

PHILANTHROPY[®]

Life After Loss

A nonprofit helps families of deceased military service members work through their grief.

By Heather Joslyn

Chantel Dooley was supposed to be getting married on this day. Instead, she was sitting at her fiancé's grave, sobbing.

Air Force Captain Alexander Stanton had died in 2016 and is buried here in Arlington National Cemetery's Section 60, where casualties of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are laid to rest. Dooley was determined to spend May 27, 2017, with him regardless.

The cemetery — and the section — was full of people on this Memorial Day weekend. Some tried to comfort Dooley by prodding her to talk about her fiancé's life, banal queries that pierced her to the core.

"Tell me about him," Dooley recounts. "Tell me about his favorite ice cream."

"Ohhhh," groan her colleagues from the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, or TAPS, a nonprofit that helps the bereaved families of people who have died while serving in the military or as a result of their service.

Bonnie Carroll, sitting with Dooley and a few others around a conference room table at the charity's headquarters, is among those groaning the loudest. Carroll, who retired as a major in the Air Force Reserve after 30 years of service, founded TAPS in 1994, two years after the death of her husband. Brig. Gen. Tom Carroll died in the crash of an Army plane. The charity, which operates on an annual budget of about \$16 million, has served more than 80,000 survivors, along with casualty-assistance officers, military chaplains, and others affected when a service member dies.

Dooley continues her story. In the cemetery, she kept crying and shaking, she says, until a TAPS volunteer stood next to her and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "They did not. Say. A word. They got it."

And that, in essence, is what TAPS does: provide whatever comfort, support, understanding, and services a bereaved family member needs.

Dooley connected with TAPS first as a beneficiary of its services. Now, she's on the charity's impact-assessment team — and helping other survivors. That concept of reciprocal help is at the heart of this organization.

Closing the Gap

TAPS' spacious office, with an oversize kitchen and vast open space to accommodate crowded gatherings, is where the cost of America's wars is tallied. Wives, husbands, partners, parents, children, siblings, and friends of the country's war dead come here, and to the group's many conferences, camps, and retreats around the country, to heal from their losses.

The charity covers a big gap in the way the military helps these families. When an active-duty service member dies, uniformed personnel arrive

at the door of the spouse or parents to convey the bad news. They make final arrangements, administer financial benefits, and hand the folded flag from the deceased's coffin to the next of kin with a heartfelt thanks for the sacrifice.

But the military isn't set up to field dark-night-of-the-soul phone calls from a young widow or a devastated parent, months or even years later. It's not equipped to help the deceased's children cope with evolving grief as they grow up. And it's not prepared to deal with the survivors' feelings of anger, guilt, or shame when a troubled service member or veteran overdoses or dies by suicide.

It's also not set up to buffer the cascading losses that a military family can suffer in the wake of a service member's death.

At TAPS events, "you always meet these families who talk about, We lived on this base and then we had to move all the way back to wherever we were from," says Heather Nesle, president of the New York Life Foundation, a TAPS supporter. "For these children, they've lost their school, they've lost their friends. There are several layers of loss. It's hard enough when you're a kid and everything's fine and you have to move."

'A Safe Place to Fall Apart'

Elizabeth Means Culp credits TAPS with helping her and her sons, now ages 10 and 13, heal after the suicide five years ago of her husband, Brian. The group reached out and assured her that her story was one shared by others, and it connected her with a survivor who had also lost her husband to suicide and had young children.

Meeting others who had similar stories and were further ahead in their recovery gave Culp "a spark of hope" that she and her children could get there, too.

A few months after her husband's death, she and her boys went to a TAPS suicide-survivor camp in Florida. "That weekend was one of the healthiest investments for the three of us," she says.

After dinner one night at camp, she wandered by the hotel pool, where the children attending grief camp were watching a movie outdoors. Her sons were in the pool, laughing.

"It was the first time I'd seen them being little boys, being with other little kids, and enjoying themselves," since their father's death, she says.

"TAPS has been a safe place to fall apart — and get back together," Culp says. "I can ask hard or snotty, obnoxious questions. Somebody has already asked that."

For instance: dealing with her feelings about spending her husband's life-insurance money. "Our family was financially set. But it came from a dark avenue. It came at the cost of a person's life. How can I view it as a blessing?"

She has remained active in TAPS, attending the suicide-survivors' grief camp every October:

"It's my personal mile marker, to say, I have come a long way."

Culp also now helps other survivors. "No matter how [the death] happened, that's your child or your high-school sweetheart or your dad or your mom," she says. It means a lot, she adds, "to have someone say, I know how you feel, because I walked in that trench. I don't think our family would be as healthy as we are without TAPS."

