

Operation Homefront

Helping families in need during deployment

By Lewis Carlyle

Photos courtesy of
Operation Homefront

Jim Knotts, Class of 1990, is passionate about helping others. In early 2009, he accepted the position of CEO for a non-profit organization called Operation Homefront, a military support non profit which provides emergency financial assistance to the families of service members and wounded warriors. As a veteran of operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Knotts has a strong understanding of the challenges families face when their loved ones are serving on deployment. “Operation Homefront began in the spring of 2002,” Knotts begins, “shortly after the deployments to Afghanistan started in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Things actually started off as an online support group for Navy spouses in the San Diego area. Within a year, we joined forces with another organization that was focused on emergency financial assistance around the nation. Together, the two organizations had both the family support and financial components; today, financial assistance is our primary focus.”

In a time of war, it is the families of military service personnel who are the first to make sacrifices. Knotts explains that his organization focuses on families in the rank range of E-1 to E-6. “These are essentially our junior enlisted. They’re the lowest paid, and they’re also the most at risk for financial hardship.”

The CEO says that he first became aware of Operation Homefront several years back when he was running the corporate philanthropy program for Lockheed Martin. “At the time,” Knotts recalls, “I had the privilege of getting to know a lot of really great military support non-profits. I was drawn to Operation Homefront because of its focus on supporting the service members who were deployed, by helping take care of their families back home.”

While serving for two years on Operation Homefront’s national board of directors, he chaired the fundraising committee, which raised more than \$30 million in support of the organization’s efforts on behalf of military families. “This gave me a solid understanding of the remarkable things this organization was able to do for military families on a day to day basis.”

In early 2009, the then chairman of the board asked Knotts if would consider taking the reins of the non-profit as its new CEO. “I did the thing that most of us do,” he says. “I went home and spoke to my wife about the opportunity. After that, I finally decided that doing this kind of work on

behalf of our military families was something I wanted to do on a daily basis.”

Knotts said farewell to Lockheed Martin, took a significant pay cut, left corporate America and joined the cause. As it turned out, the new CEO has his work cut out for him. Homefront sets up cash grants to help families with rent, utilities and food assistance. “Between 2008 and 2009,” Knotts recounts, “we saw a 190 percent increase in the number of requests for food assistance; and these are by military families. Much of this is due to the tough economic times. Spouses on the home front are losing their jobs, not to mention, some of the situations military families encounter put them into financial hardship.”

Another of the programs Operation Homefront supports is Wounded Warriors. By providing short-term transitional family housing for wounded veterans, the organization is able give a select few a free place to live while they make the transition from military to civilian life.



Operation Homefront strives to help families in need, especially during the holidays.



Jim Knotts, '90 (left) is the CEO for Operation Homefront

Knotts points out, "People often ask me, 'what are you going to do when the deployment to Afghanistan and Iraq end?' To answer that question, I always point out two things—even though the President says we're turning the page on Iraq, we still have 50,000 service members deployed there; and they will be there through the end of 2011. Furthermore, there are 150,000 in Afghanistan with no end in sight."

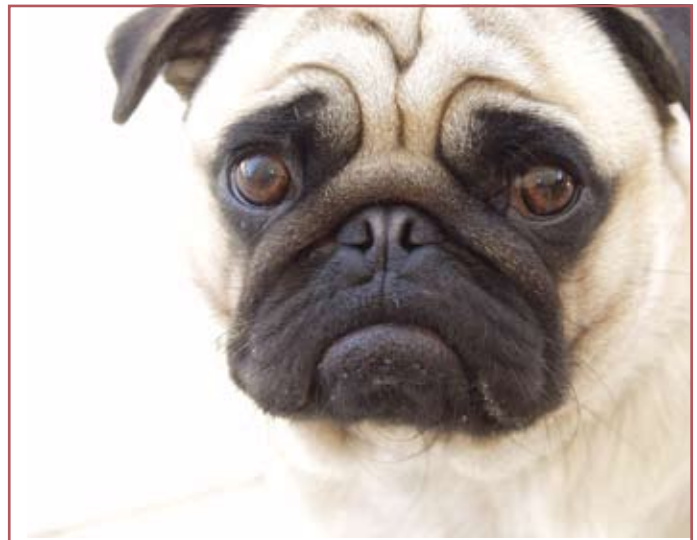
Two wars keep staffers at Operation Homefront busy. Despite the promise of draw-downs in the future, the organization knows there are still going to be injuries in Iraq and Afghanistan. Typically, the average recovery time for a wounded vet is anywhere from 18 to 24 months. "These people have made tremendous sacrifices," says Knotts passionately, "and our country owes it to them to assist with a successful transition back to civilian life."

Giving people hope at home and abroad are among the many rewards the a philanthropic organization can provide. "All of us in the military know that there are tremendous sacrifices made by our families when it comes to deployments," Knotts explains. "We give our deployed war-fighters peace of mind by ensuring that their families are being taken care of back home."

Back at Lockheed Martin, working in corporate philanthropy, Knotts was exposed to the entire spectrum of Navy, Marines, Army and Air Force. Now at Operation Homefront, he feels right at home serving the military in yet another capacity, by helping to strengthen the families who really are the foundation of our military service members. To this day, he still draws upon lessons he learned at USAFA. "One of the things that the Air Force Academy taught me is there are lots of ways to serve and that we can always help change peoples' lives for the better."

In addition to helping families who are enduring deployments today, Knotts has his eye on the future. "We've grown to have a national footprint," he explains, "with 23 active chapters serving 32 states. We've expanded beyond the original concept and I see that expansion continuing."

Between the dwindling economy and the tough resolve of Islamic militants in the Middle East, it is clear that service members and their families will continue to need help all across the United States. As the wars continue, Knotts hopes that his organization will be able to touch the lives of those who bear the burden of casualty and hardship. "We who wear the uniform know that no matter what happens in the future, we will always be needed. There will always be service members away from home and families on the home front who need help. I expect Operation Homefront to be there every step of the way." ❑



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