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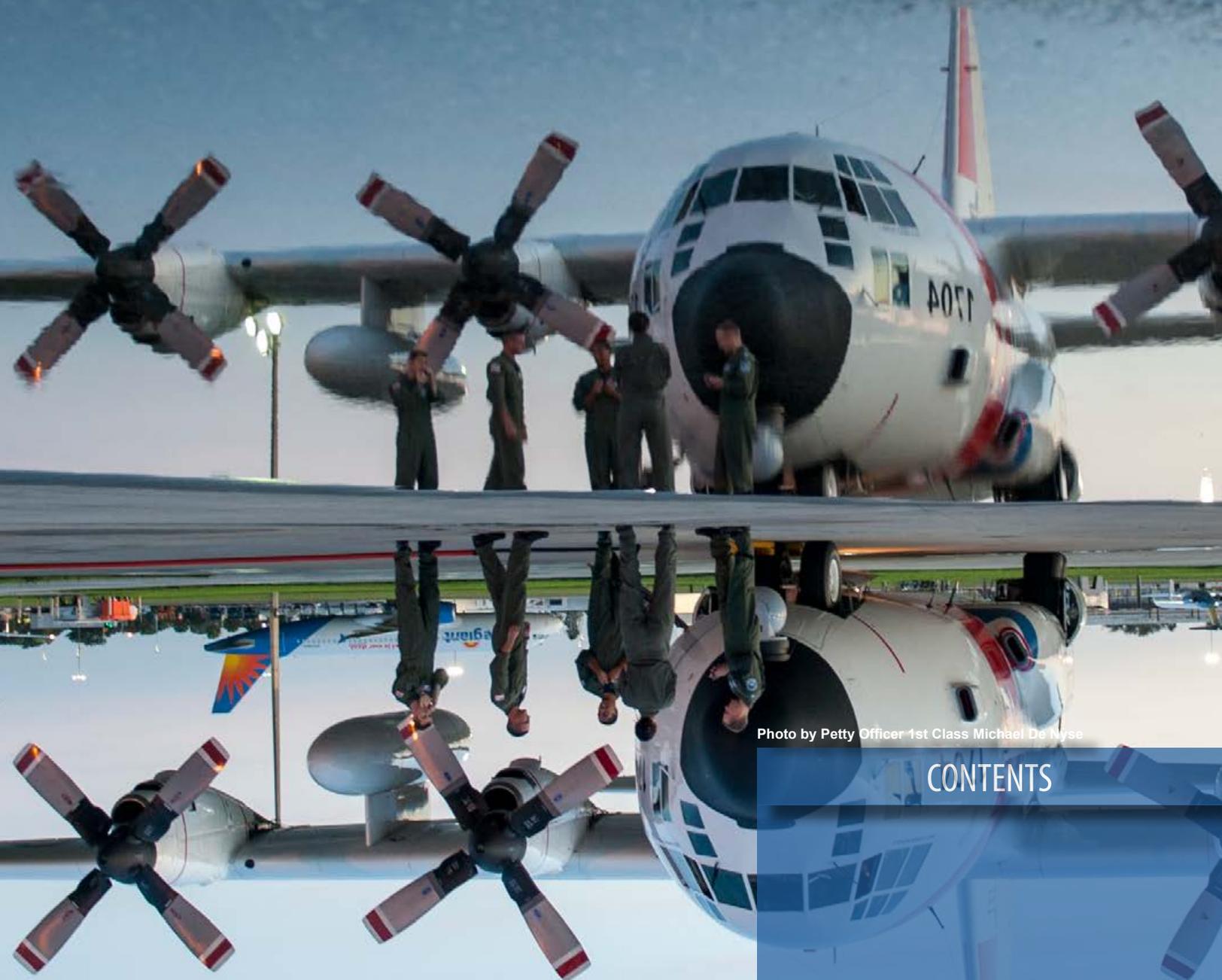


Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Michael De Nyse

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For Those Who Serve and Those Who Support™

cut to align with the existing benefit payment policy.

This policy did not just affect the Jahns family; it had implications for the families of all Guard and Reserve airmen that perform their missions on IDT status. Ernst's empathy and passion propelled him to take action. He spent the next five years committed to ensuring equal benefits for equal sacrifice.

"Every day, teams of Active and Reserve Component airmen work together to accomplish the Air Force mission," said John Fedrigo, deputy assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Reserve Affairs and Airman Readiness. "When an airman makes the ultimate sacrifice, that airman and his or her family should be properly cared for and should receive the benefits they deserve. Their benefits should not be based on the status they happen to be in on that given day."

