



COMMUNICATING INFORMATION AND RESOURCES



Gold Star Spouses Day Pays Tribute to Surviving Loved Ones

By Stephanie Hunter, Navy Gold Star Program Analyst

Gold Star Spouses Day will be recognized on April 5, 2024, a day dedicated to honoring the husbands and wives of those who died while serving on active duty.

Since 2010, Congress has annually acknowledged April 5 as “Gold Star Wives’ Day,” paying tribute to the contributions of individuals associated with Gold Star Wives of America, a nonprofit organization established in 1945 by women who lost their husbands in service to our country. As the military has evolved over the years, so has the role and demographics of the military spouse, leading to a more inclusive resolution that now recognizes April 5 as Gold Star Spouses Day.

The tradition of the Gold Star recognition traces back to 1918 when families would affix a gold star over the blue service star in their window to signify the loss of a loved one serving in the U.S. military overseas. In 1947, Congress approved the design, production, and distribution of the official Gold Star lapel button, which symbolizes service members who made the ultimate sacrifice in combat operations. The lapel button for next of kin of deceased personnel, featuring a gold star on a gold background surrounded by laurel leaves, was introduced in 1973 to honor active-duty service members who lost their lives in non-combat operations.

The survivor support community has embraced April 5 as an opportunity to recognize the sacrifices made by all Gold Star spouses and express gratitude for their unwavering commitment. The Navy Gold Star Program remains dedicated to providing support and fostering connections among Gold Star families, ensuring they remain connected to their Navy family for as long as they desire.

In commemoration of Gold Star Spouses Day, let us honor the families of the fallen, acknowledging that no one has given more for our nation. If you encounter someone wearing a Gold Star lapel button or the lapel button for next of kin of deceased personnel,

remember that these symbols represent the families of our fallen heroes. If you know or meet a Gold Star spouse, please take a moment to acknowledge their loved one’s sacrifice and express gratitude for their continued service.

To learn more about how the Navy Gold Star Program is honoring Gold Star spouses in your area, we encourage you to connect with your closest coordinator. Visit www.navygoldstar.com/locations to find out more.





A Survivor's Story

By Dawn Akozer, Gold Star Mother of YNS1 Demir Akozer

My name is Dawn, and 20 months ago I lost my 28-year-old son, PO1 Demir Akozer. I was overtaken by the initial shock and disbelief that Demir was really gone. I had to make difficult and heartbreaking decisions regarding funeral and burial arrangements. Thankfully, the Navy's casualty assistance calls officer (CACO), along with a command, were there to help my family and I through these early weeks. When our CACO introduced me to Ms. Patsy Jackson, the Navy Gold Star coordinator, I tearfully listened as she explained the program. Patsy was so warm and genuine. She hugged me that first day and invited me to attend an upcoming event where I could meet and connect with other Gold Star moms just like me. At first, I felt hesitant. How was I ever going to live the rest of my life without my son? Something only another parent who has walked in my footsteps could understand. So, I embraced the program, and I am so grateful that I did, because, aside from my family, it has proven to be the most significant source for support and understanding throughout my grief journey thus far.

My daughter and I attended our first Gold Star event, which was the Bells Across America for Fallen Service Members ceremony, and then the Mother's and Family's Day event a few days afterward. It had been a few months since we lost our beloved Demir, and through my ever-flowing tears, I was comforted by one mom sitting next to me with her family. She shared her story of how she lost her son a few years earlier. I met two more moms and a dad, and together we walked over to an area which had all our sons' names and pictures beautifully displayed. As I talked about Demir, it wasn't long before we were all sharing photos, tears and smiles, and exchanging phone numbers. I left both events feeling so inspired from these incredible women whose losses range from a couple of years, 10 years, even over 20 years ago. They come out to remember their fallen loved ones and to connect and support one another as only a parent who has suffered the loss of a child can do.

I have attended a few Gold Star events over the past year and a half, holiday gatherings, bowling, and the National Memorial Day Concert where I sat with my new friend, who has been a Gold Star mom for 22 years. Like her, for her son, I cling to events that remember and honor Demir, and where I can hear or say Demir's name out loud. Without the Gold Star Program, I would not be able to do this in ways that would be as honorable and meaningful.

