

Service dog helps war vet cope

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NOV. 23, 2009 -- Angela Peacock, an Iraq war veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, gains comfort from her psychiatric support dog, G.I. Joe, on outings, such as this trip to Dierbergs last week. "Petting Joe grounds me," says Peacock, of Hazelwood. The Army is doing a study on use of the support dogs. (By [Laurie Skrivan](#)/P-D)

It's rush hour in midtown one evening when loud barking rings out.

A Labrador retriever named G.I. Joe has spotted several other dogs playing on an empty lot.

He leans his big black body out the passenger window of Angela Peacock's car and stares longingly.

He wants in on the action.

Peacock, 30, of Hazelwood, is headed to Forest Park to walk G.I. Joe but changes her mind. He'll run with the dogs on the lot instead.

"This is good for him," she says. "It gives him balance so he isn't always working."

That's the way things are with G.I. Joe, a psychiatric service dog, and Peacock, a veteran of the Iraq war: She gives him breaks from his work, and he gives her breaks from the fears and anxieties that plague her.

One in eight soldiers returning from Iraq or Afghanistan report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, according to the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. Peacock, an honorably retired Army sergeant, is among them.

Symptoms include strong surges of panic and fear, despair, guilt, sleepless nights and numb feelings toward loved ones. The disorder also can cause hallucinations and hypervigilance.

Psychiatric service dogs have been assisting people with a

variety of mental illnesses for more than a decade; 10,000 such dogs are in use today.

A survey by the Psychiatric Service Dog Society found that the trained dogs reduced post-traumatic stress symptoms in 82 percent of 39 patients surveyed. Forty percent said they used less medication, and many reported that their dogs could sense impending manic episodes and panic attacks, even before the patients did.

The Army found those findings promising enough to allocate \$300,000 to study the effects of pairing the dogs with soldiers who have the stress disorder. Twenty soldiers will be divided into two groups. One group will get dogs; the other won't. Both groups will undergo standard treatment for the disorder and will be evaluated at Walter Reed Army Medical Center to measure changes in symptoms, medication use and stress hormone levels over one year.

Veterans Affairs paid \$6,000 for G.I. Joe, but he and Peacock are not a part of that study. For now, she is believed to be the only war veteran in St. Louis with a psychiatric service dog.

Corliss Strathearn, vocational rehabilitation counselor with the Department of Veterans Affairs in St. Louis, treats Peacock and has seen her with G.I. Joe. She thinks the match is a good one.

Dogs, Strathearn points out, tend to give people a sense of confidence, protection, companionship and something to focus on besides their anxieties.

"Some of these dogs can be trained to wake you up during a nightmare," she says. "And they force you to get out if you're a shut-in, because they have to go out. ... Angela's doctor actually wrote a prescription for the dog, but Angela did a lot of the legwork herself on making a case for having him."

PASSING OUT

Peacock and G.I. Joe have been constant companions since May, when she got him from George Fratarelli, owner of Sirius K9 St. Louis, which trains service dogs. The black lab, Fratarelli says, had excelled in advanced obedience classes. .

An ideal psychiatric service dog, Fratarelli says, is relaxed. That describes G.I. Joe to a T.

He followed Peacock through Trader Joe's and Target one recent evening, lying calmly behind her in the aisles and checkout lines so no one could get in her space. When people brush up against Peacock, it makes her nervous, she says.

She remembers a Christmas shopping trip last year when the lights, the noise and the crowds reminded her of the chaos in Iraq. She began hyperventilating and passed out.

That was before G.I. Joe, when she would never go more than one place a day.

"And then it was like, OK, hurry up, get your (stuff) and get out," she says. "Now, with him I can go to three or four places, and I'm not as nervous."

FALLOUT FROM IRAQ

Peacock's troubles began nine years ago, when, she says, she was raped by a noncommissioned officer while stationed in South Korea.

In May 2003, she was deployed to Sadr City, a poverty-stricken suburb of Baghdad and site of some of the bloodiest fighting in the months after the

invasion.

Peacock lost 48 pounds in a couple of months, dropping to 103 pounds. She was eventually airlifted to Germany, where she says she was diagnosed with lymphocytic colitis. Then it was back to Fort Lewis in Tacoma, Wash. Things weren't much better there.

Every time a door slammed, Peacock jumped, thinking it was a gunshot. If a military plane flew overhead, she would duck, certain that it was an incoming rocket-propelled grenade.

"The members of my unit didn't understand, because they hadn't been (to Iraq) yet," she says. "So they were like, 'What in the hell is wrong with you?' I tried to cover it up."

During a checkup for an earache, a nurse discovered Peacock's pulse racing at 140 beats a minute. She was having a panic attack. She was ordered to report to the behavioral health unit.

She knew then that her military career was over.

GETTING CLEAN

During the next two years, Peacock married, then divorced. She had multiple surgeries that jump-started an addiction to painkillers and cocaine, she says. She burned through her savings to support her drug habit.

She had no self-esteem. No sense of identity.

"But I had the painkillers, so I was feeling good," she says.

After a suicide attempt and an overdose scare, Peacock looked around and realized that she was a mess and, worse, all alone.

It took four stints in drug rehab, but Peacock has been clean for three years.

Now she's piecing her life together with 12-step meetings and intense psychiatric and vocational therapy at Veterans Affairs.

She keeps G.I. Joe nearby.

He nudges her when she gets overly emotional and reassures her that she's not in danger when she hears a suspicious sound.

He's also a bridge to the outside world, Peacock says. He's rebuilding her trust in humanity.

While she's checking out at Trader Joe's, the cashier smiles and asks whether she's training him.

No, Peacock explains, she was an Iraq war vet and he's her psychiatric service dog.

He thanks her profusely for her service to our country. She smiles shyly.

"How's he working out for you?" the cashier asks.

"Great. Otherwise I wouldn't be here," she says. "I wouldn't leave my house."

Later, while sipping coffee in her living room, Peacock describes a panic attack she had the night before. She buried her head in G.I. Joe's shiny black coat. She rubbed him and thought hard about how he wasn't panicking, so everything must be OK.

"And in 10 minutes, I was OK," she says. "He forces me to think about something besides myself."

Reference:

http://www.stltoday.com/stltoday/lifestyle/stories.nsf/healthfitness/story/B0ED4F3D178C35EC8625767F00098354?OpenDocument#tp_newCommentAnchor