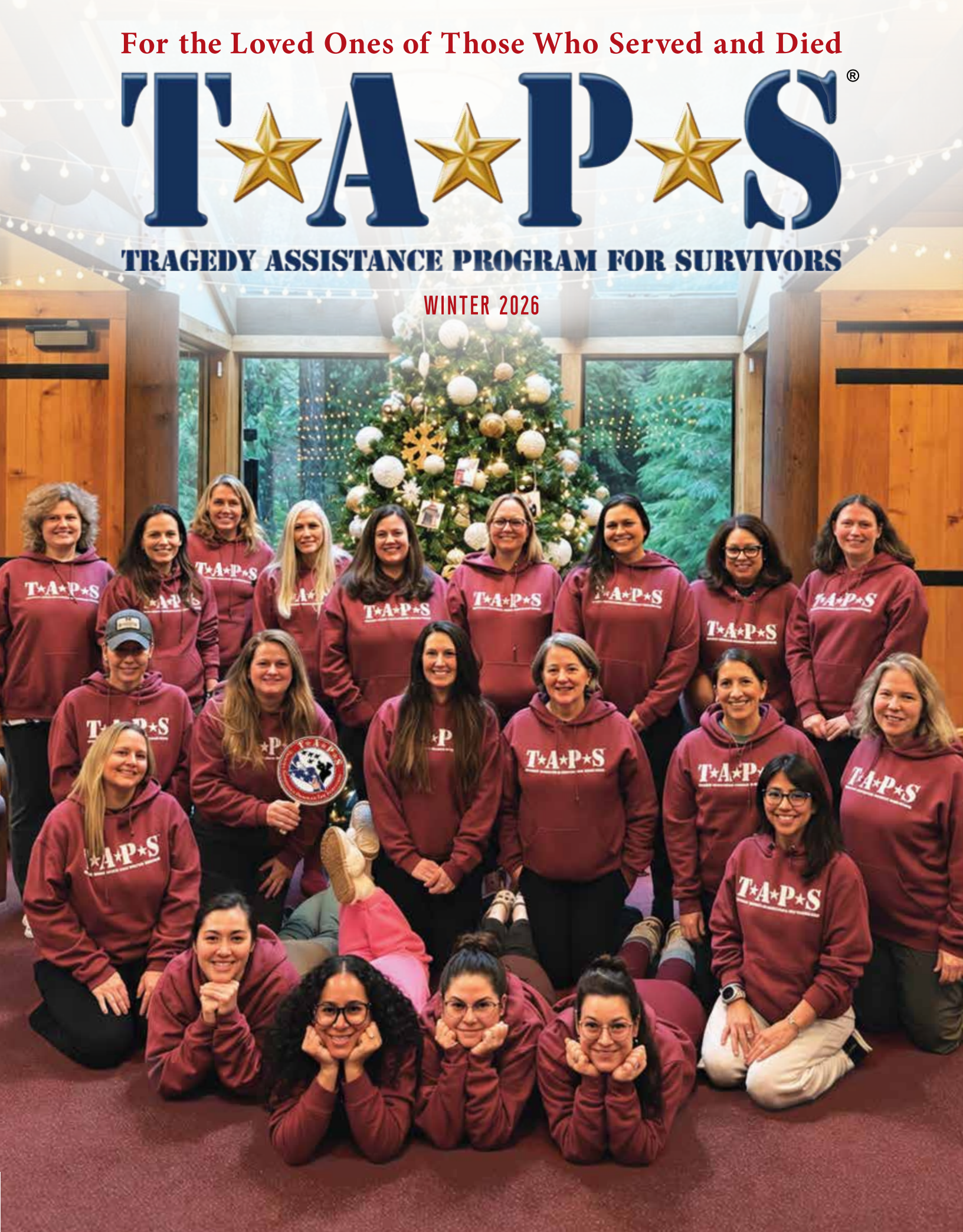
For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

T★A★P★S®

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

WINTER 2026



Gone From My Sight

"I am standing upon the seashore.
A ship, at my side, spreads her white sails
to the moving breeze and starts for
the blue ocean.

She is an object of beauty and strength.

I stand and watch her until, at length,
she hangs like a speck of white cloud
just where the sea and sky come to mingle
with each other.

Then, someone at my side says,
"There, she is gone."
Gone where?

Gone from my sight. That is all.
She is just as large in mast, hull and spar
as she was when she left my side.
And, she is just as able to bear her load
of living freight to her destined port.
Her diminished size is in me – not in her.

And, just at the moment when someone says,
"There, she is gone," there are other eyes
watching her coming, and other voices
ready to take up the glad shout,
"Here she comes!

And that is dying..."

— Henry Van Dyke



For Our TAPS Families

During the holidays, our hearts often feel the absence of those we love. Their physical presence may be gone, but love is not. Our loved ones remain as large in spirit, strength, and impact as they were when they were with us. You are not alone in your grief. We see you. We honor you. We walk beside you.

Love never leaves. Hope never fades.

HONOR. REMEMBER. HEAL.

Together.

The holidays may look different,
but love and memories live on.
We are here for you – today and always.

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

3101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 600
Arlington, VA 22201

President and Founder: Bonnie Carroll
Art Director: Jennifer Bonney

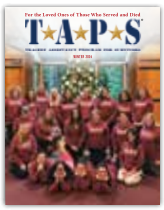
CONNECT WITH US
24 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK
202-588-TAPS (8277)
taps.org ✯ info@taps.org

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

TAPS PROGRAMS & SERVICES

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

** For full descriptions, see pages 16-17.*



ON THE COVER: The 2025 TAPS Suicide Loss Survivors Retreat in Washington offered survivors a compassionate space to honor their loved ones, share their grief, and find comfort and connection with others who understand.

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 welcome every survivor impacted by a death in the military or veteran community. We are proud to work alongside the world's leading experts in grief, trauma, peer support, and childhood bereavement through our Advisory Board and professional partnerships. Together, we combine decades of research and real-world experience to create programs and support proven to help survivors find connection, healing, hope, and strength as they learn to grow with grief.

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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VOLUME 32, ISSUE 4

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TAPS exceeds industry standards for financial accountability and outperforms 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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To Our TAPS Family,

Love Lives On

The holidays have a way of bringing love and memories close.

A favorite song, a familiar tradition, a place at the table, or a quiet winter evening can remind us so powerfully of the person we love and miss. Whether this is your first holiday season after loss or one of many, please know there is no right or wrong way to move through these weeks. You are welcome here exactly as you are.

This issue of *TAPS Magazine* is devoted to helping you find comfort, connection, and hope during the holidays. Within these pages, you will find stories from fellow survivors, thoughtful ways to honor those we love, and gentle reminders to care for yourself along the way.

Hope does not ask us to leave grief behind. It grows beside it.

Sometimes hope is found in continuing a beloved tradition. Sometimes it is in creating a new one. It may come through a Peer Mentor who understands, a Care Group where no explanation is needed, the laughter of family and friends, or a quiet moment when a treasured memory brings more warmth than pain.

That is the heart of TAPS. We remember together, we support one another, and we carry the love of those who died forward with us.

Throughout the holidays, TAPS is here for you 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Reach out whenever you need connection, care, or simply someone who understands. You are never alone in this family.

As you turn these pages and move toward a new year, I hope you find moments of peace, unexpected joy, and the reassurance that love remains.

Love does not end when a life ends. It changes, but it stays with us.

With all my love and care,

Bonnie Carroll
TAPS President and Founder

Dear TAPS

In every season of grief, you belong here.

TAPS is here to walk beside you 24/7.

800-959-TAPS (8277)

"TAPS has been amazing in supporting us during this complex and difficult time. The National Seminar was my first, and I became a Peer Mentor because I want to give back. Your team is phenomenal. We want to help others who are going through this complex grief."

