
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Why We Fight: FGB6

Lon Wagner explains what the Sept. 17 Fight Gone Bad fundraiser means to the families of fallen spec-ops soldiers.

By Lon Wagner

September 2011



All images Courtesy of the Robinson Family

There's so much Courtney Robinson will never know about her dad. And there are so many things Courtney has done that her dad never got to see.

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He never got to see her as a teenager.

Never got to see her drive a car.

Or watch her walk out the door dressed for the prom. Or graduate high school. Or go to college. He couldn't stand in the crowd on that proud day when Courtney moved the tassel on her mortarboard from one side to the other to graduate from the University of North Carolina.

Lt. Col. Craig Robinson died when Courtney was 11, "one month to the day after my birthday," she said. Her sister, Hillary, was only 8. Her mother, Janet, suddenly became a widow responsible for raising two daughters by herself.

Robinson was in the special forces, a Ranger with the U.S. Army, and his family had just moved from Fayetteville, N.C., to South Korea when he died after a training run. He told someone in his unit he wasn't feeling well, sat down on a picnic table, had a massive heart attack and died.

Courtney and her sister, really, were just getting to know their father then, and they sure didn't know what being in the elite of the U.S. military entailed. To this day, even Janet doesn't know many details about the missions her husband went on.

It was years later that Courtney visited her dad's grave, read his headstone at Arlington National Cemetery and wrote down some of those missions. When she got to a computer, she Googled them, and the reality of what special-operations warriors did sank in.

"He did all that and could have been killed at any point," she says. "It could happen in a training accident. There are so many different ways men in special operations can die."

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we're paying for those kids'
education—that's not a
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**—Scott Zagarino,
Sportsgrants**



The Robinson family.

After Courtney's father died, her mom sweated the details of raising the girls by herself: getting them to soccer, cheer-leading practice, school events and church. And there was one huge financial hurdle that she worried about, too—figuring out how to send two girls to college.

It turned out that would be taken care of by a non-profit called the Special Operations Warriors Foundation. SOWF pays 100 percent of the college expenses of the children of special-operations men who die on missions or in training. This fall, 150 children of deceased special-operations warriors will go to college on SOWF grants.

And on Sept. 17, at [Fight Gone Bad 6](#), to be held at CrossFit gyms all over the country, a non-profit called Sportsgrants will be raising money to keep those scholarship coffers full.

Since SOWF was founded in 1980 after an attempted rescue during the Iranian hostage crisis resulted in the deaths of eight servicemen, 911 children of fallen service members have qualified for the grants. Two hundred are now college graduates.

The Chinook helicopter that was shot down in Afghanistan on Aug. 6 this year, in which 25 special-operations warriors died, added fresh perspective and urgency to this year's Fight Gone Bad event. On that day, 31 children lost their fathers, and SOWF is also offering scholarships to the children of the five military members who perished but were not in the special forces.

Scott Zagarino, the founder of Sportsgrants, had told SOWF he wanted to raise \$3 million on Sept. 17 to add to the scholarship fund. That would pay for 60 kids to go to college. After Aug. 6, he upped the ante.

"As soon as that happened," Zagarino said, "we agreed to fund those scholarships—immediately. Even if this event doesn't raise it, we'll pay for it some other way."

Zagarino hopes the people doing the fundraising workout on that day think about those children while they are gutting out the routine.

"You give up 17 minutes of your life for it," he said. "The people you are raising money for feel that way every day. I'm telling you right now, we're paying for those kids' education—that's not a 'could be' or a 'might be.'"



Lt. Col. Craig Robinson with his daughters, Courtney and Hillary.



Are You CrossFit?

Scott Zagarino gets right to the heart of Fight Gone Bad 6.

An old friend of mine, a poet and a warrior named Scott Tinley, who has been equally heroic in glorious victories and crushing defeats, once told me that there are two kinds of triathletes: the kind who frame their Ironman-finisher T-shirts and hang them over the mantle and the kind who wash their cars with them.

