

# HONORING OUR OWN

101 Ways to Support Fallen Hero Families



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## ***Honoring Our Own 101 Ways to Support Fallen Hero Families***

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*Tragedy is a tool for the living to gain wisdom, not a guide by which to live.*

– Robert F. Kennedy

Losing a loved one is one of life's most challenging trials. The experience is often intensified when the loss is sudden or unexpected. Stacey Falzarano knows this pain firsthand; her husband, Col. Tom Falzarano, passed away well before his time. His passing sent shockwaves throughout our spaceforce community.

Stacey turned this unimaginable loss into purpose with the advice she presents in this book, *Honoring our Own: 101 Ways to Support the Families of a Fallen Hero*. Her words are meant for military leadership. No one except those who have experienced loss is better suited to advise on what matters most to survivor families. With this toolkit, leaders will know how to impactfully help families during this challenging time. As a result, anyone experiencing the same unimaginable loss will be comforted in the ways that matter most.

Tom served as my executive officer, and my wife Mollie and I worked closely with him and Stacey. As a rising senior leader, Tom had a bright future in our newly established United States Space Force. He was steeped in space operations and was recognized as an expert. He showcased how space capabilities are critically important to Joint and Coalition operations through numerous assignments and deployments.

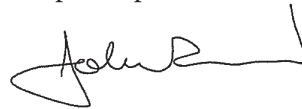
Every time I called him on the phone, Tom's greeting was, "How can I help?"

By writing this book, Stacey has memorialized Tom for their children Trevor, Spencer, Michael, Thomas, and Valentina. Her insight, gained through her experiences on what mattered most, will provide a path to healing while providing all who read this book actionable advice on what can be done to help families faced with similar loss.

This toolkit is a testament to Stacey's character. It is an act of true courage and perseverance in the face of heartbreak, loss, and despair. In Tom's own words, "How can I help?"

Thank you, Stacey. Through your work, you will make a tremendous difference in the lives of others.

Semper Supra,



JOHN W. RAYMOND

General, USSF

Chief of Space Operations

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stacey Falzarano's past can be described as happy—really happy. While experiencing an exciting and rewarding career as a military intelligence analyst, Stacey fell in love with Tom. And together, they adopted three beautiful children increasing their family to seven. Then, tragedy. Tom unexpectedly and suddenly died.

Stacey's present life can be described as one in transition as she seeks to help others move beyond surviving to a life of new meaning and purpose. As an advocate for Fallen Hero families, Stacey currently serves on the USAF/USSF Survivor Advocacy Council, working to improve survivor issues. Also, she uses her publications as a platform to change the narrative of the survivor community. Empowering Fallen Hero families with purpose helps to heal. And, with purpose, we can, in turn, serve our local and military communities.

With inspiring leadership from Mrs. Mollie Raymond and the administration of Dr. Mehmed Ali and Mr. Tim Thomas and others at the Air University Press at Maxwell Air Force Base, Stacey hopes this writing aids USAF and USSF leadership spouses to embrace Fallen Hero families as they struggle to get back on their feet and find ways to thrive in new paths in life.

Stacey's future is bright, and she will continue to advocate for Fallen Hero families, work to empower survivors, and help create opportunities for all to shine, contribute, and pay it forward. Stacey's forthcoming publication will be a Military Widow's Workbook. It will be broken down into three sections

Stacey offers a big, heartfelt thank you to fellow Fallen Hero families, organizations serving military survivor families, and the wider military community—all of whom helped the Falzarano family get back in the game.

## If I Could Do It All Again....

In these few pages are specific, actionable ideas you can use to help the family of a Fallen Hero.<sup>1</sup> I offer them so you can pick and choose, and can tailor the ideas to fit both what you can reasonably provide a Fallen Hero family and to fulfill what the family might need. If you can act on even one suggestion on this list, you will have a positive impact that may last forever with a Fallen Hero family.

While many in the military take care of so much, there are still many more needs after losing a loved one. And, as military leadership spouses, you have the tools to initiate, organize, and lead. Please be a person of action, not just of good intentions. I'm writing this because you need to know what a Fallen Hero's family needs in a time of extreme trauma and grief. How could somebody understand that we needed a male father figure to come over after work and jump on the trampoline with my boys, to roughhouse with them, to play freeze tag with them? If you ask me what I need, that's the kind of action I need. We must create new memories, and experience new activities, to move forward. Who could know the type of help a Fallen Hero family needs except somebody who has walked in the same shoes?

