

“SURVIVORS HELPING SURVIVORS HEAL”

TAPS Provides Peer Support, Resources And Comfort in Tragedy



COURTESY OF TAPS

Retired Marine LtCol Buzz Hefti, member of the TAPS Board of Directors, shows his enthusiasm during an annual TAPS Honor Guard Gala at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. Hefti, who served as a CACO during the Vietnam War, believes wholeheartedly in the organization's mission of providing peer-based emotional support for the survivors of fallen servicemembers.

Part Two

This is the second in a two-part series that covers the work of Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) in caring for those grieving the loss of a military loved one. Part One appeared in the February issue of Leatherneck.

By Sara W. Bock

As a young Marine captain at the height of the Vietnam War, Buzz Hefti knocked on the doors of 50 families' homes across the Northwestern United States, his crisp service uniform communicating the sobering news even before the dreaded words could leave his mouth: their Marine had been killed.

Assigned to the Inspector-Instructor staff with a reserve unit in Spokane, Wash., after a tour in Vietnam, Hefti served as the casualty assistance calls officer (CACO) for a fairly remote region that

included eastern Washington, northern Idaho and western Montana. With often hundreds of miles separating him from the surviving families he served, he was spread thin as the family members' only point of contact in the Marine Corps. And he did it all without a manual or CACO training and without any resources he could direct the families to that could provide the emotional support that many of them desperately needed.

"I knew when I was the CACO that there was something missing here," said Hefti, who, aside from making the initial, in-person notification of death, also planned burials for the fallen Marines and handed folded American flags to mothers, fathers and spouses on behalf of a grateful nation.

It wasn't until many years later that Hefti, then a retired lieutenant colonel working as a lobbyist on Capitol Hill, realized exactly what that missing element was.

Called into a meeting by U.S. Senator Ted

Stevens of Alaska, which was also attended by Army General John Shalikashvili, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Hefti was introduced to Bonnie Carroll, a Gold Star spouse and retired Air Force Reserve major. In the midst of her own grief journey, she was working to start an organization that in 1994 became Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS).

As he listened to Carroll talk about her efforts to create a national peer support network for those grieving the loss of a military loved one, Hefti knew it was an endeavor he needed to support. He's been involved with the organization in various capacities ever since, and today serves on the TAPS Board of Directors.

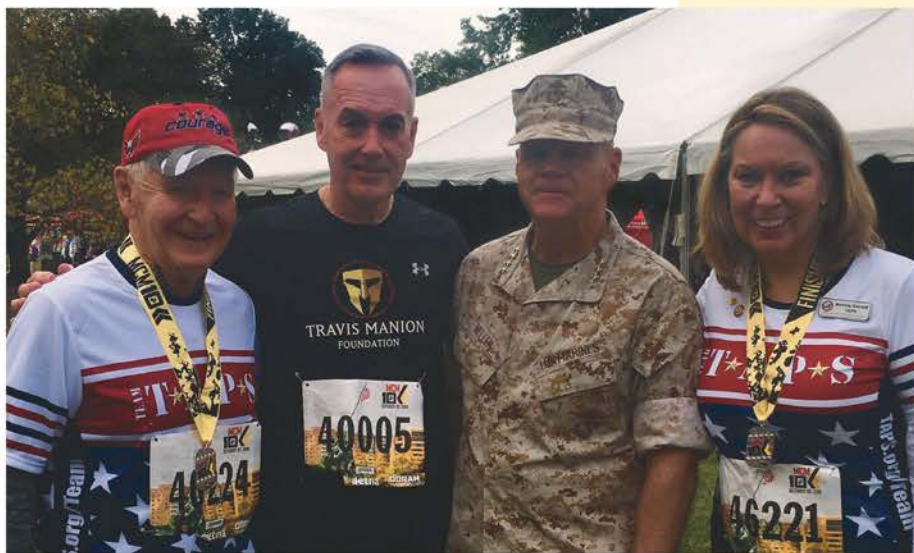
"My experience working as a CACO has proved to be invaluable with interactions with my TAPS family, and I am forever grateful for that experience. We needed TAPS when I notified all those families to help them during this early critical time for their grief—now we have this wonderful organization, and it is my personal passion to help our military families recover during their journey with grief," said Hefti. "My CACO experience was the most important duty I had in my 20-year Marine career."

For Carroll, it was her own experience navigating grief and profound loss that led her to recognize the need for a national organization that focused primarily on providing peer-based emotional support for military survivors. It was something that she had searched for, to no avail, in the wake of her husband's tragic death.

