

MARINE RECONNAISSANCE FOUNDATION



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‘We are not alone. Nobody is.’

At annual 2022 Recon Challenge and Gold Star Family Retreat, Marine Recon community pulls together for support, camaraderie, honoring the fallen

In the predawn darkness of April 29, Molly and Mike Morel stood at Red Beach, at the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base and watched as 50 men rush into the chilly Pacific, rucksacks bouncing on their shoulders, waves breaking into each other.

The teams of two would swim 1,000 meters before returning to the beach in the first event of the 2022 Recon Challenge, an annual, grueling, daylong competition held at the Southern California base that covers nearly a marathon's length and honors the fallen Marines and Navy corpsmen of the Marine Corps' Reconnaissance community.

One of the teams – Recon veterans Mike Mendoza and instructor Tristan Held – carried the name of the Morels' son, Capt. Brent Morel, stamped on a bright panel affixed to their packs. This year marked the 13th running of the Recon Challenge, organized by Recon Training Company at the School of Infantry-West and sponsored in part by Marine Recon Foundation, but the first time the Morels of Tennessee joined in watching the competitors.

“We tried to go to each event that we could get to,” Molly Morel said. “We went and watched everything we could to cheer them on. I'm just astounded that they could physically endure all of that.”

This year's Recon Challenge was the first time she and her husband have been to Camp Pendleton since Dec. 7, 2004. That was just eight months after Brent died in an April 7, 2004, ambush in Iraq. The Morels, including Brent's wife Amy, were among several Gold Star families who met privately with then-President George W.

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MRF story by Gidget Fuentes

Photos courtesy of MRF, Jennifer Carter, USMC/Lance Cpl. Hope Straley

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Bush during his visit to the base. A year later, the Marine Corps presented Amy with the Navy Cross, awarded to Brent Morel posthumously. Mendoza, as well as Sgt. Willie L. Copeland III, also received the nation's second-highest medal their bravery in combat for their actions carrying the mortally-wounded Morel off the battlefield during the fatal ambush and the ensuing firefight of Second Platoon with B Company, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion against dozens of insurgent fighters.

On the beach this time and throughout the day, Molly and Mike were enveloped by Recon Marines and Corpsmen – seasoned veterans and young “ropers” undergoing Reconnaissance training – in an environment representative of the Recon community’s mantra: *Never Above You, Never Below You, Always By Your Side*. Among them was retired Maj. James Capers, Jr., a legendary Force Reconnaissance Marine and Vietnam combat veteran who, at 84, continues to support the fallen and the special operations community.

“It was amazing to be around the Recon guys, so many of the guys who served with Brent that we had not met,” Molly Morel said.

The open-ocean swim and 10 events – all based on real-world, operational skills used by Recon Marines and Special Amphibious Recon Corpsmen – are intended to challenge competitors and test their endurance, physical, marksmanship, water and mental skills. It’s a timed race, and there’s no chance to stop the clock over the nearly 26-mile course. This year, 32 teams competed, the most in the event’s history.

At one point during the competition, the Morels watched Mendoza and Held navigate the “fireman’s carry” around a 400-meter track. “It brought to mind, to me, that Mike carried Brent off the battlefield,” Molly Morel said, noting Tristan was tall like Brent. “It was really a struggle for Mike, so that sort of brought back that vision in my head of how he must have struggled with



all the gear and everything both of them had on.”

As difficult as that was to witness, she said, “it just meant so much for us to be surrounded by Marines and Sailors, to know that Brent was their brother, and that they’re not going to forget him. That was the biggest takeaway that any Gold Star family member wants, is to know that when we’re gone, there’s going to be somebody who’s still going to remember him.”

Eight Gold Star families, including the Morels, stayed a few nights at the base’s beach cottages as part of the Recon Challenge weekend and Gold Star Family Retreat, courtesy of the Marine Reconnaissance Foundation. The nonprofit, all-volunteer organization supports Recon Marines and Navy SARCs and their families through various support programs and services.

The Morels met Marines who served with Brent and some who didn’t but knew of him. “It just meant a lot to talk to them, and just to sit back and watch the brotherhood that they have,” she said. “We never really understood the military brotherhood, how deep it runs, until we lost Brent.”

Racing to honor and remember

The Recon Challenge was first held in 2009 in honor of their fallen brothers, Recon Marines and Special Amphibious Reconnaissance Corpsmen who died in training or in combat. After the one-kilometer swim, teams must cover 25 miles along Camp Pendleton’s scrubby coastal hills while carrying a heavy pack and together navigating various operational challenges, including on a shooting range and in the combat pool, and grunt through tire flips and a memory test. Upon crossing over a banner finish line, they stopped at a “battlefield cross” memorial and draped the dog tags of the fallen warrior in whose name they ran in honor.

