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OUR COURAGEOUS  
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US MILITARY, PAST  
AND PRESENT

# THE Eagle

Summer 2019

## OTA CELEBRATING 15 YEARS OF SERVICE TO OUR TROOPS AND VETERANS

It all started with a random act of kindness.

Fifteen years ago, **Kristen Holloway** was looking for a way to brighten the spirits of a few U.S. troops who were fighting in the Iraq War. She reached out to a small group of family and friends, asking each of them to pitch in \$25 so she could purchase Under Armour® T-shirts for the soldiers. Kristen bought the T-shirts from a wholesaler, packed the boxes in her basement and shipped the packages to Baghdad.

The response she got from 1/107 FA, Alpha Company 759 MP, a platoon of the Pennsylvania National Guard, amazed her. And it changed history.

"We started to get these beautiful thank you notes from those troops," recalls Kristen. "You could tell how overwhelmed they were with this simple act of generosity. I shared the thank you notes with all the people who supported this project. And then I thought: If we made this powerful connection with just a few T-shirts, maybe we could do another project and see where this takes us. I never imaged what this would turn into."

Today, Kristen's personal project has evolved into **Operation Troop Appreciation (OTA)**—one of the country's most successful military charities. Since OTA was established as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in on July 1, 2004, it has raised more than \$3 million in contributions and has served hundreds of thousands of members of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines, as well as active duty National Guard and U.S. Reserve Units. In addition, OTA provides community-based support for thousands of veterans and their families.

Kristen said that OTA took off because it brought together many people who wanted to show their appreciation for the brave men and women who serve our country.

"During the early days of the Iraq War, you would see a lot of cars with yellow ribbons and 'Support Our Troops' stickers," said Kristen, who headed Operation Troop Appreciation until she retired two years ago. "It was great to see that show of support. But our troops can't see those ribbons and stickers when they are deployed overseas. Operation Troop Appreciation mobilized a group of volunteers who wanted to show their gratitude in a more tangible way."

*"...If we made this powerful connection with just a few T-shirts, maybe we could do another project and see where this takes us. I never imaged what this would turn into."*

One of the OTA's most passionate volunteers was **Monica Orluk**, a Pittsburgh native who comes from a military family. Monica also was looking for a way to support troops who were being deployed to several hot spots throughout the Middle East.

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## MESSAGE FROM MO



### MISSION

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.

It is with great pride that I say **HAPPY ANNIVERSARY** to the volunteers, donors and sponsors who have helped OTA reach this incredible milestone – 15 Years of commitment to our courageous!

I remember fondly meeting Kristen on July 4, 2004 and asking “what can I do to help?” Little did I know that it would lead to a deep and lasting friendship, partnership and mission that has brought OTA from a small charity operating out of our basements to a nationally recognized non-profit with a 13,000 SQ operations center. I never imagined that I would one day sit at the helm of this wonderful mission!

The road has not been easy, in fact, we've been challenged year after year with maintaining and growing our charity – it takes a lot of work, from a lot of people to ensure we remain operationally efficient, dedicated to our mission, and committed to being a 100% volunteer organization. There have been tears of joy and frustration and sadly, tears through the years as members of our OTA family made the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

It is that sacrifice that spurs our success. The team at OTA is comprised of veterans and civilians united in one common goal, to recognize the service and sacrifice of those who serve our country so bravely. And behind that team of volunteers are many generous donors and sponsors who ensure we have the funding to support our programs. We could not do it without you!

I recall a conversation I had with Kristen back in 2004. I asked her, “How long do you think we'll need to do this?” Her response, “Until everyone is home, safe and taken care of.” Little did we know that 15 years later, our services would still be needed.

On behalf of the volunteer team at OTA, and the brave troops and veterans we serve, **THANK YOU** for sharing this journey with us. We know that we can count on your support as we continue our good work and carry out our mission.

Personally, thank you to Kristen and all those who entrust me to continue the work of OTA. I am so proud of our team, and everyone who believes in our cause.