Dwan Avent Vinson ★ Surviving Spouse of U.S. Army SGT Jeffery Lynn Vinson

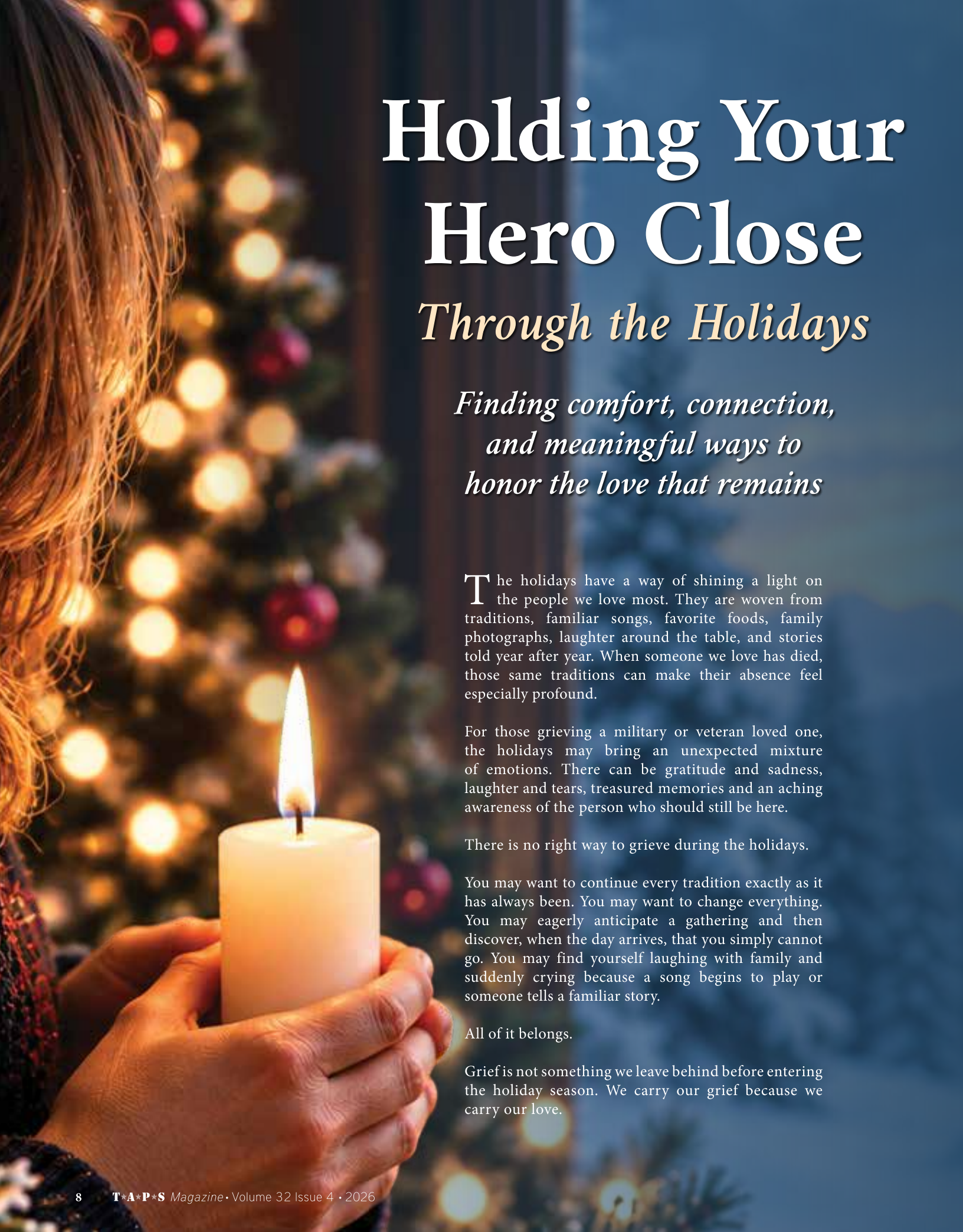
"I deeply appreciate TAPS and the *TAPS Magazine*. I have always felt isolated from other survivors due to my location and you have been a life line for me. As time passes, my love for my late husband has not waned and I miss him as much now as then. The gratitude I feel for TAPS remembering and not letting go of me is endless. Thank you so very much."

Pamela Mettille ★ Surviving Spouse of U.S Army SGM Michael C Mettille

"I just received Volume 32, Issue 3, and I love it more than the last... I especially need to thank you for the wonderful words on the inside of the front cover, based on the sermon following the death of King Edward VII. Never in the over 3 years since my husband died have I read something that struck me to my core: "I am but waiting for you. For an interval. Somewhere. Very near. Just around the corner." It is that last line–"Just around the corner" that somehow has brought me to tears yet so much comfort. Thank you from the bottom of my heart–today and always, I am forever grateful to TAPS."

Deborah Goff ★ Surviving Spouse of U.S. Army SPC Roger Goff





Holding Your Hero Close

Through the Holidays

Finding comfort, connection, and meaningful ways to honor the love that remains

The holidays have a way of shining a light on the people we love most. They are woven from traditions, familiar songs, favorite foods, family photographs, laughter around the table, and stories told year after year. When someone we love has died, those same traditions can make their absence feel especially profound.

For those grieving a military or veteran loved one, the holidays may bring an unexpected mixture of emotions. There can be gratitude and sadness, laughter and tears, treasured memories and an aching awareness of the person who should still be here.

There is no right way to grieve during the holidays.

You may want to continue every tradition exactly as it has always been. You may want to change everything. You may eagerly anticipate a gathering and then discover, when the day arrives, that you simply cannot go. You may find yourself laughing with family and suddenly crying because a song begins to play or someone tells a familiar story.

All of it belongs.

Grief is not something we leave behind before entering the holiday season. We carry our grief because we carry our love.

Give Yourself Permission

One of the greatest gifts you can give yourself this season is permission: permission to say yes, permission to say no, permission to leave early, permission to change your mind.

Grief takes energy. Holiday expectations can take even more.

Consider deciding ahead of time which traditions feel comforting and which feel burdensome this year. You do not have to attend every gathering or fulfill every obligation. You can simplify the meal, shorten the visit, ask someone else to host, or create an entirely new tradition.

Sometimes the most compassionate answer is simply, "Not this year."

There may be another year when it feels right again.

Make Room for Your Hero

Many families find comfort not by avoiding the person who died, but by intentionally including them.

Set a place at the table. Hang their stocking. Prepare their favorite dish. Light a candle in their memory. Display a favorite photograph. Wear something that belonged to them. Visit a place they loved.

Invite everyone to share a story.

Children can draw pictures, make ornaments, write messages, or choose a special way to remember their person. These simple acts help communicate something important: We are still a family, and the person we love remains part of our family story.

You might also choose to honor your hero through service. Donate to a cause they cared about. Deliver a meal to someone who is struggling. Help another military family. Perform an anonymous act of kindness in their name.

Love can continue to have an impact in the world.

Let Joy and Grief Sit Together

Survivors sometimes tell us they feel guilty the first time they genuinely enjoy themselves after their loved one dies.

If that happens this holiday season, remember that experiencing joy does not diminish your love.

You are allowed to laugh.

You are allowed to celebrate.

You are allowed to make new memories.

And you are allowed to cry five minutes later.

Grief and joy are not opposites. They can occupy the same heart and sometimes the very same moment. A beautiful memory can make us smile because it happened and ache because it cannot happen again.

You do not have to choose between remembering your hero and continuing to live your life. You can do both.

Tell Their Stories

The holidays are filled with stories, and stories are one of the ways we keep our relationships with those we love.

Say their name.

Tell the funny story everyone has heard a hundred times. Tell your children what their parent was like as a child. Tell grandchildren about the grandparent they may never have met. Talk about their service, their quirks, their dreams, their terrible jokes, their favorite holiday traditions, and the countless ordinary things that made them extraordinary to you.

Our heroes are so much more than the circumstances of their deaths. Their lives mattered. Their service mattered. Their love mattered.

And their stories deserve to keep being told.

Love Remains

The holidays may never be exactly as they once were. But over time, many survivors discover that something new can grow alongside the grief.

Traditions change. Families change. We change. *Love remains.*

Your hero's chair may be empty, but their place in your family is not. Their influence continues in the people they loved, the lives they touched, the values they passed along, and the stories you continue to tell.

So this holiday season, be gentle with yourself. Hold close what brings comfort. Let go of what does not. Say your hero's name. Tell their stories. Make room for tears and laughter alike.

And know that wherever the holidays find you, your TAPS family is beside you. *You are never alone.*

You Don't Have to Do This Alone

Perhaps most importantly, remember that you do not have to carry the holidays alone. Reach toward people who understand. Call a friend. Connect with your Peer Mentor. Attend a TAPS Care Group or TAPS Together. Spend time with other survivors who will not become uncomfortable when you say your hero's name or when tears unexpectedly appear.