To the competitors, it’s more than just a race to the finish.



Recon legend retired Maj. James Capers, Jr., front, joined other Recon veterans to motivate competitors at the 2022 Recon Challenge at Camp Pendleton, Calif.

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The trek to the finish line is a journey of pushing one's limits – together as a team – beyond aches and pains. Many are drawn to challenge themselves, honor their lost brothers and revel in the camaraderie and nostalgia every Recon gathering creates.

“It's a good way to honor our fallen,” said Master Gunnery Sergeant Cory Paskvan, the senior enlisted leader with Reconnaissance Training Company and a 27-year veteran. “It's an all-around positive event and just a positive environment for the community.”

This year, as well as last, Paskvan and his teammate, Maj. Morgan Jordan, the RTC commander, ran in memory of Lt. Col. Kevin M. Shea, who died at 38 in a 2004 rocket attack in Iraq. “It's all about representing the families,” Paskvan said. The overall event and Gold Star retreat “is a pretty positive experience for a lot of the families.”



Recon veteran Mike Mendoza, left, completed the 2022 Recon Challenge in memory of his friend and team mate, Capt. Brent Morel,

Paskvan and Jordan won, again, finishing ahead of the 28 teams that started that morning in under eight-and-a-half hours.

It's the second victory trophy for Paskvan, who had competed six times, finishing second three times before his first win in 2021 with Jordan. Their 2021 finish drew attention: Their combined age of 84 made them the oldest team, to date, to earn the paddles. One year later, two years older, they got another title, more bragging rights and kudos from some young students, who he reminded them that “If you rest, you rust.”

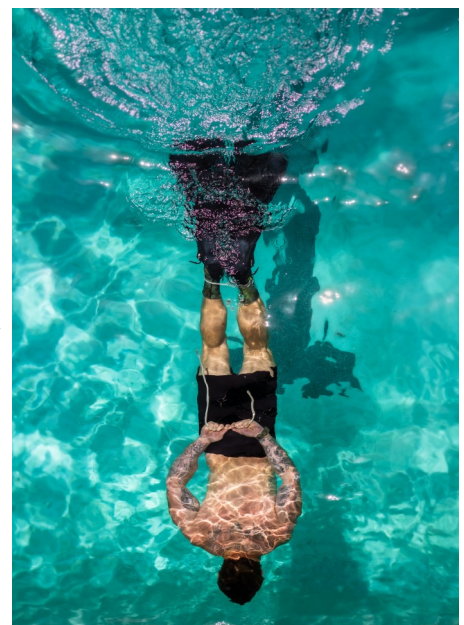
Competitors might find a particular event more challenging than others; for Paskvan this year, it was the M10 semi-automatic sniper system. But the key to winning boils down to the transition, from one event and into the next, he said. In the months before the Challenge, he and Morgan did deep-dives into preparing to do those transitions efficiently. On race day, they moved out quickly while other teams took breaks.

Paskvan and Jordan were the second team out of the ocean after the one-kilometer swim, but they were first to run from the transition area through Pulgas Canyon and into Camp Pendleton's coastal hills after the leading team had to turn back after forgetting something at the changing tent.

“It wasn't the spot that I wanted to be, because I hate being first, because you'll have to run the whole day with a target on your back,” said Paskvan. His preferred place was in second, not far from the leader, so they could “strike later on down the road.” At one point, they got briefly passed at Station 4, but their swiftness making that transition and their sustained pace kept them the team to beat. They

This year's race, which started at Camp Pendleton's Red Beach, “was a really fast course,” covering nearly a marathon's length. The course, designed by Gunnery Sgt. Frank Simmons, a Recon instructor, didn't have the steep, elevation climbs of some prior Challenges. This year, organizers substituted the “fireman's carry” for the obstacle course, which was unavailable.

The pool events remained tough nuts to crack. Teams first had to swim across the pool with hands and feet tied. Then, some 20 miles into the race, they had to bob down and up to the surface for a full two-and-a-half minutes with hands and feet tied. Any break in that restarted the time within a 15-minute window once they got to the pool and stripped down their gear. “I was cramping up, we all were,” Paskvan said, after running the hills. They worked to stay calm and focus on the breathing, “and that was the hard part.”



MRF on mission to provide support to those in need

This year's Recon Challenge was the biggest yet. It's become “probably the most impactful single event in our community,”

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drawing participants from as far as Okinawa and even some who are retired, said Jose “Pep” Tablada, a Recon veteran and MRF president.