Finally, I'm sharing our story below to illustrate how utterly destructive trauma and grief are after losing a loved one. Until one experiences trauma and grief firsthand, one cannot fathom the depth of lasting pain and despair. By sharing our story, I hope and pray you all can be leaders of action to help fellow Airmen and Guardian families in their darkest hours.

## The End of Our Love Story

"Hey, Hun. I'm home." He called me "Hun," a play on combining Honey and Attila the Hun. Inside joke.

"Hey, Sweetie. There's leftover gnocchi in the fridge," I announced back to Tom as he entered the kitchen through the laundry room door.

It was lunchtime on a Tuesday. A regular run-of-the-mill Tuesday. May 12. COVID-19 allowed Tom to come home for lunch and exercise on our treadmill. It was nice to get to see him in the middle of the workday.

Tom walked up to me, sitting at the kitchen table. He sat down next to me, started unlacing his boots, and leaned over to give me a loving kiss. He said, "I love you." My response... well, it's my first regret of many. I perfunctorily said, "love ya." Why didn't I look the love of my life straight in the eyes and tell him, "I love you so much? I appreciate you so much. I'm so proud of you. You gave me my beautiful family and my beautiful life."? But I didn't. Just "love ya." Those were the last words I said to my husband. I said a lot to him several minutes later as I knelt over his body. But I can't be sure he heard me.

Trauma is the immediate and utter disruption of life, plans, feelings, emotions, and one's existence. Trauma can shake your faith to the core. Trauma destroys your world in a second and is totally and irrevocably irreversible—all while you're simply sipping coffee at the kitchen table. Your world has just

<sup>1</sup> I use the term "Fallen Hero" inclusively to refer to any Active-Duty death irrespective of cause, time, or place.

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forever changed, and your coffee is still warm. How did I get so utterly blindsided? That's the curse of trauma.

Then, at the height of the shock, in the night, grief creeps in to relieve the trauma of its evil deeds. Time for a whole new set of horrors to enter my world within hardly any time at all. Grief is such a small word. Some may think it's sadness. It's not. Some may think it's something from which one can heal. It's not. Grief is an inappropriate word for the depths of despair, sorrow, and loss I feel.

Trauma and grief are embodied in me as I'm figuratively lying face down on the ground spiraling into darkness. Panic and fear enveloped me. Sadness engulfs my soul. I'm utterly lost, rudderless. What do I do? I can't breathe. I'm thrashing about, draped in a cloak of despair. I lost my husband, the love of my life, best friend, father to my children, protector, and provider. I lost our home and way of life, our future together, my military family, and my identity.

A great man died of natural causes, and trauma entered my life...

Wing Queen Widow<sup>2</sup>

Day 6 (18 May 2020)

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to myself as Wing Queen Widow in my writings for two reasons. First, I find it an ugly title. And trauma is very, very ugly. Second, I want to illustrate that trauma happens to everybody, even a wing commander's wife. Ultimately, we're all the same, just people groping in the dark and reaching for a hand to pull us out of the valley of the shadow of death.



## Near and Intermediate-Term Actions After Loss

### (Hours, Day, and Weeks)

1. One of the first calls you can make for the Fallen Hero's family is to the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS). TAPS will send out a survivor resource kit tailored to each family after losing a Fallen Hero. TAPS can be reached anytime at (800) 595-8277 or <https://www.taps.org/connect>.
2. Drop off a coffee or treat at the front door. Then text the spouse that it is there. You need to be present for only some acts of kindness. And you don't need to ask permission for every act of kindness. Just do it.
3. Take the Fallen Hero family member to a local coffee shop. Make the time commitment and invest in the welfare of a Fallen Hero spouse, parent, or sibling. It's just a cup of coffee, but being present and listening or, if they prefer, sharing light-hearted stories as a distraction is priceless. You will be fondly remembered forever by that family member.
4. Sit for an hour to watch small children so the widowed spouse can take a shower.
5. Take a family member for a walk in nature. And then do it again a week later. We all know the health benefits of exercise. Combining that with some exposure to nature and sunlight can do wonders for a grieving soul. The physical stress was so immense that I'm surprised I didn't fall dead within days of losing my husband.
6. Offer to help with the grieving spouse's funeral clothes. My friend on base asked me if I was set for the memorial service. I replied with a simple yes. I had black work clothes I could wear. Then she asked if I had black pantyhose. "No," I replied. "Do you have waterproof mascara?" Also, a negative reply. I didn't really know her plan; I was in a deep fog. She ran to the Base Exchange, picked up supplies, and then texted me that she had dropped them off at the front door. Done!
7. Help with children's memorial or funeral clothes. Check in with the Fallen Hero's spouse to ensure this is a detail not overlooked. Another good friend took my boys to Kohl's and got suits and shoes for them and a black dress for my 18-month-old daughter. Another fine woman of action.
8. Organize a "food train." When my neighbor asked if I'd like her to start a sign-up sheet for a food train, I replied no need. I had plenty of food in the house, after all. Thankfully the Chief was there and gently but firmly said, "Yes. You'll take the food train." Boy, was it a lifesaver. By day three, I still hadn't slept and wasn't hungry. I was in a very dark place. But I had five little lives depending on me. Thank God for my neighbor and the Chief. We had plenty of food, and I didn't have to be concerned with all five of our children eating well.
9. Deliver a bag of essential groceries like tissue boxes, toilet paper, coffee, juice, milk, eggs, pancake mix, and a loaf of bread.