Sometimes comfort comes from being with someone who does not need an explanation. Your TAPS family understands that grief does not follow a calendar. There is no deadline for missing someone, and there is no holiday by which you should be "better."

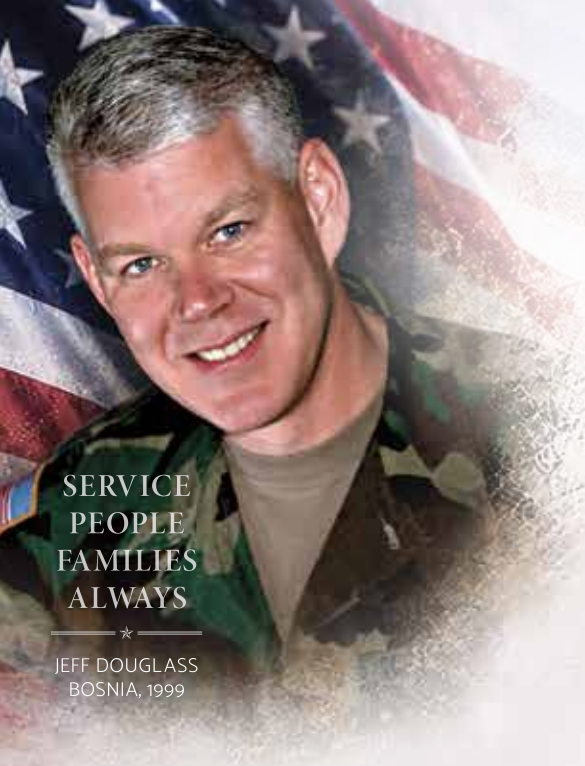
Whether this is your first holiday season without your hero or your thirtieth, we are here.

If the days become especially difficult, the TAPS 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline is always available at 800-959-TAPS (8277). On holidays, weekends, late at night, or in the quiet hours when memories feel especially close, someone is here to listen.

STILL SERVING

WHY TAPS MATTERS TO ME

Col. Jeff Douglass, USMC (Ret.) ★ TAPS Supporter



I came to know TAPS through my wife, Jillene.

Jillene volunteers with TAPS, and she is deeply proud of the organization, not simply because of what TAPS does, but because of the spirit with which it serves. For quite some time, she encouraged me to take a closer look and consider how I might support the mission myself.

I sometimes joke that she "badgered" me into it. She did not, of course. What she really did was help me see something that spoke directly to my own life of service, loss, responsibility and remembrance.

I served as a United States Marine for 33 years, from 1972 to 2005. And while I no longer wear the uniform, I am still and will always be a Marine.

My only regret about those years is how quickly they passed.

I was fortunate not to serve in combat, but I served in many a clime and place, and I saw enough to understand the cost and meaning of military service. I lost good friends. I stood with families in moments of unimaginable grief. On 10 different occasions, I had the solemn privilege of presenting our nation's flag to a fallen marine's next of kin at Arlington National Cemetery.

Those moments stay with you.

You do not forget the weight of the folded flag in your hands. You do not forget the faces of a wife or husband, a parent or a child whose world has just changed forever. You do not forget the broken hearts you see in their eyes.

And you understand, perhaps in a way you did not before, that when America loses one of its own serving in harm's way, his or her family carries that very personal loss for the rest of their lives.

In 1999, I led a deployment of marines in Bosnia, a war-torn nation still struggling from years of strife and still a very dangerous place Technically and professionally we were prepared for this mission. But one thought haunted me more than any other: the possibility that I might have to write that terrible letter home, telling a marine's family that their marine – entrusted to us – would not be returning safe and sound.

That burden never felt abstract to me. Those marines were someone's son or daughter, husband or wife, father or mother, brother or sister. My responsibility was not simply to accomplish the mission. It was to do everything within my power to bring them home.

The experience also left its mark on me.

I came to understand something about the darkness trauma can create and how difficult it can be to find your way back. It took me some time to dig out of my own darkness. That experience changed how I think about suffering, and it deepened my compassion for people carrying wounds that the rest of us may never see.

Then came September 11, 2001.

I was at the Pentagon that day.

More than 25 years later, some memories remain as immediate as if they happened yesterday.

I can still smell the aviation fuel. I can see the first responders waiting to save. I can see the disbelief in the eyes of those who were there.

There are moments in a life that never really leave you. They become part of who you are. And perhaps that is why TAPS resonates so deeply with me.

TAPS understands that grief does not operate on a timetable.

It understands that remembrance is not about dwelling in the past. It is about honoring a life, carrying love forward and making sure those left behind are surrounded by people who understand.

I think especially about our National Guard and Reserve families.

For many active-duty families, there is at least the reach of a military installation nearby, a community that understands deployments, separations and the rhythms of military life. But many Guard and Reserve families live far from those communities.

They watch someone they love put on a uniform and leave for the other side of the world, while they remain in communities where few people may truly understand what that service demands.

The waiting can be lonely.

The worry can be lonely.



SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

A day that lives on in our hearts

And if the unimaginable happens, and their loved one comes home in a flag-draped casket, there may be no military community nearby to immediately circle around that grieving family.

That kind of isolation can make an already unbearable loss feel even heavier. This is where I believe TAPS does something extraordinary.

TAPS creates the community that grieving military and veteran families need.

It says: We know your loved one mattered.

We know your grief and loss do not end after the funeral.

We know there will be birthdays, anniversaries, holidays and ordinary Tuesdays when the loss suddenly feels brand new again. And TAPS will still be here. That matters enormously to me.

TAPS does not simply offer a program or provide a service. It surrounds people with compassion, practical help, friendship, understanding and hope. It connects grieving families with others who have walked a similar road. It helps them remember that while life has changed forever, life can still hold meaning, purpose, connection and even joy. That is why I chose to invest in TAPS.

There are many reasons, more than I could ever capture in a single story. But at the heart of it is something very simple.

I believe in taking care of our people. I believed in that responsibility when marines were entrusted to me. I believed in it when I stood at Arlington and placed our nation's flag into the hands of a grieving family member. I believed in it on September 11. And I believe in it today.

Military service does not end with the person wearing the uniform. The sacrifice belongs to the family, too.

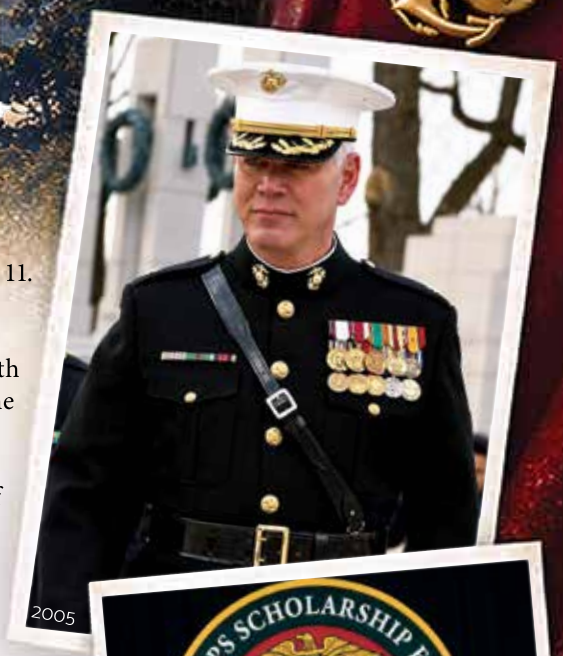
And when a family suffers the death of someone they love, our responsibility to them should not end when the ceremony is over and everyone else goes home.

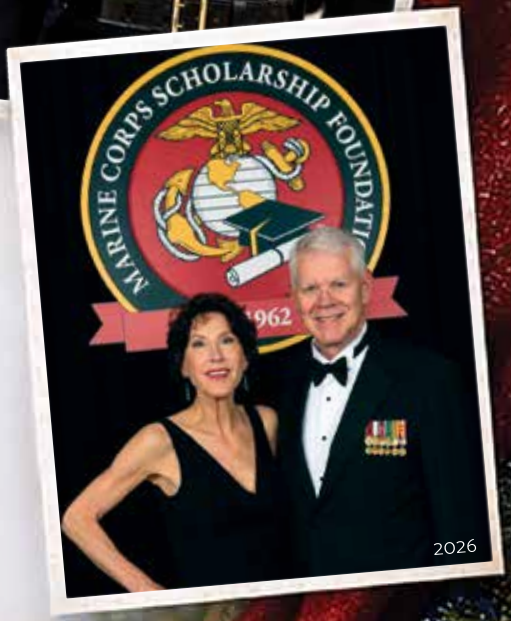
We should remain.
We should remember.
We should show up.
TAPS does exactly that.

