Their Lives Are Our Mission.

The mission of Operation Healing Forces (OHF) is to serve the needs of our active-duty and recent-veteran wounded, ill, and injured Special Operations Forces (SOF) and their spouses by starting or continuing the process of mentally, physically and emotionally healing in preparation to return to the fight or transition successfully into civilian life.
Special Operations Forces (SOF) represent 3% of the U.S. Military’s end strength. That’s only 74,000 personnel out of 2.5 million active duty service members, national guard, and Department of Defense civilians.

Even though America’s most elite warriors represent such a small number in the total force, the Special Operations Warrior Care Program is larger than the Warrior Care Programs of all the other major service branches (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard) combined based on the numbers of personnel with over 17,000 wounded, ill, and injured SOF enrolled.

The suicide rate amongst active duty service members continues to increase and recently reached the highest level in 5 years. Military family members are also committing suicide at an alarming rate. This past decade from 2008 to 2018, we lost more veterans to suicide (over 60,000) than were lost during the entire Vietnam War.

Meeting the Needs of Special Operations Forces

By The Numbers:
- Special Operations Forces (SOF) make up approximately 3% of the U.S. Military.
- Elite SOF Operators in the field are only about 8% of SOF.

19 Years in a State of Perpetual Combat

This September 11, 2020 will commemorate the 19th anniversary of the attacks in 2001. The date also marks 19 years in a state of perpetual combat for our nation’s Special Operations Forces.

Because these warriors have the skills and training demanded by modern warfare, they increasingly carry the burden of repeated high-intensity combat deployments and training missions for years on end. Increased deployments mean more stress on marriages, families, and quality of life.

“Each of you bears upon his body the permanent, honorable scars of dangerous service. Service rendered in order that our great nation might continue to live according to the expressed will of its own citizens.”

—Dwight D. Eisenhower
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Special Operations Forces are delaying retirement and deploying with wounds, injuries, and illnesses to ensure their teams have enough coverage for their mission.

Many SOF missions go unfilled, because the demand outweighs the SOF human supply resulting in multiple, repeated deployments without respite. Furthermore, US Special Operations Command created the Warrior Care Program, Care Coalition after 9/11 due to the high number of casualties SOF were taking from constant warfare. The Care Coalition's primary focus is to assist the wounded, ill, or injured SOF service members return to duty to replenish the force, because it takes so long to grow a special operator. As a result, Care Coalition has a 73.8% return-to-duty rate for SOF wounded, ill, and injured. This is amazing given the extent of these warriors’ traumas such as missing limbs, gunshot wounds, traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress, burns, and battlefield stressors on the operators and their families. Yet, they willingly return to the fight. Likewise, there is also a reluctance to admit needing help having seen or unseen wounds, which affects their service.

“When they say ‘special operations,’ they are not kidding: these people are special. From an operational, physiological standpoint, they can do things that nobody else can do.”

—Dennis Grahn
Senior Research Scientist, Stanford University, National Geographic’s Television documentary Fight Masters: Special Forces.

• It is assumed that every frontline Special Operator has some degree of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Much of it goes untreated or mistreated.

• Depression and suicide rates among active duty and newly retired SOF are up sharply. More than 22 SOF committed suicide in 2018 tripling from 2017.

• Divorce rates are escalating at an alarming rate. The continuous deployments with no notice, the uncertainty surrounding the deployments, and the cumulative effects on special operators and their families have deteriorated marriages and the divorce rates are now the highest in the history of special operations.

• Traumatic Brain Injury is increasing due to the weaponry and special tactics SOF use. They also receive cumulative and significant damage to the brain, experts say, but many SOF don’t even recognize or report it.

• One of SOF’s greatest concerns right now is that its community of highly skilled, mentally agile, and extremely physically fit service members are contracting cancer at an alarming rate. In this exceptionally select group, their rates of cancer have already outpaced the civilian population. SOF leaders have not been able to determine the cause(s).
Our Concept is Simple: Strengthen Human Bonds.

Through therapeutic retreats, our purpose is to enable these war-torn men and women to break through the silence to openly discuss their battlefield and personal hardships. A safe, protected environment allows our participants to let their guard down and share. Realizing they are not alone, participants discover it is appropriate — and not a stigma — to seek help, support and guidance when needed from fellow SOF professionals and their families.

The retreat environment combined with peer-to-peer counseling and recreational therapies enable sincere bonding between couples, with other spouses going through similar hardships, and among fellow SOF service members.

“The retreat had a deep and positive impact on our lives that we will carry with us forever. It is truly a life-changing program.”

