

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

TAPS®

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

FALL 2023



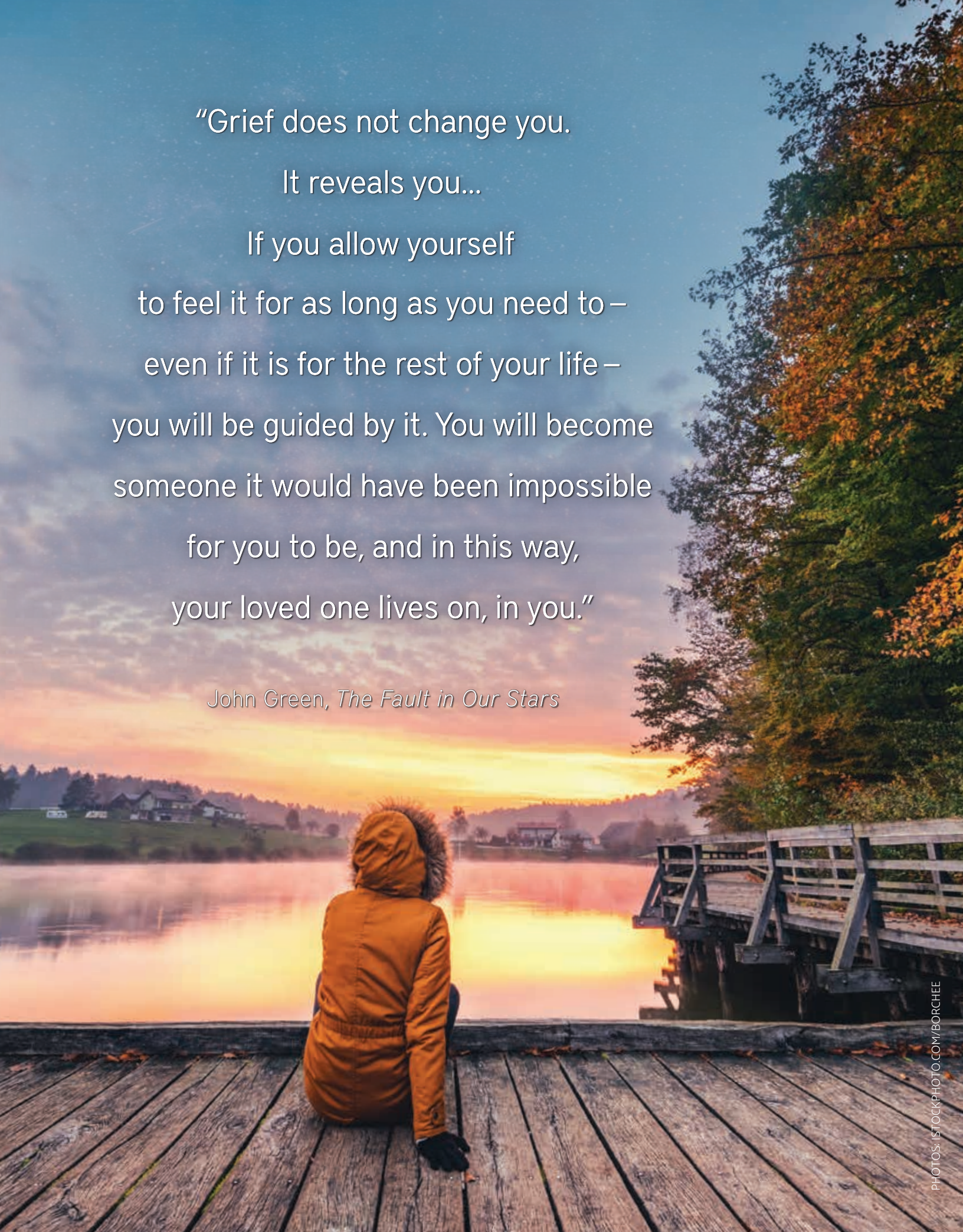
Our new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Brown, and Mrs. Brown share a LOVE of the game and a dedication to the TAPS mission

PLAY BALL,
MAKE MEMORIES

FACE THE FEAR
BEHIND GRIEF'S "CRAZINESS"

FIND JOY
IN LASTING GIFTS

MEET THE HERO
BEHIND A CULINARY SCHOLARSHIP

A person wearing a brown hooded jacket is sitting on a wooden dock, looking out over a calm lake at sunset. The sky is a mix of blue, orange, and pink, with the sun low on the horizon. The water reflects the colors of the sky. In the background, there are some houses and trees. On the right side, there are trees with autumn-colored leaves. The dock is made of wooden planks.

“Grief does not change you.

It reveals you...

If you allow yourself
to feel it for as long as you need to –
even if it is for the rest of your life –
you will be guided by it. You will become
someone it would have been impossible
for you to be, and in this way,
your loved one lives on, in you.”

John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*



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Arlington, VA 22201

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CONNECT WITH US
24 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK
800-959-TAPS (8277)
taps.org/info@taps.org

SHARE YOUR STORY
BRING HOPE TO
FELLOW SURVIVORS
editor@taps.org
taps.org/shareyourstory

TAPS PROGRAMS & SERVICES

- 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline
 - Survivor Care Team
 - Peer-Based Support Network
 - Community-Based Care
 - Casework Assistance
 - Education Support
 - Suicide Loss & Illness Loss Support
 - Care Groups
 - Online Community
 - TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®
 - Survivor Seminars & Good Grief Camps
 - TAPS Togethers
 - Women's Empowerment
 - Men's Program
 - Young Adults Program
 - Youth Programs
 - Sports & Entertainment Events
- * For full descriptions, see pages 18-19.



ON THE COVER: Pictured in front of a statue of the late Arthur Ashe, a tennis legend and a U.S. Army veteran, Gen and Mrs. Brown joined TAPS families who were honoring their fallen loved ones at the Lt. Joe Hunt Military

Appreciation Day at the U.S. Open Tennis Championships in New York. We thank the Browns for their dedication to honoring America's fallen and ensuring those they left behind are supported, and we look forward to sharing more moments with the Browns as Gen Brown steps into the role of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
COVER PHOTO: MIKE LAWRENCE, USTA

About TAPS

Caring for the Families of America's Fallen Heroes

We are a family of military survivors ready to embrace and connect all who grieve the death of a military or veteran loved one with resources, services, and programs. TAPS provides support to survivors 24/7, regardless of the manner of death, the duty status at the time of death, the survivor's relationship to the deceased, or the survivor's phase in their grief journey.

At TAPS, we open our hearts and resources to the world with our award-winning programs and services to support all military bereaved. TAPS works with leading experts in the fields of grief, bereavement, trauma, and peer support to integrate decades of research on military grief into action to help heal hearts.

At TAPS, we:

Honor and Remember the lives of our military loved ones and celebrate military survivors as the living legacies of their service and sacrifice.

Empower survivors with healthy coping skills, resources, and opportunities to connect in the comfort of their home, their community, their region, and the nation to grow with their grief.

Connect all those grieving a military death to a nationwide network of peer-based, emotional survivor support and critical casework assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Educate using research-informed best practices in bereavement and trauma care for survivors, and we advocate on behalf of survivors with policy and legislative priorities.

Create Community with survivors to provide comprehensive comfort, care, and resources where they live, when they need it, and in a manner comfortable for them.

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TAPS IS A TOP-RATED
NONPROFIT CHARITY

TAPS exceeds industry standards for financial accountability and out performs most charities. We are proud to have received many of the top nonprofit charity ratings available today. Our donors should be confident they are supporting an organization that is financially healthy, accountable, and transparent.



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PHOTO: Survivors gathered at the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., for a peaceful day of fishing with their TAPS family and the National Park Trust in October 2022. Credit: David Moss

To Our TAPS Family,



Welcome to the fall issue of *TAPS Magazine*, sent to you with so much love and care. Fall is a time of the year for transition, and we recognize that it might be difficult for our TAPS family — for those of us who may be new to our grief and even for those who are farther along after loss. At TAPS, we recognize that the love we have for those we remember and cherish lives on, and that we will redefine our relationship with them, finding new ways to honor and remember our loved ones and bring them present into our lives today.

Through all of our transitions, TAPS is a constant for you. We invite you to always come as you are — wherever you are in your journey with grief. You will always be welcomed, understood, and supported.

In this issue, we share so much of what TAPS can do for you, and we bring you stories that comfort, connect, and inspire.

In this month's Klinger's Korner, Andy McNeil discusses the transitions our surviving children and teens face as they return to school this fall. Dr. Alan Wolfelt helps us understand the "craziness" we feel at times as we face life after loss. We hear from survivors who share precious memories of their loved ones and how TAPS stepped in to help them heal, honor their hero, and make precious memories to carry forward.

As we begin the fall season, I encourage you to connect with your TAPS family. Make plans to travel to one of our events — there is something for everyone. You can also get to know your local TAPS family by joining a TAPS Care Group. Care Groups meet all over the country in person and online to provide emotional support, encouragement, and coping skills in the company of other survivors. Staying close to home, you might also find TAPS Togethers happening near you throughout the year. Whether our annual Friendsgiving events, Carry the Load walks, a coffee meet-up, or a visit to a unique local spot, TAPS Togethers bring comfort and connections to you.

If you are ready to support other survivors, consider becoming a TAPS Peer Mentor. What you have learned through your own grief is incredibly valuable to someone walking the same path. That concept is at the heart of all we do at TAPS.

This fall and always: Together we heal, and together we honor the lives and service of our heroes. I look forward to seeing you along the way.

With care,

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Bonnie".

Bonnie Carroll
TAPS President and Founder



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

Dear TAPS®

CARRY THE LOAD EDITION

This issue's Dear TAPS column is dedicated to the members of our TAPS family who participated in Carry the Load events nationwide in 2023. TAPS' participation in Carry the Load continues to grow annually – drawing survivors from Team TAPS and TAPS Together who honor their heroes while walking alongside other survivors and supporters. See what a few of this year's participants shared about their experience, and mark your calendars to join TAPS at a Carry the Load event near you next May.