My wife first opened the door for me to understand this extraordinary organization, and I am grateful she did. I am proud of her service to TAPS, proud of the people who carry this mission forward every day, and grateful for the opportunity to play even a small part in it.

After 33 years in the Marine Corps, I still believe deeply in service. Supporting TAPS feels, in its own way, like another way to continue serving.

And I can think of few missions more worthy than making sure the families of those who served our nation know that they are remembered, they are valued and they should never have to walk alone through grief.





PHOTOS: COL. JEFF DOUGLASS

Healing Your

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

If you could go back in time and relive a special holiday, which one would you choose? Close your eyes for a moment and think about this holiday. Now, slowly, walk through this memory in your mind.

What made it so special? What were the surroundings like? Who inhabits this memory with you?

Holidays have such rich associations for us because humankind created them as a way to honor and celebrate that which is truly important. We step out of the hustle and bustle of our day-to-day routines and into a world where our spiritual beliefs and connection to others matter above all else. We give pause to give thanks, and we share of ourselves.

As the Grinch learned that memorable Christmas, the holidays don't really come from a store — they come from the heart and soul.

Which is why when someone loved dies, the holidays can be so very painful. The heart of the holidays has been torn apart. Without love, what is life? Without the people we love, what are the holidays?

I want you to know that you can find continued meaning in the holidays and in life. You can continue to live and love fully. You must grieve, but you can also celebrate.

Setting Your Intention to Heal

It takes a true commitment to heal in your grief. Yes, you are changed, but with commitment and intention you can and will become whole again. Commitment goes hand in hand with the concept of "setting your intention." Intention is defined as being conscious of what you want to experience. A close cousin to "affirmation," it is using the power of positive thought to produce a desired result.



How can you use this in your journey through holiday grief? By setting your intention to heal.

Turning to Ritual

Setting your intention to mourn and heal during the holidays — and beyond — is one important way to move forward in your grief journey. Harnessing the power of ritual is another. We create holiday rituals because everyday activities and normal conversations cannot capture our most profound thoughts and feelings. Rituals give them voice and shape. So, we decorate our Christmas trees, light our menorahs, give gifts, hold hands, and say prayers.

During your time of grief, the very rituals of the holidays can help you survive them. Try participating in some of your normal holiday traditions but with a focus on your grief. When you light candles in your home, do it in honor of the person who died. You might also create a special holiday ceremony or private ritual in memory of the person who died. The holidays are ritualistic and ritual can help you survive (and heal) right now. Remember this when you are considering whether or not to participate in your next holiday tradition.

Living in the Now

Return once more to the holiday memory I asked you to conjure up at the beginning. This memory is so special to you because you were so very present to the moment.

You can find continued meaning in the holidays and in life. You can continue to live and love fully. You must grieve, but you can also celebrate.

Holiday Grief

When your grief overwhelms you this holiday season, try focusing on the now. Your grief wants you to live in the past through memories of the precious person who died. Remembering is indeed important, and your memories will always be a special part of your life.

Your grief will also project you into the future at times. You will worry about what the coming months and years hold for you. Looking ahead is also a normal and natural part of grief.

But when remembering and projecting exhaust you — and they will — return yourself to the present moment. Concentrate on what is going on around you right now. Hear the sounds and see the sights. Try drawing on the power of now to find continued meaning in your holidays and in your life.

You'll notice I have used the generic term "holiday season." By that I mean the winter holidays bookended, in the United States, by Thanksgiving and New Year's Day. In between are the spiritual/religious holidays of Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa. But whatever holidays you celebrate and no matter where you live, the principles apply to the holidays that are most meaningful for you — including other holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries sprinkled throughout the calendar year.

A List of Ideas to Heal Your Holiday Grief:

Be Compassionate with Yourself

Let your holiday grief be what it is. And let yourself — your new, grieving self — be who you are.

Survive

If the death was very recent, you may be in survival mode this holiday season. If that's true for you, it's OK — the world will keep turning whether you participate in the holidays or not.

Keep What Matters

You might consider simplifying your holiday rituals instead of abandoning them altogether. Keep the traditions that matter most to you and set the others aside, at least for now.

Communicate Your Wishes

Muster the strength and courage to tell the people in your life what your wishes are for the holidays. If you'd like their company but prefer to gather somewhere different than you usually do, say so. If you'd rather skip some of the celebrations this year, tell them. If you're feeling unsure about how to spend the holidays, tell them.

Attend a Remembrance Ceremony

Many hospitals, hospices, and funeral homes host remembrance ceremonies during the holidays. The act of joining together in our grief and ritualizing our mourning can be very healing. Especially early in their grief, many families say it was the most important thing they did during the holidays.

Hang a Special Stocking

If your holiday traditions include hanging stockings, consider hanging a special stocking in memory of the person who died.

Be a Secret Santa

You could probably use some "feeling good" this holiday season. Give yourself a dose of pleasure by giving to someone else.

Prepare Favorite Holiday Foods of the Person Who Died

Special foods are an important part of the holiday traditions. Chances are your family prepares many of the same dishes each holiday, and everyone looks forward to those unique smells and flavors.

If You're Alone, Find Ways to Connect

If you're alone this holiday season, you would be well-served to make an effort to connect with other human beings. Invite your neighbor to dinner. Volunteer at a homeless shelter or nursing home. Join a group at a place of worship.

Make an Appointment with a Grief Counselor

Seeing a counselor or spiritual advisor for just a session or two over the holidays may help you cope better and focus more on what is important to you this year and what is not.

Count Your Blessings

Think of all you have to be thankful for. This is not to deny the hurt, for the hurt needs to take precedence right now. But it may help to consider the things that make your life worth living, too.

Believe in a Better Next Year

Believe in your capacity to heal and grow through grief. Believe in the enduring holiday spirit of giving and love.



About the Author

Longtime TAPS supporter Dr. Alan Wolfelt serves as the director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is a member of the TAPS Advisory Board. He has written many books that help people mourn, including Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death (*coauthored with TAPS President Bonnie Carroll*) *and* Nature Heals: Reconciling Your Grief Through Engaging with the Natural World, *from which this article is excerpted. Visit CenterforLoss.com to learn more about grief and order Dr. Wolfelt's books.*

PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES

The *Steady* Hand

Laura Benton ✭ Surviving Spouse of HMC Kevin Benton Jr, USN



This July marked ten years since I became part of the TAPS family.

I did not arrive by choice. None of us do. I came to TAPS in the aftermath of a loss that shattered the life I knew, changed the future I imagined, and left me trying to understand how to keep going for myself and for my little girl.

Most people think of military sacrifice as something that happens on a battlefield far away. They picture uniforms, deployments, combat zones, and flag-draped honors. And yes, sacrifice happens there. But sometimes the war follows our loved ones home. Sometimes the wounds are invisible. Sometimes the battle is fought in silence.

My late husband was Kevin to our family and friends, but to many he was called, "Doc." Kevin was a Navy Independent Duty Corpsman who served 19 years in various deployable units within Naval Special Warfare and Marine Corps Special Operations. He was a strong and capable person with an empathy towards others that made him exceptional at being, "Doc." He had earned and was very proud of his title and role as were all his teammates in theirs. The name, "Doc" carries with it the responsibility that all combat veterans have, but also the expectation to fix the things that combat broke. Treating the sick in austere locations, introducing a small village to better hygiene and health practices, bandaging wounds, medically evacuating patients and mourning the loss of those he could not save or carrying the pain of actions you've taken that are necessary in war, even as the non-combatant embedded in a combat team. This responsibility carried a heavy toll, a burden that would never be released or forgotten. This burden carried by him was invisible to most. You see, "Doc," is the one who fixes the hurt and the broken, so he did not seek someone else to get fixed, he was that someone. But like many, he instead carried this alone, quietly...painfully.

You have likely heard the phrase, "the fog of war." This refers to the loss of awareness, or situational certainty on the battlefield. When he died, I was immediately thrust into the "fog of grief." I lost my compass and was now uncertain as to where I would go next. At first, I could not see through the fog of grief. The shock, the questions, the heartbreak, and thoughts of my daughter's future without her Daddy.

