

OFFICERS' CORNER

Welcome to this edition of the OTA Newsletter! It's hard to believe that we've been together for 12 years in support of our troops and veterans! Since our last update, significant events have transpired at OTA, and we are excited to share the highlights with you.

Our charity has grown substantially and 2016 presented some opportunities. OTA outgrew the space we were using at Century III Mall and we are excited to **move into a new space** that allows us to grow and adapt to the changing needs of our military and veteran community.

Since 2014, our expanded services to veterans have grown through our "Welcome Home" program and key partnerships with other veteran agencies. We're proud to present you with highlights of these services throughout this issue.

We continue to provide critical support to men and women deployed overseas. **We have surpassed 160,000 military members** helped by our active-duty "Wish-List" program. And we continue to support them as

military engagements evolve globally.

In July 2004, we had no idea that our little project, conducted from our basements and kitchen tables, would grow to be a nationally recognized non-profit operating out of a 13,000 square-foot space. And we are so proud of our accomplishments, made possible by you – the donors, sponsors and volunteers -- who ensure we have the resources needed to serve the troops and veterans helped by OTA every day.

We hope you enjoy this edition of our newsletter. We are happy to share stories of our volunteers, and the letters and photos of the brave troops and veterans we serve.

Thank you so much for your continued generosity and support!



Kristen Holloway Querriera (Founder and CEO), Monica Orluk (President)

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OTA has been rated a Top Charity six years in a row by *Great Nonprofits*, the nation's leading provider of reviews and ratings of nonprofit organizations.

OTA's mission is to show our commitment to our military community, reflecting our dedication to past and present, active and veteran members of our Armed Forces.

OTA demonstrates its mission to build and sustain the morale and well-being of the military community by providing them with items and services that contribute to their morale, well-being, and self-sufficiency.

WHY WE STILL NEED TO SUPPORT OUR TROOPS

Our lives are busy. Kids have gone back to school. Political advertisements are bombarding us as Election Day approaches. So it's sometimes easy to forget about our nation's military engagements, especially since the media's focus has shifted, barely covering the war on terror and only pausing to report on stories with a large impact.

At OTA, our servicemen and women and veterans are always our focus and that keeps our lives very busy as well. To keep up, OTA recently launched our new website – www.OperationTroopAppreciation.org – and moved our headquarters to a bigger, more functional space.

Running a non-profit like OTA takes a lot of volunteer hours to operate and an incredible amount of time and energy planning, organizing, and fundraising. But what drives us is this: *Serving Those Who Serve*. And a reminder of why we do what we do often comes in the form of a letter like this one we received recently:

Dear OTA,

Thank you so much for your support and everyone there. Thank you is not enough words to express how much all the support meant to us as we were away from our family. We will try our best to stay safe for the remainder of our deployment.

About three weeks ago we lost one of our soldiers and it got us down to our knees and buckle [sic] down for a bit. Not only we lost one, one of ours got injured pretty bad, and four of our coalition forces were also killed on the same mission.

But it won't stop us from doing what America expects of us.

Thank you so much for the taste of home and we want you and everyone to know that we appreciate all the support and what you're all doing for us.

Much love for everyone and God bless.

Very Respectfully,

SFC I. M. (stationed in Afghanistan)

On Saturday, Oct. 1, before our monthly shipping day and amidst a pile of unpacked moving boxes, OTA volunteers stopped and took a moment to reflect on the lives lost for our freedom and our way of life. We can never repay the debt of sacrifice, but what we can do is support them in every way we can.

So far in 2016, OTA has shipped 346 boxes, totaling 13,700 pounds, to 143 separate units (8,407 individual soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines). The majority of these shipments went to Afghanistan and Iraq, where soldiers are engaging the enemy every day.

What we cannot count is the number of smiles, tears, hugs and laughs from OTA that go into those boxes; we lost track of those long ago, but continue to pack them in every box that goes to our troops.

We will never forget those who serve, and those we have lost. No, we will never forget.



OTA SAYS THANK YOU & WELCOME HOME!



In 2014, we launched our “**Welcome Home**” veteran support program.

This program provides **critical support** to veteran families in need. **This is a unique OTA service that no other agency provides.** We focus on gaps in services our veterans receive from other providers to ensure that they continue on a path to good health and improved quality of life as they move forward from financial hardship, physical, and psychological challenges.

Our veterans receive medical care, housing assistance and employment opportunities through federally funded programs. OTA asks: But what happens to a vet after they secure a home and job?