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10. Offer to drive and sit in the waiting room for crisis therapy sessions. Fallen Hero family members probably are not in the right frame of mind to be driving. It's a significant contribution of your valuable time and something a wonderful leadership spouse did for me.
11. If the family has young children, you can drop off "fairy money" or some other surprise under the doormat every morning for a few days. The monetary value isn't significant. Just days after witnessing their daddy die, these five-year-old boys knew the fairy would come by and leave them a surprise under the doormat. They would wake up and rush to the door with joy. It was a pleasant moment for the children first thing in the morning—a little distraction from their nightmare reality.
12. Arrange for the installation spirit rock to be painted with a loving message supporting the Fallen Hero's family. Please take a picture of it and text it to the family.
13. Donate a one-time cleaning service before the funeral since some families may hold a reception at their home for family and friends. After two weeks of just living in my nightmare, I did not realize how dirty the house had become. I learned how bad it had fallen into disarray, but I still didn't care when the Chief came by for a visit and took a towel to wipe the thick dust off our television stand. When traumatized, it's hard to shower, eat, or even breathe. So, this act of donating a cleaning service was most welcome before the extended family came into town.
14. Offer to babysit small children so the widowed spouse can exercise outside or run errands.
15. If the spouse, parents, or siblings are readers, order some appropriate books delivered to their front doors. My favorites are *Traveling Light* by Max Lucado, and *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience*, and *Finding Joy* by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant. I also extensively relied on *Daily Devotionals* to sustain me through the days and nights. You can find a more robust list of books at the end of this handbook.
16. If you're crafty, create a unique gift for the family. For example, I was gifted a "joy jar" filled with star-shaped origami. Each star, when unwrapped, had a Bible verse written inside. It was a unique gift and exemplified the time a very thoughtful woman invested in me.
17. If the Fallen Hero's family regularly goes to church, it might have fallen off their schedule. Invite them to church with you. Or offer to drive them to their church.
18. Drop off thank you cards, a couple of pens, and a book of stamps, so the family has them ready to use.
19. Gift the Fallen Hero family member a one-of-a-kind, but not costly, piece of jewelry (e.g., an Air Force charm or a Space Force pendant with the Fallen Hero's name engraved on it.)
20. Better yet, create black memorial bracelets for the family.



21. If the family is moving, organize a collection of gift cards for restaurants along the road. Or items to entertain children on the car trip.
22. If the Fallen Hero dies before the start of the school year, deliver book bags for the children filled with pens, markers, folders, paper, and other age-appropriate school supplies. Or drop off gift cards for back-to-school clothes for the children as the family embarks on their next chapter.

