

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

TAPS®

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

FALL 2024



ANNIVERSARY

Ms. Rebecca Harrison
Mullany
Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors



Love

Came First...

You don't move on after loss,
but you must move with.

You must shake hands
with grief, welcome her in,
for she lives with you now.
Pull her a chair at the table
and offer her comfort.

She is not the monster you
first thought her to be.

She is love.

And she will walk
with you now,
stay with you now,
peacefully.

If you let her.
And on the days when
your anger is high,
remember why she came,
remember who
she represents.

Remember.
Grief came to you,
my friend,
because love came first.
Love came first.

DONNA ASHWORTH,
Wild Hope



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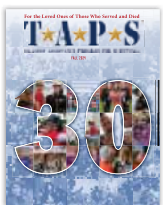
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SHARE YOUR STORY
BRING HOPE TO
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TAPS PROGRAMS & SERVICES

- 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: This fall, on Oct. 17, we recognize 30 years of TAPS. As we reflect on three decades of healing and honoring heroes together, we are reminded of the growth we've shared. Looking forward, across all TAPS programs, we will continue to support you and all those grieving the loss of a member of the military community.

COVER PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES

About TAPS

Caring for the Families of America's Fallen Heroes

TAPS is the national nonprofit organization providing compassionate care and comprehensive resources to all those grieving a death in the military and veteran community. 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 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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A member of Team TAPS runs the 2023 Marine Corps Marathon in honor of a fallen hero. We wish all of our Team TAPS athletes good luck in this year's race season, including the 2024 Marine Corps Marathon. If you are interested in joining Team TAPS, submitting your loved one's name for the Fallen Hero Match program, or supporting our runners, visit taps.org/teamtaps. ✨ PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES



taps.org/teamtaps



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To Our TAPS Family,



For 30 years, the *TAPS Magazine* has been our way to bring the comfort, community, and resources of TAPS to your home and heart each season, and it is with love and care that we welcome you to the fall 2024 issue.

The *TAPS Magazine* has transformed over the last three decades — what started as a black-and-white newsletter is now the vibrant quarterly periodical you are holding in your hands today. We've brought heartwarming stories of hope and healing through each issue. We've also shared honest accounts of loss penned first on tear-stained pages because this is the only community that truly understands our pain. We've published articles by experts in grief and trauma — many of whom serve on our TAPS Advisory Board or our peer-professional staff; shared critical legislative updates important to surviving military families; provided coping strategies for caring for bereaved children; and connected you with resources from TAPS and our partners. The pages of this issue may not look much like volume one, issue one, but — at its core — the *TAPS Magazine* has always represented connection, healing, and growth. Our magazine mirrors the care we provide at TAPS in that way. We are ever-evolving to reflect the latest research and best serve the needs of all those grieving the death of a military or veteran service member — your needs — whatever they may be.

TAPS was established on Oct. 17, 1994, a date nestled in the comfort of autumn — the season of transition and transformation. In the fall, the world around us prepares for winter. Depending on where you call home, you may bear witness to this transformation as green leaves take on vibrant hues of red, orange, and yellow. For others, autumn enters more subtly — a sudden crispness in the air that wasn't there the day before or the emergence of pumpkins around town. Whether you welcome fall's arrival or hope each year for just one more summer day, it arrives and carries us on its journey of transformation. Autumn reminds us that there can be beauty in change. Our TAPS Family reminds us that, while there is pain in grief, there is also beauty in grief — it is the love we still hold for the person we lost; it is the common thread that so bittersweetly ties us all together.

Throughout this issue, you'll find incredible examples of healing, post-traumatic growth, and survivors honoring the loved one they lost. Whether they inspire you to lean into your own grief, attend your first TAPS Care Group, or host a TAPS Togethers event; or, if your heart just needs to read and sit with words of hope within these pages, this magazine is for you.

Just as we have been for 30 years, TAPS is here for you now. Grief, like autumn, holds many opportunities to transform. Your TAPS Family will walk beside you through each one — celebrating your bright days, wrapping you up on the difficult days, and empowering you to grow with your grief.

With gratitude and comfort for the season ahead,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bonnie".

Bonnie Carroll, TAPS President and Founder



PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES

Dear

TAPS



SOMEONE TO *Call*

“Thank you so much for being there for survivors as we go through this. It truly is overwhelming, and just knowing there is someone to call, even if we don’t use it — just knowing someone has my back — has been a huge comfort. Now that I look back on it, it is a blur of raw emotions and constant change, processing and grieving, life-changing coping and healing. There are days when I look around and think, ‘How did I get here? How did I make it through all of that?’ Thank you so much to everyone in the TAPS Family who provides a moment of peace and assistance through that chaos. I am so appreciative of the TAPS Family and the work that you are all doing. It matters, and it makes a difference. I will continue to look forward to the emails of events and webinars and will reach out if I have any questions. Thank you again from the bottom of my heart.”

CHERYL CLARK
SURVIVING SPOUSE OF NATIONAL GUARD MAJ
KURTISS CHARLES CLARK

NETWORK OF *Support*

“Several years ago, one of the precious black bracelets that are so recognizable to anyone who has been touched by military loss was lost inside the Pentagon, likely falling off of a service member’s arm while moving about the building. It was picked up by a gentleman who saw it and tried to find the original owner who dropped it. It is my understanding that he eventually notified someone at TAPS and they put a notice on Facebook about the lost bracelet. I saw the notice and was astounded. You see, the name on the bracelet was that of my niece, U.S. Army Captain Kimberly Hampton! I immediately sent TAPS a message and inquired as to whether or not the owner had been found — he had not. Several months later, I received a call from someone at TAPS telling me that the original owner of the bracelet still had not been found.

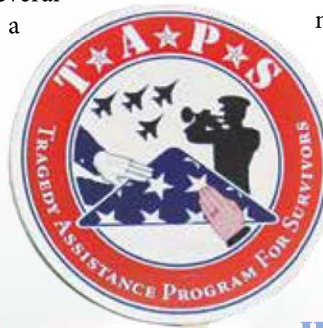
The gentleman who found the bracelet wanted a member of CPT Hampton’s family to have it. Soon afterward, I received the bracelet in the mail. It is something that reminds me of my niece, who is so deeply missed, and the incredible network of supporters who honor America’s fallen and care for their families and how we are all, in some way, connected.”

PATSY HAMPTON FINLEY
SURVIVING AUNT OF ARMY CPT KIMBERLY HAMPTON

Love AND GRATITUDE

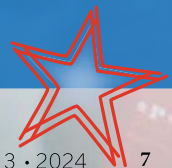
“It has been 10 years since my life turned upside down. My son’s suicide was a tragedy, but the human gifts I received have been nothing short of miraculous. TAPS has held my hand all the way along. The support, especially on the anniversaries and holidays, continues to help me feel anchored. Thank you for being with me all these years. I send this note with love and gratitude.”

JILL PAINTER
SURVIVING MOTHER OF ARMY SPC DEREK PAINTER



Has TAPS impacted your life after loss? Tell us how at taps.org/deartaps. Your words may just be what a fellow survivor needs to hear to take the first step toward healing.

[»» taps.org/deartaps](https://taps.org/deartaps)



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

The Valley of the Shadow...

Heather Gray Blalock ★ Surviving Spouse of Air Force Maj Walter David Gray ★ TAPS Peer Mentor

Those of us who have lost a loved one often feel as if we reside in the valley of the shadow of death. Every day is Memorial Day because not a day goes by when we aren't remembering the one we lost. Since David's death, I've climbed Pikes Peak with his unit, I've founded a nonprofit that hosted a corporately sponsored Memorial Run, and I have ruck-marched from Maryland to his Arlington National Cemetery gravesite with his battle buddies. For the last few years, I've — at minimum — led my family in an annual 5K, even if only around the local park. I've attended ceremonies, published articles about resilience and faith, preached hope in the aftermath of tragedy, and shared our story of loss with an international audience. Yet, at the risk of sounding disrespectful to avoid being disingenuous, I felt indifferent

this year. For me, the official Memorial Day felt different this year.