—Navy SEAL with 14 overseas deployments

These three concepts have always been the hallmarks of OHF. Over the course of our retreats, special operators and their spouses enjoy:

Recreational, therapeutic sports designed to be fun but also to serve as physical and social therapy to promote bonding—within couples, between operators, and amongst SOF spouses. Special Operators are by nature quiet personalities and humble, with exceptional physical capabilities that need to be maintained. The small-group setting with recreational therapy and peer counseling components goes a long way toward breaking the emotional ice, allowing the individual couples and the group as a whole to bond, all the while helping physical, mental, and emotional scars heal.

Informal discussions with the spouses help to answer questions, share hardships, and form the foundation for a lasting and supporting relationship between these spouses. The spouses often think they are the only ones experiencing feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, fear, loneliness, anger, and depression. In addition, spouses are trying to figure out what has happened to their mate, how to deal with it, and will their relationship ever return to what it once was.

Peer discussions with the Special Operators. These Special Operators share similar but different experiences, so they understand and trust each other. The Operators will talk within SOF “tribes” (SEALs, Rangers, Green Berets, etc.) what they would rarely share with an outsider. On the retreats, SOF find an environment where they can share experiences and hardships without fear of reprisal and learn from one another that it is okay to seek help and how to do so.

Mental Health

Every single Service Member and Spouse reported improvements in multiple mental health symptoms following the retreat while 86% reported continued improvement 6 months to a year or more later.

Every Service Member that completed a pre-retreat survey, reported experiencing one or more than one of the following:
- Angry outbursts (44%)
- Depression (38%)
- Anxiety (69%)
- Loss of Hope (12%)
- Inability to sleep (64%)

Retreat participants responded that they will be seeking treatment for the following medical issues following the retreat:
- Anxiety (50%)
- Depression (26%)
- Loss of Hope (11%)
- Angry Outbursts (23%)
- Inability to sleep (47%)
- Other (39%) suicidal ideations, cancer screenings, chronic pain, orthopedic injuries, PTSD, TBI, hormonal imbalance, marriage counseling

Communication

Over 94% of annual survey respondents reported improved communication with their spouses following the OHF retreat.

58% of Service Members reported that communication with their medical care team improved following the OHF retreat.

Relationships

91% of participants believe that their support network has improved due to the relationships made on the retreat as well as their relationship with the organization and their retreat lead.

79% of annual survey respondents believe that the peer to peer exchange during the retreat aided in their personal recovery.

Additional Improvements

Over 98% reported increased sense of confidence in their physical abilities following the recreational activities they participated in during the retreat while 100% were planning similar activities with their spouses following the retreats.

Over 60% of Service Members reported that they learned of additional resources or benefits during their retreat from the other couples or the retreat lead.
As we expand our therapeutic retreats, we could no longer deny the need for additional programming to support our wounded, ill, and injured through immediate crisis support, expanding our alumni program to offer continued care to our past retreat participants, and continue to grow our network through the establishment of an ambassador program to reach more SOF couples.

The immediate needs program opened for requests in February 2019, and we were able to complete 152 requests from USSOCOM’s Care Coalition and served over 503 individuals in just 11 months. Through Care Coalition, this included dire requests from SOF service members, spouses, and family members in need of immediate financial or crisis support to cover medical treatment or equipment costs, emergency travel expenses, respite care, and more. In addition, OHF was also able to provide one-time grants to support costs of transitioning into civilian life after major wounds/injuries sustained in the line of duty for our Special Operators.

Given some cases are so time sensitive to literally save lives and/or help alleviate extreme hardship, assistance must happen quickly. When SOF is in need, OHF has become the rapid response force for Special Operation Command’s immediate needs.

In 2020, OHF will Double SOAR Immediate Needs Support

Total Support in 2019: $117,725
- Relief Care 2%
- Transition 5%

Our staff has worked closely with OHF Alumni, the USSOCOM’s Care Coalition, and Special Operations leadership to develop additional programs to provide support to the SOF community in areas where the Government, Insurance, and other non-profits were unable to do so.
Additional OHF Outreach Programs:

**OHF Employment Services**
Operation Healing Forces has worked closely with the Markel Veterans Program (MVP) for 4 years to introduce members of the Special Operations community to careers in the Insurance realm through an immersive 4-6 week training program that culminates with career placement in a Markel Corporation location nationally. The program is a huge success, and we are already working closely with several other interested companies to connect Special Operators, their spouses, and even college-aged children with career opportunities.

