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## **MARINE SAVES INJURED PUPPY WHILE DEPLOYED, SUCCESSFULLY BRINGS HER HOME**

The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) International has helped many soldiers bring four legged friends back home with them after their formal service has ended.

Written by [Jen Reeder](#)



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When U.S. Marine Tommie Johnson left his home in metro Atlanta, Ga. to deploy to the Eastern European country of Georgia, he had no idea he'd fall in love with an orphaned puppy – and then end up fighting to bring her home.

Back in August 2020, just two weeks into his deployment, the country went into lockdown due to a surge in COVID-19 cases. Johnson and his fellow Marines were essentially restricted to the military base. By late November, they were told there was no chance of going into the town for the rest of their deployment.

Morale plunged. Every day was the same.

During a rainy day in December, servicemembers were completing the day's physical training when a puppy's head popped up by the side of a road. They took a closer look and discovered six tiny, shivering pups – five girls and one boy. There was no mother in sight.

"One of them was badly hurt," Johnson, 20, tells The News Station. "She had a really bad hip, so she would limp. And they all had worms, so they were like little bloated meatballs."



*Blessing. Courtesy of Tommie Johnson*

The warriors scooped up the pups and took them to the base where a veterinarian visited to provide everything from vaccinations and medications for malnourishment, fleas and worms. X-rays revealed the injured puppy was most likely hit by a car, but her leg and hip were starting to heal so the vet doubted she'd suffer long-term damage.

After a few weeks, people started getting attached to whichever puppy would run up to them: Lady, Kiwi, Gypsy, Brutus and Freyja. But the little pup couldn't run to greet the soldiers because she was still hurt, so she'd just lie down.

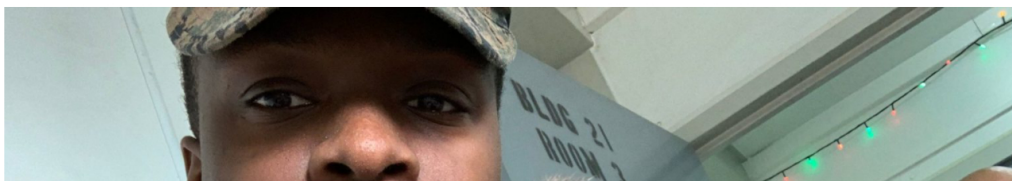
"I ended up gravitating towards her and taking care of her more," Johnson recalls. "She was the last one to get named, because I didn't know what to name her. And then I was like, 'Well, it's a blessing she's still here.' And it just kind of stuck. From that point on, we always called her 'Blessing!'"

Each day while the Marines worked, the puppies would play and run around, with Blessing wobbling a few paces behind the pack. At night, they'd snuggle with the humans while they listened to music around a bonfire.

"Blessing would get cold and start shivering, so I'd throw her inside my jacket. And I'd just have her head sticking out of the top, and I'd just zip her up in it," Johnson says. "We'd just drink and have fun for a couple of hours every night. ... The puppies were a big morale boost."

In January, with their deployment set to end the following month, Johnson and his friends realized there was no way they could leave their canine companions behind. But the logistics of getting the dogs home were already complicated, let alone during a pandemic.

So they reached out to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) International, a nonprofit with a program called Operation Baghdad Pups: Worldwide that helps active duty members of the military bring home pets they meet while serving overseas – anywhere in the world.





*Blessing's litter-mate Gypsy and Justin Jacobs. Courtesy of Justin Jacobs*

“The vet and SPCA International really helped out with us getting all the information that we needed in regards to what we needed to get them home,” Johnson says. “They were able to get microchips, all their shots, get the necessary crates to fly home with.”

Travel restrictions due to the pandemic delayed the puppy transports a couple months, but on March 30 the Marines reunited with their puppies in Hapeville, Ga.

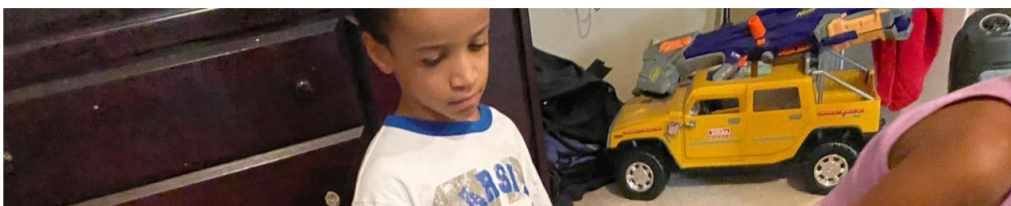
Blessing hadn't forgotten Johnson, but he was surprised she'd gotten so big. She was a little drained from the long flight and not her usual energetic self, but once she got to Johnson's home — which he shares with his mom and younger brother and sister — she got so excited she ran around the yard until the sun set.



