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INSEPARABLE Sharif, who knows 40 commands, has helped Jeffrey Adams adjust to his prosthetic leg. A bomb disabled Mr. Adams in Iraq. Alan Poizner for The New York Times

Veterans Helped by Healing Paws

By KAREN JONES November 11, 2008

DEUCE is a chocolate Labrador retriever who knows exactly which patients at [Walter Reed Army Medical Center](#) in Washington give the best treats, said his owner, Harvey Naranjo. Both he and Deuce are part of the Military Advanced Training Center, a department at Walter Reed that cares for severely disabled veterans.

A certified therapy dog, Deuce assists with rehabilitation and helps relieve stress. He excels at both, said Mr. Naranjo, who brought him to the center three years ago to help the growing number of severely disabled veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. “Medical technology has given us the opportunity to save more lives with this conflict, but they are surviving devastating injuries,” said Mr. Naranjo, adaptive sports program coordinator and a certified occupational therapy assistant at Walter Reed.

Encouraged by Deuce’s success with patients, Mr. Naranjo contacted accredited service dog organizations and learned that several had started programs specifically for recent veterans. “These soldiers are a very young population; they do not want canes or crutches,” said Mr. Naranjo, who is also a specialist in the Army Reserve.

Many veterans, after suffering traumatic injuries, are “fighting to get their independence back, and dogs give them a sense of independence,” he added.

Service dogs are 24/7 companions that can retrieve and carry objects, open doors, call attention to safety hazards, help with stress and balance difficulties, and provide a bridge back to society. “Veterans can feel vulnerable walking around with these disabilities,” Mr. Naranjo said. “When they go out with a service dog, it draws attention away from the injury.”

Through the efforts of Mr. Naranjo, the staff at Walter Reed’s department of physical medicine and rehabilitation and the Military Advanced Training Center, the hospital refers qualified veterans to organizations like Canine Companions for Independence Veterans Program (cci.org), America’s VetDogs (guidedog.org/vetdogs) and Neads Canines for Combat Veterans (neads.org).

JEFFREY ADAMS AND SHARIF

As a platoon leader in a combat engineering unit in southern Baghdad, Jeffrey Adams, 29, a first lieutenant, was responsible for 35 soldiers. While he was on patrol on Nov. 7, 2004, an improvised explosive device blew up 10 feet from him. When he looked down, his leg was gone. “All I could think of was, I have to crawl back to my vehicle and I have no leg,” Mr. Adams said.

By Nov. 10, he was at Walter Reed, where he was given a titanium prosthetic leg. His rehabilitation lasted six months. Afterward, he and Mr. Naranjo started discussing the possibility of a service dog.

Though a dog lover, Mr. Adams found that the traits that make a good soldier do not always make a good patient. “You get military people that think, ‘I’m an alpha male, alpha female, and I don’t need a dog,’ ” he said. He eventually overcame his reluctance, and in February 2008 was teamed with Sharif, a yellow Labrador and golden retriever mix from Canine Companions for Independence Veterans Program. The two have been inseparable since.

Sharif is trained to respond to 40 commands, a skill that becomes crucial when Mr. Adams removes his prosthetic leg. In addition to retrieving dropped objects and helping with balance, the dog barks only in an emergency, and the neighbors know that. Mr. Adams said that his wife, Katie, “jokes that Sharif has made me lazier, but that’s not it. He makes me safer.”

Mr. Adams has adjusted well to his disability. Retired from the Army, he lives in Huntsville, Ala., and works for Boeing as a systems engineer. After taking up skiing in 2005, he became a certified ski instructor in 2007 and teaches other disabled veterans. He is also a dedicated advocate for service dogs

for wounded veterans. “They are there to help you, assist you, and will be always there for you regardless,” he said.

MARK EUGENE GWATHMEY AND LARRY

Master Sgt. Mark Eugene Gwathmey, 38, comes from a family with a proud history of military service. He enlisted in the [Marines](#) at 19, served in the first gulf war and did two tours of duty in Iraq. While in Iraq, Sergeant Gwathmey was near several devastating explosions. A building wall collapsed over him, and in another incident, his foot was injured. He returned home in May 2005 to his wife, Carolyn, a retired master sergeant in the [Air Force](#), and lives in Upper Marlboro, Md.

Shortly after coming home, he began to show serious symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, or P.T.S.D., including hand tremors, extreme anxiety and nightmares. When unexplained seizures soon followed, he began treatment at Walter Reed in 2006.

Ms. Gwathmey said her husband’s seizures last anywhere from a few seconds to three hours. “They can be bad enough that he will start to drool,” she said. “His body will lock up and shake violently.” After them, she said, he sometimes does not know who or where he is.

In the summer of 2007, Sergeant Gwathmey saw a brochure at Walter Reed for America’s VetDogs, part of the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind. Though unsure his injuries merited a dog, he said he “finally took that big ball of pride and swallowed it,” and contacted the organization. In November 2007, he was teamed with Larry, an English Labrador and golden retriever mix. The bond between them was instant.

Larry helps with walking stability and P.T.S.D., and has also demonstrated the potentially life-saving ability to alert Sergeant Gwathmey to a seizure before it happens. Larry has changed his life, he said, and has given him back a large degree of independence.

“Before Larry, I couldn’t stand crowds,” he said. “My confidence in being out in public has gone from not going out at all to going out on my own.” Sergeant Gwathmey is also being treated for [traumatic brain injury](#) and is assigned to the Wounded Warrior Regiment at Walter Reed.

The confidence Larry has given him applies to caregivers as well, Carolyn Gwathmey said, adding: “I can’t imagine life without Larry. He helps me take care of my husband.”

SUE DOWNES AND LILA

Sue Downes, 28, enlisted in the Army in 2004 as a precursor to a career in law enforcement. In 2006 she was deployed to Afghanistan as a military police officer, and there, on Nov. 28, her military vehicle exploded after hitting an improvised explosive device.

Because of the mountainous terrain, a medevac unit was unable to reach her. "I bled out for six hours," Ms. Downes said. She was eventually treated at two local [NATO](#) hospitals, where both her legs were amputated.

After returning to the United States, she spent a long rehabilitation at Walter Reed before rejoining her husband, Gabe, also a disabled veteran, and their two children in Gallatin, Tenn.

While at Walter Reed, she was encouraged by Mr. Naranjo to apply for a service dog through the Needs (National Education for Assistance Dog Services) Canines for Combat Veterans program. In August 2007 she was paired with Lila, a yellow Labrador, and the two became known as "blonde on blonde" by other patients.

In addition to helping Ms. Downes walk with her prosthetic legs, Lila has become a loving and intuitive companion, particularly with P.T.S.D. "The big thing is, she helps me with a lot of stress issues, which I didn't expect her to do," she said. "If I'm down in the dumps one day, she knows. She'll come lay at my feet or jump up on the couch. She's not supposed to, but I let her. She lies beside me and tries to cheer me up."

Ms. Downes is retired from the Army and said she feels that she has adjusted "pretty well," with good days and bad. She tires easily and does not go out as much as she used to. However, on a good day she and Lila might visit the local veterans association or shop for groceries; Lila also likes to go to PetSmart. Ms. Downes said she was thankful that while out in public, people tended to pay more attention to Lila than to her disability.

"Sue has overcome a lot," Mr. Naranjo said. "I think Lila makes her feel at ease. In the Army, we have this thing called a battle buddy. You never go anywhere by yourself, and you always take your battle buddy because they are there to protect you and you are there to protect them. It's the same concept with a service dog."

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