SPREAD THE WORD

“Thank you for coordinating this event in the Saint Augustine, Florida, area. It was a very emotional time for me and my daughter, Gini. We honored my only son and the youngest of our family in our walk, SSG Seth M. Plant. Seth was tragically killed in a bear attack on May 10, 2022, in Alaska. We were able to talk about Seth, why he chose the Army, and why he loved our city. We passed by all the places he loved to visit. We received shout-outs and cars honked in encouragement. I do not usually walk that far at one time, so it was a push for me physically...We will definitely participate again and would love to help spread the word of future events.”

Joy Plant

Surviving Mother of SSG Seth M. Plant,
U.S. Army

BREAKTHROUGHS

“The month before the event, we told everyone we knew and every stranger we met about the event and invited them to walk for their loved one. We started as a group of three, [but] on the day of the event, 77 people showed up for Team TAPS Shreveport-Bossier. Our community came together for one cause, it was amazing! A reporter walked with us and would ask random people who they were walking for. When the event was over, I started seeing the news coverage and people on Facebook who walked for my son. To hear people shout out my son's name was amazing. In the five years since my son's death, my husband has refused to participate in anything. He signed up for the walk and was one of the ones the reporter asked who he was walking for. He boldly said, “MY SON, CHRIS CAGLE.” That was a major breakthrough. Everyone I have spoken with since the event talked about the healing they felt from this walk. I am proud to have been a part of this and will definitely participate next year. Thank you, TAPS, for making this possible.”

Natalie Cagle

Surviving Mother of LCpl Christopher Cagle,
U.S. Marine Corps Veteran

OUR STORIES

“For me, it was inspiring to represent TAPS and walk along with other organizations that support military and first responders. [We] loved sharing our stories; it seemed we did not have enough time in that 4.5 hours we walked!”

Charles Reineck

Surviving Father of Brandon Reineck,
U.S. Navy Veteran

GIVING BACK

“It was a wonderful experience. I didn't exactly know what to expect, but I knew I wanted to walk to honor my son CTT2 Samuel A. Elliott. He was such a great, caring guy, that would give the shirt off his back. So to me, this was me giving back to him. It was awesome to see how many people came out for their loved ones, or just to honor fallen veterans. I will be doing it again next year.”

April Elliott

Surviving Mother of CTT2 Samuel A. Elliot,
U.S. Navy

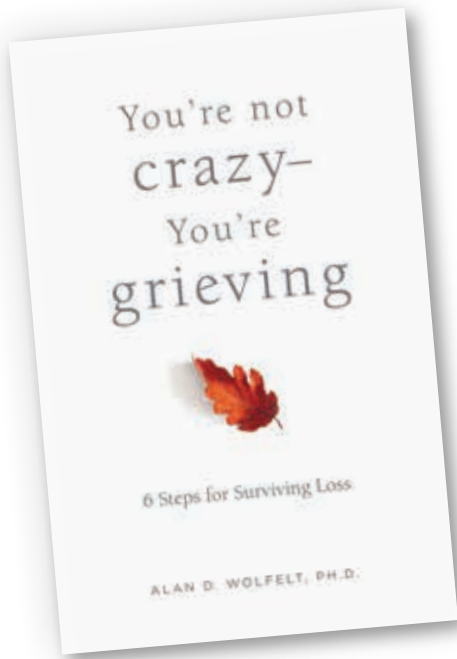


Submit your TAPS experience at taps.org/deartaps for a chance to be featured.

You're not crazy —

PART 2 It's Important for You to Feel Safe and Comforted

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. ★ TAPS Advisory Board



This is part two of a six-part series adapted from Dr. Alan Wolfelt's book, You're Not Crazy — You're Grieving. Part one appeared in the summer issue of TAPS Magazine.

Have you felt stressed, anxious, fearful, agitated, panicked, worried, or uneasy since the death? I'm not sure grief is possible without these feelings. As author C.S. Lewis wrote after his 45-year-old wife died of cancer, "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear."

Feeling afraid or anxious is not pleasant, and I know it can be terrifying. Still, fear is perfectly normal after someone important to you dies. And if you've been experiencing fear, it could well be part of what is making you feel "crazy."

Why We Feel Afraid After Loss

Why is fear so common in the first weeks and months after a death? While fear rarely feels good, there are a number of reasons it makes sense in early grief.

First, the death of someone we love impacts our sense of safety, which arouses our bodies' fight, flight, or freeze systems. Stress chemicals flood our bloodstreams. Our minds and bodies are placed on high alert for the possibility of more danger.

Second, a death often creates numerous practical stressors. In the first weeks, immediate family members have a lot to take care of. People must be notified and funerals planned. Many forms have to be completed. Financial matters must be tended to. Difficult conversations are required. All of these obligations are stressful and compound the natural biochemistry of fear.

Third, death naturally causes existential fear. It makes us worry about how or if we'll survive being shattered. We are forced to confront unanswerable questions about the meaning and purpose of life. We realize how vulnerable we are — and how vulnerable other loved ones who are still living may be. Life's cruelty and fleetingness are especially pronounced at this time, and they can feel quite scary.

And fourth, one of our core relationships has been severed. Our relationships often make us feel safe and secure in who we are as individuals. In addition, they ground us as part of a family and a community. The prospect of having to rebuild both our self-identity and sense of security can be overwhelming.

It is no wonder fear and anxiety can be such a big part of the craziness of early grief. Acknowledging that fear is one part. The other part is finding ways to soothe that fear. Your capacity to build a well-stocked toolkit of effective soothing strategies will help you survive this time.

Recognizing Your Fear

Are you aware that you've been feeling afraid or anxious since the death? It can sometimes be hard to recognize fear and anxiety for what they are, especially if they show up in ways that you don't necessarily associate with fear.

Here are some common fear-based symptoms in early grief:

- Nervousness, tension, or restlessness
- Sense of foreboding that something else bad is going to happen
- Faster than normal heart rate
- Faster than normal breathing
- Trembling or shaking
- Fidgeting or jumpiness; startling easily
- Fatigue and weakness
- Gastrointestinal troubles
- Racing thoughts
- Repetitive thoughts or worries
- Trouble concentrating
- Trouble sleeping
- Avoiding certain places, people, circumstances
- Over-isolating

You're grieving

If you are regularly experiencing one or more of these symptoms, you're probably struggling with fear and anxiety in early grief. It is common and normal. It is also something that requires your compassionate attention.

Soothing Your Fear and Anxiety

While fear in early grief is normal and understandable, it can also be a paralyzing, all-consuming experience that prevents you from getting the help and support you need in the short-term. And if it goes on intensely for too long, it can also harm your health because stress chemicals can cause and worsen disease. Studies show that chronic anxiety weakens our immune systems, causes cardiovascular damage, leads to gastrointestinal trouble, accelerates aging, worsens memory and decision-making, and may result in the risk for clinical depression.

Also important: Unchecked fear tends to get in the way of other mourning work that will help you integrate and move through your early grief. Basically, fear can throw up a roadblock that stalls and even intensifies your early grief. What this means is that learning how to soothe your fears in healthy ways is an essential daily self-care priority.

The following tips and activities may help ease your fear.

Any time you feel anxious, restless, or afraid, give one of them a try. Keep testing out different approaches until you find at least a few that reliably work for you.

Keep Linking Objects Close

Linking objects are items that belonged to the person who died that you might now like to have around you. Objects such as clothing, books, knick-knacks, jewelry, artwork, and other prized possessions

can help you feel physically closer to the person you miss so much. They can also help you feel safer and calmer.

If you like to hold, be near, look at, sleep with, caress, or smell a special belonging of the person who died, you're not at all crazy. You're simply trying to hold on to a tangible, physical connection to the person. The person's body is no longer physically here, but these special items are. And if they help you make it through the naturally scary, anxiety-filled early months of grief, so much the better.





I would also suggest that you not rush into giving away the belongings of the person who died. Sometimes people hurry into clearing out all the “stuff” because they think it will help them heal and “move on.” But as we’ve said, grief is necessary. Trying to go around it doesn’t work and is not a good idea. Many grieving people have told me how much they regret having quickly gotten rid of the belongings of the person who died — only to wish months later that they had them back.

Care for Yourself

If there was ever a time to indulge yourself with your favorite comforts, it’s now. In fact, think of them as survival tactics — not indulgences. Take a nap. Curl up on the sofa with your softest blanket and binge your favorite TV show. Eat your favorite comfort foods. Take a long shower or bath. Meet

up with friends at your favorite restaurant, or invite a good friend over for takeout. Ask for hugs. Listen to soothing music. Watch the sunset. Play a game on your phone. Play with your pet. Reread your favorite book.

“What if I don’t feel like doing anything?” you might ask. This is common in early grief. It is normal to have an inability to experience joy for a period of time after experiencing significant loss in your life. There is even a term for it called “anhedonia.” It’s when nothing feels motivating. Nothing feels pleasurable or makes you content or happy. If you read the ideas in the last paragraph and thought that most of them sounded unappealing, you may be experiencing the normal anhedonia of early grief. Other signs include a lack of interest in things you used to enjoy, such as work, sex, food, etc.

If you feel stuck in anhedonia or your grief is preventing you from taking care of your own basic daily needs, it’s time to see your primary care provider or a grief counselor. While temporary anhedonia is normal in early grief, ongoing anhedonia is a potential sign of clinical depression. Please reach out to get the support you need and deserve.

See a Physician or Counselor

If you are feeling so unwell or crazy that you’re having a hard time sleeping, eating, and functioning, it’s a good idea to schedule a checkup with your primary care provider. This would also be a good time to consider seeing a grief counselor or therapist for a few sessions.

I’m not suggesting there is anything wrong with you! I have simply seen time and again that getting a little professional reassurance and support for the normal, intense symptoms of early grief can help you better survive and take steps to understand them.