This year, I got as far as putting on the now-fading t-shirt that bears my late husband's name, his KIA details, and the words "Finish Strong." It's been 12 years since he died. There isn't a day I haven't thought of him. Monuments to his life and our love are permanently erected in my heart. Every day is Memorial Day. But on the day that the rest of the country (hopefully) stopped to remember the fallen, I just didn't have it in me. I sat on the floor of my closet next to the running shoes I just couldn't muster the strength to put on. There was no sobbing or even specific, painful reminiscence. I just felt numb and stared blankly into the void... indifferent. I'm not entirely sure how long I sat there. But, because I have an incredible

support network, at some point a paper plate of biscuits was placed before me on the floor without question or conversation other than encouragement to eat. I am grateful for the day officially designated by our country to remember loved ones lost, like mine. For at least one day, others pick up the mantle of remembrance, allowing me to chase away the guilt of times I can do nothing but leave it on the floor.

The Years That Hit Differently

Though my indifference eventually faded, Memorial Day was still different this year. I truly had intended to do our annual 5K, but when I didn't get it organized in time, all but one other family member did their own thing. Eventually, I took an evening walk with my 17-year-old son, and we agreed that we have done hard things every

ON THE DAY THAT THE REST OF THE
COUNTRY (HOPEFULLY) STOPPED TO REMEMBER
THE FALLEN, *I just didn't have it in me.*

PHOTO: UNSPLASH.COM/NICO_VASSIOS

Where *Every* Day Is Memorial Day

day since his dad died. There was no need to run a 5K in 100-degree heat to feel like we had honored him. Instead, we did one lap around the neighborhood, then sat on the kitchen floor together eating popcorn and picking the mandarin oranges out of an old fruit salad while watching a K-drama. During those floor-sitting times, we are still honoring him. At least that's what I've come to tell myself. It is what I hope any fellow floor-sitters give themselves permission to believe. Because this is life in the valley of the shadow. I thank God it is a shadow, which by nature changes with the position of the light. Grief doesn't have to doom us to complete darkness forever, but it does cast a long shadow. And just like a real shadow, it's impossible to truly vanquish it. Sometimes I walk or even run through the valley of the shadow of death, fearing no evil. Sometimes, I just sit on the

floor wearing the memorial t-shirt — proof and reminder of past strength.

Survivors bravely go from strength to strength, but we should extend grace to ourselves when there are lulls and valleys in between. Whether it is Memorial Day, an anniversary, a birthday, or any other significant time of remembrance, survivors have the right to “tap out.” It is OK to miss a tradition or walk away from one that no longer works for us. Especially as the holiday season approaches, it is important to recognize that the grief process is fluid and life may look and feel completely different this year. The years that hit differently are not wrong. Families who have suffered loss remember and honor their loved ones every day. No absence of tradition will ever change that. We honor our loved ones best by simply carrying on in their absence.

THE YEARS THAT HIT DIFFERENTLY ARE NOT WRONG.
FAMILIES WHO HAVE SUFFERED LOSS REMEMBER
AND *honor their loved ones every day.*



TAPS Together create space for military and veteran survivors to gather and build community through a shared experience — whether meeting for a cup of coffee, walking a nature trail, attending a special event, or visiting a local attraction. These events bring the feeling and support of TAPS to you, wherever you are. Consider hosting a TAPS Together event on a holiday or date meaningful to you — or any time — to strengthen bonds with the supportive network of survivors in your area.

taps.org/tapstogether

You're not crazy —

PART 5

Embracing Your Spirituality Helps You Survive

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

of life — your life, the life of the person who died, and life in general.

It is also normal to wrestle with the difficult feelings that can accompany these kinds of thoughts after a death. Anger, sadness, guilt, despair, frustration, and even awe and joy often go hand-in-hand with searching, questioning, and sometimes discovering insights about meaning.

Most *why* questions and concerns after a death are esoteric in nature. In other words, they're spiritual. They're spiritual because they can't be answered with concrete facts and hard sciences. Instead, they have to do with our innate sense that there may be something bigger or greater than us at work in our lives and in the universe. Perhaps, we think, there is something cosmic or divine that we are all a part of in some hard-to-fathom or even unknowable way.

It is important to acknowledge that spirituality and religiosity are not synonymous. In some people's lives, they overlap completely — their religious life is their spiritual life. Other people have a rich spiritual life with few or no ties to an organized religion. Still others may not consider themselves "spiritual," but have a philosophy of life they live by.

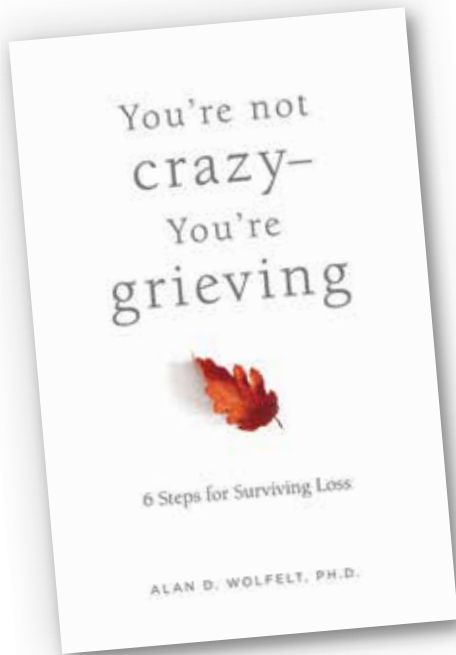
Obviously, each of us needs to define our own spirituality in the depths of our hearts and minds. Regardless of your beliefs, spiritual practices can help you survive the early months as well as profoundly enrich the remainder of your days.

Searching for Answers and Learning to Live with Uncertainty

In the early weeks of grief, many people struggle with finding reasons to get out of bed in the morning. This is mostly a practical, not spiritual, kind of searching. Anything that helps you feel safe and comforted is probably also a reason to get out of bed in the morning. If the thought of a cup of your favorite tea or sitting outside in the sun gets you out of bed, great. If meeting your best friend for lunch appeals to you, excellent. I urge you to be generously compassionate with yourself by sprinkling your day with activities and incentives that will help you get from one hour to the next.

In the more spiritual kind of searching in grief, however, there generally aren't easy answers to the grand *why* questions. Sometimes there aren't answers, period. I like to say that instead of pinning down understanding in grief, we often have to get more comfortable with standing under the mystery. That's one of our chief challenges in grief, in fact — learning to live with not knowing and uncertainty.

But even if there aren't answers, there is still a lot of value in the search. Simply by exploring your questions and looking for answers, you are allowing yourself to authentically mourn. Ideally, you're talking to other people about your search. You're expressing your feelings about your questions and frustrations.



This article is part five in a series of six. Parts one through four were published in the summer and fall 2023 issues and the spring and summer 2024 issues of TAPS Magazine.

In early grief, existential questions tend to naturally arise. Why did the person have to die? Why now? Why in this way? Why does anyone live and die? Why are we here? I often say *why* questions naturally precede *how* questions. "Why did this happen?" instinctively comes before "How will I survive this loss?"

It is normal to try to make sense of things — to try to understand. It is normal to wonder about and search for the meaning

Each of us needs to define our own spirituality in the depths of our hearts and minds.

You're grieving

And, as you're doing so, you're building and strengthening bonds of friendship and love.

What's more, you might sometimes find glimmers of answers along the way. You may well discover or work toward a way of viewing things that begins to help you make peace with what happened. Any core beliefs you had before the death might be tested, changed, or strengthened. This is all to say that searching for spiritual understanding and meaning is normal and healthy in grief.

Taking Care of the Spiritual Self

When I'm counseling someone who's grieving, I always encourage them to build spiritual practices into their everyday routines. Even just 10 minutes a day devoted to caring for their spirit can have a profound impact on their healing and well-being.



Spiritual practices can clear your head, help you feel grounded, and nurture your divine spark. Try incorporating these into your days:

- **Go for a walk in nature**
- Attend religious or spiritual services
- **Speak with a clergy person or other spiritual leader**
- **Sit outdoors somewhere beautiful**
- Breathe deeply
- Listen to music that speaks to your soul
- **Do something good for your body**
- Write in a journal
- Pay attention to your five senses in the moment
- **Pray**
- Meditate
- Make something
- **Spend time with someone who loves you**
- Do something that makes you feel hopeful
- Help someone else
- **Watch the sun rise or set**
- Read a spiritual text
- Practice yoga
- **Garden**
- Get a massage
- Give a gift
- **Read or write poetry**



Other times the sign comes in the form of a familiar smell or sound, a found object, or a natural phenomenon, such as a rainbow. Such synchronicities often feel mystical when we are searching for meaning.