In just this short time, I have come full circle since first becoming a Gold Star mom. A couple of months ago, sadly, I met a new Gold Star mom. She was full of that familiar heartache and emptiness. I went over to her and introduced myself, and began sharing my story and photos of Demir. We exchanged numbers and have been in contact over the past several weeks. For her, and the other incredible women who share a brokenness from inside, we have special friendships that will take us through the rest of our lives. They are my friends for life.

My coordinator, Patsy, does a superior job in coordinating events and sending regular communications. I look forward to reading her messages of grief support and hearing about upcoming events for this year. There are other grief support programs available, but thus far, none have been as heartfelt and impactful in my grief journey as the Navy Gold Star Program has. For that, I am thankful.



Navigating Spring: Grief in a Season of Renewal

By April Tischler, Navy Gold Star Program Coordinator

As the vibrant colors of spring begin to emerge and the sun graces us with its warmth for those of us in the northern hemisphere, your journey with grief may take on new dimensions. The changing seasons can evoke a complex mix of emotions as seasonal routines change.



Establishing Positive Routines

Re-establishing routines can provide a sense of stability during times of upheaval. Consider incorporating positive activities into your daily schedule that promote healing and well-being. Start your day with a mindful practice such as meditation or journaling to center your thoughts and emotions. Engage in regular exercise to release tension and boost your mood, whether it's a morning walk, yoga session or pickleball.

Harnessing Sunlight

The increasing daylight hours of spring offer an opportunity to harness the healing power of sunlight. Spend time outdoors soaking up the sun's rays, visiting National Parks, or simply taking a leisurely stroll. Sunlight stimulates the production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter known for its mood-lifting properties, helping to alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety. For more information about free entrance to National Parks for Gold Star families, visit www.nps.gov/playourvisit/veterans-and-gold-star-families-free-access.htm.

Memorial Gardens

With the help of university extension master gardeners near you, you can find resources to create and grow a food garden, a memorial garden, or plant a tree in honor of your service member. You can find more information through your local library on free seed banks and community groups. Many municipalities also offer community plots for gardening if you do not have the space to do so at home. The creativity and physicality of gardening have positive health benefits.

Embracing Movement

Movement is a powerful tool for processing grief and restoring a sense of balance. Explore activities that resonate with your interests and abilities, whether it's dancing, hiking or practicing tai chi. Movement allows emotions to flow freely, releasing tension held within the body and fostering a deeper connection to oneself and the world around you. Signing up for the gym in January can be intimidating, and you may find it less crowded as winter turns to spring to venture into new places. You do not need the new year to try out a new way to move.



Cultivating Connections

Spring is a time of growth and renewal, making it an opportune moment to cultivate connections with others. Reach out to friends, family members or support groups who can offer empathy, understanding and companionship along your journey of healing. Share stories, memories and experiences as a way of honoring your loved one's legacy and keeping their memory bright. The Navy Gold Star Program is here to provide support, resources and access to resources as you navigate the complexities of being a Gold Star family member. Your Navy Gold Star Program coordinator is standing by to share support resources with you. If you are not sure who your coordinator is, visit <https://www.navygoldstar.com/locations> for more information.

Meet our Newest Navy Gold Star Coordinators



Catherine Ragsdale

Navy Gold Star Program Coordinator

Catherine Ragsdale joined the Navy Gold Star Program in January 2024 after serving on the Army Survivor Outreach Services (SOS) team since 2019. She was awarded the Georgia Meritorious Service Medal for her years of service in support of Georgia Army families. Prior to working with survivors, she worked for nonprofit organizations serving veterans and military families.

Catherine's husband is a retired infantryman and combat veteran who now serves as an Army SOS coordinator. The two founded a nonprofit dedicated to taking military veterans and first responders kayak fishing. The time in nature helps the couple to be their best selves for each other and the families they serve. They are committed to sharing that experience and opportunity for self-care with others.

