

Battle Buddies



Mister is trained to help Shaffer deal with the emotional scars of war.

AMANDA ENGEL PHOTOGRAPHY

Service dogs can make a world of difference for military veterans with PTSD.

Nevada resident Dave Shaffer has been through a lot in service to his country. He served for eight years in the U.S. Army, deploying for two combat tours to the Middle East—Operation Desert Thunder and Operation Desert Fox—plus three to South America. He rose through the ranks to sergeant while working in ammunition and explosive ordinance disposal.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Shaffer was walking toward the Pentagon to visit friends who worked there when terrorists crashed American Airlines Flight 77 into the building. The emotional trauma, compounded with mobility issues, forced him to leave the military in 2002.

“That’s one of my big triggers: If I hear aircraft flying overhead, I’m always looking quickly because of that sound,” he says. “Back in the day, they never talked about PTSD, so they never tested me for it, even though I knew I had something because I was always angry.”

His experiences took a toll on his personal life and contributed to a divorce. But things took a turn for the better in August 2020, when Shaffer partnered with a service dog trained by Freedom Service Dogs of America, a nonprofit based in Denver, Colorado.

It took all of 15 minutes for him to bond with Mister, a yellow Labrador Retriever. The dog can retrieve items, such as pulling laundry out of the dryer; wake Shaffer from nightmares; and calm him in anxious or stressful situations.

Mister loyally lay by Shaffer’s side while he recovered from major back surgery in October 2020 and helps him stay upbeat during physical therapy exercises. The Lab seems to intuitively



Mocha is constantly on the alert for signs of anxiety in Green, always prepared to move in for a reassuring nudge.

know what’s needed at any moment, even offering comfort to other veterans at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital in Las Vegas.

“Having Mister in my life helps out so much,” he says. “He’s my battle buddy. We have each other’s backs, no matter what.”

DO THEY HEAL?

Service dogs like Mister can be life changing, even lifesaving, for military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. An estimated 30 percent of Vietnam War veterans have experienced PTSD, and about 12 of every 100 Gulf War veterans have PTSD in a given year, according to the VA’s National Center for PTSD.

Tragically, the VA’s most recent data found an average of 17.6 veterans died by suicide each day of 2018.

To help document the effectiveness of service dogs for veterans, the nonprofit Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) funded a 2018 study titled “Pilot Study of the Effects of Service Dogs on Mental Health and Wellness in War Veterans with PTSD and/or TBI.” Researchers compared levels of the stress hormone cortisol between veterans waiting for service dogs and those already partnered with psychiatric service dogs from the nonprofit K9s for Warriors.

The results found veterans with service dogs experience less stress than those waiting to receive a service dog.

“Having a service dog was also associated with less anger, less anxiety, and better sleep,” says HABRI President Steven Feldman. “This research demonstrates that service



By Your Side: Mister greeting Shaffer after back surgery

dogs can be a complementary intervention for veterans with PTSD. The preliminary study has also served as the foundation for deeper research into this subject.”

Feldman hoped the research would help drive policy changes, and it did: Legislation that would create a pilot program at the VA to fund service dogs for veterans with PTSD—the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) for Veterans Therapy Act—received bipartisan Congressional support and President Biden signed it into law on Aug. 25, 2021.

“We hope that every veteran with PTSD who wants a service dog will be able to acquire one and benefit from the healing power of the human-animal bond,” he says.

ALWAYS ON THE ALERT

In the meantime, some veterans are witnessing the benefits for themselves. Ari Jontry, a dog trainer and veteran liaison at Assistance Dogs of the West in Santa Fe, New Mexico, says his service dog, a yellow Lab named Cedar, helps him cope with PTSD. Jontry served as a combat soldier in the Israeli military and grew up in Israel when there were suicide bombings every week.

“I think what happens to the traumatic mind is it becomes hypervigilant,” he says. “Looking for work is a combat term used to look for other threats. If somebody fires upon you and you fire on them, and you hit your target, then you assess the situation. What else is threatening your environment?”

But when walking Cedar, he focuses on his dog’s perspective and ways to set him up for success.

“What happens is your mind has been busy tending to this animal, and you’re no longer in a hypervigilant,



Their natural desires to learn, work, and help make Labs excellent service dogs.

scary state,” he says. “It subsides quite dramatically—at least, it did for me.”

While service dogs have federal access to public spaces, which offers a sense of security to handlers, the animals also attract attention, which can be a challenging adjustment for some veterans. In those cases, veterans can benefit from classes with the non-profit Warrior Canine Connection, in which veterans learn to train service dogs for people with disabilities.

The emphasis is on positive training techniques because it’s the “gold standard” and because inflicting pain could be triggering for a veteran, according to Jontry. Around 30 veterans participate in each six-month class. Many decide to apply for their own service dogs afterward and continue volunteering to keep their training skills sharp, and because they enjoy the camaraderie with other veterans.

DREAM CHASERS

Labrador Retrievers are often excellent service dogs because they have a “personality to serve,” according to Florida resident Ronald Green, who began 20 years of service with the Air Force in 1977. Then he spent years working for the Department of Homeland Security, but due to his cases and his experiences in the military, his



TOP: COURTESY RONALD SHAFFER. BOTTOM LEFT: AMANDA ENGEL PHOTOGRAPHY. RIGHT: COURTESY AMERICA'S VETDOGS

TOP: COURTESY JOHN TODD/ASSISTANCE DOGS OF THE WEST;
BOTTOM LEFT & INSET: COURTESY AMERICA'S VETDOGS

Links for more information:

Freedom Service Dogs of America:
freedom servicedogs.org

The Human Animal Bond Research Institute: habri.org

Assistance Dogs of the West: assistedogsofthewest.org

America's VetDogs: vetdogs.org

K9s for Warriors: k9sforwarriors.org



Looking for Work: Cedar and Jontry



PTSD became almost unbearable.

In February 2018, Green partnered with a service dog, Mocha, a black Lab trained by the nonprofit America's VetDogs. She's adept at many tasks, including interrupting his nightmares.

"I think for the first year Mocha probably thought she would never get any sleep, because that's just how bad it was for me," he says.



By interrupting nightmares, Mocha has given Green the gift of a good night's sleep. Inset: Green as a young airman

"It was a constant thing—seven, eight, nine nightmares a night."

Mocha is very attentive to Green, particularly when she's working in her service dog vest. If he becomes agitated, she moves closer and nudges him. She's also intuitive and stayed with Green's wife—a fellow Air Force veteran—when she wasn't feeling well.

Thanks to Mocha, Green-enjoys more sleep and has been able to reduce his medication. Just knowing she's there helps.

"As the military said, it was that partner that I knew would watch my back no matter what," he said. "This dog is unbelievable." **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is the former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.

For PTSD support:

- Call 1-800-273-8255 (Press 1 if you are a veteran)
- Call 911 or visit a local emergency room
- Visit ptsd.va.gov