There are a few different ways to think about these mystical experiences.

One is that you are, in fact, receiving real communications from the beyond. The person who died or other spiritual beings are contacting you, usually to give you reassurance that all is well.

Another way to think about these experiences is that mysterious happenings are just that — mysterious. We can't know why these things happen, but we can acknowledge that they do happen. We can stay open to the mystery without needing to fully understand.

You get to decide how to think about your mystical experiences. When other people share their mystical experiences with you, you also get to decide how to understand and respond. Keep in mind, of course, the principle that all grief is unique and valid. There is no wrong or right answer.

I would encourage you, however, to be open-minded and pay attention to how these experiences make you feel. If they make you feel better or curious, then choosing to embrace them is probably a good spiritual

they make some people feel crazy! If you've had mystical experiences having to do with the death or the person who died, you're not alone, and you're not crazy.

It is not unusual for people experiencing grief to feel they're being contacted by the person who died, for example. If the person doesn't show up themselves in some way, such as a dream or fleeting glimpse, then a sign or symbol from them does.

Sometimes this sign comes in the form of a bird or animal. When a cardinal, fox, or butterfly, for example, suddenly appears in their yard or path, they might take it as a sign from the person who died that they are safe and well.

You can do a spiritual practice and be mourning at the same time. You can pray about your loss or talk about the loss with a loved one. Together, grief and spirit work often make a powerful combination.

Embracing Mystical Experiences

Mystical experiences are common in grief, and they often give comfort to grieving people. And sometimes, because they fall into the realm of the supernatural,

TAPS can connect you with compassionate peer groups that will listen and walk with you through the spiritual *how* and *why* questions and every other step along the path of grief. Scan the QR codes to find a community of support no matter where you are on the map or in grief.



taps.org/onlinegroups



taps.org/caregroups

The amazing thing about grief rituals is that they naturally facilitate healing.

self-care decision for you. Pondering and exploring them further can also help you continue to search for meaning.

Dealing with Dreams and Nightmares

We can think of grief dreams as a subset of mystical experiences. And as with all mystical experiences in grief, you can choose to think of any grief dreams you might have however you would like. As always, you get to decide.

Obviously, pleasant grief dreams are easier to live with than bad dreams or nightmares. Nightmares might make you feel especially crazy. If you're having bad dreams about the death or person who died, I encourage you to talk about the dreams with people who care about you. If your nightmares are recurring or often intrude on your waking thoughts and feelings, I encourage you to see a grief counselor to help you explore them. As we've discussed, getting good rest is essential for your body in early grief. If your dreams are preventing you from reaching restorative sleep, it's also a good idea to discuss this issue with your primary care provider.

Finding Healing in Rituals

I often find that additional rituals after the funeral can be helpful in surviving early grief. What do I mean by rituals? I simply mean actions that we perform in a certain way and in a certain sequence. We perform them for a purpose that has emotional and spiritual meaning and is greater than the sum of its parts.

Grief rituals don't have to be formal ceremonies, though. In fact, most of them can be brief, informal, and simple.

One example is what I call the "10-Minute Grief Encounter Ritual."

1. Find a quiet space and center yourself.
2. Set your intention for the ritual on that day — to feel more calm or appreciate the love you still have for the person who died, for example. It can be anything you want.
3. Name the grief feelings you are having in that moment, and acknowledge their normalcy. Try this while holding or looking at a symbol of the person who died, such as a photo or article of clothing. You might say something like, "I am feeling afraid. Fear is a natural part of grief."
4. Place your free hand over your heart, pressing gently as you name each new thought and feeling. Then, allow your hand to fall to a resting position again.
5. Pray these thoughts and feelings instead — if you're someone who prays — as you step through the ritual.
6. Continue feeling, naming, and exploring your emotions for five to 10 minutes. When the time is up, take a moment to express your gratitude for anything authentic you thought, felt, and acknowledged during the ritual.
7. Close with an affirmation that restates the intention you set at the beginning of the ritual, but this time as a present truth. For example, "I love [name your person who died]. I am capable of grieving and loving and healing all at the same time."

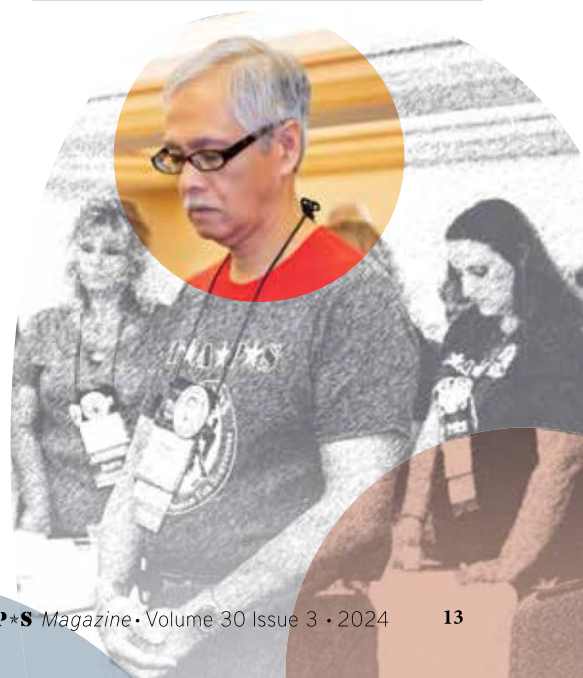
The amazing thing about grief rituals is that they naturally facilitate healing. This is especially true when they're done regularly, day in and day out. I urge you to give them a try. I have seen them work effectively many times in the lives and hearts of grieving people. In fact, ritual is so effective in grief that when I meet a griever who is especially struggling, I often recommend additional rituals as well as talk therapy.

If you're someone who's not already comfortable with spiritual practices, the idea of grief rituals might sound a little crazy. But embracing the crazy is what this article series is all about, right? You're not really crazy, and grief rituals aren't either.



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. Visit centerforloss.com or email Dr. Wolfelt at drwolfelt@centerforloss.com for more information.



HINDSIGHT IS 20/20

Gregory T. Jacobs ★ Surviving Father of Army SPC David M. Jacobs ★ TAPS Peer Mentor

In a recent conversation with a surviving father, I expressed how clear our vision is in hindsight — it's 20/20. However, our vision looking forward at the start of our grief journey can seem blurry and near-sighted at times.

My son, David, died in an auto accident on Dec. 23, 2020, while serving in the U.S. Army at Fort Carson, Colorado. Immediately after his death, I lived in regret. Did he know I loved him deeply? Was I too strict on him growing up? Did I support his life decisions? Was there anything that could have been done to prevent the accident? I felt stuck in a cave of despair with no hope or vision for the future or what it might hold.

THE CAVE

While visiting Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky, my wife and I signed up for a lantern tour with a maximum of 13 tickets sold for each tour and only six lanterns to be handed out. We lined up, every other person holding a lantern. The small gas lamp gave me just enough light to see five feet in front of me. I had to trust the guide and others ahead of me holding their own lanterns.

As we walked, my mind drew parallels between this tour and times I wished I could know what the future held — winning lottery numbers, a hot stock pick, or the foresight to buy a piece of real estate before it appreciated. But we can't know the future; we can only make decisions based on the information we have in the present moment — the illuminated part of our path.

IN HINDSIGHT, I SPENT THE FIRST YEAR
OF MY GRIEF JOURNEY FOCUSED ON
SURVIVING

PHOTOS: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/MAGIA_OBRAZU; GREGORY T. JACOBS

LIGHTING OUR PATH

In hindsight, I spent the first year of my grief journey focused on surviving — taking one step at a time, not knowing what *why* and *what-if* questions lay just outside the metaphorical lamplight. In grief, we might feel out of control at times, and that is OK. We might not be able to see much of the path in front of us, and — unable to see the hope ahead of us — there will be moments when we lack hope and become consumed with the *whys* and *what-ifs* behind us.

Just as I trusted the lamp holders in front of me in that dark cave, we must trust others who have gone before us in grief who are holding a light up for us to see. Looking back, I have found solace in the wisdom of others who have walked this path ahead of me. Through my interactions as a TAPS Peer Mentor or a Care Group facilitator,

I've learned we can't make this journey without the light of others.

