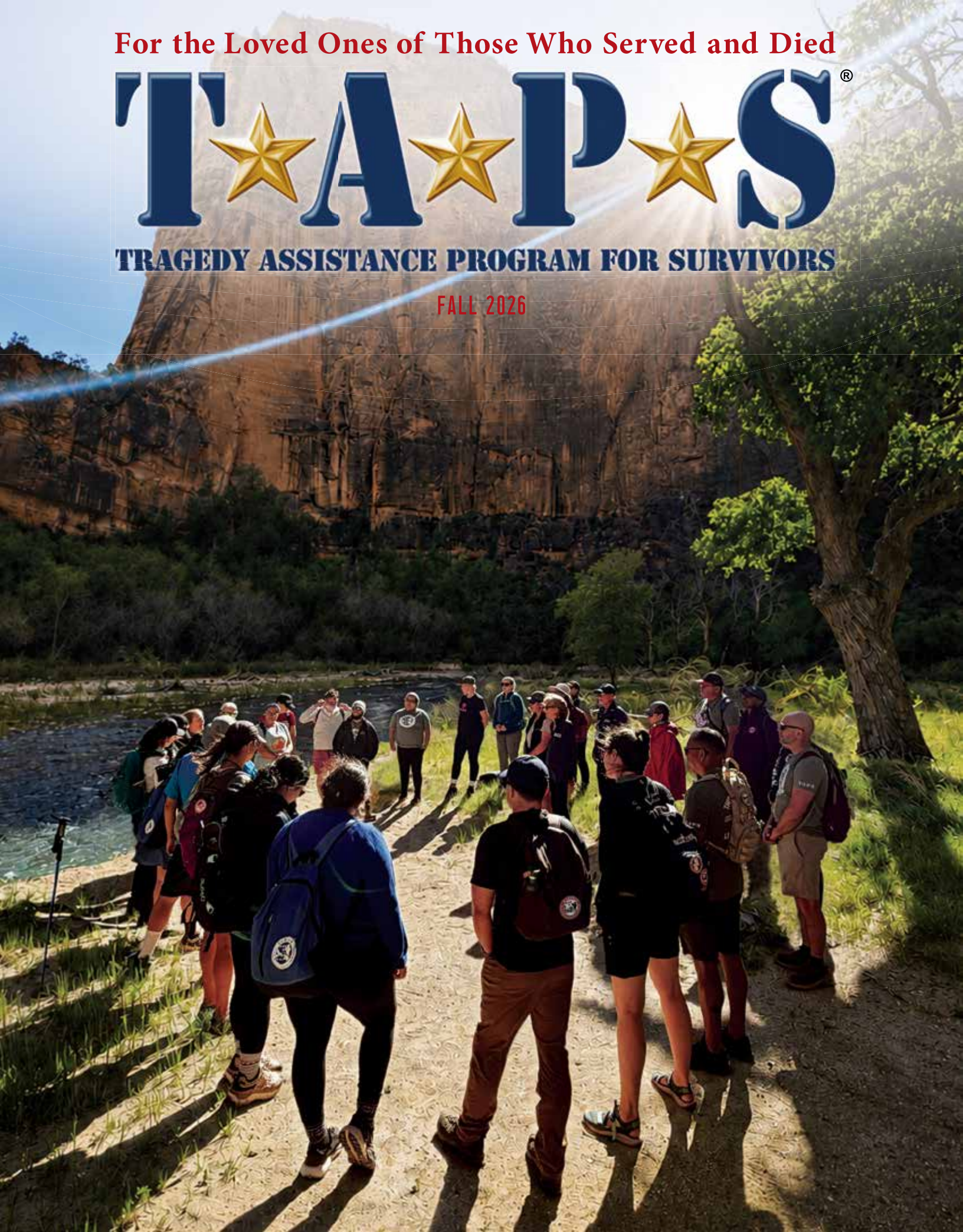


For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

TAPS®

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

FALL 2026





Death is nothing at all.
I have only slipped away to the next room.
I am I and you are you.
Whatever we were to each other,
That, we still are.

Call me by my old familiar name.
Speak to me in the easy way
which you always used.
Put no difference into your tone.
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow.

Laugh as we always laughed
at the little jokes we enjoyed together.
Play, smile, think of me. Pray for me.
Let my name be ever the household word
that it always was.
Let it be spoken without effect.
Without the trace of a shadow on it.

Life means all that it ever meant.
It is the same that it ever was.
There is absolute unbroken continuity.
Why should I be out of mind
because I am out of sight?

I am but waiting for you.
For an interval.
Somewhere. Very near.
Just around the corner.

All is well.

*Based on a sermon given at St. Paul's Cathedral
following the death of King Edward VII*



3101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 600
Arlington, VA 22201

President and Founder: Bonnie Carroll
Art Director: Jennifer Bonney

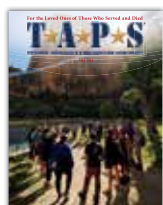
CONNECT WITH US
24 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK
202-588-TAPS (8277)
taps.org/info@taps.org

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 Together

* For full descriptions, see pages 20-21.



ON THE COVER: TAPS families experience the breathtaking beauty of Zion National Park, finding connection, hope, and healing along the Virgin River during the closing ceremony of the TAPS Adventure Retreat.

PHOTO: LISA WELCH

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.

TAPS MAGAZINE VOLUME 32, ISSUE 3

TAPS Magazine is published quarterly by the TAPS, 3101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 600, Arlington, VA 22201. Copyright© 2026 by TAPS, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited without authorization. All articles appearing in TAPS Magazine, unless copyrighted by others, remain copyrighted materials of TAPS.

TAPS IS A TOP-RATED NONPROFIT CHARITY

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.



and **TAPS** are registered U.S. Trademarks. All rights reserved. | TAX ID# 92-0152268

Please send subscription requests and address changes to info@taps.org.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

7 DEAR TAPS

Gratitude and comfort from survivors like you

8 CARRYING LOVE FORWARD

General Mahoney reminds us that love does not end

11 BUFFALO COMES TOGETHER WITH TAPS AND NEW ERA CAP

TAPS and New Era Cap come together for the TAPS Northeast Regional Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp

12 HOLDING THE HAND OF THOSE NEWER TO GRIEF

Laurie Laychak's journey from loss to helping others find hope through TAPS Peer Mentorship

14 A WALL OF POPPIES. A FATHERS LOVE. A PROMISE THAT LIVES ON.

Memorial Day is never just one day

16 THE PERMISSION I NEEDED MOST

Giving myself permission to grieve, ask for help, and be human

18 THE CHILDREN WHO GREW UP TOGETHER: FINDING OUR WAY HOME

Community can help you find your way home

20 PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Wherever you are in your grief journey, TAPS is here



22 A LEGACY HONORED ON FOOTBALL'S BIGGEST STAGE

A new sport brings joy, connection, and a wellbeing meaningful tribute to Corporal Jesse Leon-Alfaro

24 NATURE HEALS

Discover how nature can ease stress, support wellbeing, and bring comfort during grief

27 PAIN

Letting love, not guilt, shape the pain of loss

28 JESSE TUBB: STILL SOUNDING THE CALL

From sounding Taps at Arlington to supporting survivors, Jesse continues to honor the fallen

30 GROWING UP TAPS: BACK TO SCHOOL AFTER LOSS

Helping children and teens navigate a new school year with understanding, confidence, and support—while making space for grief, new challenges, and the memories they carry with them.

32 A NEW GAME, A LASTING LEGACY

A special Fourth of July filled with rugby, joy, and remembrance brings a TAPS family together to honor the life and legacy of Corporal Jesse Leon-Alfaro.

34 UPCOMING EVENTS

Join your TAPS Family for connection, community, and meaningful experiences throughout the year



To Our TAPS Family,

As autumn settles in, we find ourselves in a season of reflection, change, and remembrance. The days grow shorter, the air turns cooler, and many of us feel the quiet pull of memories that come with this time of year. For our TAPS Family, every season carries the love of those we hold close in our hearts.

This fall, I am reminded again of the strength and tenderness of our community. Across the country and around the world, surviving families continue to find one another through TAPS, whether at a seminar, around a campfire, in a Care Group, through a TAPS Together, or in a simple phone call with someone who understands. These connections matter. They remind us that grief does not have to be carried alone.

As our nation continues to reflect on service, sacrifice, and the 250th anniversary of America's independence, we know these ideals are deeply personal. Freedom is not an abstract word to our families. It is lived in love, in loss, and in the legacies of the brave men and women whose service shaped our lives forever.

