Reclaiming Identity Through Service to Dogs in Need

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ABSTRACT

Dog Tags is an animal-assisted therapy offered by the Washington Humane Society (WHS) in partnership with the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC). The program is open to all ranks of enlisted service members using WRNMMC services. Dog Tags is a 3-tiered certificate program allowing Soldiers, recovering at WRNMMC, to learn and apply progressively complex and challenging elements of canine positive reinforcement training to dogs awaiting adoption at the WHS. Although each tier is a self-contained and complete curriculum, subsequent tiers build on the skills and knowledge acquired in the previous one(s). Dog Tags Warrior/trainers work with fully-screened (health and temperament) shelter dogs to provide these dogs with mental stimulation, environmental enrichment, and socialization that are vital to their successful adoption and integration into new homes. The Soldiers also benefit because they develop new skills, build positive bonds with the dogs, and continue to serve their community.

dog tag n. 1. A metal identification disk attached to a dog’s collar. 2. A military identification tag worn on a chain around one’s neck.

Source: Webster’s II New Riverside University Dictionary

To many wounded service members, the trauma of war has altered their sense of identity. Often it is the change in one’s ability to cope in life because of mental and cognitive difficulties, or altered body image from burns or the loss of limb(s). Whatever the reasons, something is lost—often the confidence in one’s capacity to serve and be productive given the new circumstances. It is recognition of this desire of Wounded Warriors to serve combined with the needs of shelter dogs that inspired the staff at the Washington Humane Society’s (WHS) Behavior and Learning Center to develop Dog Tags, open (free of charge) to all ranks of enlisted service members recuperating at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC).

Dog Tags is a natural extension of the WHS’s vision: to create ways for animals and people in need to help one another. It is one in a series of ongoing programs that actively encourage the human/animal connection, yet Dog Tags is unique in that it is tailored to a specific adult population, one that brings special understanding to help WHS’s more challenging dogs. These Warrior/dog partners are superbly situated to emerge stronger and better able to cope because of shared experiences.

The Washington Humane Society is the only open-access animal shelter in the District of Columbia. No animal in need is turned away, and every effort is made to place all adoptable animals in homes. Although the commitment to adoption is solid, not all dogs appear to be good candidates for placement in a family. Nevertheless, WHS takes the view that these dogs can learn, grow, and improve their behavior and their chance for adoption. But, given the volume of dogs that enter the shelter each year (2,000 to 2,500), evaluating them and implementing individual behavioral rehabilitation plans are daunting. This is where Dog Tags meets such needs, serving a vital function.

WARRIOR/DOG PARTNERS

All Dog Tag program participants face challenges. The recovering Soldiers at WRNMMC are dealing with the stress and pain of compromised agility and coordination. They are, to differing degrees, dependent on others for help; resulting in self-doubt about their identity as independent, self-reliant service members. Likewise, the dogs often come from traumatic situations and may be physically injured or emotionally scarred, demonstrating resource guarding by aggressively defending food, space, toys, etc. Other dogs are surrendered because of typical puppy or adolescent characteristics. They chew (furniture, carpets, clothes, and shoes), are “mouthy” (use their mouths to interact with people or other dogs, lacking bite inhibition), test boundaries (jump up, refuse to move, stand and bark), get into “mischief” (raid the trash, steal dirty clothes, chase the cat), or pee on the carpet.

In some shelter programs, due to lack of resources or expertise, behaviors such as mouthing and resource guarding can label a dog “unadoptable,” which means...
either rejection from a program and/or euthanasia. Yet, no matter the circumstances that bring these Warriors and dogs to WRNMMC and the WHS respectively, they are treated as individuals, their problems evaluated, and steps taken to help them reach a positive outcome; be it a return to the force, reintegration into civilian life, or a loving permanent home. Dog Tags is there to help these Warrior/dog teams create a new beginning.

