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## **For the Battle-Scarred, Comfort at Leash's End**

By JANIE LORBER

WASHINGTON — Just weeks after Chris Goehner, 25, an Iraq war veteran, got a dog, he was able to cut in half the dose of anxiety and sleep medications he took for post-traumatic stress disorder. The night terrors and suicidal thoughts that kept him awake for days on end ceased.

Aaron Ellis, 29, another Iraq veteran with the stress disorder, scrapped his medications entirely soon after getting a dog — and set foot in a grocery store for the first time in three years.

The dogs to whom they credit their improved health are not just pets. Rather, they are psychiatric service dogs specially trained to help traumatized veterans leave the battlefield behind as they reintegrate into society.

Because of stories like these, the federal government, not usually at the forefront of alternative medical treatments, is spending several million dollars to study whether scientific research supports anecdotal reports that the dogs might speed recovery from the psychological wounds of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In dozens of interviews, veterans and their therapists reported drastic reductions in P.T.S.D. symptoms and in reliance on medication after receiving a service dog.

Veterans rely on their dogs to gauge the safety of their surroundings, allowing them to venture into public places without constantly scanning for snipers, hidden bombs and other dangers lurking in the minds of those with the disorder.

In August, Jacob Hyde got his service dog, Mya, from Puppies Behind Bars, a program based in New York State that uses prisoners to raise and train dogs for lives of service. The organization has placed 23 dogs with veterans with P.T.S.D. in the last two years, training them to obey 87 different commands.

“If I didn’t have legs, I would have to crawl around,” said Mr. Hyde, 25. “If I didn’t have Mya, I wouldn’t be able to leave the house.”

If Mr. Hyde says “block,” the dog will stand perpendicularly in front of him to keep other people at a distance. If he asks Mya to “get his back,” the dog will sit facing backward by his side.

The dogs are trained to jolt a soldier from a flashback, dial 911 on a phone and even sense a panic attack before it starts. And, perhaps most important, the veterans’ sense of responsibility, optimism and self-awareness is renewed by caring for the dogs.

The dogs help soldiers understand “what’s happening as it’s happening, what to do about it, and then doing it,” said Joan Esnayra, a geneticist whose research team has received \$300,000 from the Defense Department to study the issue. “You can use your dog kind of like a mirror to reflect back your emotional tenor.”

The dog is also often the first visible manifestation of a former soldier’s disability. Because people are curious about the animal, the veteran gets an opportunity to talk about his condition and his war experiences, discussions that can contribute to recovery. More broadly, the dogs help increase public awareness of P.T.S.D., which the Veterans Affairs Department said affects about one quarter of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans with whom it has worked.

Under a bill written by Senator Al Franken, Democrat of Minnesota, veterans with P.T.S.D. will get service dogs as part of a pilot program run by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Training a psychiatric service dog and pairing it with a client costs more than \$20,000. The government already helps provide dogs to soldiers who lost their sight or were severely wounded in combat, but had never considered placing dogs for emotional damage.

But there is debate within the emergent field about the appropriate time to pair a veteran with a dog. Sara Meisinger, the chief of occupational therapy at the warrior transition unit at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, said a service dog should be used only in the final stage of treatment, after a soldier has accomplished as much as possible with traditional therapy. Many experts say the veterans should be living on their own for at least a year before they receive a dog.

But when Gloria Gilbert Stoga, who runs Puppies Behind Bars, received an application from Maj. James Becker, she decided, with support from his doctors, to take a chance on a veteran who had just left inpatient care.

Major Becker, 45, suffered two severe brain injuries in separate explosions, earning two Purple Hearts in his three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. When he came home last winter, his 24-year-old daughter, also an Iraq veteran, was being treated for leukemia.

In Major Becker's mind, home started to resemble Afghanistan's Helmand Province. His P.T.S.D. symptoms worsened, and a suicide attempt in July landed him in San Diego Naval Medical Center for seven months. A few weeks after leaving the San Diego hospital, Major Becker flew to New York to collect his dog, Annie, and participate in a two-week training session with Puppies Behind Bars. Still, he said he spent a lot of time alone in his room "because it's easier to deal with four walls than it is to come out and deal with crowds."

But within days, Annie was beginning to pull him out of his shell. "She helps me meet people," he said, describing how people are attracted to the dog.

He added, "I like to think it's going to get better."