In this issue of TAPS Magazine, I hope you find stories that comfort you, inspire you, and remind you of the enduring bonds we share. Wherever you are in your grief journey, whether your loss is recent or many years have passed, please know there is a place for you here.

This fall, I encourage you to reach for connection in whatever way feels right. Join a TAPS event, call a peer, attend a Care Group, explore the Institute for Hope and Healing, or simply call our 24/7 Helpline at 202-588-TAPS (8277). We are here, now and always.

With love and care,

Bonnie Carroll,
TAPS President and Founder



PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES



Dear TAPS

Every letter, every phone call, and every shared story reminds us why connection matters. We are honored to share these words from members of the TAPS family.



Compassion That Makes a Difference

“Thank you all so much for your support. I received the card from TAPS and cried, I was so touched that what a special group you are and the emotional support I received because of losing my boyfriend (Walter). On 7/11 it will be a year he's gone. I want to thank all the special women who answer the phone that I have talked to. Each one of them is special in their own way and they have helped me every time. It's so much easier talking to them because they have been in my shoes so they understand what I feel, I thank all of them. They are all my angels and I appreciate them all. Thank you all so very much again for your love and support. You are all awesome!!”

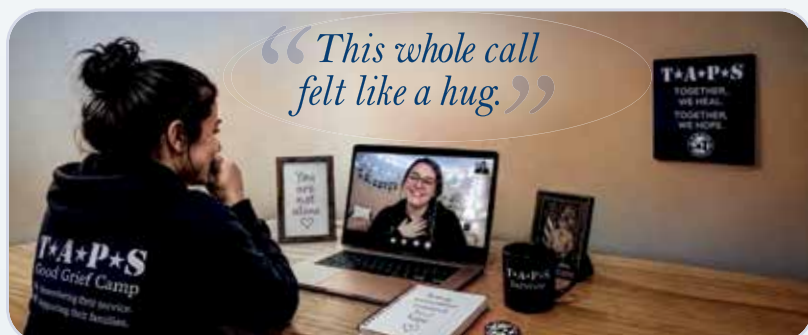
Julie Molesse ★ Surviving girlfriend of Walter



Finding Comfort, One Page at a Time

“I am writing to you today to let you know that I just finished reading the latest TAPS Magazine cover to cover. It was by far one of the best editions I have read in many, many years. Thank you for producing such an outstanding helpful magazine.”

Susan Thraen ★ Surviving Spouse LTC Michael Thraen



The Heart of the TAPS Helpline

“God bless you! I am so glad that I called. You made my day, and yes, you are my family. Thank you!”

“I've always been there for everyone else. After I lost my husband, I needed someone to be there for me. TAPS held me up when I needed it the most. Thank you for all you do!”

“I appreciate you being comfortable with my uncomfortableness. I do feel better.”

“I just want to thank TAPS for always being there for me, reaching out, and never forgetting about me. I've truly enjoyed every webinar I've attended, and I wanted to make sure I shared how much I appreciate everything you do.”

“I feel like this phone call has been more helpful than the last year of therapy.”

“I want to thank TAPS for always being there when no one else is. I can always count on your answering the phone when I need to talk.”



Share your own TAPS experience.

Email Editor@TAPS.org with “Dear TAPS” in the subject line.

Carrying Love Forward

General Mahoney reminds TAPS families that love does not end — it continues through every story, every name, and every act of showing up.

At the TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp, there are moments when the room itself seems to hold a heartbeat. Around the tables are surviving spouses, parents, children, siblings, battle buddies, and friends — each carrying a story, a name, and a love that did not end with death.

At the Survivors Grand Banquet on May 23, General Christopher J. “Chris” Mahoney, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stepped into that sacred space not simply as one of our nation’s senior military leaders, but as someone deeply moved by the courage, grace, and love of the TAPS family. His remarks spoke directly to survivors with honesty, tenderness, and a message that reached the heart of the TAPS mission: we do not have to walk this journey alone.

From the beginning, General Mahoney made clear that what he felt in the room was not formality — it was family.

“It is an honor to be a part of the energy in this room,” he said. “It is an honor to be a part of the TAPS community, which I’ve seen after a few events, is truly a family.”

“*It is an honor to be a part of the TAPS community, which is truly a family.*”

That is what remembrance does. It brings love into the present.

For survivors, those words matter. Many arrive at TAPS after the world has changed in an instant. They come carrying the weight of a folded flag, a final phone call, an unanswered question, a birthday that still belongs on the calendar, or a name that deserves to be spoken again and again. At TAPS, they find others who understand without explanation. They find a place where grief is not rushed, love is not diminished, and remembrance is not confined to one day of the year.

Before speaking at the banquet, General Mahoney visited the children at Good Grief Camp. With humor and affection, he described the energy of the young survivors upstairs, joking that scientists trying to discover fusion energy needed only to visit them. Beneath the laughter was something deeper: a recognition that even in grief, children carry light, spirit, and possibility. At Good Grief Camp, they are surrounded by mentors, fellow surviving children, and caring adults who help them know they are not alone in their loss.

General Mahoney also visited the Wall of Remembrance, where photographs and messages honor the lives of fallen service members and veterans. He shared that the moment nearly brought him to tears.

What moved him was not only the photographs, but the love written into the notes beside them. He said he saw “a real and true and strong connection” between the people who wrote those messages and the loved ones pictured on the wall. “It came alive,” he said. “The wall came alive.”

That is what remembrance does. It brings love into the present. A picture becomes a voice. A handwritten note becomes a bridge. A name becomes a promise: you are remembered, you are honored, and your story continues.



in photos tucked into wallets, in traditions kept alive, in songs that still bring tears, in laughter that returns unexpectedly, and in the courage to say a name out loud.

General Mahoney named this truth with words that reflect the heart of TAPS:

TAPS does not ask you to move on. TAPS helps you move forward.

Speaking directly to survivors, General Mahoney did not offer easy answers or empty comfort. Instead, he offered truth — the kind survivors recognize because they live it.

“I will not tell you that ‘time heals all wounds,’” he said. “It don’t.” He also rejected the phrase “everything happens for a reason,” acknowledging how painful such words can be when spoken into another person’s tragedy. And he made one thing unmistakably clear: no one should tell a survivor to “get over it.”

“We are not here to celebrate anyone ‘getting over’ anything,” he said. “You do not get over a love that’s miles deep. And you do not get over a life that shaped yours.”

For those who grieve, these words can feel like an exhale. Because the truth is, love that deep is not something to be overcome. It is something to be carried. It is carried in stories told at dinner tables,

There is a world of difference between the two. Moving on can sound like leaving someone behind. Moving forward means bringing their love, lessons, humor, courage, and memory with us into each new day. It means allowing grief and love to coexist. It means understanding that healing is not forgetting. It means knowing that a life can continue to shape us long after death.

Again and again, General Mahoney returned to one of the most important promises within the TAPS family:

we show up.



*We will say their names.
We will tell their stories.
We will support their families.
And, we will keep showing up.*



That message is a gift to anyone who has wondered whether joy is allowed after loss. Laughter does not mean love has faded. A smile does not dishonor grief. A new memory does not erase an old one. In the TAPS family, survivors learn from one another that love can make room for tears and laughter, sorrow and hope, remembrance and renewal.

General Mahoney described this strength as contagious. The family that once arrived broken becomes the family waiting at the door for someone else. The child who once needed a mentor becomes the mentor. The survivor who once wondered how to make it through the night becomes the person who helps someone else survive theirs.

*"That is not getting over loss," he said.
That is love carried forward.*



He also reminded families that every loss within TAPS is honored. Combat, training, illness, suicide, and invisible wounds of war all leave grief in their wake. TAPS does not ask survivors to prove that their grief belongs. Instead, as General Mahoney said, this community opens the door "with compassion, not judgment."

Because TAPS is not defined by how our loved ones died. It is defined by how they lived, the love they gave, and the lives they continue to shape.

As he closed, General Mahoney returned to the promise at the center of this community: *"We will say their names. We will tell their stories. We will support their families. And, we will keep showing up."*

For every survivor reading these words, may that promise bring comfort. Your love is not something you must set down. Your grief does not make you weak. Your laughter is not betrayal. Your loved one's story is not over.

Together, we carry them forward.

"When the casseroles stop, you show up," he said. "When the weight comes back without warning, you show up."