As a citizen airman, Ernst began his efforts by briefing his own military chain of the inequity between duty statuses and writing background papers. He personally briefed numerous committees and personnel including the Reserve Forces Policy Board, the Air Forces Policy Committee, the Chief of the National Guard Bureau, the Air Force Reserve commander and the Air Force Chief of Staff.

In his capacity as a private citizen, Ernst engaged numerous congressional offices as well as key Veteran Service Organizations. He also developed and maintained, 95letters.com, a website to serve as an ongoing reference for both congressional and defense staff, as well as the affected families.

Ernst maximized his rights as both a military member and a private citizen, and his combined efforts were rewarded on Dec. 23, 2016, when President Obama signed into law the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act that, in part, revised the Reserve and Guard survivor benefits policies.

The NDAA removed the disparity in survivor benefits between active duty members and Guard or Reserve

*By Kristal Gault, 340th Flying Training Group*

Retired Lt. Col. Todd Ernst believes the notion of "taking care of the military family" starts with taking care of your fellow airmen. At a ceremony here Feb. 13, Ernst was recognized for doing just that.

His efforts to help a fallen airman's family led to a legislative change that ensures the more than 700,000 currently serving Reserve and Guard personnel and their families will receive survivor benefits equal to those provided to the surviving families of active duty service members.

While on active duty in 2003, Ernst flew alongside Maj. Pete "Oly" Jahns, a Reserve instructor pilot for the 100th Flying Training Squadron (FTS), which preceded the 39th FTS. Jahns perished on March 19, 2003, in a T-38 crash during a routine training flight at JBSA-Randolph.

Ernst participated in the missing man formation for Jahns' memorial and subsequently forged a strong friendship with the Jahns family. The bond between Ernst and the family grew when Ernst returned to JBSA-Randolph in 2007 as a reservist with the 39th FTS. When Ms. Jahns received news in early 2012 that there would be significant changes to her survivor benefit payments, Ernst was one of the first people she contacted.

Jahns received one of 95 letters sent to surviving family members stating that a "significant error" had been made when accounting for their loved ones' administrative pay status at the time of death. As a result, survivor benefit payments the families had relied on for years were drastically lowered and, in many cases, stopped altogether.

Ernst learned there was a differentiation in survivor benefit payments based on whether the member was on "active duty" or "inactive duty training" (IDT) status. Maj. Jahns was on IDT status when he perished and now his family was caught in the middle of a legislative provision in the survivor benefit program. The survivor benefits payments they had been receiving for nine years were



Retired Air Force Lt. Col. Todd Ernst (L) receives The Seven Seals Award from Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) from Navy Capt. Steve Knight (R) during a ceremony on Feb. 13 at Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph, Texas, to honor him for his efforts to bring about the legislative change that now ensures families of Reserve and Guard service members receive the same survivor benefits as active duty service members. (Air Force photo by Joel Martinez, Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph Public Affairs)

members who perish while serving in IDT status. Now the survivors of all service members who perish while serving their country will receive equal survivor benefits. Additionally, the revised law will now allow airmen on inactive duty status to be buried in a National Cemetery if they perish while performing the mission.

Fedrigo explained that, "with this change in legislation passed in the Fiscal Year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act we corrected an inequity in survivor benefits that existed between various duty statuses Reserve Component airmen participate in."

"I'm just thankful to have played a role along with a great team of others in ending this disparity in benefits for our fellow military families who have sacrificed so much," Ernst said. "This is truly what it looks like when

the military family steps up to take care of each other."

As a token of appreciation for all of Ernst's efforts that led to this change in the current NDAA, Fedrigo presented him a letter of thanks from Daniel Sitterly, principal deputy assistant to the Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. Ernst also received The Seven Seals Award from Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve or ESGR from Navy Capt. Steve Knight.

"I am proud of my Air Force team and proud of service members such as Lt. Col. Todd Ernst who brought this inequity to our attention and who fought valiantly to right this wrong," said Fedrigo. "It is the least we can do for the men and women who put their lives on the line for our protection." 



Attendees of Operation Love Letters release balloons at the conclusion of the event, Feb. 19, 2017. (Photo by Brian D. Godette)



Michele Carey and Linda Keneen prepare the desserts for Operation Love Letters attendees. These were favorite desserts of fallen service members remembered during the event by families in attendance. Sweet memories were created as families shared why the Service member chose this as their favorite dessert or some other detail that made an important memory to associate with the dessert. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Scott, Army Reserve Medical Command)

not counting when he was killed. It seems that no matter how many good memories, the last memories remain.”

Mercado has found that being an active participant of Survivor Outreach Services (SOS) is a source of strength. Previous SOS events, such as OLL, have been recognized as a great resource to expand peer-to-peer survivor support, gain spiritual insight and resilience, and interact with command leadership, family program directors, chaplains, child and youth services, and community partners.

