

in their
Debt

By Jen Reeder

CAPTAIN EARL

Black Lab Earl excels in work as a facility dog –
and commissioned officer – at Madigan Army Medical Center.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TRACY BAKER

Tracy Baker and Earl.

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Army Major Brittney Nicole is tough. As the current chief of production and service in the nutrition

care branch at Madigan Army Medical Center on Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington State, she oversees a team responsible for putting out more than 1,000 plates of food each day for hospital patients, staff, and visitors at the largest military hospital on the West Coast.

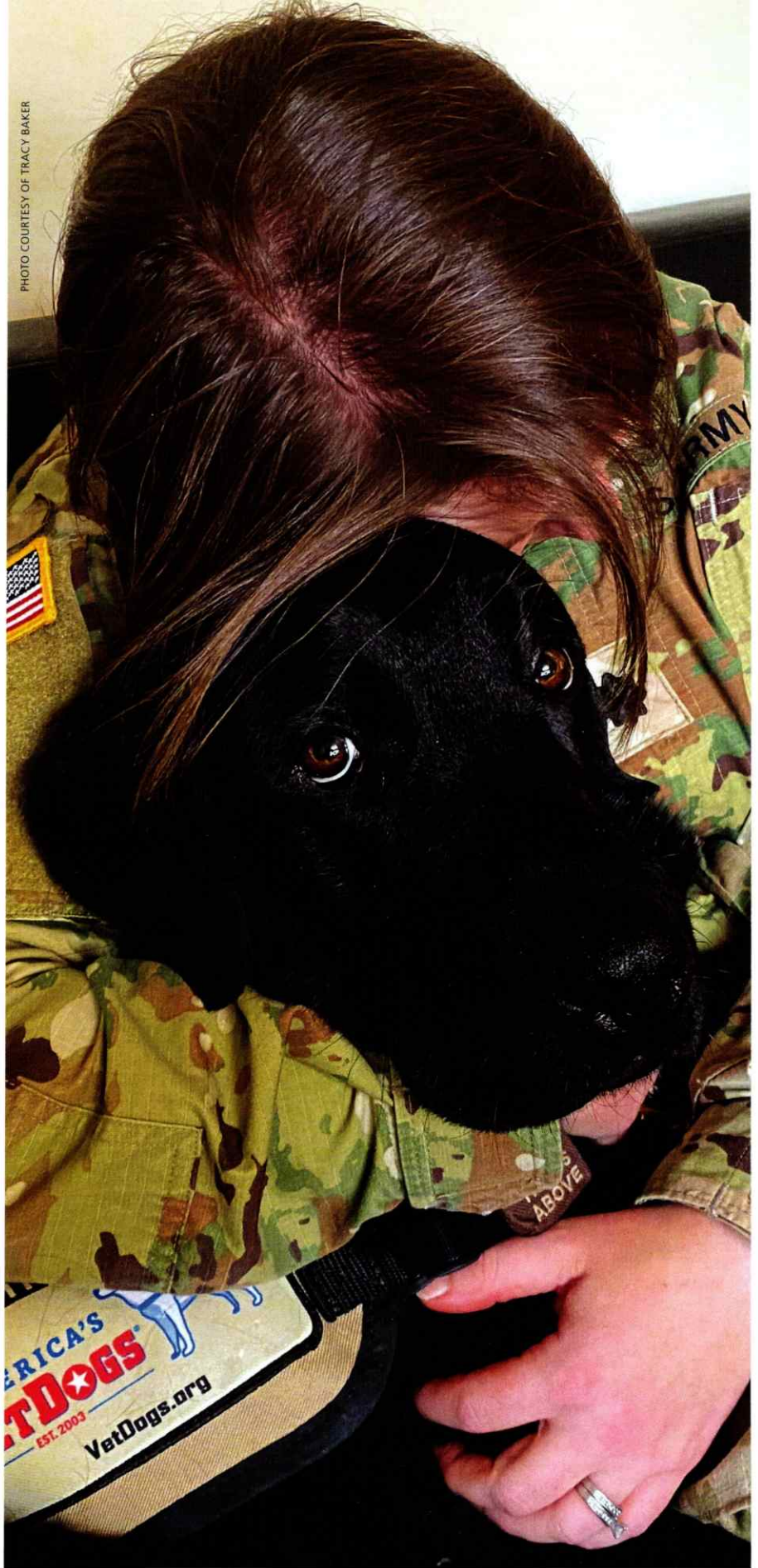
But whenever she sees Earl, a black Lab who works as the hospital's facility dog, she melts.