I will always remember the deployment he never truly returned from. Physically, he was back with us. But something had changed. The truth is that not every wound has a single clear beginning. Some pain builds quietly. Some burdens are carried for years.

Kevin died by suicide on July 28, 2016.

In that single, devastating moment, I became a widow, and our daughter, Gabriela, who was just two years old, lost her daddy.

How do you explain an invisible wound that steals a parent? How do you help a child understand a loss you can barely understand yourself? How do you stand in the wreckage of a life that changed in an instant and begin to imagine tomorrow?

At first, I could not see through the fog of grief. The shock, the questions, the heartbreak, the fear for my daughter's future — it all felt too heavy to carry. Suicide loss brings its own kind of silence, and in that silence, it is easy to feel alone, confused, and even paralyzed.

Then, within a week of losing Kevin, TAPS came into our lives.

TAPS did not offer an empty "I'm sorry for your loss" and then disappear. TAPS

in the *Fog*



Discovering that even in the darkest places, there can still be connection, purpose, and hope.

stepped into the chaos with us. They became the steady hand reaching through the fog. They reminded me that Gabriela and I did not have to navigate this alone.

That mattered more than I can ever fully explain.

In those early days, I did not need someone to fix everything. No one could. I needed someone to sit with me in the reality of what had happened. I needed someone who understood that Kevin's life was more than the way he died, but also that the way he died mattered deeply to the grief we were carrying. I needed people who could honor his service, his love, his struggles, and his humanity all at once.

TAPS gave us that.

Over time, TAPS helped me understand that healing does not mean forgetting. It does not mean the pain disappears, or that the questions are all answered, or that grief follows a neat timeline. Healing means learning how to carry love and loss together. It means finding people who will say your loved one's name. It means discovering that even in the darkest places, there can still be connection, purpose, and hope.

For Gabriela, TAPS became part of the story of how she would grow up knowing she was not the only child missing a military parent. For me, TAPS became a place where I could breathe, where I could be honest, and where I could begin to believe that life could still hold beauty.

To any survivor reading this who is new to this grief, I want you to know: you do not have to be strong every moment. You do not have to have the right words. You do not have to understand everything today. You only have to take the next breath, and then the next one.

Let people reach for you. Let TAPS walk with you. Let others carry hope for you until you can hold it for yourself.

Ten years later, Kevin is still missed. I still wish Gabriela had more time with her daddy. I still carry the weight of what happened and love that will never end. But I also carry gratitude — for the people who showed up, for the community that held us, and for the reminder that we are not alone.

Kevin was more than his final moment. He was "Doc." He was a husband. He was a father. He was a friend. He was a Navy Corpsman. He was loved. He mattered.

And because of TAPS, Gabriela and I have been reminded again and again that we matter, too.

There is life after loss. It may not look like the life we planned. It may come slowly, in small moments, through tears, through community, through the courage to keep showing up. But it comes.

And when it does, we do not walk into it alone. TAPS has been and continues to be the steady hand in the fog.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

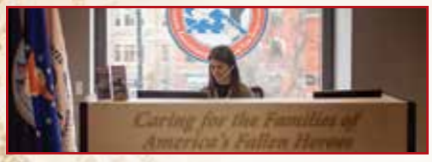
For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died.

T★A★P★S®

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

TAPS.org/Programs-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.



TAPS TOGETHERS • TAPS.ORG/TAPSTOGETHERS

TAPS Togethers events bring survivors together in their local communities to connect, share, and build meaningful memories rooted in honor and remembrance. TAPS Togethers events are hosted in communities across the country: at coffee shops, National Parks, and more. No matter what type of connection you are seeking, there is a TAPS Togethers for you.



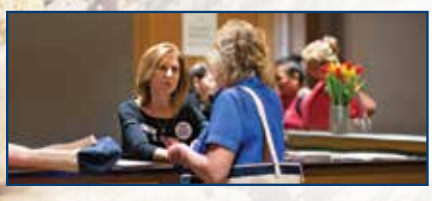
CASEWORK ASSISTANCE • TAPS.ORG/CASEWORK

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.

ILLNESS-LOSS SUPPORT • 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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.



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

Center for Loss & Life Transition®

RESOURCES • SUPPORT • HOPE

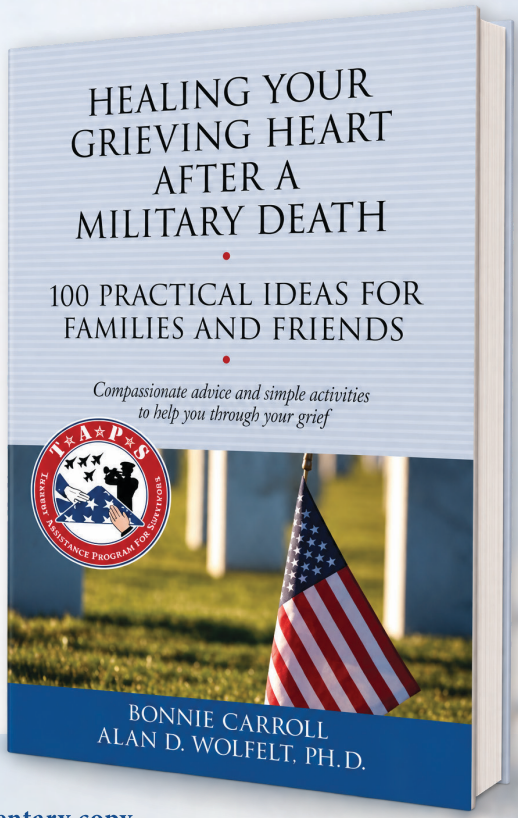
TAPS Daily Reflections

Grief has no timetable. Some days, you simply need to know that someone understands.

That is why Bonnie Carroll and Dr. Alan Wolfelt wrote *Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death*. We wanted to create a gentle companion for military and veteran survivors—one that offers hope, practical guidance, and reassurance that you do not have to walk this journey alone.

Rather than reading it from beginning to end, you can open the book to any page and find a brief reflection or simple idea to help you navigate the day ahead. Whether you are newly bereaved or many years into your grief journey, these 100 reflections remind us that healing happens one step, one memory, and one act of courage at a time.

At TAPS, we have the privilege of walking beside survivors every day, and we know that while grief changes us forever, hope can grow alongside it. This book is one more way we hope to bring comfort and encouragement whenever you need it most.



If you are a surviving family member of a service member or veteran, we would be honored to send you a **complimentary copy** of *Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death*. Simply email **info@taps.org** with your mailing address, and we'll send one to you with our love.

TAPS Daily Reflections

As another source of daily support, we also invite you to subscribe to **TAPS Daily Reflections**. Each morning, you'll receive a brief message of hope, healing, and encouragement written especially for military and veteran survivors. Many tell us these reflections arrive just when they need them most.

Wherever you are today, please remember:

You are not alone.

Your TAPS Family is always here for you.

Three Ways to Boost Memories of Loved Ones This Holiday Season

Allison Gilbert ✯ TAPS Advisory Board

We know holidays can be challenging for individuals who've lost loved ones, but they also offer opportunities for keeping memories alive. Below are three of my favorite ways to honor and celebrate the family and friends we never want to forget.



Use Social Media

If you can't be with your family for the holidays, share memories of your loved one on social media. I used this strategy on the 20th anniversary of my mother's death. First, I changed my profile photo to a picture of my mother and me. The swap was a visual cue something different was happening, and my Facebook friends should (hopefully!) pay attention. Next, I wrote a brief status update about the milestone, tagged people who knew her best, and encouraged everyone to post a favorite recollection. The result? A virtual celebration of her life.



Make Memory Magnets

If you're gathering in person, consider doing an activity together–creating memory magnets. Each person needs a photo of their loved one. Other supplies include epoxy bubble stickers, sheets of magnetic backing (both the bubble stickers and magnetic sheets are widely available at craft stores), and scissors. First, affix the epoxy stickers (sticky-side down) to the top of your picture, giving it a glass-like finish. Next, cut a magnetic strip to size and shape your sticker and place it on the back. Done! Encourage family members to take these sentimental favors home to use on their refrigerators and washing machines.

Create Poignant Playlists

Use memories to inspire meaningful holiday playlists. Before my uncle died, he dictated a list of his favorite pieces of music. The playlist I made with his favorite songs brings back wonderful memories. What music did your loved one enjoy most? Make a playlist, and then consider sharing it. A commemorative playlist happens to make an especially thoughtful holiday gift.