When I look back on the year 2020, I am reminded of my post-traumatic growth. I decided early on that grief was not going to keep me in that dark cave. I would grow in wisdom from the loss of my son. My challenge to you is to continue daily to bring your loved one's memories along with you everywhere you go — I take David with me. Never stop talking about your loved one — this is an expression of our love for them. Surround yourself with a network of support — people who care about you and can help light your way.

Finally — when you're ready — take the opportunity to carry the lamp for someone else journeying the path of grief. When they feel lost in early grief, your experience and hindsight can light their way.

WHEN YOU'RE READY —
TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO
CARRY THE LAMP
FOR SOMEONE ELSE JOURNEYING
THE PATH OF GRIEF.



At TAPS, survivors help survivors heal. We are grateful for all of our Peer Mentors who help light the path of grief for other military and veteran survivors. Whether you are a current TAPS Peer Mentor wanting to deepen your knowledge and involvement in the program or you're at least 18 months beyond the loss of your loved one and you're ready to pursue Peer Mentor training for the first time, our knowledgeable and compassionate team will provide training and ongoing support as you let your experience light the path for fellow survivors. Scan the QR code to learn more about becoming a TAPS Peer Mentor.



>> taps.org/becomeapeermentor

A LONELY CROSS

1LT Peter Duston, U.S. Army Retired ★ Bugler, Maine State Honor Guard

CHERRYFIELD, MAINE

The fourth-grade class in Cherryfield, Maine — a small coastal town of 1,900 where I live — has been making an annual pilgrimage to one of our small cemeteries for over 20 years — a tradition started by Korean War Veteran Joe Sproul, who would share with the children the

background of those buried there from the Revolutionary War to the present, including brothers killed in the Civil War who left behind a grieving mother to mourn over their empty grave. Inside the cemetery is an unknown Civil War grave marked only by a rusted Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) flag holder as our community tries to keep his memory and the memory of those he represents alive. We understand that it will be up to our children to remember, honor, and carry on the responsibility.

Each year in Cherryfield — with the help of scouts, school children, and volunteers — we place over 400 American flags on graves for Memorial Day and another 400-plus wreaths during the holiday season. We instruct participants to say the veteran's name as they place flags or wreaths and ask the scouts to salute. Watching an 8-year-old Cub Scout salute a hero he never knew is heartwarming, but this particular May, our town's fourth grade teacher shared that — after placing the Memorial Day flags, with no prompting — a 10-year-old student gathered the teachers and students in a circle and asked for prayers for those buried below and those above them.

For our small-town Memorial Day program, we gather at the bandstand with the Cherryfield Band playing the national anthem and close with the attendees singing

“God Bless America.” Our scouts hand out serviceable grave flags with a 3x5 card listing the name and details of a veteran in our 20-plus cemeteries. During “Calling the Role,” we ask that each individual among the crowd of 80-plus attendees hold up their flag and read the veteran's name and story so they are not forgotten. It's a very powerful reminder to attendees of all ages that freedom is not free and continuing to say the names of the fallen is the responsibility of each generation. Our scouts then lead a march down Main Street where the flower girls toss their homemade bouquets into our tidal river for those lost at sea and at the Civil War monument in the larger Pine Grove Cemetery for those killed on land, both to the tune of taps.

ICONIC BATTLEFIELDS

In 2018, my wife and I visited the Normandy American Cemetery on the bluff overlooking Utah Beach on the Normandy coast where the D-Day invasion took place June 6, 1944, 80 years ago this year. I brought my beat-up Boy Scout bugle with the goal of playing taps in that sacred place. There were tour buses, a huge car park, hundreds of visitors, and no quiet or personal place for me to play as the cemetery prepared for the D-Day remembrance ceremony.

Wanting to escape the crowds, I followed the walkway to the farthest end of the cemetery, passing row upon row of white crosses and a few Stars of David — each



★ WE MUST CARRY THEIR LEGACIES, SAY THEIR NAMES, AND KEEP THEIR MEMORIES ALIVE. ★

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; DVIDS; PETER DUSTON

CARRYING ON THE NAMES AND STORIES BEHIND THE STONES

bearing witness to the soldier buried in that sacred ground. The crosses were arranged to end on a single lonely cross at the apex of that remote section, “Known but to God.”

I was alone with that unknown soldier — no other visitors in sight. I took a deep breath, breathed a solemn prayer, and stood at bugler’s attention to play the very best taps I could muster. This unknown’s grave was the farthest from the main memorial, so I figured he never got to hear taps where he lay during the various memorial programs over the years. As I meditated in that shaded glen, I experienced a feeling of awe, reminding me that freedom is not free. I also reflected on who this unknown was as a son, a brother, a grandson, and the grief his family would have experienced when receiving a regretful letter from the War Department. I know from researching these losses that the families often received no closure, just the vague promise that, someday, the remains of their loved one may be recovered.

HIDDEN MEMORIALS

As a bugler, I often ponder the memory of Gerry Scott, my childhood trumpet teacher who taught me taps when I was a 12-year-old Boy Scout so I could sew on the patch as “Troop Bugler.” Gerry deployed to Korea in 1951 and went missing that bitter winter when the Chinese overran his unit. He never came home, and his family still waits. Gerry never had taps over his lonely grave.

Years ago, my wife and I visited South Korea. With the help of our friends and three Republic of Korea Army officers, we used old battle maps to locate the exact spot of Gerry’s capture. I brought a POW medal and small American and MIA flags, and we held a memorial service for Gerry, burying the medal in an old fighting position. I didn’t bring my bugle on this trip, so we played Arlington National Cemetery taps from an iPhone.

I never knew Gerry’s family, but an article I wrote for his hometown newspaper connected me to his brother and his family. They were moved that Gerry was not forgotten as I told them that I often think of Gerry when I sound taps at a military honors funeral. At 85, I still play taps and fold flags with military honor guards here in Maine. It’s an honor to stand as an anonymous sentinel at a funeral and sound those solemn 24 notes for the survivors — expressing thanks from a grateful nation. As a scout leader, I still wear my 1950 Bugler patch and teach scouts pursuing the Bugling merit badge.

Over the years, as photos fade, names are forgotten, stories dissolve with generations, and memories dim, these Soldiers, Sailors,

Airmen, and Marines are lost again. It’s up to us — whether in our own small towns, standing on the hallowed ground we read about in history books, or memorializing quiet, unsuspecting pieces of foreign land that bore witness to last breaths. We must carry their legacies, say their names, and keep their memories alive.



Honoring fallen heroes is such an important part of the TAPS mission. Be sure to add your loved one to our Grateful Nation Memorial Wall, and share their story with us. We would love to consider your writing for publication on our blog or in future issues of this magazine.



>> taps.org/gratefulnation



>> taps.org/shareyourstory



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 postsecondary 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.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/GOLIBO/SJI PRODUCTIONS/INSIDE CREATIVE HOUSE; MIKE NOWAK/LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

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.



Understanding How Our *Children* Grieve

Andy McNiel, M.A. ★ Senior Advisor, TAPS Youth Programs

There is a personal nature to how each of us grieves, and that individuality extends to our children and teenagers. They uniquely grieve the death of their person based on (but not limited to) their personality type, individual preferences, how they most feel comfortable being in the world, the nature of the relationship they shared with their person before they died, and where they are in their developmental process. Understanding their grieving style and coping style can be helpful as we, as their parents and guardians, navigate what role we play in their continued healthy growth and development.

Common Grieving Styles

Let's look at a few grieving styles and what might be common reactions to loss at different developmental ages, keeping in mind that these generalizations will vary from person to person.

Private in Grief:
Those Who Grieve
More Quietly

It is important to first remember that quiet or private grief is not “absent” grief. Children and teenagers who are more private about their grief are still grieving. They likely have a personality type that is more comfortable expressing their grief when they are alone. This does not mean that they never outwardly share their grief with others or visibly emote, and this may vary widely from one person to another. One of the challenges for individuals with this style of grieving is that others may assume they are not grieving. Because of this, people who are more private with their grief may not have the same level of



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVE

outside support from others in their family and circle of friends. We can support our children with this style of grieving by setting times to check in with them at appropriate intervals to see how they are doing.

Although they may not contribute to a conversation, grievors who are more quiet or private are still observing, taking in what others are sharing, and processing ideas for coping with the intense thoughts, emotions, and experiences grief is bringing to their lives. As their parents and primary caregivers, our acknowledgment and validation are important to their ability to adapt their loss into their lives as they grow into healthy adults.