– *Monica*

## 15 YEARS OF SUPPORT

**Total Donations:**  
**3.3 MILLION DOLLARS!**

**Launched Active Duty Wish List Program 2004:**  
**172,000 TROOPS HELPED**

**Launched Veteran Welcome Home Program 2014:**  
**4,400 VETERAN PROJECTS COMPLETED**





# Thank You to Our Volunteers!



***There would be no OTA without the wonderful team of volunteers who have worked thousands of hours in support of our troops and veterans. Never has there been a group of people with the level of commitment and pride in service as our team. For 15 years of being "Committed to Our Courageous," we thank you!***

## **OTA CELEBRATING 15 YEARS OF SERVICE TO OUR TROOPS AND VETERANS, *continued from cover.***

"I had a very close friend who was deployed to Iraq and I started sending care packages to his unit," she said. "And then it occurred to me that maybe I could help more than one unit. But I wasn't sure what to do. Coincidentally, I went to an Independence Day celebration on July 4, 2004 at Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Hall in Pittsburgh. And wouldn't you know it, that in a crowd of 1,500 people, I ended up standing next to **Kristen Holloway**, who had just started Operation Troop Appreciation. We hit it off and I've been with OTA ever since."

Right from its beginning, OTA put an emphasis on personalized support so it could better meet the needs of various troops and units. Through OTA's Active Duty Military Support Project, troops can fill out wish lists and ask for items such as tactical gear, sports and fitness equipment, video gaming, computers, musical instruments, phone cards, and snack and hygiene supplies.

"We modeled OTA after organizations such as The Make-A-Wish Foundation," said Monica, who became Operation Troop Appreciation's CEO and executive director in 2017. "Our goal was to provide our troops with items that would contribute to their health, welfare and morale."

As OTA grew, it began to expand its services to support troops who had come home and needed help transitioning back into to civilian life.

"We reached a turning point between 2012 and 2013," said Monica. "There was a drawback in military operations in the Middle East, so there wasn't as high of a demand for wish list items at the time. That gave us an opportunity to step back and assess how we could find additional ways to serve the military. We did some research and found that many veterans were falling through the cracks once they returned home. Some of those veterans were entering new homes with only the clothes on their back. They were literally sleeping on the floor. If you aren't getting a good night's sleep, your health will eventually suffer. That's when we decided to launch our Welcome Home Program to support our veteran community."

Partnering with organizations such as the VA Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program and the Veterans Leadership Program of Western PA, OTA began providing support to help prevent homelessness and defray the cost associated with establishing a new home. Since 2014, OTA has reached out to more than 4,200 veterans and their families who are in need of beds, mattresses, pots and pans, dishes, laundry supplies, towels, sheets, bathroom supplies and cleaning items. They obtain these brand new items through partnerships with The Original Mattress Factory, Dollar General, Wal-Mart and other major distributors.

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## OTA CELEBRATING 15 YEARS OF SERVICE TO OUR TROOPS AND VETERANS, *continued from page 3*

OTA also began to assist veterans who needed help accessing medical care and other services in the community.

“Many veterans are dealing with physical, psychological and/or substance abuse problems as they ease back into civilian life,” said Monica. “They need health care but some of them don’t have transportation to make it to their appointments. We make sure those veterans get a ride whenever they need to see their doctor or therapist.”

Monica added that transportation services are arranged through the Vet Taxi Company—an organization that provides veterans with meaningful employment opportunities. Veterans who use this taxi service also have an opportunity to bond with the veterans who transport them.

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*“...OTA has been named a “Top-Rated Charity” by Great Non Profits for eight consecutive years [and] it was presented with a “Do Gooder” award from Consol Energy...”*

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OTA has grown so much that it moved into a 13,000 square foot office in West Mifflin, PA. It also oversees a network of churches, schools and community groups across the country that help with collection drives and events.

