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From The Sunday Times

December 6, 2009

Pooch platoon gives traumatised troops new life

Christina Lamb in Washington

1 COMMENT | RECOMMEND? (1)

WHEN John Landry takes his romanian sheepdogs for a walk along the boardwalk of Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, everyone stops to look.

"They're gorgeous!" gasp onlookers as they pull out mobile phones to be photographed alongside the large floppy white dogs that look like something out of Hamleys' soft toy department in London.

The dogs might be huggable to look at but they have a far more important role — to help re-integrate military veterans scarred by the horrors of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Everyone stops to talk so it's a way of breaking the ice for those who are finding it hard to fit back into society," says Landry, a dog trainer.



(Susana Raab)

Will Acevedo and wife Tina with their puppy Xena. The dog will attend therapy with him

The US army is using exotic dogs and other animals to relieve combat stress as it finds its forces increasingly stretched. Next week it will hold its first animal assisted therapy symposium at Fort Myer army base in Virginia.

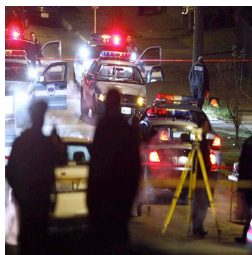
There is growing concern within the top ranks about the human toll of fighting wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Military suicides have been on the rise. By late November this year, 141 US soldiers had killed themselves, one more than in the whole of 2008. There were 115 soldier suicides in 2007.

A study by the Rand Institute, a think tank, last year found 20% of the 1.6m US soldiers who had served in Iraq or Afghanistan suffered symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Yet nearly half go untreated because they fear that asking for help

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would be seen as a sign of weakness.

A cluster of murders may also be linked to combat stress. The city of Colorado Springs has been stunned by a string of murders, rapes and drive-by shootings in the past two years. Eventually police arrested and charged 10 men, four of whom have been convicted.

They were all from the same battle-weary infantry battalion whose members were known during tours of Iraq as the Lethal Warriors. Their lawyers argued that prior to the crimes, they had all displayed classic symptoms of PTSD.

So alarmed is the Pentagon that it has begun the country's biggest study of suicide and behavioural health among military personnel.

Vice-chief of staff General Peter Chiarelli has spearheaded a suicide prevention taskforce as well as giving every soldier regular mental assessments. The army is "tired and under immense stress as the result of a protracted conflict", Chiarelli wrote in a memo. "Under these strains, current efforts are not enough."

At Walter Reed army medical centre in Washington several initiatives have been introduced to help rehabilitate traumatised veterans. Therapists say they are increasingly using horses and dogs in the treatment, previously an option for those with physical disabilities. "We're using dogs a lot for patients with invisible wounds too," said Lieutenant Colonel Matthew St Laurent, assistant director for occupational therapy. "They have a tremendous effect."

His department started using dogs in 2005 as comfort animals. "Dogs are extremely responsive and their love is unconditional," he said. "Petting a dog is very soothing and it also helped children of the wounded and interaction for a family in turmoil. It was hugely positive."

The hospital also introduced a dog training programme. "It helped with emotional regulation. We have a lot of patients who are very anxious and blow up. Well, to train a dog to sit you can't yell — you have to have a calm voice."

Then some of the veterans asked if they could have a dog when they went back home — so-called "psych dogs".

Joan Esnayra set up the Psychiatric Service Dog Society 12 years ago after herself being diagnosed with PTSD and finding that a puppy helped her deal with it.

It now has 500 members, 150 of whom are former soldiers. "One female soldier told me she can't sleep and even if she hears a tiny noise she will get her gun," she said. "But once she got a dog she could sleep as dogs have much keener sensory capacity than us so she could trust it to assess the safety of her surroundings."

Although she says any dog can help, she recommends quieter breeds such as maltese, yorkies, great danes, mastiffs and ridgebacks.

To meet the need for psych dogs, David Sharpe, a sufferer from PTSD, recently set up Pets2Vets, a voluntary organisation that pairs homeless animals with traumatised service veterans in the Washington area. "We've had a huge demand," he said. "We only started on October 1 and are already pairing two or three vets with dogs a week."

On Friday, Sharpe was joined at the shelter by Will Acevedo, who has been living with PTSD since returning from Iraq in 2003. Acevedo was waiting to be united with his young jack russell called Xena. He picked the energetic puppy, in part, because of a cast on her paw. "I walk with a cane and I'm injured, too," Acevedo said. "We're both healing. We fit together."

"Veterans often suffer alone, silenced by the stigma still attached



White House pair latest in a long line

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to mental injuries like PTSD," he said. The dog will attend therapy sessions with him and keep him company when his wife Tina, who is also in the army, is away.

Additional reporting: Marjorie Korn

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YOUR COMMENTS

1 Comment (Displaying 1-1)

Jerry Scroggin wrote:

Children should be raised with the idea there should be no shame in asking for help for mental problems anymore than asking for help for a physical problem.

December 6, 2009 6:25 AM GMT

RECOMMEND? (1)

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