And when someone is facing the shattered pieces of life after loss, he said, "the TAPS family shows up there, too."

For survivors, showing up is sacred work. It may look like answering a late-night text, sitting beside someone in silence, remembering an anniversary, mentoring a grieving child, or welcoming a newly bereaved family through the doors for the first time. It may look like sharing tears over coffee, walking together through

Arlington, or saying, "I understand," and truly meaning it.

General Mahoney also spoke to the way grief and strength live side by side. People often tell survivors, "You're so strong." As he noted, those words are usually offered with kindness, but they can sometimes miss the truth of what strength really is.

"Strength is not the absence of grief," he said. "Strength is saying their name, out loud, without apology. Strength is laughing again, and realizing that laughter is not a betrayal but a continuation of spirit."



& TAPS

Buffalo,
New York!

Join Your TAPS Family *in Buffalo*

Together, TAPS and NEW ERA CAP FOUNDATION honor our fallen heroes by caring for the families who live their legacies.

**Northeast Regional Military Survivor Seminar
and Good Grief Camp — Buffalo, New York**
NOVEMBER 20 – 22, 2026

TAPS is proud to join with New Era Cap Foundation to welcome surviving military families for a weekend filled with connection, remembrance, hope, and healing.

Join us for a weekend filled with:

- ★ Caring connections with fellow survivors who understand
- ★ Comfort, hope, and healing for adults, children, and teens
- ★ Good Grief Camp experiences created especially for our youngest survivors
- ★ Meaningful opportunities to honor and remember your military or veteran loved one
- ★ The strength and friendship of the TAPS community



Scan the QR code to learn more and register for the Northeast Regional Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp.

» TAPS.org/events/2026/seminar-northeast

We are deeply grateful to New Era Cap Foundation for standing alongside TAPS and the families of America's fallen heroes. Their partnership makes it possible for survivors to come together in Buffalo, build lasting connections, share the stories of those they love, and experience the extraordinary power of community.

We invite you, to be part of this special weekend.
Come to Buffalo, bring the story of your loved one,
and join a community ready to welcome you.





HOLDING THE HAND OF THOSE NEWER TO GRIEF

LAURIE LAYCHAK
TAPS PEER MENTOR OF THE YEAR

When Laurie Laychak was recognized as TAPS Peer Mentor of the Year, she accepted the honor with the humility and heart that have defined her years of service to the TAPS family.

“It is truly an honor to be among such incredible, selfless people,” she shared. “It means so much to be recognized; however, I have to say that accolades are not the reason I serve with TAPS. I serve to help ease the suffering of my fellow grievers.”

In that simple sentence, Laurie captured the sacred heart of peer mentorship.

Peer Mentors do not serve because grief has become easy. They serve because they remember when it was impossible. They

remember the shock, the devastation, the questions, the loneliness, and the ache of trying to take the next breath when the world has been shattered. They serve because, somewhere along their own journey, someone reached for them — and now they are able to reach back.

Laurie’s own journey began on September 11, 2001, when her husband was killed at the Pentagon. She was in her late thirties. Her son was nine years old, and her daughter was seven. In a single day, their lives were forever changed.

Nearly 25 years later, Laurie still remembers the devastation clearly. That is the nature of profound loss. Time may pass, children may grow, families may change, and life may continue — but love

remains. So do the memories. So does the sacred place held by the person who died.

Like so many survivors, Laurie did the hard and courageous work of learning how to live with grief. Over the years, she spent countless hours in therapy, attended support groups, took classes, pursued grief certification programs, and sought every opportunity to better understand what she was experiencing. Her healing did not come from avoiding grief, but from walking through it with honesty, care, support, and time.

Eventually, Laurie found herself in a place where she could help others.

“Over time,” she said, “I became ready to hold the hand of others newer to their grief.”

I serve to help ease the suffering of my fellow grievers.

That is one of the most beautiful descriptions of a Peer Mentor’s calling. Peer Mentorship is not about having perfect words or all the answers. It is about

*A Peer Mentor's greatest gift is not expertise alone.
It is the courage to say, "I remember. I understand. I am here."*

presence. It is about sitting beside someone in the early devastation and letting them know, gently and truthfully, "I understand. I have been there. You are not alone."

Laurie knows what it feels like to be in the depths of despair. She knows the kind of pain that makes it hard to imagine getting through the next breath, much less the next day, week, or month. She does not minimize that pain. She does not rush it. She does not offer easy answers. Instead, she offers something far more powerful: earned hope.

Earned hope is different from simple optimism. It is not the promise that everything will be fine or that grief will disappear. Earned hope comes from someone who has lived through the unimaginable and can say, with tenderness and truth, "The intensity of this pain can soften. You will not always feel exactly as you feel in this moment. I will walk with you while you find your way."

For a newly grieving survivor, that kind of hope can be a lifeline.

Laurie says what helped her most was being surrounded by others who were walking the same treacherous path. That is what eventually led her to begin volunteering with TAPS 17 years ago. She wanted to walk beside others as they navigated the maze of emotions she had faced years before.

That is what Peer Mentors do every day across the TAPS family. They meet survivors where they are. They listen without judgment. They honor each

person's grief, each loved one's life, and each family's unique path forward. They understand that grief is not something to be fixed, but something to be carried with love, support, and community.

They also remind us that no survivor should have to walk alone.

This is the gift Laurie has offered for nearly two decades. Through her compassion, wisdom, and willingness to accompany others in pain, she has helped newly bereaved survivors feel less alone in their darkest moments. Her service is a reminder that grief, when held in community, can become a bridge from one heart to another.

And for current and future Peer Mentors, Laurie's example offers a powerful invitation.

You do not have to be perfect to serve. You do not have to have every answer. You do not have to be untouched by grief. In fact, it is often your own tenderness, your own memory of those early days, and your own willingness to be present that make your support so meaningful.

A Peer Mentor's greatest gift is not expertise alone. It is the courage to say, "I remember. I understand. I am here."

At TAPS, we are part of a family that understands a pain others can scarcely

imagine. We come together not because any of us would have chosen this path, but because love has connected us in the aftermath of loss. Through that connection, we find strength. Through service, we find purpose. Through one another, we find hope.

Laurie Laychak's recognition as Peer Mentor of the Year honors far more than one person's service. It honors the spirit of every TAPS Peer Mentor who answers the call to walk beside another survivor. It honors those who turn their own grief into compassion, their own pain into presence, and their own healing into hope for someone just beginning the journey.

Thank you, Laurie, for reminding us what it means to serve with humility, love, and an open heart.

And thank you to every Peer Mentor who helps fellow grievers know: we are here, we understand, and we are with you.



USAA POPPY WALL OF HONOR



NATIONAL MALL

A WALL OF POPPIES. A FATHER'S LOVE. A PROMISE THAT LIVES ON.

For those of us in the TAPS family, Memorial Day is never just one day.

It is every birthday celebrated without someone we love. Every graduation where an empty chair is quietly felt. Every holiday, every milestone, every ordinary moment when we wish we could hear one more laugh, receive one more hug, or simply say, "I miss you."

Each Memorial Day, however, our nation pauses to remember alongside us. This year, USAA's Poppy Wall of Honor once again transformed the National Mall into a sea of more than 600,000 red poppies, each representing an American service member who gave their life in service to our country since World War I.

This year, USAA honored one of those families by sharing the story of TAPS surviving spouse Michelle Taylor and her son, Jake, remembering the life and legacy of Army Major David G. Taylor Jr., who was killed on October 22, 2006, while serving in Baghdad.

David left behind Michelle and a tiny baby boy just 13 days old.

Before he deployed, David began writing a journal for Jake. It was a father's gift to the son he knew he might not be there to raise. Within its pages, he shared his hopes, his wisdom, his values, and above all, his love.

It is a breathtaking sight.

But what touches our hearts most is what each poppy represents.

- A beloved son or daughter.
- A husband or wife.
- A mother or father.
- A battle buddy.
- A family whose love did not end when their hero's life did.



"Saying goodbye to his 13-day-old son was the hardest thing Army MAJ David Taylor ever did." - USAA

Yet David's love did not end with that goodbye.

It continues in every page of that journal.

It lives in the stories Michelle has lovingly shared with Jake through the years.

It lives in the man Jake has become.

For many of us, that story feels familiar.

Our loved ones are no longer here to make new memories with us, yet their love continues to shape who we are. Their values become our compass. Their laughter echoes in family stories. Their kindness lives on in the way we care for others. Their legacy continues through us.