Your medical doctor can help assure you that any physical symptoms of grief you may be experiencing — heart palpitations, body aches, headaches, trouble sleeping, and more — aren’t due to an illness that needs diagnosis and treatment. If you’re having any physical concerns that mimic the symptoms or cause of death of the person who died — for example, if you’ve been having chest discomfort, and your loved one died of a heart attack — your primary care provider can help ease your mind by ruling out this possibility.

Like seeing a physician, grief counseling is another basic form of self-care. Just a few sessions with a good grief counselor can help assure you that you are not going crazy, but actually grieving. They can also help support you while you experience your intense pain.

Move Your Body

Fear is a primal physical response in the body. Moving your body is an excellent way to reduce the stress chemicals while

**Fear is a primal physical response in the body.
Moving your body is an excellent way to reduce the stress chemicals...**

Good sleep and wellness go hand in hand. Poor sleep, fearful thinking, and feeling crazy do too.

also increasing the biochemicals that boost feelings of contentment, ease, and happiness, such as dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins.

Light exercise can do wonders for lessening anxiety and enhancing feelings of well-being. You can start really small if you are not physically active already. Try walking for 10 minutes to start with, then gradually increase the duration. If you don't like walking, choose an activity you enjoy more, such as biking, yoga, shooting hoops, pickleball, or gardening.

Make Sleep a Priority

Good sleep and wellness go hand in hand. Poor sleep, fearful thinking, and feeling crazy do too.

Insomnia is often a normal part of the early grief experience. But if you're not sleeping and incapable of functioning due to exhaustion, it's probably time to get help with your sleep. See your primary care provider and explain your sleep challenges. Temporary use of sleep medication or

supplements, such as melatonin, might be wise. You can also try relaxation and sleep apps on your phone, such as Calm and Loona. It is worth continuing the search until you find something that ensures you get adequate sleep.

Avoid Misuse of Alcohol and Drugs

Many people turn to alcohol and drugs to help them feel less anxiety and pain after a major loss. Nobody wants to experience hurt of this magnitude. Looking to numb the pain and fear is understandable.

The problem with using drugs and alcohol to cope with grief, of course, is that they can harm our bodies and are also habit-forming. What's more, when they are relied on too often, they distance us from the reality of our loss and grief. I have seen many times that substance use hindered or complicated healing rather than helped it.

If others express concern about your alcohol or drug use, or if you yourself are wondering if the frequency or degree of

your substance use is healthy, I urge you to talk to your primary care provider about it. Cutting back is probably a good idea, and if you are struggling with addiction, getting help right now is the wisest, best thing you can do.

About the Author



Dr. Alan Wolfelt is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people — including You're Not Crazy — You're Grieving, from which this article series is adapted — have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. He is the founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a TAPS Advisory Board Member. centerforloss.com





BOCCE, GOOD FOOD, AND BRIGHT FUTURES

By Kristi Stolzenberg ✨ Editor, *TAPS Magazine*

What could bocce and the Culinary Institute of America possibly have in common with TAPS? As it turns out, a couple of things: the Michael C. Cerullo Memorial Veteran Scholarship, which is awarded to a deserving TAPS survivor on the road to culinary greatness, and the annual bocce tournament that funds it, hosted by Michael's surviving son, Paul.

SUMMER 2023

Michael's son, Paul Cerullo, spent a week in the attic over the summer, sorting through boxes of letters his parents sent back and forth during World War II. He shares, as matter-of-factly as only someone with nine brothers and sisters can, that when his mother, Lillian, passed away in 1997, there was not much to divide among the siblings, but all he wanted were the war letters.

It was just after completing his rewarding task of archiving photos and cataloging years of wartime daily writings between

his young parents that Paul got a call from me — hoping to interview him for an upcoming magazine article about the scholarship he established in his father's name at the Culinary Institute of America. The timing wasn't lost on either one of us.

Eager to learn about Michael's life and service in the Army, I asked Paul to tell me a bit about his dad before I got to my interview questions. As he drew me in with a vivid retelling of his father's life — details freshly dusted from his recent walk down memory lane in his home's attic, I quickly realized I would not be needing my meticulously honed interview questions.

MICHAEL CERULLO

Michael, as Paul told me, was a U.S. Army cook during WWII, and he was a pretty good one at that. He (unofficially) earned a 5-star review from a 3-star general who dubbed Michael the best Army cook he'd ever had. Rumor has it that he was so good, that this

general didn't want him going overseas and tried to pull his name, but that didn't go over very well.

During his workup for the deployment that almost wasn't, Michael received a routine yellow fever vaccine like nearly every other U.S. and Allied troop during WWII. But that inoculation — though it would happen years later — was when Michael contracted a quiet illness that eventually took his life in 1970. Not suspecting anything was wrong, Michael deployed as planned and served in Patton's Third Armored Division at the Battle of the Bulge. He sustained the front-line troops by cooking and delivering meals via portable mess kitchens, and he even found himself driving a truck of explosives and ammunition to front-line tankers during blackout conditions.

After the war, he became head chef at a small neighborhood hospital in Providence, RI — the Miriam Hospital — which is now a Brown University affiliate and a top hospital in the state. He continued to make good

MICHAEL, AS PAUL TOLD ME, WAS A U.S. ARMY COOK DURING WWII, AND HE WAS A PRETTY GOOD ONE AT THAT. HE (UNOFFICIALLY) EARNED A 5-STAR REVIEW FROM A 3-STAR GENERAL WHO DUBBED MICHAEL THE BEST ARMY COOK HE'D EVER HAD.

Mike Cerullo's Veal & Peas (Vitello Di Spezzattino)



5 lbs Veal - diced or sliced in bite sized pieces
¼ Cup and 2 tbsp. Olive Oil
1 tbsp. Salt
2 tsp. Black Pepper
1½ lbs Onion
10 Garlic Cloves (finely sliced)
2 cups Tomato Sauce
1½ lbs Peas
Dried Red / Green Peppers (optional)
½ tsp. Crushed Red Pepper
½ Gal Chicken Stock

Procedure:

In half the oil, sauté (or heat in high oven) the veal thoroughly. In a 1½ gallon saucepan, use the remaining oil to brown the onions. Add garlic and cook until soft, approx. 5 mins. Add red pepper, salt and black pepper, tomato sauce and chicken stock. Simmer for approximately 1 hour or until the veal is tender. Add peas and continue simmering until peas are thoroughly cooked and liquid thickens slightly. At this point, if stew is not thick enough, you may add 1 tbsp. of butter and 1 tbsp. of flour (mixed together) and continue cooking for 10 more minutes. Serves 20.



PAUL RECALLED, "THERE WAS NO TAPS BACK THEN. YOU GOT A CHECK IN THE MAIL, AND THAT WAS IT."

food, love his family, and share his fondness for bocce for as long as his illness allowed.

THERE WAS NO TAPS

I sat attentively on the other end of the phone as Paul's tone changed — heroic war stories and happy post-war memories of his family gave way to the struggle for benefits and his father's declining health.

Paul recalled, "There was no TAPS back then. You got a check in the mail, and that was it." His mother, Lillian, fought hard — acting as her own advocate, legal counsel, and medical expert — to ensure Michael achieved a disability rating that would

guarantee education benefits for her 10 children; that was her primary concern.

BOCCE AND SCHOLARSHIP

Paul grew up and attended the Culinary Institute of America, graduating in 1969, just prior to his father's passing in 1970. Lillian would later urge him to pursue a bachelor's degree, which he did. Paul built

a beautiful life with his wife, Sharyne, and he shared that a few members of the family followed in his father's footsteps and went into the food business.

But, 12 — maybe 13 — years ago, Paul had an idea. It was a way to bring the big Italian family together over a holiday weekend, honor Michael's life, and raise a little money that Paul planned to turn into a bright future for another surviving child interested in pursuing a culinary degree. "My father loved bocce," Paul told me, so a bocce tournament was the perfect event. He put out the word to the family. Everyone brought a dish to share, and they filled a "caring mason jar" with contributions, which the grandkids tallied up at the end



WHEN PAUL LEARNED TAPS HAD A PROGRAM SOLELY FOCUSED ON EDUCATION SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS, HE SAID, "IT JUST CLICKED."



of the tournament. Whatever was raised, Paul would match, and the funds would be forwarded to the institute to be awarded to a surviving child enrolled or accepted to the Culinary Institute of America. To date, the endowed scholarship is approaching its \$200,000 commitment.

IT CLICKED

There was only one hiccup. Paul soon realized that it's nearly impossible to identify a survivor among a pool of applicants unless they openly share it. This made the process of awarding the scholarship a little trickier, but Paul was set on honoring his father in a way that would support other surviving children.

Something had come along since Paul's family fought to receive educational

benefits: TAPS. When Paul learned TAPS had a program solely focused on education support for survivors, he said, "It just clicked." The Michael C. Cerullo Veterans Memorial Scholarship found its home with TAPS, and that is where it can be accessed today. The scholarship — still reserved for a student attending the Culinary Institute of America — is now solely awarded to a surviving child from TAPS.

GET COOKING

As our conversation wound down, I had just two questions left for Paul. One, "What was your favorite meal that your father used to make?"

Paul didn't skip a beat before answering, "Veal and peas — I'll send you the recipe." Lastly, I asked Paul what he would say to

a survivor on the fence about pursuing higher education — at the Culinary Institute of America or anywhere. He said, "I would tell them what my mother told me when she convinced me to get a secondary degree: The soldier you lost is still taking care of you [through the GI Bill, benefits, and other opportunities]. They didn't serve just to have their families stop learning, growing, and using their talents."

So, learn, grow, cook — if that's your passion, connect with TAPS Education Support Services to discover resources available to you, and maybe play a little bocce.



TAPS EDUCATION SUPPORT SERVICES

Thanks to the generosity of Paul Cerullo and his family and friends, the **Michael C. Cerullo Veterans Memorial Scholarship** is waiting to propel a qualified survivor to a career in the culinary arts. If food is where your passion lies, contact TAPS Education Support Services at education@taps.org or **202-588-TAPS (8277)** to learn more about this incredible opportunity.

