In December 2007, a new program to include therapy dogs in combat and operational stress control units was initiated by Army occupational therapists. The intent of the program was to complement the job of the therapists by using a highly skilled dog to achieve therapeutic goals. The dogs, SFC Boe and SFC Budge, were a donation from America’s VetDogs, a subsidiary of Guide Dogs of America. Therapy dogs are trained to provide individuals a pleasurable interaction via animal-assisted activities (AAA) or animal-assisted therapy (AAT). According to the Delta Society*

Animal-assisted activities provide opportunities for motivational, educational, recreational, and/or therapeutic benefits to enhance quality of life. Animal-assisted activities are delivered in a variety of environments by specially trained professionals, paraprofessionals, and/or volunteers, in association with animals that meet specific criteria.2

Animal-assisted therapy is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is directed and/or delivered by a health/human service provider working within the scope of practice of his/her profession. Animal-assisted therapy is designed to promote improvement in human physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning. AAT is provided in a variety of settings and may be group or individual in nature. This process is documented and evaluated.3

As of this writing, 6 dogs have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, offering Soldiers a small reminder of home. For the Army occupational therapists who led the way in this endeavor as primary handlers, the path has been rocky but ultimately rewarding.

**PREDEPLOYMENT TRAINING**

Predeployment training was vital for the dog handlers, because none of the handlers were previously trained in nor had they utilized AAT in their profession. The 3 handlers’ previous experience with dogs ranged from no experience to owning a dog as a family pet. In February 2010, the 85th Medical Detachment Combat and Operational Stress Control (COSC) hosted 5 days of predeployment training at Fort Hood, Texas. Two trainers and 4 dogs from VetDogs of America traveled to Fort Hood to train over 15 unit personnel. The 4 dogs were assigned to individuals that would most likely be the primary and secondary dog handlers once in theater. At the end of each day’s training, the dogs went home with their assigned handler. The overnight stays helped ensure the handlers understood the responsibilities of taking care of a dog full-time. The formal training consisted of an overview of AAT, history of VetDogs of America, instruction on commands, obedience training, ways to utilize the dogs in theater, and general care of the dog. An Army veterinarian provided instruction on heat casualties, general medical care, and required check-ups for the dogs. Next, the trainees were afforded the opportunity to take their new training to the streets. They took the dogs to the post exchange, hospital mental health clinics, the range, and the motor pool. These sites exposed the therapy dogs and the handlers to a variety of situations and allowed them to practice their newly acquired skills.

*The Delta Society is a national nonprofit organization which focuses on training, certifying, and registering therapy and service dogs, and conducts research into human-animal interactions.3*
of military environments. The outings allowed the handlers to practice their new skills in a safe and controlled environment. They received constructive feedback from the trainers about what was good as well as what should be changed. Caring for a canine, especially while deployed, is a massive responsibility, and the predeployment training was a valuable and essential component of the success of the program.

**Transfer of Care**

Some dogs deployed and redeployed with the same unit, yet other dogs remained in theater and had to be transferred to new handlers. In March 2010, SFC Zeke and SFC Albert were transferred from the 212th Medical Detachment (COSC) to the 85th Medical Detachment (COSC). During the transfer process, the redeploying therapist educated the incoming therapist regarding the dog’s daily schedule and his likes/dislikes. They also informed the new handlers about how and where to obtain additional food, supporting veterinarians, upcoming medical needs, and units they supported. Some units were accustomed to seeing the dogs on a weekly basis and had set appointments to see the dogs. The outgoing handlers also transferred information regarding a research project that involved the dogs. The dogs’ belongings such as kennels, beds, food, treats, and work vests were also transferred. The most difficult part was after the transfer was completed and the previous handler was still on the forward operating base. SFC Zeke was confused, and he did not know from whom to accept commands. For a short time, SFC Zeke tested his boundaries. He was like a child with a substitute teacher, and he wanted to see what he could get away with. After about one week, he acclimated to his new handler and the two of them were able to do some great things across the base.

**Acclimation**

The therapy dogs not only have to acclimate to new handlers, but they must also acclimate to new environments and new people on a daily basis. Each AAT dog has a different personality and each acclimated to new situations and new people differently. At times, SFC Zeke would get more timid in unfamiliar situations while SFC Albert would get overly excited. Overall, the dogs were friendly, well-mannered, and thrived on interaction. They slept well, ate well, and were very kind to the individuals who cared for them, as well as to the individuals who interacted with them. The dogs seemed to inherently know when they were at work versus when they could relax. When their work vests were put on their demeanor changed. They were more attuned to commands, obedience, and performing tricks. The dogs were not afraid of the environment or the individuals who interacted with them. In fact, there is only one incident when SFC Zeke became afraid. He walked near a very loud generator, stopped, and would not proceed. His handler did not make a big deal of the situation. She simply took a different route and the problem was solved. For the most part, the AAT dogs adapted well to new people and new situations.

