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Memorial Day Hurt

Some place flowers on the graves of soldiers on Memorial Day, and others suffer through a painful workout to honor the fallen.

By Hilary Achauer

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

Josh Appel has a Memorial Day tradition. Before the barbecues, before relaxing with his family, Appel spends time doing a painful workout, one that makes him suffer.

Appel is an emergency-room doctor, a flight surgeon, and a former Air Force pararescue jumper. Suffering on Memorial Day is his way of honoring the fallen.

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On July 2, 2005, in Afghanistan, Appel led the pararescue team that flew behind enemy lines to rescue Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Marcus Luttrell, the only survivor of Operation Red Wings. Luttrell told his story in the book "Lone Survivor," which was turned into a 2013 movie of the same name starring Mark Wahlberg.

On July 4, Appel and his team returned to recover the bodies of the rest of the four-man SEAL team, including Lt. Michael P. Murphy.

This Memorial Day weekend, Appel will be doing a workout that honors Murphy and the 86 Naval Special Warfare troops killed in training and combat since Sept. 11, 2001, as well as the thousands of others who have died in service of their country.

The [Navy SEAL Memorial Challenge](#), will be held on Saturday, May 24, at the Half Moon Bay Golf Links, just south of San Francisco, California, and it will consist of two parts. In the first, 86 participants will complete the workout Murph: a 1-mile run, 100 pull-ups, 200 push-ups, 300 air squats and another 1-mile run.



Courtesy/Navy SEAL Foundation

Memorial Day is an opportunity to honor those who gave all for their country.

At the same time, 86 players, combined into 43 two-player teams, will play an 18-hole shamble-format golf tournament on the Ocean Course.

Unlike most competitions, however, there will be no winners. The focus will be remembering the 86 people who gave their lives.

Appel will be there, joining in on the suffering and thinking of those days in July.

The Origin of Murph

The workout Murph is named for Murphy, who lost his life during a mission to capture a Taliban leader in Afghanistan. Murphy and his SEAL team were trapped in a firefight behind enemy lines. Unable to call for backup where they were pinned down, Murphy abandoned cover and went into the open to call Bagram Air Base. He completed the call but was shot in the process, and he eventually died of the gunshot wounds. Only one soldier from Murphy's team survived: Luttrell. Posthumously in 2007, Murphy was awarded the [Congressional Medal of Honor](#) for his bravery.

In August 2005, the workout Murph was posted on CrossFit.com. The combination of gymnastics bracketed by one-mile runs was one of Murphy's favorite workouts, and he called it "Body Armor."

Appel was the one who started the association between Memorial Day and Murph.

"I started doing CrossFit in 2006 and heard about the workout Murph, so I started doing Murph on Memorial Day," Appel said

The next year, in 2007, Appel took the idea to his gym, Albany CrossFit, and proposed the idea of everyone doing Murph on Memorial Day.

"I thought this would be a good fundraiser," Appel said. He spoke with Dan Murphy, Michael's father, telling him he had an idea for an Internet-based national fundraiser to benefit the [Lt. Michael P. Murphy Memorial Scholarship Foundation](#).

The idea was for people to sign up online and do Murph.

"Dan was like, 'Let me get this right. You want to start a fundraiser where people sign up online and then go to their own gym and work out?'" Appel laughed.

"Yeah, pretty much," he told Dan.



Courtesy Navy SEAL Foundation

Soldiers make sacrifices every day, and the CrossFit tradition is to pay tribute with sweat.

Dan asked Appel, “You think it will work? You sign up, you pay, you go to your own gym. Who would want to do that?”

“You don’t understand the CrossFit community,” Appel told Dan.

He was right. Since 2011 Appel has collected donations totaling about US\$300,000 for the Lt. Michael P. Murphy Memorial Scholarship Foundation, Lone Survivor Foundation and That Others May Live Foundation. The latter supports the families of Air Force rescue personnel who are killed or severely wounded in training or on missions.

Appel ran the fundraiser from his house for the first few years, but as it grew he turned it over to others. What hasn’t changed is that proceeds from the fundraiser still benefit the Lt. Michael P. Murphy Memorial Scholarship Foundation.

Appel is attending the Navy SEAL Memorial Challenge in Half Moon Bay as a way to honor Murphy and the others who have given their lives.

“It’s not just about Michael Murphy,” Appel said. “It’s an opportunity to memorialize everybody that’s paid the ultimate sacrifice. Instead of going out and having a

barbecue, go out and suffer a little bit and think about sacrifices people have made ... you put out a little pain, a little blood, a little sweat, some tears, for them.

“We are assigning names, but it’s really for everyone—your grandfather in WWII, that uncle you had that served in Vietnam, pretty much everybody.”

Working Together

The vice chair of the Navy SEAL Memorial Challenge, Mackenzie Tobin-Padell, said they chose the number of participants—86—to pay tribute to those Naval Special Warfare personnel who gave their lives since 2001. The challenge raises money for the [Navy SEAL Foundation](#), which provides immediate and ongoing support to the Naval Special Warfare community and its families.