## Long-Term Caring (First Two Years)

### Action

23. As leadership spouses, organize a lunch or brunch for local Fallen Hero families and listen to them. Do this annually. It can also serve as an opportunity for them to connect.
24. Ask the Air Force Families Forever (AFFF) installation representative to add you to the email group for Fallen Hero families so you have insight into the information shared with them.
25. Gift tickets to a Fallen Hero family. For example, access to an airshow, rodeo, base movie night, on-base sip-n-paint, or any local festival that offers military tickets to those local events. As much as the families are told they will always be a part of the Air Force/Space Force family, an act like this demonstrates the sentiment to be true.
26. Mow a Fallen Hero family's yard a couple of times.
27. Even better, offer to care for the yard with the spouse or parent. Weeding, mowing, and trimming need to be done, but the added benefit of companionship is priceless.
28. Accompany a Fallen Hero spouse, parent, or sibling to a home improvement store, buy a couple of plants and some soil, and plant them in their yard in honor of their Fallen Hero.
29. Spend 30 minutes playing with young children. An outstanding lieutenant from the mortuary team came to my home and spent a few minutes teaching my boys how to ride their bicycles without training wheels. My son's response, months after that initial lesson, was for me to text this wonderful person and say how proud he was to be able to do it finally! Only a few minutes of quality time with my boys, and they remember and appreciate him so much.
30. Organize, with the local AFFF representative, a special event for Fallen Hero families. For example, at Patrick Space Force Base (SFB), arrange a VIP trip to watch a space launch. At an Air Force base, arrange for a special VIP viewing of an air show.
31. Work with the local Airman's Attic to promote a donation event for Fallen Hero uniforms. It's tough to part with our loved one's items. This can be especially true for uniforms. But knowing a uniform will help a fellow Airman, or Guardian can help us part with some, or at least one, uniform. And do it ceremoniously, where Fallen Hero families can meet one another, talk with

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the local AFFF and TAPS representatives in person, and meet some extraordinary leadership spouses.

32. Ask if you can take some occupational camouflage pattern uniforms (OCPs) from the Fallen Hero's family to make teddies for children or a quilt for the Fallen Hero's spouse, parents, or siblings.
33. These gifts are forever keepsakes and help lessen the impending problem of dealing with clothes. It was tough to part with my husband's OCPs. But the beautiful teddies remain on the children's beds, and my quilt is next to my bed.
34. If there are young girls in the Fallen Hero's family, giving them an hour of your undivided attention is a precious gift they soon won't forget. Have a tea party, play with dolls, do a little Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) craft together or toss a ball



Figure 1. Teddies by "Quilts and Crochet by Jonna" on Facebook

ness I highlighted.

around. Your gift of time gives the children a new memory and provides the spouse with a moment of rest. Visit again a month later. In addition to losing my husband, I found becoming a suddenly single mom quite overwhelming.

35. If young children are five to 18 years old, ask the Fallen Hero spouse if they would like you to help them sign up for the TAPS Military Mentor Program (<https://www.taps.org/militarymentor>). My children's military mentor comes over and spends 30 minutes with my boys wrestling with them just like their daddy used to do. The military mentor gets them into a laughing frenzy. They love him for this simple act and precious gift of time. When I briefed the Secretary of Defense on issues concerning military widows, this was the act of kindness I highlighted.

36. Send a care package containing a small book, stickers representing the children's hobbies and interests, markers, and glue sticks. Inform the Fallen Hero spouse that the children can create a little memory book, glue in pictures of their Fallen Hero, decorate it with stickers and drawings, and keep it in their bed to keep the Fallen Hero parent close at night.
37. If you are near a base with water access and a Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) program that rents out boats, take a few Fallen Hero families out on the water for a couple of hours. Help create new experiences and new memories, and a boat ride is quite fun and memorable.
38. If the children like animals, call the local zoo and see if they would honor them by gifting an annual pass or a special behind-the-scenes visit. Brevard Zoo did this for us simply

because I wrote a note on their comment board about how cathartic it was for us to visit there regularly. A board member called me and invited us for a special day with the zookeeper to feed the fish, meet a hyrax, and help train the giraffes. Again, allow the family to create new memories by arranging this type of activity.

39. Invite Fallen Hero families to a base-promoted event such as a fire station burger burn or deployed/community family dinners.
40. Invite Fallen Hero families to the Air Force or Space Force birthday celebrations and cake cuttings.
41. Invite a few Fallen Hero families for a bowling game on base. Or arrange for several Fallen Hero families to enjoy a bowling event.
42. Make and give two “Get Out of Jail Free” cards so that when the Fallen Hero spouse gets stuck, say, dealing with a sick child while also needing to go to the commissary they can call and cash in a favor. It’s hard to ask for a favor. This little method makes it easier.
43. Organize and host a sip-n-paint on the installation for Fallen Hero adult family members. The creation of new, fun memories is paramount to moving forward.
44. Invite Fallen Hero families to join you for an interment at the local National Cemetery to lay to rest and honor Forgotten Heroes, who are unaccompanied Veterans with no identified family or friends. Find out more from the Missing in America Project at [www.miap.us](http://www.miap.us).
45. Inform a Gold Star family that they are eligible for a free national park pass. Visiting national parks can be so cathartic.
46. If you knew the Fallen Hero, collect photos and make a small memory book with lovely hand-written stories from the office. These are memories the family will cherish and a side of the Fallen Hero they likely did not experience firsthand.