To access all **Education Support Services** has to offer, visit taps.org/edu. Use their scholarship search tool to identify scholarships that fit your goals. →



UPCOMING EVENTS

REMEMBER THE *Love,*
CELEBRATE THE *Life,*
SHARE THE *Journey.*

We have enjoyed seeing so many members of our TAPS family at in-person events across the country this year. There is still time to register for our remaining 2023 in-person events, and registration is now open for our 2024 self-funded cruises.

2023-2024 TAPS EVENTS

VISIT [TAPS.ORG/EVENTS](https://taps.org/events) FOR EVEN MORE UPCOMING OPPORTUNITIES, INCLUDING ONLINE AND IN-PERSON EVENTS HAPPENING ALL YEAR.



OCT. 6-8, 2023
15TH ANNUAL NATIONAL MILITARY
SUICIDE SURVIVOR SEMINAR
& GOOD GRIEF CAMP
Boston, Massachusetts
**For survivors of suicide loss*



OCT. 27-29, 2023
WESTERN REGIONAL
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR
& GOOD GRIEF CAMP
Long Beach, California



NOV. 3-6, 2023
CALIFORNIA
FAMILY CAMP
Portola, California



NOV. 29-DEC. 3, 2023
MIDWEST OUTDOOR
FAMILY RETREAT
Carbondale, Illinois



JAN. 7-14, 2024
TAPS 7-NIGHT EASTERN CARIBBEAN
& PERFECT DAY CRUISE
Orlando, Florida
**Self-funded*



SEPT. 2-9, 2024
TAPS 7-NIGHT ALASKA CRUISE
Seattle, Washington
**Self-funded*



Save the Date

MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND 2024
30TH ANNUAL NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR
SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP
Arlington, Virginia

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES



CONTROLLING WHAT YOU CAN: **Attitude**

The fall season brings with it several transitions each year. Most of us see a change in the weather, temperature, and natural environment. Many will experience the change of colors as the leaves burst with orange, red, and brown. Others may have a slight shift from the heat of summer to more moderate temperatures of fall. Children and teenagers transition back into a structured school schedule — homework, after-school activities, and earlier rising and bedtimes. Fall largely brings welcomed changes, but sometimes change can come with challenges.

For children and teenagers grieving the death of a family member or friend, the transition back to school can, sometimes, be challenging. They may struggle with concentration, focus, or motivation. The change in seasons may bring back memories of things they did with their person before they died during this time of year. Grief is not something that children or teenagers can easily plan for or control. So, they will often struggle with the lack of control they have over grief's impact on their lives as they transition back to school.

Yet, there are many things that children and teenagers can control. As parents and guardians, we can help them become more aware of their choices, provide options for them so they have a "say so" daily, and model for them that the greatest choice we make — even in our grief — is choosing our attitude. Here are three lessons to teach and model for your children as they transition into the fall season.

You Have Options

We can help our children learn that, though there may be things in our lives we cannot fully control, we still have options. At times, we all struggle with over-focusing on things we cannot control. Sometimes we do this to an extreme and focus only on those things. When our attention is solely on what is going wrong or what is not in our control, we often lose sight of what we can control. We can remind ourselves and our children that even in the worst of times, we still have options. For example, we can choose how we spend our time in the afternoons after school — join an after-school activity, play outside with friends, read, spend time together as a family, or support someone else going through a difficult time. If we put our minds to it and look for opportunities, we begin to see them all around us.

Your Choices Matter

Sometimes in our grief, we might believe that, since we cannot control whether bad things will happen, our choices do not matter at all. The reality is that our choices always matter, and they matter even more when we are going through a difficult time. Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist who survived the WWII death camps, but lost almost every member of his immediate family. He wrote, "When we are no longer able to change our situation, we are challenged to change ourselves." What he meant by this is that even in the most challenging of circumstances, we can

choose how we spend our time, what we pay attention to, and who we spend time with. We can model this for our children by making healthy choices for ourselves, even during our grief.

Your Attitude Is Your Choice

Viktor Frankl also wrote that the greatest human freedom is "to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." This is not always easily done, especially when we are grieving. This amount of self-control takes practice. We can start by practicing this through self-talk with a trusted friend, through journaling and getting some thoughts and feelings on paper, or by focusing on our breathing, calming ourselves as we look for those things around us that we can control. Our children are paying attention to how we are responding to the circumstances of life and our grief. As we learn to control our attitude, we can teach them how to do the same.



Family Activity



Weekly Planner

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday

WEEKLY SCHEDULES, RITUALS, AND ROUTINES ACTIVITY

SUPPLIES NEEDED

- Poster Board
- Markers
- Sticky Notes

DESCRIPTION

Use back-to-school time as an opportunity to make plans as a family. Remember, how you spend your time each week is your choice. You can let the days come and go, only facing whatever each day brings, or make some choices about how you spend your time each day.

Set a time to sit down with your children and plan your weekly schedules, rituals, and routines. Lay the poster board on the floor in the middle of the room. Give each of your children and teenagers three sticky notes. Ask them to write an activity they look forward to or enjoy doing on each sticky note. Then, without talking, have them

place their sticky notes on the poster board. Go around the room and have each person share or point out their sticky notes and why that is something they like. When everyone has shared, then group similar sticky notes together. This should give you several activity themes you could plan to do together on a weekly or biweekly basis. For example, you might designate one night a week as movie night and another as game night. On other evenings, you might visit a special location, like a nearby park. Let each of your children or teenagers share input. You can then work with your children to draft a weekly routine on the poster board and post it somewhere in the house for all to see.

KLINGER, A STORY OF HONOR AND HOPE

Based on Klinger, a real horse that serves in the U.S. Army Caisson Platoon in Arlington National Cemetery, Betsey Beard's *Klinger* is an endearing story written for TAPS honoring all of America's beloved fallen heroes. The children's book illustrates a young horse dreaming of fame as a racehorse, struggling to achieve his dreams, and then finding fulfillment in honoring fallen heroes and bringing comfort to their families. A journey of loss, grief, and hope, *Klinger* is a wonderful and helpful book for young children experiencing grief over the death of a military loved one. Scan the QR code to learn more and order your copy.



TAPS YOUTH PROGRAMS

TAPS Youth Programs provide safe spaces for surviving children to honor their loved one and explore their grief all while experiencing fun, adventure, mentorship, and camaraderie with peers, mentors, and caring professionals.

Visit taps.org/youthprograms to learn more and browse events, including Good Grief Camps, family campouts, and online groups and workshops.





TAPS.ORG/PROGRAMS-SERVICES

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died



TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES



TAPS NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR HELPLINE • 800-959-TAPS (8277)

A caring network of peer professionals is standing by to provide emotional support, connection to resources and programs, a listening ear, and open access to all that TAPS provides. Survivors can call any time, day or night. We always answer, we always have time, and we always care.



PEER-BASED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/PEERMENTORS

At TAPS, survivors help survivors heal. Survivors at least 18 months out from their loss can receive training and join our national network of Peer Mentors. Newly bereaved survivors are closely matched with a Peer Mentor based on manner of loss and relationship to their loved one to help them navigate their unique needs in the aftermath of loss.



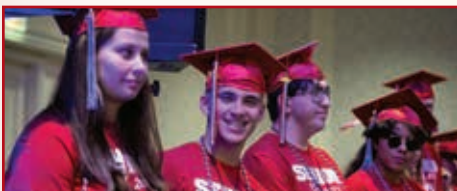
COMMUNITY-BASED GRIEF SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/GRIEFCOUNSELING

The right mental health or grief professional can guide military survivors to discover their strengths, develop coping skills, navigate relationships, and explore secondary losses. TAPS carefully connects survivors to the right mental health professional, trauma resources, and support groups, all within their local community.



CASEWORK ASSISTANCE • TAPS.ORG/CASEWORK

Our casework team provides compassionate, customized support to surviving families in alignment with TAPS partners and third-party resources. Caseworkers can connect survivors to pro-bono legal assistance, emergency financial resources, state and federal benefit information, and private social-services support to guide families toward long-term stability and self-sufficiency.



EDUCATION SUPPORT SERVICES • TAPS.ORG/EDU

TAPS Education Support Services empowers survivors in pursuit of post-secondary education by connecting them to benefits, resources, and scholarship information that meet their financial needs and educational goals.



SURVIVOR CARE TEAM • TAPS.ORG/SURVIVORCARETEAM

Survivor Care Team members are surviving military family members with extensive professional training in peer-based support, traumatic death, suicide prevention and postvention, and grief support. These skilled listeners assess the needs of the newly bereaved, create safe spaces for sharing, and empower the pursuit of the healthy coping skills and long-term support systems TAPS can provide.



SUICIDE LOSS SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/SUICIDE

Death by suicide can leave behind a wake of powerful, complicated emotions and questions that shape a unique grief journey. TAPS provides compassionate support and hope for all suicide-loss survivors and safe spaces to honor and grieve. Survivors are gently guided toward a path of healthy grieving, healing, and growth.

ILLNESS LOSS SUPPORT • [TAPS.ORG/CAREGIVER](https://taps.org/caregiver)

TAPS ensures families whose loved one died from illness are recognized, cared for, and aware of pertinent benefits. We advocate for improvements in caregiver support and raise critical awareness about the unique needs and situations of military caregiving families, including the effects of toxic exposure. TAPS also provides healing peer connections and programs that support healthy next steps for caregiving survivors.



ONLINE COMMUNITY • [TAPS.ORG/ONLINECOMMUNITY](https://taps.org/onlinecommunity)

Our online community brings the meaningful connections of TAPS directly to survivors, wherever they are. Online groups are peer-led, facilitated sessions where there's never pressure to share, but always an opportunity. TAPS workshops and online series build supportive communities that learn and process new information together and create space to share perspectives in an effort to find inspiration, clarity, and connection.



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT • [TAPS.ORG/EMPOWERMENT](https://taps.org/empowerment)

TAPS Women's Empowerment programming provides surviving women with the tools and confidence to shape their identity, spirituality, and goal setting in their lives after loss. A combination of in-person and online events foster a vibrant, compassionate community where participants treasure opportunities to be each other's teachers, confidants, cheerleaders, and friends.