Want more ideas?

I reveal 85 practical and creative opportunities in my book, Passed and Present: Keeping Memories of Loved Ones Alive. Want to share your creative strategies with me? I'd love to know about them! Connect with me on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter by searching *@agilbertwriter*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALLISON GILBERT; PEXELS.COMPASCAL CLAIVAZ;; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/LINEARCURVES; TAPS ARCHIVES

You're Invited

33RD ANNUAL

National Military Survivor Seminar

AND

Good Grief Camp

MAY 27–31, 2027

HYATT REGENCY CRYSTAL CITY,
ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA



Each Memorial Day, our nation pauses to remember the brave men and women who served and died. At TAPS, we gather as a family to remember them in a deeply personal way because for us, every day is Memorial Day.

We share their names. We tell their stories. We celebrate the lives they lived, the love they gave, and the difference they made.

The National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp will bring together survivors from across the country for a meaningful weekend of remembrance, connection, learning, and hope. Whether this will be your first TAPS connection, or one of many, there is a place for you here.

Survivors of all ages and all relationships to the fallen are welcome. Regardless of whether your loved one died in a duty status, veteran, National Guard or Reserve, all are welcome. If you are unable to join us in Arlington, virtual workshops will also be available.

» TAPS.org/national

#HonorThem

Remember the Love,
Celebrate the Life,
Share the Journey.

Adults

If you are grieving the death of someone who served in the military, we invite you to spend Memorial Day weekend with people who understand the unique journey of military and veteran loss.

Throughout the weekend, you can choose from workshops, activities, and small group conversations designed to offer connection, understanding, and hope. There is no expectation to participate in everything. You can make the weekend your own and choose what feels meaningful to you.

Come as you are. Share when you want to share. Listen when you want to listen. Most of all, spend time with a community that understands the love behind your loss and honors the person you carry with you.

Young Adults

Young adulthood brings change, possibility, and questions about what comes next. Grief can shape that journey in deeply personal ways.

The TAPS Young Adults Program brings together young adults who understand what it's like to grow up after the loss of a military loved one. Through meaningful conversations, activities, and shared experiences, participants build friendships, explore identity and purpose, and find ways to carry their loved one's legacy forward.

Whether you're new to TAPS or have been part of the community since Good Grief Camp, there's a place for you here. All young adults ages 18–30 are welcome. Come as you are, meet others who understand, and discover a community where you belong.

Youth

At TAPS Good Grief Camp, children and teens ages 5 to 18 can remember their loved one, make friends, have fun, and discover that other kids understand what it is like to grieve someone who served.

With caring adults and TAPS Military Mentors beside them, children participate in activities designed for their age and stage of development. They can share memories, learn ways to express their grief, build confidence, and simply enjoy being kids.

Good Grief Camp creates a place where remembrance and fun can exist side by side, and where children can carry the love and legacy of their person with them as they grow.

Trained, licensed, and insured caregivers will provide child care for children 5 years old and younger who are not yet attending kindergarten.



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

Become a Peer Mentor

» TAPS.org/becomeapeermentor

One of the most meaningful parts of TAPS is survivors supporting survivors. During the National Military Survivor Seminar, TAPS offers Peer Mentor training for adult military survivors at least 18 months beyond their loss who feel ready to support others.

As a Peer Mentor, you can honor your loved one by offering the understanding that comes from experiencing military loss. Peer Mentors connect with survivors at seminars, retreats, TAPS Togethers, support groups, in the Online Community, and through one-to-one connections.

If becoming a Peer Mentor feels like a meaningful next step, register for the in-person training when you register for the seminar. The Peer Mentor Program team will follow up with information.

HELPING CHILDREN & TEENS COPE WITH

Grief During the Holidays

Pamela Gabbay, Ph.D ✭ Director, TAPS Youth Programs & TAPS Advisory Board Member
Author, Understanding and Supporting Bereaved Children

GROWING UP T★A★P★S

The holidays are often described as the "most wonderful time of the year." But for a child or teen who is grieving, the holiday season can feel overwhelming and extremely sad because someone very important in their life has died.

A favorite tradition may suddenly highlight who is missing. A holiday song can bring back a memory. An empty chair at the table may feel especially noticeable. Even happy moments can be complicated by the realization that someone they love is not there anymore.

For TAPS children and teens, one of the most important things we can give them during the holidays is permission to experience the season exactly as they need to.

LET THEM KNOW THERE IS No "Right" Way to Feel

Children and teens may worry about the adults around them. They may hesitate to talk about the person who died because they don't want to make someone sad. They may also wonder whether laughing, celebrating, opening presents, or having fun somehow means they are forgetting the person who died.

Remind them that grief and joy can exist together.

They can miss their person and still enjoy the holidays. They can cry during a holiday tradition and laugh five minutes later. They can want to talk about their person one day and not want to talk about them the next. None of those responses means they are grieving wrong.

WHENEVER POSSIBLE. Give Them Choices

After a death, children and teens have very little control over what has happened to their family. During the holidays, even small choices can help restore a sense of predictability and control.

Instead of deciding for them how the family will remember their person, invite them into the conversation:

"What traditions do you really want to keep this year?"

"Is there anything you'd rather do differently?"

"Would you like to do something special to remember them?"





REMIND THEM THAT Grief & Joy CAN EXIST TOGETHER.

Their answer may be yes, no, or "I don't know." All three are okay.

Teenagers, especially, may want some traditions with family and others with friends. Making room for both respects where they are developmentally as well as where they are in their grief.

MAKE SPACE FOR *Remembering*

For many children, remembering the person who died can be comforting. Create opportunities for remembrance without making participation mandatory. A child might choose a special ornament, light a candle, prepare their person's favorite food, look through photographs, play a favorite song, write a note, or share a favorite holiday memory.

An example could be, "Dad always ate the cookies Christmas morning," followed by everyone laughing. It could also be remembering where everyone sat while they were opening presents. The big and little memories all matter.

PREPARE THEM FOR *What Might Be Hard*

Children often cope better when they know what to expect. Before a holiday gathering, talk about who will be there, what will happen, and what might feel different this year. You can also create an exit plan. Give children and teens permission to step into another room, text a trusted person, take a walk, put on headphones, or leave an event early if things become overwhelming.

Knowing, "I don't have to stay if this gets too hard," can sometimes make it easier to be a part of a holiday gathering or event.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO SAY *Their Person's Name*

Adults sometimes avoid mentioning the person who died because they are afraid of upsetting a grieving child.

But saying their name doesn't remind a child that someone died. They already remember. Silence can sometimes communicate that their person—or their grief—is too difficult to talk about.

Follow the child's lead, but don't be afraid of memories. A simple, "I was thinking about your mom today," or "I remember how much your dad loved this tradition," can open a door.

If they want to walk through it, listen. If they don't, that's okay too.

LET JOY BE *Joy*

When grieving children are laughing, let them laugh. When they're excited about presents, let them be excited. When they're playing with cousins, watching a movie, or doing something wonderfully ordinary, resist the urge to bring grief into that particular moment.

Children naturally move in and out of grief. They may be deeply sad one moment and completely absorbed in play the next. That isn't avoidance. It is one of the ways children regulate overwhelming emotions.

Joy does not diminish love. Having fun does not mean they have forgotten.

SOMETIMES ANTICIPATION MAY *Be Harder Than the Actual Holiday*

Sometimes the weeks leading up to a holiday are more difficult than the holiday itself. Children may hear classmates talking about family traditions, see holiday displays everywhere, or worry about what the day will feel like without their person.

Check in before the holiday—not just on it. Instead of asking only, "Are you okay?" try:

"I've been wondering what you're thinking about the holidays this year."

"How can I help you get through them?"

"Are there things that we can do together that might help?"

MAKE ROOM FOR *Old and New Traditions*

Families sometimes feel pressure to recreate the holidays exactly as they were before the death. Others feel they need to change everything.

Keep what still feels meaningful. Change what doesn't. Create something new when it feels right.

A new tradition isn't a replacement for the person who died. It is a way for the family to continue living while carrying that person's memory forward. Maybe the family still makes their person's favorite dessert but chooses a new meal together. Maybe they hang the same special ornament each year and add a new one chosen by the child.

Over time, the holidays may become a blend of remembered moments and new ones. There may still be an empty place at the table, but there can also be new laughter, new rituals, and new memories being made.