Additionally, Catherine is an advanced yoga teacher with specific training in trauma-informed yoga, meditation, and breathwork. Yoga has given her a stronger sense of self and the tools to find mental and emotional space amidst great tragedy, personal loss, and everyday stress. Catherine's personal and professional journeys have taught her compassion and given her the gift of great empathy.

Catherine believes that we are put on this earth to help others, and she finds a special joy in serving those who have served for us. She understands the passion, work ethic, and loyalty that define our military families and the specific challenges they face, particularly in times of tragedy.

Catherine holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Providence College. She grew up in Massachusetts and now lives in North Georgia with her husband, Clay, and their four pets, Titan, an English bulldog, Gunner, a mini Aussie, and two Ragdoll cats, Aoife and Whiskey.



Lori Culberson

Navy Gold Star Program Coordinator

Lori Culberson's passion and dedication for working with military families began more than 30 years ago with the start of her husband's military career. Before embarking on a career working within military family programs, she served in several key volunteer positions. Her work supporting families during Operation Enduring Freedom was recognized by Gen. Richard Cody, commander of the 101st Airborne Division, who presented her with the Eagle Service Award in 2002.

Lori has spent the last 17 years working within Family Programs for the Florida Army National Guard. From November 2006 to June 2016, she was the Family Assistance Center specialist at Camp Blanding Joint Training Site, where she assisted well over 10,000 service members and their families. In June 2016, Lori became an Army Survivor Outreach Services support coordinator. There she spent seven years serving Florida surviving families of fallen soldiers.

Serving survivors is particularly important to Lori because of her personal experience supporting friends through the loss of their loved ones. She believes that providing families with the knowledge of available benefits empowers them and eases some of the burdens of the grief process. Her ability to form connections between community partners and military families is what Lori finds most rewarding. This has allowed community partners to show their appreciation for the sacrifices that military families make while also helping those families feel more connected to their community. She feels humbled to see the lasting impact that those experiences bring to everyone involved and is excited to join the Navy program to continue her passion.

Lori and her husband, Dan, live in Florida, and they have two sons. When Lori isn't spending time with family, their two Boston terriers, Mack and Beau, four chickens, and thousands of honeybees keep her busy.

May is Gold Star Awareness Month

**Paying tribute to the fallen,
honoring their loved ones
and sharing their stories**



www.NavyGoldStar.com
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Education Resources for Gold Star Families

By Catherine Ragsdale, Navy Gold Star Program Coordinator and Lisa Bauch, Navy Gold Star Program Analyst

Gold Star families have had to endure unimaginable loss and overcome so many obstacles while proving that they are some of the most resilient people out there. One of those obstacles should not be how to pay for college. Below is a collection of resources and scholarship opportunities available to Gold Star families. It is not intended to be exhaustive, as there may be others out there, nor is this an endorsement by the U.S. Navy for any of these organizations. This information should serve as a starting point for your own independent research to help you find the resources best for you and your family. If you have any questions, want further assistance with this topic or any other, be sure to contact your Navy Gold Star coordinator. If you are unsure who that is, visit www.navygoldstar.com/locations and select your state of residence to find out.

VA Education Benefits

Q: Am I eligible for VA education benefits? What is the difference between DEA and Fry?

A: Visit <https://www.va.gov/education/survivor-dependent-benefits/> for more information on VA education benefits and eligibility.

Q: I've narrowed down/selected my school. What will each benefit cover?

A: Visit <https://www.va.gov/education/gi-bill-comparison-tool> to learn about and compare your GI Bill benefits at approved schools.

Q: Who do I call if I need help?

A: Contact the VA Education Call Center (ECC) at 1-888-442-4551 and select Option 5 for assistance.

Q: Should I use Dependents' Education Assistance (DEA) or the Fry Scholarship? What is the difference between the two?

A: While we cannot tell you explicitly which benefit to use, we recommend that you think about your long-term education plans. You can view the comparison table at <https://www.va.gov/education/survivor-dependent-benefits/>.