## Organizations

47. Help the spouse register children with A Soldier’s Child. This is a fantastic organization that supports Fallen Hero children during birthdays and through various camps to build their resiliency and confidence. It requires filling out a long form, and it would be helpful to sit with the spouse and help them fill it out. (<https://www.asoldierschild.org>)
48. Help the Fallen Hero’s spouse register young children with Angels of America’s Fallen. This organization strives to build up children’s resiliency by supporting them to pursue a sport or hobby through their eighteenth birthday. My children took survival swim lessons and classes through them. (<https://aoafallen.org>)
49. Help the Fallen Hero spouse register with the Gary Sinise Foundation. It hosts many events where families can gather, make new memories, and get to know other families with shared

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experiences. Through Snowball Express, we decorated Halloween cookies together, virtually met Winter the Dolphin in Tampa, and visited Kennedy Space Center. (<https://www.garysinisefoundation.org/snowball-express>)

50. Help the Fallen Hero's family register with TAPS and walk them through the many services they offer, highlighting ones that may be of interest to the family, such as a Regional Military Survivor Seminar, the National Military Survivor Seminar, and Good Grief Camp over Memorial Day week, or a local or online TAPS care group. (<https://www.taps.org/>)
51. Inform the family about TAPS Expeditions to experience a physically challenging adventure and bond with fellow Fallen Hero families. (<https://www.taps.org/expeditions>)

## Holidays

52. Encourage installation recognition of November as Children's Grief Awareness Month.
53. Write a note to Gold Star widowed spouses on April 5 (Gold Star Spouses Day).
54. Write a note to Gold Star widowed mothers on the last Sunday of September (Gold Star Mother's and Family's Day).
55. During September's Suicide Prevention Awareness month, invite Fallen Hero families who experienced suicide loss out for a coffee at the Base Exchange for an hour to chat.
56. Arrange for the installation spirit rock to be painted with the names of all local Fallen Heroes during May.
57. Put flowers on the Fallen Heroes' graves at local veterans' cemeteries on Father's Day or Mother's Day—or any day. Please take a picture and text it to the family. This may be special for families who live far away and cannot regularly visit the gravesite.
58. With a list of addresses from the AFFF of local Fallen Hero families (and with their permission to share information, of course), find two dates of importance to them, such as the Fallen Hero's birthday or Mother's Day (if they lost a child). Fill up your calendar with these dates and mail them a little card that states something like, "My husband and I are thinking of you today." This is a card they may save for a long time.
59. Send a Father's Day text or phone call. These sensitive holidays are dates people tend to avoid to "not upset" the Fallen Hero's family. They might already be upset, and might welcome an unexpected and caring call.
60. Also, consider calling a Fallen Hero spouse on a regular, holiday-free Friday or Saturday evening. I find these times to be my loneliest.
61. Note the couple's wedding anniversary and send a heartfelt card. Even my sisters-in-law did

not want to call or text me on our wedding anniversary to avoid upsetting me. Once I explained to them that I was already upset about that particular date, they now reach out to me. It warms my heart when people remember our wedding date.

62. Attend a wreath-laying event on National Wreaths Across America Day, the Saturday before Christmas, and invite Fallen Hero families to volunteer to lay wreaths with you.
63. Organize the placement of ribbons on lamp posts or pillars on base with local Fallen Hero names and pictures during Memorial Day week.
64. Work with the base chaplain's office and arrange for a memorial tree in the chapel for our Fallen Heroes. Invite Fallen Hero families to decorate the tree with pictures of their loved ones. You can set up a craft table next to it so Airmen, Guardians, and families who visit the chapel for services can take a moment to create and hang an ornament in honor of a Fallen Hero.
65. For Memorial Day, set up a memorial table with pictures and stories of local Fallen Heroes in the Base Exchange. Invite Fallen Hero families to place letters or photos on the table at a set time so they can meet each other and perhaps meet leadership and their spouses.
66. Help organize a POW/MIA flag-raising ceremony on the third Friday of September.
67. Encourage the base library to set up a Memorial Day display featuring local Fallen Heroes. Highlight books on trauma, grief, and survivorship.
68. Send Valentine's Day gifts to a Fallen Hero spouse. It was nine months after Tom died when Valentine's Day rolled around. I thought, there's a good chance I will never receive a Valentine's Day card or gift again. A fine woman sent a Valentine's Day package to our house. I immediately thought it was probably a little candy for the children. That would have been so sweet and thoughtful. But I was utterly surprised when I opened the box and saw the gifts were for me! Somebody thought of me on Valentine's Day! How special. You could send a bath bomb, candies, roses, a base logo coffee mug, a patch from leadership, etc.
69. Arrange for the commander's spouse or key spouse to send a personal note on the "Angelversary" (death date). It's impactful to get a personal message from leadership, especially after time has passed. It demonstrates that the Fallen Hero is not forgotten. And it also shows that we are still a part of the Air Force/Space Force family.
70. Note the Fallen Hero's birthday and send a heartfelt letter to their parents.
71. For Father's Day, if there are young children, take the children to "out for ice cream." It's under \$10 and one hour of your time, but it will forever impact their young lives. Speaking from experience, if the Fallen Hero is a father, his children may not be surrounded by many father figures and may be craving their attention, as my children are. On Father's Day, my six-year-old son said, "I wish we had a father to celebrate Father's Day with." When I ask male friends to come over and roughhouse with my boys, I find that they think it's an odd request, yet they all happily do it. My daughter, Valentina,