Maybe that's why I've had a love affair with CrossFit since the first time I allowed myself to be badgered into doing what hadn't yet been dubbed a "WOD" by my good friend Andy Petranek. It's probably more because I've always wanted to be a superhero and I finally found out where the clubhouse is.

But what is it that makes us CrossFit? The T-shirt? The fact that we know who Pukie is and—although we hate him—visit him more often than some of our relatives? I don't think so.

I think we belong here more than in that "grey and dismal place that is inhabited by those who know neither great victory nor crushing defeat" because it's hard, because it hurts, and because we hurt together.

The one thing that will truly tell you you are CrossFit is the reality that the more we suffer, the more we feel the suffering of others. Maybe that's why we feel the ghost of Lt. Michael Murphy when Murph is on the whiteboard. Maybe that's why we turn out for Steve's Club, Barbells for Boobs and the families of the Fort Hood shooting. They call, we come—and that's CrossFit.

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Dad Was a Soldier

Courtney Robinson can talk all about what the scholarship meant to her and how she wished she had never qualified for it.

Courtney grew up in Fayetteville, N.C., because that's where Fort Bragg was. She remembers her father as a "really big," sometimes stern but very playful Dad. He loved to hunt and fish, so she loved to go hunting and fishing with him—and he had no problem with that. He taught her to bait a hook, to track deer. He'd dress her in blaze orange and take her out into the woods.

She remembers that once, when she was about 7, she was sure she could cast with a fishing rod. Instead of casting the line, she ended up casting his fishing rod itself—his very expensive fishing rod—into the lake.

"He wasn't happy," Courtney recalled, "but it didn't ruin the vacation."

Craig took Courtney and Hillary trick or treating. Courtney remembers standing at the barbecue grill with him when he cooked the venison from the deer he had shot. He set up his Army tent in their backyard and camped out with the two girls.

He took her to her fifth-grade dance, taught her how to go off the high dive.

Courtney's mother remembers another favorite: Courtney would play Mary Lou Retton. Dad would lie on his back on the floor, Courtney would come running toward him, she'd jump, and he would flip her head over heels.

And Craig would sing *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree (With Anybody Else But Me)* while he danced with his daughters.

"To me, he was just 'Dad,'" Courtney says. "He was just this normal guy who did all these normal things. I had no idea there was this Clark Kent-to-Superman change. That's what it was. That's what it is for all those guys."



To a young Courtney, her father wasn't a special-operations soldier. He was just "dad."

Craig Robinson had grown up in small-town Louisiana, the son of working-class parents. Pretty early on, he decided he had to go to West Point.

"I don't know that my mom would want this printed, but whatever," Courtney says, "Dad didn't make the grades for West Point, so he went to a small school in Louisiana first."

He did so well there that he did get into West Point. He graduated in the same class as David Petraeus, now designated to head the Central Intelligence Agency.

Janet met her husband after he had already become an Army Ranger. They were sent to Fort Bragg and he was going to be in the 82nd Airborne, but he was immediately flagged for a job in the Inspector General's office, then decided to go after becoming a member of the special forces.

He was part of the Joint Special Operations Command when the family was sent to Korea.



Originally from Louisiana, Lt. Col. Robinson loved hunting and fishing with his family.

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Finally, that's the reason there's a Fight Gone Bad.

It certainly isn't my genius or my sparkling personality that had anything to do with the more than \$4 million we've raised together since 2006. Anyone who knows me will tell you that if those were the qualities necessary to pull this off, we wouldn't have raised enough to get through a tollbooth.

Fight Gone Bad is Fight Gone Bad because it's CrossFit. Because we suffer together, we feel suffering together. For 17 minutes once a year, we suffer for someone else. We do what we can to make a payment on the debt we owe for the gifts we've received. That's CrossFit.

I'm the busboy in this operation. I set the table and do the dishes after. I whine and I complain, but I do my job because it's an honor to be your busboy. It's not my place to say who is CrossFit and who isn't, but on Sept. 17 this year, when men and women in some God-forsaken desert put in their 17 minutes in uniform, on station, and raise money to pay a debt that by all rights they should be getting a check for, they'll know who's CrossFit.