Nonprofit Scholarships

The Folded Flag Foundation	https://www.foldedflagfoundation.org/
Navy Marine Corps Relief Society	https://www.nmcrs.org/our-services/scholarships
Folds of Honor Foundation	https://foldsofhonor.org/scholarships/
Fisher House Heroes Legacy Scholarship	https://fisherhouse.org/programs/scholarship-programs/heroes-legacy-scholarship/
Children of Fallen Patriots	https://www.fallenpatriots.org/faqs-for-families

Please note that submission deadlines and eligibility criteria for each scholarship offered vary greatly. Contact the organization directly for full details.



Scholarship Databases and Resources

The following resources are not a complete listing of all resources that may be available. We recommend that you also speak with your school's financial aid office or academic counselors for assistance.

T.A.P.S. Scholarship Search Tool: The non-profit organization, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (T.A.P.S.), offers an online scholarship research tool that allows you to search through many scholarships that are offered for surviving military families. It can be found at <https://www.taps.org/scholarships>.

U.S. Department of Education: The U.S. Department of Education's Federal Student Aid website offers information on how to search and apply for scholarships opportunities at <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/scholarships>. In addition, information on scholarships and federal student aid programs for veterans and military family members is available at <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/military>.

MySECO Scholarship Finder: The Department of Defense Spouse Education and Career Opportunities program provides education and career guidance to military spouses worldwide and offers comprehensive resources and tools for all stages of your career progression. Browse their database of financial resources at <https://myseco.militaryonesource.mil/portal/>.

CareerOneStop Scholarship Finder: The CareerOneStop Scholarship Finder, sponsored by the Department of Labor, offers information on scholarships, fellowships, grants, and other financial aid award opportunities. Visit CareerOneStop at <https://www.careeronestop.org/toolkit/training/find-scholarships.aspx>.



Know the Significance of Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Veteran's Day

By Stephanie Hunter, Navy Gold Star Program Analyst

Many people today see Memorial Day and Veteran's Day as simply a day off and may not even know about Armed Forces Day. The significance and meaning of these dates is often muddled by the down time.

Spending time with family or friends and enjoying the time off from work can still be a great way to honor the men and women in uniform, both past and present, to whom these days are dedicated, but it is still important to understand their significance and differences. Armed Forces Day is celebrated annually on the third Saturday of May. It is a day to pay tribute to men and women who are currently serving in the U.S. Armed Forces. Armed Forces Day is also part of Armed Forces Week, which begins on the second Saturday of May. The single-day celebration stemmed from the unification of the U.S. Armed Forces under the Department of Defense.

Memorial Day, celebrated the last Monday in May, is when we remember and honor the men and women who died while serving in the military. In traditional observances, the flag of the United States is raised briskly to the top of the staff and then solemnly lowered to the half-staff position, where it remains only until noon. It is then raised to full staff for the remainder of the day. The half-staff position remembers the more than one million men and women who gave their lives in service of their country. At noon, their memory is raised by the living, who resolve not to let their sacrifice be in vain, but to rise up in their stead and continue the fight for liberty and justice for all. Some other traditional observances included wearing red poppies, visiting cemeteries, and placing flags or flowers on the graves of our fallen heroes, or visiting memorials.

The traditional observance of Memorial Day has diminished over the years, and many Americans have forgotten the meaning and traditions of the day. To help reeducate and remind Americans of the true meaning of Memorial Day, the "National Moment of

Remembrance" resolution was passed in December 2000. It asks that at 3 p.m. local time, all Americans "voluntarily and informally observe in their own way a moment of remembrance and respect, pausing from whatever they are doing for a moment of silence or listening to Taps."

Veterans Day, celebrated on Nov. 11, is the day to thank all the men and women who have served in the military during wars and peaceful times. Veterans Day began as Armistice Day to honor the end of World War I, which officially took place on Nov. 11, 1918. In 1954, at the urging of a veterans service organization, the word "Armistice" was changed to "Veterans" to honor America's veterans of all wars for their patriotism, love of country, and willingness to serve and sacrifice for the common good.

Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day and Veterans Day are important observances in the U.S. to honor different groups of people who have been members of the military. As the holidays approach this year, please try to remember the significance and difference between the holidays and pay tribute to those whom the holiday was intended to honor.

MEMORIAL DAY, the last Monday in May, honors those who died in military service.

VETERANS DAY, November 11, honors those who have served in the military.