*Blessing takes a drink break on her first day in Johnson's home. Photo courtesy of Tommie Johnson*

Blessing has settled into American life nicely. Potty training is going well — she's only gone number two in the house once — and she delights in playing with the kids, trying to play with the family's temperamental Chihuahua and staring at their pet bird, Violet (who stays safely perched in a cage).

But mainly, the mixed breed dog just wants to be near the man who rescued her. During a phone interview for this story, she was lying on her back and kept “nibbling” on Johnson.





*Blessing relaxes at home with Johnson's younger brother Mark. Photo courtesy of Tommie Johnson*

"I love it. Keeps me from being bored, I tell you that," he says. "She lets me clip her nails, brush her, everything. I haven't seen another dog as mild-mannered as her. She's happy."

Blessing is one of 1,146 formerly stray pets SPCA International has successfully reunited with members of the military since 2008. [\*Operation Baghdad Pups: Worldwide\*](#) started with a soldier named Eddie who wanted to bring home a dog named Charlie he met while deployed in Iraq.

Since then, the program has expanded to help not just dogs but cats — and even a donkey named Smoke, according to Meredith Ayan, executive director of SPCA International.



*Smoke the donkey came to America from Turkey. Photo courtesy of SPCA International*

"It never gets old," she tells The News Station. "I've been doing this for 11 years and get the same familiar goosebumps, and that overwhelming feeling of relief and excitement for the animal, for the soldier, knowing the life they're going to have versus the life they would have had. You just can't help but get emotional about that."

Though it can be challenging to cut through red tape to transport the pets to the U.S. from overseas, Ayan says the organization is committed to doing so because otherwise it can be a death sentence for the animal — and a huge source of stress for the returning servicemember to wonder how their pet is faring.

"We know what's going to happen to these animals if they're not taken out of these situations. It's not like they're going to end up in a shelter or go to another home — there is no future for them," she says. "So we can relieve that burden for that soldier who comes home."

The coronavirus pandemic has complicated those efforts. Whenever possible, SPCA International arranges for a flight volunteer to travel with the pets to ensure nothing happens in transit, like an animal missing a flight or getting lost.





*Blessing and other strays in transport to America. Courtesy of SPCA International*

During the pandemic, it wasn't feasible to send a U.S. citizen to a foreign country to have to quarantine for two weeks before meeting up with a dog to fly back.

"There's such a huge ex-pat community of U.S. citizens in most countries that we're able to contact them and arrange a flight," she explains. "I call it our 'Bat Phone' – volunteers that we can activate in different parts of the world when we need them."

SPCA International also has a program called *Operation Military Pets* which works to keep pets with military families by helping cover pet relocation costs when servicemembers deploy or transfer to another base. The initiative has served over 2,000 families since 2013.

"The purpose of this program was twofold. It was one, to keep families together, and two, to help shelters with an overabundance of pets being surrendered for no other reason than it was cost prohibitive for these families to travel with them," she says. "And then you start thinking about the children that are moving with the families and having to leave a pet behind. I mean, that's just heartbreaking. Nobody should have to do that for financial reasons. So that is a very important way for us to support our military as well. ... It's an honor."

And perhaps, even, a Blessing.





Blessing's reunion. Courtesy of Tommie Johnson

For more information about SPCA International, visit: [spcai.org](http://spcai.org).



### Jen Reeder

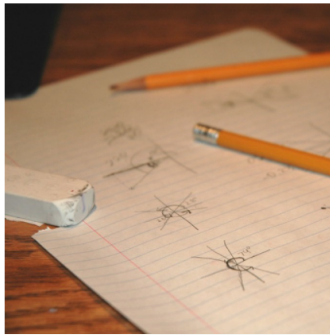
Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. Bylines include BBC News, The Christian Science Monitor, The Daily Beast, Inside Your Dog's Mind, HuffPost, TODAY.com, PBS's Next Avenue and many others. Visit her at [JenReeder.com](http://JenReeder.com).

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