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and I laugh on the sidelines while the boys get tossed around and play. As I mentioned earlier, how could anybody guess that what I need is for a male role model to come over and jump on the trampoline with my boys?

72. Invite Fallen Hero families to the installation's Easter egg hunt, or, at least, inform them of the time and location. We're considered military family members, yet we often feel we get overlooked.
73. Invite Fallen Hero families over for the chapel Christmas tree lighting, hot chocolate, and firetruck visit with Santa. Arrange for a special meeting between Fallen Hero children and Santa.

## Educate and Advocate<sup>3</sup>

74. Meet with your local AFFF representative and listen to them. Have a semiannual phone call or in-person meeting with them.
75. Ask the AFFF who the Fallen Hero families are in the area and what their current, most pressing needs are.
76. Be an advocate for Fallen Hero families. Learn more about active and yet-to-be-resolved issues. Contact the USAF/USSF Survivor Advocacy Council. (AFPC.DPFFF.AFFF@us.af.mil)
77. While there are many scholarships for Fallen Hero children entering college, there are limited resources to help younger children in private or parochial schools. Folds of Honor is an excellent place to start for children in elementary schools. Certain military communities, such as Special Operations, have more robust options for young children. It takes some internet research to discover all possible scholarships for a young Fallen Hero child who wants to remain in a private or parochial school. You can help by spending some of your time researching this area. (<https://foldsofhonor.org/>)
78. Inform the Fallen Hero spouse about Military OneSource life coaches. And, if interested, help the spouse register. I found that once I lost my life partner, I was no longer a confident, secure woman able to make life's tough decisions. Where should I settle my family? What work should I start? These are overwhelming questions for me, and I no longer have my rock, my sounding board, my confidant to bounce questions off. I had no idea what to do, and now these little lives depended solely on me for answers. Cue "freak out." I signed up for Military OneSource online chats with a life coach. We chatted for about 20 minutes every other week. I did not know what to expect from a life coach, but she helped me break down overwhelming life decisions into bite-sized pieces I could handle in a shorter time. I think of it as moving the ball 10 yards instead of always going

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<sup>3</sup> While a few of these recommendations fall under the purview of the FAR, the Casualty Assistance Representative (CAR), or AFFF; redundancy helps ensure nothing is missed.



for the end zone. Smaller goals I can handle as I get closer to the big answers. (<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/>)

