Crossing the Berm: An Occupational Therapist’s Perspective on Animal-Assisted Therapy In a Deployed Environment

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As an Army occupational therapist assigned to the 212th Combat and Operational Stress Control (COSC) Detachment, I was given the opportunity of a lifetime providing service to my fellow Warriors, the Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen, along with Department of Defense employees of the United States. My role was to manage a CSC clinic that provided behavioral healthcare in Iraq and to conduct fitness and prevention operations for which I had been trained. In addition to the doctrinal education and concepts that I formally learned through the Army’s Combat and Operational Stress Control Course (COSC), I received a new tasking—one in which I would be assigned a 4-legged, furry battle buddy named Sergeant First Class Albert.

Albert is a tan Labrador retriever that was donated to my detachment by an organization named America’s VetDogs to assist our efforts in treating clients who had experienced combat and operational stress reactions (COSR) during their tour of duty. In August of 2009 he was “boots on the ground,” prepared to save a life one paw at a time. This mission was my initial first-hand experience in using animal-assisted therapy (AAT) as a therapeutic medium for behavioral healthcare. Albert’s ability to engage clients as they entered the COSC clinic, attend a one-on-one appointment with a provider, or even visit the Soldier at their duty location proved to be beneficial in enhancing the mood of our clients and their contemporaries.

He was able to ease tension of many of our clients in order to assist in their willingness to seek out the COSC unit for care and to openly discuss the issues that had troubled them. His presence aided in normalizing the context of a deployed setting for many clients that had not seen their loved ones for many months. The avid dog lover naturally enjoyed his services, but many other clients who previously did not have affection toward canines would open up to his charismatic nature and engage in leisure activities with him. Many of our clients would play fetch, pet him, and even go through his series of commands in order to develop assertiveness.

Albert’s training allowed him to be used within our fitness program to teach multiple life skills classes such as effective communication, anger and stress management, and assertiveness training. He assisted our clients by building their confidence in how they projected their voice and tone, delivering clear and concise directions, and by implementing contextually appropriate use of body language and gestures when communicating. In addition to developing communication skills, many of the service members were able to use his services as a healthy coping mechanism for dealing with stressful life events. He was more than any mascot could be in enhancing esprit de corps, he was a friend in a rough and unforgiving environment that helped many clients see the value in their mission abroad and enabled them to relate with other service members within a psycho-educational group setting.

The ability to travel with Albert to each unit within our contingency operations base provided opportunities to engage our clients from a preventive standpoint. The COSC unit performs prevention operations as a community-based approach to service our clients who may not have had an opportunity to engage a provider within the walls of the clinic. Under this premise, I was able to teach classes in a small group setting, within their respective area of operations while using Albert as a way to provide continuous opportunities for preventive education. He simultaneously operated as another outlet for the Soldiers to vent and cope with their stressful predicaments in a positively focused manner. As we would visit a unit, news would travel to adjacent units that would also request our services. This only further assisted our detachment in trying to reach all of the potentially at-risk COSR casualties. Furthermore, we had a buy-in from the command groups that we supported to assist in fighting the negative stigma associated with seeking behavioral healthcare.

The benefits of Albert’s services could best be defined by the number of smiling faces that routinely greeted him. As the popularity of his presence resonated throughout...
the base, Albert would add units to his weekly visits and would be frequented by new clients within the clinic. There were few locations where he was not allowed, and his efforts were even lauded by the 3rd Infantry Division Commander as demonstrated by his recognition as the Military Working Dog of the Month.

Hindsight is always 20/20. With the experience of using a canine for animal-assisted therapy, I can honestly say that the wait for Albert to arrive in theater was well worth it. A lot of training had to be planned, coordinated, re-sourced, and implemented for all of the personnel within the detachment who were designated as animal handlers. It ultimately proved beneficial in maintaining Albert’s skill set and to maintain continuity among the handlers. As a lesson-learned, Albert was received very well by the population treated and was useful for the life skills classes that I instructed with him. His effort has added to the foundation of AAT in a deployed setting and will hopefully guide a doctrinal change in how the Army utilizes, trains, and deploys canines for behavioral healthcare.

The procurement of canines while in garrison would be the most effective means of establishing AAT capability prior to a deployment. Canines are pack animals and require time to adjust to their handler, thereby identifying their role and responsibility within the pack. Albert adjusted well to his changing environment, however, this was greatly influenced by his personality. Maximizing the amount of time spent between Albert and the detachment boded well for his transition. I strongly advocate that a COSC unit requisition the assignment of a canine as soon as they are tasked with an AAT mission.

I highly recommend the use of animal-assisted therapy as a treatment modality for combat and operational stress control detachments, with emphasis placed on a concerted effort to establish a standard procurement process that integrates the canines into a detachment’s deployment cycle. As soon as a unit enters their “reset window,” it would be beneficial to have the canine available to begin training, rapport building, and integration within COSC operations. My experience with AAT was challenging and rewarding, all in the same light. More importantly, I learned that these furry friends have a benefit that transcends the relationship of a typical pet owner, indeed, rather, is should be likened to that of a comrade in arms, focused on conserving the fighting strength. I thank my superiors who tasked me for the opportunity represented by this wonderful assignment, and America’s VetDogs for providing such an efficiently trained canine.

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