

# **Saving the Soul of a Soldier**

## **By Angelina Spencer, MPS**

**A Dog Handler helps returning soldiers with PTSD reconnect with life—but the VA says, “STOP! The dogs are government property and must be returned to us!”**

*“Petting, scratching, and cuddling a dog could be as soothing to the mind and heart as deep meditation and almost as good for the soul as prayer.”*

— Dean Koontz, *False Memory*

When Veterans first arrive at Carol Borden’s dog training facility in Williston, FL, they often say, “the medication I’m prescribed is not working—I need help.”

Indeed, you might not expect to see former combat soldiers, all just back from fighting in the Middle East, petting dogs on a Florida farm—and healing.

Carol makes quick work of any skepticism. She opens a door in her home and encourages participants —many suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a debilitating anxiety condition without a cure—to interact with the canines she brings into the room.

Carol spends months customizing the training for every German shepherd on her farm to be paired for free with a Veteran. The goal is to teach each service animal how to recognize and respond to a soldier or marine’s specific PTSD treatment needs—and help him or her gain better control of emotions, thoughts and to dial back feelings of panic or anxiety.

One of her recipients, retired Sgt. Major and Naples resident Brian Jones, served in Iraq, Somalia and Columbia as a Delta Force Operator. Though he has been stateside since 2005, he sometimes feels hyper vigilant.

Carol tears up remembering the first time she introduced Brian to his service dog “Sarge.”

“He instantly connected with his service animal as the dog licked his face. It was the first time he’d relaxed in years. Brian was finally ‘off duty’.”

“ I’d been to the VA...nothing helped,” adds Jones. “Sarge has changed my life. I am able to finally sleep and go out in public and interact. What most people take for granted from a social perspective, I wasn’t comfortable doing—until now.”

The majority of Borden’s recipients have experienced multiple deployments and the death of their military ‘brothers’ or ‘sisters’.

According to the National Institute of Health, about 40% of troops spending time in combat zones experience some form of PTSD. The Veteran’s Administration cites one military suicide per day and reports that 2012 was the highest rate ever for Army suicides.

The Department of Veterans Affairs will pay service-dog benefits to veterans with vision, hearing or mobility-related injuries but not to veterans suffering PTSD. Pages of rules concerning veterans in need of service dogs were published in the 2012 Federal Register. The VA justifies its decision, citing “nationally established” and “widely accepted” training protocols for sight, hearing and mobility-assistance dogs and the lack of similar training protocols for PTSD service dogs.

“Until such determination can be made, the VA cannot justify providing benefits for mental health service dogs,” reads the Register.

Veterans are very upset with the ruling.

“You get doctors and people telling you that you’re not disabled enough,” said Jim Stanek, an infantryman in the U.S. Army who served three tours of combat duty in Iraq. Stanek has been diagnosed with PTSD and traumatic brain injury.

“The VA keeps telling me I need to go on medication,” says Jones. “I don’t need medication—I’ve seen what it does to combat veterans and it’s an insult to ply our heroes with psychotropic’s and not even acknowledge what does help. Carol is an awesome trainer and I’ve witnessed first hand how her service dogs change lives.”

Service dogs are individually trained to perform tasks for a specific person. Some of the tasks performed to assist veterans with PTSD include surveying darkened rooms, turning on lights, re-orienting their owner during nightmares or flashbacks, navigating through crowds, sensing anxiety, enforcing boundaries for personal space and retrieving help if needed.

Under the VA rule, all of Borden’s federal funding for her facility is stripped. VA staff also publicly accused Borden of running a faulty facility and subjected her to numerous surprise inspections—all of which were countered by independent satisfactory inspections. The Additionally, the VA sent her a cease and desist letter ordering her to repossess any dogs in a veteran’s possession, because they were, in effect, government property and could be seized.

The VA decision leaves many former combat veterans demoralized. Benefits will no longer cover travel expenses for obtaining a service dog, license tags, food, grooming, dental cleanings, nail trimming, boarding, veterinary services or pet medications.

The VA defends its position, saying it estimates only a few veterans would apply for mental health service dog benefits.

Jones is concerned that medications override alternative therapies like service dogs when it comes to treating PTSD in combat wounded veterans.

“What it may mean in practice is, if we can dope you up to a certain level with medications, then you don’t need a dog,” Jones said. “I think that is wrong. It’s an insult to our wounded veterans to subject them to the exact same treatment as someone who is unfit for service, has never seen combat, or has a drug addiction or mental illness.”

Jones contributes heavily to Borden's cause, along with other veterans. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, of 2013, they sponsored a Bark-a-Que to raise money for soldiers in need of service dogs. The afternoon event drew hundreds of donors and raised approximately \$60,000.00.

"Guardian Angels medical service dogs deserves it and so do our veterans," adds Jones. "It's a good charity, fully tax-deductible, and if she's willing to stand behind our rights and our veterans, we should support and help them both. God knows they deserve it."

"This is what I was born to do," adds Borden, who is determined to pair all 80 of her dogs with deserving Veterans. "There's transparency with everything we do here—and each time a dog is paired with a soldier, we give him or her peace—and the ability to walk back into the world better able to handle life's challenges."

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