79. Help a Fallen Hero spouse register for Military OneSource's Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) Program. They will also need a DS Login and proof of Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS) status for eligibility.
80. Even better, sit with the spouse and go through the Military OneSource website with them to review the vast array of tools. Or arrange for a Military OneSource representative to have a conference phone call to walk through all the resources for the spouse. Sometimes the Military OneSource website feels like "drinking from a firehose," so it is good to have somebody help walk you through it.
81. Recommend that the Fallen Hero spouse talks with an installation financial consultant, which is free. The consultant can sit down with them and help make a budget, a financial plan, or preparations for doing taxes alone.
82. Reinforce the Fallen Hero spouse's understanding of the Heroes Earnings Assistance and Relief Tax Act (HEART ACT). Inform the spouse that, under the HEART ACT, the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) and Bereavement monies can be put into a Roth IRA only within the first year after the death of the Fallen Hero. This is a great opportunity to allow the money to grow free from taxes. Arrange a meeting with the local Casual Assistance Representative to learn about this offer.
83. Help the immediate family get in touch with the installation's education services specialist, who can help walk through the educational benefits, requirements, and time limits for Fallen Hero spouses and children. Reinforce the family's knowledge about the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry (Fry) and Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance (DEA) scholarships, what the differences are, who is covered, and for how long.
84. Inform the Fallen Hero family about equine therapy opportunities. Remount Foundation in Colorado Springs and Military OneSource can help with equine therapy options. The first six sessions may be free, depending on the facility. This is something you can research on the family's behalf. The Fallen Hero spouse likely is very low on energy and motivation, and the Family Assistance Representative (FAR) can't be expected to know everything. Helping with this type of research can be very useful. (<https://remountfoundation.org/>)
85. Inform the Fallen Hero spouse of Accelerated Resolution Therapy (ART) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapies to treat trauma and anxiety.
86. With a bit of research on your part, you may be able to discover benefits specific to the Fallen Hero family's state residence. Help ease the burden of searching for benefits that might be overlooked. For example, in Texas, a Gold Star four-year-old can enter full-time pre-kindergarten for free.
87. Fallen Hero parents may want access to the military installation as the last connection to their lost child. It is up to the installation commander if MWR is open to Fallen Hero parents to allow

them, as Defense Biometric Identification System (DBIDS) card holders, access to facilities like the gym, base lodging, or bowling alley, etc. Advocate for more installations to allow DBIDS holders access to MWR.

88. Advocate for DBIDS holders to be able to bring another family member or friend with them onto the installation. After all, who wants to go alone? The single mom who lost her only child in Afghanistan may wish to bring her best friend to the home installation to lay flowers as she visits the base that meant so much to her son.
89. Change the culture around trauma, grief, and death. Please avoid using a whispered voice and shying away from us. Face the ugly. Hold the widow's/widower's hand and walk with them for a moment. It takes a brave and special person to do that. And I was so blessed to walk for a while with a few amazing women of courage and grace as they helped me back onto my feet.

## What to Say and What Not to Say

90. Please do not text, "If there's anything I can do for you, just let me know." This was the text I received the most and the one I came to dislike the most. I felt I was already a "ruined" human being, and now I was required to ask/grovel for help. It made me feel like I had to ask for charity.
91. Also, please do not leave a message saying, "Please call if there's anything I can do for you." Instead, say what concrete action you would like to take for them. Pick something from 1-88 listed above. Your efforts will be forever appreciated. Don't ask; do.
92. Please do not say, "He's not forgotten." No kidding. I think of my husband 1,000 times a day, every day. Instead, say, "I think of him often." Or "he remains in my prayers."
93. Please do not say, "You're doing great." Or "you seem to be doing so well." No, I'm not. You don't understand the internal turmoil even if I look put together on the outside.
94. Ask, "Would you like to go for a walk?" "Would you like to get some sunshine?" or "Would you like to breathe fresh air with me?"
95. Be specific with your text messages: "Can I help you sort out your memorial/funeral clothes?" "Do you have suits for the children?" "Do you have black pantyhose and waterproof mascara?" "Wanna meet at the Exchange for a coffee and doughnut in an hour?"
96. Please avoid sending a good-gesture text stating, "I know you're not on Facebook, but there's been a nice outpouring of tributes to your son." Instead, print off the tributes, arrange them in a little scrapbook and stick them in the mail to the Fallen Hero's spouse or parents, so they have a thoughtful keepsake.

97. Ask, “Can I drive you to the grocery store today? You really don’t need the added stress of driving in traffic.”
98. Please avoid saying, “he did all he had to do on Earth.” Or “he lived a full life.” Instead, say, “he was a great man. I will never forget him.”
99. Please avoid saying, “You need to give yourself time to grieve.” What does that even mean?
100. Please text, “I’m at Domino’s. I will drop off a pizza at the front door in 15 minutes.” Again, do. Don’t ask; do. The worst case is that a pizza gets thrown away.
101. If you know the family, please write a long heartfelt letter detailing a specific memory you have of the Fallen Hero. Somebody wrote me a story about seeing my husband and baby dancing together at SnoFest, the annual family skiing event hosted by Colorado front-range military bases. It was such a nice visual for me. The story is so valuable to me because my daughter will likely not even remember Tom since she was so young when he died.

## Where Are We Now?

So, I am a survivor. But I absolutely hate being a survivor. I don’t want to simply survive. I want to thrive. I want joy back in my heart. I want to fall in love again. I want to be happy and fulfilled.

