

Operation Horses and Heroes
Board of Directors
740 Cheyenne Lane
Elgin, IL 60123

6 October 2017

Dear OHH Board Members,

The Operation Horses and Heroes program truly is nothing short of Heaven on earth! This miraculous experience will forever remain etched on my heart as a cherished memory.

I'm a 20-year USAF retiree & served from 1979-2000. During my career, I was deployed several times. My personal experiences during said deployments included many victory celebrations, but (unfortunately) I encountered quite a few horrific events as well. One of the most devastating was the Black Hawk 5 Friendly Fire Incident, which occurred in Apr 94 & resulted in the loss of 26 fellow military brothers & sisters from the US, United Kingdom, France and Turkey. We lost several fellow Kurdish warriors on that day as well. Two US Army Black Hawks were shot down by two USAF F-15 Fighters. Needless to say...There were no survivors. When the incident occurred, I had already been in-theater for over 2 months & had worked closely with many of the victims, which added more weight to my emotional burden. It simply stands to reason that involvement in an incident such as this has left a horrific scar on my heart and the passage of time has done very little to ease the pain of my emotional wounds.

Also, I've been single all of my life & I have no children. Since I was constantly surrounded by my military family members while on active duty, this void wasn't so difficult to endure. However, since 2000; it's been sheer hell on earth. After retirement, I had to return to rural NC where the closest military installation is at least a 4-hour drive away. Due to the fact that I have so many emotional scars, I've become the butt of an endless flow of hurtful & humiliating jokes among my family members. In recent years, my relationship with my mom has become severely fractured due to the fact that she's made very little effort to gain knowledge and/or understanding regarding my illnesses as well. One of her routine statements to me has always been: "You need to put this behind you & move on. I don't understand why you can't just get over it." I've also had to sever my relationship with 1 of my 2 brothers. One of his routine statements to me was: "Every time I look at you, I no longer see my sister. I just see her illness."

Eventually, I transitioned from having a very limited amount of meaningful connections with others to almost no connections at all. This past May, the loneliness & alienation became so painful that I began researching PTSD treatment programs. The first application I sent out was rejected because they only treat male veterans. Upon receipt of this news, my level of devastation intensified even further & placed me squarely at the very end of my rope. I then posted a request for prayer on a military Face Book group page. Shortly thereafter, I received an invitation from Jerry Paulsen (Founder of Operation Horses and Heroes) to attend a treatment program at Hambden Hills Stables in Chardon, OH. My prayer had finally been answered!

All OHH staff members are veterans; therefore, they have the ability to provide a level of care that is a derivative of both professional training AND personal experience. Consequently, this wonderful team of dedicated therapists are able to provide a level of care that is nothing short of miraculous! During the entire program, all focus is placed on each participant and the staff members ensure that all participants' individual needs are fully met. Also, the fact that all participants are blessed with the awesome privilege of spending an extended amount of time with their fellow brothers & sisters in arms is yet an additional layer of icing on the cake!

The surrounding community stepped in to cater our meals, donate tables, chairs, a large canvas awning, etc, etc. The equine facilities are all privately owned & the proprietors allow OHH to use them free of charge. The Knop family hosted our event to honor their 22 year old son (Allen) who lost his life in 2005 while serving in Iraq. Many of the OHH volunteers live several hours away & made that long drive just for us!

On our last day there, we were given personal contact info for each member of the OHH Cadre & we were told to call them at any time. Also, several staff members have followed-up with me via text, email & personal phone calls. Obviously, when these dedicated men & women say: "Call me at any time (day or night) & I'll be there for you." They truly MEAN IT! On the last day of the program, we were also given a questionnaire. The rating numbers on each question were: "1-5". I crossed out that string of numbers next to every question and replaced them with a "10+!"

I will be forever grateful to each and every member of the OHH team who worked from sun-up to sun-down for us during each day of this miraculous program.

Donna Wray, USAF (ret)