MEN'S PROGRAM • [TAPS.ORG/MEN](https://taps.org/men)

The TAPS Men's Program was designed by men, for men. It paves the way for men to grieve their way, at their own pace. Surviving men lean on each other, share perspectives, grow stronger by elevating one another, and honor the legacy of their military and veteran loved ones.



YOUTH PROGRAMS • [TAPS.ORG/YOUTHPROGRAMS](https://taps.org/youthprograms)

Though their lives are impacted by grief, young TAPS survivors know their lives will also be marked by camaraderie, mentorship, emotional maturity, adventure, and fun. TAPS Youth Programs — led by experts in child development, children's grief and loss, mental health, and education — provide safe spaces for surviving military children (ages 5-18) to explore grief and embrace healing at Good Grief Camps and Family Camps. Online programming is also available for parents and guardians of grieving children.



YOUNG ADULTS PROGRAM • [TAPS.ORG/YOUNGADULTS](https://taps.org/youngadults)

Five pillars of growth — Personal Development, Financial Stability, Communication, Career Development, and Service to Others — guide military survivors, ages 18-30, as they grow with their grief. Through in-person, multi-day experiences, and online group discussions, young adult survivors connect and engage with others to create a well-rounded life full of hope, healing, and growth.



TAPS INSTITUTE FOR HOPE AND HEALING® • [TAPS.ORG/INSTITUTE](https://taps.org/institute)

The TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® is a leader in training and education for grief professionals and bereaved individuals and families. The institute provides no-cost grief and bereavement programming through webinars, webcasts, and other events on a variety of topics, such as understanding and responding to suicide; children's grief; coping with loss; wellness workshops; and preserving memories of lost loved ones. Professionals can access academic programs and a wide range of continuing education credits.



SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT • [TAPS.ORG/ENTERTAINMENT](https://taps.org/entertainment)

Stars4TAPS and teams4taps collaborate with the entertainment industry and sports organizations across the country and in the U.K. to bring joy, healing, and incredible memories to surviving military families as they honor their fallen heroes.



Covered In Comfort This Fall

SHOP TAPS ONLINE



ADULT FLEECE-LINED PULLOVER HOODIE \$29.99 • MEN'S SPORT BONDED FLEECE FULL-ZIP JACKET \$59.99
PACKABLE WATER-RESISTANT JACKET \$39.99 • LIGHTWEIGHT PERFORMANCE EXPEDITION HOODED LONG-SLEEVE TEE
\$36.99 • YOUTH PULLOVER HOODIE \$9.99 • YOUTH LONG-SLEEVE LOGO TEE \$8.99 • ROUND LOGO LADIES FULL-ZIP
HOODIE \$34.99 • FLAG FRONT LONG-SLEEVE TEE \$22.99 • CAMELBAK EDDY BPA-FREE BLUE WATER BOTTLE \$17.99



PHOTOS: ASHLEY CROSS

TAPS.ORG/SHOP

YOUTH ROUND LOGO SHORT-SLEEVE TEE \$12.99 • EMBROIDERED LADIES POLO \$22.99 • RED BISTRO MUG \$9.99
MULTI-FUNCTIONAL NECK GAITER \$11.99 • FLAG STRUCTURED CAP \$29.99 • EMBROIDERED LOGO BACKPACK \$39.99
UNISEX SPORT QUARTER-ZIP LONG-SLEEVE TECH SHIRT \$24.99 • TAPS MINI FOAM FOOTBALL \$4.99



TO THE Stars

.....
LTC Davina French ★ North Dakota National Guard, Ret.
TAPS Military Liaison
.....

The rain beat down, creating puddles on the road that could throw your vehicle around a bit. The passenger window went down again. This time about four inches, I rolled it up and told Scout to quit messing with me. As soon as I got the passenger window back up, my driver's window started to go up and down erratically. Then it went down and stayed down. Doing 60 mph, drenched by the sideways rain now inside my vehicle, I turned on my blinker and exited the highway in the middle of nowhere Vermont.

I slowed as I approached a stop sign situated next to a smaller sign that simply read "To the Stars" with an arrow pointing right. I was listening now.

A few months ago, I searched for validation — a sign — before attempting this 10,000-mile journey that currently had me drenched in Vermont. I was being challenged by my internal compass and couldn't quite articulate why this trip was so important to my heart. What kind of person just gets into an RV with a pup named Scout and sets off on a TAPS briefing tour, stopping at military installations nationwide and looking for the good in the world?

The Godwink I needed arrived as a movie ad on my computer screen, a still shot of the words Ad Astra as the theme music played in the background. I thought about Jon, tears leaking like pouring rain. I kept thinking about Jon.

Days later, I needed to fill my RV's propane tank before I started the 10,000-mile journey, so I stopped at a hardware store. As the employee reached down to close my propane tank. Speechless, I stared at the tattoo on his arm — this was a full-blown Godwink; it read, "AD ASTRA PER ASPERA" (to the stars through hardship). Why did it feel like Jon was lurking around? Time is a strange commodity to try to stop, even if it is just for a memory.

.....
One hot June day 20 years ago, we were driving in this dastardly convoy that was full of nothing and everything simultaneously. When you go for long periods of white-knuckle desert driving, you can be lulled by the serenity of the sand-filled view. The tenacity of the sizzling heat was like driving in an oven. Sand blasting your skin, steering wheels so hot that your skin turns into leather as it cooks on the metal in your vehicle. Every moment was so quiet and so very tense. Your concentration is on the taillights of the vehicle in front of you.

After driving the treacherous sand trails of Main Supply Route Tampa, all soldiers welcomed a few hours to nap at Camp Cedar, which was just a couple of fuel trucks, barbed wire fence, and armed military sentries. The local Iraqis were on the outside of the sharp barbed wire fences begging for food and water. Young Iraqi men would just appear and stare at our unit's anomaly of 49 female soldiers driving giant trucks. We parked our trucks in a tight formation and hunkered down for a four-hour sleep break. My boots were off, body armor off, shirt untucked, and pants loosened for comfort.





Kenny slept on the front grill of the vehicle. Jon lay on the hummer roof with me. We talked about home and the stars in the sky. I told Jon the story about the Stars of Talil and why each one was so beautiful in its own way. I admit to completely making up every fact about astrology as I told the stories of why stars looked like the animals of the arc and Disney characters. He laughed politely, and by the end of the conversation I had convinced Jon that, because we were on the other side of the world, all the dippers were upside-down and backward. The power of belief is amazing.

Jon's power to humor his commander was priceless. We found all the dippers and convinced ourselves that my star theory was the way of the world.

Startled from a deep sleep by the feeling of someone in my immediate space, I jumped off the top of the hummer like a superhero, yelling in some made-up foreign language gibberish. A small group of young Iraqi men had entered the unit area, and I was having nothing to do with the intrusion. As I started the chase, my bootlaces flapped in the wind. My right hand flailed around as it held my 9mm, which I'd fallen asleep holding. My left hand rhythmically reached out in front of me in a swimming motion to gain speed. I must have looked like Yosemite Sam, who famously ran around shooting his guns in the air and stomping his feet in those oversized boots.

Those young men were way faster than my 40-year-old attempt to chase them, and I learned later that they were authorized workers. I had acted like a fool, becoming a raging mother hen to protect my soldiers. I was flustered, humbled, and then — energy drained — I flopped onto the ground in the snow angel position.

Fighting gravity and laughing his dorky North Dakota snort-laugh, Jon ran toward me. Before offering me a hand, he mimicked my absurd running scene — something about puppet legs and swimming on land. Contagious laughter spread through the

convoy as I sulked back to the lead vehicle, secretly smirking inside at how sometimes team building comes in the weirdest packages.

When Jon was killed the next month, all I thought about were the stars. I was overwhelmed with events after the ambush, orchestrating controlled chaos, worrying about the effects of these events, and wondering how each young soldier was faring in the wake.

As the commander, I was to lead a field memorial service. In my planning and sullen silence, I found myself just walking around the vehicles in the motor pool. The reality of the incident was right in front of me. Tears welled up in my eyes as I read for the first time, beautifully drawn in chalk above a flag on the driver's door of a truck identical to Jon's, "Ad astra per aspera' (to the stars by hard ways)." Jon Fettig's name was carefully drawn with tenderness and respect. And 180 souls from North Dakota would never forget his name or this day.

Loud, pouring rain continued to drench my patch of Vermont.. That was enough daydreaming about a past I can't change, but I tipped my hat to the mere coincidence of a loving memory brought present as I hit my right blinker to follow the sign to the stars.

I maneuvered my RV up the muddy trails that climbed the back hills of Vermont.

The trees, a vibrant summer green, shielded the rain, allowing me to navigate the slip-and-slide. Anticipation mounting, the road suddenly turned slightly to the right and ended in front of a pink house. As I parked and bounded out of my RV, a giant of a man came darting out of the house.

Unsure of what I was looking at, I mumbled to the man about my soldier, the signs, the muddy road, and the RV window as he simultaneously tried to catch me up. I snapped a couple pictures, desperately looking for something — the why.

The pink house, which turned out to be the 100-year-old Stellafane Clubhouse — one of Vermont's best spots for stargazing — spoke to me, and I received the message. If it weren't for the rain or the window, or the trail of signs grabbing my attention, I would have missed it. A fearless warmth accompanied me back to the RV as I imagined Jon saying, "You know, ma'am, been here with you, and I got your back."

I drove back down the mountain in silence with a calmness in my heart, eager to call Jon's family. It's been 20 years, but I miss my soldier, and I want to tell more stories about him. Before I forget, I want to tell my stories.

Those of us who served with your loved ones have stories. Ask us. We treasure our connections to your loved ones and any chance to share the side of them we knew and hear the side you knew. We remember our fallen comrades tenderly. Reach out to someone who has a story.