Most often, they have little in way of personal possessions. Imagine moving into a new home, or starting a new job, but not having a bed to sleep in or dishes to cook with? Or having a doctor appointment or therapy session without a reliable means of transportation?

That’s where OTA steps in! We ensure that the veteran remains **focused on recovery** and eliminates some stress that could derail that process.

Veterans are referred to OTA through the PAServes network, when they secure housing through other agencies. We provide the veteran – and all members of their family - with new beds and a **Welcome Home Kit** with all the essentials needed to help make the house a home. Brand new dishes, cookware, bake ware, kitchen supplies, towels, linens, small appliances, cleaning and laundry supplies are presented to the veteran as a gift. These gifts have critical impact on a veteran with limited funds. They don’t have to choose between paying rent or buying groceries for their family and purchasing these needed items.

Through our partnership with **VetTaxi** in Pittsburgh, OTA provides free transportation for veterans to attend medical appointments, counseling, therapy sessions and job interviews.

OTA’s partnership with **Original Mattress Factory** enables OTA to provide each veteran and family member with a free bed, including mattress and box spring.

In 2016, OTA provided 457 veterans with:

- ★ 97 Welcome Home kits
- ★ 237 taxi rides
- ★ 123 beds

Program Total since 2014 inception:

- ★ 2,350 veterans helped

We are also proud that **80 percent of the veterans who enter our program** in either a “critical” or “poor” status, **are in a “thriving” or “good” status** one year after receiving services from OTA.

No veteran should be homeless or struggle to live a quality life. OTA continues to work hard daily to say “Thank you!” and “Welcome home!” to every veteran we meet.



Happy veterans with their OTA Welcome Home Kits!



WE HAVE MOVED!

The Officers and Board of Directors are pleased to announce that OTA has found a new home!

We have moved our operational headquarters to the **South Hills Industrial Park in West Mifflin**, which provides 13,000 square feet of operating space, office and conference facilities.

This is a very exciting time for OTA as this new lease provides us with a number of key benefits that not only support our current needs, but will allow us to adapt to changes going forward.

The move took extraordinary effort on the part of our volunteers, but it was pulled off with military precision! (As if we should expect anything different from our crackerjack volunteers and move coordinator, former Army Sergeant Jim Nickelson!)

Special thanks to **Ed Sickmund of My Way Moving & Storage** for transporting us to our new home! Ed and My Way have helped us in our previous moves and have been steadfast supporters of OTA for many years. We could not have done this without their generous provision of moving services for our inventory, furniture and shelving.

“In our first 12 years of history, we have directed at least \$.98 of every dollar to our troop and veteran programs,” said Monica Orluk, OTA President and COO. “We are incredibly thankful to Tony Sylvester for leasing us this new space in the South Hills Industrial Park on Route 885 at a very affordable rate, so we can continue to be excellent stewards of the financial gifts of our donors.”

Our new address is:
1200 Lebanon Road
Unit 510
West Mifflin, PA 15122

We are deeply **grateful to our many volunteers** who worked tirelessly for weeks to execute the move and get OTA settled into our new space. They donated hundreds of hours of work to ensure OTA's service to our troops and veterans. They were amazing, each and every one of them!



Our new space before the move...

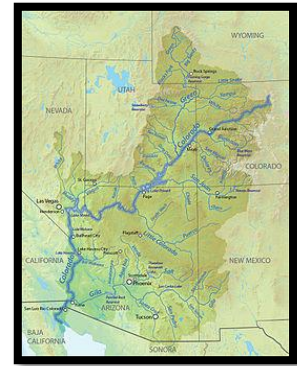


building in progress...



...our volunteers back in business!

VETERAN RESOURCE HIGHLIGHT: CANYON HEROES



OTA is happy to present our veteran resource highlight organization, **Canyon Heroes**. The organization serves veterans by providing an adventure therapy experience: hiking and rafting the Colorado River to help heal the psychological wounds of war.

The trip is **free** to eligible veterans.

Trip participants are supported on their journeys by professional counselors experienced in working with the military community. Adaptive outdoor recreation, combined with professional counseling, can help veterans adjust, decompress and shed the complex responses that are related to everyday events.

OTA frequently refers veterans to Canyon Heroes and our volunteer, Sgt. Jim Nickelson (Ret.) attended this year's trip and shares these thoughts of the experience:

"My trip with Canyon Heroes was amazing. Prior to the trip I was going through some family issues, battling depression, and PTSD was taking over my everyday life. I was skeptical about going because I've tried so many different types of therapy and groups that never seemed to be very beneficial.