In November 1992, her husband, Brigadier General Tom Carroll, was one of eight soldiers killed in a plane crash while serving in the Alaska Army National Guard.

"The world came crashing down," said Carroll of the moments after she received the heartbreaking news. "You just don't realize how absolutely all-encompassing the death of an immediate family member is until you experience it yourself."

Carroll, who held numerous high-level government positions in Washington, D.C., while also



COURTESY OF LTCOL. BUZZ HEFTI, USMC (RET)

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serving in the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve, had been working on President Ronald Reagan's staff in 1988 when she was asked to travel to Alaska on behalf of the administration. She was assigned to check on the National Guard efforts in "Operation Breakthrough," the mission to save three gray whales that had become trapped by ice, the events of which were later featured in the 2012 film "Big Miracle" starring John Krasinski and Drew Barrymore. It was there that she met Tom Carroll, and, she says, "immediately fell in love." Just four years later, she became a Gold Star spouse.

Above: TAPS relies heavily on the support of senior Marine Corps leaders and gaining visibility at events like the annual Marine Corps Marathon. From the left, Hefti; Gen Joseph F. Dunford Jr., 19th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Gen Robert B. Neller, 37th Commandant of the Marine Corps, and TAPS founder and president Bonnie Carroll gather after the Marine Corps Marathon 10K race.



COURTESY OF TAPS



COURTESY OF TAPS

Left: Bonnie Carroll met her husband, then-Col Tom Carroll of the Alaska Army National Guard, in 1988 while she was serving on President Ronald Reagan's staff. Four years later, Tom was killed in a plane crash, and Bonnie's search for peer support after that tragic loss led her to create TAPS in 1994.

“It’s helpful being surrounded by people that just get it. A lot of people give you condolences and a lot of the time people don’t know what to do or what to say, but at TAPS everybody understands”

—Anna Steg

In the months that followed his death, Carroll looked for a group or organization that could help provide the emotional support she knew she needed. There were organizations for survivors of fallen law enforcement officers and homicide victims but none for the loved ones of fallen military servicemembers—none that “spoke the language” of the unique culture of the military.

On her first Memorial Day as a Gold Star wife, Carroll attended a ceremony in Alaska alongside some of the other surviving spouses whose loved ones perished in the same crash. The group decided to go out for lunch after leaving the cemetery, and the day became a turning point for all of them. The comfort Carroll felt from being in the company of others who understood what she was going through solidified in her mind the importance of peer support for those grieving the death of a military loved one.

“Lunch went into afternoon, went into dinner, and we shut the place down when it closed at night,” said Carroll. “It was unbelievably normalizing and validating and healing to talk with someone else who got it, someone else who was living the same experience and feeling the same emotions and fears and hopes and dreams and nightmares and all of it.”

Carroll spent the next two years conducting what she called a “needs assessment and gap analysis.” Leveraging her unique experience and connections from working at the senior levels of government, she sat down with the Secretary of Defense and



COURTESY OF ANNA STEG

Left: Anna Steg, surviving fiancée of SSgt Benjamin Hines, holds a photograph of the fallen Marine, who was killed in Afghanistan in 2019. Connecting with TAPS has helped her find new ways to honor his life, including becoming a peer mentor for other survivors.

the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and spent time looking at what the government offered to families of fallen servicemembers, what the “gaps” were, and how they could be filled.

“I certainly didn’t want to start anything if it already existed,” said Carroll. “But doing this completely, 100 percent in coordination and consultation and awareness with DOD and VA and all the other organizations I could find who in any way touched military survivors, [...] this would become kind of the complement to all the good work already being done.”

Through her research, Carroll found four areas that needed to be addressed. These became the basis for TAPS and remain the organization’s core services today, 27 years later.



COURTESY OF TAPS

Left: TAPS family members gather at a Washington Nationals baseball game, one of many sports and entertainment events the organization makes possible for survivors across the U.S. each year.



COURTESY OF ANNA STEG

Right: SSgt Hines was deployed as part of the Georgia Deployment Program-Resolute Support Mission when he was killed in a car bombing in April 2019. His surviving fiancée, Anna, connected with TAPS and the experience has helped her navigate life after loss.



COURTESY OF ANNA STEG

TAPS' core services are providing a national network for peer-based emotional support; a 24/7 helpline—"grief is not 9 to 5," Carroll says; connections to community-based care like grief groups and counseling in the survivor's local area; and casework assistance, connecting survivors to education benefits, emergency financial support and other services and support organizations available to them.

