs

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

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.

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 2020 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 families.



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



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, 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 or by mail to:

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Creating bonds that cure.

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