While OTA has never sought attention for its philanthropic efforts, that hasn’t stopped others from praising the organization for all it does to support our nation’s troops and veterans. Among its honors, OTA has been named a “Top-Rated Charity” by Great Non Profits for eight consecutive years, it was presented with a “Do Gooder” award from Consol Energy for outstanding contributions to the community and it received the “Organizational Tribute Award” from the Veterans Leadership Program of Western PA for support



of veterans through the Welcome Home Program.

In addition, OTA has been featured in national media stories and it was inducted into the George W. Bush Presidential Library in Dallas, Texas.



Through the years, OTA has mobilized a team of dedicated volunteers as well as a large group of generous private individuals, businesses and corporate sponsors who have a deep respect for the troops and veterans who have served our country.

“Many charitable causes often reach a fatigue point,” said Monica. “It is difficult to continue sustaining an all-volunteer staff for more than several years. In the beginning, people told us we had a great idea but that we’d eventually have to start paying people to keep our organization going. Well, guess what? We’ve continued to grow and now have a core group of 50 volunteers who are willing to sacrifice their time and energy to ensure we have the resources to carry out our programs. That’s a testament to all our volunteers and their love for our country.”

As OTA reflects on its accomplishments the past 15 years, it is already looking for more ways to serve America’s troops and veterans in the future.

“Deployments and missions evolve over time and we’ve shown the ability to adapt to the ever-changing needs of our active duty military,” said Monica. “We will continue doing this for as long as we have deployed troops who need our services. In addition, we will continue to expand our Welcome Home Program to reach even more veterans in Allegheny and Butler counties, as well as in surrounding counties. As a member of the PAServes network, we’ve been able to fill a critical gap for veterans who need our services.”

Monica is confident that OTA will continue to bring together Americans from all walks of life who share a common respect for our military.

“There’s a lot of division in our country today,” she said. “However, OTA proves that no matter what our political affiliations and beliefs may be, we all share a love of our military. We show our patriotism when we support our troops. And I know first-hand how much our troops and veterans appreciate that outpouring of love. All of us at OTA believe that we will continue to make a difference for our troops and veterans for many years to come.”





# SOLDIER STORIES

## *OTA Helps to Save Sergeant Brian Sgro's Life Both On and Off the Battlefield*

Ever since Operation Troop Appreciation (OTA) began serving America's military community in 2004, it has made a difference in the lives of more than 175,000 active and veteran members of our Armed Forces.

A perfect example is retired U.S. Army Sergeant **Brian Sgro**. OTA helped Brian to stay safe in one of the world's most dangerous war zones and it also enabled him to focus on recovery when he returned to civilian life back in the States.

"OTA has been there for me through thick and thin," said Brian, a resident of Canonsburg, PA. "I don't know what I would have done without them."

Brian said OTA first came into his life not long after his HHB 4-319th Unit was deployed from Bamberg, Germany to the center of Afghanistan for a dangerous combat mission.

"It was early winter when we arrived in the Wardak Province," recalls Brian, who served in the U.S. Army from 2008 to 2014. "The nearest supply depot was located at an Army PX base over an hour away, so it wasn't easy accessing supplies to stay warm and comfortable."

When Brian learned that OTA was sending supplies to U.S. troops overseas, he wrote to OTA founder Kristen Holloway, who promptly followed up and sent a care package to his unit.

"It was like heaven," recalls Brian. "We received items such as blankets, warm socks and space heaters, as well as Under Armour T-shirts, personal hygiene supplies, snacks, CDs, DVDs and newspapers. I'm a big sports fan and I enjoyed keeping up with news about the Pirates and the Penguins. It felt great to be appreciated. The care packages were a real morale booster for everyone in my unit."

During the next nine months, OTA sent several more packages to the HHB 4-319th Unit, including a shipment of GPS devices. Brian said the GPS equipment helped to save his life several times.

"We were serving in an area that wasn't completely mapped so we would often get lost when returning from long missions," said Brian. "It was easy to end up in enemy territory without the assurance that we'd be able to return safely. Once during a rocket attack, our GPS device helped us to calculate the exact grid where the bomb would hit within seconds. Another time, the GPS gave us information about where a VBIED (vehicle-borne improvised explosive device) would land. Our colonel told us, 'God bless your OTA friends!'"