For Soldiers, life at WRNMMC can be routine, boring, and/or full of surgeries and medical appointments. Finding an activity outside of the ordinary can be very helpful in making their stay more productive and enjoyable. It is similar for the dogs in the shelter environment, where often it is noisy and lacking in positive stimulation, which may be play and one-on-one time with people and friendly dogs. Both parties have temporarily lost their autonomy; having to live by the routines and requirements of others, making daily life frustrating, perhaps a little depressing. Dog Tags works to alleviate these stresses by creating a positive mentally and physically demanding environment where independence and self-determination is restored, bonds are established, and progress achieved.

**METHOD AND STRUCTURE**

Dog Tags is a 3-tiered certificate program designed to teach wounded Soldiers foundational skills in positive, reward-based animal training and care—skills essential to entry into the field of animal services. Each 8-week module is complete, self-contained, and earns certification upon completion. Although it is not required that students complete all 3 modules, when linked together, those modules become increasingly difficult and demand greater individual responsibility and creativity. Dog Tags is constructed such that students, from hobbyists to those wanting to launch a new career, can be accommodated and trained based on their goals and commitment.

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**Level I (first tier):** 8 weeks, 1.5 hours twice a week at the WHS Behavior and Learning Center. The subject matter covers:

- Philosophies of training and learning theory.
- Historical trends in canine training techniques from harsh dominance to total positive methods.
- Conditioning: classical—stimulus elicits an involuntary response, eg smelling a food you dislike and feeling nauseated; operant—voluntary response to stimulus, eg, the dog offers to sit because it has earned him a treat.
- Observation of canine body language; eg, what is communicated when a dog’s tail is high and stiff, hackles are raised, or belly is exposed.
- Foundational obedience skills: sit, down, wait, stay, come when called, etc.
- Introduction to canine parlor tricks: shake, roll over, crawl on your belly, etc.
- Agility obstacles: jumps over a hurdle or through a hoop, over an A-frame, through a tunnel, etc.
- Training equipment: leashes, harnesses, neck collars, head collars, and treat/bait bags.
- Motivational tools: food, touch, voice, play, etc.

Students work with fully-screened shelter dogs, training them in basic obedience and good manners, such as calm interactions with dogs and humans, to develop the quiet polite behavior necessary for typical home and neighborhood environments. All of the exercises help build confidence in both the dogs and the Warrior/trainers. All instruction with the dogs is given using humane, motivational techniques (food treats and praise as rewards while ignoring and/or redirecting unwanted behaviors). There are also readings, lectures, and written exams throughout the module to mark progress and identify areas for concentration and improvement.

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**Level II (second tier):** 16 weeks (completion of Level I plus an additional 8 weeks), 1.5 hours twice a week at the WHS Behavior and Learning Center. Subject matter covers:

- Understanding and resolving common canine behavioral problems: chewing, house soiling, jumping up.
- Studying the art of assisting group classes: working on their observational and communication skills by helping outside student handlers with timing rewards, manipulating a leash, and treats.
- Offering individualized guidance; preparing enrichment activities for the kennel population awaiting adoption – stuffing Kong toys (KONG Company, Golden, Colorado) with tasty food items to alleviate boredom while dogs are in their kennels, etc.

As in Level I, there are readings, lectures and written exams throughout the module to mark progress and identify areas for concentration and improvement.
Level III (third tier): 24 weeks (completion of Levels I and II plus an additional 8 weeks), 1.5 hours twice a week at the WHS Behavior and Learning Center:

- In-depth instruction in canine relationships and pack dynamics.
- Learn to hold and conduct group obedience classes and private consultations with the general public.
- Advanced training in obedience and service dog exercises. The Soldiers use their more advanced knowledge of animal behavior to develop creative approaches to correct more complex behavioral problems.

They also perfect their listening, communication and interpersonal skills as they interact with the public and dogs outside the program while conducting private consultations and group obedience classes.

**Benefits and Observations**

Although each Soldier is awarded a certificate documenting his or her service and successful mastery of the skills and knowledge upon completion of a training module, there are numerous positive physical and mental/emotional benefits derived from the experience.