**Dog Care**

Some handlers were dog owners at home and were familiar with taking care of a dog. A deployed environment proved to be much different. There were no fenced back yards where one could let the dogs out to run and play. In the summer, the temperature is consistently 120°F in Iraq and the rainy season brings endless amounts of mud. Unlike military working dogs that stay in a caged kennel when they are not working, the animal assisted therapy dogs shared living quarters with the primary dog handler. The primary handlers had a vested interest in keeping the dogs clean, which also required extra time and effort. The handlers were not able to go to the local grocery store and buy dog food, but they had to plan months in advance in order to secure food. The significant responsibility was exhausting and overwhelming at times because being a primary handler was not a primary duty, but an additional duty. The handlers were still responsible for performing duties as officer-in-charge, educators, mental health officers, and occupational therapists. Their duty day was not over when the clinic closed, because they still had to walk the dogs, feed them, and take them to visit Soldiers on the forward operating base (FOB). They were responsible for maintaining a healthy weight for the dogs which proved to be one of the most difficult and stressful parts of caring for them. The assigned dogs were Labrador retrievers, a breed which has a nature to be scavengers. The handlers had to be careful when taking them on walks and interacting with individuals on the FOB. Many people really wanted the dogs to like them, and they knew that with food comes affection. Many individuals would go to great lengths to sneak treats to the dogs despite numerous requests to not feed them. The handlers’ dedication to their role sometimes prompted feelings of fear that they might not be up to the responsibilities in the care of their canine charges. At times, one handler seriously worried that her dog may get injured while she cared for him, and that would disappoint the Soldiers that really needed him. Properly caring for a dog requires much effort. All of the handlers faced some challenges while caring an animal-assisted therapy dog, but after being responsible for and interacting with such a valuable animal, they gained a new appreciation for dogs and have themselves become better pet owners.
Utilization of Therapy Dogs

Combat and operational stress control (COSC) in the Army focuses on actions taken by military leadership and programs geared to prevent, identify, and manage adverse combat and operational stress reactions (COSR). Occupational therapists who deploy as part of a COSC unit may be assigned to either a restoration or prevention program.

Restoration programs are designed to teach military members basic coping skills to aid with completion of a successful deployment. The programs vary due to the location needs and the environment, but typically run for 3 to 7 days and include group classes and individual therapy sessions. By the time an individual is referred or volunteers to enroll in a restoration program, he or she has exhibited or is beginning to experience COSR.

In contrast, prevention programs are led by mobile teams who visit service members in their area of operations. The goal of the prevention team is to educate the population on the services provided by the COSC unit and to provide basic education on managing COSR. It is important for the prevention team to build a strong relationship with the leadership and the units so that they feel comfortable seeking services from the COSC, particularly when traumatic events occur.

The therapy dogs were initially used as part of the prevention team to assist the therapists with making contacts and describing their services. Mental health personnel are encouraged to make contacts with command teams, which might range from company commanders to brigade commanders and first sergeants to command sergeant majors. This can be both frustrating and intimidating, however, the ambiance became more inviting when the therapy dog was present. The dog’s presence helped the therapist seem more approachable and assisted with the flow of conversation. Senior officers and enlisted personnel took more time to listen to the mental health staff and find out what services were available for their Soldiers. The mental health team also walked through motor pools and aircraft hangars, and throughout the FOB’s work and living spaces to make contact with service members and to try to gauge the stress and morale levels. If the therapy dog was present, service members appeared more likely to share their concerns, fears, and goals, and to let down their guard for a short time. Soldiers who were angry and stressed suddenly smiled. Many people shared stories about their own dog and showed pictures of their animals. As service members became more comfortable with the COSC team, therapy dogs began to play another role in restoration programs. They were incorporated into group classes to assist with self-esteem, anger management, or communication skills. If requested by the service member and the schedule permitted, therapy dogs were also used for individual therapy sessions to assist with anxiety reduction. The therapy dogs allowed the COSC units to market their services in a unique way, because they were able to post flyers and write stories about the therapy dogs. The primary handlers noticed an increase in requests for unit visits and commands scheduled more commander briefs after the stories were published. They successfully opened doors for the COSC and ultimately the prevention mission was much easier and more effective with therapy dogs as members of the team.