Michelle and Jake found TAPS soon after David's death. Like so many families, they discovered a community that understood the language of military grief without explanation. They found people who could sit beside them in sorrow, celebrate victories, remember anniversaries, and gently remind them that they would never have to carry this journey alone.



JAKE & MICHELLE REMEMBER DAVID
AT THE USAA POPPY WALL OF HONOR



JAKE & MICHELLE AT THE USAA POPPY WALL



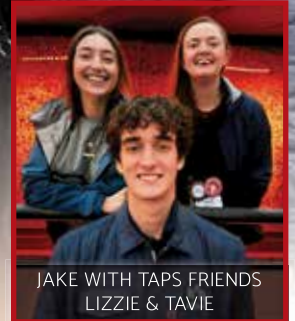
WITH USAA CEO JUAN ANDRADE



MICHELLE & JAKE REFLECT ON DAVID'S STORY



HUG FROM LIZZIE, JAKE'S FRIEND FROM TAPS



JAKE WITH TAPS FRIENDS LIZZIE & TAVIE

DAVE'S ROTC CLASSMATES FROM DAVIDSON WITH SGT. MAJ. KEITH LONG WHO GAVE US A SPECIAL TOUR. HE SERVED FOR MORE THAN THREE DECADES IN THE MARINES AND NOW WORKS FOR USAA.

Jake grew up in TAPS.

He attended Good Grief Camp alongside other children whose hearts had also been broken by military loss. He laughed, cried, remembered his father, built lifelong friendships, and discovered that while grief becomes part of our lives, it does not have to define our future.

Today, Jake serves as a TAPS Legacy Mentor, walking beside newly bereaved children and teens with compassion born from his own experience. The little boy whose father wrote him a journal is now helping another generation of surviving children discover hope. *What a beautiful reflection of love that continues across generations.*

That is why the USAA Poppy Wall matters so deeply.

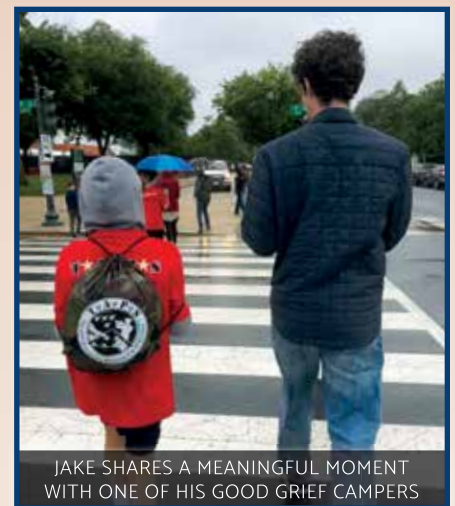
It reminds our nation that behind every poppy is not only a fallen hero, but also a family whose story continues. A family learning to carry both grief and gratitude. A family discovering that love never dies.

We are profoundly grateful to USAA for faithfully standing beside surviving military families and helping millions of Americans see beyond the symbol to the lives forever connected to it. Their partnership helps ensure that our loved ones are remembered not only for how they died, but for how they lived, how they loved, and how their legacy continues through those they cherished most.

*Behind every poppy is a hero.
Behind every hero is enduring love.
Behind every story stands a
TAPS family that remembers
together, *heals* together, and carries
every legacy forward with hope.*

**To every member of our
TAPS family, we hope
you know this:**

- ★ Your loved one is remembered.
 - ★ Their life mattered.
 - ★ Their story continues.
- ★ And you will always have a place in this family.



JAKE SHARES A MEANINGFUL MOMENT WITH ONE OF HIS GOOD GRIEF CAMPERS

That is what TAPS is all about

- ★ We cannot change what happened.
- ★ We cannot erase the ache of missing someone we love.
- ★ But together, we can make sure no survivor has to walk this road alone.
- ★ Every time one survivor reaches out to another...
- ★ Every time a child finds a friend who understands...

*Every time a story is shared,
a name is spoken, or a memory
is cherished... *Love continues.**



THE PERMISSION I NEEDED MOST

Jennifer Ballou ★ Surviving spouse of Staff Sergeant Edwardo “Eddie” Loredó

When my husband died, grief felt like a tight chest. I remember wondering if I would ever take a full breath again.

Everything familiar had changed in an instant, yet life kept moving forward. There were children to care for, decisions to make, and responsibilities that could not be put on hold.

What surprised me most was not the grief itself. It was how quickly I felt pressure to be strong.

The pressure wasn't coming from just one place. Some of it came from me. Some of it came from the expectations I felt as a mother, a soldier, and a leader. I was accustomed to being the person others could count on. Admitting that I was struggling felt harder than simply carrying the weight.

I wanted my children to feel safe. I wanted them to know we would be okay. The truth was, I wasn't sure of that myself.

Looking back, I can see that I was carrying an expectation that I needed to have answers I simply didn't have. I thought strength meant knowing what came next. I thought moving forward meant holding everything together.

The truth is, I had no idea what came next.

I didn't know what my life would look like in a year. I didn't know how I would navigate raising my children without Eddie. I didn't know how to carry my grief while helping them carry theirs. I didn't know how to rebuild a future I had never imagined living.

What I needed most was not a plan.

I needed permission.

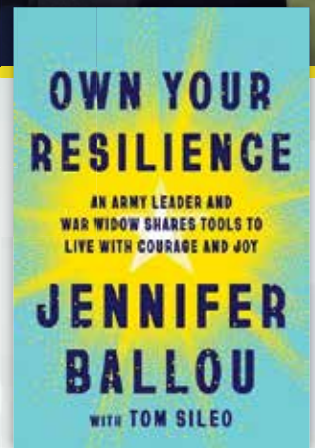
Permission to not have all the answers.

Permission to stop pretending I was stronger than I felt.

The permission I needed most was permission to be human.

Most of all, permission to feel what I was feeling instead of trying to push it away.

At the time, I didn't understand how important that was. Like many people, I thought strength meant holding things together. I thought if I stayed busy enough, I might somehow stay ahead of the grief.



About the Author

Jennifer Ballou is a retired U.S. Army Master Sergeant, Certified Yoga Therapist, and resilience coach. She is the surviving spouse of Staff Sergeant Edwardo “Eddie” Loredó, and author of the forthcoming book *Own Your Resilience: An Army Leader and War Widow Shares Tools to Live with Courage and Joy* (St. Martin's Press, November 2026). Learn more at JenniferBallou.com.

It didn't work.

Grief has a way of demanding our attention.

The more I tried to push my feelings down, the heavier they became. The more I tried to carry everything on my own, the more exhausted I felt.

There was another challenge I didn't anticipate. From the days immediately after Eddie's death, through the journey home, his funeral, and the months that followed, people often told me how strong I was.

I know those words came from a place of kindness and respect. But each time I heard them, I felt myself tighten a little more.

The truth was, I didn't feel strong.

I felt heartbroken. I felt overwhelmed. I felt uncertain about the future and exhausted from trying to hold everything together.

When people saw strength, I worried they couldn't see how much I was hurting. And if everyone believed I was strong, I wasn't sure there was room to ask for help.

What helped me most was not finding the right answers. It was finding people who were willing to sit with me in the questions.

The people who helped me most were rarely the ones with the perfect words. In fact, some days even the most well-intentioned words could sting. Grief made me more sensitive than I had ever been before, and there were times when I felt misunderstood or alone.

What helped were the people who stayed.

The people who checked in after the calls, cards, and casseroles had stopped.

The people who didn't have the perfect words but showed up anyway.

The people who believed in me when I could not yet believe in myself.

The moments that helped me most were rarely the big ones. They were the quiet reminders that I was not alone and the conversations that allowed me to be honest.

Years later, I would come to understand that many of the lessons I wrote about in my book began during those early days of loss, long before I had language for them. Self-awareness helped me recognize the pressure I was placing on myself. Openness allowed me to receive support from others.

Gratitude looked different than I expected. It wasn't about ignoring what I had lost. It was about recognizing what remained: the friend who called months later, the people who checked in long after the initial shock had passed, and those who have continued showing up over the years. Their presence reminded me that even in grief, I was not alone.

None of these lessons erased my grief. They simply helped me carry it differently.

For a long time, I felt guilty whenever I experienced moments of happiness. I worried that laughter meant I wasn't grieving enough. I worried that moving forward somehow meant leaving Eddie behind.

What I slowly learned was that grief and joy are not opposites.

I could miss him deeply and still laugh with my children.

I could carry sadness and still notice beauty.