Seen in Grief:
Those Who Grieve
More Visibly

The phrase, “the squeaky wheel gets the grease,” comes to mind when considering this style of grieving. Some children and teenagers grieve in a way that is more outward-facing and visible to others. This can manifest in many ways — some may be more visibly emotional, while others may be more talkative, using their words to share openly about their grief experiences with others.

Those children and teens who are more emotionally open might draw the attention of caring adults in their lives who worry they are struggling and are unsure how to offer help. Those who more openly share their grief might also lead their parents or caregivers to believe they are managing their grief well. In either case, the reality is that they need attention and support from their trusted adults. Whether we simply sit with them and comfort them or actively listen to and affirm them, we are letting them express their emotions and giving them room to grow with their grief.

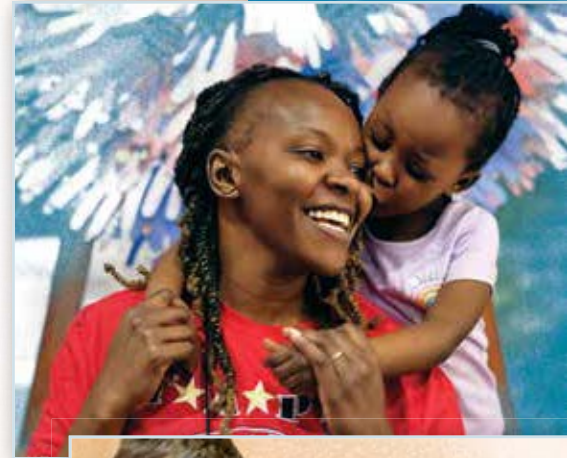
Postponed Grief:
Those Who Tend to
Avoid Grieving

At different times in grief, the pain is just too much to bear, and we might find ourselves doing things to avoid this discomfort. From time to time, this is certainly natural — even necessary — for people of all types of grief styles. There are those children and teenagers, though, who tend to use avoidance, denial, or distractions to postpone grief or keep themselves from experiencing grief altogether. This can look like focusing on making good grades, stepping into voids left by the person who died and taking on their roles, or staying so busy that they do not have to think about what happened and how it impacted them.

Parents and caregivers rightly worry about their children and teens who have this grieving style — concerned that their grief will show up at a later date and time much worse than if they had addressed it early on. While these concerns are valid, it is important to note that we cannot force a person to lean into their grief. People, including children and teenagers, deserve to do this on their own timetable.

Rather than pushing our children and teens to experience the intensity of their grief, we can focus on our relationship with them. Affirm them, spend time with them, and reassure them that we are there for them and will be there for them should they find themselves experiencing their grief on a deeper level in the future. Building, nurturing, and preserving a strong, supportive relationship will be important when their grief becomes more “front and center” down the road.

Whatever their grieving style might be — one of the three outlined here, a combination of these three, or some other



unique way of being in the world — the greatest gift we can give our children and teens as their parents and caregivers is our time, attention, and support. Though it might not always be obvious to us, our children and teenagers need us.



TAPS Youth Programs can support grieving children and teens of all ages and grief styles, and support you as their parent or guardian. Learn more about our programming and events that cater to growing up with grief.

>> taps.org/youthprograms

Keystones of Grief for Different Developmental Ages

The following chart outlines how a child’s developmental age can impact their understanding and experience of grief. It is meant to serve as a guide for parents and guardians supporting a child or teen in grief, but — of course — just as children grieve their own way, they also develop at their own pace and may match descriptions for varying developmental ages.

Developmental Age	Understanding	Experience
Infant & Toddler BIRTH – 2 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have no cognitive understanding of death • Lack a language to express themselves • Live in the moment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be unsettled, upset • Search or long for the person who died • Might want to be held more often • Might have trouble sleeping
Early Childhood 3 – 5 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have limited or no understanding of death • Do not understand the permanence of death • Are potentially aware that someone is missing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask repetitive questions and need to be told multiple times that the person has died • Experience “magical thinking” about death • May have periods of crying, sadness, and acting out, followed by periods of acting as if nothing happened • Experience regressive behaviors (thumb-sucking, bedwetting, baby-talk)
Later Childhood 6 – 8 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are developing an understanding of the concept of death, but still do not see death as permanent • Might feel responsible for the death, thinking that something they did (or did not do) caused their person to die • May think that death happens only to old people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worry about who else might die (other parent or other family members) • Feel responsible • Have bouts of sadness and at other times are seemingly “normal” • Have difficulty concentrating in school • May have a lot of questions for the adults in their lives • Express their grief through play
Preteen 9 – 12 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the concept of death • Often understand the finality of death and that death is universal • Hold onto some of their child-like understandings of death (in transition) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Might express sadness, anger, and intense feelings about the person’s death • May be curious about the dead body and what happens to a person after they die • May ask a lot of questions about the circumstances of the death • Worry about who else might die or that they might die
Teen 13 – 17 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are challenged by the death, since it contradicts their perception that they are invincible • Have a more adult-like understanding of death and the ability to understand abstract concepts • Have a personal view of death and ideas about what happens after someone dies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience varied reactions — intense emotions of sadness, anger, and shock, or will show little to no emotion • Do not like to be identified as a “grieving person” • Seek support and connection with their peers over family • Might take on adult responsibilities around the home • Like to appear in control and not in need of support



Visit taps.org/youthprograms to learn more about how TAPS supports grieving children of all ages and their parents or guardians.

[»» taps.org/youthprograms](https://taps.org/youthprograms)

Make

CONNECTIONS

TAPS understands the needs of the grieving heart are not universal, which is why we offer a variety of online and in-person opportunities for healing and community. Discover all the ways you can connect with TAPS, and make plans to join us.

Upcoming **EVENTS**

TAPS events offer opportunities for healing and personal growth. Whether a weekend-long seminar, peer-group retreat, family event, or transformative experience in the beauty of nature, there is something for every survivor.

Be sure to check **TAPS.org/events** often; events are added throughout the year.



>> TAPS.org/events

More ways to **CONNECT**

▶ **TAPS CARE GROUPS**

TAPS Care Groups bring the comfort of TAPS to your local community with meetings happening all throughout the year. These recurring meetings provide time to talk, opportunities to listen, and a comforting reminder that we are not alone in grief. Scan the QR code to find a peer-led group near you.



>> TAPS.org/caregroups

▶ **TAPS TOGETHERS**

Looking for a way to connect with survivors in your local community outside of Care Groups? TAPS Togethers are one-day, organized social events led by TAPS staff members or a survivor like you to share experiences and expand the local community of support. Scan the QR code to share an idea for an event near you.



>> TAPS.org/tapstogether

▶ **TAPS ONLINE GROUPS**

No matter where you are in the world, you can access TAPS through Online Groups. Groups are organized by relationship to the fallen, cause of death, and peer group and occur at a variety of convenient times, giving you the option to attend one or multiple groups that meet your needs and your schedule.