"When I see him in the hallways, I totally lose my professionalism," she said. "You would think I was a ten-year-old who's never seen a dog before. I just get so happy to see him. I don't have the words for how much I love him."

Earl, trained by America's Vet Dogs, joined the hospital staff in May of 2022 and has been making waves ever since, according to his handler Tracy L. Baker, special assistant for healthcare resolutions at Madigan Army Medical Center, who served for 27 years as an Army Nurse Corps officer. Now she works with Earl to offer peer support – essentially supporting the staff members experiencing typical day-to-day stresses as well as those coping with an event with a bad outcome, such as losing a patient. They also visit patients who are feeling their worst.

"He's already making a huge impact for Madigan," Baker said. "We hear all the time,

PHOTO COURTESY OF TRACY BAKER



The staff gets welcome relief with a hug from Earl

'This made my day,' or, 'This changed the whole feel of the clinic' because they've had a moment of reprieve – and excitement – having Earl visit. It's amazing the impact a dog can have."

It's not surprising to Major Nicole, who said she knows many soldiers who have left their own families and pets to serve and miss their companions. She herself feels guilty leaving her two dogs and a cat at home each day to head to work. So seeing Earl can be like enjoying the comforts of home.

"The most wonderful thing about Earl is you can't be stressed when he's looking in your eyes and doing his cute little tricks," she said.

One of Earl's signature moves is the "bop," basically a fist bump with his nose. He also knows the cue "rest" to

place his head on someone's knee so they can pet him, and he can carry a little bag with gifts in his mouth.

Earl is currently learning "bow" and has more than mastered "shake." In fact, he is constantly approaching people and offering a paw for a shake in the hope of being rewarded with a treat, according to his handler.

"He's just like all Labs: very motivated for food," Baker said with a laugh. "It's a constant."

Even before his third birthday, Earl seemed like a mellow old soul – but with a goofy side. He accompanies Baker to meetings and classes she teaches, so she has to leave early because so many patients and staff members stop to pet the popular pooch. She also knows it's not personal if people laugh in one of her classes – it's usually because Earl has started snoring or let out a big sigh like he's bored.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TRACY BAKER

Earl relaxes at the beach.

“Everybody knows Earl. They don’t know me, but they all know Earl,” she quipped. “They all say hi to Earl.”

The beloved Lab is even a commissioned officer. Last July, Madigan Army Medical Center held a commissioning ceremony, and the commander bestowed Earl with the rank of Captain, pinning an insignia to the dog’s vest.

“Then we all sang the Army song like a normal ceremony for a promotion,” Baker said. “I was so proud.”

When off-duty, Earl spends time at home with Baker’s two golden retrievers. One of Baker’s friends got a Lab puppy named Blue after being charmed by Earl, and the two black Labs became fast friends.

Since partnering with Earl, Baker says she’s realized why Labs are such a popular breed.

“People just migrate toward him. I don’t know if I’ve ever experienced anything like that,” she said. “This is my first Labrador, and I’ll tell you, they are pretty addicting. They are really, really good dogs.”

Earl has made her work much more enjoyable – and she knows she’s not alone.

“I have people knocking on my door all the time just to have a moment with Earl,” she said. “Those moments make my job more rewarding to know that he’s impacting staff morale and helping us recover from a tough few years in healthcare.”