The Gold Star family retreat is held in concert with the annual Recon Challenge, which MRF sponsors in a collaboration with Recon Training Company and what’s become something of an unofficial Recon Reunion. “These families realize that their sons, their daddies, their brothers, their husbands were part of something very special, frankly, that most people don’t know about,” Tablada said.

The Foundation casts a wide net in its support to the Recon community. “We support Gold Star families, but we also support active-duty Recon units and their kids and families,” said Martin Williams, a retired Recon Marine and MRF treasurer.

There’s a camp for children, retreat for wounded teammates, grants for Recon-owned businesses and a strong program to tell and share Recon’s deep, storied history. The Foundation, which relies on private donations and fundraising, has helped provide trained therapy dogs, financial aid and other support to families grappling with suicide, accidents and unexpected disasters. The community, for example, came together to support a Recon veteran who suffered the loss of his family home in a wildfire.

This year marked the fourth Gold Star Family Retreat, held at the Paul Mitchell estate in Lanikai, on Oahu’s eastern windward coast. Five families are hosted by MRF for nearly a week with a menu focused on rest and relaxation, and with the intangible goals of healing and support that comes from new and supporting relationships with one another.

The idea germinated after Tablada joined the MRF board of directors. He and his wife Charity, who live in Hawaii, had ideas for several recurring programs including retreats for Gold Star families and wounded teammates, and these soon took root. In Hawaii, with its culture of family and familial bonds, they found support from the Mitchell family and others.

While some organizations hold retreats that may be therapeutic or clinical and structured in mind, MRF wanted something different. “In this case, it’s all about the families,” he said. “They’re told: We will do nothing, unless you want to do it. We try to make it truly all about them.”

MRF supports families at the Gold Star family retreat portion held in California during Recon Challenge weekend at Camp Pendleton’s beachfront cottages and, like in the Hawaii portion, provide the housing, transportation and all meals for the families. Both events create new bonds and relationships that continue long after.

“That’s one of the beauties, that we create these micro-communities” of families, Tablada said. “The circumstances of their relationship, very few people can understand.”

Aside from a few events, including a luau and tree-planting in memory of their lost loved ones, the retreat is an unscripted respite for the families, by design. “The families naturally talk to one another, because they’ve all got something in common,” said Williams. So “we just let things happen organically.”

A luau welcomes the families to Hawaii, and enables the MRF team “to show our aloha,” Tablada said of Hawaiian culture. “It allows us to bring in Hawaiian culture, which is very loving and family-oriented and powerful.”

A tour of Pearl Harbor “is demonstrating that we have not forgotten,” he said. “It shows them that we honor all of the fallen, and it gives them a chance to honor others.” The families are escorted by a senior officer, the families get a tour that ends on the USS *Missouri*, where the war’s end was signed onto documents in 1945 in Tokyo Bay.

A tree-planting event is about establishing roots and showing them that while their loved one is gone, physically, by planting a native tree as part of a reforestation project, “they are planting roots in the soil here in Hawaii,” he said. “They will always have roots here in Hawaii.”

“I think the most meaningful thing is the sense of community that is established,” Tablada said. “That’s the long term win here. Great memories together, and then building the community and establishing connections that frankly is awesome.”

Families find new, renewed bonds at MRF retreats

Molly and Mike Morel were one of the families at this year’s retreat. It was an experience different from other Gold Star events they’ve done over the years. They had time to do whatever they wished, and often it was with members of the other



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families over each meal or seated around the fire pit, getting to know one another. In those short days, they built deep bonds.

The families agreed that “we’d want to be more than just Christmas-card friends,” Molly Morel said. “We enjoyed each other’s company, and it was really meaningful to hear about their loved ones and interact with them.... Four families were brought together, and we all seemed really compatible.”

The families gathered for a Pearl Harbor tour, riding the admiral’s barge to the historic USS *Missouri* for a tour, a ride around Pearl Harbor and a stop and tour of the USS *Arizona* Memorial. They stopped at a local Ko’olau Distillery, run by two former Recon Marines, for tastings and conversation, and they left with an MRF commemorative bottle of whiskey that they hope to break open whenever Recon Marines visit them in Tennessee.

They joined in a tree-planting ceremony at Gunstock Ranch, on Oahu’s North Shore. Each family set a sapling of a tree with heart-shaped leaves into the ground and, with cupped hands, watering its roots. “That symbolizes to Hawaiians that our family is now rooted in Hawaii,” Molly Morel said. “It was an emotional thing, to plant the tree,” she added, noting they wrapped it with a dog tag with Brent’s photo they had brought along. “That meant a lot to all the families.”

