



Marching Orders

What happens to military pets when their people are deployed?

By Amy Souza

When soldier Tracy Lippincott left for Iraq in 2005, saying goodbye to her dog, two cats and two hermit crabs was especially difficult. "Their life spans are so much shorter, and we're missing a year or 19 months of their lives," says Lippincott, a sergeant first class in the Delaware Army National Guard. Still, Lippincott, who spent a year stationed at Camp Liberty in Baghdad, feels lucky because family members took in her animals during her tour of duty. Many other deployed soldiers find themselves with no one willing or able to care for their pets.

"This is a side of the war that hasn't been looked at," she says. "If you think about the hundreds of thousands of people being deployed, and all of the civilian Americans working in Iraq, it's a

staggering thing. The Army has a lot of tools in place to help people with deployment issues; they're really focused in on families. But there's nothing to help with pets."

Even in peacetime, military members can't help but be transient. Permanent-change-of-station orders can force families to move across or outside of the U.S., and family pets sometimes get left behind, as any animal shelter near a military base will attest. But after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq required a military call-up that meant thousands of soldiers at once were leaving their homes, families and pets. Single-parent military members and military couples must file a family plan detailing the care of their children, but a pet care plan, while highly recommended, is not mandatory.

It's easy to lay blame on military personnel themselves for not ensuring their pets' care, but it's important to realize that even the best-laid plans can go awry. Imagine these scenarios: A family member who had agreed to watch your animals backs out or falls ill. Or the plan to drive your dogs to a caretaker in another state gets derailed when the Army decides you can't leave the base before deployment. Single and divorced soldiers are often hardest hit, but married soldiers are affected, too, particularly when a spouse moves in with family members who will not allow animals in their home. When all other options have been exhausted, the choices that remain can be bleak and can leave people with pets feeling desperate.

Thankfully, many individuals and groups are stepping in to serve the military community and to provide loving, stable homes for their pets during their deployments.

A civilian call to arms

Soon after 9/11, Steve Albin began receiving calls from friends who remembered what had happened to animals during Operation Desert Storm. "They'd get left at shelters or maybe just abandoned," he says.

Linda Mercer kept hearing the same thing. She says, "People were lamenting that once there was a call-up, there'd be a burden placed on local shelters."

Albin's Military Pets Foster Project went live on September 19, 2001; one week later, Mercer began Operation Noble Foster, a cat-only foster program for military pets. Mercer says her organization

now has 3,500 potential foster homes across the country, with 500 to 1,000 foster homes full at any given time. Albin estimates he's made 11,000 foster placements over the past seven years.

In 2005, Linda Spurlin-Dominik started Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet (GASP) after reading an online plea from a soldier seeking a foster home for his dog. "I figured, if there's one, there's got to be more," she says. "I've been involved in animal rescue and in military support, but I'd never before thought of combining the two."

Today, GASP has approximately 290 foster homes nationwide, including a number of locally run state chapters, and is raising funds for an Arkansas-based sanctuary to house military pets for the duration of their people's deployment.

All three groups are volunteer-led nonprofits unaffiliated with any branch of the armed forces. They rely on word-of-mouth advertising, contacts at local bases, news coverage and

grassroots-type marketing, such as websites and paper flyers, to reach potential foster parents and military people with pets.

To place animals in the most appropriate foster home, each organization gathers detailed information from the pets' people and from foster parents. Spurlin-Dominik conducts a phone interview with each potential foster parent; whenever possible, GASP volunteers conduct foster home visits. A GASP volunteer also calls each military person to review his/her application and in some cases accompanies the person to the initial meeting at a foster home.

Albin, on the other hand, does not screen Military Pets Foster

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— Jennifer Caldwell, foster mom

A Special Kind of Person

Jennifer Caldwell has no relatives in the military and had never considered the plight of military people with pets before reading a newspaper story about Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet (GASP). She had been considering adopting another cat, but decided to foster instead.

"I would hate for somebody to have to give up their pet to go and do what their country has asked of them. It's an unnecessary burden," says Caldwell, who fostered cats Rocky and Adrian for 13 months. "Your stance on the war doesn't matter. This is something anyone can do to help."

Foster volunteers are the lifeblood of any animal rescue organization, providing love, stability and structure for animals in transition. But fostering a military pet is not the same as taking in a dog or cat from a shelter. For one thing, the animals

are not strays, which generally means that they are house-trained and accustomed to living in a home. But they have been taken away from the people they know and love, and an adjustment period is inevitable as they learn to fit into the routines of their new family (who, after all, the pets don't recognize as temporary).

In addition, the amount of time that pets are fostered is usually greater — up to 18 months. "It takes a unique person who's willing to take on an animal for that long and then give them back," says GASP's Linda Spurlin-Dominik.

Elise McKinney, a GASP volunteer from Minnesota, had wanted to foster a mellow, older golden or retriever mix, but ended up with 11-month-old Sadie, a chocolate Lab with a disposition radically different from that of her own Lab who had recently died. Her Lab had been mellow and in-

dependent; Sadie is high-energy, snuggly and social.

