



OHF INTEL

Winter 2017

A Quarterly Report from Operation Healing Forces.



The Essence of OHF A Letter from a Retreat Participant

Please allow me the opportunity to greatly send my thanks and praise for your dedication and efforts in supporting a program like Operation Healing Forces. My name is (name hidden due to still on active duty and classified operations), and I'm currently a SOF operator with Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC). I have been operating within the SOF community just 2-months shy of 20-years. I recently attended the retreat in Virginia Beach with my beautiful bride, Megan, whom has been by my side for the last 8-years. We have been overwhelmed with emotion from the special retreat that you so kindly provided.

This retreat was not a vacation, instead it was a moment for my wife and I to stare each other in the eyes and focus on reconnecting without distractions.

It allowed for me to hold her hand and feel her persona without dealing with the day to day life issues. We not only reconnected with one another, but we were given the prestigious opportunity to connect with the 3 other couples that attended as well. During the retreat, we openly talked about things like PTSD, injuries, marriage, sleep issues, and deployments. My wife and I realized that I was not the only one out there having the same problems. One day during dinner my wife just started taking to Jeff, as the members of the house listened, and she realized that I had the same issues as everyone in the room. Jeff explained to her the issues that he had encountered, and she so eloquently raised her eyebrows at me as to confirm that "this abnormality is normal," for the most part. SOF operators have gone for

so long, so hard, so fast, and so frequent, that it has become us. We don't know how to physically, psychologically, and emotionally slow down the way that most "normal" people do. For so many years, I have placed my military training and deployments over my health, my family, and my marriage. I constantly preach to my teammates that I am a veteran at failed marriages and a rookie at a successful one. Your retreat allowed my wife and I to disconnect from the kids and the outside interferences without being judged by members of my command. This is one of the largest takeaways that I left with. I felt during the retreat that there was no judgment, no disappointment, and no discredibility from the occupants in the house. Your retreat allowed Megan and I to focus on what we meant to one another and to recharge our marriage in the simplest forms. I have been tremendously successful in my military career, but the factor that is a critical component is that I could have never done this without my wife by my side. Many people do not realize the burden that is left on the wives when the service members leave. Megan on numerous times has helped pack my

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"Twin Rivers is our family retreat in Arrington, Virginia. It has meant so much to our family to see others enjoy it as much as we do and bringing couples together to share experiences and heal."

■ Ann and Jerry S. – Retreat Home Donors

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1000 YARD STARE

If you've been there
you know this well
the stare of a man
who's been through hell

In search of a friend
who can't be found
only to be told
he's homeward bound

ain't nuthin' to it
it don't mean a thing
another brother flying
upon silver wings

push it back
try not to care
bury the emotion
with the 1000 yard stare

By Richard D. Preston

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bags for training and deployments with a hearty warm smile. Even though my bags were small, her pack was about to get much larger and heavier. She has been the anchor that has allowed me to serve this country honorably. We had a little baby girl born in February of 2016 and three and a half weeks later I was leaving for a 7-month deployment to a not so friendly area. When I left home, I assumed everything would be ok like it has always been, but it was not. She had suffered post-partum and hand required multiple post pregnancy related surgeries, because she had abnormal bleeding issues related to our daughter's birth. This never stopped her from being a mom, a wife, and my supporter, but I know that she suffered because she was doing it alone. She never really explained the severity of these issues, because she did not want to

distract me from what I loved to do, wanted to do, and had to do. She understood that serving my country for my family was my passion and I would like to say to you, my family has now gotten a bit larger. As I prepare to deploy again in the next 10 months I not only will fight on behalf of my immediate family, but now I will be honored to fight for yours as well, my extended family. You may never know the true impacts that your retreat provides, but your simple act of kindness to support veterans is immense. You allow veterans to connect with their wives and purge their issues for a short time. You allow veterans to hold on to a hug a bit longer, to kiss a bit softer, and to hold a warm hand just a bit lengthier... Please let me know if there is anything at all that I can do for you, because you have done so much for us.



Recently retired Special Forces Sergeant Major David Tope and his lovely wife, Tina, also in the United States Army and their beautiful family.

My wife and I were able to reconfirm our love for each other and begin a long and slow healing process. Both of us are Veterans that have witnessed firsthand the cruelties war offers. Speaking for myself, the space and time you provided with other kindred souls demonstrated that we weren't the only ones hurting and that the hurt can be overcome. We are slow healers, not yet mature enough to cry or fully lament our pain but still able to recognize unconditional love. Your loving actions made us closer by healing the unspoken pain of deployments and separations.

— **Recently Retired Army Special Forces Sergeant Major with 28.5 years of service, spent three years in Afghanistan, two years in Pakistan, and multiple deployments to Central and South America**

Letter from the Chairman

Gary Markel, OHF Founder

We Remain Committed.

2017 was a fabulous year for OHF but not without its challenges. By year's end, we will have conducted 19 therapeutic retreats for the wounded special operations community. Unfortunately, Hurricane Irma destroyed five retreat locations that provided wonderful settings to reunite wounded couples and facilitate their bonding and healing.

But, we are not deterred, and my brother Tony and I remain fully committed. We continue to cover 100 percent of our overhead costs so that every dollar of every donation goes directly to OHF programs for these elite heroes.

For 2018, we are seeking 12 more locations to complete our 30 planned retreats

for the year. These locations need to offer five bedrooms each with their own private bath for seven days. Please help us spread the word. We are also seeking monetary donations to cover meals, incidentals, and bonding activities during the retreats.