For Jennifer Carter, the whole trip from her home in Connecticut to California and then Hawaii was surreal but wholeheartedly fulfilling. Initially, she wasn’t so sure. Unlike her mother, Jennifer hadn’t involved herself in Gold Star family events in the years after the death of her brother, Cpl. Kevin J. “Jack” Dempsey, who was killed in Iraq on Nov. 13, 2004, one month before his 24th birthday.

“I was actually blown away that something like this would actually be going on. It’s amazing to me, like, this whole trip has been unreal,” she said. “It was very emotional leading up to it. It was something that I felt like I really wanted to do, but at the same time, it also definitely was stressful in a way.”

Jennifer and her brother had lost their father when they were young. They were very close, as she took care of him while their mother worked. “When he passed, it definitely changed my life. My whole world, it got flipped upside down,” she said.

“I felt a tremendous responsibility to be strong for my mom. So I think for many years I didn’t truly grieve,” she added. Luckily, a strong community of close friends and her then-boyfriend-now-husband provided critical support to her and her mother.

Jennifer Carter had last seen her brother in August 2004 when he visited before shipping out with Alpha Company, 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion. Every year since, that time of year begins an uneasy season of loss and grief buried subconsciously.

“It lasts through Thanksgiving, because he was killed on November 13th, and he was buried on the day before Thanksgiving... And his birthday is December 9th. It feels like it just drags out across that time,” she said. “And then I kind of feel like I get relief after Christmas, and then Memorial Day rolls around, and then it’s like in your face again. It’s amazing how that loss does not go away, that pain.”

Over the years, Recon Marines from Jack’s unit have routinely reached out to Jennifer to see how she’s doing. “It’s a brotherhood like no other,” she said. “I know many people from different branches in the Army, and the Recon Marine just have something that is above and beyond those other units. They don’t compare. I really saw that even more so with this trip. Just how unbelievable it is. Pep and his team are just awesome, they really are.”

Her brother enlisted at 21, spurred by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S. A football player and natural athlete, he was pursued by recruiters. He became interested in bomb detail, she said, and he was asked to try for Recon, “and they loved him. He was perfect for him. He went quickly from private to corporal,” advancing in rank quickly and eventually trained for and joined the Recon community.



Molly and Mike Morel planted a tree, native to Hawaiian islands, in memory of their son, Capt. Brent L. Morel.

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“He just ate it up. He loved it. He loved the challenge,” she said. “He’d be telling us all the stories and he’d be laughing, like staying up for 48 hours straight and basically hallucinating at the end. My mother is going whiter and whiter as he’s telling the story, and he’s just laughing.”

“He became a man in the Marine Corps, he really did. He went from a kid to a man, and everybody said that about him when he came home to visit.” Teachers took note of his ramrod straight back, and how he greeted them with a proper handshake.

From their loss, Gold Star families build new bonds

In California, Jennifer Carter and her mother met other Gold Star families, and they quickly bonded over late-night fire-side chats with Recon veterans. In Hawaii, those bonds deepened. “It was amazing. All of us have been reconnecting,” since returning home, with group texting a regular thing, she said. “Pep kept saying, ‘you’re going to have family for life, you’ll see.’ I really feel it. It’s pretty awesome.”

The tree-planting event in Hawaii “was so emotional,” she said. At one point, comforted by the Gold Star children at the retreat, “that’s when I realized how powerful it was for all of us to have that. It was just amazing. The whole experience overall I’m still processing, really. All such positive stuff.”

Jennifer Carter said she had toyed with the idea of getting a tattoo, in memory of Jack, for 17 years but hadn’t. At Del Mar, she got inspired by one Marine’s tattoo, so while in Hawaii, MRF arranged for a local tattoo artist to do the art with Polynesian symbols of warrior, soldier, protection, air and water, family, and a passage to another life. It stretches from her wrist to her elbow and across her forearm, she said, “so when I put it over my chest, it’s on my heart.”

Part of Recon’s mantra is *always beside you*, “and that’s how I feel about this with the Gold Star families. We’re on this road together, and I’m here to help and to listen. We’re not alone. Nobody is alone,” said Diane Homm, a Gold Star mother and MRF’s Gold Star family liaison. “It’s important to let the Gold Star families know you’re not alone. It is hard, and I know it’s hard, and you don’t know what day is going to be harder, but just know that I’m here. Somebody’s here, and we’ll always be here for each other.”