Connecting With Peers

A visit to TAPS' headquarters reveals not only the warmth of the charity's mission but also Carroll's tight-ship organizational approach. A veteran of the Reagan and George H.W. Bush White Houses, where she held a number of senior-level positions, she also served in Baghdad for a year after the Iraq invasion as deputy senior adviser for programs in the Ministry of Communications. In 2015, President Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, for her work with TAPS.

As Bonnie Mersinger, she grew up in Upstate New York and in Virginia, the daughter of an insurance executive "too young for World War I and too old for World War II," she says. Her mother, however, was an aviator in World War II whose service in the Women's Army Air Corps inspired her daughter to join the military.

It was while working in the Reagan White House, in 1988, that she met — by phone — the man who would change her life. As a staff member, she worked with the Alaska National Guard to help solve a crisis: Three whales were trapped in the ice. She got to know then-Col. Tom Carroll as they discussed the rescue effort long distance. (The whale crisis, including the meet-cute twist, was dramatized in the 2012 movie *Big Miracle*.)

The two married and settled in Alaska. In 1992, after her husband and seven other soldiers died in a C-12 airplane crash, Bonnie Carroll found herself isolated in her sorrow. She had worked in critical-incident response — helping to debrief others in the wake of tragedies — and had thought the training would help her. But after trying other grief-support groups, Carroll remained lost.

Only talking to the other widows whose husbands had died in the same crash helped.

"That really validated for me the need to have a peer connection with someone who is speaking the same language, from a place of shared experience," Carroll says. "That really is the anchor to what we do."

For two years after her husband's death, she worked her contacts in Washington, trying to find out if such a program already existed. "It was very important to do a needs assessment and a gap analysis," she says. "To take a step back and say, it's not just what I need. Is there a need?"

A key question she sought to answer in her research: What could be best provided by nonprofits versus the government. Her conclusion, she says, was “it’s really not appropriate for the federal government to provide the kind of support that one needs when they’re grieving.

“Grief is not a mental illness. We only grieve because we love.”

Military Ties

In 1994, Carroll designed a logo and mocked up a brochure for TAPS; she went to Washington to discuss her plans with officials.

“Off I go to the Pentagon, thinking people will be resistant,” she recalls. “I showed the brochure to some military-family people for the first time, and they said, ‘Oh, yeah, this is a great organization. Very helpful!’ They thought it already existed.”

The first national summit meeting of survivors, held in 1995, was attended by the then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. John Shalikashvili. Since then, TAPS has had a close relationship with the military. Casualty officers ask the next-of-kin in military deaths whether TAPS can contact them. If so, the charity reaches out with phone calls, texts, a resource kit, and more.

Today, one of TAPS’ key military supporters is another former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, retired Gen. Martin Dempsey. “If this were a start-up company, we’d be reading about it in the *Wall Street Journal*,” says Dempsey, who joined TAPS’ board upon his retirement in 2015.

He attended his first TAPS event, for children, at a Northern Virginia hotel, during Memorial Day weekend in 2011. “Just go and allow the kids to ask you questions,” he was told by his aide.

He showed up in his dress uniform and was dumbstruck by what he found: About 600 kids, most of them under the age of 12, each with a military mentor. “I’m Irish and a general, and with those two things, I thought I’d never be speechless,” Dempsey says.

He shed his uniform jacket and “waded in,” he recalls. “A girl of about 4 asked me, ‘Is my daddy an angel?’ I choked up. I was rocked. I said, ‘Of course your daddy’s an angel.’”

To “stop this death spiral of emotion,” Dempsey adds, “I sang this silly little Irish ditty called ‘The Unicorn Song.’”

After the event, he says, “I told Bonnie, ‘I will do whatever you want.’”

One thing he did: form a bond with that 4-year-old. Lizzie Yaggy, daughter of a deceased Marine aviator, has introduced Dempsey at every subsequent TAPS event he’s attended — and also at his military retirement ceremony.

Dempsey credits Carroll’s leadership with TAPS’ success. “She’s one of the very best leaders I’ve met in my career,” he says. “For one thing, she is passionate. You can’t talk to Bonnie Carroll without becoming captured by Bonnie Carroll and what she’s trying to accomplish. That passion is boundless.”

Also, he credits her humility, which he says filters down to her 100-member staff: “She’s won the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She’s proud of it, but if you ask her about it, she blushes.”

She is also constantly interested in improving TAPS’ offerings, Dempsey says. “Probably the phrase most often out of her mouth is, ‘What can we do better?’”

Corporate Support

The way TAPS carries out its mission, along

with its exemplary leadership, has drawn a lot of corporate sponsors: Boeing, the insurance companies Prudential and USAA, and Major League Baseball and the National Football League are among the largest supporters. Companies and their foundations provided 56 percent of the charity’s support last year; nearly the same share of its budget is in unrestricted funds.