ARMED FORCES DAY, the third Saturday in May, honors all the U.S. military services as well as its members, both past and present.



Finding Your New Normal as a Grieving Survivor

By Ken Boben, Navy Gold Star Coordinator

Losing a loved one changes life as it was previously known. Once a family member passes away, your new normal is something entirely different. Finding a new normal does not mean forgetting your loved one but remembering them in your own unique way.

You should be aware and consider that different emotions such as shock, numbness, anxiety, sadness, frustration, and anger you may be experiencing and struggling with are normal and valid. The journey of grief is tough, but it can bring some comfort to know that you are not alone.

When you are experiencing deep pain from grief, it can appear as though your heart will never be healed. There is hope! The heavy and devastating feelings of unhappiness and unbearable pain can lessen with time. You may believe you are not strong enough to bear it, but over time, you can manage your emotions in ways you could not have envisioned, and you can find meaning in your life again.

Although you will still naturally miss your loved one, you can survive and even flourish. It takes patience and fortitude understanding that it is difficult and painful, but you can do it.

Support and help when you are grieving is very important. An excellent way to help manage the stress of grief is to talk to people who are nonjudgmental and supportive, people who will not tell you what you should do or shouldn't do or what you need to do, or what you need to stop doing. Find a friend or family member who can be there for you or attend a support group. Support groups can be very helpful for grieving people and can provide the kind of nonjudgmental listening support that grieving people need.

You do not have to figure this out on your own. Some ways to cope with grief is to stay connected with those who can understand and relate to you. Take good care of yourself by engaging in hobbies and finding ways to relax. Try to be gentle with yourself by acknowledging your pain rather than avoiding it, knowing and accepting triggers, and accepting your new normal.

Your Navy Gold Star coordinator can connect you with a compassionate grief counselor who is knowledgeable about the complexity of grieving and can assist you with healing. If you are ready to learn how to cope and heal after your loss, please contact your Navy Gold Star coordinator for assistance.

[Sources: <https://www.karlahelbert.com/the-new-normal.html> and <https://empowercounseling.net/how-to-face-a-new-normal-adjusting-to-grief-and-loss/>]



Duck, Duck, Jeep for Gold Star Awareness Month

By Stephanie Hunter, Navy Gold Star Program Analyst

The Navy Gold Star Program has designated the month of May as Gold Star Awareness Month to help raise awareness within the military and local communities. This year, the program is implementing the “You’ve Been Ducked Campaign.” The idea comes from a tradition that Jeep owners have of “ducking” other Jeeps. Many Jeep owners will personalize little rubber ducks and “duck” another Jeep owner for fun. It has become a movement that Jeep owners from all over the world participate in.

To help raise awareness while having fun during this year’s campaign, the Navy Gold Star Program has customized ducks that have a small business card attached to them explaining the significance of Gold Star Awareness Month. The You’ve Been Ducked Campaign encourages people to help us let survivors know that the nation has not forgotten them or the sacrifice of their fallen heroes.

If you get “ducked” with a Navy Gold Star duck this May, we encourage you to snap a picture and post it, along with the location (city, state) where you have been ducked, on our Facebook page. Our goal is to reach all 50 states as well as overseas locations. We will be tracking the states and countries we have reached throughout the month of May, so be sure to visit our Facebook page for updates. Who knows, a duck may be found in a community near you!

If you are a Gold Star family and would like to help us with our campaign, please reach out to your Gold Star coordinator for information on how you can provide support.

For more information on the Navy Gold Star Program, visit www.navygoldstar.com or www.facebook.com/navygoldstar. #NAVYGOLDSTAR #NGSPDUCKS





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By Stephanie Hunter, Navy Gold Star Program Analyst

Each year thousands of military personnel make the selfless sacrifice to defend our country and the freedoms in it. Our strong and patriotic military-affiliated families understand the importance of serving our nation and the commitment it takes to serve, as they stand with the men and women who serve so valiantly.

As a country, we support and thank those men and women for their service, as we should; however, our support should not end there. Every year we lose hundreds of service members because of suicide, combat, training accidents, accidental occurrences, illness or homicide. In 2023 alone, the Navy lost 194 active-duty Sailors, leaving behind loved ones - our Gold Star families.