"There were 24 veterans and four counselors on the trip. Once we started packing the rafts, we immediately started bonding. We worked together every day and talked every night. The support and camaraderie grew stronger by the hour.

"Being cut off from the world in such a beautiful place, with servicemen and women that share your problems was very reassuring and relaxing. There was something very spiritual and calming about that canyon.

"By the end of the trip I made 28 lifelong friends. We stay in touch and support each other even from states away. Having a veteran support structure is essential to overcome and deal with the everyday struggles of PTSD and depression. It gave me the boost I needed to push forward in life.



"I am very thankful to Canyon Heroes for going above and beyond. It was a true life changing experience."

If you are a veteran who could benefit from this trip, or know of someone who could, please visit <http://canyonheroes.org/> for more information and to submit an application for next year's trip, scheduled for August 2017.

FROM THE FRONT
LINES & THE
HOME FRONT



I've received 2 of 3 packages already (boots still on way) and have been distributing the items amongst the service men and women here at Camp RS (I'm told, the hygiene products went quickly in the ladies' dorm as we shared with the entire building, so special thanks on their behalf!). Please relay to all involved at OTA our extreme appreciation and know everything you've provided has boosted morale and will be put to good use.

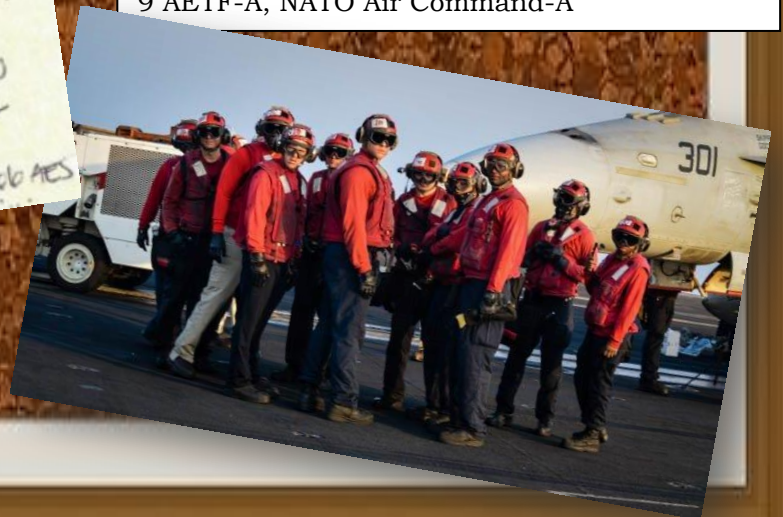
Picture attached of a portion of our staff (sorry I'll try to get everyone, but it's hard with the operations tempo.... fittingly, I'm the guy holding the "O"). Again, we'd like to thank you all for your support!

Very Respectfully,
Big-O



O.S., Major USAF
9 AETF-A, NATO Air Command-A

I regret that this took so long to get to you. On behalf of the men & women in my unit, thank you so much to you & your organization for the wonderful care packages. We made sure the wealth was spread amongst all of our people. Some of the simplest things are hard to get out here, so we THANK YOU!
Thankfully,
on behalf of 906 AFS



Thank you so much
because of Operation Troop
my three girls that they
really needed. I don't know how
kindness and generosity
they now have them
of you! Bless all
Sincerely



It is with heartfelt gratitude and tears in my eyes right now that I thank Operation Troop Appreciation from the bottom of my heart for your donation of presents to me and my three girls, ages 15, 10 and 8. I am an Air Force veteran from Operation Desert Shield. 2013, 2014 and 2015 have been the most mentally, medically and physically difficult years of my life and I reached out to the VA for help and they performed miracles. What the VA couldn't do OTA stepped in to assist. Anyway, the surprise and happiness on my girls' faces was overwhelming. Words cannot describe my feelings at that moment but tears of joy said it all, and I'm 49. So again THANK YOU for your donation and what you do for veterans and active duty members in country and out. I was proud to have served my country, still believe in the oath that I took and will be loyal to this country until the day that I die.



Absolutely incredible support to deployed military members. While every care package/letter received is great, a lot of the guys don't have families back home helping them get through this. Operation Troop Appreciation meets specific needs identified by the military member. At some camps you can get just about everything needed, at others--many everyday items are in short supply or never available. OTA goes out of their way to hunt it down and get it to us. That kind of personalized support is something you'd normally only get from family. For many, it is the little things that go a long way toward making the time away from home bearable. Thank you and please keep up the great work--your Operation is definitely Appreciated by the Troops!

