

Military Veteran Experiences Both Sides of Trees for Troops – as recipient and program coordinator

By: Elizabeth LeBrun- 9/24/2021

The Christmas Spirit Foundation counts Retired U.S. Navy Commanding Officer Larry “Mac” McCullen as a prime example of the positive effect that Trees for Troops (T4T) has on military members and their families. After retiring from 36 years of military service with a helicopter squadron, an amphibious assault ship, and the Naval ROTC, Mac purchased Piper Mountain Christmas Tree Farm in Maine and now serves as the state’s program coordinator for T4T. As coordinator, Mac organizes the collection of about 20 tree farms’ tree donations and serves as the pickup location for the trees. He and his wife, Anne, receive letters from active-duty troops who appreciate receiving donated trees and messages. “I’ll never forget the feelings of warmth and joy that I felt when I saw a live tree in the dining facility on our operating base in Kuwait in 2003 and 2004. It reminded me of all the trees my family and I had decorated together when I was young and it made me feel a little closer to home all those miles away from the U.S.,” explains McCullen. “I personally believe that this year is going to be one of the most impactful years ever for the program.”

Mac grew up in Knoxville, a rural area of north-central Pennsylvania where he worked summers on local dairy and beef farms. He joined the Navy and “feels truly blessed” to have had the opportunities to command both at sea and ashore during his service. “I had tours of duty in Jacksonville and Pensacola, Florida, Norfolk, Virginia, San Diego, California, and Sasebo, Japan (located on Kyushu Island near Nagasaki). I also flew missions in southern Iraq in 2003 and 2004,” explains Mac. After finishing his Naval career, a career survey pointed him to the forestry industry, which led him and Anne to visit New England tree farms for sale. Piper Mountain in Maine was one such farm operated by Jim Corliss and his wife. “After spending a couple hours on the farm and seeing the potential memories we could build, I was hooked and wanted to become a Christmas Tree farmer,” says Mac.

Piper Mountain is comprised of 185 acres started in 1978 by the Corliss Family. Jim Corliss had served as President of the National Christmas Tree Association and on the Christmas Tree Promotion Board. Mac and Anne purchased the farm in 2017 and observed and learned the trade before taking over in 2019. They have been involved with Trees for Troops for many years since. “I know that the troops really appreciate the trees. There truly is nothing better than the smell of a real Christmas tree to transport you back to the place where you first saw and smelled one during the Christmas Season,” says Mac.

As a T4T Program Coordinator for Maine, Mac works with other statewide Christmas tree growers, the Christmas Spirit Foundation’s Executive Director, and the local FedEx representative. “We solicit tree donations from local growers, provide growers and the public with information about the program, and ultimately receive 300 donated trees and ornaments which are loaded onto a FedEx truck for delivery to troops at bases across the country,” says Mac. His tree farm plants approximately 4,000 trees annually and maintains about 25,000 on 27 acres at the choose and cut farm in Newburgh, Maine. Mac believes that the T4T program has always been well-executed and very much appreciated.

“Our troops and their families make numerous sacrifices to protect our nation and way of life, and this program is a means to show our nation’s gratitude for the service and sacrifice of those who serve,”

explains Mac. “We just finished our nation’s longest war in Afghanistan, and it is going to leave a lot of our troops wondering what it all meant. Many veterans are asking themselves if their time over there made any difference at all. I believe that the T4T trees that they will receive in their homes this year (many may not have been home for Christmas for some time now) will let them know that what they did over there matters, and it really matters to us! This is our chance to let them know that we appreciate what they did for our nation, the Afghan people, and our national security,” says Mac.