“We go to so many ceremonies, and I am very grateful that they want to honor our sons and daughters. Today is different. There are no gun salutes, and there are no Taps,” said Mercado. “It’s all about remembering their lives and sharing that with everyone else.”

“We write letters and attach them to balloons, which we later release in remembrance of the fallen. It’s a relaxed environment,” she explained. “We are still honoring our loved ones, but in a different way.”

Mercado is a member of American Gold Star Mothers, Inc., an organization for mothers who have lost a son or daughter through their service. She is also a member of Blue Star Mothers of America, Inc., an organization for mothers, grandmothers, and stepmothers of children serving in the Armed Forces, to include veterans. Her membership with Blue Star Mothers is in relation to her oldest son, Army veteran, Staff Sgt. Carlos Vaquenaro.

Mercado’s involvement with SOS, as well as Gold Star Moms, has a goal of guiding family members through the

process of coping with the loss of their loved one. Her personal goal is to help raise awareness in how families grieve the loss of their loved ones.

Mercado explained how the trials that we endure allow us to comfort others through their trials.

“The trials that we go through allow us to experience hardship so we can help or comfort others,” Mercado said. “We don’t have to speak, [because] it’s the little things that count. A smile or a hug [or] just being there for a person who is suffering.”

Mercado said that all people experience grief in different ways and on different levels, and she described the pain experienced from the loss of her son as being unique.

“Jalfred was placed on life support on December eleventh. He was declared brain dead a few days later on December thirteenth. I had to make the decision to take him off life support,” said Mercado. “I then lost a sister from lung cancer a day later, and a couple weeks later my nephew was killed in a car accident.”

Mercado said it is important to have awareness when relating to other family members who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

“I never tell another Gold Star Mom, ‘I understand your pain.’ Although we have something in common,

everyone goes through the grief process differently,” she said. “It would be better to say, ‘I have an idea of your pain,’ because the pain that I am experiencing may be different than everybody else. It may not be as dramatic to anybody else, but still it’s my pain. It is unique.”

Mercado said that placing the needs of others above your own correlates to the principles America’s military was founded on. She also said that embracing this mindset helps her to remain close to and remember her son.

“It’s about doing something for someone else. I helped plan OLL this year and last year,” said Mercado. “Instead of just thinking about my son, it’s about everybody. You become apathetic as opposed to

sympathetic.”

Mercado placed an emphasis on families who continue to support the military community after their loss.

“I’d like to think that I can provide support and comfort to fellow survivors, being a source of inspiration for those who share their unique problems,” said Mercado.

“I encourage families to attend OLL, but if the family finds it to be too painful, I am understanding of that,” she said. “It’s true. It is painful, but it’s an opportunity for people to honor and remember [their] loved one.”

By Victor J. Washington, Army Reserve Family Programs

Yolanda Mercado, mother of fallen service member, Pfc. Jalfred D. Vaquerano, made an opening speech to kick off the 2nd Annual Operation Love Letters (OLL) event, hosted at the Veterans Memorial Park and Museum.

Operation Love Letters takes place at 16 locations throughout the United States. Mercado is one of many mothers of fallen service members who gather annually for this event to honor their loved ones. For Mercado, this event was an opportunity to celebrate the life of her son who was killed in action on Dec. 13, 2011, while deployed to Afghanistan.

As she pondered memorable moments had with her son, she described the joy she felt at Jalfred’s graduation from basic training, in contrast with the sadness she felt when he deployed.

“One of the fondest memories that I have about my son was when he graduated basic training at Fort Benning,” said Mercado. “He was at Basic Training for three months, which was the longest he had ever been away from home.”

“One of the saddest moments was when he came to say goodbye before deployment,” she said. “Of course

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*“Instead of just thinking about my son, it’s about everybody.”*  
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Lt. Gen. Charles Luckey, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Reserve Command, addresses the audience of the 2016 Department of Defense Reserve Family Readiness Awards at the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes in Arlington, Va., Mar. 24, 2017. (U.S. Army photo by Eboni Everson-Myart)

Deployment Handbook and the Return and Reunion Homecoming Handbook for Parents and Extended Family into Spanish in order to provide a beneficial tool that assisted family members with language barriers. These handbooks ensured family members were familiar with common readiness terminology, and provided a resource to which they could later refer.

Sgt. Maj. Shawn Michael Isaacson explained that when del Carmen Guererra recognized a need for bilingual language packets within the unit, she devoted her own time and talents

to translate them so that every family in the unit would be able access the information.

These examples represent the kind of readiness and response that has come to exemplify the very best in Reserve family readiness programs, and why the Department of Defense has taken to recognizing those units that go above and beyond in their support of Service members and their families.