Rightly or wrongly, I think of my life paralleling that of someone who is a double amputee. It’s as if an improvised explosive device (IED) blew off my legs. I experienced trauma. Shock, horror, blood everywhere. Trouble breathing. I entered the emergency care and survival time. The medics, in my case, were the Chief and a priest. They administered life-saving triage.

I survived the initial onslaught of trauma and entered a period of long, devastating, grief-filled traumatic days and nights as I realized I wasn’t going to wake up from this nightmare. Ghost legs ache. My life was so intertwined with Tom’s that half of me died with him. The support team for my survival at this stage consisted of a FAR, a CAR, and a mortuary team member.

Days turned into weeks. Weeks into months. This is when some family and friends start trickling away or thinking I should be getting over it. People don’t think these thoughts about an amputee. They can see the wound, which is precisely why I am using this analogy. It’s also the point where I realized my legs wouldn’t grow back despite all the prayers asking God to return to how I was. I still feel them ache at night, praying for God to return Tom to me— begging for mercy.

The next stage resembles an amputee adapting to living with a wheelchair. This living is hard and isolating and filled with negative emotions. And for an amputee, it’s the time to embrace life with prosthetic legs. I did so reluctantly. There’s no going back to my life or the person I used to be. Since I must move forward, I’m going to hold on to the image of walking with the most advanced prosthetic legs, perhaps an inch taller than I was, perhaps springy so I can run marathons. That’s my goal, my vision. I stopped praying for my husband to return and started praying that the loneliness won’t last

a lifetime. Getting fitted for prosthetics is uncomfortable and painful at times. It is a hurtful adjustment. And my ghost legs still ache. Adjusting to prosthetics—or life without my husband—is also scary. My life is filled with periods of anxiety and nervousness. But my life is also filled with tiny glimpses of hope, a future, happiness, and faith. This is where we're at now. I'm falling forward and remembering the vision.

-Wing Queen Widow

Month 18 (6 November 2021)

## Helpful List of Reading Materials

These resources, like the suggestions above, are listed in alphabetical order. I have read most, but not all, of the resources listed below. However, the ones that still need to be read were recommended to me by other Fallen Hero family members. The resources are a mix of religious and secular, informative and self-help.<sup>4</sup> The list is here to offer some titles as a starting point in case you decide to send books to a Fallen Hero family or for you.

Ambard, Linda. *Courageously Alive: A Walk Through Military Loss*.

Asaro, M. Regina, and Joanne Steem. *Military Widow: A Survival Guide*.

Bonanno, George. *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us about Life after Loss*.

Byock, Ira. *Dying Well: Peace and Possibilities at the End of Life*.

Carlson, Trudy. *Suicide Survivors' Handbook*.

Clear, James. *Atomic Habits: An Easy, and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones*.

Dungy, Tony. *Uncommon: Finding Your Path to Significance*.

Feldmanm, David. *Super Survivors: The Surprising Link between Suffering and Success*.

Fine, Carla. *No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One*.

Floyd, Gregory. *A Grief Unveiled: One Father's Journey through the Loss of a Child*.

Haugk, Kenneth, C. *Journeying through Grief* (four short books to be given to the Fallen Hero family member at three weeks, three months, six months, and 11 months)

Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*.

Lucado, Max. *Traveling Light*.

Poole, Robert. *Section 60: Arlington National Cemetery*.

Sandberg, Sheryl. *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*.

Young, Sarah. *Jesus Calling* devotional book.

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<sup>4</sup> This list is not all-inclusive as it relates to me being a Christian woman. However, there are excellent books based on other faiths to help the grieving family. E.g., *No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life* by Thich Nhat Hanh is a Buddhist approach to death.

## Abbreviations

|       |                                                 |
|-------|-------------------------------------------------|
| AFFF  | Air Force Families Forever                      |
| ART   | Accelerated Resolution Therapy                  |
| CAR   | Casualty Assistance Representative              |
| DBIDS | Defense Biometric Identification System         |
| DEA   | Dependents' Educational Assistance              |
| DEERS | Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System |
| EMDR  | Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing   |
| FAR   | Family Assistance Representative                |
| IED   | Improvised Explosive Device                     |
| MWR   | Morale, Welfare, and Recreation                 |
| OCP   | Occupational Camouflage Pattern                 |
| SECO  | Spouse Education and Career Opportunities       |
| SGLI  | Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance            |
| STEM  | Science Technology Engineering & Math           |
| TAPS  | Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors        |
| USAF  | United States Air Force                         |
| USSF  | United States Space Force                       |