It's also CrossFit when parents whose lives have been shattered by the loss of a child to something as innocent as a swimming pool see that CrossFitters from Iraq to New Zealand have remembered them \$10 at a time in the most important way they can be remembered. Making sure that no more children drown on our watch is CrossFit.

You may be reading this and thinking to yourself that your Fran is under 5 minutes, or that you broke 300 in the Fight Gone Bad that happened on some other day, but on Sept. 17, whether you're in it or not, you'll know in that truest of places who is CrossFit.

So with that I'm going back to being your busboy, and on Sept. 17 I'm going to make damn sure the table is set and anyone who wants a seat has one, because that's how I know I'm CrossFit.

And for anyone who wants to know, My Fight Gone Bad is 310 and it doesn't matter how long ago it was.

—Scott Zagarino

They had just moved there, Courtney remembers. Because her dad had the training run that Saturday morning, Courtney, her sister and their mom were going to go see a movie. She looked out the front door and saw a couple of men approaching. She figured that because her family was new there, they had come to introduce themselves.

"They asked us to go outside and play," she said.

After that, Janet Robinson didn't really know what to do.

"They said, 'Where do you want to go?' I said, 'I don't know,' so they brought us back to Fort Bragg because we had been here so long."

Courtney was old enough to understand, mostly, that her father was dead and not coming back. Hillary had a tougher time getting the full impact. Their father was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

The first time they went back to see his headstone, Janet remembers that Hillary, only 8, jumped out of the car. She raced to the headstone, put her arms around it and wouldn't let go.

"That was her dad. That was some tangible thing that she could hold onto," Janet recalled.

Widowed at 38, Janet didn't want to burden her friends by asking for too many favors, so mostly she tried to raise the girls by herself.



*"He was just this normal guy who did all these normal things. I had no idea there was this Clark Kent-to-Superman change."
-Courtney Robinson*

Picking Up the Pieces

Widowed at 38, Janet didn't want to burden her friends by asking for too many favors, so mostly she tried to raise the girls by herself. She got a job as a substitute teacher so she could drop the girls off in the morning and pick them up after school.

"You could put them in after-school care, but I didn't do that either because I thought, 'I'm responsible for raising them,'" she said.

Janet was mourning. Her brain was on auto-pilot. A friend who had also lost her husband gave her advice:

"It's like he's on a mission, and you just kind of go on like they're going to come home someday. You keep doing the routine you did before."

Privately, she worried about everything. Could she afford the mortgage? Could she buy a car? Military wives are the family money managers, but at least they have someone to consult when their husbands are around. Now she didn't. And she still wanted to be able to do certain things with the girls. Friends did help out. Whenever one of Hillary's friends went to Disney World, they invited Hillary to join them every time. Janet offered money, but they refused. And Janet worried about the massive expense of college tuition. Because their father was killed during training, Courtney and Hillary didn't qualify for scholarships from the Special Operations Warrior Foundation for a long time.

The foundation had gotten in touch with them right away, sent them birthday cards every year, sent them age-appropriate books about being fatherless, but it only gave scholarships to special-operations personnel killed in action. They told her to check back, and she checked back every year or so, but nothing had changed. Privately, she joked to herself that she'd "be out in the street holding a cup" if she had to pay for college.

Then, just before Courtney's freshman year in 2001, she called SOWF. They called back and said, "We're looking at it."

Courtney had applied to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, an in-state university for them, but it was still a lot of money. When she was filling out the application, her mom suggested that she might want to let them know that she was the daughter of a fallen spec-ops member. She got the same response from Courtney that she'd get from Hillary a few years later:



Soldier and father.

"Uh-uh, I'm not doing that. I don't want people to feel compelled to enroll me."

Dad would have loved that.

Changing the Rules

The Special Operations Warriors Foundation granted scholarships under various names until 1995, when it took on the SOWF moniker. In 1998, the board saw revealing statistics showing that many special-ops warriors had died during training incidents.