Your care and appreciation was distributed amongst the team I'm working with here in Afghanistan. You brought smiles to quite a few faces when we saw all the "goodies" (that's what we call them) that were waiting for us in your box of care and appreciation. I can't tell you how much it really does mean for those of us still deployed to know that we have your support from back home.

Some people say that we are heroes, I say the real heroes are all the amazing people such as yourself that display acts of selfless service and support our troops on a daily basis. Selfless service is 1 of 7 Army values we live by. It's an important one. We are taught it, and taught to live by it. It wasn't something new to me when I joined, but to some it was moon. But once you learn it you live it. That's not a common value displayed by many civilian people. So I thank you for taking time out your life to make time for the thousands of us still deployed.

Very Respectfully,

SSG R. H & The Afghan National Security Force Logistician Advisors in Kabul Afghanistan.



VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

As a 100% volunteer non-profit, we rely on our team to not only complete our troop and veteran support activities, but to also manage our business. We'd like to take this opportunity to introduce you to key members of our team who work tirelessly every day at OTA!

Moving a charity of our size is no small feat and it would have never happened without the extraordinary efforts of **Steve Marone** and **Jim Nickelson**. From breaking down shelving, coordinating our move, securing move team volunteers and construction in our new space, Steve and Jim worked day and night to make it happen!

We at OTA describe Steve as the "stealth" volunteer. We may not always see him, but we definitely know when he's been working for OTA! Steve not only performs operational work for OTA, he helps coordinate efforts in our active duty "Wish-List" program, packing for the troops and transporting boxes to the post office.

Steve Marone is a key OTA team member and is also the Chief of the Skyview Volunteer Fire Department, a member of the West Mifflin Borough Council, and an advocate of many causes in our community, including support for the homeless. And he works a full-time job to boot!



Steve Marone

It's not uncommon for us to walk into our space and find that something has been repaired, or set up in our space. This is because Steve came in during the wee hours of the morning or late the night before and took care of it.

In addition to helping OTA, Steve and his wife, Nina, can often be found feeding the homeless or participating in charity events throughout the community. Steve wants no recognition for the work he does with OTA. His commitment to service and to his community is exemplary and we are proud to have him on our team and to feature his service in this issue of the newsletter.

Jim Nickelson



Jim Nickelson served as a Sergeant with the US Army. He deployed to Iraq in 2007 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and sustained injuries in combat that resulted in the loss of his left leg below the knee. During his deployment, recovery, and transition to civilian life, OTA provided support and assistance. Now living in West Mifflin, Jim continues to serve our troops overseas and our veterans at home as **Volunteer Manager of Operations & Logistics for OTA**.

Jim worked tirelessly, 12 hours a day in the weeks leading up to our move, assembling teams of volunteers, breaking down shelving, packing inventory and preparing the new space. He coordinated all activities with My Way Moving & Storage and created a move plan that was executed with military precision. He continues to manage post-move activities and construction of shelving and set-up of inventory so OTA didn't miss a step getting back to the business of serving our brave heroes.

Jim is also an advocate for veterans and shares his personal story, struggles and experience with donors, sponsors and veterans every day as he continues to recover himself. This valuable experience not only helps our team better understand the challenges our veterans face every day, but also provides a personal connection to the veterans we serve.

We are proud of Jim and his service to our country and to OTA, and grateful to have him on our team!

BRING CHRISTMAS CHEER TO THE TROOPS!

The volunteer staff of OTA would like to say THANK YOU! Your commitment to our troops has been overwhelming, and we are grateful for your generosity and support of our brave military men and women. Even more important, our troops and veterans are grateful for your support!

Because of YOU, **OTA has provided “wish list” items to over 160,000 deployed troops since July 2004**, and **“Welcome Home” kits to more than 2,350 at-risk returning warriors**. You've let them know that you remember and appreciate their service and sacrifice.

With the holidays approaching, won't you show special support to our troops and veterans this Christmas?

SPONSOR A UNIT

Make an individual *monetary contribution* or work with your church, school, civic group, friends or family to donate funds in support of a deployed unit with specific needs.