I could honor what I had lost and remain open to what life was still offering.

While every loss is different, I have learned that many of us carry similar questions, fears, and uncertainties in the aftermath. We wonder how we will move forward. We wonder if we are grieving the "right" way. We wonder if life will ever feel familiar again.

If you are newly grieving, please know that you do not need to have all the answers.

You do not need to know what your life will look like a year from now.

You do not need to be strong all the time.

The permission I needed most was permission to be human.



JENNIFER, EDDIE AND THEIR NEW BORN SON.



HOMECOMING AFTER DEPLOYMENT

The moments that helped me most were rarely the big ones. They were the quiet reminders that I was not alone and the conversations that allowed me to be honest.

My hope is that you will offer yourself that same grace.

Take the next breath.

Accept the helping hand.

Allow people to walk beside you.

Trust that even if you cannot see the path ahead today, you do not have to walk it alone.

And when the future feels overwhelming, remember that sometimes the bravest thing we can do is simply take the next breath.

THE CHILDREN WHO GREW UP TOGETHER:

FINDING OUR WAY HOME

Mark Paine Fisher ★ Son of Capt. Robert T. Paine, USAF

I was five years old when my father died. Capt. Robert T. Paine, United States Air Force, was killed in a plane crash on December 29, 1966. At five, you do not understand death. You understand absence. You understand the empty chair. You understand that a voice you loved has disappeared from the house.

One of my clearest memories of my father is beautifully ordinary: he taught me how to tie my shoes.

I did not know it would be one of the last lessons he would ever teach me. There was no goodbye I could hold onto, no final conversation, no moment when someone explained that the shape of my life had changed forever. There was only a young father kneeling beside his little boy, helping him learn something small and necessary.

For years, I thought losing my father was a chapter from childhood. A sad fact. A family story.

But children do not leave grief behind simply because they grow taller.

The little boy who was not allowed to attend his father's funeral grew into a man who carried questions he could not name. A child who loses a parent carries more than memories. He carries silences, imagined conversations, graduations, weddings, and ordinary Tuesdays when he wonders what his father would have said.

For children who lose their dads as infants, the ache can be even more mysterious. They may not remember the hands that held them, the voice that soothed them,

or the face that bent over the crib. But the absence still grows up with them. It sits beside them in classrooms. It follows them to ballfields and dances. It stands quietly in the doorway on Father's Day.

That is why the TAPS community matters so deeply.

When my father died, there was no circle of other surviving children around me. There were no peers who knew what it meant to miss someone everyone else expected you to "move on" from. There were no cabins full of kids comparing stories, no mentors showing that grief and laughter could live in the same day.

I often think about how different life might have felt if that five-year-old boy had known he was not the only one.



**COMMUNITY DOES NOT REMOVE THE EMPTY CHAIR.
IT PLACES OTHER CHAIRS AROUND IT.**

CIRCA 1966, SOMEWHERE IN WEST TEXAS, BEFORE EVERYTHING CHANGED.

FROM LEFT: ROB PAINE FISHER, CAPT. ROBERT TREAT PAINE, STEPHI LOUISE PAINE FISHER, AND MARK PAINE FISHER.

IN A SINGLE SNAPSHOT, TIME FOLDS. MY BROTHER IS IN OUR FATHER'S ARMS. MY MOTHER IS CARRYING MY SISTER, RACHEL. I SEE MY PARENTS NOT SIMPLY AS STORIES I HAVE BEEN TOLD, BUT AS YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DREAMS STILL AHEAD OF THEM. NEARLY SIXTY YEARS LATER, THIS MOMENT HAS NOT FADED.



THE TABLE. EVERY MEMORIAL DAY. EVERY YEAR. ★ NOT AS HISTORY. AS INHERITANCE.
CAPT. ROBERT TREAT PAINE, FORT JONES, CALIFORNIA, AUGUST 23, 1939 TO DECEMBER 29, 1966

Today, many TAPS children have grown up with the kind of community I craved. Some lost their dads before they could speak. Some have only photographs, folded flags, stories told by mothers, grandparents, battle buddies, and friends. And now they are in their 20s and 30s. They have become adults who have never known a life untouched by loss, but they have also never had to carry that loss completely alone.

They grew up with a community of peers.

That is no small thing.

A child who grieves in community learns that tears are not weakness. A teenager who grieves in community learns that anger, questions, laughter, and love can all belong. A young adult who grieves in community learns that becoming happy does not mean becoming disloyal. Joy does not erase the father who died. Joy can be one of the ways his love continues.

TAPS gives surviving children something grief often tries to steal: belonging.

It gives them people who understand the strange geography of growing up without a dad. They understand that grief changes as we change. The questions of a six-year-old are not the questions of a sixteen-

year-old, and the questions of a thirty-year-old may arrive with surprising force when he becomes a parent himself.

Community does not remove the empty chair. But it places other chairs around it.

It says: Your father mattered. Your story matters. You do not have to explain why this still hurts. You do not have to apologize for remembering. You do not have to choose between sorrow and a full life.

For a long time, I thought healing meant the sadness would disappear. I do not believe that anymore. Healing means grief no longer takes up all the space.

There is room now.

Room for gratitude.
Room for laughter.
Room for love.
Room for joy.
Room for the child we were.
Room for the adult we are becoming.

The five-year-old boy who lost his father will always be part of me. But he is no longer the only part of me.

My father missed so much: graduations, marriage, children, grandchildren. And yet, nearly sixty years later, he is still

teaching me. Not how to tie my shoes this time, but how to remember. How to let the little boy inside me know: You can stop trying to prove you are enough.

You always were.

Maybe that is the beautiful mystery of loving someone we lost: their story does not end when they die. Sometimes, through memory, community, and the courage to keep living, they are still helping us find our way home.

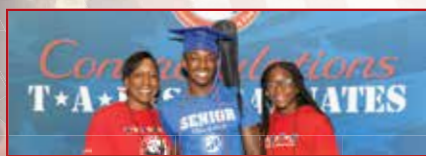


About the Author

Mark Paine Fisher is a storyteller, speaker, and founder of Inspiring Growth. He is the author of *The Paine Protocol*, a Cold War thriller inspired by his father's 1966 military plane crash and his family's nearly sixty-year search for answers, healing, and hope.



 TAPS.org/Programs-Services



For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died.



TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

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

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

PEER-BASED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/PEERMENTORS

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

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](https://taps.org/caregiver)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stars4TAPS and teams4taps collaborate with the entertainment industry and sports organizations across the 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](https://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.



A LEGACY HONORED

ON FOOTBALL'S BIGGEST STAGE



“

WHEN MY HUSBAND PAUL DEPLOYED HE WAS ABLE TO MAINTAIN A CONNECTION WITH OUR SONS, SHARING A LOVE OF FOOTBALL. WE WERE LUCKY THAT PAUL COULD CELEBRATE THE GIANTS SUPER BOWL WITH US BEFORE PAUL DIED, EVEN FROM A DISTANCE.

ANNOUNCING THE NFL DRAFT PICK FOR THE NY GIANTS WITH TAPS WAS MORE THAN A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME MOMENT—IT WAS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR OUR FAMILY TO HONOR MY HUSBAND AND HIS LEGACY WHILE INTERTWINING MEMORIES HE SHARED WITH HIS SONS. STANDING TOGETHER ON THAT STAGE WAS A REMINDER THAT WHILE SACRIFICE SHAPES OUR STORY, LOVE, RESILIENCE, AND HOPE DEFINE HIS LEGACY.

— TRACI VOELKE

”





For most football fans, the NFL Draft is a celebration of dreams realized—a night when the next generation of athletes hears their name called and begins a new chapter. But for one TAPS family, the 2026 NFL Draft became something even more profound: an opportunity to honor a hero whose legacy continues to shape their lives every day.

When the Voelke family stepped onto the stage to announce the New York Giants' fifth overall pick in the first round of the NFL Draft, they weren't simply participating in one of the league's most celebrated traditions. They were representing the millions of military families whose lives have been forever changed by service and sacrifice. Most importantly, they were honoring the life and legacy of their husband and father, Major Paul Voelke, U.S. Army.

This opportunity came to be because TAPS is an NFL Salute to Service partner

and the family has shared their love of the Giants with us. On April 23, the family stood with the NFL commissioner before a national audience carrying with them not only the excitement of the evening but also the enduring memory of the man they loved. In just a few moments on stage, they reminded millions of viewers that behind every military uniform is a family whose courage continues long after a loved one's service has ended.