For grieving children and teens, the most compassionate holiday may be one where they are allowed to remember, participate, step away, laugh, cry, and be accepted for however they may be feeling.





PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

At TAPS, we are here to help you and your children during the holidays and all throughout the year. YOU Belong Here.



Holidays, the *Empty Chair,* and the *Family Mobile*

Benjamin Wolfe, M.Ed., LICSW, FT ✭ TAPS Advisory Board

Each person on the family mobile has gifts to offer, and even after a loved one's death, mobiles will ALWAYS include the person who has died. The "weight" of the person who has died may become lighter over the years yet there are many times each year when that "weight" becomes larger, even if only for a short time.

When it comes to holidays and the "empty chair," remember the person who died is still on the family mobile. How do we acknowledge, honor and remember the person who is no longer physically here? Some ways people have dealt with the holidays include mentioning out loud at the dinner table the name of the person who died and sharing stories about them. Cooking a favorite meal. Having pictures or physical items that belonged to the person who died nearby. Lighting a candle. Playing special music. Writing a poem or a short writing one can read out loud. Laughing, crying, knowing it is also okay to be angry. Buying gifts to give away or making a donation in memory of the person. Going for a walk. Visiting a special place. It may be painful but sharing stories openly and feeling the pain of loss is normal and healthy. And don't think it is only in year one after a death that can be challenging. The "weight" on the mobile is there forever. I know personally dates and events matter, and holidays in particular can be a significant challenge to a family mobile. Keep the "old traditions" or create new ones? Accept an invitation to attend a special event or make the decision to not attend, and how many invitations do you accept?

When we think of the "empty chair," it is not only during the holidays but also those special days each of us remembers. The birthday or anniversary gifts or cards we still have tucked in the top drawer. The toothbrush I am not ready to let go of yet. Giving birth and knowing the child's father never saw, touched or had a chance to spend time with their son or daughter. The "empty chair" is also when you are alone putting your child on the school bus or walking them to school on their first day. Attending without your loved one: ballet and dance recitals, plays, athletic events, reading books out loud, going camping in the woods, graduations and wedding ceremonies. Halloween, going hunting, or attending religious programs. These times are also the "empty chair." These are also the times the reduced "weight" on the mobile becomes heavier for a period of time. And like a storm, sometimes it shows up without warning.

Healthy grieving for family mobiles is like running a full or half marathon. I know from personal experience people do not finish a marathon when they only drink liquids at the finish line. They need nourishment at different locations throughout the race. There is strength in reaching out. Find your nourishment and reach for it, don't wait for it to find you. Take some risks. Give yourself permission to develop a "new normal" with your life and to create new traditions, if you choose. It is OK to live. Do not feel guilty for wanting to, or for feeling good once again. And if this year the "weight" feels overwhelming… reach out. The grief you are going through is different than anyone else's. People and mobiles do recover. "Empty chairs" will always be there, but take some chances and give yourself and your family permission to move forward with your lives.



Mobiles

Colorful objects that balance, generally pleasant to the eye, fun to play with, and can be broken if hit too hard. Some mobiles hang outdoors, some indoors, and some can be created in our minds. If we imagine a family mobile, we can see each member in a family making up the parts: parents, children, grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, friends and others. Each family and every mobile is unique, with family members or very close friends who have died continuing to be part of the mobile. Families who experience loss will not be the same again. Significant events that change individuals also change families.

"Empty chairs" **will always be there, but take some chances and give yourself and your family permission to move forward with your lives.**

The Gifts Love Leaves Behind

The holidays are filled with gifts. We wrap them in paper and ribbon. We place them beneath trees, carry them through airports, tuck them into boxes, and send them across the miles. We search for something that says, I know you. I remember you. You matter to me.

For those of us who are grieving, however, the season of giving can also illuminate what is missing.

There may be one less name on the gift list. One less stocking to fill. One familiar voice absent from the room. We may remember gifts exchanged in years past, traditions carefully kept, or the person who always seemed to know exactly what would make us smile.



And yet grief invites us to consider another kind of gift, one that cannot be wrapped at all.

It is the gift of who we became because someone lived and loved us.

The people we love leave much more behind than photographs and belongings. They leave traces of themselves within us. A sense of humor. Courage. Curiosity. Compassion. A devotion to family. A willingness to serve. A love of music, cooking, the outdoors, sports, faith, country, adventure, or simply gathering everyone around the table.

Sometimes those gifts were taught intentionally. Others entered our lives almost unnoticed.

Perhaps your loved one taught you to be generous because you watched them quietly help someone who was struggling. Perhaps they showed you perseverance by getting up every morning when life was difficult. Maybe they taught you how to laugh at yourself, how to welcome a stranger, how to fix something that was broken, how to stand up for what matters, or how to tell people you love them while you have the chance.

And perhaps the greatest gift was simply being loved by them.

When someone dies, it can seem for a time as though everything we shared with that person has ended. Grief can make the world feel divided into a before and an after. But love does not disappear at the moment of death. It changes form.

What was once exchanged between two people can begin moving outward into the world.

The patience your loved one gave you can become patience you offer someone else. Their kindness can become your kindness. Their service can inspire your service. The encouragement they once gave you may become the words you offer another grieving person who cannot yet imagine making it through tomorrow.

In this way, the gifts of a life continue to travel.

For many TAPS survivors, this happens through peer support. Someone who once arrived at TAPS carrying profound sorrow eventually finds themselves sitting beside a newly bereaved survivor and saying, in one way or another, I have been somewhere like this. You do not have to walk it alone.

That is an extraordinary gift.

It is the gift of who we became because ***someone lived and loved us.***



It does not mean the grief is finished. It does not mean we have "moved on" from the person we love. Quite the opposite. Often, helping another person becomes one of the ways we continue carrying our loved one forward.

We give because they gave to us.

We love because we were loved.

We serve because their life taught us something about what matters.

During the holidays, you might gently ask yourself: What gifts did my loved one bring into my life? What parts of them live within me now? Is there one of those gifts I might share with someone else?

There is no requirement that the answer be grand.

You might make a favorite recipe and tell someone whose recipe it was. You might donate in your loved one's memory, write a note of encouragement, invite someone who is alone to your table, volunteer for a cause they cared about, teach a child something your loved one once taught you, or tell a story that keeps their name present in the gathering.

You might simply offer another person the tenderness you once received.

And on a holiday when you have very little to give, that is all right too.

Grief has seasons of abundance and seasons when simply getting through the day requires everything we have. Receiving care is also part of love. Resting is part of healing. Allowing someone else to carry you for a while does not diminish the gifts within you.

There will be time.

One of the beautiful truths we discover in grief is that a life can continue to influence the world long after it has ended. Every time we carry forward something loving, generous, courageous, or joyful that came to us through the person who died, their life continues to ripple outward.

Perhaps that is one of the most meaningful gifts we can offer during this season.

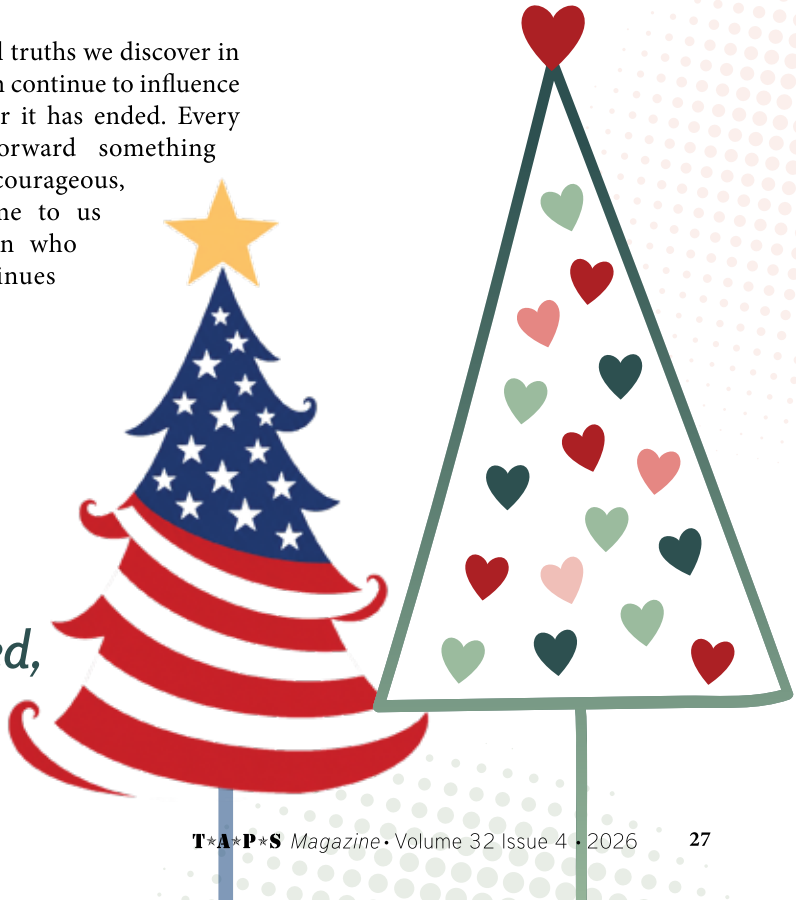
Not forgetting.