For unit sponsorships, we provide an information sheet that includes:

- ★ Unit photo with mission description
- ★ Background information on the unit
- ★ Requested “wish list” items
- ★ Suggested target donation to complete “wish list”



“WISH LIST” PROGRAM

Help keep our troops more comfortable in their difficult environments and donate items they have requested in their “wish lists,” like:

- ★ Personal care items
- ★ Hygiene supplies
- ★ Snacks
- ★ Recreational items
- ★ Other care and comfort goodies



To make an even bigger impact, coordinate a collection drive of “wish list” items within your church, school, neighborhood or circle of friends.

“WELCOME HOME”

Provide a “hand up” to returning warriors who need assistance. You can sponsor a veteran and their family with a monetary donation that enables OTA to provide a “Welcome Home” kit that includes:

- ★ Beds and mattresses
- ★ Kitchen and bathroom supplies
- ★ Laundry and cleaning items
- ★ Bedding and other home goods



Contact **OTA President Monica Orluk** for more information about these programs, or to make arrangements to deliver your items at our donation drop-off location at South Hills Industrial Park in West Mifflin, PA (Pittsburgh South Hills).

Please email her at Monica@OperationTroopAppreciation.org

HELP OTA WHEN YOU BUY ON AMAZON

With Christmas right around the corner, many of us are getting geared up for holiday shopping.

Why not help OTA, our troops and veterans with your everyday and Christmas shopping?



A **FREE** program from Amazon, called **AmazonSmile**, allows Amazon shoppers to direct **0.5%** of their eligible purchase totals to their favorite charity.

That's right: It's free for shoppers. The Amazon Smile Foundation makes all the donations from eligible purchases, and shoppers still get the same low prices on all items.

And what charity would be grateful for your designation? **Why, OTA of course!**

There is **no cap on donation** amount, so there is **no limit** to how much OTA can receive.

How Do You Do It?

1. Go to ***smile.amazon.com***
2. Search and select ***Operation Troop Appreciation***
3. Start shopping and Amazon will start giving

Thank You.

Now when you shop at **smile.amazon.com**, your purchases will support **Operation Troop Appreciation**.

What Will I See?

- The **shopping experience is identical** to the regular Amazon.com site — same selection, same prices — with the exception that eligible products will be marked as such on product detail pages.
- And on the top left hand corner of your Amazon page, you'll see the **AmazonSmile logo** (instead of the regular Amazon one). And next to that, it will show the charity you're supporting. (And what is that again? You're right! **Operation Troop Appreciation!**)

How Do You Know If Your Purchases Are Eligible?

- **Only** purchases made through the **Smile.Amazon.com** site will receive .5%.
- Purchases made through the regular **Amazon.com** website are **not eligible**.
- Kindles and items purchased through **Subscribe & Save** are **not eligible**.

So, go to
Smile.Amazon.com
and start shopping
(and supporting) today!

MORE HAPPENINGS AT OTA

Stand Down Pittsburgh 2016

Stand Down Pittsburgh is a day of care and free services for homeless veterans or veterans who are at risk of becoming homeless.

Each year, the event provides breakfast, lunch, 60 health and community services, barbers, entertainment, clothing, and supplies.

The 2016 Stand Down was held at Stage AE on Pittsburgh's North Shore on September 24.

Other Stand Down event assistance includes substance abuse, domestic violence, military sexual trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, and education and training programs.

OTA is proud to have been one of the participating service providers at this event, where we gave hygiene and personal care items to over 400 veterans in attendance.



OTA Volunteer extraordinaire Carol Hamilton greeted hundreds of veterans at Stand Down.

Our New Website!

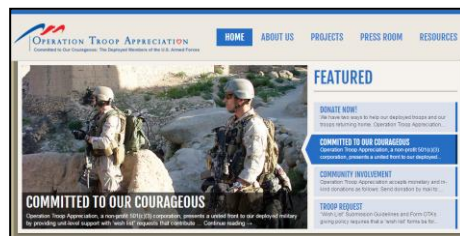
Throughout our 12-year history, we have been blessed to have outstanding web design and support from Pittsburgh-area firms.

For our first 11 years, **Buzz Honey**, led by CEO Chris Bannon, graciously donated hundreds of hours of design and maintenance on our site. They also designed our latest site.

After a change in their business model, Buzz Honey handed the reins over to CEO Derek Wahila at **Wahila Creative**. Derek and his gifted team put the finishing touches on our new site, made it super user-friendly, and brought our new look to life!

We are very grateful to Buzz Honey and Wahila Creative for donating their talents and resources to give us a new improved website.