“Each participant will be assigned a Naval Special Warfare hero,” Tobin-Padell said. “This is a celebration of life, and the idea is that each of the people will have that hero in the back of (his or her) mind.”

Unlike most competitions and challenges, the day is not about competition. It’s about remembering the fallen and raising money for the Navy SEAL Foundation. There will be no podium. For the Murph portion of the event, all

participants will run the first and last mile together.

The event chairman is Dick Costolo, CEO of Twitter and a CrossFit athlete.

“(Costolo) helped set the tone,” Tobin-Padell said. “He’s been heavily involved in keeping the tone about the warriors.”

Another key participant is 2008 CrossFit Games champion Jason Khalipa, who has been involved in the event since the beginning. Khalipa reached out to people at Rogue Fitness, who agreed to send a pull-up rig free of charge for the event. Khalipa, Miranda Oldroyd and other members of the NorCal CrossFit coaching staff will be at the event to offer hands-on coaching for the participants taking on Murph.

Khalipa will run everyone through a warm-up and advise the athletes of scaling options. Even with Khalipa’s busy schedule—running multiple affiliates, training for the CrossFit Games, and welcoming a new baby into his family—Tobin-Padell said the athlete put his heart into this event.



Robert P. Smith

Lori Leathers (left) runs in tribute to her brother, Matthew.

“He’s been amazing,” Tobin-Padell said of Khalipa.

For Her Brother

Lori Leathers, a 45-year-old primary-education teacher, is relatively new to CrossFit. The idea of 100 pull-ups is a little terrifying for her. But she’s willing to put her hands on the bar in the name of her brother, Special Warfare Operator 1st Class Matthew Leathers.

On Feb. 19, 2013, Matthew, a Navy SEAL, was on an ocean training exercise in Oahu, Hawaii. He went missing while free diving and never came back. He was 33.

“He was extremely experienced in free diving,” Lori said. “They couldn’t find him. It turned into a 10-day, crazy search, the largest search ever in that region with the Coast Guard.”

Despite their efforts, Matthew’s body was never recovered.

As Lori and her family mourned, she searched for a way to honor her brother. Matthew was very athletic and was especially interested in endurance running.

It was Lori who got her brother into running. He used to hate it and complained about the running he had to do in the military. Then Lori visited Matthew in San Diego, California. They went for a run together and Lori outran her little brother.

The gauntlet had been thrown down. Matthew went on to run the Honolulu Marathon. As he trained, he kept his sister updated on his progress, calling her to talk about the miles he had run and the blisters on his feet.

“It kind of became our thing,” Lori said.

In 2012, Matthew ran the Hurt 100, a 100-mile trail race held every January in Oahu, Hawaii. “Outside” named the race one of the nine toughest ultramarathons in the world. Matthew took sixth.

He ran it again in 2013, but he broke his foot about halfway through the race and was unable to finish.

After Matthew went missing, Lori decided she would finish the race for him and started training for the 2014 Hurt 100. Lori’s boyfriend suggested she start going to Another Level CrossFit in Lodi, California, once a week to build her upper-body strength in preparation for the race.

Lori ran the Hurt 100 in January 2014, making it through 80 miles before the 36-hour cutoff. Her family and members of Matthew’s SEAL team were there to cheer her on.

After the race, Lori started going to Another Level CrossFit three times a week in preparation for the Navy SEAL Memorial Challenge.

"I'll be honest: I'm kinda freaked," she said about the idea of doing Murph.

"I have to be assisted with the band for a pull-up," Lori said. "I'm pretty tiny, and I don't have much upper-body strength."

But Lori said she knows it's not about her pull-up ability.

"It's really about Matthew, more than anything," she said.

When Lori was asked to participate in the event, she said she started crying.

"It hit me. I was just shocked. There's a lot more people out there, in my opinion, who deserve to represent him, not me. I'm just the sister. I see these guys (the SEALs) as these rock-solid studs that can just do anything. When (I was) asked to do it, I thought, 'Why me? I'm going to embarrass him.'"

Then Lori decided she would do it to honor the memory of her brother.

"I think that he would be very impressed with whatever I do," she said. "I'm just there to bust my ass and represent (the SEALs) and not give up."

A Day of Remembrance

"(Memorial Day is) not just a day off work so you can do whatever. It's a day of remembrance. A day to remember people who have sacrificed," Appel said.

That's one of the reasons he started the tradition of doing Murph on Memorial Day.

"It promotes physical fitness, but it also gets people to remember what Memorial Day is all about," Appel said.

There are many ways to honor those who've sacrificed their lives for our country. Some put flowers on the graves of soldiers. Others endure a punishing workout, which can be a type of meditation—clearing the mind and forcing it to focus on remembrance.

For many SEALs, enduring Murph on Memorial Day is how they choose to remember.

"They do (Murph) every year," Lori said. "Every single SEAL I think on God's planet, every year on (Memorial Day), whether they are a on a ship somewhere, it could be in



Navy SEAL Matthew Leathers was lost Feb. 19, 2013, in a training exercise in Hawaii.

Saudi Arabia on the sand somewhere ... I guarantee you, they are figuring out a way to do that WOD to honor him," she said.

"That's just how they are."



About the Author

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