Diane lost her son, Staff Sgt. Caleb Medley, a Recon Marine and combat veteran, in a February 2013 military freefall parachuting accident in California. Caleb, 26, had enlisted in the Marine Corps at 18 and deployed to Iraq with his infantry battalion. After becoming a Recon Marine, he deployed to Afghanistan with 1st Recon Battalion and later was assigned to 1st Force Reconnaissance Company at Camp Pendleton.

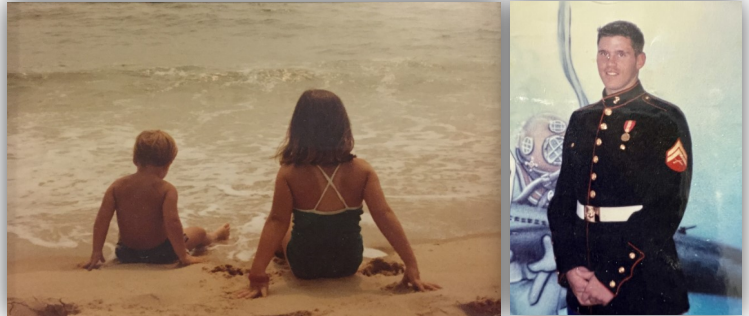
Diane attended their first Recon Challenge in 2013, just months into grieving Caleb’s death. There were few families attending the annual event back then and watching the teams step off for the daylong event. “It was just so meaningful that these guys who carried the names of their fallen brothers and they went through all of these obstacle courses, for them,” she recalled. “They loved these brothers... Whether they knew them or not, there’s just that special bond of being in Recon.”

“As the years have gone on, I remember thinking more families need to come to this,” she said. “It just really touches your heart.

“It’s like a part of Caleb is in each one of these guys. You’ve got to be a special person to be in Recon to go through all of that. To me, being around them – their personalities, their abilities – there’s a bit of Caleb in all of them, so it’s just so really meaningful. And to follow along with those people who are carrying their names, from one I’ve seen through the years, it means a lot to them to have their families there.”

Diane Homm attended the first Gold Star family retreat, at MRF’s invitation. “I had no idea what that was going to be like, you’re going to spend a week with families you’ve never met?” she recalled. She had attended other events as a Gold Star mom, meeting families of other service members, “but this one was different, because it was all Recon. You know that your loved ones all went through this training and they were all part of that elite group.”

She’s come to appreciate the uniqueness and tight bonds within the Recon community, especially the young “ropers” going through training. “They see the families. They see the active duty guys. They see the retired. They see generations of the Recon community at the Challenge. That’s awesome.”



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Caleb “had so much respect for these guys, and I know why,” she said. “And I know that the respect was mutual.”

As MRF's Gold Star liaison, Diane Homm serves as an important link to families, reaching out if needed at the most delicate, emotional times. “It's hard, yeah, but I understand. But I've been through it, and I can help,” she said. “We're on this road together, and if you're on this road, what better people to walk with.”

“It's a journey that unless you've been on, you can't tell somebody else how they should be,” she added. “I think we've all gone through that, where people have said things that are hurtful and harmful and insensitive and plain mean, and they probably don't even realize it. But to know that there's somebody that can say, when they say move on, I move on every day, but get over it? That's not ever going to happen.”

“This Foundation does what it says it is going to do,” she said. “It is very active and cares about the community, and helps, and none of us get paid. It's all volunteer.”

The Recon Challenge event “really showcases what the community is about, and how the community really backs each other,” said Paskvan, a director of the Force Recon Association, which also sponsors the Challenge along with MRF. And it's impacting the next generation of Recon.

After the 2021 Challenge, “we had an influx of students. We actually produced more Recon Marines than we were supposed to, during that time,” Paskvan said. “I think it was in fact the students were able to witness it and watch the entire event. They feel more connected to the community, and they feel more of a brotherhood and they feel more of that camaraderie.”

“So when they get back into training, they're less apt to drop on request or fail events,” he said, “or if they do fail an event, they know they really need to pass this because if not, I'm going to be out of this forever.”

Among the most-recent prep course students, no one rang the bell to quit. “We had no drops-on-request before land nav, and they all passed” the land navigation test, he said. They'll be starting BRC in July, “so we probably won't see the fruits of the Challenge until mid-summer.”

Those new Recon Marines will have lots of support along the sidelines as they continue their training and join reconnaissance units across the Marine Corps. “What a powerful thing those young Marines realize – if I can make it through this training, I can become part of this incredibly small and tight, incredible community,” Tablada said. “They see it happen, generations of teammates and families all coming together. That is a fantastic intangible.” ✕

“You're going to have family for life, you'll see.' I really feel it.”

— Jennifer Carter,
Gold Star family member and sister of
Cpl. Jack Dempsey.