Take some time to surf through the pages to learn more about OTA.



Visit www.OperationTroopAppreciation.org today!

Dollar General Partners with OTA!

This summer **Dollar General** and OTA joined forces to provide much needed items for our active duty "Wish-List" and veteran "Welcome Home" programs.

Shoppers at 40 select Pittsburgh-area Dollar General stores can purchase items from our donation list, and Dollar General will give them to OTA.

So far over 100 large cartons of supplies have been delivered from Dollar General to OTA by the Pittsburgh Jeepers Club.

We appreciate the support we receive from our corporate sponsors, and are proud to have Dollar General as a key partner in our efforts to serve our brave heroes!



A few of the many cartons of Dollar General donations delivered by a caravan of the Pittsburgh Jeepers.

thank you!

DOLLAR GENERAL

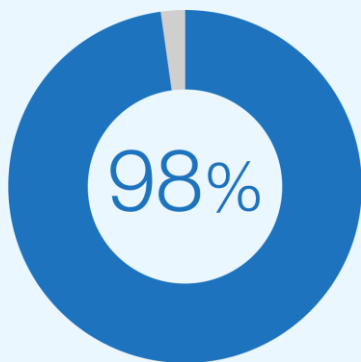
OTA IS EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT

For over 12 years, OTA has provided for more than **160,000 deployed troops**, and more than **2,350 veterans in crisis situations**.

As a **100% volunteer organization**, we have kept our overhead costs to a minimum, ensuring financial contributions are spent in the spirit in which they are given: **To provide meaningful support to our military members and veterans, NOT to cover extraneous costs.**

We are grateful for our relationships with local Pittsburgh companies and individuals who provide many of our critical services pro-bono. No one at OTA, including our officers, volunteers or board members, receives a salary or wages. As a result, OTA is able to channel **98% or more of our spending directly to our troop and veteran programs.**

To put it more simply: **For every \$1 a donor gives, OTA spends \$.98 or more providing the critical items and services** our military members and veterans need.



For full financial reports and additional information on OTA, or any U.S. charity, please visit the world's largest independent source of information on nonprofit organizations at GuideStar.org.



Please remember, there are troops deployed all over the world. OTA is always in need of donated items and monetary contributions to fulfill our troops' "Wish List" requests.

Easy Donations or Organized Collection Drives

In many deployed locations, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq, our troops are unable to purchase many items on their own and must rely on packages from supporters at home.

Please consider donating any of the following items to OTA to help our troops and veterans stay stocked on critical items.

Hygiene:

- Toothbrushes
- Body wash
- Men's deodorant
- Baby wipes
- Men's triple blade razors

Food (unopened and unexpired):

- Nuts & tuna packets
- Beef jerky & beef sticks
- Dried fruit & trail mix
- Granola bars & energy bars
- Microwave popcorn & cookies
- Cookies, crackers, chips & pretzels
- Powdered drink mix (no liquids please)
- Specialty ground coffee

Veteran Welcome Home kits:

- Multi-purpose cleaner & dish soap
- Aluminum foil & plastic wrap
- Quart & gallon zipper bags
- Tall Kitchen & large trash bags
- Buckets, brooms, dustpan sets
- Kitchen towels & cleaning rags
- Bath towel sets
- Cleaning rags & sponges

Yellow Ribbon Campaign:

A simple and easy way to help raise money for the troops! OTA will provide you with a "Support the Troops" Yellow Ribbon template, you print them and distribute for a donation (typically \$2-\$5). Donors write their names on the ribbons which are then posted in your church, school, or store. Proceeds are given to OTA to purchase "Wish List" items for the troops.

Cents for Soldiers:

OTA's Cents for Soldiers campaign is a great option to raise funds simply by collecting loose change. Groups place a Cents for Soldiers Donation Jar in a central location, and ask family, friends and coworkers to toss their spare change in. It's also a popular activity for schools to teach students math and counting skills, as well as community awareness.

Letter Writing:

Our troops love to get cards and letters from supporters (especially school children) back home. It's a great boost to troop morale and facilitates pen-pal correspondence. This is a particularly popular project for schools, church youth groups, day cares and senior centers.

For more information on these programs, please contact OTA President Monica Orluk at Monica@OperationTroopAppreciation.org

CONNECT WITH US

Operation Troop Appreciation is an official cause on Facebook and Twitter.

Follow us for announcements of upcoming events, notice of volunteer opportunities, pictures and postings from the troops we help.