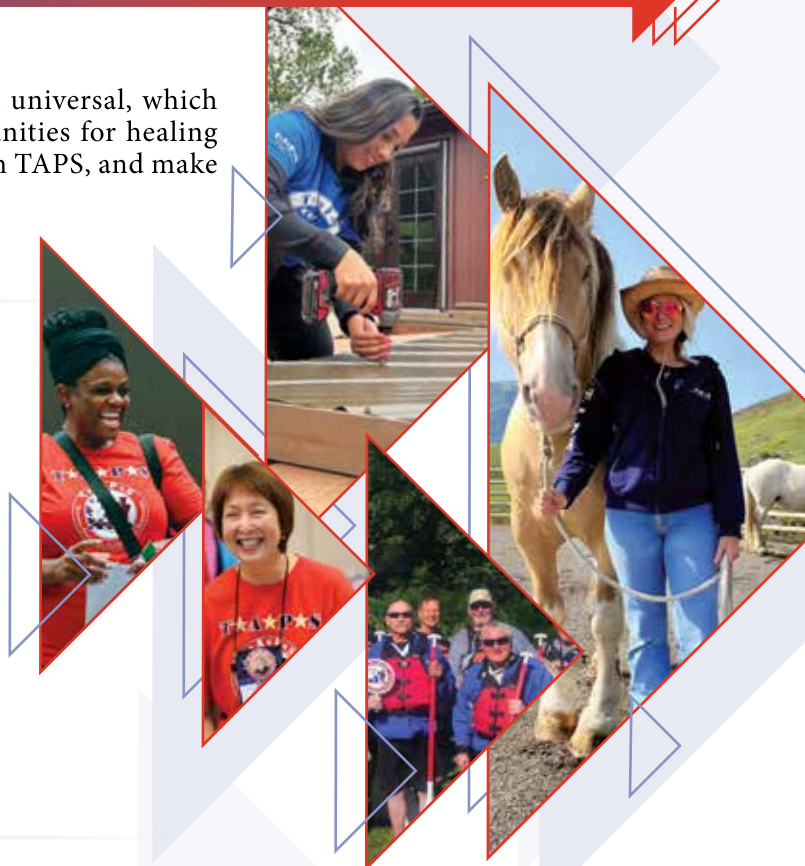
>> TAPS.org/onlinegroups

▶ **IN-PERSON & ONLINE WORKSHOPS**

TAPS offers in-person and online opportunities for personal growth that help you heal, build resilience, find meaning and gratitude after loss, and nurture relationships. From Peer Mentor training to Theatre Lab and a diverse selection of webinars and workshop series through the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®, we have courses to support your growth through grief.



>> TAPS.org/workshops



Why I'm Here

Emily Henkel ★ Surviving Fiancée of SPC Alexander B. Lofgren, U.S. Army Veteran

“I will get through this. I can do hard things. These hard things will make me better and stronger. Please let me fulfill the rest of my life on this Earth. Please let me use this for good. Please send me a blessing — any blessing — and I pray so hard that soon my rescue will come.”

— Personal journal entry, Apr. 7, 2021, from a cliffside in Death Valley National Park

Life has exposed itself to me in its purest and most naked form — revealing its deepest sorrows and most painstaking moments, providing the rarest view of what is most important. It's a type of beauty that I've seen because I've loved with my entire heart and soul and lost it. If you're reading this, there's a good chance you are a part of this “club,” too.

Some days, I call it a gift. So many other days, I curse it. How can it not feel like a weight to have experienced the fragility

and absolute beauty of life while so many others negate and deny it — to ever-so-frustratingly try to explain to someone, who is not part of this club, that room-temperature wine or someone driving too slow on the freeway is, in fact, not the worst thing that could happen to you today?

You know better. You too have both the gift and the curse of loving with your whole heart and losing it. Not everyone feels the deep sense of gratitude and sorrow that you do — the liveliness and numbness, the growth and the grief, the hope and despair, the admiration and the hatred.

April 2021

On Apr. 3, 2021, I dreamt of a wholesome life with my soon-to-be husband and our future children. After a lifetime of settling for comfort, familiarity, and submission, I had the life that I worked so diligently and patiently to build.

The very next day, all of that was wiped away in the blink of an eye when I lost my best friend and fiancé, Alexander Lofgren, in a hiking accident. He passed quickly, while I spent the next six days as a missing person fighting — through grief — for my own life. When a Navy search and rescue team found me, I had a severely broken leg from falling, but the will to fight harder than I had ever fought before.

Just like the fragility of life, desert sandstone can break down in an instant with a gust of wind or sudden rainfall. In the same way, my life, my goals, and my future with Alex were reduced to millions of sandstone dust particles in a single breath. The day I lost Alex and chose to start fighting for my own life was the first day I understood that, though I am just one person in a world of billions, I can use my voice and strength to help anyone willing to listen.



PHOTOS: EMILY HENKEL; TAPS ARCHIVES



This is why I am still here.

After surviving something I absolutely should not have, I spent the better part of 2021 searching for life's meaning. Accepting a life without your better half is one thing, but coming to terms with almost losing my own life was another burden to bear. I've spent every day of my healing — three years, plus a lifetime ahead — reminding myself that I chose a fight bigger than I could ever fight alone. But, our loved ones who no longer physically stand by our sides are — in fact — there, watching us every step of the way. They root us on. They are ready for us to move mountains on their behalf, in their honor, and — even more so — for ourselves.

When life was at its lowest, I decided to fight and at least make Alex's life worth living since he couldn't do it himself. At the time, I didn't know what this would entail, but I knew his memory would remain as vibrant and passionate as his personality. Even more so, I had no idea how this would impact my life and the memory I would allow to live on. Some days, all I can do is sit solemnly with no fight left in me to muster, but I pick myself

up the next day redetermined to be a beacon for those who so desperately need light.

Alex

Alex was a combat engineer in the U.S. Army, honorably discharged in 2012 after four years of service. When I met him as a veteran five years post-separation, he still struggled each day with the burdens of combat. Alex was determined to make something out of his service in Afghanistan, so he dedicated his life to helping fellow veterans. Between policy advising with a U.S. senator and working alongside a U.S. representative, he was making a difference in ways that mattered.

Alex and I shared a love for solitude in nature. Living in Arizona, we had ample opportunity to spend our weekends exploring the American Southwest, and that's precisely what we did, as often as we could.

Nature healed Alex and allowed him to feel at peace. It healed me in ways I never



knew I needed. There was a sense of camaraderie in setting up camp together as a couple, and a solitude in gazing up at the tall ponderosa pines swaying back and forth from the passing breeze. He hadn't experienced peace like that since long before the war.

“Life has exposed itself to me in its purest and most naked form — revealing its deepest sorrows and most painstaking moments, providing the rarest view of what is most important.”



Since the moment Alex passed, I searched for meaning in my own life. Why did I survive? Why couldn't he? It felt nearly impossible to replicate the passion he embodied, but everyone who knew and loved him was determined to fill the void he left in our lives.

Act

In December 2021, within the year of his passing, miracles happened on Capitol Hill. A bill was unanimously signed into law that honored the man who fought for veterans' rights and experienced the healing benefits of nature, the place we spent so much of our time together.

The Alexander Lofgren Veterans in Parks Act was signed into law, granting free access to U.S. national parks and lands for life, beginning Nov. 11, 2022 — Veterans Day, a most appropriate tribute to Alex.

Two years after the law passed, I purchased a camper van and traveled the Southwest United States for nearly a year by myself and two of our dogs, both in Alex's honor and for my own healing. I was fulfilling a vow to live a gratifying life after life as I knew it was ripped out from under me. I visited national parks new and old — ones Alex and I experienced together, and ones we dreamt of visiting one day. I collected a passport stamp for every park I visited, keeping our tradition — and his memory — alive. While I experienced a deep void being in these beautiful places without him, I found endless comfort in knowing his spirit inhabited every natural space I explored. I was never alone.

It wasn't until the end of my life-changing van adventure that I found a part-time role with TAPS, further fueling my desire

to live a purpose-driven life following my harrowing experience and Alex's premature earthly departure. But, as I would learn five months later, my future was only beginning to come into focus.

May 2024

I stood among thousands of people just like me at my first TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar in Washington, D.C., in May, carrying my story of pain, sorrow, perspective, passion, the Alexander Lofgren Veterans in Parks Act, and traveling the country in a van. For the first time, I felt weightless in the arms of survivors who understood me without a single word — just souls connected in one moment.





“You can do hard things. You can do impossible things. We are all in this together and are connected more than we ever thought possible... Just keep going.”

Everyone who has loved and lost carries their own unique and heartbreaking story that — though incredibly painful — is the foundation of their own purposeful life.

Sunday at the seminar was a sunny and incredibly humid day to take a hike, but I felt seemingly unstoppable against the discomfort I have grown to know so well. Plus, being surrounded by other nature-loving survivors felt like home no matter the external forces at play. I stood atop Gravelly Point along the Potomac River with two surprise guests: the National Park Trust and rangers with the National Park Service. Little did anyone know, all 70 hike participants, including myself, were about to receive their very own America the Beautiful National Parks Pass, a precise 882 days after the Alexander Lofgren Veterans in Parks Act was officially signed into law.

That moment awakened the same feeling I'd had a thousand times staring at the Milky Way and endless universe above me, or experiencing the thousand-foot-tall red sandstone bluffs of southern Utah for the first time. It was like the absolute freedom of driving my van into the westward sunset with my two dogs, Jane and Nora, to be with Alex in our national parks. It was like the time TAPS fell into my lap five months prior, except this time — in a full-circle moment — I shared Alex's story of love and light, life and healing in U.S. national parks, something I now get to share with so many others who may need that light more than anything.