As it turned out, OTA would help to save Brian's life once again, when he finished his military career in 2014.

"I had just retired and was having difficulty adjusting to civilian life," said Brian. "I was pretty banged up and needed knee surgery. At the time, I was also going through a divorce. Fortunately, OTA stepped up and gave me the help I needed to get my life back on track again. OTA helped me to access the Veterans Health Administration for health care and they provided me with transportation to get to doctor's appointments. Someone from OTA even checked on me at home to make sure I was doing OK."

Although Brian still feels some lingering effects from his battlefield injuries, he is now enjoying an active, fulfilling civilian life. He helps install roofing, siding and windows for a contractor and works as a security guard for a company in Pittsburgh.

In his free time, Brian enjoys volunteering for OTA. He speaks on behalf of OTA, helps assemble care packages for troops who are deployed overseas and lends a hand at OTA's Motorcycle Run.

"I'm so grateful to OTA for what they have done for me and my fellow veterans, that I'd do anything for them," said Brian. "I would go to the moon and back for them. I will be there for them—just like they were there for me. Our troops and veterans won't find a better friend than OTA. You can always count on them to take good care of you."



*Monica with Sergeant Sgro.*



*Sergeant Sgro's unit.*

*Sergeant Sgro.*



### *Sergeant 1st Class Matthew Claycomb Enjoys Giving Back to OTA*

Sergeant 1st Class **Matthew Claycomb** is a huge believer in giving back. Matthew is so grateful to Operation Troop Appreciation (OTA) for everything it has done for him, that he decided to return the favor when he returned home from combat duty.

"OTA has impacted my own life and the lives of many other troops in a big way," said Matthew, who is currently stationed in New Castle, Pa. as a full-time Readiness Non-Commissioned Officer for the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. "Now that I'm back in the United States, I want to do everything I can to help this wonderful organization reach even more troops and veterans."

Matthew's relationship with OTA started in 2003, when he was deployed to Iraq. Like many other troops stationed overseas, Matthew found a taste of home in every care package that OTA sent to him.

"One of the soldiers in our unit had a sister who knew Kristen Holloway, the founder of OTA," said Matthew. "When Kristen learned that our troops were in need of some basic necessities, she began sending us care packages. Whenever a delivery came in, it was like Christmas in July. We looked forward to getting the packages because you can't drive to a convenience store in Baghdad for everyday supplies."

Matthew never forgot about OTA. He finally had a chance to meet Kristen when he returned home from Iraq in 2005 and was stationed in the Pittsburgh area.

"I attended a homecoming ceremony in New Castle and spotted Kristen in the crowd," said Matthew. "I walked over to Kristen and told her that I recognized her face from an article in the newspaper. I thanked Kristen for all the great work she was doing and asked her to give me a call if I could do anything for OTA."

Kristen got back to Matthew and before long he became one of OTA's most passionate volunteers. He also has served as a spokesman for OTA at community events.

"Whenever I go out and speak about OTA, people come up to me and say they want to help," said Matthew, who also serves as an OTA board member. "I tell the public that OTA needs their donations to continue helping more troops and veterans."

Matthew also speaks to schools, churches and organizations in the Pittsburgh area about the military. He is heartened by the display of admiration and respect people show for the U.S. Armed Forces.

"People have a sincere desire to help," he said. "It's nice to see so many dedicated supporters of OTA out there."

Matthew said he began to think about a career in the military when two members of the Florida Army National Guard brought him much-needed supplies after Hurricane Andrew swept through Florida in 1992.

"I was living in Miami at the time and my supply of food and water was nearly depleted," he said. "I was so inspired by what these soldiers were doing for the community that I decided to join the military. The military has been great for me and has given me the tools to be a better person."

One particular experience stands out in Matthew's memory. In 2016, Matthew was driving home on a highway in southwestern Pennsylvania when he encountered a serious auto accident. Matthew jumped out of his car and rushed to assist a man who was pinned inside another vehicle.