The NFL Draft stage became a place where remembrance met celebration, where a family's loss was met with gratitude, and where Major Voelke's legacy was honored before one of the largest audiences in sports.

TAPS is grateful to the National Football League and the New York Giants for creating experiences that recognize and uplift surviving military families. We are especially grateful to Traci, Andrew, and Ben for allowing us to honor Paul and

being part of this wonderful night. These moments extend far beyond a ceremonial draft announcement. They offer healing, connection, and the reassurance that our nation's fallen heroes continue to be remembered by communities across America.

For the Voelke family, the evening was about much more than football. It was about carrying their hero's legacy forward with pride. It was about showing his sons that their father's life of service continues to inspire others. It was about standing together as a family, supported by the TAPS community, and experiencing a moment that transformed personal remembrance into a shared national tribute. For TAPS, it was a powerful reflection of our mission. And for everyone watching, it was a beautiful reminder that our nation's heroes—and the families who carry their legacies forward—will never be forgotten.



Nature Heals

Caring for Yourself by Engaging with the Natural World

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

“The best remedy for those who are afraid,
lonely, or unhappy is to go outside. . .
I firmly believe that nature brings
solace in all troubles.”

~ ANNE FRANK



When we experience the death of someone precious to us, we feel deep pain. While we know the pain of grief is natural and is a result of having loved, it still hurts. It is still grueling and agonizing. It can be tempting to self-treat the pain of grief, but allow me to suggest a powerful alternative. It's free, it's readily available, and it only takes a few minutes a day.



Of course, I'm talking about nature. Nature eases stress. Nature heals. Not only can engaging with the natural world help you destress right now, it can also become a meaningful habit that deeply improves the quality of the rest of your life.



Unfortunately, most of us today are nature-deprived. We now interact with technology more than we do with anything else in our environment or with our fellow human beings. In his bestselling 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods*, author Richard Louv coined the term “nature deficit disorder” to describe the consequences of humanity’s modern-day alienation from nature. He believes that a lack of connection with nature has caused widespread anxiety, depression, and attention disorders. I know that I’m more relaxed and in a better mood when I’ve spent time outdoors. I’m also better able to focus.

These same symptoms—anxiety, depression, and an inability to concentrate—are also common in people who are stressed. If you’re stressed and you’re nature-deprived, then, are some of your stress symptoms exacerbated unnecessarily? I think they often are.



THE SCIENCE OF NATURE AS HEALER

In recent decades, as we have become increasingly disconnected from nature, scientists have been studying how our bodies and minds respond when we return to nature. Their findings can help us better understand the many ways in which we can use nature to help us cope with stress in the short-term and live more balanced lives in the longer-term. You might be surprised at the powerful, myriad benefits nature offers us.



Physical Health

Spending time in nature has been shown to have numerous physical benefits. It lowers blood pressure and heart rate. Crucially, it also lowers levels of the stress chemical cortisol in your body. When cortisol levels remain high over time due to chronic stress, you're at risk for a whole host of problems ranging from anxiety to heart disease, weight gain, and sleep problems.

Speaking of sleep, nature time improves sleep quality because exposure to sunlight during the daytime helps regulate your sleep cycle. What's more, fifteen to twenty minutes of sunshine each day helps your body better absorb vitamin D, which strengthens your bones and reduces your risk for certain diseases, including cancer.

Researchers have determined that all of these physical benefits of spending time in nature are independent of exercise. In other words, you don't have to be moving around outside to reap the rewards; simply sitting or resting in a natural setting activates these positive changes. BUT! But when you add exercise, the physical rewards of nature time are even greater. Your blood flow improves, bringing more oxygen to all the cells of your body and further lowering blood pressure and heart rate. Your muscles get stronger and your joints more flexible. And physical activity also releases happy brain chemicals called endorphins.



Cognitive Health

If you're not thinking clearly, go for a short nature walk.

People who take a walk in a natural setting perform 20 percent better on cognitive tests than those who take a stroll in a city or indoors. Why? Because in an urban setting, or when interacting with technology, our minds are forced to think about possible dangers and problem solving. Basically, encounters with other people, with buildings and other manmade environments, with advertising and media, as well as the constant decision-making required of navigating these situations, are cognitively fatiguing.

When we're in nature, on the other hand, our minds are free. Our brains can let their guards down and relax. Gazing at a sunset or an ocean view are other good examples of this phenomenon. I'm sure you know what this feels like. Most of us enjoy these



“I go to nature to be soothed, healed, and have my senses put in order.”

~ JOHN BURROUGHS

activities because they're both beautiful and nontaxing. We're also less likely to ruminate when we're in nature, according to scientists. That is, we're less prone to focusing repetitively on problems or worries. In natural environments, our thoughts are more apt to drift freely and peacefully.



Emotional Health

The green of nature is emotional gold.

One study of a million people persuasively arrived at the conclusion that children raised in neighborhoods with the least amount of green space or easy access to nature—independent of affluence and other variables—were 55 percent more likely to be mentally unwell.

It makes sense. When our bodies feel better and our minds are relaxed, our emotions tend to follow. Spending time in nature has been proven to improve our mood, reduce feelings of anger, increase resilience, and even boost self-esteem. It eases depression and anxiety. It's simply an all-around emotional tonic.

Something important to keep in mind is that nature offers these emotional benefits regardless of setting or season. Studies show that engaging with any natural environment in any weather improves emotional wellbeing. Even if you prefer a certain landscape—the beach, perhaps, or the mountains—or a certain season of the year, please remember that spending time in whatever natural environments are most convenient to you, year-round, will be essential to your self-care.



Spiritual Health

Natural settings are spiritual settings. We tend to feel a connection with the divine when we are on a mountaintop or when we look up at a night sky full of stars. We feel awe. We sense that we are part of something much larger, and our own troubles, no matter how painful, seem less significant in the grand scheme of things.

What's more, nature surprises and inspires us. The more present we are in nature, the more we notice. And the more we notice, the more awed we become at the miraculous sky, plants, trees, rocks and sand, water features, and animals. From the majestic to the miniscule—and everything in between—we find wonder upon wonder.

Studies show that spending time in nature induces brain waves similar to those generated during meditation. Nature feels sacred and mysterious. And that connection to the sacred helps us get in touch with our divine sparks—that still, small voice inside us that whispers of life's meaning and purpose.

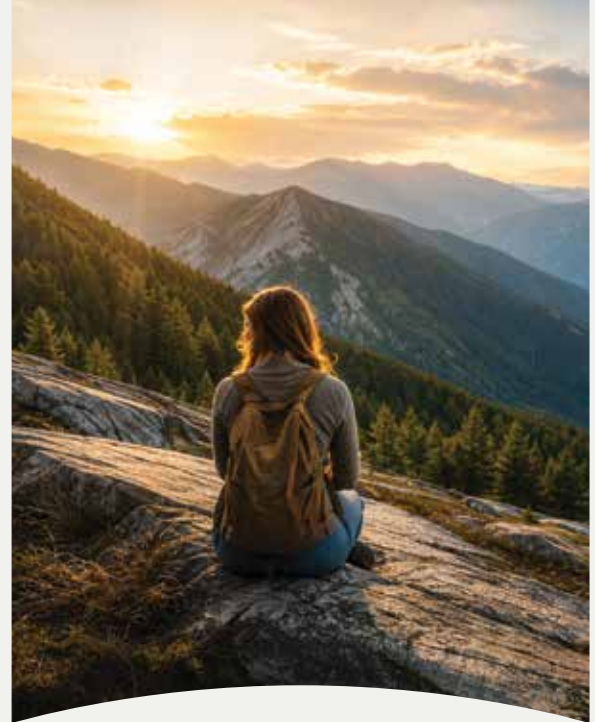
"I go to nature to be soothed, healed, and have my senses put in order."
—John Burroughs

Our spirits and souls are powerfully drawn to nature. In nature we more readily contemplate our beliefs and values. We are better able to transcend the mundane realities of our lives and consider the boundlessness and timelessness of the universe. We crave nature in large part because we crave these special moments of epiphany and transcendence.



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.



ADDING MORE NATURE TO YOUR LIFE

How much time do you have to spend engaging with nature to feel its positive effects?

Recently, one large study in England determined that a total of 120 minutes a week spent in nature was sufficient for people to report high levels of wellbeing. The research showed that those two hours could be split up among many brief outings, several half-hour sessions, or a single exposure. The study also controlled for physical activity, so the 120-minute threshold applied whether people were exercising or sitting on a park bench.