Both NOSC San Jose and MACG-48 received the 2016 Department of Defense Reserve Family Readiness Award in a ceremony at the Pentagon Friday morning.

“One of the reasons we’re able to rely on our Reserve members is because of the great readiness programs at home,” said Matthew Dubois, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Integration, during the ceremony. Dubois also noted how the nation’s Guard and Reserve members have been critical in supporting operations worldwide in the wake of the events on September 11, 2001. Since that date, nearly 1,000,000 Reservists have been deployed, making the task of readying Reservists and their families for mobilization all the more critical.

Established in 2000, this award recognizes National Guard and Reserve units, one from each of the seven Reserve Components, who demonstrate outstanding programs supporting their military families. Representatives from each of the winning units were in attendance and received a commemorative plaque and framed certificate from Dubois.

Each unit also received a certificate of recognition and award from the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA). With more than 370,000 members from every branch of service – including active duty, National Guard, Reserve, retired, former officers, and their families – MOAA is a powerful force speaking for a strong national defense and representing the interests of military officers at every stage in their careers. This is the 12th year MOAA has presented units with a monetary award intended to enhance family support programs.

[Click here for a complete list of all 2016 recipients.](#)



Across the United States, Reserve family readiness programs work to help National Guard and Reserve members and their families overcome hardship and adversity. Sometimes these challenges arise from deployment, and other times they come from unexpected places.

After losing his job and flunking out of school, a financially stressed San Jose Reservist sunk deep into depression. Fearing for her husband, his wife reached out to the service member’s command. Staff from Navy Operational Support Center (NOSC) San Jose jumped into action to get them through their post-deployment crisis.

“When we find a family in crisis we’ve responded in different ways, relying on our resources and really giving it that personal touch,” said Commander Amy Hunt of NOSC San Jose. “I don’t think we look at [family readiness] programmatically. It’s just really about caring for our service members.”

The NOSC provided mental health services and brought the Reservist on orders to generate immediate income for his family. They also invited him to assist with planning a public health project that serves veterans struggling with service- and combat-related issues. Soon the service member was able to find a new job, and his involvement with the project helped him emerge from isolation and find new hope.

“They gave me back my husband,” said his wife.

And stories like this are not uncommon.

Take the story of a volunteer at Marine Air Control Guard 48 (MACG-48), 4th Marine Aircraft Wing, who helped to combat feelings of isolation experienced by the unit’s large Hispanic population.

Maria del Carmen Guererra translated both the Headquarters Marine Corps Community Service Pre-

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The following employers have been named finalists for the 2017 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award. In all, National Guard and Reserve service members submitted 3,064 nominations for 2,575 different employers.

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- Accordia Urgent Care & Family Practice
- Argentech Solutions
- Aspen Aerogels
- Boston Fire Department
- Boston Scientific Corporation
- Cargill, Inc.
- Comcast NBCUniversal
- Conductix-Wampfler
- CSI Aviation
- Dale L. Buchanan & Associates, P.C.
- Great Lakes Components
- Hensel Phelps Construction Co.
- Howard County Fire & Rescue
- Indianapolis Fire Department
- Johnson & Johnson
- Mesa Natural Gas Solutions
- Minnesota Department of Transportation
- National Grid
- New York State Police
- Office of the District Attorney, Eighteenth Judicial District
- Rapid City Police Department
- Renown Health
- Salt River Project
- San Diego District Attorney
- Tesoro
- UST Global
- Webb County Sheriff’s Office
- West Valley City
- Wright Brothers, The Building Company
- Zapata, Inc.



# YOUR STORY IS OUR STORY

Since its inception, the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP) has reflected the faces of every segment of society, and has continued to evolve to meet the needs of its broad and diverse community. We are interested in getting first-hand accounts from Reserve Component members who have been helped by YRRP. In the coming months, we would like to highlight your stories on the Guard and Reserve Support Network.

If you have deployed multiple times, are a single parent, a woman who has deployed, or a member of the LGBTQ community or any community that adds to the rich fabric of the Reserve Component and have a story to tell, please consider allowing us to share it with your peers. There may be others in your shoes who could benefit from your experiences. Your identity will remain anonymous if you choose. If not, we invite you to provide us with a photo.

If you have a story but are not sure of how to get it down on paper, consider this template as a guide:

- Introduce yourself—name, rank, unit
- Where did you/do you serve?
- What aspects of Guard and Reserve life did you find difficult to navigate?
- How did you manage or overcome those roadblocks?
- Advice to others?

Please send your stories to [OSD.YRRP@mail.mil](mailto:OSD.YRRP@mail.mil)