**SOF Caregiver & Spouse Retreats**
After years of Creating Bonds that Cure between SOF couples in hopes of repairing and strengthening marriages, we realized that the SOF spouses and caregivers had truly become our unsung heroes of the war. The spouses who have borne the brunt of war often having to raise a family singlehandedly and work needed a hope for renewal and rest. There are no military programs to support the spouses. Too many times, these incredible people are left wondering, “What happened to the man I fell in love with…?” And, they now have to adapt to a service member with often both visible and invisible wounds with too many times the collateral damage of those wounds affecting the entire family. Hence, we found it very important for our military SOF spouses to create their own bonds to help encourage and support one another through therapeutic retreats designed just for them by one of their own.

**Alumni Support**
The Operation Healing Forces therapeutic retreat program has grown every year. With over 800 OHF alumni and growing, we recognized that many of our couples need continued assistance following their retreat. The OHF Special Operations Additional Resources (SOAR) program was designed to meet these continued needs. We have been able to provide immediate financial crisis support, continued counseling resources, and create a large network of alumni to share resources, benefits, and information.

**Ambassador Dinners**
The Operation Healing Forces Ambassador Program was a direct result of our passionate alumni’s desire to spread the word about OHF throughout the SOF community! Retreat alumni and OHF staff come together to host special events to inform other Special Operation’s families about the retreat program as well as our other programs. These awareness events have been very successful by allowing us to reach Special Operators and their families at SOF units across the United States.

**Financial Planning**
In Partnership with The Valdes Group of Merrill Lynch, Operation Healing Forces has started a pilot program designed to help families from the Special Operations community create a long range financial plan for themselves and their families for the remainder of their military career as well as the their transition to retirement or civilian careers. SOF families are often so focused on the mission while trying to maintain some semblance of a home life, they often forget to plan for their financial future after service. The first three SOF pilot families have successfully completed the program and have a new direction, sense of financial security, and now a plan for their continued financial health as a family thereby alleviating a huge amount of stress.

**Legal Assistance Program**
Operation Healing Forces and Foley Lardner LLP are developing a resource to assist Special Operations families with legal needs such as real estate matters, general business matters, contractor agreements, estate planning including will and trusts, probate, guardianships, immigration matters, income tax controversy matters, and general litigation issues. The SOAR program will provide the initial assessment and referral for all OHF families. Once again, this will provide SOF families a much needed resource in times of crisis.
2019 Financials

Program Expenses $2,299,905
General & Administrative Expenses $136,183
Fundraising Expenses $359,183
Total Net Assets $1,875,988

Gary and Tony Markel have committed to covering all overhead expenses, so we can continue to use 100% of all donated dollars towards program expenses.

Dear Friends of Operation Healing Forces,

As our Nation’s longest war rages on, a Special Forces soldier who attended an OHF retreat wrote quoting Congressman Dan Lipinski and said, “On the battlefield, the military pledges to leave no soldier behind. As a Nation, let it be our pledge that when they return home, we leave no veteran behind. Mr. Markel, you and the OHF Donors have gone above and beyond to make sure you live up to Mr. Lipinski’s pledge.”

This would not be possible without you. And, I want to express my sincere gratitude for your continued and increasing support of Operation Healing Forces to aid the Special Operations Community. Our special operations families are bravely bearing the brunt of the fight and making the sacrifices associated with war and doing so without complaint on behalf of our Country—on our behalf. In a war of shadows against radical terrorist groups in faraway lands prevent that battle from raging on our own shores, countryside, and streets. Yet, what these special men and women do goes largely unreported. However, every casualty hits this entire small knit community through the heart. Perhaps the greatest casualty of all for a soldier is being forgotten, and at OHF with your continued support, we will ensure our Nation’s best are always remembered and cared for as they should be.

In 2019 to answer the need of the special operations community in addition to our incredible retreat program, we’ve also instituted an immediate needs program to aid those SOF and their families whom the government, military, TRICARE, or another nonprofit cannot help. Sadly, yet proudly with your support, we’ve answered every immediate case request from US Special Operations Command, over 200 to date and counting. Each case has been literally heartbreaking and life-changing for these war-torn operators and their impacted families.

In the words of John Paul Jones, “I have yet begun to fight.” And, I ask you to continue to join me and other patriots to take care of those who have given so much—sacrificed too much—to make their lives a little better and heal from the scars of war. We look forward to 2020 and beyond, and for the special operations community, in special operations terms, we have your six.

With warmest regards,
Gary Markel, Chairman

O HF had Over 140 Volunteers
36 Property Donations in 2019
139 Businesses Donated Meals & Services

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