"It isn't replicating what the casualty officer does," said Carroll. "The government does a brilliant job of administering benefits to those who are eligible—to designated beneficiaries—and of providing the final resting place and providing the final honors."

While TAPS is a nonprofit and not a government agency, Carroll recognized early on the importance of being closely aligned with and connected to the military service branches and having support from the highest levels of the Defense Department, all the

Steg, left, fondly remembers Hines wearing his patriotic blazer to special events, and says he wasn't afraid to showcase his love of country. She describes him as a bubbly, high-energy individual who people always enjoyed being around.

way up to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. According to Hefti, who has served as the chair for the annual TAPS Honor Guard Gala in Washington, D.C., the joint chiefs and their spouses regularly attend the gala and other events as honored guests and speakers.

Carroll is particularly impressed by the reciprocal relationship TAPS has with the Marine Corps—"the Marine Corps really truly does set the standard of care for survivors," she says—and she was thrilled that from the beginning, Marine Corps leadership has recognized the value of TAPS services for surviving families and notifies TAPS of deaths so that the organization can reach out and offer support.

"What we can do is come in very early on in that survivor's experience and offer that emotional support that's so important, to be there to provide any additional financial needs, which is really important for extended family members," said Carroll.

Carroll tells a story of getting a call from a Marine CACO who was having issues getting funding for air travel so that the brother of a fallen Marine could attend the funeral. Ten minutes later, Carroll called him back with a flight number and confirmation number from the airline.

It was a gesture that made a huge impact on that Marine. "He just became this huge fan of TAPS because he said, 'This is what we need at that moment, we need to know if it's not possible, if there isn't government eligibility for this thing that needs to happen, then boom—here's a place that you can go and it will happen immediately, and it will be done because it's the right thing to do for this family,'" Carroll recalled.

Whether it's a seemingly simple gesture like sending cards to family members on the anniversary of their loved one's death or birthday or a connection to a peer mentor who has walked in their shoes, an offer of financial support or a weekend-long seminar or camp, it means the world to survivors to know that someone recognizes their loss and is there to provide the support they need.

Anna Steg was planning a wedding when her fiancé, Marine Staff Sergeant Benjamin Hines, was killed in a car bombing in Afghanistan in April 2019 while deployed as part of the Georgia Deployment Program-Resolute Support Mission.

Just weeks after Hines was killed, Steg reached out to TAPS at the recommendation of Hines' commanding officer. They connected her with another surviving fiancée to serve as her peer mentor, which was particularly beneficial.

"It's helpful being surrounded by people that just get it. A lot of people give you condolences and a lot of the time people don't know what to do or what to say, but at TAPS everybody understands, and they give you hope [...] and inspiration that there's



COURTESY OF ASHLEY LUDDEN

Above: Marine veteran Eric Ludden left active duty as a corporal and 10 years later was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He died in 2015.

Above right: For Ashley Ludden, pictured here with Eric and their two daughters, receiving support from TAPS despite the fact that her husband no longer was serving on active duty at the time of his death has meant a great deal to her.

Far right: TAPS founder and president Bonnie Carroll embraces a participant at a TAPS survivor seminar. The organization, which traditionally has relied heavily on the benefits of in-person interaction and events, has had to modify its programming to offer virtual seminars and online care groups due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



COURTESY OF ASHLEY LUDDEN

going to be a bright future down the road,” said Steg. “I’ve gotten a lot of hope and a reminder that love does not die. That’s one of TAPS’ big things. It lives on, and it lives through us. One thing I’ve gained through it is that ‘what better way to carry on his legacy than to live my life to the fullest?’”

She describes Hines’ loving, bubbly and contagious personality and how he made everyone feel like they were his best friend. Her goal is to use her own pain to help others and she plans to become a TAPS peer mentor herself.

“He always made it his mission to try to make whoever he was around smile,” Steg said of Hines, describing a blue star-spangled blazer he would wear to social events and weddings. “It portrayed his personality and showed his love of country. And obviously in the end he ended up giving all for it.”

In the wake of Hines’ death, Steg, as a fiancée but not yet a spouse, faced a number of challenges because she wasn’t yet a military dependent and therefore was not entitled to all of the services or benefits that she would have received if they had been married. It was the welcoming, embracing environment that TAPS provided that drew her to the organization. “They accept everyone,” Steg said. “Fiancée, friend, co-worker, battle buddy—you name it, you’re accepted.”

That level of inclusivity sets TAPS apart from other organizations and ensures that everyone in need of emotional support after the death of a military servicemember will receive it.