About the Author

Davina French serves as TAPS' Military Liaison, maintaining the strong bond between TAPS and the military services. Throughout 2023, she visited military installations nationwide to share the support and services available to service members.



VERY IMPORTANT DOCUMENT

PFC Diego Rincon, U.S. Army ✨ Forward by Kristi Stolzenberg and Ideliz Mora-Cruz, TAPS Staff

FORWARD:

PFC Diego Rincon died on foreign soil on March 29, 2003, proudly wearing a U.S. Army uniform, but he was not a U.S. citizen. He was just 5 years old in 1989 when he immigrated to the United States with his older brother and his parents, Jorge and Yolanda. They sought peace for their growing family, and they found it in their own little corner of Georgia until September 11, 2001.

Diego, 19 by 2001, watched the footage of the Twin Towers and felt — for the first time since arriving in the United States — insignificant. He felt compelled to defend his “adopted homeland.”

In *My Country to Defend*, A. E. Dimond writes about Jorge and Yolanda’s reactions to Diego’s announcement to enlist, “America was his soul mate, and [he] was right to protect her. ‘Join the Army,’ Diego’s father gave his blessing again, and [brokenhearted] his mother turned her head. There was a haunting, piercing pain in her breast, taking her breath away.”

Diego soon deployed to Iraq. Immense pride in their brave son and hope of his safe return carried his parents between letters and calls. In his last letter home, Diego’s tone was different. His words

balanced the innocence of a young man with a keen understanding of the world and himself — many take a lifetime to discover wisdom like this, but a service member picks it up quickly.

Following his death, Diego received U.S. citizenship posthumously, and his final letter continues to be a source of comfort for Yolanda, Jorge, Diego’s siblings, and his extended family and friends. With the hope that Diego’s words will bring comfort to other surviving families, we are proud to share Diego’s words here.



DOCUMENTO MUY IMPORTANTE

PFC Diego Rincon, U.S. Army ✨ Forward by Kristi Stolzenberg and Ideliz Mora-Cruz, TAPS Staff

FORWARD:

PFC Diego Rincon murió en tierra extranjera el 29 de marzo del 2003, orgullosamente llevando el uniforme del Ejército, pero no era ciudadano de los Estados Unidos. Tenía solo 5 años de edad en 1989 cuando emigró a los Estados Unidos con su hermano mayor y sus padres, Jorge y Yolanda. Buscaron la paz para su creciente familia, y la encontraron en su propio rincón de Georgia hasta el 11 de septiembre del 2001.

Diego, de 19 años, observó las imágenes de las Torres Gemelas y por primera vez, desde que llegó a los Estados Unidos se sintió insignificante. Se sintió obligado a defender a su “patria adoptada.”

En *Mi País Para Defender*, A. E. Dimond escribe acerca de las reacciones de Jorge y Yolanda al Diego anunciarle de alistarse, “Estados Unidos era su alma, y [él] estaba correcto en protegerla. ‘Ingresa al Ejército’, el padre de Diego le dio su bendición una vez más, y [con el corazón desolado] su madre volteo la cabeza. Había un dolor agonizante y perforador en su pecho, que le quitaba la respiración.

Diego luego fue enviado a Iraq. El enorme orgullo de su valiente hijo y la esperanza de su regreso seguro sostenía a sus padres entre cartas y llamadas. En su última carta a casa, el tono de Diego era diferente

Sus palabras balanceaban la inocencia de un joven y una profunda comprensión del mundo y de sí mismo que a muchos les lleva toda la vida descubrir sabiduría como esta, pero un miembro del servicio la obtiene rápidamente.

Después de su muerte, Diego recibió la ciudadanía de los Estados Unidos póstumamente, y su última carta sigue siendo una fuente de consuelo para Yolanda, Jorge, los hermanos de Diego y su amplia familia y amigos. Con la esperanza de que las palabras de Diego traigan consuelo a otras familias sobrevivientes, nos enorgullecemos de compartir aquí sus palabras.



February 22, 2003

Hola Mother,

How are you doing? Good, I hope. I'm doing OK, I guess. I won't be able to write anymore starting the 28th of this month. We are moving out. We are already packed and ready to move to a tactical Alpha-Alpha (in Iraq). Once that happens, there will not be any mail sent out. We will only receive mail that is less than 12 ounces. At least that's what they said. I'm not sure where exactly we're going to be yet, but it is said to be a 20-hour drive in the Bradleys.

So I guess the time has finally come for us to see what we are made of, who will crack when the stress level rises, and who will be calm all the way through it. Only time will tell. We are at the peak of our training, and it's time to put it to the test.

I just want to tell everybody how much you all mean to me and how much I love you all. Mother, I love you so much! I'm not going to give up! I'm living my life one day at a time, sitting here picturing home with a small tear in my eyes, spending time with my brothers who will hold my life in their hands.

I try not to think of what may happen in the future, but I can't stand seeing it in my eyes. There are going to be funerals and tears rolling down everybody's cheeks. But the only thing I can say is: Keep my head up and try to keep the faith and pray for better days. All this will pass. I believe God has a path for me. Whether I make it or not, it's all part of the plan. It can't be changed, only completed.

Mother will be the last word I'll say. Your face will be the last picture that goes through my eyes. I'm not trying to scare you, but it's reality. The time is here to see the plan laid out. And hopefully, I'll be at home in it. I don't know what I'm talking about or why I'm writing it down. Maybe I just want someone to know what goes through my head. It's probably good not keeping it all inside.

I just hope that you're proud of what I'm doing and have faith in my decisions. I will try hard and not give up. I just want to say sorry for anything I have ever done wrong. And I'm doing it all for you, Mom. I love you.

P.S. Very Important Document

Your son,

Diego Rincon

22 de febrero del 2003

Hola madre,

¿Cómo estás? Bien, espero. Estoy bien, supongo. No podré escribir más a partir del 28 de este mes. Nos estamos mudando. Ya estamos empacados y listos para mudarnos a un Alfa-Alfa táctico (en Irak). Una vez que eso suceda, no se enviará ningún correo. Solo recibiremos correo que pese menos de 12 onzas. Al menos eso es lo que dijeron. Todavía no estoy seguro en dónde exactamente vamos a estar, pero se dice que será un viaje de 20 horas en los Bradley.

Así que supongo que finalmente ha llegado el momento de que veamos de qué estamos hechos, quién se derrumbara cuando aumente el nivel de estrés y quién estará tranquilo durante todo el proceso. Sólo el tiempo dirá. Estamos en la cima de nuestro entrenamiento y es hora de ponerlo a prueba.

Solo quiero decirles a todos cuánto significan para mí y cuánto los amo. ¡Madre, te quiero mucho! ¡No me voy a rendir! Estoy viviendo mi vida un día a la vez, sentado aquí imaginando mi hogar con una pequeña lágrima en los ojos, pasando tiempo con mis hermanos que tendrán mi vida en sus manos.

Trato de no pensar en lo que puede pasar en el futuro, pero no soporto verlo en mis ojos. Habrá funerales y lágrimas rodando por las mejillas de todos. Pero lo único que puedo decir me es: Mantén la cabeza en alto y trata de mantener la fe y ora por mejores días. Todo esto pasará. Creo que Dios tiene un camino para mí. Ya sea que lo logre o no, todo es parte del plan. No se puede cambiar, solo completar.

Madre será la última palabra que diré. Tu cara será la última imagen que pase por mis ojos. No estoy tratando de asustarte, pero es la realidad. Ha llegado el momento de ver el plan trazado. Y con suerte, estaré en casa en él. No sé de qué estoy hablando o por qué lo estoy escribiendo. Tal vez solo quiero que alguien sepa lo que pasa por mi cabeza. Probablemente no sea bueno guardarlo todo dentro.

Solo espero que estés orgullosa de lo que estoy haciendo y que tengas fe en mis decisiones. Me esforzaré y no me rendiré. Solo quiero pedir perdón por cualquier cosa que haya hecho mal. Y lo estoy haciendo todo por ti, mamá. Te amo.

P.D. Documento muy importante.

Tu hijo,

Diego Rincon



At TAPS, we know that grief is a universal language, but military and veteran survivors speak many different languages. If you speak another language and are ready to support other survivors, we would love to welcome you to our Peer Mentor team. Visit taps.org/becomepeermentor to learn more and apply.

HONORING AN AMERICAN HERO AT AMERICA'S BALLPARK



By Grace Polk ★ Sports & Entertainment Senior Coordinator

On Oct. 16, 2003, New York Yankees Infielder Aaron Boone hit a walk-off home run in game seven of the American League Championship Series. History repeating for the perennially downtrodden Red Sox Nation — a city of loveable losers lost once again. I was 8 years old. My mom grew up in Dorchester, and as a Massachusetts native, she lived through the dark days — the curse. She carried with her Babe, Buckner, and the rest of the baggage that was, at that point, any Sox fan's birthright.

Dropping me off at school after that ALCS loss, I hopped out of the car with youthful innocence and optimism, “Don’t worry, Mom, we’ll get ‘em next year.” I don’t recall her response, but she later wrote to my dad, announcing “Another doomed Red Sox fan.”

SPORTS ARE COMMUNAL.

THEY PROVIDE A RALLYING POINT

AROUND WHICH DISPARATE

GROUPS OF PEOPLE UNITE IN

LIGHT OF A SHARED LOVE

AND A COMMON CAUSE.

I WANTED TO HARNESS THAT

POWER AND ENGAGE WITH

PEOPLE MEANINGFULLY AND

AUTHENTICALLY THROUGH SPORT.

The following fall, my lucky cap and I kept the faith while my mom paced, sat down, stood back up, walked outside, came back in, sat down facing away from the television, stood up, paced, and repeated. But, as we all know, we did it. We got ‘em — one of the rare incidents in our family history where mom was wrong, and I was right.

I don’t say this to stick it to my mom (though she was wrong), but to provide a brief account of what I consider to be part of my origin story — my roots as not just as a Sox fan, but as a sports fan. My fandom ran so deep that when I started contemplating what to do with my life, the answer firmly became, “I want to work in sports.”