"Training in special ops is every day, and training is as intense or more intense than combat," said Steve McLeary, a retired Air Force major who is now executive director of SOWF.

Upon seeing the numbers of those killed during training, SOWF's board decided to add the children of those special-ops personnel to the pool eligible for scholarships.

"The right decision," McLeary said, "was to go all the way back to 1980."

When McLeary came on board in 2000, he was told that his first task should be to find the families of those killed in training. That required a massive effort. Two hundred and twenty families were involved, they knew that. But some of the mothers had married again and changed last names. Some of the kids lived with aunts, uncles, grandparents or in foster homes.

"We had to turn over rocks, do whatever we had to do," McLeary said. "We didn't stop until we found them, and in 2004 we found the last family. We found every one of them."

SOWF had to take a hard look at what it wanted to do from an unemotional vantage point.

"I hate to think of it that way," McLeary said, "but we brought in actuaries and developed tables."

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SportsGrants/Department of Defense

Whether in action or in training, spec-ops soldiers face risks every single day.



After graduating from UNC with the help of the Special Operations Warriors Foundation, Courtney pursued a career in media.

Their cost, projecting figures for the number of special-ops members killed each year, how many children they will likely have and rising college tuitions, now stands at \$76 million.

"If the couple in Oregon (Sportsgrants) can raise what they say," McLeary said, "that would be an unbelievable amount of money for us."

Sportsgrants now has 844 teams registered for Fight Gone Bad 6 and is adding 300 participants a day. Each day, another \$25,000 rolls in, said Greta Zagarino, Scott's wife. They had raised \$500,000 by Aug. 24, but Fight Gone Bad brings in most of its donations from Sept. 1 to 17.

Most participants will do the fundraising Fight Gone Bad workout in CrossFit gyms in the U.S., but others will do it wherever they are in eight other countries. More than 700 service members will do the workout while stationed in Afghanistan.

FGB6's largest fundraiser is Maj. Daniel Blackmon, who is on his third tour of Iraq. Blackmon will come to the U.S. on leave to do the workout, then report back to duty in Iraq immediately afterward.

"That's why we have no tolerance for fundraising excuses," said Scott Zagarino.

Degrees of Separation

Courtney Robinson took full advantage of the SOWF grant. She got her degree from the University of North Carolina in mass communications and journalism; went on to become a television reporter for a Washington, D.C., morning show; and now anchors three evening-news broadcasts for a Ft. Myers, Fla., station.

Her sister, Hillary, also graduated from UNC, and she is now a schoolteacher.

In fact, SOWF mentors those who receive its scholarship grants so well that of those who go to college, 98 percent graduate. Courtney attributes that, partly, to having the luxury of not having to get a part-time job to pay for rent or books or fees—just being able to focus on her studies.

"If my dad would have been alive," she said, "that would have been him: 'Don't get a job. Just focus.'"

Even after so many years and so many milestones without her father, she knows losing him will never quite be over. When something happens like the Aug. 6 helicopter shoot-down in Afghanistan, it hurts her personally.

"It is absolutely heartbreaking for me," she said. Her voice crackled and trailed off.

"I can't help but think about the wives and the children and what's in store for them. It wasn't easy at the beginning, and it's not easy now," she said.

"The one thing they don't have to worry about is their children going off to college. Taking that off their shoulders, that's the least you can do."

Participate in Fight Gone Bad 6 on Sept. 17, 2011, to help the families of wounded and fallen service members. Sign up for the fundraiser at <http://sportsgrants.org/fgb6/sowf> and make a donation by texting "FGB6" to 57682. From outside the U.S., text "FGB6" to 4246751014. The minimum donation is \$10, and standard text-message rates apply.



About the Author



Courtesy of the Author

Lon Wagner is director of communications for a medical-science company and a freelance writer who lives in Norfolk, Va. He spent more than two decades as a reporter and feature writer for newspapers in the Mid-Atlantic, and his stories won national awards in several top feature-writing competitions. His series about a Navy pilot downed

during the first Gulf War was nominated by his newspaper for the Pulitzer Prize. He and his wife have three daughters.