"I don't know if I would have found the courage to do that if I didn't have military training," said Matthew. "I tried to help that young man but, unfortunately, his injuries were so severe that he died. I'm a firm believer that the military empowers you to take on challenges. Sometimes you'll see even the quietest troops stand up and find their voice in high-pressure situations. That's the effect the military has on our troops."

Matthew said that OTA gives him a platform for sharing his experiences with the public.

"I tell people that if you enjoy your freedom, you should be thanking the brave men and women who serve in our Armed Forces," he said. "We all want to see peace in the world and our troops and veterans have dedicated themselves to creating an environment for peace. OTA is doing its part to show its gratitude to our military for all they do."



*Sergeant Matthew Claycomb.*





# HOW YOU CAN HELP

## Easy Donations or Organized Collection Drives

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.

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 needs.

### Hygiene

- Body wash
- Men's deodorant
- Men's triple blade razors

### Food (unopened and unexpired)

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

### 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
- Small Appliances
- Twin and Full-Size Sheet sets & Comforters



**NEW ITEMS IN ORIGINAL PACKAGING, PLEASE!**

### 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.

### Support OTA When Shopping Online

To purchase Welcome Home Kit items that are shipped directly to us, go to:

[https://smile.amazon.com/hz/charitylist/1s/1GX06K5FPKBNE/ref=smi\\_cl\\_wl\\_rd\\_cl](https://smile.amazon.com/hz/charitylist/1s/1GX06K5FPKBNE/ref=smi_cl_wl_rd_cl)

### You shop, Amazon Smile donates!

Go to Smile.Amazon.com, search for us and log onto your Amazon account to donate to OTA when making purchases.

### Cards and letters are always welcome and included in the gifts we provide to troops and veterans.

For more information on these programs, please contact OTA Community Projects Coordinator, **Sherry Einhaus**, [sdeinhaus@comcast.net](mailto:sdeinhaus@comcast.net) or by phone at 412-973-1831.

### 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.



# CALENDAR OF EVENTS

**August 24**    **3RD ANNUAL OTA MOTORCYCLE RUN**  
**OTA Operations Center**  
1200 Lebanon Road, Unit #510  
West Mifflin PA 15122  
*Continental breakfast, buffet dinner upon return, 50/50 and gift basket raffles.*  
**Registration 8:00 a.m. • Kickstands up 10:30 a.m.**

**November 8 • 1-7 pm &**    **ANNUAL JEWELRY SALE**  
**November 9 • 11 am-6 pm**    **South Park Community Center**  
2575 Brownsville Road, South Park PA 15129  
*Great bargains, gift basket raffle.*

**November 10-14**    **ANNUAL VETERANS DAY 5K RACE**  
**Hampton Township Community Park**  
3101 McCully Road, Allison Park PA 15101  
*Prizes for all age brackets, musical entertainment, awards, prizes and an all-American post race buffet.*

*We are actively seeking sponsors, donations and volunteers for all events.  
Please contact Sherri Einhaus, [sdeinhaus@comcast.net](mailto:sdeinhaus@comcast.net) if interested.*



## Donate

Many of the “wish list” and “welcome home” items we provide are expensive and available only from specialized suppliers. We are in need of funds to purchase these specialty items.

## Conduct a Collection Drive

There are many ways to conduct collection drives for needed items throughout your community, church, school or workplace.

Donations are accepted for delivery at our Pittsburgh facility.

## Be a Sponsor or Partner

We are always in need of sponsors and partners who donate their goods or services to our organization or help to sponsor fund-raising events with monetary contributions.

## Learn More About Us

Visit [www.OperationTroopAppreciation.org](http://www.OperationTroopAppreciation.org) for more information and to make a secure on-line donation.

Or send a check payable to OTA to:  
**Operation Troop Appreciation**  
PO Box 18052  
Pittsburgh, PA 15236



**COMMITTED TO OUR COURAGEOUS MEMBERS  
OF THE US MILITARY, PAST AND PRESENT**