I couldn't prepare myself for this life, especially for the moment, three years ago, when it all crumbled before my eyes. Instead of giving up, I made a pact with myself and Alex to live this life as fully

and unapologetically as possible. I am proud of myself for carrying the weight of my grief and trauma, loneliness and isolation, fear and uncertainty, and using it for good when I can muster the strength — because anyone in the club will tell you that strength isn't always there.

When I need a humble reminder of why I'm alive, I look up at that trusty night sky to feel all at once small, but mighty. I find solace in the stars that shine brightest, little twinkling reminders that Alex and the rest of our loved ones are there, and always will be.

Sometimes in the stillness of a desert night, I swear I hear the whisper of encouragement from the planets, galaxies, and stars: “You can do hard things. You can do impossible things. We are all in this together and are connected more than we ever thought possible...Just keep going.”



Thanks to a longstanding partnership with the National Park Trust, TAPS creates unique, healing experiences for survivors of military and veteran loss in some of our country's most beautiful parks and recreation areas. Check our outdoor event listings often to view upcoming opportunities, and visit [NPS.gov](https://www.nps.gov) to learn more about the lifetime America the Beautiful National Parks Passes.

taps.org/events

FINDING OUR WAY

So much life happens in cars. They carry us where we need to go — where we want to go. In them, we laugh, pep ourselves up for big days, and sing along to our favorite songs without inhibition. They are a part of first dates and first days of school; with their help, we bring home new puppies and new babies. On long drives, we share stories and snacks, nap deeply in the passenger seat, and endure badgering questions from the backseat: “Are we there yet?” Long-awaited hellos and dreaded goodbyes happen in cars. We retreat to the safety of our cars to cry, and they let us — hold us — until we recompose ourselves; then they carry us home. In our cars, we find our way.

In June of this year, several TAPS families had the opportunity to participate in the Ford Proud to Honor: Bronco Off-Roadeo event hosted by Ford Motor Company and Blue Star Families in the Texas Hill Country. This adventure driving school experience brought together Ford enthusiasts from across the military and veteran community, including our TAPS families whose loved ones had a special connection to their own Ford vehicle. These survivors took on the rugged terrain together — bonding and sharing even more incredible moments in a Bronco. Four Off-Roadeo participants from TAPS shared stories of their special Ford and dearly missed fallen hero whose memory brought them to the event.

Patty Stubenhofer ★ Surviving Spouse of CPT Mark N. Stubenhofer, U.S. Army

We have always been a Ford family. My very first car was a 1989 Ford Probe that I absolutely loved and only sold because it was too expensive to ship to our first duty station. Mark had a Ford Explorer when I married him in 1997. By the end of 2002 — after his first deployment, he got his dream truck, a Ford F-150 (with the sub-cab I required since we had two children by then). This Ford was — and still is — the most precious to us. Mark was so proud of that truck and drove it everywhere. He would sing about his truck with our son, Justin, in the backseat and promised him that it would someday be his.

Mark only got to drive his truck a few months before deploying a second time. While he was away, I covered it and cared for it so it was ready when he came home. And he did — he came home and hopped back behind the wheel of his F-150 until it came time for him to deploy a third time to Iraq. Once again, I covered it and kept up with it so it would be ready for his return, but Mark was killed in action during his third deployment, leaving us to care for “Daddy’s Truck,” as we have always called it. I could never bring myself to sell it, and it moved with me from Kansas to Virginia. Daddy’s Truck has always been much more than just a truck to our family. Our family grew up in that truck. It holds memories of Mark, and it always will.

Mark would have loved to attend the Bronco Off-Roadeo experience with us. I was, admittedly, a little nervous at first, but quickly overcame my nerves and enjoyed every part of the trail. I attended this event with Justin — who I don’t get to see often now that he’s in college. Watching him drive and take on the really challenging obstacles on the trail made the three-day event even more special.

We are still a Ford family — the ‘89 Probe, the Explorer, Daddy’s Truck, the Escape (my daughter Lauren’s first car), and the Mustang (Justin’s first car)...though I wouldn’t be surprised if his next car is a Bronco.



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; FORD MOTOR COMPANY; BLUE STAR FAMILIES, EL-TAHER, BECKER, & STUBENHOFER FAMILIES

WITH



David J. El-Taher ★ Surviving Stepfather of Patrick Stellitano, U.S. Navy

Though he ran track and wrestled, Patrick was happiest when working on engines and restoring antique cars to their former glory. Prior to enlisting in the Navy in 2019, he worked for Vintage Auto Restoration in Union Bridge, Maryland. The oldest car he helped restore was a 1911 Ford Model A, and at the time of his passing, he was in the process of restoring a 1991 Mazda Miata. Though he was never able to see this project through, that car has since been restored.

When our son, U.S. Navy Airman Apprentice Patrick G. Stellitano, was killed on Feb. 22, 2020, the Navy did an amazing job of taking care of our fractured family, answering questions, tending to

all the details, and putting us in touch with amazing support organizations, including TAPS. I am not certain how we — as a family — would have survived this tragedy without the TAPS community.

My wife, Julie, and I recently had a wonderful experience courtesy of TAPS and the Proud to Honor program! We would like to thank TAPS and Ford Motor Company for their continued support for us and for those like us who have lost a loved one in the military. Excited to participate in an event alongside our peers at TAPS — an event Patrick would have loved, we traveled to Horseshoe Bay, Texas, where we immediately felt welcomed and honored to be there.

This was my first off-roading experience, but the instruction provided was top-notch and made it easy to focus on just enjoying the trail. The sense of community among all the participants was palpable, and we felt a personal connection to our hosts. It was incredible to learn how much Ford does to support both veterans and the families of the fallen.

Since Patrick passed away, our family has pursued meaningful ways to honor the life he lived. I recently finished restoring a replica Ford Shelby Cobra in his honor — a project that helped me feel connected to his memory and process my grief. We can't thank Ford, Blue Star Families, and TAPS enough for the opportunity to pay tribute to Patrick and his love of cars.



“It was incredible to learn how much Ford does to support both veterans and the families of the fallen.”



Laura Rose Monk ★ Surviving Spouse SPC Austin H. Monk, U.S. Army

Growing up in Philadelphia, I never had a reason to learn to drive; I never even considered getting a driver's license. Even when my late husband, Austin, received orders to Fort Bragg in North Carolina, my mom assured me I'd be fine, "Just take the bus everywhere." But, after quickly realizing there were 20 miles between base and the neighboring town of Fayetteville, I knew it was time to learn to drive. I was 23 years old when I got my driver's license.

At the time, Austin was a young PFC, and we did not have a lot of money. I remember first getting turned down for a car loan from Carmax and having to walk from Carmax back to our hotel before a nice

man from Lafayette Ford was able to help us secure a loan on a 2005 Ford Focus.

I learned to drive in that Ford Focus. We sat in that car to say our goodbyes in August of 2009 before Austin deployed to Iraq. I sat alone in that car sobbing after that goodbye. We brought our dog, Nanna, home in that car, and I drove that car back and forth from Chapel Hill while Austin received cancer treatment. I drove home in that car after I picked up Austin's urn two weeks after he died.

As life has carried on, cars have come and gone — all Fords, no surprise, but that first car is still a part of my family. It belongs to my dad now. It's been well-

loved and has taken me and my family all over the country since 2009.

As I have gotten further in my grief journey, I feel more drawn to experiences that push me — hopping on a plane to explore a new place, flowing through river rapids, or off-roading in a Bronco. I attended the Off-Roadeo event with my nephew, Damien, who was 4 when Austin died. Damien and Austin were very close, and it's become my goal to support him in any way I can. I am thankful we experienced this event alongside other surviving families and military families. For a moment, we were all just one group — together to honor heroes and enjoy a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

“For a moment, we were all just one group – together to honor heroes and enjoy a once-in-a-lifetime experience.”



Learn more about the FORD PROUD TO HONOR PROGRAM and Ford Motor Company's long history of supporting our nation's military.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; FORD MOTOR COMPANY; BLUE STAR FAMILIES, EL-TAHER, BECKER, & STUBENHOFER FAMILIES



Crystal Becker ☆ Spouse of SSG Shane Becker, U.S. Army

Shane was a Ford Bronco fan long before we met. Early in our marriage, I often heard about the Bronco he had to part with when he joined the Army in 1993.

