Special Operators are often away from home not only during deployment, but spend additional time away from home during training, skills exercises, or attending specialized schools or required classes. It is not uncommon for an operator to spend around 80% or more of his time in service away.

Not surprisingly, rates of divorce, suicide, substance abuse, illnesses, and cancers continue to rise amongst our most fit fighters and their families. Even after horrific post-injuries, more than 73 percent of seriously wounded, ill, and injured SOF return to full active duty status compared to only 25 percent of all other branches of the military.

Operation Healing Forces has seen the effects of war on the couples that attend our retreats. We’ve seen how wounds (physical, mental, emotional), deployments, and illnesses can tear apart relationships for those who’ve sworn to love each other through it all.

We are grateful to all those who give for this healing process, so these elite warriors can repair their marriages, relationships, and successfully return to the fight or transition to civilian life.

“**The retreat helped us hit the reset button on our marriage.**”

- Active Duty Navy SEAL with multiple combat deployments and injuries
Four Retreats, Four Life-Changing Outcomes.

Jonathan and Colleen discovered “what healthy looked like” on their retreat.

Colleen is shown here tickling his hands, even though the right hand has no feeling in it, to help him remember what a loving touch feels like. To date, he has had small spurts of tingling when she does this.

A Special Forces Sergeant, Jonathan was on combat patrol with Afghan Commandos pursuing a Taliban leader in Afghanistan when a 105mm Improvised Explosive Device blew up three feet away from him. One of his teammates was killed instantly. Jonathan suffered multiple shrapnel wounds from his face to his legs as well as to his aorta, lost 50 percent of his right hand, and suffers from a traumatic brain injury and PTSD.

The will to rejoin the fight with his team is still strong, which leaves him feeling frustrated, doubtful, and fearful for the future. His wife, Colleen and the OHF team were able to gently urge the couple to go on a retreat, which was something Jonathan was not willing to do with any other organization prior to learning about OHF. After the first few days, Jonathan began to open up as he realized they were in a safe place to share their feelings. Discussions led to tears and eventually to laughter as they discovered they were not alone.

Navy SEAL and his love reconnect in Vail, Colorado.

After completing six combat deployments and also serving for two years as a SEAL instructor while fighting ISIS in May 2017, Jim was shot in the chest. A hemothorax ensued as his lung and chest cavity filled with blood, and Jim died but was resuscitated. The large-caliber round grazed Jim’s body armor causing additional shrapnel to penetrate his chest also. The round lodged 5/8th of an inch from Jim’s heart, and doctors are still trying to determine how to remove all the shrapnel also embedded in his lungs.

An important part of Jim’s recovery was a recent OHF retreat to Vail, Colorado where he was able to speak with fellow SOF warriors about their ordeals and spend time away from the hospital with his wife, Jody. Just as important, the retreat provided Jody time to share experiences with other wives whose SOF husbands were in various states of recovery. Still active duty, Jim is under doctor’s order to only walk – not run as is part of his training. During the retreat at a Vail ski resort, he was up at the crack of dawn each morning walking up the mountain to get ready to return to the fight.

“This is a great program that has facilitated my recovery so much. As a recent wounded warrior, this even has enhanced my ability to rehabilitate my mental status as well as my relationship with my wife.”
Army Special Forces goes from a near death experience to a new lease on life in the Keys.

Army Special Forces Herman was shot through both femurs by an enemy PKM machine gun while leading a Platoon of Afghan Commandos. When he woke up, the doctors said there was a line around the building of fellow US military volunteering their blood. It took 37 pints of blood and five long months of rehabilitation at Walter Reed Hospital to get Herman ready to return to battle.

“Thirty-seven pints of blood isn’t what saved me, it was her, my wife, Mia. She was constantly at my side taking care of me. We’ve been married 22-years and with the war and deployments, this, OHF, was the first time I’ve ever done anything for her.”

Herman and Mia have been married for 22 years, and had never dedicated any time for just the two of them given the unrelenting pace of being a special operator in service to our country. While Mia’s been his rock throughout his 27-year career, 17 of which were in continual Special Forces deployments year after year, to spend that week together “brought us closer together and made us both appreciate life and each other.”

Retreat helped this couple rediscover each other after nine deployments in just seven years.

On November 03, 2009, Barry and his team were performing a cordon and search where Barry had a platoon of Afghani commandos. Barry was approximately 50 meters from a Taliban position when he was hit with a gun shot wound to the shoulder entering through the front and exiting through the back. This same bullet killed his Afghani Commando Lieutenant and friend. In order to save Barry’s life, his 18D team sergeant threw him over a wall and then had to run about one kilometer to the MEDEVAC vehicle. In the vehicle, the medic couldn’t stop the bleeding and told Barry he had about 15-minutes to live.

Barry stated, “Give me my weapon and leave me by the road where it’ll be easier to find my body. I’m going to take as many of the enemy with me as I can.” Barry exited the vehicle and continued to fight. He remembers waking up in Kandahar where a German doctor was finally able to stop his blood loss.

Herman, who is about to re-deploy to combat again with his team, said “You [OHF] make it possible for SOF Warriors to continue to ‘pressure, pursue, and punish’ the enemies that seek to do evil to our nation’s freedoms and way of life.”

Michelle and Barry have been married now for almost seven years, and he has served on nine combat tours. The ups and downs of a life of combat have left both physical and mental scars. The retreat allowed Barry to speak openly about his past with people who truly understand and had similar stories. Both he and Michelle were able to forget about work, anger, fear, troubles, and firefights, and just concentrate on each other and getting better.

“I have no words to describe how much this trip has helped me heal some rough spots in my life. It has been a very long time since I have had a genuine smile on my face.”
In this Newsletter, we’ve highlighted a few of our Special Operations couples. Their uncommon valor, both SOF and spouse, possess super human characteristics to persevere against seemingly insurmountable odds and are indicative of the fabric of the Special Operations community.

These real life heroes and their loved ones live by the words loyalty, duty, respect, honor, integrity, personal courage, and selfless service. To them, they are not just words but a way of life—a code.

It is absolutely amazing to witness SOF couples quickly create, build, and bond in lifelong friendships amongst operators, between spouses, and with fellow couples, which facilitates healing. People may ask, how is this possible?

When tight knit groups share a code, a way of life and have suffered and sacrificed greatly to live by it, they quickly recognize and embrace new friends who’ve felt similar pains and hardships. Furthermore, the realization that people do care and show their appreciation through OHF reinvigorates our elite warriors and their spouses. Such new bonds strengthen resiliency.

A sincere debt of gratitude to all our OHF donors and sponsors for aiding all our SOF heroes, spouses, and for those we’ve yet to reach.

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