The New York Life Foundation, another major supporter, began its association with TAPS in 2011, with more than \$4 million granted so far. Recently, the company began paying travel expenses for military mentors who were previously attending the charity’s grief camps and other programs on their own dime. The company has also provided about 800 volunteers for TAPS events, such as its annual Memorial Day conference in Washington.

“Once you’ve attended an event, what starts out as very intimidating and scary turns out to be very warm and familial, and it makes people want to go back. They feel like they’re doing something tangible,” says New York Life Foundation’s Nesle.

“Bonnie is one of the best people I’ve ever met in my life,” Nesle says. “She remembers you, she remembers how you met, she remembers your story. She always has time for everybody, and she’s always there, she’s present.”

She’s a very hands-on leader, Nesle says. New York Life’s technology team is working with TAPS to assess its databases and help consolidate them. “We had a training in New York, and most places, you know, would just send the person who’s going to be managing it. But there’s Bonnie, wanting to know more about it because she sees this is potentially very important for the organization.”

‘We’ve Seen It All’

Those databases are key to TAPS’ ability to offer long-term, sensitive, and tailored help to the people it serves.

The organization has created a proprietary system that creates a detailed record of the surviving family and its service member. TAPS tracks survivors throughout their relationship with the charity, from the moment they first make contact, which sometimes happens through its 24-hour helpline.

“To have a 24/7 helpline is absolutely critical for people in crisis,” Carroll says. “Grief is not pretty at 2 o’clock in the morning.” The helpline is answered by “peer professionals,” survivors with advanced degrees in social work or related fields.

The organization offers casework, helping bereaved family members — or partners and fiancés, who would not normally have access to help through the military — fill out forms, transfer auto titles, or even gain access to the deceased’s Facebook account if necessary. “If you have a challenge, bring it,” Carroll says. “We’ve seen it all.”

It also has some donors, such as Walmart and the Gary Sinise Foundation, that provide emergency financial assistance to military families in need. TAPS pays the family’s bills directly rather than handing out cash and sometimes negotiates on the survivors’ behalf.

Another element of TAPS’ work is “community-based care,” which connects survivors with local services, such as one-on-one grief counseling or local grief meetings. TAPS’ team calls ahead to make sure the service is appropriate for a specific survivor and will even check on the availability of parking and child care.

Survivors are paired with members of a 16-member survivor-care outreach team (a

parent matched with a parent, for example), taking relationship with the deceased and the cause of death into account, according to Audri Beugelsdijk, vice president of survivor care.

As it learns from its work the most-effective ways to help families cope with grief, the charity publishes its findings. In 2018, it started the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing, a collaboration with the Hospice Foundation of America to train bereavement professionals.

Among the hardest cases are those in which military service members have killed themselves. Survivors are often at higher risk for suicide themselves as a result of the trauma from both dealing with the loss and perhaps witnessing the act or its aftermath.

TAPS is currently working with Massachusetts General Hospital on a two-week in-patient program, Home Base, for survivors of suicide-related trauma, says Beugelsdijk.

The focus of all the case work, she says, is always on stabilizing the family. “If they’re still being heavily impacted by the trauma, they can’t focus on forward movement. They can’t focus on opportunities for healing.”

Growing Demand for Services

As America’s longest war rages on, TAPS expects to see more people needing its services in the years ahead.

Carroll and her colleagues think two categories of survivors in particular will need more attention: those dealing with a loved one’s suicide or exposure to toxic substances.

The latter risk sometimes comes from the “burn pits” used to dispose of garbage and biohazards in war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some service members who have been exposed to the burn pits have developed rare or unusual cancers.

Since 2008, the number of TAPS survivors who have lost a service member to illness has rocketed 1,995 percent, according to the charity’s figures. An estimated 3 million American service members may have been exposed to toxins during their deployments since the September 11 attacks on America.

Another area of likely expansion: international programs. TAPS has been working with survivors in about 30 other countries. For instance, Carroll and Beugelsdijk met this winter with officials of the Red Cross Red Crescent in Ukraine.

“We are not giving them money raised to help American military families,” Beugelsdijk says. “We are coming to them with ideas.”

Dempsey, the retired general, is ambitious for the organization’s expansion overseas, to help find the most effective approaches to aiding military survivors and create greater access to such support.

“TAPS International isn’t a fully fleshed-out idea yet,” he says, but the demand is undeniable. “We have done a lot with our international partners: the Brits, the Australians, even the Iraqis and the Afghans. They were with us, and now they need us.”

During her yearlong service in Iraq, helping with the reconstruction effort after the U.S. invasion, Carroll spent time with Iraqi women and had what she calls an epiphany in witnessing their losses and their grief.

“We now go to war as a global coalition,” she says. “Our loved ones fought alongside service members from around the world. So we now grieve alongside families around the world. And how are we going to come together?”