Well aware of his fondness for the car, I spotted an orange Ford Bronco while heading down a country road in Texas toward our lunch destination — where the owner made the absolute best chalupas. The Bronco was sitting on the outskirts of a ranch with a for-sale sign on it.

At the time, I had a 1974 Mustang — my birth year — that I'd purchased for \$500 right out of high school. Over the years, I invested time and money to update the stereo system and upholstery — to clean it up and make it mine. We pulled up and

discovered this Bronco's "birth year" was 1971. Why shouldn't we each have our favorite vehicle that also shares our birth year? We called the number on the for-sale sign and learned they only wanted \$500 for the Bronco. We bought it, towed it home, and got to work.

At the time — with no kids and Shane working week-on, week-off in the oil field — we had ample opportunity to indulge in projects like his "new" Bronco. We got it running and began collecting the parts we needed.

Soon enough, we were expecting our first child, and the Bronco and Mustang took a backseat. Our air-conditioned truck became the go-to ride, but we continued working on

both cars until September 2001, when the winds of change took us back to the U.S. Army. Taking a pay cut to reenlist, we parted with the Bronco (and my Mustang).

In the years since we lost Shane, I've dreamt of fixing up a Bronco with the girls, and I can't tell you how much it meant to be a part of the Bronco: Off-Road event — to adventure in a vehicle that Shane loved so much.

The day after Shane and I were married, I remember, somehow, feeling freer than I did before. It was unexpected — feeling freer with someone than by myself. I felt the same freedom off-roading in the Bronco with my girls. We have always been a tight-knit squad, and what a team we made exploring the Texas Hill Country in that Bronco together.



TAPS is grateful to Ford Motor Company and Blue Star Families for sharing this incredible experience with surviving military and veteran families as a unique way to honor their heroes, alongside veterans and military families — friends and peers — from Team Rubicon, Travis Manion Foundation, and Guitars 4 Vets. This truly was the ride of a lifetime!

If your loved one has a special car connection, we would love to hear it.

taps.org/shareyourstory

Reaching New Heights

Christina Wilson ★ Surviving Daughter of CAPT David Wilson, U.S. Navy Reserve Retired

★ Rising High School Junior ★

Being a surviving TAPS child doesn't just mean losing a parent; it means losing someone who was supposed to help guide you through life.

When my father died when I was 6 years old, I thought I would miss him the most during big events, like graduation and birthdays. Instead, I've found that I notice my dad's absence most in the smaller moments, like choosing classes for my junior year or trying to figure out how to apply to college.

Dad was a wingman. He was Goose, not Maverick. When my dad died, the sailors who attended flight school with him in

Pensacola told us that he was the one who helped everyone get through the heavy academic course load. Later, he became an expert decision engineer and could help anyone come to the right conclusion about anything. In his absence, I felt lost, especially as I faced some big decisions without my navigator. My dad was supposed to be here to help me.

Going into high school, I immediately realized the sheer amount of things to worry about before college. Maintaining a good GPA, taking practice SATs, keeping up with extracurriculars, and figuring out my options for where to go all became

a daunting, stressful mess. I wondered if my childhood dreams weren't as realistic as I had previously hoped.

TAPS COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Through TAPS, though, Mom and I were able to attend the 2024 TAPS College Experience, organized by TAPS Education Support Services, which brought clarity to the swirling college questions. When we arrived at TAPS headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, this past June, we received a binder filled to the brim with the kind of content and research for which people pay thousands of dollars — including topics that I never even considered when thinking about college.

What I loved the most about the TAPS College Experience was how the speakers presented topics, like FAFSA, college applications, and resumes, all within the context of being a surviving military child. Learning about all the records and documents I should be tracking; understanding the services available to military families; and considering federal, state, and private funding made me realize how complex it all was, especially without a second adult in my life.

Unlike my classmates — the majority of whom have two parents who are alive — all of us high schoolers in that room at TAPS headquarters must navigate this college search process while grieving the loss of a parent. In an era of extreme change, knowing TAPS (and the Johnny Mac Soldiers Fund, which funded this program), could help fill in the gaps where our wingmen and women should be, has been so reassuring.



with TAPS

TAPS COLLEGE EXPERIENCE PREPARES SURVIVING CHILDREN FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER

GROWING WITH TAPS

I felt the loss of my dad when I was 6 years old, and my grief was much different as a kindergartner than it is now. After my dad died, I was a quiet, shy little girl, who rarely spoke. Now, as I go from childhood to adulthood, I enter a new chapter, not just in my life, but also in my grief journey. The absence of my father is present in different ways than it was before. Instead of missing my dad when learning how to ride a bike, I miss him when learning how to drive. These moments of discovery and accomplishment are both happy and sad, and TAPS has helped me to embrace the emotions through every stage.

In the 10 years I've been a part of the TAPS Family, I have grown to be outspoken, more confident, and always ready to share my experience with TAPS because it has given me a direction in life. Attending programs like the TAPS College Experience, Good Grief Camp, and many others has helped me to evolve as I continue to integrate my loss into my life.

Being part of TAPS has empowered me to help be my own navigator. Last summer, I earned a fellowship and attended the Georgetown University Summer Academy for International Relations. I'm a leader in several groups at my school, including our Model U.N. team and Multimedia Club. I also spent a week at Georgetown's Summer Medical Academy and am a member of my high school's HOSA — Future Health Professionals chapter. For the last two years, I've participated in TAPS Gold Star Advocacy

Week — reminding our elected officials of the sacrifices TAPS families have made and advocating for bills that support surviving families. These experiences have helped me discover a passion for public policy and advocacy and comfort in public speaking.

THE NEXT CHAPTER WITH TAPS

Over the summer, I spent two weeks learning to fly at the U.S. Air Force's Aim High Flight Academy. My great-grandfather worked with Orville Wright during the early days of naval aviation in the 1930s. My 91-year-old grandmother tells the story of how her mother was made to fly in those early planes. (To illustrate to policymakers and the press that the aircraft was safe, the Navy brass would ask the wives of Navy officers to ride in the plane with the pilots.) I am hopeful that my dad and his grandfather will be looking down from heaven and lifting my wings as I now learn to fly, helping me to spread my wings and fly the nest, not just metaphorically, but also literally.

These opportunities might not be possible if not for TAPS, which gives surviving children like me opportunities to thrive and reassurance that we are not alone. It enables me to focus more on my future and what I love to do, instead of feeling overwhelmed. TAPS brought me to this new stage of my life without fear of change. I feel ready and excited to apply for college! My dad may not be here to help, but my TAPS wingmen and women are beside me, aiding me through uncharted territory in my journeys through grief and life.



In addition to the annual College Experience, TAPS Education Support Services is available to support surviving family members of all ages as they pursue their educational goals. Learn how our team can help you or your child prepare for the next chapter.

taps.org/edu

DRESSED BLUES

Kathleen Doll Cristofaro, U.S. Air Force Veteran ★ Surviving Sister of U.S. Air Force Sgt Joseph Dennis Cristoforo

Standing silent, motionless,
Dressed in Blue,
I stand at attention, my salute crisp, as I snap to

I stand rigid
A statue of respectful pride
In memory of this young soldier
Who has died

Suddenly I shiver; my body starts to sway
As the mournful song
Of taps begins to play

Standing alone, unbendable, and tall
Only then in silence do I allow
My farewell Salute to fall
I struggle to erase this moment
That I am forced to see
Forever my darkest night
These hours will always be

For this man was like no other
Because this fallen Soldier
Is Joey, my Brother





PHOTOS: DVIDS, ATC CODY MOTT



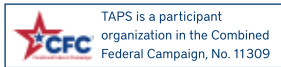
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The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors offers comfort, care, and resources to all those grieving the death of a military or veteran loved one.



“With my whole heart, thank you for always giving me the gift of knowing your kindness, endless support, and the genuine love of TAPS is there in the hardest of times.”

— Amy Litka ★ Surviving Spouse of
LTC Timothy Litka, U.S. Army



TAPS is the national nonprofit organization providing compassionate care and comprehensive resources to all those grieving a death in the military and veteran community. Visit us online or call our 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline to learn more.