Traveling With Therapy Dogs

Traveling is often necessary in order for the COSC prevention team to reach service members in remote areas. During one therapist’s deployment to Iraq, she traveled as far south as Baghdad and as far north as Mosul. The preferred mode of travel was flight, whether via helicopter or USAF transport airplane. Deployment flights are unpredictable, moreover, the frequent sandstorms in Iraq resulted in COSC team personnel being stranded in other installations for several days or even weeks at a time. Having a therapy dog further complicated the situation for various reasons. First, space is limited and the handler is often responsible for carrying his or her own bags and equipment. Combat gear is already heavy, and add to that the responsibility for a dog and its equipment, and ensuring the dog is calm during travel. The whole evolution can become quite stressful. When preparing for travel, every attempt was made to travel as lightly as possible. With the risk of being stranded on another location with fewer resources, it was difficult to ascertain exactly how much dog food to take; too little would be dangerous for the dog, too much would be heavy and burdensome. Another concern was finding lodging if stranded. Space was limited, especially when accompanied by a dog. For example, if the only sleeping space available was a communal tent, the therapy dog could not be left unattended. The dog would have to go everywhere with the handler, to include the bathroom and dining facilities. To complicate matters further, many dining facilities did not give the dog admission and the handler had to ensure the dog was properly hydrated and cooled.

Separation of Dogs and Handlers

Midway through the deployment, the 85th Medical Detachment Combat Stress Control became part of the drawdown of forces in Iraq, and the unit was required to reallocate its resources and expand its mission. The
detachment commander had to evaluate her assets and determine who must relocate and assume responsibilities of new clinics. SFC Albert was chosen to relocate to a large FOB for which the unit would assume responsibility, but his primary handler was tasked to move to a different location. SFC Zeke was known to all across the FOB. The AAT program had tremendous support and made so many positive contacts at that location that the detachment commander decided to leave SFC Zeke in place. Being one of the senior officers in the unit, SFC Zeke’s handler was tasked to open a new clinic and therefore had to relinquish her duties as primary dog handler. She again had to face the responsibility to transfer care of SFC Zeke, however, this time it was she who would leave. Fortunately, the transfer of care was minimal, because she transferred him to his secondary handler who was already familiar with SFC Zeke’s schedule, routine, habits, and idiosyncrasies. The transition was rather seamless, unfortunately, the separation was more difficult, particularly for the handler. She missed the ability to pet him and snuggle with him when she had a bad day. His new primary handler wrote her to tell her that SFC Zeke stopped at her old door and waited for her to come back. Her heart ached but she felt proud that she had the opportunity to work with him and she was proud that he remembered her. The previous handlers of Zeke and Albert were able to interact with the other AAT dog in theater, but it was not the same. It was hard for them not to compare the dogs and they never felt the same connection.

**The Affect Of A Therapy Dog On A Deployed Community**

The discussion so far has focused on how therapy dogs assisted the occupational therapy handlers in performing their deployed mission. However, the strongest proof of the success of this program is evident in the deployed community bonds the dogs help form. Many of the therapy dogs participated in community activities such as running in local 5km races, attending church, and attending unit events such as promotion and reenlistment ceremonies. Community members often made sure to invite the therapy dogs as morale boosters and for motivation. For example, many Soldiers reported the desire to want to “outrun the therapy dog” in the 5km races. A perfect example of the community support was a birthday party planned for SFC Boe in October 2009. The local Morale, Welfare, and Recreation center was reserved for the event. Several Soldiers donated a “Clifford the Big Red Dog” piñata, the local dining facility created an amazing birthday cake with a chocolate replica of SFC Boe, and the local Army band volunteered their Dixie Band to play at the party. More than 100 community members attended the event and participated in many of the activities that included sumo wrestling, piñata breaking, cake-eating, and dancing. Activities such as these break up the monotony of the deployed environment and offer simple pleasures normally experienced back home that help create the sense of a community.

**Conclusion**

For the past 5 years, combat stress control units have been using animal-assisted therapy dogs in theater. This article describes the experiences of 3 Army occupational therapists as primary dog handlers while deployed, a period that was filled with both challenges and rewards. Ultimately, it was an experience of a lifetime for the occupational therapists who were the primary dog handlers, as well as for the service members and civilians who had a therapy dog in their deployed environments. One of the most difficult coping aspects of deployment to a war zone is the fact that service members are away from family and loved ones during difficult and highly stressful times. The presence of a therapy dog in this situation offers our service members the ability to express and receive affection in an appropriate manner. On almost a daily basis, a visitor to these therapy dogs would state “I just needed a hug from the therapy dog,” or would exclaim “That is just what I needed!” upon receiving a sloppy kiss from the dog. The therapeutic activity of playing fetch or petting a therapy dog offers service members a simple pleasure from home that can make one more day of deployment bearable. Sometimes, the small gesture of unconditional love from a dog can literally make all the difference in the world.

**References**


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