What “working in sports” meant or what in the world it might look like, I had no idea. But, I asked myself the “why” question, and



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/HSTOCK

I worked to figure it out. My conclusion: Sports are communal. They provide a rallying point around which disparate groups of people unite in light of a shared love and a common cause. I wanted to harness that power and engage with people meaningfully and authentically through sport.

I was here and there, and then I found TAPS.

Through my work with the Sports & Entertainment team at TAPS, I connect surviving military family members with teams, leagues, athletes, and organizations to help them honor the service and sacrifice of their fallen hero. Engaging with people meaningfully through sport? Check.

At a Los Angeles Chargers practice, I watched a dragonfly land on a surviving mother's arm and refuse to leave. I sat behind two families at a Washington Nationals game when they discovered that the father from the family on the left was the responding flight paramedic at the very accident in Nevada where the family on the right's young Marine son was killed. I received an email from surviving parents after a Patriots practice that said they hadn't seen their son smile like that since his big brother died. Always, I believed in the power of sport, but now I know it's not just powerful — it's magical.



Our team plans these events — with the help of our wonderful partners, but those moments? I really had nothing to do with them. What do you call that, if not magic?

Earlier this year, I received an email from the surviving mother of LCpl Thomas Cutcher, U.S. Marine Corps. She wrote of her son, his service, and his love of the Boston Red Sox:

“Tommy was a baseball player. He loved the sport and was a lifelong Boston Red Sox fan. Tommy played Little League and high school ball and was playing on base in his free time. He watched every Red Sox game that he could, though the games often were not shown in California. Tommy had seven months left in his service, and he was looking forward to coming home and finally heading to Fenway to see a game. He had never been there. I grew up in Connecticut and have been a fan all my life. We live in Ohio, and I would take my kids back to Connecticut in the summertime, but we were never able to catch the Sox at home when we were there. Tommy was a heavy equipment operator and had been looking into moving to Boston to work on the docks. He thought that he would, for sure, be able to finally catch a game if he lived and worked there. Sadly, his dream never came true. I never got to share that Fenway experience with him.”

On Sept. 25, 2021, LCpl Thomas Wayne Cutcher was killed in an automobile accident on base while serving at Camp Pendleton, CA.

This story would move any member of our team to action, but I felt particularly compelled. For me, the Fenway experience is sacred. It might be old and kind of dirty; the seats might be hard and uncomfortable; if the lights go out, the home crowd might start chanting “Fenway sucks!” (not might, they will — source: my mom), but it is home for Sox fans.

I reached out to the Red Sox and shared the meaningful connection this family has to the team. They were moved by what



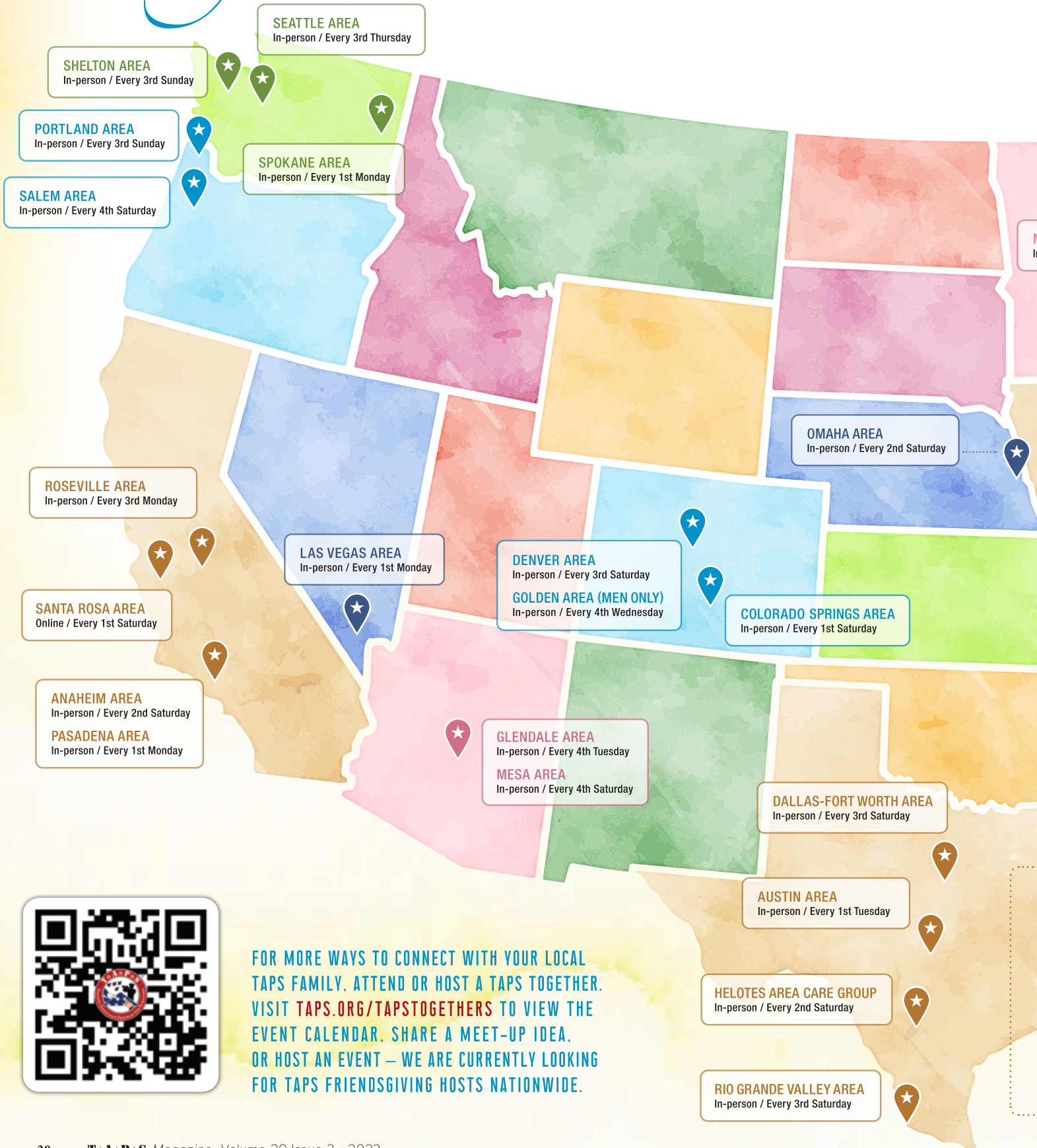
they read and worked to create a special experience for them. Red Sox owner, John Henry, and his wife, Linda, wrote an incredibly thoughtful letter addressed to the family. Accompanying this note was a touching tribute from the team: a photo of LCpl Cutcher displayed on the video board at Fenway Park. America's most beloved ballpark recognized the life and service of one of its biggest fans. Though they never got their Fenway moment with Tommy, the Red Sox welcomed LCpl Cutcher's family to a game in June, where they made precious memories together while honoring their memories of him.

Growing up a Boston sports fanatic with just a vague notion of wanting to work in sports, I never imagined I'd be here — here, on a beautiful June evening in an iconic ballpark that is such a central part of my story, of the Cutcher's and Tommy's stories. Here — privileged to bear witness to the healing power of sport in stands and stadiums across the country — it is magic.

teams4taps wants to help you create magic moments while honoring your fallen hero through sport. Scan the QR code to share your loved one's connection to a favorite athlete, team, or sport.