Initially many Soldiers come to Dog Tags to break the monotony of life at WRNMMC, but over time they find the physical and mental demands of handling an untrained dog exquisitely challenging and uniquely therapeutic on several fronts:

- Physical. The subtle or, depending on the dog, not so subtle demands on balance and fine motor control to manipulate prosthetic legs and arms/hands.

- Mental. Teaching a dog basic manners improves observational skills and timing. Capturing minute advances and rewarding them quickly builds confidence and trust. Complex problem solving: breaking down elaborate tricks (e.g., gathering toys and putting them in a box) into tiny steps and building on these to accomplish the final task. Perseverance: keep the goal in mind, and be willing to make tiny steps to get there.

- Emotional. Patience: learning what motivates a dog (touch, food, high happy voice, quiet gentle coaxing) and using this to advance as a team. Coping with frustration when physical and verbal force are not in the training tool kit—finding a way to end on a good note is a very valuable skill. Confidence: seeing the results of hard work and communication coming together and achieving the goal. Most important; knowing when to stop a training session and play or just spend quiet time together.

The dogs benefit in similar ways. Dogs chosen for the Dog Tags program are fully screened (health and temperament) prior to selection for Dog Tags, but may have behavioral or physical problems that make them less likely to move out of the shelter and into a home quickly. Nevertheless, the screening process indicates their potential to reach a positive outcome through consistent, kind training with the Soldiers.

A case in point is Smitty, a beagle/pug mix that came into the shelter severely emaciated and neglected by his owner. Smitty’s circumstances and resulting condition left him with extreme timidity toward people and food guarding issues. Nevertheless, his temperament evaluation identified his potential and, as it turned out, he was a perfect canine candidate for Dog Tags.

Smitty’s rehabilitation began with Soldier/trainers in Level I. They worked with him on foundation obedience skills to build his confidence and trust with humans. Simultaneously, advanced Soldier/trainers, under WHS staff supervision, devised and executed a behavior modification plan to overcome his resource guarding. For example, trickling kibble into his dish so he associated humans as a source for food; interspersing his kibble with obedience training and high value treats, such as hot dogs, to help Smitty realize he could work with humans, have fun, and get fed. In the end, this intense and holistic approach to training earned Smitty an American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen certificate, often the first step for dogs in training for therapy work, and a successful adoption.

The Soldier/trainers not only witnessed Smitty’s progress, but were vital to his recovery and eventual adoption. Dog Tags Soldier/trainers were able to provide...
the intense training and attention Smitty deserved, and he surpassed all expectations. Everyone’s confidence soared because their training and skills were truly tested and proved to be solid and valuable.

**Outcomes and Conclusions**

Since 2008, Dog Tags has trained over 40 Soldiers and helped approximately 75 dogs into new homes. As of this writing, at least 2 Soldiers are in the process of establishing a dog training business, and many others have returned to school furthering their education to become veterinary technicians or enter some other aspect of the animal services industry.

Additionally, Soldiers have reported other benefits that extend beyond the scope of what Dog Tags was designed to provide. The WHS and its staff have become a home away from home and an extended family, where Soldiers can visit and help. Volunteering at the shelter has helped Soldiers reestablish work routines and solid work habits, helping them to become more outgoing and social than before entering the program, in turn lowering stress and increasing happiness.

Dog Tags has honored service, built confidence, revealed new talents, provided new job opportunities, and much more. The Warrior/trainers rediscovered, reinvented, and reclaimed their identity as strong and capable individuals whose talents and skills continue to save lives and make a huge difference for the dogs and families they serve.

**Acknowledgement**

Photos courtesy of the Washington Humane Society.

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Ms Alers, an archivist at the Smithsonian Institution, is a volunteer at the Washington Humane Society.

When this article was written, Mr Simpson was Director, Animal Behavior and Training at the Washington Humane Society.