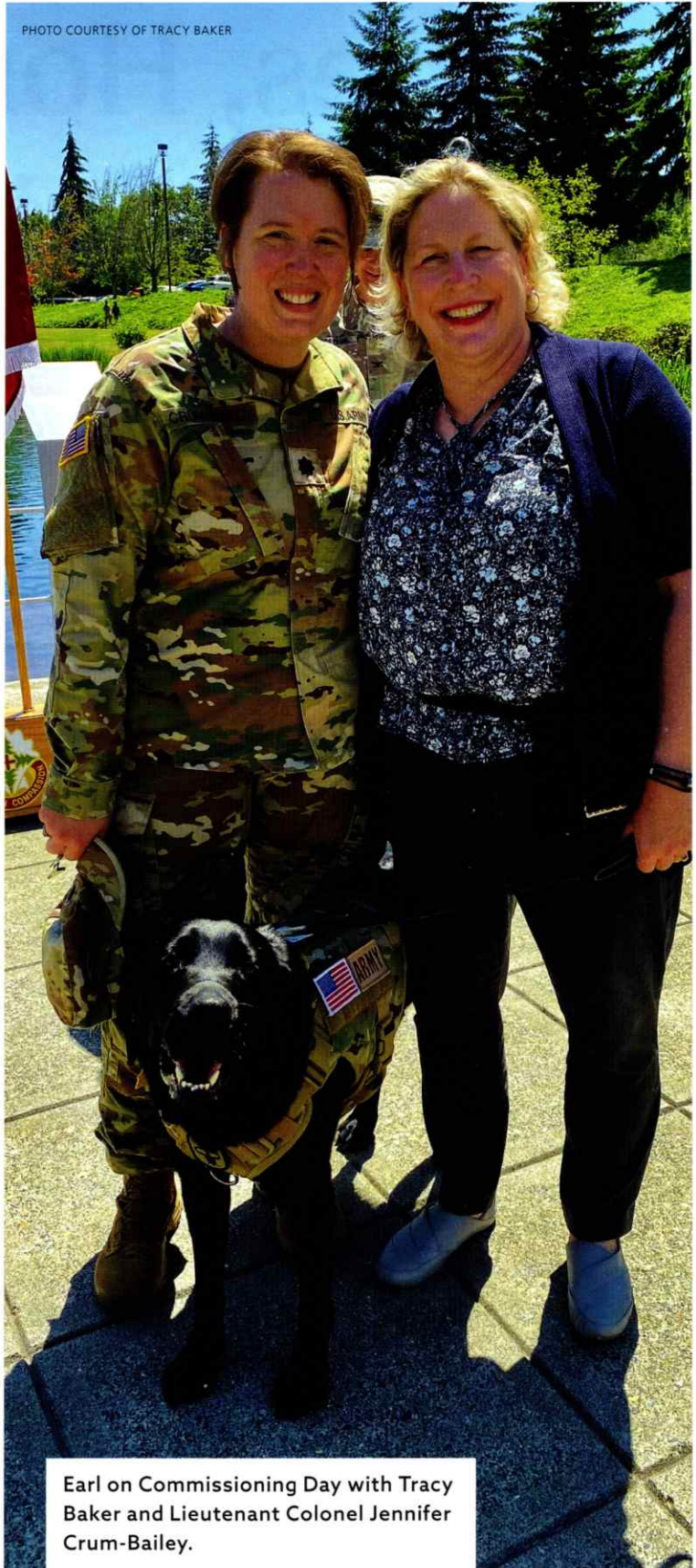
Teresa Ward, a medical social worker at Madigan Army Medical Center, requested that Earl visit her team during his very first week on the job. She’s faced short-staffing issues and understands the benefits dogs can bring, such as reducing stress. In fact, her family worked as puppy raisers for a service dog in training several years ago – a black Lab named Charlie. Sure enough, Earl worked his magic in her clinic as he visited each team in her division.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” she said. “The staff were happy, they were communicating with each other. The mood, the environment, everything was much better.”

Earl has helped her both professionally and personally. When Ward’s teenage daughter needed surgery and stayed on the pediatric floor, Earl checked in on her.

“She’s an animal lover and was very open to having Earl stop by,” she recalled. “She was able to love on him and interact with him, and it lifted her spirits.” 🐾

For more information, visit: madigan.tricare.mil or follow Earl on Instagram: @earl.thewellnesspup.



Earl on Commissioning Day with Tracy Baker and Lieutenant Colonel Jennifer Crum-Bailey.



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed “crazy dog lady” after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at www.JenReeder.com.