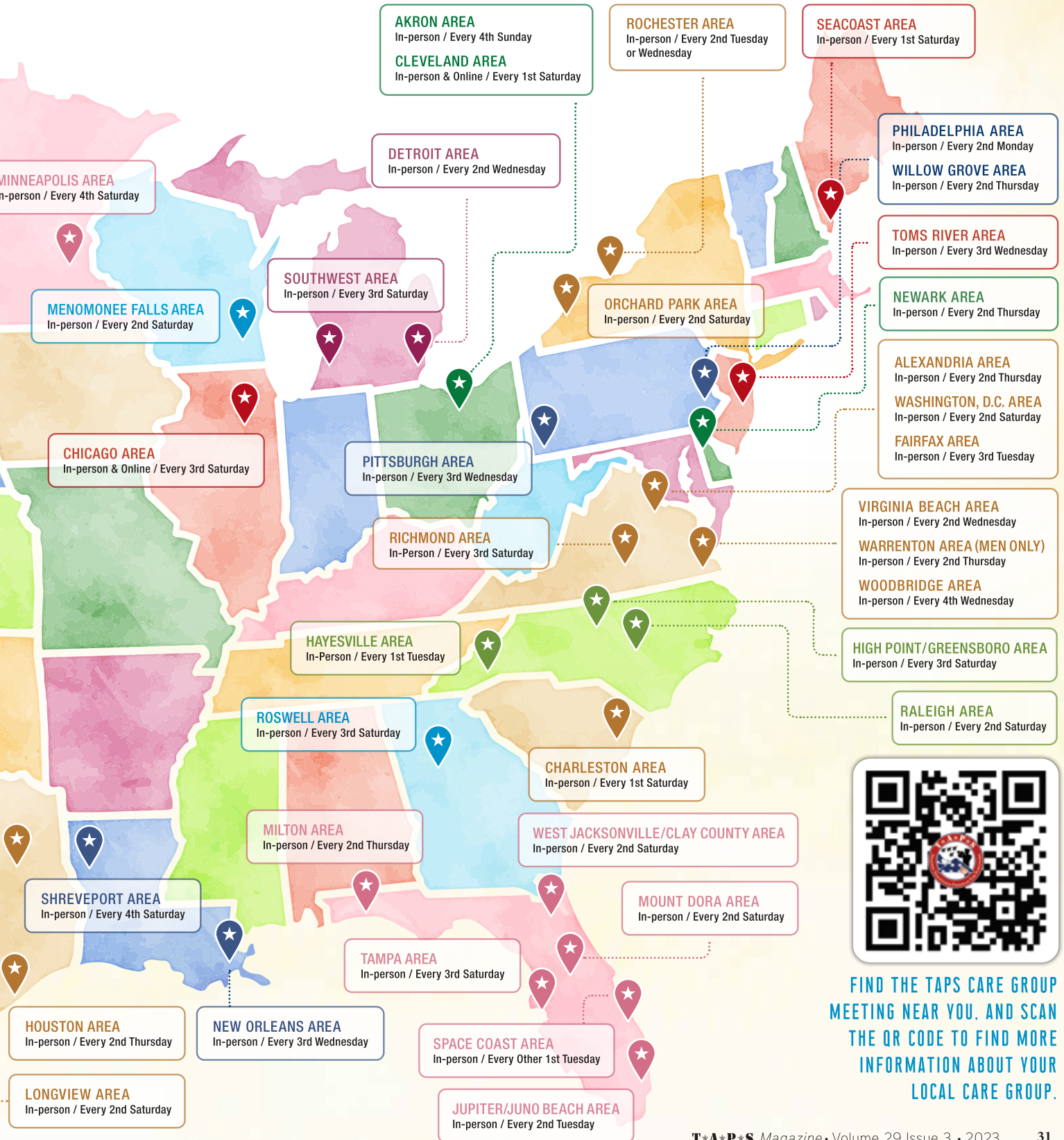
Caring ACROSS THE COUNTRY



FOR MORE WAYS TO CONNECT WITH YOUR LOCAL TAPS FAMILY, ATTEND OR HOST A TAPS TOGETHER. VISIT [TAPS.ORG/TAPSTOGETHER](https://taps.org/tapstogether) TO VIEW THE EVENT CALENDAR, SHARE A MEET-UP IDEA, OR HOST AN EVENT – WE ARE CURRENTLY LOOKING FOR TAPS FRIENDSGIVING HOSTS NATIONWIDE.

TAPS CARE GROUPS BRING THE FEELING OF TAPS *close to home*

Each month, TAPS Care Groups bring the emotional support and camaraderie of TAPS to communities all over the country. Monthly meetings are open to all those grieving the loss of a military or veteran service member, and each meeting allows opportunities to share, listen, and connect with your local community of survivors. If there is not a Care Group meeting in your area, the first step to creating one is becoming a TAPS Peer Mentor. Learn more at taps.org/becomeapeermentor, or visit taps.org/communityresourceportal to let TAPS help you find other sources of local support.



FIND THE TAPS CARE GROUP MEETING NEAR YOU, AND SCAN THE QR CODE TO FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR LOCAL CARE GROUP.

LAST *Wish,* LASTING *Gift*

By Kristi Stolzenberg ★ Editor, TAPS Magazine

Right now, on a quiet suburban street in Vienna — just outside the Beltway around Washington, D.C. — there's a child grinning widely, feeling the rhythmic whoosh of the wind through her hair as she pumps her legs back and forth on a swing. Running just past the tips of her outstretched toes, two young boys race each other back to the slide, exchanging playground taunts all the way. Children's laughter reaches above the treetops and rides the breeze of early fall.

The playground nestles perfectly into this plot of land, giving the feeling there never could have been another use for this field — homes and stately trees growing up around it, biding its time until it realized its purpose. Yet, just months ago this playground was only a plan — the plan of a bereaved wife determined to fulfill her husband's third and final wish made in the last days of his life.

MSgt Scott Walters of the Air National Guard, the namesake for this playground in Vienna, lived his life in pursuit of joy, even after he became ill. Where there was no joy to be found, he created it. Until the very end of his life, Scott was cracking jokes just to make his nurses laugh, savoring every last bite of strawberry on his tongue, and taking care of others. Before he passed in March 2021, he asked three things of his wife, Erica.

1. **BURY ME IN ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY.**

2. **CONTINUE OUR COMMUNITY GARDEN.**

3. **DONATE A PLAYGROUND TO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD.**

By March 28, 2022, Erica fulfilled Scott's first request — he was laid to rest at Arlington in the presence of family, friends, and battle buddies. As for the community garden, Scott and Erica created the garden during the pandemic. The garden was Scott's contribution to the fight against food insecurity in Fairfax County, but it has become more than Erica's second promise kept to Scott. Last year, the Scott Walters Memorial Garden donated 500 pounds of food, and this year, the goal is 1,000. Not only is it touching the lives of those who receive the food, but it creates volunteer opportunities and a space to teach gardening skills. Maintaining the garden carries Scott's legacy forward in the community he loved so much.

As his colleagues at the 113th Civil Engineering Squadron — a component of the D.C. Air National Guard — explain, the D.C. Air National Guard is a community



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within a community. They wear the uniform one weekend each month, but on every other day, they are neighbors and community members. CMSgt Joshua Vance of the 113th states “That was Scott. His legacy was his work in the community.”

With Scott’s first two wishes granted, Erica shifted her focus to his third and final wish: the neighborhood playground. Once the equipment was purchased and plans were made, she turned to her military family at the 113th. “We could have hired a contractor, but this meant more.”

On April 29, 2023, members from the 113th, Erica’s TAPS community, friends, family, and neighbors gathered to build and dedicate the Scott Walters Memorial Playground.

And that would be a perfectly fine ending.

Erica’s last acts of caregiving complete, she could exhale, return to what she was doing the day before Scott got sick, and find her new normal. But, while Erica was honoring Scott by fulfilling his last wishes, she came to realize that these were, in fact, his lasting gifts to her.

You see, the community garden didn’t just provide food and education to the community, Erica eventually recognized that — on those darkest days of grief — the garden was what pulled her out of bed in the morning. Volunteers were counting on her to show up, and she had a promise to keep to Scott — it became her purpose, drawing her forward through grief one step at a time.

And then there’s the playground. Layer by layer, Erica realized that — in his brilliance — Scott never wanted the playground as a



SCOTT NEVER WANTED THE PLAYGROUND AS A GIFT TO HIM. IT WAS ALWAYS SUPPOSED TO BE HIS LAST GIFT TO HIS FAMILY, HIS COMMUNITY, AND EVEN HIS BATTLE BUDDIES AT THE 113TH.

“THERE ARE SOULS IN THIS WORLD WHO HAVE THE GIFT
OF *finding joy* EVERYWHERE, AND LEAVING IT BEHIND THEM WHEN THEY GO.”
— FREDERICK WILLIAM FABER



gift to him. It was always supposed to be his last gift to his family, his community, and even his battle buddies at the 113th. Building the playground brought together so many people in the area who Scott knew and loved — neighbors, friends, and members of his family and the 113th. As they worked, they supported each other through grief, shared stories of Scott, laughed, and hugged. It was a healing experience for each person there who knew Scott, and for years to come, he'll bring joy to the children on that playground without ever knowing them. “It is just like him to do something to make people smile and

bring joy,” Erica proudly shares, “and he’s still doing it.”

The playground ended up taking two days to build, even with all the helping hands on deck. “I was so glad they didn’t finish on schedule because coming back a second day let me spend quality time with the crew, and it allowed one person who couldn’t be there the first day to be there, and it meant so much to him to be a piece of this project,” Erica says.

Scott’s final three wishes fulfilled, and more than two years after his death, Erica is

carrying on — an extension of Scott’s legacy in the community. But, as often happens after the loss of a great love, her grief occasionally swells to fill a quiet moment in the home she shared with Scott. As her mind wanders to the “I wishes” or “what ifs” — and just as a tear might try to fall, she hears the sound of the children laughing at the playground strategically built next door and shakes her head with the flattered, loving grin of someone at the center of a grand gesture. Scott’s last wish, his gift to Erica, created joy where there was none, and it will continue to fill her heart and her home with joy with each passing day.

**SCOTT’S LAST WISH. HIS GIFT TO ERICA,
CREATED JOY WHERE THERE WAS NONE, AND IT
WILL CONTINUE TO FILL HER HEART AND HER
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PHOTOS: TSGT ANDREW ENRIQUEZ

MEMORIALS on the Move

Honor the fallen by participating in races and special events nationwide.



Visit taps.org/teamtaps to join Team TAPS, register to have your hero matched to a Team TAPS athlete, or contribute to athletes' fundraising goals.

VA SURVIVOR BENEFITS YOU CAN COUNT ON.

As a Veteran's surviving spouse, child, or parent, you may be eligible for certain VA benefits and services after your loved one has passed, including burials and burial allowances, survivors pension, health care, education, Dependency and Indemnity Compensation, and home loans.



BURIALS AND BURIAL ALLOWANCES:

VA.gov/burials-memorials



EDUCATION RESOURCES:

VA.gov/education/survivor-dependent-benefits



SURVIVORS PENSION:

VA.gov/pension/survivors-pension



DEPENDENCY AND INDEMNITY COMPENSATION:

VA.gov/disability/dependency-indemnity-compensation



HEALTH CARE BENEFITS:

VA.gov/health-care/family-caregiver-benefits



HOME LOAN PROGRAMS:

VA.gov/housing-assistance/home-loans/surviving-spouse

Always the Right Number: Call 1-800-MyVA411 (1-800-698-2411)

Learn more about benefits for surviving family members: VA.gov/family-member-benefits

Schedule a virtual or in-person appointment with a VA benefits specialist: vets.force.com/VAVERA

Reach out to VA's Office of Survivor Assistance at: officeofsurvivorsasst@va.gov



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs



202-588-TAPS (8277) ★ TAPS.org

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors offers comfort, care, and resources to all those grieving the death of a military loved one.



TAPS is a participant organization in the Combined Federal Campaign, No. 11309

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TAPS thanks the outgoing Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman GEN Milley for the memorable moments we've shared over the years. We thank him for his service to our country and to TAPS. Being the chairman – holding that title and rank – brings a level of honor and respect. Some of our fondest moments with GEN Milley, though, have happened on the ice. He would don a pair of ice skates and a hockey jersey and play with the children of the fallen who looked to him, not as the chairman, but as an ice hockey player, mentor, and friend. We are grateful for every role he has played in the lives of our TAPS family, and we wish him, Hollyanne, their children, and their grandchildren all the very best as they continue to serve our country.