“Everybody who that servicemember loved and left behind is absolutely welcome to everything that we have to offer,” said Carroll. “If you are grieving the loss and honoring that servicemember, somebody who has stepped forward to wear the cloth of the nation and defend our freedoms, then we are there to support you in every way that we can.”

Not only is TAPS inclusive when it comes to an individual’s relationship with the deceased, but Carroll also emphasizes that all are welcome regardless of the servicemember’s cause of death or duty status at the time of their death.

At the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a large percentage of the survivors referred to TAPS

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—Ashley Ludden



COURTESY OF TAPS

were combat death-related; today, the primary causes of death are suicide and deaths due to illness.

“Many of the illness losses are compounded by the fact that the survivor was formerly a caregiver and is now grieving the loss of that identity as well,” said Carroll.

While the core services of TAPS have remained the same since its inception, Carroll says that the organization has adjusted its programming to support the complicated loss of suicide and the

complicated transition from caregiver to survivor that accompanies illness-related deaths.

Survivors are also welcome to seek support from TAPS regardless of the servicemember's duty status. If an individual is medically retired, is a reservist who dies while not on duty status, or is a veteran of the Armed Forces, their survivors are entitled to anything and everything TAPS offers. It also does not matter how much time has passed since the death occurred. "It's never too late," Carroll urges.

After Marine veteran Eric Ludden passed away in 2015 following a battle with bile duct cancer caused by toxic exposure, his wife, Ashley, didn't know where to turn. His diagnosis came 10 years after he left active duty as a corporal, so she didn't think that any military-related organizations would be willing to offer her help and support. But after connecting with TAPS, she was relieved to find out otherwise.

What means the most to her is that through TAPS, her husband's service is recognized, and the organization acts as an advocate in Washington, D.C., for families who have lost their loved one due to toxic exposure-related illnesses.

"They provided a way that Eric's life and sacrifice can be celebrated including him in slideshows showing the faces of toxic exposure," said Ashley Ludden. "For me and our children, it provides a great deal of comfort and healing knowing that his sacrifices aren't forgotten."

At TAPS events, seminars and camps, Carroll believes it's particularly important to encourage conversations about loved ones who have passed, ensuring that their memory lives on.

"It's an opportunity for families to really be cared for, to focus on themselves, to let go of all the other day-to-day stresses and just be with others who truly understand," Carroll said of the TAPS events. "It's OK to laugh, to cry, to tell stories—we wear photo buttons of our loved ones—to really talk about that person, because in our normal day-to-day life most of the people we know have either drifted away because it's just too uncomfortable to be around a grieving person, or they don't want to hear the stories anymore, or they won't mention the loved one because they think it's just too painful."

Over the past year, the coronavirus pandemic has presented new challenges for organizations like TAPS that rely heavily on face-to-face interaction and getting people together in person to carry out their mission.

"Surviving families and all those who are grieving are already feeling isolated, and when you add this level that now you're being actually told that you cannot go out, that we haven't been able to do these in-person gatherings that they may have looked forward to, we really ramped up our proactive outreach," Carroll said.

TAPS staff members who typically are focused on in-person events shifted their focus to checking in on survivors to offer support and encouraging them to join one of TAPS' online care groups or virtual seminars. They've transitioned their groups and events to the virtual conferencing platform



COURTESY OF TAPS

Zoom and have even created special backgrounds for the video calls so participants can appear on camera with a photo of their loved one behind them.

According to Carroll, these virtual offerings have been so well-received that they will now become a permanent option in the future, long after the pandemic has passed. She's heard from many survivors who aren't typically able to travel to events and are thrilled to now be able to connect with people all over the country who are just like them.

With a staff of nearly 100 individuals, the majority of whom are survivors themselves, TAPS continues even in challenging and unprecedented times to carry out the hard but heartfelt work of providing emotional support to the grieving.

"We do this as a family, as America's family, to honor those who have served and died," said Carroll. 🐾

Above: A "Team TAPS" runner is pictured with a Marine lieutenant at the 2018 Marine Corps Marathon. Many TAPS survivors find meaning in running races in honor of their fallen loved one, and events like the Marine Corps Marathon give TAPS a high degree of visibility in the community.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

The following helplines are staffed 24/7 and offer free and confidential support from people who care:

-If you're in suicidal crisis or emotional distress, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **(800) 273-TALK (8255)**

-If you're grieving the loss of a military loved one and are in emotional crisis or just want to connect with programs and resources, call the TAPS 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline at **(800) 959-TAPS (8277)**