We have a duty to take care of our Gold Star families and honor the legacies of their fallen service members. This is one of the reasons the Navy Gold Star Program has dedicated the month of May as Gold Star Awareness Month. Throughout the month of May, we emphasize the education of our military and local communities on what it means to be a Gold Star survivor. We also provide opportunities to our survivors to participate in events that pay tribute to the fallen and offer survivors an opportunity to connect with one another.

While the debt of gratitude can never be repaid to our lost heroes, we can recognize their service and sacrifice by helping their families carry on their memories. Regardless of military service, cause, location, or circumstances of the loss - surviving family members deserve our acknowledgement and deepest respect. Anytime you see someone wearing the Gold Star or next-of-kin lapel pin, remember that he or she has lost a loved one who selflessly served our nation, and take that moment to honor and remember all of our Gold Star families who have committed and sacrificed so much for our great nation. Behind every Gold Star pin there are stories of fallen service members and strong survivors.

For more information on the Navy Gold Star Program, visit www.navygoldstar.com, www.facebook.com/navygoldstar or call 1-888-509-8759.



We Remember

In this edition of Survivor's Link, we honor those lost during key moments in military history that occurred during the months of April and May.

April 10: USS Thresher - 129 crew members were lost aboard USS Thresher on April 10, 1963, 220 miles east of Cape Cod during a deep-diving test.

April 11: USS Kidd - 38 Sailors were killed aboard USS Kidd on April 11, 1945, when the ship was struck by a kamikaze aircraft off the coast of Japan.

April 19: USS Iowa - 47 crewmen were killed aboard USS Iowa on April 19, 1989, when an explosion occurred within the Number Two 16-inch gun turret during a fleet exercise in the Caribbean Sea.

May 17: USS Stark - 37 Sailors were killed aboard USS Stark on May 17, 1987, during the Iran-Iraq War, when an Iraqi jet aircraft fired two Exocet missiles at the American frigate.



THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA VIETNAM WAR COMMEMORATION



3.8 MILLION +

Vietnam veterans publicly thanked and honored



26 THOUSAND +

Ceremonies have been held and hosted by our Commemorative Partners in all 50 U.S. states, territories and commonwealths

NATIONAL VIETNAM WAR VETERANS DAY March 29

13 THOUSAND +

Commemorative Partners comprised of local, state and national organizations, businesses, sports franchises and governmental agencies



Join the Nation ... thank a Vietnam veteran!

www.vietnamwar50th.com

APRIL 9TH NATIONAL FORMER PRISONERS OF WAR RECOGNITION DAY



A prisoner of war is a person who is held captive by a power during or immediately after an armed conflict.



137,425

returned to US military control



Every military dining facility houses a memorial for current P.O.W and MIA personal



The black and white logo represents the sorrow, anxiety and hope felt by the men still missing



1,589 - Vietnam War
7,761 - Korean War
126 - Cold War
72,719 - World War II

Navy Gold Star Coordinators

Area of Responsibility	Phone
California (Los Angeles County/Northern CA), Japan, Guam, Korea	901-671-6720
California (San Diego/Riverside), Colorado, Utah, Hawaii	901-930-8290
California (San Diego/Riverside), Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada	901-930-8308
Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Minnesota, Canada	901-930-8062
Washington, Alaska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Iowa	901-671-7519
Texas	901-930-8109
Michigan, Illinois, Indiana	901-930-8593
Kansas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee	901-930-8300
Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maine	901-671-6910
New York, New Jersey, Vermont, New Hampshire	901-930-8388
West Virginia, Delaware, Maryland, and all other counties in Virginia not listed below	901-930-8578
Virginia (these counties: Isle of Wight, Suffolk, Chesapeake City, Virginia Beach, Norfolk, Williamsburg City, Hampton City, Newport News City, Portsmouth City, York, Poquoson City)	901-930-8008
North Carolina, Kentucky, Ohio	901-930-8210
Georgia, South Carolina, Europe	901-671-5597
Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida	901-671-6521
Florida	904-542-5706

Note: All postal mail should be sent to the below address.

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