I definitely don't think you need to follow a regimented nature schedule to experience stress relief and a better quality of life. But it might help you to know that engaging with nature for just 17 minutes a day, on average, is likely to have a significant positive impact on your life.

I hope you will find ways to spend more time in nature. The science supports it and, just as important, so does my experience and intuitive understanding. Whenever I take a walk in the desert or hike into the mountains, I will think of you and all the military families I have been privileged to meet in my many years as a grief counselor and consultant to TAPS. Right now, the trees outside my window draw my eye and soothe my soul. I think I will gaze a while.

PAIN

Thomas Maier ★ Surviving father of LCpl Joshua Maier

I love the pain

that reminds me how much I love my son
that I remember and treasure Josh
that I have good memories

I hate the pain

that condemns me for my failures
my blindness, my dullness
my impatience, self-centeredness

I love the pain

that points me forward to a heavenly reunion
to reconciliation
to a relationship unfettered by barriers and regrets

I hate the pain

that says it's my fault that he's gone
that I wasn't the father he needed
that I didn't get him the help he needed

I love the pain

that says don't stay here, keep moving, keep learning
bring the good things from the past along
let what's forgiven be forgotten
let what can't be changed be left behind

I hate the pain

of unfulfilled potential, unaccomplished accomplishments
unlived years of life
unsmiled smiles, unlaughed laughs
untraveled trails and unreached destinations

I hate the pain

of shattered dreams and bitter tears
unanswered questions, unknowable knowledge
of no-win situations and no do overs allowed



I love the pain

that remains at the end of the searching and regrets
and still shouts that
Josh is a treasure
and I love him



JESSE TUBB

Still Sounding the Call

There are moments when a single sound can hold more than words ever could.

For generations of military families, that sound has been Taps — 24 notes carried across sacred ground, through still air, over folded flags, and into the hearts of those who love someone who served. It is simple. It is solemn. It is unmistakable. And for Jesse Tubbs, those notes have been more than music. They have been a mission.

Jesse served for 28 years in the U.S. Army and became part of one of the most respected musical traditions in the military as a member of The United States Army Band “Pershing’s Own.” During his career, he sounded Taps as a bugler at Arlington National Cemetery, standing at the place where the nation gathers to honor its fallen and offering the final musical tribute at military ceremonies and funerals.

To sound Taps at Arlington is to carry a sacred responsibility. The bugler stands alone, yet represents so many: the nation,

the military, the family, the legacy of the one being honored. Every breath matters. Every note matters. There is no room for performance in the ordinary sense. There is only reverence.

That is part of what makes Jesse’s story so meaningful to the TAPS family. He understands that Taps is not simply a bugle call heard at the end of a ceremony. It is often the sound families remember most clearly. It is the sound that marks the moment when honor, grief, pride, and love come together. It is a prayer without many words, carried on breath.

Jesse’s connection to Arlington became visible in a remarkable and lasting way when he was selected as the model for the bugler statue at the Arlington National Cemetery Visitor Center. The life-sized likeness of Jesse represents a service member sounding Taps and was created to stand at one of the most meaningful entry points to the cemetery. When visitors arrive, they encounter not

only a statue, but a symbol: a bugler, a final salute, a promise that service and sacrifice will be remembered.

For Jesse, being chosen for that statue was not about recognition. It was about representing something larger than himself. The figure in the Visitor Center honors every bugler who has stood in solemn duty, every family who has heard those notes, and every fallen hero whose life is remembered there. It captures a moment that is repeated thousands of times yet is never routine.

But Jesse’s life of service did not stop with the last note of a bugle.

Today, he continues to serve in another powerful way — by helping others build resilience, courage, and confidence in the face of hard things. As a member of the TAPS Advisory Board, Jesse has provided workshops for surviving military families focused on emotional and mental resilience. He brings a rare combination



TAPS AS A PRAYER

For many of us, the notes of Taps bring grief close to the surface and take us back to the worst moment of our lives. It may be helpful instead to think of the prayer offered in the words of Taps, offering comfort that our loved ones may now “safely rest” as “God is nigh”.

*Day is gone; gone the sun
From the lake, from the hills,
From the sky; all is well,
Safely rest, God is nigh.*

*The same breath that once carried Taps across Arlington now carries another kind of call
— a call to keep going, to stay connected, to trust that even in sorrow,*

LIFE CAN STILL HOLD MEANING, PURPOSE, AND LOVE.

of military experience, mindfulness, coaching, endurance, and compassion to the families TAPS serves.

For surviving families, resilience can be a complicated word. It does not mean “getting over” grief. It does not mean pretending the pain is gone. It does not mean being strong every minute of every day.

Jesse helps give resilience a more honest meaning. Resilience is taking one more step when the road is steep. It is learning how to breathe when the moment feels overwhelming. It is finding steady ground after life has shifted beneath you. It is allowing love and grief to travel together. It is discovering that even when the path has changed forever, you are not walking it alone.

That message is one Jesse has lived in the outdoors as well as taught in classrooms and workshops. A seasoned endurance athlete and adventure racer, he has competed around the world, including the 2019 Eco Challenge, won the 2018 U.S. Adventure Racing Association National Championship, and won the 2022 24-hour Adventure Race Solo Championship.

Adventure racing is not a polished, predictable sport. It is long, exhausting, uncertain, and often uncomfortable.

Racers navigate through wilderness, weather, darkness, fatigue, and doubt. They have to make decisions when tired, trust teammates, adjust plans, and keep moving when the finish line feels impossibly far away.

In many ways, it is a powerful metaphor for grief.

There are no straight lines. There are unexpected turns. There are moments when the map does not match the terrain. There are times when progress looks like standing still, gathering strength, and simply choosing not to quit. Jesse understands that kind of journey. He has represented TAPS in the world of adventure racing, carrying the mission with him into demanding places and showing, step by step, what perseverance can look like.

Through GRIT Adventures, the program he founded, Jesse uses adventure racing and outdoor learning to teach life skills such as resilience, perseverance, mindfulness, self-awareness, conflict resolution, and teamwork. These are not abstract concepts. They are the very tools people need when facing uncertainty, change, and loss.

That is why Jesse’s voice resonates so deeply at TAPS events. He does not offer

easy answers. He offers practices. He offers perspective. He reminds survivors that strength can be quiet. That healing can be slow. That courage can look like asking for help. That hope can begin as the smallest light on a dark trail.

The same breath that once carried Taps across Arlington now carries another kind of call — a call to keep going, to stay connected, to trust that even in sorrow, life can still hold meaning, purpose, and love.

Jesse Tubb’s story is one of continuity. From Arlington to TAPS, from the bugle to the trail, from solemn remembrance to active resilience, he continues to honor the fallen by caring for the living. He reminds us that Taps is not only an ending. In the hearts of those who hear it, it can also become a beginning: a beginning of remembrance, of connection, of community, and of the lifelong work of carrying love forward.

For the TAPS family, Jesse stands as both a symbol and a companion on the journey. He is the bugler whose likeness welcomes visitors to Arlington. He is the endurance athlete who knows that difficult terrain can be crossed one step at a time. He is the teacher who helps us find strength within ourselves and with one another. And he is a living reminder that even after the final note fades, love continues to echo forever.

Back to School After Loss:

Helping Children and Teens Navigate a New School Year

Pamela Gabbay, EdD, FT ★ Director, TAPS Youth Bereavement Programs

The beginning of a new school year often brings a mix of excitement and uncertainty. Children wonder what their teacher will be like, whether they'll make new friends, how challenging their classes will be, and what the year will hold.

For children and teens who have experienced the death of someone they love, returning to school can bring an additional layer of emotions. Whether they are returning to a familiar classroom or starting over in a new school after a

move, they are doing so while carrying a loss that continues to shape their world.

For many TAPS families, the death of a military parent is followed by significant changes—relocating to a new community, leaving a military installation, changing schools, or adjusting to new routines. These transitions can make the start of a new school year feel especially overwhelming. Yet even children who remain in the same school may discover that everything feels different because they have changed.

There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way for a grieving child to feel as school begins. Some children are eager to return to the routine and structure of school.

Others worry about seeing classmates, answering questions, or concentrating in class. Many experience both excitement and anxiety at the same time.



Begin with Conversation

One of the most important things parents and caregivers can do is create opportunities for conversation before school begins. Rather than assuming how a child is feeling, invite them to share their thoughts and concerns.