Sadie's people, a young couple, were both deployed to Kosovo for 18 months. During their absence, McKinney kept in regular touch with the couple's young daughter, who was living with her grandmother in another part of Minnesota. McKinney says, "I made her a book with pictures of Sadie and wrote little captions. I wanted her to remember there's a dog in her life."

McKinney accepted the puppy challenge willingly and happily, taking Sadie to obedience classes at the local humane society and working on leash training. The more difficult test? Saying goodbye to the dog she's come to love. "Sometimes I think, how are we going to be able to give her back?" she says. "But it's easier knowing she has a loving family who will be coming for her."

No More Homeless Pets

Project volunteers or conduct home visits. "It's up to the military pet owner to visit the house with their pets," Albin says. "If they feel comfortable, it's a match."

Keeping dogs together, in a home

Army Major Randy Baucom could have afforded to leave his dogs at a boarding facility while he was in Iraq, but he did not like the idea of a year-long kennel stay. Baucom had raised Little Girl and Buster since the day he found a litter of seven puppies abandoned at a construction site. Within three weeks he had found homes for five of the pups, but by then, Buster had grown and his big paws were turning potential adopters away. Little Girl, the runt, appeared sickly, so people weren't interested in her, either. So, Baucom kept them both. Buster now weighs 70 pounds and Little Girl weighs around 45 or 50.

"They're not children, but these two have been with me through some pretty tough times in the past three years," Baucom says. "I wanted them in a home, and I wanted them back."

A public affairs officer with the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, Baucom had recently divorced and moved with Little Girl and Buster from Oklahoma to his new post at Fort Hood, Texas. His first instinct was to turn to relatives for help, but his mother had recently died and he didn't want to add stress to his father's life, and none of his cousins wanted to take in the dogs. Baucom found GASP through an Internet search.

Many volunteers want to foster small dogs, but Linda Spurlin-Dominik says most people have medium to large dogs. Baucom's case posed an additional challenge because he wanted Little Girl and Buster to remain together. Luckily, Baucom began looking for options even before receiving his deployment orders, which gave Spurlin-Dominik time to find the proper foster home. Little Girl and Buster moved around a bit, because of one volunteer's illness and another's inadequately fenced yard, ending up in Hot Springs,

Resources

Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet:
www.guardianangelsforsoldierspet.org

The Haven:
thehaven-nc.com

Military Pets Foster Project:
www.netpets.org/netp/foster.php

Paw Prints Dog Sanctuary and Canine Corps:
www.pawprintsdogsanctuary.org

Operation Noble Foster:
operationnoblefoster.org

Arkansas, where they lived with a retired Navy officer.

"Linda was very good about keeping me updated on the dogs," Baucom says. "I even talked to them once on the phone. It was a short conversation. I whistled, and the foster told me they went running around the house looking for me."

Coming home

Baucom's initial orders called for him to be away for one year, but in 2007 his tour of duty was extended to 15 months. When he returned from Iraq, he drove to Arkansas to pick up Little Girl and Buster, unsure of how he'd be received. But, no worries! "They acted like I was the lost puppy and licked me to death," says Baucom.

Reunions are something Spurlin-Dominik loves to witness. "They're amazing," she says. "Coming home, animals are just second in line for soldiers after seeing their family. There are tears. Of course, the dog's not crying, but they're happy. They remember."

The joy of being reunited with a pet can ease a service member's shift from war zone to a more ordinary existence. "Transitioning from civilian life to combat wasn't that difficult," says Tracy Lippincott. "It's harder to come home. When you go from a state of continual hyper-vigilance back to laughing and non-important noise happening around you every day, it's a different sort of transition."

As any animal lover knows, there's almost nothing more comforting than a wagging tail, buoyant energy or a satisfied purr.

"Every other variable changes immediately when you leave," says Lippincott. "Families adapt to fill in the gap while you're gone. But the relationship with a pet stays the same. To have that would help transition soldiers, sailors and Marines back to a state of normalcy. You know, they say that pet therapy helps, and what's better than your own pet?" ♦

Freelancer Amy Souza writes about animal issues from her home in Virginia.

Helping the Second Wave of Displaced Pets

At The Haven—Friends for Life, a no-kill animal shelter near North Carolina's Fort Bragg, military pets make up 80 percent of owner turn-ins. Helping military people with pets is one of The Haven's highest priorities.

"We offer foster care, but we're finding that's no longer what people want," says executive director Linden Spear. Instead, more service members are simply giving up their animals.

Spear saw an initial increase in the num-

ber of relinquished pets directly after 9/11 and says the second wave of animals are now being displaced as soldiers return to their own uncertain future. Some face an imminent, possibly unexpected, divorce, while many others come home with injuries that make caring for a pet difficult or impossible. In addition, multiple tours of duty are common.

Spear sees soldiers' stress firsthand, and her voice quakes when talking about it. "They are absolutely hanging on by their

fingernails. They're at the end of what they can handle," she says. "These people are sacrificing their lives for us. We owe it to the animals to help them. We owe it to the people."

Recently, a returning soldier who had suffered a head injury relinquished his dog to The Haven. "The Army can't even tell him where he's being sent for rehab," Spear says. "He came in and held his dog and sobbed for 20 minutes. How could I not help him?"