Not leaving our loved ones behind.

But taking what they gave us and placing it gently into the lives of others.

Because the love we received was never meant to end with us.

This holiday season, may we recognize the gifts our loved ones placed within us, and when we are ready, may we give those gifts away. In doing so, their love lives on.



Every time we carry forward something loving, generous, courageous, or joyful that came to us through the person who died, ***their life continues to ripple outward.***

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

Hope in a Holiday Cup



T★A★P★S TOGETHERS | Finding comfort, friendship, and a place at the table.

Inspired by Tatiana Oddson ★ TAPS Staff, Care Groups & TAPS Togethers; Surviving Mother of A1C Alfred V. Komlev, USAF

When the Starbucks barista asks for a name for my drink order, I often give Alfred's.

Then, when my drink is ready, they call out, "Alfred!"

Every time I hear my son's name, it makes me smile. For just a moment, he is right there with me, enjoying his pumpkin spice.

There is something precious about hearing a name you love spoken aloud in the ordinary rhythm of a day. The people we miss still belong in our conversations, our families, and our hearts.

A name on a coffee cup holds a lifetime of love.

★ Little Warmth for the Season

The tastes and smells of the holidays often bring back memories. There's something about holding a warm cup between your hands that offers a quiet invitation to pause and embrace the moment. For some of us, that moment may bring gratitude and fond memories of our loved ones. For others, it may ask more of our hearts than anyone will ever know. For those of us navigating the holidays while missing our loved ones, this beautiful season can bring a new set of emotions. Feelings of loneliness and heartache may now coexist with unpacking holiday decorations that have historically brought so much joy and laughter.

Whether this is your first holiday season without someone you love or you have

established traditions to honor your loved one each year, we warmly invite you to join your TAPS family in your local community to connect and enjoy a cup of holiday warmth with others.

The Comfort of Being Understood

At our Starbucks TAPS Togethers, survivors of all manners of loss and with all relationships to their loved ones come together. At these local gatherings, you can share a memory, listen to someone else's story, or stay quiet without having to explain your silence.

At these TAPS Togethers, survivors connect over their favorite coffee or tea and share conversations about holiday plans or their loved one's favorite coffee order that was complicated enough to require its own briefing! Laughter may take you by surprise, or tears may fall. Both are always welcome.

As we get to know each other, we also get to know the loved ones we remember. Their names become familiar. Their stories become part of our friendships. There is comfort in knowing that someone else will remember them too.

A Place at the Friendsgiving Table

TAPS Friendsgiving gatherings extend the tradition of holiday celebrations through a shared meal with your TAPS family.

As traditional holiday family gatherings draw near, you may be asked about your plans or invited to join another family. When you are missing someone at your own table, accepting an invitation to someone else's can take courage.

Your TAPS family understands the courage it takes to show up for a Friendsgiving gathering. We would love to welcome you to enjoy some company during the holidays, share a family tradition, or join a lively debate about pumpkin versus pecan pie. You can simply show up or bring your signature dish or one that was your loved one's favorite to share.

Thanksgiving is often marked by gratitude. If gratitude feels difficult, there is no need to force it. We do not have to be thankful for what happened. We can wish with all our hearts that someone was still here and appreciate the kindness of the people passing us a plate.



A Familiar Name, a Little Joy

"Whenever they ask for a name for my drink order,
I often give them Alfred's name.
Then, when my drink is ready, they call out, 'Alfred!'

It may seem like such a small thing, but every time
I hear his name, it makes me smile. For just a moment,
he is right there with me, enjoying his pumpkin spice."

Carrying Love into Another Season

As Christmas draws near, familiar traditions may bring difficult decisions. Give yourself permission to choose what feels possible. You can choose to decorate the house, only hang one meaningful ornament, or leave the boxes in storage.

No cup of coffee or shared meal can take away the ache of missing someone. But connecting with others who understand can give us a place to speak their name, share the weight of a difficult day, and discover moments of warmth we might have missed alone.

If joining a gathering feels beyond your reach this year, a caring heart is always available through the TAPS National Military Survivor Helpline. You can take your time.

Whenever you are ready, there is room for you, your memories, and the love you carry.

We will save you a seat.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

Healing Happens in Community

TAPS Togethers & Care Groups

At TAPS, healing happens when survivors come together. Through TAPS Togethers and Care Groups, grieving military and veteran families find connection, understanding, and support in the company of others who truly understand the journey.









PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

TAPS Togethers

TAPS Togethers bring survivors together in communities across the country for meaningful connection, shared experiences, and time to remember and honor their loved ones. Whether gathering for coffee, conversation, an activity, or a special event, TAPS Togethers offer a welcoming place to build friendships and find hope.

Care Groups

TAPS Care Groups provide a safe and compassionate space for survivors to share openly, listen, learn, and heal together. These supportive groups help participants navigate grief, gain practical tools, and experience the strength that comes from being seen, heard, and understood.

Through TAPS Togethers & Care Groups, survivors experience:

- ⋆ Connection with others who understand
- ⋆ A safe place to share and heal
- ⋆ Comfort, encouragement, and hope
- ⋆ Opportunity to honor loved ones
- ⋆ Ongoing community and support

Together, we find comfort, community, and renewed hope.

Learn more at TAPS.org ⋆ 24/7 Survivor Helpline: 800-959-TAPS(8277)

COMMUNITY & CONNECTIONS

We know the needs of a grieving heart are not universal; that is why we offer a variety of online and in-person events. No matter how you connect with TAPS, you'll find the supportive community you seek.

UPCOMING EVENTS

TAPS events, like those listed on the following page, offer opportunities for healing and personal growth. Be sure to check **TAPS.org/Events** often; events are added throughout the year.

›› TAPS.org/events







PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; PEXELS.COM/ROXANNE-MINNISH



MANY WAYS TO CONNECT

TAPS CARE GROUPS

Experience the comfort of TAPS in your local community. Recurring meetings happen year-round across the country. Join a peer-led group near you for an opportunity to listen, learn, and share.

›› TAPS.org/caregroups

TAPS ONLINE GROUPS

Access TAPS peer support wherever you are. Groups are organized by relationship to the fallen, cause of death, and peer group. Attend one or multiple groups that fit your needs and your schedule.

›› TAPS.org/onlinegroups

TAPS TOGETHERS

Meet up with survivors in your local community for a one-day event hosted by a TAPS staff member or survivor, like you. Grow your community of support while sipping coffee or experiencing something new.

›› TAPS.org/tapstogethers

IN-PERSON & ONLINE WORKSHOPS

Learn, grow, and heal through our in-person and online courses and workshops. Attend Peer Mentor training, engage in a Theatre Lab session, or pursue growth through the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® – all that and more are at your fingertips when you're ready.

›› TAPS.org/workshops

202-588-TAPS(8277) ★ TAPS.org

TAPS is the national nonprofit organization providing compassionate care and comprehensive resources to all those grieving a death in the military or veteran community.

»TAPS.org/Donate

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Light and Love this Season



This holiday season, let love shine a little brighter.

TAPS invites everyone in our community to light a virtual candle in loving memory of someone who will always hold a place in your heart. Together, these candles create a beautiful tribute to the lives and legacies of those we love and miss, reminding us that even in our darkest moments, our love shines bright.

With each candle lit and every gift made, you help TAPS bring comfort, connection, and compassionate care to our grieving military and veteran families, day and night, throughout the year.

Light a candle. Honor a life. Share the love. Keep hope shining.

Scan the QR code below or visit *TAPS.org/Light* to make your gift and light your candle.

Honor your loved one today.