You might ask:

- ★ What are you looking forward to this year?
- ★ Is there anything you're worried about?
- ★ Is there anything you wish your teacher knew about you?
- ★ What would help you feel more comfortable if you're having a difficult day?

Not every child wants to talk openly, and that's okay. Some children express themselves through drawing, music, sports, journaling, or imaginative play. Others simply need to know that when they are ready to talk, someone is there to listen without judgment or pressure.

Understanding Grief at School

Grief doesn't stay at home when children walk through the school doors. Many grieving children experience changes in concentration, memory, organization, motivation, or energy. They may seem distracted, forget assignments, become unusually quiet, or feel overwhelmed by tasks that once came easily. Some children wonder, "Why does school even matter anymore?" Others worry constantly about the safety of the people they love or fear experiencing another loss. These reactions are common. They are not signs that a child is lazy, unmotivated, or "falling behind." They are often signs that the brain is working hard to process grief while continuing to learn and function.

Patience, reassurance, and understanding from the adults in a child's life can make an enormous difference.



Partner with the School



Parents often wonder how much information to share with teachers. While children should always have a voice in deciding what personal information is shared with classmates, it is helpful for teachers and school counselors to know that a significant death has occurred. This allows them to better understand changes they may observe in behavior, concentration, or emotions and to respond with compassion rather than confusion. If your child is starting a new school, consider reaching out before the first day. A brief conversation can help establish a supportive relationship and identify a trusted adult your child can turn to if they need extra support during the day.

Help Children Find Their Words

Many children worry that classmates will ask questions about the person who died. Talking through possible responses ahead of time can help children feel more confident. Let children know they are never obligated to share more than they feel comfortable sharing.

Simple responses such as:

- ★ "My dad died last year."
- ★ "Someone important in my family died."
- ★ "I don't feel like talking about it today."

Giving children permission to choose how much—or how little—they share helps restore a sense of control during a time when so much has felt outside their control.

Create a Plan for Difficult Moments

Even when children are looking forward to school, grief can appear unexpectedly.

A classroom discussion about families, a special holiday, a Father's Day or Mother's Day project, a military appreciation event, or simply hearing another student's story can bring up powerful emotions.

Before school starts, work with your child and the school to develop a plan for difficult moments. Perhaps your child has permission to visit the school counselor, spend a few quiet minutes reading or drawing, or simply take a short break before returning to class.

Knowing there is a plan often helps children feel safer—even if they never need to use it.

Keep Checking In

Returning to school is not a one-day transition. Children's feelings often change over the first several weeks. Continue checking in—not just by asking, "How was school?" but with questions that invite conversation.

You might ask:

- ★ What was the best part of today?
- ★ Was anything harder than you expected?
- ★ Is there anything you're worried about tomorrow?
- ★ What do you need from me tonight?

Some children open up immediately after school. Others are more likely to talk during a car ride, while taking a walk, or just before bedtime.

As children grow, they understand their loss in new ways. Returning to school may bring new questions, new challenges, and new opportunities for healing. With caring adults, supportive teachers, and patient conversations, children and teens can continue learning, building friendships, and looking toward the future while still carrying the love and memories of the person who died.

At TAPS, we know grief and hope can exist side by side. As children and teens begin a new school year, they carry both the sadness of who is missing and the strength of the love that remains. With understanding, patience, and support, they can continue writing the next chapter of their story.



A NEW GAME, A LASTING LEGACY

*Some moments remind us
that healing can be found in
the most unexpected places.*

On the Fourth of July, as families across the country celebrated our nation's independence, one TAPS family experienced a day they will never forget. Thanks to a new partnership between **teams4taps** and **USA Rugby**, surviving sister **Jenny Leon** and her 12-year-old son, **Jayden**, were invited to attend their very first USA Rugby match in honor of Jenny's brother, **Corporal Jesse Leon-Alfaro**, United States Marine Corps.



HONORING THE LIFE AND SERVICE OF
CORPORAL JESSE LEON-ALFARO
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

TAPS
teams4taps



*"Thank you so much for inviting us to the USA Rugby game yesterday.
My son Jayden had a great time. It was our first time watching a rugby match, and he really enjoyed
the experience. I didn't expect to see my brother Jesse's picture on the screen like that. We thought we were
just going to watch the game, but we got so much more than that. Jayden also loved the fireworks afterwards.
We truly appreciate everything you do and the kindness you've shown, especially
helping us remember my brother, Jesse. It means a lot to us."*

Thank you!

For Jayden, an avid football and soccer player, everything about the day was new. He had never attended a rugby match before, and neither had his mom. What began as an exciting opportunity to experience a new sport quickly became something much more meaningful.

Before kickoff, USA Rugby welcomed Jenny and Jayden onto the field to watch the players warm up. Jayden was surprised with his own USA Rugby jersey and rugby ball, then spent time with members of the team learning the basics of the game. Laughing, running, and tossing the ball with the athletes, he experienced the kind of joy that reminds us how important it is for children to simply be kids, even while carrying the loss of someone they love.

Then came a moment that neither Jenny nor Jayden expected.

As the stadium watched, a tribute honoring Corporal Jesse Leon-Alfaro appeared on the video board while the public address

announcer shared his service and sacrifice with thousands of fans. In an instant, a Marine's legacy became part of the celebration of our nation's freedom. Jesse's life was remembered, his service honored, and his family embraced by an entire stadium.

After the tribute, Jenny and Jayden had the opportunity to meet USA Rugby CEO **Bill Goren** along with four USA Rugby Olympians: **Will Chevallier**, **Sarah Levy**, **Spiff Sedrick**, and **Marcus Tupuola**. Their warmth and generosity transformed an already memorable day into one filled with personal connections and lasting memories.

USA Rugby capped off the evening with a victory over Portugal, followed by a spectacular Fourth of July fireworks celebration. But for Jenny and Jayden, the greatest gift wasn't the final score or even the fireworks overhead.

It was knowing that Jesse was remembered.



AT TAPS, WE KNOW THAT HEALING OFTEN HAPPENS THROUGH MOMENTS OF CONNECTION LIKE THESE.

- ★ A new experience.
- ★ A welcoming community.
- ★ A child discovering joy.
- ★ A family hearing their loved one's name spoken aloud.

These moments do not erase grief, but they remind us that love continues, memories endure, and no family has to carry their loss alone.

We are deeply grateful to **teams4taps** and our new partners at **USA Rugby** for opening their hearts to our TAPS family. Thank you for honoring Corporal Jesse Leon-Alfaro's life and service, for creating unforgettable memories for Jenny and Jayden, and for reminding us all that behind every invitation is an opportunity to help a family feel remembered, supported, and loved.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Join your TAPS Family for a weekend of community and personal growth at one of our national or regional seminars. Registration is open now at TAPS.org/Events or by scanning the QR code at the bottom of the page. Follow us on social media @TAPSorg, and check our events page throughout the year for additional experiences, activities, camps, and retreats.

Call our 24/7 Helpline at
800-959-TAPS (8277) to register



NATIONAL SEMINARS

33RD ANNUAL NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

May 27-31, 2027
Arlington, Virginia

REGIONAL SEMINARS

NORTHEAST REGIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

November 20-22, 2026
Buffalo, New York

FAMILY CAMP

HEALING THROUGH MUSIC & NATURE

October 1-4, 2026
Antioch, Tennessee

SELF-FUNDED EVENTS

SELF-FUNDED 7-NIGHT ALASKA ADVENTURE CRUISE

September 3-10, 2027
Seattle, Washington



» TAPS.org/Events



More Events to Come!

New opportunities, retreats and activities
are being added throughout the year.

Check TAPS.org/Events for updates!



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.



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



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES



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

Learn more at TAPS.org ★ 24/7 Survivor Helpline: 800-959-TAPS





TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

3101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 600
Arlington, Virginia 22201

NON PROFIT ORG
US POSTAGE
PAID
Stevens Point, WI
PERMIT NO. 272

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

“ Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down. ”

– Oprah Winfrey



It turns out that many of our friends simply didn't know how to walk beside us in our grief. When life becomes heavy, they quietly stepped away.

Our culture doesn't teach people how to be present with heartbreak, so it's no surprise that even those who loved us sometimes didn't know what to do.

But grief was never meant to be carried alone. Your TAPS family is here to listen, to understand, and to walk with you through peer mentors, the National Military Survivor Helpline, TAPS Together, Care Groups, and every connection that reminds you that someone has climbed onto the bus, sat down beside you, and is staying for the journey.