As we approach the holidays, please consider making a gift to OHF. Your generosity, patriotism, and kindness are greatly appreciated.

I hope you had a joyous Thanksgiving and will have a very Merry Christmas. My best to you and your loved ones, and may God bless you, your family, and the United States of America.

I was shot in 2005, and have had several reconstructive surgeries and have deployed several more times... It is hard to express my gratitude, but again, thank you. I have put the Army first for so long I forget about family and this is what I needed to reenergize my commitment to my wife. I buried my best friend in 2008. I have also picked up dead and dying comrades and loaded them onto helicopters and continued to fight. I have sat and wondered why them and not me and wished that I would die in combat more times than I can remember. OHF was an eye opener. To share the time with my wife without any worries and to be in the company of other couples with the same issues was a catalyst to want to better myself and others. My wife and I will never forget the blessing this retreat has been and the impact it will have on us.

— **Active Duty Army Special Forces Master Sergeant, 20-years of service and 14-years as a Green Beret**



A Green Beret Special Forces Master Sergeant and his wife rebuild their trust and confidence not only in themselves but in each other while navigating a challenging ropes course.

When you have a heavy deployment rotation, growing apart is inevitable. After my husband's time as a Special Forces Team Sergeant, we were in a dark place. He gave everything to the Army and "his guys" while I just plodded along, because he was never home... I got to the point where I resented Special Forces even though I was unbelievably proud of what he was doing... The best thing overall [about OHF] was being around other couples. Every one of these guys is still totally in love with their wife, but sometimes they get lost. I have a better understanding of how that can happen hearing it from other couples. Certain deeply personal stories only come out in a setting like the one you so generously provided... Thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

— **Spouse of an Active Duty Special Forces Sergeant with 20-years of service & multiple combat tours**

We got married and two weeks later I deployed to Afghanistan. We've never even had a honeymoon. Our 10-year wedding anniversary was this past June, and we've never had a chance to do anything for ourselves; that of those 10-years, we have barely spent 5 of those years together due to those deployments... I have been in over 130 firefights on those deployments and watched countless friends get wounded or worse. I have been injured receiving multiple broken bones, shrapnel, and head injuries. When one returns home from fighting for their family and the country they often find that when they come home that little has changed upon their return. That the sacrifice they have made has gone unnoticed, not only by their own command as they spin up for another deployment but to the American public... Over time spent as a warfighter we are constantly away from our family and naturally grow apart from our spouse. This happens not only romantically but on a personal level as a couple, the

thoughts of love and excitement are replaced by memories we would love nothing more than to forget... You are able to provide the warfighter with the time to reconnect not only with their spouse and begin to heal some of the rifts that are built in a relationship, but to mend that rift that often grows so wide that we begin to question our own choices—our decision to fight to risk it all for the few. You rekindle the "WHY" we do what we do. There really are people out there that care. I cannot THANK YOU enough for what you have done for my wife and me, this has truly been an amazing experience.

— **Active Duty Special Forces Sergeant First Class, severely wounded in an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) explosion. He lost all his teammates on his vehicle and was the sole survivor.**

You are doing an amazing thing for Soldiers that cannot be put into words. I can tell you from my own experience that I am dealing with depression due to an injury, your kind gesture made me realize that I'm going to be ok. I keep trying to rationalize why someone would do what you all are doing, and I can only come up with one thing—you all love this great country of ours and you all love the brave men and women who are willing to pay the ultimate price. This whole week, I felt like I was unworthy of such a kind gesture. I kept thinking of how to pay this forward and after many talks with GOD, I will attempt to be a more generous person and I will use you as a model.

— **Active Duty Army Special Forces Sergeant First Class, severely wounded, and now due to intense pain having to contemplate having his leg amputated.**

3-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**



Director's Report



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

2017 Was An Excellent Year For OHF.

In 2017, we were able to conduct 19 marriage retreats aiding 154 wounded special operations couple participants. I'm happy to report that thanks to people like you and your in-kind donations of everything from

homes to airlines tickets to therapeutic activities to meals, we've cut program costs by 41 percent this year compared to 2016.

However, OHF is creating bonds that are going far beyond the marriage retreats. Our former SOF who are retreat leads, Billy, Nick, and I often spend numerous hours speaking with couples and individually with spouses and operators before, during, and after the retreat. We get calls from spouses trying to find help for their marriage when divorce seems imminent. We speak to operators and spouses about where to get help for posttraumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries. Half the battle is the operator realizing it's okay to be abnormal. They are already distinctly different based on the sheer fact that they've made it into SOF and what they've endured through multiple wartime deployments.

We've cried and hurt right alongside these couples. Together, we've learned to care for each other again and find the resiliency to keep going. When our elite warriors and their spouses realize this and fully embrace it, then there is hope.

I recently spoke with an operator who had been shot through a night vision device. The bullet shattered a portion of his skull and lodged in his brain, where doctors determined it was safer to leave it than risk brain damage by removing it. Even with such a wound, he burst into a huge smile and began telling us about how much OHF helped him, his wife, and their marriage. This is why we do what we do.

Thank you beyond words to all of our OHF donors. I'm wishing you and your families a very, merry Christmas.

I have never met the other members of the house before the retreat, but you allowed SOF operators and wives to connect with one another. We even talked about PTSD between myself and Don while the wives listened, and it made me feel normal for once.

—Active Duty Marine Raider with over 20-years of service and about to deploy again



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@operationhealingforces.org or by mail to:

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Creating bonds that cure.

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